


THE
EXPOSITOR'S
BIBLE
COMMENTARY
REVISED EDITION

1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude




J. Daryl Charles & Tom Thatcher

Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland
General Editors



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1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude

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PREFACE

Frank Gaebelin wrote the following in the preface to the original Expositor's Bible Commentary (which first appeared in 1979): "The title of this work defines its purpose. Written primarily by expositors for expositors, it aims to provide preachers, teachers, and students of the Bible with a new and comprehensive commentary on the books of the Old and New Testaments." Those volumes achieved that purpose admirably. The original EBC was exceptionally well received and had an enormous impact on the life of the church. It has served as the mainstay of countless pastors and students who could not afford an extensive library on each book of the Bible but who wanted solid guidance from scholars committed to the authority of the Holy Scriptures.

Gaebelin also wrote, "A commentary that will continue to be useful through the years should handle contemporary trends in biblical studies in such a way as to avoid becoming outdated when critical fashions change." This revision continues the EBC's exalted purpose and stands on the shoulders of the expositors of the first edition, but it seeks to maintain the usefulness of the commentary by interacting with new discoveries and academic discussions. While the primary goal of this commentary is to elucidate the text and not to provide a guide to the scholarly literature about the text, the commentators critically engage recent academic discussion and provide updated bibliographies so that pastors, teachers, and students can keep abreast of modern scholarship.

Some of the commentaries in the EBC have been revised by the original author or in conjunction with a younger colleague. In other cases, scholars have been commissioned to offer fresh commentaries because the original author had passed on or wanted to pass on the baton to the next generation of evangelical scholars. Today, with commentaries on a single book of the Old and New Testaments often extending into multiple volumes, the need for a comprehensive yet succinct commentary that guides one to the gist of the text's meaning is even more pressing. The new EBC seeks to fill this need.

The theological stance of this commentary series remains unchanged: the authors are committed to the divine inspiration, complete trustworthiness, and full authority of the Bible. The commentators have demonstrated proficiency in the biblical book that is their specialty, as well as commitment to the church and the pastoral dimension of biblical interpretation. They also represent the geographical and confessional diversity that characterized the first contributors.

The commentaries adhere to the same chief principle of grammatico-historical interpretation that drove the first edition. In the foreword to the inaugural issue of the journal *New Testament Studies* in 1954, Matthew Black warned that “the danger in the present is that theology, with its head too high in the clouds, may end by falling into the pit of an unhistorical and uncritical dogmatism. Into any new theological undertaking must be brought all that was best in the old ideal of sound learning, scrupulous attention to philology, text and history.” The dangers that Black warned against over fifty years ago have not vanished. Indeed, new dangers arise in a secular, consumerist culture that finds it more acceptable to use God’s name in exclamations than in prayer and that encourages insipid theologies that hang in the wind and shift to tickle the ears and to meet the latest fancy. Only a solid biblical foundation can fend off these fads.

The Bible was not written for our information but for our transformation. It is not a quarry to find stones with which to batter others but to find the rock on which to build the church. It does not invite us simply to speak of God but to hear God and to confess that his Son, Jesus Christ, is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Php 2:10). It also calls us to obey his commandments (Mt 28:20). It is not a self-interpreting text, however. Interpretation of the Holy Scriptures requires sound learning and regard for history, language, and text. Exegetes must interpret not only the primary documents but all that has a bearing, direct or indirect, on the grammar and syntax, historical context, transmission, and translation of these writings.

The translation used in this commentary remains the New International Version (North American edition), but all of the commentators work from the original languages (Hebrew and Greek) and draw on other translations when deemed useful. The format is also very similar to the original EBC, while the design is extensively updated with a view to enhanced ease of use for the reader. Each commentary section begins with an introduction

(printed in a single-column format) that provides the reader with the background necessary to understand the Bible book. Almost all introductions include a short bibliography and an outline. The Bible text is divided into primary units that are often explained in an “Overview” section that precedes commentary on specific verses. The complete text of the New International Version is provided for quick reference, and an extensive “Commentary” section (printed in a double-column format) follows the reproducing of the text. When the Hebrew or Greek text is cited in the commentary section, a phonetic system of transliteration and translation is used. The “Notes” section (printed in a single-column format) provides a specialized discussion of key words or concepts, as well as helpful resource information. The original languages and their transliterations will appear in this section. Finally, on occasion, expanded thoughts can be found in a “Reflections” section (printed in a double-column format) that follows the Notes section.

One additional feature is worth mentioning. Throughout this volume, wherever specific biblical words are discussed, the Goodrick-Kohlenberger (GK) numbers have been added. These numbers, which appear in the *Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance* and other reference tools, are based on the numbering system developed by Edward Goodrick and John Kohlenberger III and provide a system similar but superior to the Strong’s numbering system.

The editors wish to thank all of the contributors for their hard work and commitment to this project. We also deeply appreciate the labor and skill of the staff at Zondervan. It is a joy to work with them—in particular Jack Kuhatschek, Stan Gundry, Katya Covrett, and Dirk Buursma. In addition, we acknowledge with thanks the work of Connie Gundry Tappy as copy editor.

We all fervently desire that these commentaries will result not only in a deeper intellectual grasp of the Word of God but also in hearts that more profoundly love and obey the God who reveals himself to us in its pages.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Bible Texts, Versions, Etc.

ASV	American Standard Version
CEV	Contemporary English Version
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
ESV	English Standard Version
GNB	Good News Bible (see also TEV)
GWT	God's Word Translation
JB	Jerusalem Bible
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint (the Greek OT)
MLB	Modern Language Bible
MT	Masoretic Text of the OT
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCV	New Century Version
NEB	New English Bible
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version

NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
Phillips	<i>New Testament in Modern English</i> , J. B. Phillips
REB	Revised English Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TEV	Today's English Version
TNIV	Today's New International Version
UBS	United Bible Societies

Old Testament, New Testament, Apocrypha

Ge	Genesis
Ex	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Nu	Numbers
Dt	Deuteronomy
Jos	Joshua
Jdg	Judges
Ru	Ruth
1–2Sa	1–2 Samuel
1–2Ki	1–2 Kings
1–2Ch	1–2 Chronicles
Ezr	Ezra

Ne	Nehemiah
Est	Esther
Job	Job
Ps/Pss	Psalms/Psalms
Pr	Proverbs
Ecc	Ecclesiastes
SS	Song of Songs
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
La	Lamentations
Eze	Ezekiel
Da	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Am	Amos
Ob	Obadiah
Jnh	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Na	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zep	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zec	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi

Mt	Matthew
Mk	Mark
Lk	Luke
Jn	John
Ac	Acts
Ro	Romans
1-2Co	1-2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Php	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1-2Th	1-2 Thessalonians
1-2Ti	1-2 Timothy
Tit	Titus
Phm	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
1-2Pe	1-2 Peter
1-2-3Jn	1-2-3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev	Revelation
Add Esth	Additions to Esther
Add Dan	Additions to Daniel
Bar	Baruch

Bel	Bel and the Dragon
Ep Jer	Epistle of Jeremiah
1–2 Esd	1–2 Esdras
1–2 Macc	1–2 Maccabees
3–4 Macc	3–4 Maccabees
Jdt	Judith
Pr Azar	Prayer of Azariah
Pr Man	Prayer of Manasseh
Ps 151	Psalm 151
Sir	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
Sus	Susanna
Tob	Tobit
Wis	Wisdom of Solomon

Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Texts

1QapGen	<i>Genesis Apocryphon</i> (texts from Qumran)
1QIsa	Isaiah (texts from Qumran)
1QH	<i>Hôdāyôt</i> or <i>Thanksgiving Hymns</i> (texts from Qumran)
1QM	<i>Milḥāmāh</i> or <i>War Scroll</i> (texts from Qumran)
1QS	<i>Serek hayyaḥad</i> or <i>Rule of the Community</i> (texts from Qumran)
4QpNa	<i>Pesher Nahum</i> (texts from Qumran)
4QpPs	<i>Pesher Psalms</i> (texts from Qumran)
4Q44 (4QDt ^a)	Deuteronomy (texts from Qumran)

- 4Q174 *Florilegium* (texts from Qumran)
- 4Q252 *Commentary on Genesis A*, formerly *Patriarchal Blessings*
(texts from Qumran)
- 4Q400 *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (texts from Qumran)
- 4Q502 *Ritual of Marriage* (texts from Qumran)
- 11Q13 *Melchizedek* (texts from Qumran)

Other Ancient Texts

- Abraham* *On the Life of Abraham* (Philo)
- Aeth.* *Aethiopica* (Heliodorus)
- Ag. Ap.* *Against Apion* (Josephus)
- An.* *De anima* (Tertullian)
- Ann.* *Annales* (Tacitus)
- Ant.* *Jewish Antiquities* (Josephus)
- Apos. Con.* *Apostolic Constitutions*
- As. Mos.* *Assumption of Moses*
- Ascen. Isa.* *Ascension of Isaiah*
- Att.* *Epistulae ad Atticum* (Cicero)
- b. Ber.* *Berakhot* (Babylonian Talmud)
- b. Sanh.* *Sanhedrin* (Babylonian Talmud)
- b. Šebu.* *Shevu'ot* (Babylonian Talmud)
- Bapt.* *De baptismo* (Tertullian)
- Barn.* *Barnabas*
- Ben.* *De beneficiis* (Seneca)

<i>Bibl.</i>	<i>Bibliotheca</i> (Photius)
<i>Bibl. hist.</i>	<i>Bibliotheca historica</i> (Diodorus Siculus)
<i>Bride</i>	<i>Advice to the Bride and Groom</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Cels.</i>	<i>Contra Celsum</i> (Origen)
<i>Cic.</i>	<i>Cicero</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Claud.</i>	<i>Divus Claudius</i> (Suetonius)
<i>Comm. Dan.</i>	<i>Commentarium in Danielelem</i> (Hippolytus)
<i>Comm. Jo.</i>	<i>Commentarii in evangelium Joannis</i> (Origen)
<i>Comm. Matt.</i>	<i>Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei</i> (Origen)
<i>Corrept.</i>	<i>De correptione et gratia</i> (Augustine)
<i>Cyr.</i>	<i>Cyropaedia</i> (Xenophon)
<i>Decal.</i>	<i>De decaloga</i> (Philo)
<i>Def. orac.</i>	<i>De defectu oraculorum</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogus cum Tryphone</i> (Justin Martyr)
<i>Diatr.</i>	<i>Diatribai</i> (Epictetus)
<i>Did.</i>	<i>Didache</i>
<i>Disc.</i>	<i>Discourses</i> (Epictetus)
<i>Doctr. chr.</i>	<i>De doctrina christiana</i> (Augustine)
<i>Ebr.</i>	<i>De ebrietate</i> (Philo)
<i>Ench.</i>	<i>Enchiridion</i> (Epictetus)
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae morales</i> (Seneca)
<i>Eph.</i>	<i>To the Ephesians</i> (Ignatius)
<i>Epist.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i> (Jerome, Pliny, Hippocrates)
<i>Ep. Tra.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Trajanum</i> (Pliny)

<i>Eth. nic.</i>	<i>Ethica nichomachea</i> (Aristotle)
<i>Fam.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad familiares</i> (Cicero)
<i>1 Apol.</i>	<i>First Apology</i> (Justin Martyr)
<i>2–4 Bar.</i>	<i>2–4 Baruch</i>
<i>1–2 Clem.</i>	<i>1–2 Clement</i>
<i>1–2 En.</i>	<i>1–2 Enoch</i>
<i>Flacc.</i>	<i>In Flaccum</i> (Philo)
<i>Flight</i>	<i>On Flight and Finding</i> (Philo)
<i>Fr. Prov.</i>	<i>Fragmenta in Proverbia</i> (Hippolytus)
<i>Gen. Rab.</i>	<i>Genesis Rabbah</i>
<i>Geogr.</i>	<i>Geographica</i> (Strabo)
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Adversus Haereses</i> (Irenaeus)
<i>Hell.</i>	<i>Hellenica</i> (Xenophon)
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historicus</i> (Polybius, Cassius Dio, Thucydides)
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historiae</i> (Herodotus)
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>History of the Church</i> (Eusebius)
<i>Hist. Rome</i>	<i>The History of Rome</i> (Livy)
<i>Hom. 1 Tim.</i>	<i>Homilies on 1 Timothy</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hom. 2 Tim.</i>	<i>Homilies on 2 Timothy</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hom. Josh.</i>	<i>Homilies on Joshua</i> (Origen)
<i>Hom. Rom.</i>	<i>Homilies on Romans</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hom. Tit.</i>	<i>Homilies on Titus</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Hypoth.</i>	<i>Hypothetica</i> (Philo)
<i>Jub.</i>	<i>Jubilees</i>

<i>J.W.</i>	<i>Jewish War</i> (Josephus)
<i>L.A.E.</i>	<i>Life of Adam and Eve</i>
<i>Leg.</i>	<i>Legum allegoriae</i> (Philo)
<i>Let. Aris.</i>	<i>Letter of Aristeas</i>
<i>Lev. Rab.</i>	<i>Leviticus Rabbah</i>
<i>Liv. Pro.</i>	<i>Lives of the Prophets</i>
<i>m. 'Abot</i>	<i>Avot</i> (Mishnah)
<i>m. Pesah</i>	<i>Pesahim</i> (Mishnah)
<i>m. Sanh.</i>	<i>Sanhedrin</i> (Mishnah)
<i>Magn.</i>	<i>To the Magnesians</i> (Ignatius)
<i>Mand.</i>	<i>Mandate</i> (Shepherd of Hermas)
<i>Marc.</i>	<i>Adversus Marcionem</i> (Tertullian)
<i>Mem.</i>	<i>Memorabilia</i> (Xenophon)
<i>Migr.</i>	<i>De migratione Abrahami</i> (Philo)
<i>Mor.</i>	<i>Moralia</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Moses</i>	<i>On the Life of Moses</i> (Philo)
<i>Nat.</i>	<i>Naturalis historia</i> (Pliny)
<i>Onir.</i>	<i>Onirocritica</i> (Artemidorus)
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orationes</i> (Demosthenes)
<i>Paed.</i>	<i>Paedagogus</i> (Clement of Alexandria)
<i>Phil.</i>	<i>To the Philippians</i> (Polycarp)
<i>Plant.</i>	<i>De plantatione</i> (Philo)
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Politica</i> (Aristotle)
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>To Polycarp</i> (Ignatius)

<i>Posterity</i>	<i>On the Posterity of Cain</i> (Origen)
<i>Praescr.</i>	<i>De praescriptione haereticorum</i> (Tertullian)
<i>Princ.</i>	<i>De principiis</i> (Origen)
<i>Pss. Sol.</i>	<i>Psalms of Solomon</i>
<i>Pud.</i>	<i>De pudicitia</i> (Tertullian)
<i>Quaest. conv.</i>	<i>Quaestionum convivialum libri IX</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Quint. frat.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Quintum fratrem</i> (Cicero)
<i>Resp.</i>	<i>Respublica</i> (Plato)
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Volumina rhetorica</i> (Philodemus)
<i>Rom.</i>	<i>To the Romans</i> (Ignatius)
<i>Rosc. com.</i>	<i>Pro Roscio comoedo</i> (Cicero)
<i>Sera</i>	<i>De sera numinis vindicta</i> (Plutarch)
<i>Sib. Or.</i>	<i>Sibylline Oracles</i>
<i>Sim.</i>	<i>Similitudes</i> (Shepherd of Hermas)
<i>Smyrn.</i>	<i>To the Smyrnaeans</i> (Ignatius)
<i>Somn.</i>	<i>De somniis</i> (Philo)
<i>Spec.</i>	<i>De specialibus legibus</i> (Philo)
<i>Stat.</i>	<i>Ad populum Antiochenum de statuis</i> (John Chrysostom)
<i>Strom.</i>	<i>Stromata</i> (Clement of Alexandria)
<i>T. Ash.</i>	<i>Testament of Asher</i>
<i>T. Jud.</i>	<i>Testament of Judah</i>
<i>T. Levi</i>	<i>Testament of Levi</i>
<i>T. Naph.</i>	<i>Testament of Naphtali</i>
<i>T. Reu.</i>	<i>Testament of Reuben</i>

<i>Tg. Ps.-J.</i>	<i>Targum Pseudo-Jonathan</i>
<i>Theaet.</i>	<i>Theaetetus (Plato)</i>
<i>Trall.</i>	<i>To the Trallians (Ignatius)</i>
<i>Virt.</i>	<i>De virtutibus (Philo)</i>
<i>Vis.</i>	<i>Visions (Shepherd of Hermas)</i>

Journals, Periodicals, Reference Works, Series

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ACNT	Augsburg Commentaries on the New Testament
<i>An.</i>	<i>De anima (Tertullian)</i>
AnBib	Analecta biblica
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
<i>AThR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAGD	Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker (2d ed). <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDAG	Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (3d ed). <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>

BDB	Brown, Driver, and Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BDF	Blass, Debrunner, and Funk. <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibS(N)	Biblische Studien (Neukirchen)
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CH</i>	<i>Church History</i>
<i>ChrT</i>	<i>Christianity Today</i>
<i>CJT</i>	<i>Canadian Journal of Theology</i>
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>CTR</i>	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
<i>DukeDivR</i>	<i>Duke Divinity Review</i>

EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
<i>EcR</i>	<i>Ecumenical Review</i>
EGT	Expositor's Greek Testament
ESCJ	Etudes sur le christianisme et le judaisme (Studies in Christianity and Judaism)
ETS	Evangelical Theological Society
<i>EuroJTh</i>	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
GNS	Good News Studies
GR	Greece and Rome
GRBS	Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies
HALOT	Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
Herm	Hermeneia commentary series
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>

<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
IVPNTC	IVP New Testament Commentary
<i>JBMW</i>	<i>Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	JSNT Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	JSOT Supplement Series
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
L&N	Louw and Nida. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	Liddell, Scott, and Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i>
MM	Moulton and Milligan. <i>The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament</i>
NAC	New American Commentary
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>NewDocs</i>	<i>New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity</i>
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary

NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDNTT</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
<i>Notes</i>	<i>Notes on Translation</i>
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
NTC	New Testament Commentary (Baker)
NTD	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
NTG	New Testament Guides
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTT	New Testament Theology
<i>OJRS</i>	<i>Ohio Journal of Religious Studies</i>
<i>PEGLMBS</i>	<i>Proceedings, Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Bible Societies</i>
PG	Patrologia graeca
PL	Patrologia latina
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>Presb</i>	<i>Presbyterion</i>
<i>PresR</i>	<i>Presbyterian Review</i>
<i>PTR</i>	<i>Princeton Theological Review</i>

<i>RBibLit</i>	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>RefJ</i>	<i>Reformed Journal</i>
<i>RelSRev</i>	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
SBB	Stuttgarter biblische Aufsatzbände
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SBLSP</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>SE</i>	<i>Studia evangelica</i>
SEG	Supplementum epigraphicum graecum
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNT	Studien zum Neuen Testament
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
STR-B	Strack, H.L., and P. Billerbeck. <i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch</i>
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
<i>SVF</i>	<i>Stoicorum veterum fragmenta</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	Kittel and Friedrich. <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	Botterweck and Ringgren. <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>

<i>ThEv</i>	<i>Theologia Evangelica</i>
THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>ThTo</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TLNT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>TWOT</i>	<i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>VE</i>	<i>Vox evangelica</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>YCS</i>	<i>Yale Classical Studies</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>
<i>ZPEB</i>	<i>Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible</i>

General

AD *anno Domini* (in the year of [our] Lord)

BC	before Christ
ca.	<i>circa</i> (around, about, approximately)
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
ch(s).	chapter(s)
d.	died
diss.	dissertation
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
esp.	especially
et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
EV	English versions of the Bible
f(f).	and the following one(s)
frg.	fragment
Gk.	Greek
GK	Goodrick & Kohlenberger numbering system
Heb.	Hebrew
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
Lat.	Latin
lit.	literally
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
n(n).	note(s)
NS	New Series
p(p).	page(s)

par. parallel (indicates textual parallels)
repr. reprinted
rev. revised
s.v. *sub verbo*, under the word
trans. translator, translated by
vs. versus
v(v). verse(s)

1 PETER

J. DARYL CHARLES

Introduction

1. History of Interpretation: Authorship, Attestation, Dating
2. Readership
3. Composition and Literary Integrity
4. Form Analysis
5. Literary Relationship to 2 Peter
6. Trends in Petrine Scholarship
7. Purpose and Prominent Themes
8. Bibliography
9. Outline

1. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION: AUTHORSHIP, ATTESTATION, DATING

The author of this letter identifies himself as “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1), “fellow elder” (5:1), and “witness of Christ’s sufferings” (5:1). Personal references to “Silvanus” (5:12 NASB; cf. Ac 15:22; 2Co 1:19; 1Th 1:1; 2Th 1:1) and “my son Mark” (5:13; cf. Ac 12:12),¹ as well as allusion in 2 Peter 3:1 to “my second letter,” further buttress the case for apostolic authorship and strengthen the belief, existing among the Fathers, that the second gospel was commissioned by Peter.² On evaluating the letter, the reader becomes aware of the author’s personal and intimate identification with both his audience and the sufferings of Christ. This very tendency and tone have the effect of lending authority. Correlatively, as one might expect, the teaching and admonition being set forth in the letter are in full accord with and reminiscent of that of Jesus. The letter’s strong Christology, coupled with the related ethical implications, is precisely what one would expect from the apostle who had walked with Jesus, failed his master, and subsequently been entrusted with shepherding the flock of God.

If we assume the writer to be an eyewitness of Jesus’ life and ministry, much of the material in 1 Peter indeed seems to corroborate Jesus’ teaching

recorded in the gospel narratives—for example, salvation through Christ being prophesied (1:10–12); salvation as ransom through the blood of Christ (1:18–19); the command to love one another (1:22); being born again (1:23); good deeds that glorify God (2:12); the admonition to submit to the authorities (2:13–15) and not retaliate (3:9); being blessed because of persecution and Christ’s name (3:13–17); allusion to the days of Noah (3:20); refusing to lord it over others (5:3); and not being anxious (5:7).³

A major obstacle for some (e.g., Beare, 28–30, and Craddock, 12) in accepting 1 Peter as genuinely Petrine is the stylistic polish and eloquence of the letter. This eloquence extends to vocabulary, syntax, acquaintance with the LXX, and the use of metaphors and rhetorical devices. According to this objection, the Peter depicted in Acts 4:13—wherein Peter and John are described as *anthrōpoi agrammatōi kai idiōtai* [GK 2626], literally, “men [who are] illiterate and unlearned”⁴—was not capable of a literary product such as 1 Peter. In response to this objection, others have argued that, following Peter’s conversion, thirty years of running a fishing business in a cosmopolitan port such as Bethsaida would virtually guarantee that Peter was bilingual, albeit with a thick accent (Mt 26:73), and thus be sufficient to overcome the stereotype of an illiterate and unlearned fisherman (so Hillyer, 2, and Grudem, 27–31). While this response is possible, it is not sufficiently plausible. The more plausible explanation is lodged within the text itself: “Through Silvanus, ... I have written to you briefly” (5:12 NASB). As one commentator has remarked, these words indicate that “he [Silvanus] was more than merely Peter’s stenographer” (so Barclay, 43).

This Silvanus is doubtless the “Silvanus” of Paul’s letters (1Th 1:1; 2Th 1:1 NASB) and the “Silas” of the book of Acts (15:37–40; 16:16–40; 17:10–15; 18:5–17). Silvanus must have been a significant figure in the early church, not only because he was a ministry companion to Paul, but also because he possessed Roman citizenship (Ac 16:37). We may infer from this that, in comparison to Peter, he was a well-educated and cultured individual.⁵ Hence the thought belongs to Peter, while the writing in all probability belongs to Silvanus.⁶

Whereas the authenticity of the second letter bearing the apostle’s name has been doubted, throughout church history 1 Peter has been viewed as genuinely apostolic. Only more recently has this been called into question.

The arguments against authenticity, in the main, tend to proceed from objections along literary/stylistic and historical lines. Further response to those objections can be found in [section 6](#) below.

In the end, what is striking is the relative absence of any credible voices that dissent from Petrine scholarship. With few exceptions, the Fathers held 1 Peter to be genuine. These witnesses include Irenaeus (*Haer.* 4.9.2; 5.7.2; 4.16.5); Clement of Alexandria (*Paed.* 3.11–12; 4.18–20; Clement is said by Eusebius [*Hist. eccl.* 6.25.8] to have offered commentary on all the “Catholic Epistles”); Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.3); Didymus (PG 39:1755); Augustine (*Doctr. chr.* 2.12); Oecumenius (PG 119:513); and possibly 1 *Clement*⁷ as well as Papias.⁸ Several commentators (e.g., Kelly, 2; Michaels, xxxii; Guthrie, 760) find clear evidence of familiarity with 1 Peter in a letter from Polycarp of Smyrna to the believers in Philippi (early second century). Unlike 2 Peter, 1 Peter is not considered by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.3; 6.25) to be one of the *antilegomena*, the disputed books.⁹ Several of the Fathers (e.g., Didymus the Blind; Oecumenius) recognized that the letter has close affinities to the letter of James and that both men were apostles, though Peter concentrated more on those living outside Palestine.¹⁰ In the final analysis, attestation for 1 Peter’s authenticity appears as strong as any NT document.¹¹

The dating of 1 Peter is linked both to questions of authorship and the manner in which persecution as it is mirrored in the letter is understood. If the letter is genuinely Petrine, it is generally assumed to be dated in the mid-sixties AD. The author gives the impression that he is presently “in Babylon” (5:13), most probably a cryptic reference to Rome. Although we lack sufficient evidence to be conclusive about the persecutions mentioned in the letter, traditional scholarship has assumed a date for 1 Peter in the early- to mid-sixties, either immediately preceding or concurrent with the early stages of Neronic persecution. If Neronic persecution is in advanced stages, however, the reference in 2:13–15 to the political authorities is problematic at best,¹² and the rhetorical question posed in 3:13 seems nonsensical.¹³ For the minority of interpreters who assign the epistle a late dating, similarities between 1 Peter and the persecutions of Domitian¹⁴ or Trajan—as reflected, for example, in the letters to the emperor Trajan from Pliny, governor of the province of Bithynia (Pliny, *Ep. Tra.* 96, 97)—are typically adduced (of which Beare, 41–43, is representative).

What is the precise nature of the persecution to which the readers are subjected? And how are the sufferings on display in 1 Peter to be interpreted? A reading of the epistle suggests that the readers' suffering is of a generic variety, that is, it is probably more with *discrimination* than with persecution per se that they have to contend.¹⁵ The readers are said to "suffer for what is right" (*dia dikaiosynē paschō* [GK 4248], 3:14) and be "insulted because of the name of Christ" (*oneidizesthe* [GK 3943] *en onomati Christou*, 4:14); they endure "all kinds of trials" (*poikiloi peirasmoi* [GK 4280], 1:6) and "sufferings of Christ" (*eis Christon pathēmata* [GK 4077], 1:11).

Their social situation further suggests itself through the admonition "Live such good lives among the pagans that ... they may see your good deeds ..." (2:12). This state of affairs is unchanging, even in the face of misunderstanding, alienation, and slander. Being misunderstood, alienated, and slandered are realities that accompany normative Christian living—realities that are described in the context of the household code (2:13–3:7), which speaks to normal social relationships. This impression is further supported by the letter's opening admonition (1:13–16). The tone of this exhortation is decidedly ethical. Moreover, the sufferings in the body to which the readers are exposed are described in the context of being "done with sin" (*pepautai hamartias*, 4:1) and no longer living according to the flesh (*en sarki*, GK 4922), as the pagans live (4:2–3)—i.e., those who are surprised "that you do not plunge with them" into the same carnal excesses (4:4). The impression here is one of normative Christian living in pagan culture, a social context in which Christian discipleship stands in marked contrast. Significantly, the "purification" that the readers are undergoing (*hagnizō*, 1:22) is one for which *they themselves* are responsible, not the Lord.¹⁶

Thus, given (1) the generic character of persecution being depicted in the epistle, (2) the social context that was normative for Christians throughout the Roman Empire, (3) the distinction throughout the empire between *religiones licitae* and *religiones illicitae*, and (4) the relative restraint of the writer when describing the governing authorities (esp. when compared to the book of Revelation), imperial persecution may be less of a factor in interpreting 1 Peter than some commentators are willing to grant.¹⁷ It is reasonable to maintain that persecution of Christians could have occurred during the reign of any emperor from the middle of the first century

onward. Furthermore, local outbreaks of persecution throughout the empire would vary greatly. Finally, against the supposition that 1 Peter reflects the period of Domitian or Trajan, it should be kept in mind that Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 2.25.2–5) writes that Peter is succeeded as bishop of the church in Rome in the year 66.

Though secondary to the issues of authorship and persecution, a further hint informing the question of dating issues out of the writer's approach to church organization. Significantly, there is no allusion in 1 Peter to the offices of bishop (*episkopos*, GK 2176) or deacon (*diakonos*, GK 1356) that one might expect at the turn of the century or in the early second century; there is only mention of elders (5:1).¹⁸

On the basis of both internal and external evidence, then, the most likely scenario is that 1 Peter was written from Rome, with persecution imminent or building, in the mid-sixties, though Eusebius places Peter's death later.¹⁹

2. READERSHIP

The recipients of the letter are addressed as “God's elect strangers” who are scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1:1), which together constitute the northern region of Asia Minor.²⁰ Whether these are new believers is difficult to ascertain, although the contrast of “before” and “after” is prominent throughout the epistle (1:14–15, 18, 22; 4:1–5), indicating a predominately Gentile (though racially mixed) population. Given the governing metaphor of Diaspora or “sojourning,”²¹ the social location of the readers is Gentile and pagan, even when a sizable number of Jews inhabited parts of Asia Minor and Galatia in particular (cf. Ac 16:1–5). The greeting is consonant with the picture of the early church we find in the NT; thus Goppelt, 5, is justified in maintaining that 1 Peter presupposes and mirrors the spread of Christian faith. Already in the fifties, Ephesus, in addition to Galatia, had become a Christian center as a result of Paul's ministry. Colossians 4:12–16, moreover, creates the impression that the door to Pontus and Bithynia would be open by the sixties. Additionally, the order in which the provinces are listed is largely assumed to be the route traveled by the messenger in the delivery of this circular or encyclical letter (so Hort, 157–84, C. J. Hemer, “The Address of

1 Peter,” *ExpTim* 89 [1977/78]: 239–43, while Kelly, 42, adduces Josephus, *Ant.* 16.21–23, as evidences of such an ordered route).

Such a picture coincides with our prior argument that the discrimination/persecution and suffering being mirrored in 1 Peter is of a generic variety and not a result of state-induced policy (cf. 2:12). What we can reconstruct about the recipients from the epistle’s text is that they are of varied socioeconomic standing,²² and most likely predominately Gentile, given (1) the allusions to the preconversion state (e.g., 1:14, 18; 2:9; 4:3–4), (2) the relational duties expressed through the household code (2:13–3:12), and (3) the admonition toward civic duty over against the ruling authorities (2:13–17).

There is no evidence to suggest that either Peter (cf. 1:12) or the apostle Paul had worked in these provinces (cf. Ac 16:6–7), although people from “Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia” were present at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Ac 2:9). Nevertheless, if we suppose that Paul is dead, it would not be unnatural “for the surviving senior apostle to send a message of encouragement to Gentile churches if the apostle to the Gentiles was no longer alive” (thus Guthrie, 773). A plausible explanation for the listing of the provinces as we find it in 1:1 is that it represented the route by which the encyclical was to be delivered (see [section 4](#) below). It goes without saying that intense, state-directed persecution (were we to presuppose this element in the letter as in the book of Revelation) would have precluded such activity. To the contrary, the discrimination that the readers are suffering is described as worldwide (5:9).

First Peter combines features of private correspondence—e.g., terms of endearment (1:14; 2:11; 4:12), personal instructions (5:1–4), personal greetings (5:12–14), and a personal understanding of the readers’ plight (1:6; 3:13–15)—with those of a public encyclical, which is to circulate among various Christian communities in a wider geographical area. The writer’s appropriation of OT language and concepts, which are both direct and indirect, might inform us more about the theological orientation of the writer than the actual recipients themselves. Thus it is to the matter of literary composition we must now turn.

3. COMPOSITION AND LITERARY INTEGRITY

A merely casual reading of the epistle shows the writer's acquaintance with and dependence on the OT, both in his indirect allusion—by means of language, images, and theological understanding—and in direct citation.²³ Chester and Martin, 88, contend that, with the possible exception of Romans and Hebrews, “no NT book ... is so permeated with OT hints and ideas” as 1 Peter. Indeed, it might be reasonably argued that 1 Peter *exceeds* both Romans and Hebrews in its dependence on the OT; a strong case could surely be made for this claim.²⁴ Reliance on OT tradition material is mirrored in the following:

- use of the “sojourning”/Diaspora metaphor (1:1, 17; 2:11)
- the designation of the readers as “elect,” or “chosen” (1:1; 2:4; 5:13)
- the foreknowledge of God (1:2)
- allusion to the sprinkling of blood (1:2)
- reflections of Malachi 3:3 (1:7)
- allusion to the prophets of old (1:10–12)
- admonition to be holy because the Lord is holy (1:16)
- reflections of Exodus 12:5; Leviticus 22:19–21; Deuteronomy 17:1 (1:19)
- citation of Isaiah 40:6–8 (1:24–25)
- citation of Psalm 34:8 (2:3)
- reminiscences of Psalm 118:22 (2:4)
- reflections of Isaiah 56:7 (2:5)
- reflections of Exodus 19:5–6 (2:4–5, 9)
- allusion to the offering of sacrifices (2:5)
- citation of Isaiah 28:16 (2:6)
- citation of Psalm 118:22 and reflections of Isaiah 8:14 (2:7–8)
- allusion to a chosen people (2:9)
- allusion to a holy nation (2:9)
- allusion to a people belonging to God (2:9)
- reflections of Isaiah 42:16 (2:9)
- allusion to Hosea 1:6, 9, 10; 2:23 (2:10)
- allusion to the day of visitation (2:12)
- reflections of Isaiah 53:4–5, 7, 9, 11 (2:22–24)
- use of the sheep/shepherd metaphor (2:25; 5:2, 4)
- allusion to Sarah and Abraham (3: 6)

- citation of Psalm 34:12–16 (3:10)
- allusion to Noah (3:20)
- reflections of Psalm 110:1–2 (3:22)
- allusion to grumbling (4:9)
- allusion to judgment (4:17)
- reminiscences of Proverbs 11:31 (4:17–18)
- reflections of Psalm 31:5 (4:19)
- use of the Babylon metaphor (5:13)

The writer is particularly adept at taking OT concepts and images and weaving them together into important themes (e.g., the “stone” passages and the people/priesthood/nation passages).²⁵ These strands, while they are the object of further discussion in [section 7](#) below, require some comment at this point.

It is an understatement to say that the recent history of the interpretation of 1 Peter has been characterized by diverse exegetical approaches. Part of the reason for this is the epistle’s literary character, which is thought to complicate the exegetical task. In what is perhaps the most extensive examination of Petrine scholarship over the last one hundred years, Troy Martin, in *Metaphor and Composition in 1 Peter*, identifies numerous interpretive approaches that have emerged.²⁶ Some scholars believe 1 Peter to be comprised of two different letters.²⁷ Some regard the letter as a baptismal homily in its entirety, while others allege that a baptismal sermon has been spliced into the letter.²⁸ Yet others take an opposite approach, viewing the original as the sermon with a letter simply appended.²⁹ A variation of these is the view that 1 Peter is a letter containing two baptismal homilies.³⁰ Another variation is that 1 Peter represents a paschal liturgy.³¹ Those who see no rhyme or reason to the structure of 1 Peter tend to view the letter as a series of exhortations.³² Still others detect in the epistle several unrelated themes.³³

Most—though by no means all—commentaries take note of the variations on the baptismal theme. In the end, attempts to read a baptismal or liturgical context into 1 Peter provide an inadequate—though intriguing—method of examining the letter. At the most rudimentary level, there is only one reference to baptism that surfaces in the entire epistle.

As we consider the question of composition, one influential study worthy of note is J. H. Elliott’s *A Home for the Homeless*.³⁴ Herein Elliott takes a

central metaphor employed by the writer—“strangers,” or “aliens” (1:1)—and interprets it literally in a sociopolitical sense to mean people who are disenfranchised, those living on the margins of society. The identification of this imagery is without question important to the letter’s interpretation; nevertheless, Elliott’s understanding of the metaphor, while useful, needs modification.³⁵ The proper way to interpret this controlling metaphor of the Diaspora (1:1)—the counterpart of which is “Babylon,” utilized at the end of the letter (5:13)—is metaphorically.³⁶ Indeed the epistle of James utilizes the same imagery (1:1), with its greeting extended to the twelve tribes in the Diaspora.

A proper construal of this metaphor has important implications for our interpretation of 1 Peter. The depiction of the readers as “Diaspora,” as Kelly, 4, rightly notes, is a representative instance of the early church’s habit of “transferring to itself, as the new Israel, the language appropriate to the experience of the old.” Danker (“Consolatory Pericope,” 99) concurs, emphasizing that the new community is an *extension* of Israel, even when a crucial difference exists: in the OT, Israel suffered due to disobedience. This is by no means the case in 1 Peter, however. The images that appear in the epistle can be understood as corollaries, then, of the Diaspora metaphor—for example, sojourning, a holy nation, a chosen people, and the household/temple of God (all of which appear in 1:14–2:10), in addition to righteous suffering (2:11–3:12 and 3:13–5:12).³⁷ In contrast to the wildly divergent attempts to understand 1 Peter’s literary structure already noted, most of which result in disunity, this interpretive scheme renders unitary—and intelligible—the epistle of 1 Peter.

4. FORM ANALYSIS

The epistle as a generic form, writes Klaus Berger, is “not only an external transmission form of written communication, but it is also essentially a major genre with constitutive characteristics.”³⁸ First Peter follows the standard form of the Greek private letter, with its introduction, greeting (*chairō*, GK 5897), body proper, and conclusion,³⁹ and falls somewhere between public and private correspondence.⁴⁰ The typical letter opens with identification of the sender and the address to the receiver, followed by a greeting. On occasion the sender’s identity is expanded; on occasion that of

the recipient is amplified. In 1 Peter a modified greeting, “grace and peace” (standard in most Pauline epistles), is used. As to its specific character, 1 Peter may be understood as something of an encyclical,⁴¹ given the geographical distribution of the addressees and the needs being addressed.

The epistle not only constitutes its own genre; it also serves as a “framing” mechanism for other genres. In his important monograph on 1 Peter, Troy Martin, 85, has called attention to the presence in the epistle of an inordinate number of imperatives, beginning with 1:13 and extending to 5:12.⁴² Admonitions and prescriptives are the language of paraenesis, i.e., hortatory literature. While paraenesis (the *logos parainētikos*; cf. Ac 27:9, 22), or moral exhortation, is found in virtually every NT epistle, the Christian paraenetic tradition is perhaps most richly on display in the General Epistles.⁴³ In these letters, ethics and pastoral theology rather than theological formulations of doctrine per se are accentuated.⁴⁴ Paraenesis has as its goal the presentation of a standard for conduct, and it is this ethical trajectory that characterizes 1 Peter.⁴⁵ Accordingly, paraenesis typically incorporates the elements of regulatory rules of conduct, ethical proscriptions, ethical justification, warnings, and catalogs of virtue and/or vice.⁴⁶

Compositional considerations, noted in the previous section, combine with lexical peculiarities, literary-rhetorical devices, and the social context of the readers to inform us of the literary genre of 1 Peter, which we have identified as paraenesis. The presence of each of these elements in this epistle deserves comment.

A peculiar feature of 1 Peter to which a considerable amount of literature has been devoted is the so-called household or station code.⁴⁷ The purpose of this device can be detected in its content and the relative uniformity of its form. Household codes appearing in antiquity reiterate the duties and obligations that encompass the family circle—typically men, women, children, masters, and slaves. For example, husbands and wives demonstrate reciprocal love and respect, while children are to show obedience. Four of these constitutive elements are found in 1 Peter—slaves and masters (2:18–20), wives (3:1–6), and husbands (3:7)—while children are absent. Yet a fifth—“all of you” (3:8–9; 5:5)—might be added to this list of obligations in the letter (so T. Martin, 126), based on the writer’s

exhortation toward subordination, which undergirds the purpose of the household code in its generic sense.

It is often the case that the social situation behind paraenesis dictates a relationship of the author to his readers which is that of a father figure to a son or mentor to a disciple, the effect of which is to lend moral authority to his accompanying exhortations (so Berger, “Hellenistische Gattungen,” 1076). Such a relationship is certainly mirrored in the manner by which the writer addresses his audience. In 1 Peter he utilizes terms of endearment (1:11; 4:12), empathizes with his readers (5:1–5), reaffirms what they already know, and reminds them that they have a model to follow (3:13–14, 18–22), all of which have the effect of facilitating moral persuasion or dissuasion.

5. LITERARY RELATIONSHIP TO 2 PETER

It is broadly assumed by NT scholarship that the two Petrine letters do not issue from the same individual. Reasons for this are doctrinal and linguistic, as well as historical. Unlike 1 Peter, with its rich Christology (cross and atonement, resurrection, ascension and session, baptism), 2 Peter is thought to be devoid of theological affirmation aside from its eschatological outlook. Indeed, 1 Peter is universally praised for the exalted theological perspective it advocates. Chester and Martin, 104, are representative:

Probably no document in the New Testament is so theologically oriented as 1 Peter, if the description is taken in the strict sense of teaching about God. The epistle is theocentric through and through, and its author has a robust faith in God which he seeks to impart to the readers. The author’s mind is filled with the centrality of the divine plan and purpose in both human and cosmic affairs, from the opening exultation ... to the closing affirmation and appeal.

While 1 Peter, when contrasted with 2 Peter, strikes the reader as theologically richer, this may be the result of pastoral need rather than the writer’s own theological orientation. Linguistically, the two epistles, while

both exhibiting an elevated use of the Greek, have their distinct features. Furthermore, their appropriation of Jewish tradition-material—both biblical and extrabiblical—would seem to differ in methodology. For example, whereas 2 Peter does not utilize any direct citations, 1 Peter engages Jewish sources in both direct and indirect ways. Both, however, make paraenetic use of their sources, creatively marshaling typology and metaphor for the purpose of moral exhortation. In the end, both epistles address a readership that finds itself in a pervasively Gentile social environment, even when the specific needs in the community appear to be different.

On closer examination, 1 and 2 Peter exhibit numerous points of resemblance that are striking in and of themselves.⁴⁸ These similarities, which are theological, lexical, and rhetorical in nature, are deserving of mention:

1. Christ's second coming is a major focus of both letters (1:7, 13; 4:13; 5:4//1:16; 3:12).
2. Correlatively, the theme of judgment surfaces in both (1:17; 2:21; 4:5–6, 17//2:3–4, 9, 11; 3:6–7).
3. Much of the material in both is devoted to the presentation of a distinctive Christian social ethic (1:13–17, 22; 2:1, 11–20; 3:1–17; 4:1–19; 5:1–11//1:5–15; 2:4–22; 3:1–7, 11–18).
4. Divine “foreknowledge” (*epignōsis*, GK 2106) in both letters establishes the basis on which the saints can interpret the dealings of God (1:2//1:2–3, 8; 2:20).
5. An important subtheme in both letters is divine election, the cornerstone of the ethical life (1:1, 15; 2:4, 6, 9, 21; 3:6, 9; 5:10, 13 [*syneklektos*, GK 5293]//1:3, 10 [*eklogē*, GK 1724]).
6. Correlatively, the language of “reserving,” or “keeping/holding” (*tēreō*, GK 5498), is employed in both letters (1:4//2:4, 9, 17; 3:7).
7. In both letters, grace and peace are multiplied to the readers (1:2//1:2).
8. Divine glory (*doxa*, GK 1518) and the glory of Christ feature prominently in both letters (1:7, 11, 21, 24; 4:11, 13–14; 5:1, 4, 10–11//1:3, 17; 2:10; 3:18).
9. Being holy (*hagios*, GK 41) is an important subtheme in both letters (1:12, 15–16; 2:5, 9; 3:5//1:18, 21; 2:21; 3:2, 11).

10. Correlatively, the saints as “righteous” (*dikaios*, GK 1465) and “righteousness” (*dikaiosynē*, GK 1466) are prominent in both letters (2:24; 3:12, 14, 18; 4:18//1:1, 13; 2:5, 7–8, 21; 3:13).
11. Being “without blemish” (*amōmos*, *aspilos*, GK 320, 834), whether denoting Christ or the saints, is important in both letters (1:19//3:14).
12. One’s “way of life,” or “behavior” (*anastrophē*, GK 419) is of utmost importance in both letters (1:15, 18; 2:12; 3:1–2, 16//2:7; 3:11).
13. The triune God—the Father, Christ the Son, and the Spirit—is presented in both letters (1:2–3, 11–13, 17, 19; 2:5, 21; 3:4, 15–16, 18–19, 21; 4:1, 6, 11, 13–14; 5:1, 10, 14//1:1, 8, 11, 14, 16–17, 21; 2:20; 3:4, 18).
14. Prophets, prophesying, and prophecy occur in both letters (1:10//1:21; 2:1, 16, 19; 3:2).
15. Correlatively, the “word(s) of the Lord/prophets” (1:23, 25; 2:8; 3:1//1:19; 3:2, 5, 7) figures prominently in both.
16. Both letters conclude with an exhortation to grow or stand fast in the grace of God (5:12//3:18), which is an important concept for both writers (1:2, 10, 13; 2:19–20; 3:7; 4:10; 5:5, 10, 12//1:2; 3:18).
17. Both letters employ moral paradigms in the service of promoting Christian ethics (2:21–25; 3:5–6; 3:18–20; 5:1//2:4–10, 15–16).
18. Noah appears in both letters as a model of faithfulness (3:20//2:5).
19. The reality of the angelic realm, both in facilitating and resisting the divine purpose, is mirrored in both letters (1:12; 3:19, 22; 5:8//2:4).
20. The fallen angels are depicted as imprisoned in both letters (3:19//2:4).
21. The flood is mentioned in both letters (3:20//2:5; 3:5–6).
22. Correlatively, the disobedient are described as “unrighteous” (3:18//2:9).
23. “Salvation” (*sōtēria*, GK 5401) from the Lord appears in both letters (1:5, 9–10//3:15).
24. Virtue, i.e., “moral excellence, praises, goodness” (*aretē*, GK 746), appears in the Petrine letters three of the four times it is

- found in the NT (2:9//1:3, 5).
25. Brotherly affection (*philadelphia*, GK 5789) is commended in both letters (1:22; 3:8//1:7).
 26. God “provides/supplies in abundance” (*epichorēgeō*, *chorēgeō*, GK 2220, 5961) for the saints as described in both letters (4:11//1:5, 11).
 27. The writer of both letters addresses his readers as “dear friends” (2:11; 4:12//3:14).
 28. Both letters utilize the metaphor of redemption drawn from the slave market (1:18//2:1),
 29. thereby reminding the readers of their spiritual freedom (*eleutheria*, GK 1800) (2:16//2:19).
 30. Both letters appeal to the patience (*makrothymia*, GK 3429) of God (3:20//3:9, 15).
 31. Correlatively, this knowledge spawns greater endurance (*hypomonē*, GK 5705) in both letters (2:20//1:6).
 32. Both letters condemn the licentiousness (*aselgeia*, GK 816) of surrounding pagan culture (4:3//2:2).
 33. Both letters warn the readers to abstain from fleshly lusts (*epithymia*, GK 2123) (1:14; 2:11; 4:2–3//1:4; 2:10, 18; 3:3).
 34. Both letters appropriate an eschatological perspective that links present living with future promise (1:5, 7, 20–21; 4:13//2:3–4, 9, 11; 3:3, 6–7).
 35. In both letters the world “perishes” (*apollymi*, GK 660; 1:7//3:6, 9).
 36. The only occurrences of the word “eyewitness” in the NT are in the Petrine letters, in its verbal form (“see,” *epopteuō*, GK 2227) and nominal form (*epoptēs*, GK 2228) respectively (2:12; 3:2//1:16).
 37. The intended result of both letters is that the saints be “established” (*stērizō*, GK 5114) in their faith (5:10//1:12).
 38. This being “established” stands in direct relation to the saints’ “knowing” (*eidotes* [GK 3857], *eidotas*; 5:9//1:12).
 39. In both letters the writer’s self-designation is an “apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1//1:1).
 40. Personal apostolic reminiscences are employed in both letters (5:1//1:14, 16–18).

41. Both letters contain similar doxological praise (4:11//3:18).

6. TRENDS IN PETRINE SCHOLARSHIP

Critical scholarship of the last fifty years has sought to probe authorship, purpose, and literary form in 1 Peter. More recent Petrine scholarship has concerned itself both with literary structure and sociological perspectives. Even when the assessments of critical scholars such as Stephen Neill (1 Peter represents the “storm center of NT studies”; *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1961* [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966], 343) and Elliott (the letter is an “exegetical step-child” of NT studies; “Rehabilitation of an Exegetical Step-Child,” 243–54) may seem somewhat extreme, the sheer volume of recent commentary on 1 Peter has presented us with fresh interpretive perspectives.⁴⁹ Much of the recent work in 1 Peter has heightened our appreciation for the writer’s deft use of tradition-material that informs his literary-rhetorical strategy as well as the epistle’s literary unity.⁵⁰ That scholars have searched for an appropriate hermeneutical key using wildly divergent methods is not to consign the letter to the status of an enigma, even when it has caused some to remark that the study of 1 Peter is “at a crossroads” (so J. D. McCaughey, “On Rereading 1 Peter,” *ATHR* 10 [1983]: 41–49; Pearson, 2).

Questions have been raised by mid- and late-twentieth-century scholarship as to the letter’s authenticity. This argument consists of several planks that have already been noted—among them the dating and precise nature of persecution being mirrored in the letter, the apostle’s prior contact with churches in Asia Minor, the elegance of the Greek employed by the writer, and questions surrounding the role of “Silvanus [Silas].”⁵¹

In the previous section we observed the tendency of some scholarship—both past and recent—to associate 1 Peter with a baptismal homily or liturgy. While parts of the letter present credible evidence for this theory, this approach in its variations is not without weaknesses in explaining the epistle’s literary unity and overall purpose.⁵² Nevertheless, these variations on the baptism theme, in their sheer number and diversity, are compelling and thus are to be taken seriously. Is baptism primary or secondary in our interpretation of 1 Peter? In offering a comprehensive compositional

analysis of 1 Peter, we will have to contextualize baptism against the backdrop of the letter's purpose and dominant themes.

7. PURPOSE AND PROMINENT THEMES

It can be rightly argued that the significance of 1 Peter is disproportionate to its length. Thus, Waltner, 17, observes that “its potential significance for contemporary church life and ethics ... is larger than the brevity of the letter suggests.” Indeed Martin Luther (*Luther's Works* 12.260) would agree, having declared that 1 Peter was “one of the most significant and convicting works of the New Testament.” And how could it be otherwise? Its universal appeal is guaranteed by the themes it addresses—suffering, hope, promise, and divine care.

Several catchwords hold a prominent place in the letter and assist the reader in identifying crucial themes. Initially, the saints are depicted as “called” or “chosen”/“elect” multiple times throughout the epistle. In fact, the language of “calling” (*kaleō*, GK 2813, used six times [1:15; 2:9; 2:21; 3:6; 3:9; 5:10]; *eklektos*, GK 1723, used four times [1:1; 2:4; 2:6; 2:9]) forms something of an *inclusio* in the letter's opening and closing (1:1; 5:10).⁵³ In addition, the language of “suffering” is pervasive. It is a suffering, moreover, that has two sides: both the saints and Christ “suffer” innocently;⁵⁴ indeed, the saints share in the “sufferings”⁵⁵ and “testing”⁵⁶ of Christ.

Most commentary recognizes the theme of suffering in 1 Peter, though as we have noted there is great diversity of opinion as to the epistle's literary composition and form-critical considerations. Furthermore, there is a wide divergence of opinion as to the precise nature of the readers' suffering and, consequently, as to the writer's use of relevant sources. Nevertheless, innocent suffering is assumed or acknowledged by all commentators, regardless of their views on literary composition.

For the purposes of thematic unity, a brief review is in order. Elliott (*A Home for the Homeless*, 48, 129) sees in 1 Peter “resident aliens,” people who are sociologically marginalized. Schutter, 108, believes 1 Peter is a homily on righteous suffering, specifically a suffering that leads to glory. Michaels, 295, likewise sees the theme of humiliation leading to exaltation as a prominent motif in 1 Peter, with a basis in the OT, the gospel

narratives, and elsewhere in Christian literature. Hillyer, 4, maintains that the emphasis of 1 Peter is hope, given the grace of God that enables the readers to overcome trial and tribulation; for Clowney, 24, as well, bearing witness to the grace of God is the letter's burden. Goppelt, 19, identifies the letter's central theme as living in a non-Christian society and overcoming hardship. Similarly, Krodel, 42, understands the epistle to communicate encouragement and consolation on the basis of divine grace to believers under duress. Mounce, 5, believes the letter is intended to extend hope to those enduring hardships as a result of their Christian commitment, while Donelson, 71, sees 1 Peter as a reflection of alienation due to Christians' moral rigor.⁵⁷ And Waltner, 18, holds that the burden of the letter is aimed at *how* the readers respond to their experience of suffering, with Christ as their model.

Attentive to the role of suffering in the epistle, T. Martin, 273, calls attention to the role played in 1 Peter by “the overarching and controlling metaphor of the Diaspora.” From the opening verse to the letter's end, “images and concepts from the Jewish Diaspora dominate the material. The Diaspora provides the author with an image contributor that allows him to describe his readers' ontological status as well as the morality ensuing from that status.” This leitmotif may be understood to have two purposes: (1) to encourage the readers to engage the course of life in terms of a journey, and (2) to admonish them not to grow faint in heart when they encounter trials and opposition to the faith, even grief—all of which arise in the context of their pagan social location.

In light of this dual function of the governing “Diaspora” metaphor, baptism may be understood to ground once for all the saints in those realities they have confessed—Christ's atonement and salvation, resurrection, ascension, and rule by session. In this sense, baptism “saves” (3:21), for in the context of suffering the saints are promised rescue by God, just as the water saved Noah.

The epistle's thematic structure proceeds from the readers' very identification in the greeting. The saints are simultaneously “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” and “strangers in the world, scattered ...” (1:1–2). Thus the major blocks of material in 1 Peter are devoted to—and issue out of—these themes: the readers are (1) a called and holy people (1:13–2:10); (2) strangers and sojourners in this world

(2:11–3:12); and (3) sufferers whose righteous suffering will ultimately be vindicated (3:13–5:11). Chester and Martin, 114, summarize the message of 1 Peter well: “1 Peter is designed to inculcate that our lives are not at the mercy of ruthless forces outside [our] control, and that the beneficent power called God has entered our human experience of suffering and distress—and triumphed.”

8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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9. OUTLINE

- I. Letter Opening (1:1–2)
- II. Letter Body (1:3–5:11)
 - A. Theological Prolegomena on Christian Hope (1:3–12)
 - 1. The Basis for Hope (1:3–5)
 - 2. The Benefits of Hope (1:6–9)
 - 3. The Privilege of Hope (1:10–12)

B. Christian Identity as the New Diaspora Community (1:13–2:10)

1. The New Community's Lifestyle (1:13–2:3)

- a. The Lifestyle of Holiness (1:13–16)
- b. The Lifestyle of Reverence (1:17–21)
- c. The Lifestyle of Love (1:22–25)
- d. The Lifestyle of Transformation (2:1–3)

2. The New Community's Identity (2:4–10)

- a. The Paradox of Election and Rejection (2:4–8)
- b. God's People as God's Chosen (2:9–10)

C. Christian Witness as a Diaspora Community (2:11–3:12)

1. The Necessity of Good Deeds (2:11–12)

2. The Necessity of Ordered Relationships (2:13–3:12)

- a. A Christian View of Authority (2:13–17)
- b. A Christian View of Unjust Treatment (2:18–25)
- c. A Christian View of Marriage (3:1–7)
- d. A Christian Response to Unjust Treatment (3:8–12)

D. Christian Suffering Due to Righteous Living (3:13–5:11)

1. A Christian Perspective on Suffering (3:13–4:6)

- a. Preparing a Christian Response to Suffering (3:13–17)
- b. Christ's Suffering and Vindication (3:18–22)
- c. Christ's Example as Motivation for Living (4:1–6)

2. Eschatology and Christian Ethics (4:7–19)

- a. Eschatology and Christian Relationships (4:7–11)
- b. Eschatology and Christian Suffering (4:12–19)

3. Christian Leadership in the New Diaspora Community (5:1–11)

- a. Challenge to the Elders (5:1–4)
- b. Challenge to the Young Men (5:5a)
- c. Challenge to All (5:5b–9)

d. Benediction and Doxology (5:10–11)

III. Letter Closing (5:12–14)

A. Acknowledgment of Silvanus's Assistance (5:12a)

B. Purpose of the Letter (5:12b)

C. Greetings (5:13–14)

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1. It is plausible that 2 Peter 1:15 is a reference to the gospel of Mark.
 2. Irenaeus (late second century) ascribes the letter to the apostle Peter (*Haer.* 3.1.1; 4.9.2; 4:16.5; 5.7.2). Michaels, xxxiii, adroitly observes the importance of geography: “The testimony of Irenaeus is significant because Irenaeus was active not only in Asia Minor but also in the West.” Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.2) acknowledges that the letter is one of the undisputed books (see further illuminating comments by Eusebius [2.15 and 6.25.8]). See also Oecumenius and Andreas (cited in Bray, 126–27), each of whom attests to the letter’s authenticity.
 3. Examining the theological and linguistic parallels between 1 Peter and the gospel tradition is the thrust of Robert Gundry’s essays (“‘*Verba Christi*’ in 1 Peter: Their Implications Concerning the Authorship of 1 Peter and the Authenticity of the Gospel Tradition,” *NTS* 13 [1966/67]: 336–50; “Further *Verba* on *Verba Christi* in 1 Peter,” *Bib* 55 [1974]: 211–32). E. Best (“1 Peter and the Gospel Tradition,” *NTS* 16 [1970]: 95–113) has done the same, although he adopts a different approach. While Gundry assumes authenticity of the gospel passages, Best ascribes any similarities to the early church’s catechetical material. Similarly, Hillyer, 1–2, has helpfully noted material and themes common to 1 Peter and the Gospels and Acts, while Michaels, xl–xlii, considers the writer’s use of the OT and the gospel tradition.
 4. Guthrie, 763–64, maintains that the more likely meaning of *agrammatos* (GK 63) is “not formally trained” rather than “illiterate.”
 5. Neither is the language of the letter a problem, nor is it necessary to say in an inflated way with Beare, 28, that the use of a secretary in 1 Peter is “a device of desperation,” nor can one, based on the ancient evidence, say with Achtemeier, 8, that *dia Silouanou* “in fact ... probably cannot” mean secretarial assistance. On the peculiarities and distinctiveness of vocabulary and style in 1 Peter, see Elliott, 41–68. One need not argue, as Michaels, lxii, 306–7, and E. R. Richards (“Silvanus Was Not Peter’s Secretary: Theological Bias in Interpreting *dia Silouanou* ... *egrapsa* in 1 Peter 5:12,” *JETS* 43/3 [2000]: 417–32), that the phrase “through Silvanus” more likely indicates the *bearer* of the letter. The role of a “co-sender” is anything but clear. Moreover, the reference to Silvanus in 5:12 naturally suggests secretarial help. Contra Michaels, 307, who writes that “if Silvanus had even a small part in writing the letter, it is more plausible that his name would have been linked with Peter’s at the outset,” Paul’s use of Tertius as a secretary appears at the *end*, not the beginning, of Romans (16:22). And Richards, 432, after attempting to build a case that Silvanus did *not* write 1 Peter, in the end is left to concede that “Silvanus certainly *could* have been the secretary” (emphasis his). Finally, it is a breathtaking overstatement to assert, as F. W. Danker does (“1 Peter 1, 24–2, 17: A Consolatory Pericope,” *ZNW* 58 [1967]: 102), that “Silvanus’s role as midwife [is] largely irrelevant, and pseudonymous authorship [is] beyond the need of further demonstration.”
 6. Evidence of the use of professionally trained scribes or secretaries (Lat., *amanuenses*) abounds in the literature of antiquity. In Greco-Roman culture, those who were educated were trained in

dictation, a practice that remained part of the Western educational tradition until relatively recently (thus J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer* [GNS 41; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995], 8). These scribes would have been employed by both the relatively illiterate and those of the upper class, such as public officials and businessmen, for letter writing, providing documentation, and maintaining records. The role of the amanuensis, couched as the sender's coworker, combined with the sender's apostolic authority to lend the letters of the NT an official character. This would be all the more important in the provincial and somewhat cosmopolitan surroundings of Asia Minor.

While Paul composed letters both independently and in collaboration with others, he did not always write them out. Such an example is his letter to the Romans, dictated to and written by Tertius: "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord" (Ro 16:22). Other remarks by Paul regarding his own handwriting reveal the possible presence of a secretary (e.g., 1Co 16:21; Gal 6:11; Col 4:18; 2Th 3:17; Phm 19). In the end, the problem of eloquence in 1 Peter is no real problem.

7. Bigg, 7–9, attempts to identify close parallels between *1 Clement* (late first century) and 1 Peter. J. B. Mayor (*The Epistle of St. Jude and the Second Epistle of St. Peter* [New York: Macmillan, 1907], cxx) and Wand, 9, believe that Clement's use of 1 Peter is notable. Numerous correspondences between *1 Clement* and 1 Peter are also noted by Kelly, 12.
8. We learn of Papias through Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.17), who writes that Papias had cited 1 Peter.
9. At the same time, Eusebius draws attention to several "spurious" and "questioned" Petrine works—among these are the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Acts of Peter*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and the *Doctrine of Peter*.
10. A patristic consensus is outlined in Bray, 65. Didymus the Blind writes, "Why does Peter, an apostle to the Jews, write to those who are scattered in the dispersion, when most of them were still living in Judea at the time? To understand his meaning, we have to compare what he says with texts like [Ps 39:12], 'I am a pilgrim and stranger on earth, as were all my forefathers.'"
11. Thus the claim of Elliott, 124—it is "virtually certain that 1 Peter is a pseudonymous letter"—needs attenuation. Similarly, R. P. Martin's assertion (Chester and Martin, 92) that "the question of authorship remains unresolved" is an overstatement, while his remark that "the traditional view which accepts the claims of the epistle to be apostolic is more reasonable than any alternative hypothesis" is understated. And while Craddock, 13, states what may be factually correct—"Arguing for or against Petrine authorship has lost its importance for most students of this letter"—his rationale will be unsatisfactory for many: "This letter represents the teaching and preaching of Simon Peter and extends that ministry into Asia Minor, whether or not Simon penned it, dictated it, or was the source of the content used by a follower of his." Most assuredly, the early church did not share this view of authorship.
12. To "honor" the emperor in the midst of Nero's mid-64 campaign against Christians strikes the reader as perverse. First Peter 2:13–15 is written in the same spirit as Romans 13:1–10. The book of Revelation is the only NT book where the emperor is demonized. At the other extreme, to honor the emperor in the face of second-century persecution, if one presupposes a late date for the letter, also strikes the reader as incredible. It is precisely this language—the language of respect toward political authorities—that constitutes evidence of an early dating of 1 Peter for J. H. L. Dijkman ("1 Peter: A Later Pastoral Stratum?" *NTS* 33 [1987]: 265–71).
13. W. M. Ramsay (*The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 70* [3d ed.; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1894], 282–88) challenges the broadly accepted idea that Peter was martyred during Neronian rule by arguing that the letter is Petrine but dated at about AD 80. Church tradition regarding Peter's martyrdom largely rests on the statements of Eusebius and *1 Clement* that Peter was in Rome at the end of his life and that he died a martyr's death, with

- precisely where and when remaining speculative. Grudem, 36, sees some leeway here, arguing that Peter was in Rome *near* the end but not necessarily *at* the very end of his life.
14. Reicke, 72, asks where the writer's instructions on confronting sacrifices to the emperor are if 1 Peter is mirroring Domitian persecution. W. H. C. Frend (*Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965], 217) downplays the level of persecution during Domitian's reign: "In Rome the persecution of Domitian does not appear to have amounted to very much."
 15. Goppelt, 36–45, has perhaps best summarized the social setting facing the readers.
 16. Perhaps the primary reason for the supposition that 1 Peter is addressing a fiercer, concentrated sort of persecution induced by the state is the allusion in 4:12 to the "painful trial" that is testing the readers. The command "do not be surprised" (*mē xenizesthe*, GK 3826) is already used in 4:4 to describe the reaction of pagans who wonder why the Christians are not indulging in excesses. The sense of the imperative appears to be moderate wonder—"Don't entertain the thought"—rather than a response to catastrophic paralysis—"Be faithful unto death." The former is hardly the language one would expect if political terror resulting in execution were afoot.
 17. See, e.g., D. Warden, "Imperial Persecution and the Dating of 1 Peter and Revelation," *JETS* 34/2 (1991): 203–12. Unquestionably, assessing the character of imperial persecution toward the Christian church, difficult as it is, requires an examination of practices in the provinces, where tensions vary considerably. The imperial cult, e.g., would appear to be notably entrenched in Ephesus, Pergamum, and Smyrna (cf. in this regard Rev 2:8–17), though not universally so. Consider the exhortation to the church in Smyrna: "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev 2:10). In the end, we can only guess at the degree to which impending persecution in its concentrated form is present.
 18. Selwyn, 56–63; U. Holmer (*Die Briefe des Petrus und der Brief des Judas* [Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1976], 14–15); Barclay, 165; and E. Schweizer (*Der erste Petrusbrief* [3d ed.; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973], 11) all point to an early date based simply on church organization, since there is no mention in 1 Peter of bishops or deacons. Elliott ("Rehabilitation of an Exegetical Step-Child," 254) holds a middle-of-the-road position, i.e., between AD 70 and 90, based on certain form-critical considerations (e.g., the reworking of material in Christian circles).
 19. Those who hold 1 Peter to be pseudonymous tend to link the epistle with the persecutions under Domitian (late first century) or Trajan (second decade of the second century). Michaels (lvii–lxi) goes to great lengths to relativize supposed allusions to Peter's martyrdom, whether from the fourth gospel (e.g., John 21) or from pseudepigraphal sources (e.g., *Epistle of Clement to James*). While it is impossible to be conclusive about Peter's death, the warning of Michaels, lxi, "against linking the question of the authorship of 1 Peter too closely to the question of date" is perhaps overstated. Indeed the two are intertwined, even when precision eludes us as to when Peter died, based on church tradition.
 20. The exception is Galatia, which also extends southward.
 21. Contra Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 142–43, whose position is maintained in his commentary (*1 Peter*, 94–97, 476–83), we take the "Diaspora" allusion in 1:1 to be metaphorical and not literal. For an evaluation of Elliott's argument, which deserves serious consideration, see [section 3](#) below.
 22. Best, 17, points to 2:18–3:7 as evidence of this diversity. Specifically, 2:13–17 may be addressed to freemen, a group probably including wealthy individuals.

23. See in this regard E. G. Selwyn, "Eschatology in 1 Peter," in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1956), 394–401. Schutter, 5–43, believes that half of the epistle consists of OT material. Two attempts to illuminate the hermeneutic employed in 1 Peter are D. E. Johnson, "Fire in God's House: Imagery from Malachi 3 in Peter's Theology of Suffering (1 Peter 4:12–19)," *JETS* 29/3 [1986]: 285–94; and W. L. Schutter, "1 Peter 4:17, Ezekiel 9:6 and Apocalyptic Hermeneutics," *SBLSP* 26 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 276–84.
24. Goppelt, 30–31, conveniently supplies a list of notable similarities between 1 Peter and James, as does Hillyer, 8–9.
25. Davids, 211, has listed not only direct citations but also perceived allusions to the OT, some of which I have noted and others of which, though likely, are more difficult to assess. On the matter of varying hermeneutical approaches to Jewish tradition-material and the degree to which such material is "borrowed," particularly as it is on display in the General Epistles, see my articles "Noncanonical Citations in the General Epistles," and "The Old Testament in the General Epistles," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 814–19, 834–41.
26. Martin's volume is devoted to an analysis of the letter's structural integrity. In his survey of scholarship, Martin identifies six general explanations for the composition of 1 Peter. More recently, S. C. Pearson (see [bibliography](#)) identifies five: (1) epistle, (2) baptismal homily, (3) baptismal liturgy, (4) apologetic tract, and (5) homiletic midrash.
27. So, e.g., Hort, 3; Wand, 1–2; C. F. D. Moule, "The Nature and Purpose of 1 Peter," *NTS* 3 (1956/57): 1–11.
28. So, e.g., H. Gunkel, *Der erste Brief des Petrus* (SNT 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), 530; Reicke, 74; O. S. Brooks, "1 Peter 3:21—The Clue to the Literary Structure of the Epistle," *NovT* 16 (1974): 290–305; and more recently, Schutter, 35–43.
29. So, e.g., A. von Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis Eusebius—Vol. 1* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1897), 451; R. Perdelwitz, *Die Mysterienreligion and das Problem des I. Petrusbriefes* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1911), 12–15; W. Bornemann, "Der erste Petrusbrief: Eine Taufrede des Silvanus?" *ZNW* 19 (1920): 161; H. Windisch, *Die katholischen Briefe* (HNT 4/2, 2d ed.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1930), 46–47; Beare, 8; Leaney, 8.
30. So R. P. Martin, "The Composition of 1 Peter in Recent Study," in *Vox Evangelica: Biblical and Historical Essays*, ed. R. P. Martin (London: Epworth, 1962), 40.
31. So Cross, 20. The position of R. P. Martin (see [previous note](#)) resembles to a certain degree that of Cross: 1 Peter is an epistle that incorporates catechetical and liturgical material.
32. So, e.g., Cranfield, 122; W. C. van Unnik, "First Letter of Peter," in *IDB* 3:759–68; W. Schrage, *Die "katholischen" Briefe* (NTD 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), 64–65.
33. So, e.g., Goppelt, 8–12; Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless*, 284; Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 124.
34. See also, more recently, Elliott's *1 Peter* in the Anchor Bible series.
35. To his credit, Elliott (*A Home for the Homeless*, 13–14) demonstrates a willingness and ability to bring insights from a variety of disciplines to bear on exegesis. His approach seeks to direct attention to the "total constellation of factors" (ecological, economic, political, social, and cultural, including religious) that shape the context in which a text is produced.
36. D. L. Balch ("Hellenization/Acculturation in 1 Peter," in *Perspectives on First Peter*, ed. C. H. Talbert [Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press, 1986], 79) wisely cautions against Elliott's literal understanding of Diaspora: "Sociological theory should be suggestive rather than generative,"

illustrative but not determinative. Satisfactory responses to Elliott's argument have been offered by a number of scholars—among them Balch; Talbert, 141–51; T. Martin, 144–46; Achtemeier, 55–58, 173–76. Michaels, xlvi–xlix, 310–11, concurs, though his identification of the genre of 1 Peter as an “apocalyptic Diaspora letter to ‘Israel’” needs some qualification. While noting parallels between 1 Peter and 2 *Baruch* 78–87, Michaels, lxvii, concedes in the end that the “formal features” of apocalyptic literature are absent from 1 Peter.

37. In fact, the “servants” in 2:18–25 are *oiketai* (“household servants,” GK 3860), in keeping with the family vocabulary used throughout the letter. The household image, write Osiek and Balch, 190, “provides an anchor of identity in a sea of strangerhood,” given that the saints are *oiketai* (1:17; 2:11) and *parepidēmoi*, GK 4215 (1:1; 2:11). See the extensive commentary on this cluster of associated images in T. Martin, 161–267, as well as the helpful overview of the language and thought-world of 1 Peter found in Achtemeier, 3–23.
38. K. Berger, “Hellenistische Gattungen im Neuen Testament,” in *ANRW* II.25.2, ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984), 1338 (my translation).
39. On epistolary content and structure, see S. K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (LEC; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), W. G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity*. More recently, in *Paul the Letter-Writer*, Murphy-O'Connor has examined at length the role of letter writing in the apostle Paul's life.
40. So Craddock, 12. That is, 1 Peter is “public” insofar as it is to be read in Christian communities extending throughout several provinces of Asia Minor, and it is “private” to the extent that it addresses a specific readership on a specific issue.
41. This assumption derives from Hort, 157–84. It finds further support in Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire*, 279–95; Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1904), 183–96; and Hemer, “Address of 1 Peter,” 239–43, even when explanations of the traffic routes in Asia Minor vary. Most commentators describe the epistle in terms of a “circular” or encyclical. So, e.g., Kelly, 3; Goppelt (in *Der erste Petrusbrief*, ed. F. Hahn [KEK 12/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978], 44–45), who describes 1 Peter in terms of a *Rundbrief*; Michaels, 9; Chester and Martin, 98.
42. Martin cites J. H. Moulton's *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, which counts twenty-eight imperatives in this portion of the letter.
43. Both L. G. Perdue (“Paraenesis and the Epistle of James,” *ZNW* 72 [1981]: 241–56) and R. W. Wall (“James as Apocalyptic Paraenesis,” *ResQ* 32 [1990]: 11–22) have called attention to the role of paraenesis in James; I have noted elsewhere the paraenetic character of Jude and 2 Peter (*Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude* [Scranton, Pa.: Univ. of Scranton Press, 1993], 72ff., and *Virtue amidst Vice: The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter 1* [JSNTSup 150; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 37–43 [implicit in 84–98]); Lauri Thurén (*Argument and Theology of 1 Peter: The Origins of Christian Paraenesis* [JSNTSup 114; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995]) and T. Martin, 85–121, argue for its guiding presence in 1 Peter.
44. Another feature common to paraenetic literature that goes hand in hand with imperative language is the use of moral typology. Not infrequently, the ethical standard being advocated is illustrated through either historical or legendary models that belong to popular tradition. We see this practice vividly on display in Jude (unbelieving Israel, the fallen angels, Sodom and Gomorrah, Cain, Balaam, and Korah), 2 Peter (the fallen angels, Noah and his contemporaries, Sodom, Lot, and Balaam's ass), and James (Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah), where moral paradigms are marshaled for the purpose of admonishing or warning the readers. In 1 Peter fewer models are presented, and yet the hortatory language is equally strong when compared to the other General Epistles. Moral paradigms in 1 Peter include Christ (2:21–25; 3:18–22; 4:1–2), Sarah (3:1–6), and even the author himself (5:1–5). On the hermeneutical tendencies and use of moral typology in the General Epistles, see my “Interpreting the General Epistles,”

- in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 433–56.
45. Those who proceed from the assumption that 1 Peter is paraenesis include Selwyn; Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*; D. Hill, “‘To Offer Spiritual Sacrifices ...’ (1 Peter 2:5): Liturgical Formulations and Christian Paraenesis in 1 Peter,” *NTS* 16 (1982): 45–63; T. Martin, 85–134.
 46. On the paraenetic tradition in general, see Berger, “Hellenistische Gattungen,” 1075–77; A. J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (LEC; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 124–29. Identification of the letter as paraenesis is further supported by several conspicuous lexical phenomena—in particular, the abundance of imperatives and related participles. Throughout 1 Peter the readers are admonished toward particular behavior in innumerable ways—see, e.g., 1:13, 15, 22; 2:1, 2, 5, 11, 13, 17; 3:14; 4:1, 7, 12–13, 15, 16; 5:2, 5, 6, 8. Correlatively, literary-rhetorical features such as ethical catalogs (i.e., vice and virtue lists), contrast or antithesis, and household codes are defining (though not universally appearing) characteristics of paraenetic literature. The ethical catalog abounds as a teaching device in Stoic ethical discourse, both in literary and oral tradition, and is readily imported into Christian literature. Numerous examples of virtue lists and vice lists are employed by the NT writers, perhaps the most conspicuous example being 2 Peter 1:5–7 (see [commentary on 2 Peter](#)). Four ethical catalogs occur in 1 Peter—one virtue list (3:8) and three vice lists (2:1; 4:3; 4:14). A further element in paraenesis frequently linked to the use of moral paradigms is contrast or antithesis. More often than not, this involves setting positive and negative behavior in opposition. First Peter exhibits this feature prominently: 1:14–15 and 2:1–2 contrast the believers’ former and present life; believers and unbelievers are compared in 2:7–9 and 4:4–5; 2:20 contrasts misconduct with right conduct; 3:3–4 compares a woman’s inner disposition and outward appearance; 3:9 places insulting and blessing in contrast; 4:15–16 compares suffering justly and unjustly; while 5:1–3 sets against one another proper and improper ways of leading.
 47. Two helpful examinations of the household code and related literature are the book by D. C. Verner (*The Household of God* [SBLDS 71; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983]) and the essay by Balch, “Household Codes,” 25–50. On the use of the household code in 1 Peter, thorough and helpful discussions are found in T. Martin, 124–30, and Goppelt, 162–228. Further discussion of the household code is found in the [exposition of 2:13–17](#).
 48. Contra W. Marxsen (*Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. G. Buswell [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970], 236), who asserts that “the contents [of 1 Peter] do not reveal a ‘Petrine character’ in any way,” thus making it “unlikely for a number of reasons” that Peter was the author of this work.
 49. For a bibliography of 1 Peter scholarship up to ca. 1982, see D. Sylva, “A 1 Peter Bibliography,” *JETS* (1982): 75–89 (reproduced in Talbert, *Perspectives on First Peter*, 17–36). Detailed bibliographies of ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern sources on the epistle can be found in T. Martin, 289–338; Goppelt, xxi–xlii; Elliott, 155–227.
 50. In his important study on the composition of 1 Peter, Schutter, 43, identifies six variations of hermeneutical method: (1) telescoping an OT text, (2) uniting a catena of texts through a single idea, (3) conflating multiple texts, (4) utilization of a “text-plot,” (5) associating a text with a known exegetical tradition, and (6) utilizing florilegia (i.e., numerous texts strung together).
 51. Although not widely held, the view that 1 Peter is pseudonymous has several variations. One school of thought, presupposing a late date, detects in the epistle what Guthrie, 778, calls “pseudepigraphal machinery”—i.e., fictitious material that might generate “authority,” such as the apostolic pedigree in 1:1, references to “Silvanus” and “my son Mark” in 5:12–13, and the cryptic allusion to “Babylon” in 5:13. The most prominent representative of this position is

Norbert Brox (“Zur pseudepigraphischen Rahmung des ersten Petrusbriefes,” *BZ* 19 [1975]: 78–96; “Tendenz und Pseudepigraphie im ersten Petrusbrief,” *Kairós* 20 [1978], 110–20). Another school of thought, perhaps wishing to circumvent the ethical problems normally associated with pseudonymity, prefers to speak of a “Petrine school” or “Petrine community” (thus, e.g., Best, 63; M. L. Soards, “The Letter of 1 Peter: An Account of Research,” *ANRW* II.25.5 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988], 3827–49; P. J. Achtemeier, “Newborn Babes and Living Stones: Literal and Figurative in 1 Peter,” in *To Touch the Text*, ed. M. P. Horgan and P. J. Kobelski [New York: Crossroads, 1989], 207–36). In this way, it is suggested, the early church “was affirming the leader’s abiding presence and valuing the legacy of his continuing influence,” thereby “appealing to what the apostle might have said if he had survived to a later decade” (so Chester and Martin, 91). Advocates of this position tend to opt for an intermediate date, usually between the years 75 and 85. As already noted, the church historically has accepted the letter as apostolic. Evidence has already been put forward to demonstrate that any challenges to Petrine authorship are less than persuasive. No irrefutable obstacles arise externally from the church’s tradition or internally from the text of the epistle itself. The judicious observation of A. F. Walls (*The First Epistle General of Peter* [TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959], 22) remains unchallenged: the references to “Peter” in the letter are quite restrained—the very opposite tendency of pseudepigraphal writings.

52. T. G. C. Thornton (“1 Peter: A Paschal Liturgy?” *JTS* 12 NS [1961], 14–26) has raised much-needed criticisms in the light of the proposed baptismal liturgy theory.
53. Significantly, the language of calling is buttressed by the “stone” passage (2:4–8), which borrows the stone metaphor from Isaiah 28:16 (the selected, precious cornerstone), Psalm 118:22 (the stone the builders rejected), and Isaiah 8:14 (the stone of stumbling). This strong emphasis of divine purpose—revealed in part to the prophets of old and fully realized in the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord who now sits in power, ruling over the cosmos—is important for the readers in the light of a second dominant theme.
54. The verb *paschō*, “suffer,” GK 4248, occurs twelve times (2:19, 20, 21, 23; 3:14, 17, 18; 4:1 [twice], 15, 19; 5:10), with the verb *hypomenō*, “endure,” GK 5702, appearing twice in 2:20. The link between the saints who suffer and Christ, the paschal lamb who suffered, is immediate: in the epistolary opening the readers are linked to “the sprinkling by [Christ’s] blood” (1:2; cf. also the reference to Christ as “a lamb without blemish or defect,” 1:19).
55. See 1 Peter 1:11; 4:13; 5:1; 5:9. Significantly, the generic word for “distress, affliction,” *thlipsis*, GK 2568, does not occur in the letter. “Suffering” is conceived of in 1 Peter primarily in terms of *pathēma*, GK 4077, and *paschō*.
56. The “testing” or “trial” (*peirasmos*, GK 4280) they encounter (1:6; 4:12) is reminiscent of that which Christ endured.
57. The reflections of Donelson, 69–86, on suffering constitute one of the most thoughtful and nuanced discussions that can be found. See also Davids, 30–44.

Text and Exposition

I. LETTER OPENING (1:1–2)

¹Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, ²who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

COMMENTARY

1 Peter begins with the standard private epistolary form of sender-recipient-greeting that characterizes letters of antiquity. The writer identifies himself as “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Here he uses his nickname (“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah,” Mt 16:17; “You are Simon son of Jonah. You will be called Cephas [which, when translated, is Peter],” Jn 1:42) by which the NT writers typically identify him. As “an apostle of Jesus Christ” he joins the inner circle of those providentially called and “sent out” (*apostellō*, GK 690) to witness to the life, death, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus Christ.

Writing as an apostle, then, Peter addresses his intended readers with inherent authority; his letter is therefore to be received as wholly inspired and authoritative. But this authority is also one that has been tried and tempered by deep maturity. Gone is the impetuous, impulsive nature of earlier years. Moreover, the Peter who presently writes is a “fellow elder” and “witness of Christ’s sufferings” (5:1), a man of deepened humility (hence the call to a humble attitude in 5:5–6). Finally, the writer conveys the sense of a father figure, one who views Mark as a “son” (5:13).

The recipients of the letter are described in a twofold manner: they are “dispersed people” or “exiles” (NIV, “strangers ... scattered”; *diaspora*, GK 1402, from which we derive the noun “Diaspora”; for the Christian community elsewhere in the NT as a new Diaspora, see Heb 13:14 and Php 3:20), and they are “elect” (*eklektos*, GK 1723, from *eklegomai*, GK 1721). These two designations inform the very substructure of the epistle, from which the major themes derive and in which 1 Peter coheres. As exiles or sojourners, the readers are said to be scattered in various provinces of Asia Minor. Five provinces are named: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Together these territories constitute all of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) north of the Taurus mountain range. The province of Asia, bordering the Aegean Sea, included the cities of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation. Furthermore, Paul had ministered in several of these regions; among those noted by Luke, for example, is southern Galatia (Ac 16:1–5). The order in which the provinces are listed is largely assumed to be the route traveled by the messenger in the delivery of this circular or encyclical letter.

But precisely who are these “sojourners”? Is the language of “Diaspora” to be interpreted literally or metaphorically? And why are the readers scattered or dispersed? An intriguing answer has been put forth by J. H. Elliott in his work *A Home for the Homeless*, which has animated 1 Peter commentary for the last two decades. Elliott interprets the allusion to *parepidēmoi* (GK 4215; cf. *TDNT* 2:64–65) in 1:1 and 2:11 and *paroikoi* (GK 4230; cf. *TDNT* 5:841–53) in 2:11 (*paroikia* in 1:17) literally, understanding the readers to be “resident aliens,” i.e., those who have been marginalized in a socially and politically hostile environment.

While the merits of Elliott’s argument have already been considered in [section 3 of the introduction](#), it should be observed that his interpretive rubric is simultaneously a help and a hindrance. Elliott’s attentiveness to the sociological implications of a document such as 1 Peter provides fresh insights into the epistle that have invigorated the present generation of commentators. At the same time, he does not take into sufficient account the hermeneutical method employed by virtually all the NT writers themselves, which is to take language, images, concepts, and metaphors that applied to the covenantal people of Israel—the chosen—and apply them to the new covenant community—the church. Indeed, Jesus predicted that the inheritance of Israel would be taken from them and given to others

(Mt 21:41; Mk 12:9; Lk 20:16), thereby establishing the Christian community as the chosen, the true Israel of God. Not insignificantly, this is one of the important subthemes of 1 Peter.

From the perspective of the new covenant, the real “Diaspora” is not the Jewish people; it is the community of Christian saints scattered throughout the world. These are “exiles” who are called to be *in* but not *of* this world. Rightly understood, exile is not withdrawal or isolation; rather, it is the awareness that we are not *fully* at home, given the fact that our allegiance is to something beyond this world. That allegiance is our touchstone and guide for conduct.

2 The theme of exile and sojourning, i.e., Diaspora, is incomplete, however, unless it is tethered to another familiar theme in the history of the Jewish people—one that reflects transcendence. The saints are not merely exiles; they are also (and more importantly) the elect of God (*eklektoi*), chosen by God as his own people (also 2:9; cf. Dt 4:37; 7:8; 10:15; 1Ch 16:13; Pss 33:12; 105:6; Isa 45:4; Am 3:2). The “choosing” of the saints results from the predetermination of the divine purpose; God moves all things toward a goal, a *telos* (GK 5465, 1:9). Special status as well as special responsibilities inhere in the reality of divine election. In order for the readers of 1 Peter to fulfill their responsibilities—to persevere in the face of adversity and cultural hostility—they must be anchored in an awareness that they are the elect of God, the recipients of noteworthy grace (1:2; 5:12). In the words of Waltner, 26, “More significant than their ethnic background, social status or place of residence is their relationship to God.”

Exploiting the OT language of election, Peter calls his readers to ethical transformation by means of a Trinitarian formula. He reminds them that they are called “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father,” that this is done “through the sanctifying work of the Spirit,” and that such has as its goal “obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.” The saints’ election is rooted in the mystery of divine foreknowledge (*prognōsis*, GK 4590) and thus in God’s eternal purpose (Ac 2:23; Ro 8:29–30; 11:2; Eph 1:4–6, 11–14; 2Th 2:13). In times that try one’s faith, an awareness of this mysterious reality is reassuring.

The church, then, is no mere voluntary association of like-minded individuals; nor does its origin lie in the will of the flesh. It owes its very being to the eternal counsel of God the Father, who creates and sustains his

own creation. God's fatherhood in 1 Peter is highly qualified: the Father is sovereign (1:2), merciful (1:3; 2:10), creative (1:3; 2:23), holy (1:15–16), impartial (1:17), just (2:23), sustaining (2:23), patient (3:20), faithful (4:19), and gracious (4:10; 5:12).

The second part of the Trinitarian formula calls attention to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Among other things, 1 Peter is an emphatic call to be holy, to be set apart (1:14–16; 2:9) in the world. This calling, it goes without saying, is critical both to Christian self-understanding and Christian morality. The divine command “Be holy, for I am holy” (1:16; cf. Lev 11:44; 19:2) is fulfillable only to the extent that believers appropriate and submit to the Spirit's dynamic. It is the Spirit who is the operative agent in conforming the believer to the image of Christ, for he awakens within the desire for holiness, brings conviction of impediments to holiness, supplies empowerment to attain holiness, and gives assurance that God is, in fact, making us holy.

The third and christological affirmation within the Trinitarian formula underscores God's purpose revealed through the Spirit: *obedience to Jesus*. The metaphor of “sprinkling by blood,” borrowed from Israel's cultic life, bespeaks cleansing and consecration. It is fitting for the readers to be reminded that Jesus' blood, whether in the cultic ritual of the OT or the once-for-all sacrifice that ratifies the NT, is “precious” (1:19), i.e., costly in terms of the price of redemption. Through the sacrifice of Christ, these two realities are actualized in the believer's life: sins have been cleansed and forgiven, and one is pledged to a life of obedience. Hillyer, 26, summarizes the work of the triune God in the believer's life: “the Father purposes; the Spirit sanctifies; [and] the Son brings believers into a right relationship with himself.”

The wish extended to the recipients of 1 Peter, following the theologically rich address, is the standard Christian formula appearing in all the Pauline epistles (Ro 1:7; 1Co 1:3; 2Co 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Php 1:2; Col 1:2; 1Th 1:1; 2Th 1:2; 1Ti 1:2 [with “mercy” added]; 2Ti 1:2 [with “mercy” added]; Tit 1:4; and Phm 3), as well as in 2 Peter and 2 John (1 *Clem.* has the same salutation as 1 Peter: *charis hymin kai eirēnē plēthyntheiē*). Peter wishes them “grace and peace” and that both be theirs “in abundance” (*plēthynō*, GK 4437, also in 2Pe 1:2; Jude 2). The tandem of grace and peace in all likelihood is an echo of early Christian worship

and derives from Jewish liturgy, a practice rooted in the priestly blessing recorded in Numbers 6:24–26: “The Lord ... be gracious to you; ... and give you peace.”

NOTES

1 To be an apostle in the narrow, restricted sense, according to Peter, was to be “one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us” (Ac 1:21). Moreover, the apostolic office required being “a witness with us of his resurrection” (Ac 1:22). It is this narrow scope of high privilege that the apostles themselves rehearsed as they met in the upper room to find a replacement for Judas Iscariot (Ac 1:12–26). In witnessing to Christ’s ministry, death, and resurrection, the apostles by virtue of their authority were the guarantors of the Christian (i.e., apostolic) tradition that would be passed on to others. For this reason, along with the prophets, the apostles are described in the NT as the “foundation” of the church, “with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20).

Not all the NT writers are “apostolic” in the technical sense. And to a certain extent, the one individual who plays the greatest role in developing Christian theology in the early church—Paul, the “apostle to the Gentiles”—did not meet this technical requirement until his personal encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus Road (Ac 9). Therefore, when Paul states in one of his letters, “I am the least of the apostles” (1Co 15:9), this is not merely rhetorical flourish. Paul is, in fact, keenly aware that he was not “one of the men” who “went in and out among us.” Only through sovereign appointment by the Lord himself was Paul made an apostle, and the qualifying element was being a witness to the resurrected Christ—hence his rhetorical question to the Corinthians (some of whom were questioning his authority), “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1Co 9:1).

2 On the Jewish practice of doxology and benediction inherited by the early church, see R. Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit* (SUNT 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967).

II. LETTER BODY (1:3–5:11)

A. Theological Prolegomena on Christian Hope (1:3–12)

1. Basis for Hope (1:3–5)

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

COMMENTARY

3–4 Hymnic praise to God begins the writer’s description of the grounds for Christian hope. This hymn of praise is identical to that utilized by Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:13 and Ephesians 1:13 and was likely a pattern of earliest Christian confession (see Ro 10:9; 1Co 12:3; and Php 2:11). The ground for Christian hope is mercy—indeed, “great mercy” (*poly eleos*) that results in the person’s new birth spiritually (cf. Tit 3:5 and Eph 2:4–5). The assurance for Christian hope is rooted in “the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” A realization of the basis of their hope will affect both how the saints embrace the suffering that comes their way and their standard of conduct before a watching world.

Hope is integral to the message of 1 Peter (1:3, 13, 21; 3:15). In a climate of hostility and spiritual opposition, the sojourner is inclined to despair and will not persevere. The salvation that infuses the believer with hope is not only evidenced by the new birth that lies in the past; it is also an inheritance (*klēronomia*, GK 3100) that is future in scope—an inheritance that is “reserved” (NIV, “kept”; *tēreō*, GK 5498) in heaven, imperishable, undefiled, and unfading in nature. “Reservation”/“preservation” is an important concept in the Petrine epistles (1Pe 1:4; 3:19 [*phylakē*, GK 5871]; 4:19 [implied]; 2Pe 2:4–5 [*phyllassō*], 9, 17; 3:7) and strengthens the

readers' future-orientation. It is important to be future-oriented when sojourning, for in this world there will be misunderstanding, slander, and persecution for one's faith. Hence Peter can speak of a "living hope" that the believer possesses.

At the heart of the Christian gospel is "the resurrection of Jesus Christ." This event establishes, historically and for all time, the validity of both the Christian experience—"it [baptism] saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (3:21)—and the authority of Christian truth-claims. We have already noted that being a witness to the resurrection was requisite for apostolic authority. In the same way it constitutes the grounds for ongoing witness by the church in the world (3:15): the believer, on being tested and examined, is admonished toward a particular mind-set, namely, "always be prepared to give an answer [*apologia*, GK 665] ... for the hope that you have." And what is the basis for this hope? It is the fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead and now sits "at God's right hand, with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him" (3:22). If even death is subject to Christ, the Christian lives with hope and has nothing to fear ("Do not fear what they fear [i.e., those who insult you]; do not be frightened" [3:14]).

Thus the resurrection not only validates Christian experience and proclamation, it is also assurance of the inheritance that lies in the future—an assurance the writer will reiterate (3:9; 4:13; 5:4). Michaels, 21, and others note the rhetorical effect created by the alliteration of the three terms *aphthartos* (GK 915), *amiantos* (GK 299), and *amarantos* (GK 278), used in succession to describe this inheritance: it is free from death, impurity, and decay. What is more, it is an inheritance that is being "kept [*tēreō*] in heaven." No one can remove, undermine, or destroy this promise; it is in safe custody.

5 Salvation, whether in its past, present, or future manifestation, is a core Petrine concept (*sōzō*, GK 5392, 3:21; 4:18; *diasōzō*, GK 1407, 3:20; *sōteria*, GK 5401, 1:5, 9–10; 2:2). While it entails the individual, it does not emphasize the individual over the community. The salvation that comes from God, furthermore, has both temporal as well as eschatological dimensions.

This multi-perspectival view of salvation and inheritance, it should be noted, fits the theme of sojourning and pilgrimage. In the OT, the chief means of typologizing the believer's inheritance was Canaan, the promised

possession (e.g., Lev 20:24; Dt 15:4; 19:10; 20:15), though the Lord himself is the occasional object of such language (e.g., Dt 10:9; Pss 16:5; 73:26). The promised “land” only had meaning, however, against the background of Israel’s wandering in the desert and exile in Babylon. Salvation for Israel was past (i.e., deliverance from Egyptian bondage), present (in its “exilic wandering”), and future (blessings predicated on obedience to divine commands), and it retains these multiple dimensions in the new covenant for the chosen people of God.

NOTES

3 The parallels between the early Christian emphasis on “new birth” and that contained in mystery religions are fascinating, especially given the fact that 1 Peter is addressed to Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor, where mystery cults proliferated. Moreover, the verb ἐποπτεύω, *epopteuō* (GK 2227, “to be a witness”), and its nominal form ἐπόπτης, *epoptēs* (GK 2228), appearing in the NT only in Petrine literature (1Pe 2:12; 3:2; 2Pe 1:16), are employed in a technical sense to describe those individuals who have been initiated into the mystery rituals (*TDNT* 5:374). Nevertheless, resemblances in 1 Peter remain at the level of speculation.

5 On the nature of salvation, Waltner, 37, writes, “Regeneration is thus perceived as initiation into salvation; the spiritual growth that follows moves them toward its fullness,” i.e., the Petrine understanding of salvation is both “process and possession.” It is already experienced (1:22–23; 3:21), and it is yet to be revealed (1:5, 13; 4:13; 5:4). The expression “in the last time” mirrors the eschatological dimension of salvation that is foundational to the world of NT thought. Jewish theology divided time into the present age—an age dominated by evil powers—and the age to come. In between lay the “last days,” the “day of the Lord,” and divine judgment. The early Christians clearly believed they were already living in the last time, and not infrequently warnings were attached to this concept (e.g., 2Th 2:1–2; 2Ti 3:1; 1Jn 2:18; Jude 18). Nevertheless, this notion is expanded somewhat through divine revelation (e.g., Ac 2:17; Heb 1:2), so that the early church must persevere and wrestle with the “already/not yet” eschatological tension and its attendant implications. This inherent ambiguity is lodged in Jesus’ parables, which stress both *imminence* and *occupying*.

2. Benefits of Hope (1:6–9)

⁶In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

COMMENTARY

6–7 From his reiteration of the basis for Christian hope Peter moves to its effects in the believer’s experience, hereby mirroring the readers’ actual situation. The saints are able to “greatly rejoice” (*agalliazō*, GK 22, also in 1:8; 4:13; *chairō*, GK 5897, is used only in 4:13; cf. Jude 24), despite the fact that it has been “necessary” to “suffer grief” in the context of “various trials” (cf. Ac 5:41). Peter does not offer any description of the precise nature of those trials. Rather, his emphasis is twofold: that they are diverse and varied (*poikilos*, GK 4476), giving the impression of being highly generic in nature, and that they are to be expected (based on the *ei deon* [“it is of necessity”] construction). The suffering and trials are neither ascribed directly to God nor viewed as detrimental to one’s faith. And yet the language of trial being employed here makes it clear that the writer is not minimizing the readers’ experience of hardship; theirs is an agonizing ordeal.

The present trials, nevertheless, are said to serve a purpose (as expressed through the *hina* clause), namely, “so that the genuineness of your faith [*hina to dokimion hymōn tēs pisteōs*] . . . may be proved. . . .” The suffering and trials the readers currently encounter are compared to the process of metal refinement (“of greater worth than gold, which perishes”). Through the refining process the value of the object increases, since the object becomes purer, more genuine.

And so it is with a believer's faith. Having gone through sundry trials, the saints are encouraged to recognize the purifying effect that these have had on their faith. Indeed, purification is an important subtheme that laces its way throughout the epistle—1:2 (sprinkling as a medium); 1:7 (faith as refined by fire); 1:15 (holiness as imperative); 1:19 (Christ as without blemish); 1:22 (obedience as a medium); 2:1 (exhortation to “rid yourselves”); 2:2 (milk as pure); 3:2 (purity and reverence); 3:4 (genuine beauty as an inner quality); 3:16 (keeping a clear conscience); and 3:21 (baptism as symbolic of cleansing). It is impossible, humanly speaking, to perceive the divine intention in the midst of refinement itself; for this reason, the believer needs perspective and reassurance that the testing lasts “now for a little while” (v.6). The refinement must be understood as both temporal and temporary.

In sum, the result of their testing—a result that is enduring, indeed eternal—is twofold: (1) one's faith is stronger and more valuable, and (2) the believer garners “praise, glory and honor” at the appearance (*apokalypsis*, GK 637, lit., the “unveiling”) of Jesus Christ. The saints are thus vindicated and rewarded in Christ's return to take his own.

But such endurance, though rigorous and disciplined, does not depend on self-effort. Not insignificantly, the same adjective that is used to describe trials, *poikilos* (“all kinds of”), also modifies the grace of God later in the epistle (4:10, “various forms”). Our afflictions may be varied, but so is the nature of divine grace. For every trial there stands accessible to the believer an appropriate and corresponding grace (a promise also reiterated by Paul, 1Co 10:13). No trial exists without an available source of the grace of God.

8–9 Based on the material that follows, the character of the trials confronting the readers appears to be related to hostility that issues out of the tension between culture and Christian faith. The message of 1 Peter is consonant with that of the entire NT: believers are to rejoice when they are persecuted for their faith insofar as this persecution arises out of their identification with “the name of Christ” (4:14; cf. Mt 5:11–12; Lk 6:22–23; Jn 15:18–25; Ac 5:40–42; Ro 8:18, 35–39; 2Co 6:4–10; 1Th 1:6; 2Th 3:12; Heb 10:32–39). On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus accents this reality with sobering clarity: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why

the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (Jn 15:18–20).

It is difficult not to see in 1:8–9 the writer’s personal reflections on being an apostle. Peter the apostle was privileged to have been called and commissioned by the Lord Jesus (Mt 16:13–20; Jn 1:40–42; Ac 10:39). Indeed, kings and prophets would have wished to witness what Peter and the apostles witnessed, yet did not (Mt 13:16–17; Lk 10:23–24; Heb 1:1–2). In time the realization of this commissioning would grow, both in terms of privilege and responsibility for shepherding God’s flock (Ac 1:15–26; Eph 2:20; 4:11–16); hence the language of shepherding in 1 Peter is significant: “For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (2:25); “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers” (5:2); “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (5:4); “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour” (5:8).

The writer of 1 Peter is not the impetuous hothead he once was. He has been tempered and seasoned by the sufferings that accompany both “the name” (5:1; 4:14) and the apostolic office (1Co 4:9–13; 2Co 6:4–10). But as an apostle he commends the readers who believe—and suffer—even though they have not had the privilege of personal contact with the Lord Jesus. This lack of physical contact is not, however, the source of faith. The message of the NT is this: “we live by faith, not by sight” (2Co 5:7), for faith is “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Heb 11:1). Jesus himself was adamant about this very point: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29). And yet, despite never having seen Christ, the saints are intimately united with him. The relationship, as depicted in 1 Peter, is one of love and radiant, inexpressible joy.

The result, goal, or destiny (*telos*) of such faith—a faith that is established (cf. 5:10) though without sight—is “the salvation of your souls.” The modern reader must resist the temptation to interpret “soul” in the narrower sense of *psychē*, or fallen nature. Rather, as Waltner, 39–40, has well emphasized, salvation in 1 Peter concerns the total person, as confirmed by its use in 2:11 and the allusion to salvation in 3:20.

Furthermore, the living hope that is a subtheme of 1 Peter is for the whole person, confirmed by and anchored in Christ's resurrection (1:3; 3:18).

NOTES

6–9 Occurring frequently in Scripture (e.g., 1Ch 29:17; Job 14:4; 18:15; 22:23–25; 23:10; 31:6; Pss 26:2; 119:27; 139:23; Pr 8:10; 17:3; 27:21; Jer 9:7; Zec 13:9; Mal 3:3; Ro 5:3–5; 2Co 4:17; Jas 1:2–3; Rev 2:18; 3:18), the refinement imagery on display in these verses is understandably conspicuous in the book of Job, which features a man for whom the process of refinement has taken agonizing turns (see esp. 22:23, 25; 23:10; 28:15; 31:6).

7 One can withstand pain, hardship, and deprivation if there is a goal—and subsequent motivation—impelling one onward. Such is poignantly demonstrated by the athlete, who will endure (at least, to the average person) indescribable hardship—both physically and psychologically—for the sake of the prize, the reward, the crown, the trophy. For this reason, the readers are reminded of the goal of persevering faith and the reward that awaits: that it “result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” The verb “result,” εὐρίσκω, *heuriskō* (GK 2351), hints at judgment, i.e., a day of moral reckoning, and therefore gives an early hint in the letter of vindication for the righteous. (Note Paul's use of the athletic metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, where he speaks of beating his body for the sake of the prize that lies ahead; cf. also Ac 20:24; Gal 2:2; Php 2:16; 3:14; 1Ti 1:18; 2Ti 2:5; 4:7. For the apostle, the athletic metaphor has crucial parallels to Christian living, without an understanding of which the believer risks disqualification.)

REFLECTIONS

In both the introductory remarks to this commentary and the commentary itself, the position has been taken that 1 Peter does not yet mirror persecution of an official (i.e., state-induced) character but rather is mirroring what much of the NT promises: “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2Ti 3:12). This position needs some qualification. There are two perspectives to be avoided as we seek to interpret suffering in 1 Peter. One is the viewpoint that minimizes the

specific or local variety of trial facing the readers. As already noted, the imperial cult varied greatly in strength and allegiance throughout Asia Minor. Thus, some of the congregations in the five provinces listed in 1:1 may have had to endure persecution of a particularly intense degree, whereas others may not. Moreover, it is quite probable that Peter is writing on the eve of an outbreak of persecution in Rome and thus is acutely sensitive to the sufferings of Christians elsewhere throughout the empire. The other viewpoint to be avoided is one that only sees in 1 Peter state-sanctioned persecution such as is displayed in Revelation. This reading is inclined to minimize the reality of the normal, day-to-day hostility with which early Christians throughout the world (5:9) had to deal. Either of these ill-advised readings has the potential to rob the letter of its value and relevance to contemporary Christians.

3. The Privilege of Hope (1:10–12)

¹⁰Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. ¹²It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

COMMENTARY

10–11 An additional reason for rejoicing is suggested by the writer besides reflecting on the basis and benefits of Christian hope. Gratitude for the high privilege of identification with Christ will serve as a healthy antidote to the discouragement or despondency that might be the inclination of those encountering persistent trials. The readers are reminded of the progressive nature of divine revelation and salvation—a salvation that was typologized and previewed in the old covenant and is now fully realized in Christ. In the old scheme, the prophets of God spoke under the inspiration

of the Spirit and even predicted in various ways the coming and passion (cf. Lk 24:25–27) of the Messiah. They were granted partial, incomplete insight into the purposes of God. By contrast, every saint who partakes of the new covenant is far better off by virtue of possessing greater revelation than the prophets. Such is the meaning of Jesus' astounding commendation of John the Baptist's ministry (Mt 11:11, 13). This Petrine understanding of OT revelation and the divine economy is vividly on display in the apostle's sermon at Pentecost (Ac 2:14–36), in which the present is explained solely in terms of prophetic speech from the past. Primary sources cited in this sermon are Joel and Davidic psalms (cf. also Ro 15:4; Heb 1:1–2).

Two nuances in this intriguing passage invite our consideration. One is the writer's indication, revealed in the language of vv.10–11, that much speculation among Jews attended the advent of the messianic age—its time, its nature, its manner, and its embodiment. This certainly squares with the picture we find in the Gospels, particularly in John 1, where numerous messianic notions are mirrored. The second concerns Peter's description of the object of the prophetic inquiry. The prophets are said to have been guided by the Spirit in a twofold direction: they foretold Messiah's "sufferings" as well as his "glories that would follow." Mention of both is important because of the writer's identification with his readership. Christ is presented in 1 Peter as a model, and his example beckons the readers in two fundamental ways: (1) he suffered, *like them* (1:18–19; 2:21–24), and thus "entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (2:23); and (2) he was vindicated, *like they will be*, having been raised and now exalted "at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him" (3:22).

12 The particular revelation of the old covenant, incomplete as it was, is said by Peter to have foreseen both aspects of Christ's ministry—suffering and glorification. From the standpoint of the sufferer, this is good news and a necessary consolation—suffering is not an end in itself; it leads to ultimate vindication ("glory") over one's enemies. Moreover, the reader should take courage all the more to know that the prophets, who indicated these two aspects of divine purpose, "were not serving themselves but you." And this is precisely the message the readers have received from those "who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven," of which Pentecost was a dramatic demonstration.

But Peter does not end with the prophets. As though to pique the readers' fascination (and gratitude) further, he adds somewhat cryptically that "even angels long to look into these things," i.e., the nature and embodiment of salvation to which only humans have been made privy. The double verb used to describe angelic inquiry, *epithymeō* ("to long," GK 2121) and *parakypsaī* ("to lean the head sideways," GK 4160) is intended to accent the sense of curiosity and fascination. Since this remark about angels occurs only in passing, it resists any attempt on the part of the reader to develop a full-blown "Petrine angelology." The point of emphasis is simply that angels, who as part of creation are limited in knowledge and authority (cf. also a similar statement in Heb 2:16), are curious about salvation. Such agrees with the Pauline statement that the "manifold wisdom of God" was "made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (Eph 3:10; cf. 1Co 6:3). Salvation, then, is a high privilege that humans alone can appreciate, especially if even angels themselves are denied personal understanding of the crucial event of salvation history—as well as its effects in the believer's life.

NOTES

10–11 While the role of the OT prophets was both to "forthtell" and foretell, Kelly's caution, 59, has some merit: "In their historical setting the prophets were not so much concerned to peer into the future as to announce God's verdict on the world in which they lived." Indeed, salvation for the prophets was first and foremost *this-worldly*: geopolitical events inevitably were a mirror of divine activity in the world.

12 The fact that the remark by the writer that the angelic realm "longs to look into" the things of salvation is made in passing is not to say that the angelic realm is unimportant. Rather, it is to emphasize that the angels are limited in knowledge and authority. Indeed, Petrine angelology (1:12; 3:18–22; cf. 2Pe 2:4) confirms the utter glory and purposes of God. Kelly, 63, sees in 1:12 a parallel to *1 Enoch* 9:1, which depicts four archangels looking down from heaven at events on earth. Given the quasi-Enoch imagery in 3:18–22 (see [commentary](#)), this is plausible.

B. Christian Identity as the New Diaspora Community (1:13–2:10)

1. *The New Community's Lifestyle (1:13–2:3)*

a. *The Lifestyle of Holiness (1:13–16)*

OVERVIEW

Having established a theologically rich basis for faith and hope—entities that are predicated on God's revelation through Christ—the writer is now ready (“Therefore ...”) to exhort his readers on how to conduct themselves. They are simultaneously *elected* by God and *rejected* by the world, and thus must come to terms, ethically speaking, with their identity as the new, universalized “Diaspora.” High privilege entails unique responsibilities that will alienate. In this light, how are they to conduct themselves? How are they to resolve the tension of being *in* the world but not *of* it? How are they to reconcile the dual responsibilities of earthly *and* heavenly citizenship? And by what qualities will the distinctly Christian ethic be characterized?

The Christian lifestyle, according to Peter, takes on a conspicuous shape: it will be mentally prepared, self-controlled, anchored in divine grace, obedient and not conforming to the desires associated with the former life, and, most important, exhibiting of the divine character of holiness. In a word, it will be countercultural. Each of the aforementioned traits is organically related to the others. Each has a notable ethical quality about it.

¹³Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. ¹⁴As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

COMMENTARY

13 The first attitude comes to vivid expression in the Greek by means of a metaphor—literally, “Gird up your mind”—that connotes a sense of readiness or alertness. It does so by calling to mind a person tightening a garment or robe with a belt around the waist for maximum freedom of

movement, so as not to be hindered, impeded, or distracted in the task (thus Barclay, 183: to roll up one's sleeves or take off one's jacket). The idea being conveyed is the need to be prepared for *whatever* may come.

The second disposition called for is to be sober-minded or self-controlled. The verb used here, *nēphō* (GK 3768), also occurs in 4:7, where it is applied to prayer, and in 5:8, where alertness to the wiles of the devil is enjoined. Mental alertness will lead to sobriety and a disciplined life. This stands in stark contrast, it goes without saying, to surrounding society, which is given to excess, carnality, indiscretion, and faddishness. Not surprisingly, the Christian community is called again and again in the NT to exhibit the virtue of self-discipline (e.g., 1Th 5:6; 2Ti 1:7; Tit 1:8; 2Pe 1:5); indeed, as a character trait it is virtually synonymous with wisdom (e.g., Ps 94:12; Pr 3:11; 5:12, 23; 12:1; cf. Heb 12:11). It is the sign that one is under the control and inspiration of another master when one lives the disciplined life.

The imperative that follows is to “set your hope fully [*teleiōs*, GK 5458, lit., “perfectly” or “absolutely”] on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.” Herein the readers are reminded that ethics is eschatologically motivated, i.e., that it has one eye on the future so as not to get bogged down in the present. Hope is rooted in one's expectation of future reward; therefore, one can persevere and live a prepared, disciplined life. To endure hardship or rigor is to be motivated by future anticipations; both the musician and the athlete serve to demonstrate an awareness of this important connection. But 1 Peter simultaneously assures the reader that the disciplined life does not consist merely of sheer willpower, such as the Stoic moralist might envision. Rather, the Christian draws from the wellspring of divine grace. Whereas secular ethics is self-originating and self-directed, Christian ethics is rooted in a grace-filled conception of living. The Christian's confidence lies not in his or her ability to be self-sufficient; it is tethered to grace, which is constant and available, regardless of the situation (cf. 1Co 10:13).

14 Peter further exhorts his readers, as “obedient children,” not to conform (*syschēmatizomai*, GK 5372, from which we derive “schema,” or “pattern”) to former desires (*epithymia*, GK 2123, appearing frequently in the Petrine epistles; also 2:11; 4:2, 3; 2Pe 1:4; 2:10, 18; 3:3) that typified the previous life of “ignorance.” Obedience is an important Petrine concept.

It is obedience to Jesus that is God's purpose (1:2); obedience to the truth results in purification (1:22); and Sarah's obedience to Abraham is considered paradigmatic for godly women (3:6). To take obedience seriously, according to 1 Peter, is to resist conformity to the world (cf. Ro 12:1–2), which characterizes life *before* the new birth. It is both the privilege and responsibility of the Christian to live a life that is qualitatively different.

15–16 If nonconformity expresses the negative duty of obedience, the positive side is to emulate the very Lord himself, who is moral perfection; for “just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.” To this end, scriptural admonition is cited from the Torah: “Be holy, because I am holy” (Lev 11:44, 45). The reader's *conduct* (*anastrophē*, GK 419, occurring six times in the letter, with the verbal form appearing once) is of utmost importance to Peter. To be holy is to be set apart or consecrated *to* something, and that something is the Lord himself. Just as there are negative and positive ingredients to obedience, i.e., nonconformity and holiness, holiness itself has both positive and negative coordinates. Holiness is incomplete if it *only* consists of avoiding the world or certain patterns of behavior. It must first and foremost be directed *to* an object—and for the Christian that object is transcendence that in its essence is moral perfection. Peter, of course, will have much more to say about being a holy people.

NOTES

13–14 The linkage of faith leading to self-control and perseverance is also present in the catalog of virtues found in 2 Peter 1:5–7. Faith generates virtue (ἀρετή, *aretē*, GK 746, i.e., moral excellence), which generates knowledge, which generates self-control, which generates perseverance, which generates godliness, which generates brotherly affection, which generates and ultimately expresses itself in love (ἀγάπη, *agapē*, GK 27). On the moral progression suggested in this catalog of virtues and its function within the epistle, see my “The Language and Logic of Virtue in 2 Peter 1:5–7,” *BBR* 8 (1998): 55–73; a fuller discussion of the catalog is found in my *Virtue amidst Vice*, 128–52.

Paul, in his Areopagus address in Athens, also speaks to the issue of pagan “ignorance” (ἄγνοια, *agnoia*, GK 53) in the context of announcing that the Creator-God calls people everywhere to repent (Ac 17:30). Of

interest is his particular use of ἄγνοια, *agnoia*, which appears to be part of a skillfully crafted wordplay on “knowledge” (γνῶσις, *gnōsis*, GK 1194), a subtheme in his address (17:22–33) and in Luke’s summary recounting of Paul’s work in Athens (17:16–21). In the brief narrative of 17:16–33, “knowledge” derivatives occur in vv.19–20, 23 (twice), and 30 (cf. my “Paul before the Areopagus,” *Philosophia Christi* 7 [2005]: 134–35).

Clues to the readers’ former life, hinted at in v.14 and scattered throughout the epistle, suggest themselves as the following: lusts (1:14; 2:11; 4:2–3); the combination of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander (2:1); disobedience (2:8); darkness (2:9); ignorant speech (2:15); license (2:16); an improper view of authority (2:16–18); disordered relationships (3:1–8); retaliation (3:9); guilty consciences (3:16, 21); the combination of pagan debauchery, drunkenness, sexual immorality, and idolatry (4:3); greed (5:2); self-service (5:2–3); and pride (5:6).

b. The Lifestyle of Reverence (1:17–21)

¹⁷Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. ¹⁸For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. ²¹Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

COMMENTARY

17 Following the exhortation to holiness, Peter extends the sojourning theme with which the epistle is opened. He appeals to God the Father, who is an impartial judge, as ethical motivation for the reader: “live your lives [*anastrephō*, GK 418] as strangers [*paroikia*, GK 4229] here in reverent fear.” A significant amount of material in 1 Peter (material bridging chs. 2 and 3) is devoted to ordered relationships—e.g., servants and masters, husbands and wives, even the emperor and God. It is noteworthy that, in the

context of differing levels of authority, Peter writes, “Show proper respect for everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king [emperor]” (2:17). While all people are to be respected, including the governing authorities, only God is to be feared reverentially.

18–20 In Petrine theology there is no tension between divine judgment and divine mercy. Having already offered praise to God for his great mercy and the believers’ living hope (1:3–5), Peter rehearses by means of standard paraenetic language (*eidote*) the marvel of redemption and the purchase price for that redemption—the blood of Christ. The metaphor of the slave market occurs frequently in the NT (e.g., Mk 10:45; Ro 6:15–23; 8:15; Gal 4:1–7; 1Pe 1:18–19; 2:16; 2Pe 2:19–22) and is critical to a proper understanding of the nature of salvation. It speaks to the condition of bondage caused by sin, to the beneficence of the one buying the slave, to the costly nature of the redemptive transaction, and to the state of freedom (i.e., the household) into which the redeemed is brought. From the Petrine perspective, reverential fear is heightened by the believers’ grateful awareness of the high cost of ransom. This cost, sacrificial blood, greatly exceeds the value of silver or gold used in the business transaction, either of which is perishable (cf. 1:4). The result is that the believer is brought into a marvelous spiritual freedom (2:16). Reverence acknowledges that the ransom price was indeed high.

This costly transaction, however, is presented in 1 Peter as no second thought or “plan B” in the counsel of God (cf. Ro 16:25–27; 1Co 2:7–10; Eph 3:1–6; Col 1:26–27; Tit 1:1–3). Rather, the ransom, it is emphasized, was in the purpose of God “before the creation of the world,” even though it has been fully “revealed in these last times” for the sake of the saints. Once again, as in the letter’s opening, Peter appropriates the language of sovereign election: Christ, the unblemished sacrificial lamb (cf. the language of Ex 12:5 and Isa 52:13–53:12 and its resemblance to 1 Peter), was “chosen” or, more precisely, “foreknown” (*proginōskō*, GK 4589). Peter’s confession of Christ’s role in salvation history is a remarkable and compelling witness to the preexistence of the second person of the Trinity (on which cf. Jn 1:1–3; 17:5, 13, 18, 24; 8:16, 58; Php 2:6–11).

21 The believer’s faith, mediated through Christ, is in God, “who raised him [Jesus] from the dead and glorified him.” This confession, thought by Kelly, 77, and others to contain elements of an established early hymn, is

crucial for the readers who struggle to put their suffering in proper perspective. It is a declaration that Jesus, having suffered on the cross, was vindicated (lit., “given glory”) by God. The same pattern is repeated in 3:18–22, which depicts Christ’s triumph over evil and extends to the saints themselves. Thus their “faith and hope are in God,” who will vindicate them as well.

NOTES

17 The fear of the Lord, while by no means confined to the OT, is nonetheless a prominent theme in the OT. Reverential fear, rightly conceived, is the appropriate response of human beings to God’s holiness. Reverence is the characteristic disposition of a person who consciously lives in the presence of Almighty God. The failure to realize this truth is the lesson of tragedies such as those that befell Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1–3; Nu 3:4). What is recorded of the Lord’s response to “unauthorized” attempts at an offering is instructive. “Among those who approach me I will show myself holy ... I will be honored” (Lev 10:3) is the divine response to Aaron’s sons, who offer “unauthorized fire before [the Lord].”

On various occasions Luke records that great “fear” came upon the church throughout the book of Acts at the manifestation of the Lord’s work (e.g., Ac 2:43; 5:5, 11; 9:3, 31; 19:17). Paul observes that holiness is, literally, “brought to completion [ἐπιτελέω, *epiteleō*, GK 2200] in the fear of the Lord” (2Co 7:1). Peter simultaneously admonishes the church to *fear* God (1Pe 1:17) and *not to fear* the terror of those persecuting them (3:14). The clear suggestion is that there is a legitimate and illegitimate fear. The former is anchored in a proper reverence. This reverence, it should be added, while it does not disengage or cancel out the subject’s love and affection (1:8), does proceed from the awe that properly recognizes the Lord as holy (v.16) and as judge (v.17)—thus Paul’s observation in Romans 11:22: “Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God.” The Christian lives with the awareness of a day of moral reckoning; for this reason, the fear of the Lord should compel the saints toward moral earnestness.

c. The Lifestyle of Love (1:22–25)

²²Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. ²³For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴For,

“All men are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
²⁵but the word of the Lord stands forever.”

And this is the word that was preached to you.

COMMENTARY

22 Obedience and purification, two important subthemes in the letter, as we noted earlier, are said by the writer to result in a *brotherly love* (*philadelphia*, GK 5789) that is “sincere”: “Now that you have purified [*hagnizō*, GK 49, as opposed to *hagiazō*, “sanctify,” GK 39, suggesting the need for *cleansing*] yourselves by obeying the truth ...” Love that is “sincere” (*anypokritos*, GK 537)—i.e., unfeigned or unhypocritical—is hearty and affectionate among the saints. To love one another “deeply” and “from the heart” is particularly important in a social climate of hostility, wherein mutual encouragement, affection, and support would be indispensable to be able to withstand persecution. As Hillyer, 53, and John Piper (“Hope as the Motivation for Love: 1 Peter 3:9–12,” *NTS* 26 [1980]: 212–31) fittingly observe, a community of love will produce and necessarily preserve a community of hope.

23–25 Reinforcement of the enduring nature of love, which undergirds communal bonds, is found in Isaiah 40:6–8. This citation follows Peter’s reiteration of abiding, imperishable seed (*spora*, GK 5078) of the new birth, i.e., the regenerative and living “word of God” (cf. Mt 4:4; 13:1–23; Mk 4:1–20; Lk 8:1–15; Heb 4:12). The link between community and new birth is not to be lost on the readers. Mutual love cannot exist in unadulterated,

unfeigned fashion without the element of purification that only comes by way of a new (i.e., spiritual) birth.

But the citation from Isaiah 40 is important for another reason. Its historical context concerns the experience of exile foreseen by the prophet. The prophetic word of God “comforts” the people of God (40:1) in the midst of sojourning as resident aliens. The message is intended to encourage Israel, to offer hope at a time of social hostility in her exilic experience. This point of contact with Peter’s audience is readily recognized. The purposes of Almighty God stand, and he has not forgotten his Diaspora people, even though their sufferings would seem to suggest such. “The word of the Lord stands forever,” Peter recalls, and *this word*, furthermore, is that which was “preached to you.” This preached word, let it be remembered, is “good news” (cf. Isa 40:9). And the good news remains: the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him (40:10). His care for his people, declared by the prophet Isaiah, is never far from the mind of Peter (2:25; 5:2): “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (Isa 40:11).

NOTES

22 Contra Waltner, 64, the intention behind these admonitions is not to contrast φιλαδέλφια (*philadelphia*) and ἀγάπη (*agapē*, GK 27), nor is it to show the deficiencies of the former and the qualitative superiority of the latter. As the catalog of virtues in 2 Peter 1:5–7 makes clear, the two coexist, are necessary, and emphasize a different quality in the way humans relate to one another. In the Petrine epistles, one does not have priority over the other.

d. The Lifestyle of Transformation (2:1–3)

¹Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ²Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

COMMENTARY

1 Peter recapitulates at this point. The sum total of the imperatives of holiness, reverence, and love irreversibly point, “therefore,” to transformation, i.e., a changed life. Theirs is to be an ethical standard that stands in marked contrast to its pagan counterpart, characteristics of which are said to be malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander—what one commentator describes as a “comprehensive list of the ills to which the human heart is host” (so Hillyer, 56). Because of the corrosive effect of these practices on the Christian community and Christian fellowship in general, Peter calls his readers in no uncertain terms to action: “rid yourselves” (*apotithēmi*, “to discard or strip off as a garment,” GK 700) of them *all* (three times the word *pan*, “all,” “every,” is used for emphasis). This catalog of vices—an ethical-rhetorical device that occurs frequently in the NT (e.g., Ro 1:29; 1Co 6:9–10; 2Co 10:20; Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; Gal 5:19–21; 1Ti 1:9–10)—closely resembles its secular counterpart commonly employed by Stoic moralists of the day. These vices constitute behavior that is patently opposed to and incompatible with *philadelphia* (1:22). The ethic of transformation, however, is not rooted in self-sufficiency, as pagan Stoic moralists might contend. As we have already seen, it is anchored in grace (1:13)—a grace that allows the believer to grow progressively in the salvation that is already a present reality.

2 Growth in any area of human existence is progressive, incremental. This growth, it goes without saying, is dependent on food as nourishment. Having noted the enduring character of the word of God, Peter depicts this “word” as being the means by which nourishment comes to the Christian. This food, in contradistinction to the vices just enumerated, is “pure” (*adolos*, GK 100); it is free from mixture, containing not the slightest trace of impurity. Peter describes the word as a kind of “pure spiritual milk,” conjuring an image of life sustenance in its basic form. The believer is to “crave” (*epipotheō*, GK 2160) the milk of the word, just as a baby craves its milk (the imagery of infants and milk also occurs in 1Co 3:2; 1Th 2:7; Heb 5:12). While it is natural for commentators to see in this image the idea of spiritual immaturity (a notion reinforced by the context in which milk is used in Heb 5:12–13), or to view the readers as young in the faith (so, e.g., Beare, 114, and Kelly, 84), the main point of the imagery—illustrated by the verb “crave”—is to stress the idea of hunger and focused pursuit. Peter

wishes foremost to convey motivation for growth, not to suggest immaturity on the part of the readers (thus Grudem, 94).

3 With a focus on the readers' *experience* of Christian faith, Peter employs a partial citation from Psalm 34:8, writing, "now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." While at first glance, the writer's borrowing from this Davidic psalm may seem arbitrary, very much the opposite is the case. Psalm 34 extols the Lord in the context of affliction (v.2), deliverance from fears (vv.4, 7), and salvation from difficulties (v.6). The psalmist therefore enthuses, "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him [cf. 1Pe 1:17], and he delivers them" (v.7), which leads into the subsequent declaration (vv. 8–9): "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. Fear the Lord, you saints, for those who fear him lack nothing."

The points of contact between Psalm 34 and 1 Peter become immediately apparent: trials and difficulties, affliction, deliverance from fear, salvation, and a pronounced reverential fear and trust in the Lord. The remainder of the psalm confesses divine nearness: "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous" (v.15); "the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (v.18); "a righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all" (v.19); and "the foes of the righteous will be condemned" (v.21). The psalm concludes with the reassuring proclamation that "the Lord redeems his servants" and that "no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him" (v.22).

Sensitive to his readers' situation, Peter appropriately enlists the "word of God," spoken in a similar situation, in order to encourage and strengthen his audience. Indeed, Psalm 34 is of such relevance to the readers that Peter will cite verbatim from it later in the epistle (3:10–12). Peter's reminder is ethical in trajectory. To the extent that the readers experience ("taste and see") the Lord as good, they move progressively forward in the continuum of salvation.

NOTES

1–3 On the use of ethical catalogs in the NT, see B. S. Easton, "New Testament Lists," *JBL* 51 (1932) 1–12; N. J. McEleney, "The Vice Lists of the Pastoral Epistles," *CBQ* 36 (1974): 203–19; my "Vice and Virtue Lists," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. C. A. Evans and S. E.

Porter (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000), 1252–57; my *Virtue amidst Vice*, 112–27. In addition to 1 Peter 2:3, other verbal parallels to Psalm 34 in the NT include Hebrews 6:4–5 (34:8); Luke 1:53 (34:10); and John 19:36 (34:20).

2. The New Community's Identity (2:4–10)

a. The Paradox of Election and Rejection (2:4–8)

OVERVIEW

After a rehearsal of Christian conduct (holiness, reverence, love, transformation), attention is now directed toward a fuller understanding of the church's identity as the new Diaspora community, the leitmotif of 1 Peter that was introduced in the opening of the letter. In the present section, Peter is wholly reliant on OT themes and images. Unless the saints have an accurate understanding of their identity and place in this world, they will not be sufficient to the task of mirroring a distinctly Christian ethic, more generally speaking, or of enduring persecution and hardship in the narrower sense. Orthopraxis, i.e., right conduct, is rooted in orthodoxy, right belief. Something of an enduring nature is lodged in the OT image of Israel as God's chosen covenantal people. It is the teaching of the NT that the church has been grafted into Israel (Ro 11:11–24) and now represents the new Diaspora community in its universalized expression.

Numerous metaphors are used by the writers of the NT to depict the nature and function of the church. More often than not, the NT writer is dependent on OT images—a bride, an army, a flock, a temple, a people, etc. Several of these “types” appear in 1 Peter. Typology is a chief means by which NT writers show that peoples, institutions, and events of the old covenant find their ultimate fulfillment in the new. The language of typology is critical to an understanding of the Petrine hermeneutic—e.g., the sacrificial lamb and Christ, the suffering of the righteous, vindication of the righteous, Israel and the church as God's elect, Israel and the church as a Diaspora community, the temple and the church as God's habitation, the Levitical priesthood and the church in offering acceptable sacrifice. Typology underscores the sovereign purposes of Almighty God, for what has been determined in the divine counsel goes into fulfillment not only as a preordained result but also at the appointed time through the appointed

means. If Christ the lamb is chosen before the foundations of the world to redeem humanity, then the church—the new community—has a privileged place in mediating that redemption to the world in which it has been placed. Several perspectives on the church’s nature and function are accented in 1 Peter.

Most commentary on 1 Peter assumes on the part of the writer a “midrashic” reworking of Jewish tradition-material. This creative reinterpretation and contemporizing of OT texts in the early church mirrors an exegetical practice employed within mainstream Judaism concurrent with the advent of Christ. This practice can be seen in Peter’s appropriation and application of selected OT “stone passages.” Several of these are marshaled to symbolize both the cornerstone, Christ, as “the living stone,” and believers as “living stones” that constitute a new temple, a dwelling place of God’s presence. Midrashic application to the new covenant of the stone metaphor, however, does not begin with Peter. Referring to himself, Jesus declares, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,” citing Psalm 118:22 (Mt 21:42; Mk 12:10; Lk 20:17). Peter also freely cites Psalm 118 when he and John are interrogated by Jewish leaders (Ac 4:11), as he does twice in this epistle (2:4 and 2:7). The stone metaphor contains a paradox that applies to Christ as well as to his disciples. Both were elected by God; both are rejected by humans. Lest the saints despair because of their rejection by the world, they are reassured of their election in the divine purpose. God considers them “chosen” and “precious.” Thus the new Diaspora community can rest in the fact that it will be vindicated, as Christ their model in fact was (1:21; 3:18–22).

Two other OT references using the stone symbolism are utilized with persuasive rhetorical effect. Cited is the word of the prophet Isaiah at a time of national apostasy and geopolitical intrigue: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation” (Isa 28:16). While this passage is not messianic, it nevertheless depicts Yahweh’s faithfulness to his people—a covenantal faithfulness that ultimately leads to the messianic advent. The other citation depicts the Lord as “a stone that causes men to stumble,” although the offense applies to Israel herself (Isa 8:14). The emphasis of being “chosen” *and* “precious” resonates with the readers, particularly if they struggle with a sense of social shame arising out of cultural hostility.

It is indeed fitting that among the NT writers it is Peter who develops a homiletical midrash using the stone metaphor. After all, it is Simon Peter, “the Rock,” who makes the important messianic confession for which he is commended by means of a wordplay: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Mt 16:18). And it is the same Peter to whom Jesus forcefully declares, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me” (16:23).

⁴As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”

⁷Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone,”

⁸and,

“A stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

COMMENTARY

4–5 There exists in the mind of the writer a natural extension of the stone metaphor that allows him to conceive of the Christian community as “a spiritual house” whose architect is God himself: “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house.” The notion of God’s people as a house, building, or temple is one of the prominent reapplications of OT imagery by the writers of the NT (e.g., Ac 7:48; 1Co 3:9–17; 2Co 6:16; Eph 2:21–22; 1Ti 3:15; Heb 3:6; Rev 21:3). A reinterpretation of the time-honored temple, in fact, is traceable to Jesus himself in his previewing of sacrifice (Mt 26:59–61; Mk 14:55–59; 15:29; Jn 2:19)—words that are offensive to Jewish leaders—and in his commendation of Peter for the latter’s messianic confession (Mt 16:18).

With the sealing of believers with the Holy Spirit in the new covenant (Eph 1:13–14; 2Co 1:21–22), the saints collectively constitute the temple of God, a spiritual habitation for God that is continuously “being built,” i.e., under construction. Thus it is fitting that Peter begins this material, “As you come to him” (2:4); it is reminiscent of the language in Psalm 34:5, and it is consistent with the temple image as well. Individual believers fulfill their true calling and assume their true position *only* to the extent that they allow themselves to be built into the edifice that is the church, the Christian community. Barclay, 195–96, writes, “Individualistic Christianity is an absurdity; Christianity is community within the fellowship of the church.”

Not only is the notion of the temple, the house of God, extended here (as elsewhere in the NT) but also the concept of a consecrated or “holy priesthood.” This second image is of necessity an extension of the first: the duties of the Levitical order as required in the OT now belong to all the saints. All have access to God and bring others to God while offering spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God, whether in worship, praise, or petition. This occurs through the mediation of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 4:14–5:10).

7–8 Peter interjects application of the stone passages: “Now to you who believe, this stone [which was rejected] is precious” (v.7). To the believer, God’s chosen agent of redemption (1:18–21) is “precious” (*timē*, GK 5507), honored, and respected. To those who do not believe, writes Peter, there is only rejection and stumbling: “They stumble because they disobey the message.” The consequence of disobedience, Peter adds, is that for which

“they were destined” (*tithēmi*, GK 5502, used in a similar way and bespeaking appointment in Mt 22:44; Lk 12:46; Jn 15:16; 2 Ti 1:11; and Heb 1:2). The language of condemnation here is not unlike that of Jude, who writes that the condemnation of some was “written about long ago” (v.4).

These verses are not teaching that people are without moral agency. The language of predestination, rather, underscores the certainty of divine retribution for those who disobey. In Scripture, divine sovereignty and human freedom coexist. Such balance is notably on display in 1 Peter, which encourages the saints with the language of sovereignty and election while simultaneously exhorting them via paraenesis to moral earnestness.

The paradox of selection and rejection is part of the writer’s arsenal to address the tension that arises from faith encountering culture. Cognizant of their own election, the saints can cope with the shame and stigma arising from the world’s rejection. Otherwise, they will be tempted to capitulate. But as Christ, the rejected one, was vindicated, they too await the same reward.

NOTES

4–8 On the nature of typology, the best resource remains L. Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). See also G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology* (Napierville, Ill.: Allenson, 1957).

When biblical scholars employ the term “midrash,” they are referring, in the wider sense, to the tendency of the writer to interpret an OT passage in the light of contemporary circumstances. Such a hermeneutic usually has the character of a paraphrase, prophecy, or parable (thus J. Neusner, *What Is Midrash?* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987] 25). On the nature of midrashic exegesis, see M. Gertner, “Midrashim in the New Testament,” *JSS* 7 (1962): 267–92; A. G. Wright, “The Literary Genre Midrash,” *CBQ* 28 (1966): 118–38. On its application in the General Epistles, see I. Jacobs, “The Midrashic Background for James ii.21–23,” *NTS* 22 (1976): 457–64; P. H. Davids, “Tradition and Citation in the Epistle of James,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. W. Gasque and W. S. LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 113–26; R. J. Bauckham, “James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, ed. D. A. Carson and H.

G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 303–17; my *Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude*, 31–33, 73–74; my *Virtue amidst Vice*, 84–95; my “On Angels and Asses: The Moral Paradigm in 2 Peter 2,” *PEGLMBS* 21 (2001): 1–12.

That Paul also cites the same two texts from Isaiah suggests they had a prominent place in the preaching of the early church. Selwyn, 268–77, believes that vv.6–8 of 1 Peter 2:1–10 constitute a partial hymn that is appropriated by both Peter and Paul (Ro 9:33). This suggestion is plausible, though inconclusive. On the use of the “stone” passages in the NT in general, see C. D. F. Moule, “Some Reflections on the ‘Stone Testimonia’ in Relation to the Name Peter,” *NTS* 2 (1955): 56–59; L. W. Barnard, “The Testimonium Concerning the Stone in the NT and in the Epistle of Barnabas,” *SE* 3(1964): 306–13; N. Hillyer, “Rock-Stone Imagery in 1 Peter,” *TynBul* 22 (1971): 58–81; P. S. Minear, “The House of Living Stones: A Study of 1 Peter 2:4–12,” *EcR* 34 (1982): 238–48.

b. God’s People as God’s Chosen (2:9–10)

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

COMMENTARY

9 Here Peter recapitulates, stringing together OT metaphors that remind the saints of God’s covenantal faithfulness and their basic identity. The saints are a “chosen people,” a “royal priesthood,” “a holy nation,” and a “people belonging to God” (cf. Ex 19:5–6; Dt 7:6; 10:15; 1Sa 12:22; Isa 43:21; 62:2). As God’s “chosen” people, believers are reminded of and encouraged by the notion of covenant. The fact that God has entered into covenant with his people entails both privilege and obedience/obligation; the two go hand in hand.

A “royal priesthood” is best understood in the light of the LXX’s translation of Exodus 19:6, rendered “a kingdom of priests” in most versions. Michaels, 109, and Achtemeier, 165, understand this phrase as a priesthood that belongs to and acts in the service of the king. For Kelly, 96, the community is royal because the king dwells in her midst. Not insignificantly, in Revelation the saints are a “kingdom and priests” (1:6; 5:10), where “they will reign”; i.e., the saints are *vindicated*.

As a “holy nation,” the readers are reminded again that they are consecrated to God and thus set apart, in the sense of being different, from the world. They will resist conformity to the world because of their ultimate allegiance. Also, they are “a people belonging to God” and, consequently, have great value. Precisely why is it important to affirm basic Christian identity? What is the goal of the Christian community? It is “that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” The church’s mission, simply put, is to witness to the splendor of moral transformation.

10 The remarkable nature of this transformation—before and after—is illustrated by yet another interpretive use of the OT (Hos 1:6, 9–2:1, 23), wherein the prophet had drawn parallels between his unfaithful wife and Israel. By the creative, restorative mercy of God, those who were formerly “not a people” were now made “the people of God.” Just as divine compassion and mercy were available to restore Israel, despite her unfaithfulness, pagans as well, who had no former claim on God’s mercy, were candidates (and recipients) thereof. The saints are simultaneously called out of something—spiritual darkness—and to something far greater—spiritual illumination leading to moral transformation.

NOTES

9 The light-darkness dualism is pronounced in the NT (see, e.g., Mt 4:16; Lk 1:78–79; Jn 1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35; Ro 2:19; 13:12; 2Co 4:6; 6:14; Eph 5:8; Col 1:12–13; 1Th 5:4–5; 2Pe 1:19; 1Jn 1:5).

C. Christian Witness as a Diaspora Community (2:11–3:12)

OVERVIEW

In order to persevere in the face of social hostility and rejection by the world, the pilgrim community must be firmly anchored in the awareness of its identity, hence, the precision and care with which Peter has developed the material in 1:3–2:10. This protracted section of the epistle is no mere academic exercise; rather, it is a thoroughly necessary theological prolegomena. In order to bear up under the world’s rejection, the saints must be secure in their sense of divine election. Only on this foundation can they endure hardship.

1. The Necessity of Good Deeds (2:11–12)

¹¹Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹²Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

COMMENTARY

11 Following the writer’s opening rehearsal of the divine purpose and reaffirmation of the new community’s basic identity—both of which are well-calculated, theologically rich, and immersed in OT concepts—Peter is able to get to the (pastoral) point at hand. The ethical implications of the saints’ privileged status must now be stressed. His admonition is twofold, containing a negative and positive dimension. Verse 11 begins the writer’s *logos pareinētikōs*, his word of exhortation, as from a father to a son (“Dear friends,” 2:11 and 4:12): as “aliens [*paroikoi*, GK 4230; also in 1:17 and 2:11] and sojourners [NIV, “strangers”; *parepidēmoi*, GK 4215; also in 1:1 and 2:11] in the world” (cf. Lev 25:23), they are “to abstain from sinful desires, which war against [the] soul.” In this paraenesis, Peter blends a military image (cf. Ro 7:23; 2Co 10:3; Eph 6:12; Jas 4:1) with the letter’s controlling Diaspora metaphor.

12 The readers are further charged: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” If any in the Christian community misconstrue being the new Diaspora—i.e., “aliens and

strangers”—to mean escapism or isolation, Peter dispels that illusion. In truth, responsible earthly citizenship struggles with how most effectively to “advertise” or bear witness to the transcendent values of the kingdom of God. The veracity of Christian truth-claims, one may infer from Petrine teaching, is demonstrated to the extent, and only to the extent, that the Christian lifestyle is *ethically viable*. This will entail translating Christian ethics in relevant ways to the pagan mind-set—ways suggested in the material that immediately follows (2:13–3:7).

The implication is this: Christian witness will be upheld by the quality of “goodness” unbelievers observe in the Christian community. Whether or not pagans convert to the Christian faith is in God’s hands, but this is not Peter’s immediate concern. Rather, he insists that, even if pagans malign or accuse believers wrongly, on the day of moral reckoning—literally, on “the day of overseeing” (*hēmera episkopēs*)—they themselves will have to acknowledge the qualitative difference among Christians, thereby “glorifying” God.

One might legitimately argue that doing good deeds that glorify God was the heart of Jesus’ teaching, based on Matthew’s representation (5:16): “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Peter, at least late in life, seems to concur: the essence of the Christian lifestyle is leading a virtuous life, demonstrating the Christian ethic in a manner that shows it to be qualitatively different.

REFLECTIONS

We have just observed a core assumption in Petrine thinking: The Christian ethic must translate itself in ways that are relevant to the pagan mind-set. This is the essence of good citizenship. Goodness, as the reader discovers, is a major concern to the writer (see W. C. van Unnik, “The Teaching of Good Works in 1 Peter,” *NTS* 1 [1954/55]: 92–110). The frequent appearance in 1 Peter of *agathos* (GK 19) and cognate forms (*agathos*, 2:18; 3:10, 11, 13, 16 [twice], 21; *agathopoiōs*, 2:14; *agathopoiā*, 4:19; *agathopoiēō*, 2:15, 20; 3:6, 17; *kalos*, twice in 2:12) confirms this emphasis and reveals an operating assumption on the part of the writer: *agathopoiēō*, doing good (GK 16), is the basis for Christian credibility, since it is a standard acknowledged even by pagan unbelievers themselves.

Goodness is not merely “Jewish” or “Mosaic” or “Christian” in the narrow sense; rather, it is responsible conduct that is universally recognized. Perhaps there are those present in the community whose eschatological outlook is such that the only way of expressing Christian hope is to cling to an imminent return of the Lord; and indeed the writer himself states later on in the letter that “the end of all things is near” (4:7). While this statement in its context is taken up later in the present commentary, several remarks are presently in order. One is that the early church continually lived with the expectation of the Lord’s return. And yet it must also be said that every generation since has struggled with this very tension: how does one live in the light of “the end of all things”? The bulk of the NT’s teaching—and that of Jesus (“Occupy until I come”)—is directed not toward passively awaiting the Lord’s return but *active occupation until the end*. And so it is in 1 Peter.

Inevitably, this creative approach to responsible “occupation” affects how we relate to people. Indeed, one measurement of the distinctiveness of the Christian ethic is the manner in which Christians conduct their social lives. How do they relate to the employers? To governing authorities? To established social conventions? How are their marriages? Their families? Are they isolationist? Subversivist? Conformist? Such will be the test of whether, in the end, the Christian message is to be believed in a pagan context, in accordance with its claim, or whether it is just another sect with its strange notions of deity, sexuality, and afterlife. Throughout the empire, and certainly in Asia Minor, these are the kinds of questions that would be asked of the Christian community. The Christian witness, then, has an inevitable *social* dimension by which it is judged. It is to this social dimension we now turn.

2. The Necessity of Ordered Relationships (2:13–3:12)

OVERVIEW

For Peter, the social dimension of Christian witness consists of several crucial realms. In each realm particular duties are the norm for established culture. One central element that as a thread unites all of these spheres is that of *authority*. If the Christian community is going to demonstrate both coherence and relevance in a pagan context, faith will show itself viable in

the way it understands and responds to authority—a point argued convincingly by C. F. Sleeper (“Political Responsibility According to 1 Peter,” *NovT* 10 [1968]: 270–86). Christians, above all social groupings, will be responsible in their attitude toward varying forms of authority. In the end, social responsibility will authenticate Christian witness.

Without question, Jesus’ exhortation to “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Mt 22:21) is as radical—and timeless—today as it was in the first century. This admonition, of course, cuts both ways. To those who are only concerned about religious duty, the first half of this command seems untenable. To those, however, who are beholden to earthly cares, the second half tends to desacralize.

Doubtless for the first-century Christian the issue of authority was a delicate subject, given the pervasive nature of Roman *imperium* as well as the varying approaches to rule by the provincial governors. As a Jew living in Galilee for most of his life, Peter is under no illusions: Christians must live their lives against the backdrop of authorities that at best tolerate their faith and at worst persecute them for their faith. But not even the apostles believed that citizenship was passive in nature; according to Paul, Christians are called to intercede “for kings and all those in authority” (1Ti 2:2).

NT scholarship has recognized in 2:13–3:7 a standard code of duties governing social relations that has been called a household or station code. These obligations range from civic duty to familial obligations at various “stations” of life and had become popularized in Stoic notions of morality (e.g., Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.14.8; 2.17.31; Seneca, *Ep.* 94.1) and find their way into the NT (Eph 5:21–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; 1Ti 2:8–15; Tit 2:1–10; cf. *Did.* 4.9–11; *1 Clem.* 1:3; 21:6–9; *Barn.* 19:5–7).

It is only natural that the early Christians would adopt this feature into their writings. The thread that unites each part of the material in 2:13–3:7 is the attitude of respect that must be rendered in several common social contexts. In 1 Peter this attitude of respect is mirrored in five specific areas: governing authorities (2:13–17), slaves with masters (2:18–25), wives toward husbands (3:1–6), husbands toward wives (3:7), and everyone in the Christian community (3:8–12). Despite modernity’s quandary over the vocabulary, the fact that admonitions to three of these five groups contain the verb *hypotassō* (“submit,” GK 5718) reflects the Greco-Roman primacy

of respect for order (*taxis*, GK 5423), as Goppelt, 175, and Elliott, 498, have sought to emphasize. Hierarchical harmony and domestic order were thought by Hellenistic culture to produce stability and order in the city-state (thus Aristotle, *Pol.* 1 [1253b]; *Eth. nic.* 8 [1160a–1161a]). Moreover, Roman philosophers, governors, and emperors viewed the household code as useful in an attempt to *maintain order* in an aggressively expanding empire (so Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 65–80). To “submit” is a form of honor and respect, and Peter’s concern is that Christians be motivated by respect at every level (a reading confirmed by 5:5). Balch (“Household Codes,” 29 n. 234) sees in the household code a virtual “apologetic” function, to the extent that it serves to deflect outside criticism of the Christian community. Why? Because the household code promotes integration rather than isolation, allowing Christians a “selective acculturation” as they struggle with the tension between faith and culture. A divided (and disrespectful) “house,” then, is understood by the writer to undermine Christian witness.

In the first sphere (2:13–17), the believers are admonished, “Submit [*hypotassō*] yourselves ... to every authority instituted among men,” and this “for the Lord’s sake.” In the second section (2:18–25), slaves are admonished to submit to their masters, both to the kind and the harsh. Wives and husbands are further and specific objects of exhortation; wives are to be submissive to their husbands as a demonstration of Christian witness (3:1–6), while husbands “in the same way” are to be considerate of and show understanding toward their wives, treating them with respect (3:7). Lastly, Peter appeals to all in the community to be mindful of and sympathetic toward one another (3:8–12).

a. A Christian View of Authority (2:13–17)

¹³Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority,
¹⁴or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.
¹⁶Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for

evil; live as servants of God. ¹⁷Show proper respect to everyone:
Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

COMMENTARY

13–14 Case illustration number one calls for subordination to “every authority instituted among men.” Some disagreement among interpreters exists as to how to translate *ktisis*. The NRSV renders *ktisis hypotassō* as “accept the authority,” a reading that has both strengths and weaknesses. To be commended in this reading is the extent to which “accept” entails the notion of *recognition*. The recognition underscored by Peter and reiterated by Paul in Romans 13 is that authority in its generic form derives from the Creator. The recognition that all authority is owing to God is not qualified in either Peter or Paul by those who exercise the authority, whether just or unjust. The prophetic viewpoint of the OT reminded Israel again and again that the Lord accomplishes his purposes through the existing powers (cf. Pr 21:1; Jer 25:9; 27:6; 43:10; Da 4:17). The reading of “accept” is weak to the extent that it does not do full justice to the nuances of the verb *hypotassō*. Lest the reader view Peter’s prescription as unquestioning obedience or spiritual compromise (a major concern of Achtemeier, 182; Michaels, 121; Waltner, 87), Peter’s exhortation is framed in terms of doing wrong and doing right. The context is guided by the issue of punishment for wrongdoing (cf. Ro 13:3–4). Thus this has to do with criminal justice.

14–15 The Petrine understanding, consistent with Paul’s, is that governing authorities are appointed by God for sociomoral order; 1 Peter 2:13–17, therefore, cannot be misconstrued as a call to uncritical subservience. The primary responsibility of the “king” (vv.13, 17; elsewhere in the NT at Jn 19:15; Ac 17:2; Rev 17:12) and the “governors” (v.14, *hēgemōn*, GK 2450; cf. Mt 10:18; Mk 13:9; Lk 21:12) is to preserve the social order. Part of this entails “commending those who do right,” and Peter believes that good deeds will “silence” (*phimoō*, “to muzzle,” GK 5821) the mouths of ignorant people—people who might falsely accuse Christians. Moreover, both 1 Peter and Romans frame social obligation in terms of conscience, *syneidēsis* (GK 5287, 1Pe 3:21; Ro 13:5), and subordination, *hypotagē* (GK 5717, 1Pe 2:13, 18; 3:1; Ro 13:5). That governing authorities are listed first in the household code suggests the

consistent presence of both the Roman *imperium* and governors in the lives of the saints.

16–17 Several practical words of advice follow, with the writer keenly aware of class and social distinctions: “Live as free men,” regardless of worldly or social status; “do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil,” rather “act as free men” who are “servants of God,” since freedom is conditioned by responsibility; and “show proper respect to everyone.” Three examples of respect are listed—“love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king”—each of which has decidedly practical ramifications. Brotherly affection (cf. 1:22) among Christians will not only be a needed encouragement in a socially hostile climate, it will also validate Christian witness. While the emperor is the supreme political authority, the exhortation toward “respect” and “honor” simultaneously desacralizes the emperor in status and addresses an attitude of disrespect toward political authority that some Christians—perhaps “Zealot” types—might harbor.

NOTES

13–17 The expression “station code” comes from the German *Ständetafel*. T. Martin, 138, attributes the origin of the term to Hans von Campenhausen, *Polykarp von Smyrna und die Pastoralbriefe* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1951). See Balch (“Household Codes,” 25–50) for a survey of research on the household code up to ca. 1988; cf. Martin, 124–30. With some justification, Goppelt, 165, laments that the designation “household code” in the end is inadequate, since “station” better reflects the social institutions to which one is assigned in God’s providence.

b. A Christian View of Unjust Treatment (2:18–25)

OVERVIEW

Barclay, 210, has estimated that there were as many as sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire at the time Peter was writing. Given their sheer numbers and their lack of legal rights (thus Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 10.8 [1134b]), it would be quite natural, though misleading, to think they were consigned to mere menial tasks. Indeed they served as teachers, musicians, tutors, physicians, and secretaries. It is important to note that the term Peter

uses for slaves is not *douloi* (GK 1528), typically rendered “slaves,” but *oiketai* (GK 3860), i.e., household or domestic servants. Thus we have to do with a household code in 2:18–25. Treatment of household *oiketai* varied greatly; some were treated harshly, while some were treated with respect and considered members of the family. Peter’s admonition mirrors both scenarios.

The early Christian community offered a radical contrast to society, since it collapsed social barriers such as slave and free (1Co 12:13; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). Understandably, not a few slaves were members of the Christian community. Most likely, it is for this reason that the NT devotes considerable advice to them (e.g., 1Co 7:21; Eph 6:5–8; 2Pe 2:19). Correlatively, masters are addressed in Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13; Ephesians 6:9; and Colossians 4:1. The introduction of Christian faith into a slave’s life—or a master’s for that matter—would raise new and perhaps baffling tensions. Certainly the question “Does faith eradicate social distinctions or conventions?” is one many would have pondered. Whatever the tensions, Peter wishes to emphasize the Christian element in the relationship, choosing not to editorialize on the ethical viability of master-slave relationships. He acknowledges that some slaves will incur “good and considerate” (*epieikēs*, GK 2117) masters, while others will have “harsh” (*skolios*, GK 5021) ones. For the latter, day-to-day bearing up under such conditions is an enormous ethical challenge.

¹⁸Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. ¹⁹For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. ²⁰But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

²²“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

²³When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

COMMENTARY

18–20 In the context of master-slave relationships, Peter wishes to emphasize respect that issues out of redemption. His admonition to “submit,” and to do so “with all respect,” has two goals: to engender respect but also to preview vindication. Indeed, “fear” (NIV, “respect”; *phobos*, GK 5828) cuts both ways. Peter observes further that it is “grace” (NIV, “commendable”; *charis*, GK 5921) before God, i.e., evidence that grace is operative in our lives, when a person “bears up under the pain of unjust suffering”—doubtless an approach to suffering radically different from what comes naturally. It is in such a crucible that the Christian distinctive is evidenced. There is, of course, no merit to suffering for wrongdoing, as is accentuated through the rhetorical question “But how is it to your credit ... ?”; after all, such is deserved. But the consequence of being a Christian, i.e., being “insulted because of the name of Christ” (4:14), is that a person will suffer unjust treatment, given the conflict that exists between two different standards of conduct and the fact that the Christian is “conscious of God” (cf. 1:17). But one endures hardship, it must be stressed, not out of Stoic indifference or Stoic self-sufficiency, but out of “conscience before God” (NIV, “conscious”; *dia syneidēsin theou*, v.19).

21–22 While a revolutionary call to undermine the social structure is not Peter’s emphasis, Jesus’ attitude toward suffering and unjust treatment is. To facilitate this model, the “suffering servant” song of Isaiah 53 is utilized, of which Jesus’ attitudes are reminiscent (cf. also its use by Philip, Ac 8:26–40). This establishes an immediate and obvious link to the readers’ situation—committing no sin, no deceit being found in his mouth, refusal to respond in kind, and not threatening under the heat of suffering but

entrusting himself to God. After all, Christians constitute the “community of the cross” (so Davids, 106–8).

Peter is by no means fatalistic about persecution for the sake of Christ, but once more he enlists the language of election: “To this [i.e., suffering for good] you were called [*eklēthēte*, GK 1721]” (cf. up to this point 1:1; 2:4, 9). The Petrine perspective on suffering is that Christians endure hardship for the sake of Christ precisely because he suffered, as an example (*hypogrammos*, GK 5681), for us. The words “To this you were called” are a reiteration of the conditions of basic Christian discipleship, and the call of Jesus is to “take up the cross” and “follow” him (Mt 10:38; 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23; 14:27). For this reason, the saints are called to “follow in his steps.” In recalling Jesus’ penetrating post-resurrection challenge to Peter to “follow” (Jn 21:19), Peter’s failure earlier in his life to do precisely this doubtless imbues his present exhortation to “follow in his steps” with deep meaning.

24 Peter returns here to the notion of sacrifice (cf. 1:19), which provides a thematic link to Isaiah 53, making application to all in describing Christ’s willingness to “bear our sins in his body on the tree” (cf. Isa 53:4, 12). That Christ did so “in his body” accents his identification with the human situation as vicarious sufferer; Jesus is representative through his suffering. The sins of all humanity were being borne, “so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.” Christ, therefore, redeems our plight. Suffering, thus seen, has a redemptive element: “by his wounds you have been healed” (cf. Isa 53:5). Sin-sick humanity is restored, and Christian “freedom” is predicated on the bedrock of redemption (as already suggested in 1:18–21).

25 Rhetorically speaking, Peter finds it necessary to remind his readers that, formerly, “you were like sheep going astray” (cf. Isa 53:6), as he has already suggested earlier in the letter (1:14, 18; 2:10). But “now you have returned [*epestraphēte*, GK 2188].” Doubtless his own returning is in the back of the writer’s mind; he knows what it means to be restored (“when you have turned back [*epistrepsas*], strengthen your brothers,” Lk 22:32).

Given the delicate nature of the themes being addressed (unjust suffering, mistreatment, showing respect to all, confidently entrusting ourselves to God who vindicates), it is fitting that this section concludes with the sheep/shepherd metaphor, reminiscent once more of Isaiah 53:6–7. The shepherd tends the flock, and in so doing he selflessly cares for the sheep,

recovering those who stray. He alone is aware of dangers lurking that threaten the flock's welfare. Christ's example is compelling for several reasons. Not only did his vicarious suffering bring about redemption and not only did he not respond in kind, but through his own suffering he also established *solidarity* with the saints. Because "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but ...who has been tempted in every way—yet was without sin" (Heb 4:15), the saints can "approach the throne of grace with confidence." It is there that they "receive mercy and find grace to help [them] in [their] time of need" (4:16).

Christ is here depicted as both "Shepherd" and "Overseer of your souls." The designation "Overseer" (*episkopos*, GK 2176, hence the English "bishop") is not intended to denote an ecclesiastical title (and thereby suggest a later date for the epistle, as some commentary assumes). In a secular milieu, *episkopoi* are governors or administrators who supervise law and maintain public safety; thus, rich in what it suggests, the term reinforces the fact that Christ is concerned for—and superintends—the saints' welfare. He guards them in a multifaceted way. Not incidentally, Paul addresses the elders of Ephesus in very similar terms. He calls them both to "be shepherds of the church of God" and be "overseers" thereof, which was "bought with his own blood" (Ac 20:28). These attributes, which Christ himself exhibits toward the church and which inhere in the sheep/shepherd metaphor, are emphasized again later in the epistle's concluding exhortations (5:2–4); the elders are to demonstrate the same qualities as they shepherd the flock of God.

REFLECTIONS

What is disturbing to the modern mind-set is that the NT writers do not call slaves to leave their households and masters. Peter and Paul share the common conviction that Christian faith transforms relationships, in the process transcending the existing social differences—hence Paul's instructions to Onesimus not to run away from Philemon but to respond as a brother in Christ (Phm 16). The social scheme, flawed as it was, was not to be bypassed or jettisoned; rather, transforming the social scheme was the intended goal.

Peter, it should be said, is not calling his readers passively to embrace abuse. For both him and the apostle Paul, social status is neither an

advantage nor a disadvantage in Christian discipleship. For both, Christians are to resist taking justice into their own hands (cf. Ro 12:17–21). A negative exhortation—refraining from these actions—is matched by a positive obligation, predicated again on the Master himself: “he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (cf. 1:17)—an injunction Peter repeats later in the epistle (4:19). The Lord himself judges all men; he is all-seeing and all-knowing. Ultimately there will be a day of moral reckoning, at which time the saints can expect vindication.

Great confusion exists within the Christian community in our present day and age regarding peace, peacemaking, forgiveness, and nonviolence. One noted confusion advocates a “peace” ethic that conflates personal forgiveness with political responsibilities to the social order. Biblical revelation witnesses to the governing authorities’ appointment by God to execute justice—and thus maintain social order—commensurate with Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17. The magistrate, therefore, is not held accountable by God to “forgive,” as is mistakenly suggested by Waltner, 116–18, who draws from the arguments of Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), and L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). While individuals privately are commanded in Scripture not to harbor bitterness, resentment, or hatred, forgiveness in the technical sense may not be granted where *repentance* has not first occurred—a spiritual reality implicit in teaching as diverse as Matthew 18:15–18 (reconciling a brother) and Leviticus 16:1–34 (the Day of Atonement). For a thorough discussion of forgiveness that is both faithful to biblical revelation and sensitive to interpersonal psychology, see A. Clendenen and T. W. Martin, *Forgiveness: Finding Freedom Through Reconciliation* (New York: Crossroads, 2002).

c. A Christian View of Marriage (3:1–7)

¹Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, ²when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. ³Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of

gold jewelry and fine clothes. ⁴Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. ⁵For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, ⁶like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

⁷Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

COMMENTARY

1–2 Peter maintains his focus on domestic relationships (*homoiōs gynaikeis*, “Wives, in the same way”) and considers the tensions that might arise within the marriage as a result of Christian faith. His advice is directed toward both husbands and wives, with the latter addressed initially. The exhortations to wives strongly suggest that Peter envisions marriage in which one partner has become a believer. In keeping with the letter's theme of hardship, Peter insinuates that the marital relationship might emit strain in the case of a “mixed” marriage. Accordingly, husbands “who do not believe [*apeitheō*, GK 578] the word” will be “won over” or “gained” (*kerdainō*, GK 3045). Precisely how are unbelieving husbands won over? According to Peter, it is the wife's “behavior” (*anastrophē*, GK 419, twice in vv.1–2; also in 1:15, 18; 2:12; 3:16) that is strangely effective. Because of the power of purity and reverence in their conduct, as confirmed by parallels in ancient literature (e.g., Seneca, *Ben.* 7.9; Philo, *Virt.* 39; *Moses* 2.243; Plutarch, *Mor.* 1, 141), Peter can exhort wives to subordinate themselves (*hypotassō*) to their husbands; such serene behavior has the ability to change the husband (on which, see Osiek and Balch, 148).

At first glance, the modern reader may wonder why the instructions to wives are significantly longer than those directed to husbands. This may well reflect the fact that the wife's position, especially following conversion to the Christian faith, was much more precarious. Barclay, 218, writes, “If a husband became a Christian, he would automatically bring his wife with

him into the Church and there would be no problem. But if a wife became a Christian while her husband did not, she was taking a step which was unprecedented and which produced the acutest problems [given the absence of any rights for women in antiquity and the absolute obedience to the husband that was expected].”

Curiously, however, despite these potential challenges Peter does not counsel such women to leave their husbands. Nor are they encouraged to undermine existing social distinctions—something that may strike the modern reader as scandalous. Since submission of the wife to the husband was the social custom, in a mixed marriage a lack of submission would undermine the gospel. For this reason a wife who has become a Christian must be judicious with her freedom. Seen in this light, Peter’s advice is to underscore how powerful—and immensely attractive—a woman’s lifestyle can be. Such purity and reverence, he observes, can “win over” the husband. Moreover, this “conversion” is predicated on the wife’s behavior “without words.” Hereby, Peter may be speaking to or countering the temptation toward being argumentative, nagging, or manipulative toward the unbelieving husband, which might be counterproductive.

3–6 A woman’s attractiveness is magnified in Peter’s argument by means of a contrast between inner and outer beauty. To the pagan, virtue is praiseworthy. Believing wives have a model in this regard—Sarah in her relationship to Abraham—and should thus aspire to be “her daughters” in doing “what is right.” In contrast to an “outward adornment” that is characterized, for example, by “braided hair” (cf. 1Ti 2:9), “the wearing of gold jewelry,” and donning “fine clothes,” authentic beauty subsists in the attractiveness of the “inner self”—in a beauty that is “unfading” (*aphthartos*, GK 915, also used in 1:4 regarding the saints’ inheritance and 1:23 denoting the word of God). This inner beauty, it is pointed out, shows itself in “a gentle and quiet spirit,” which is said to be “of great worth in God’s sight.”

Just as Peter has alluded to Jesus as a model of not returning evil for evil, so he cites “holy women” of the OT as an example to follow (v.5). They are exemplary because they “put their hope in God” and were accustomed to adorning themselves by being “submissive toward their husbands.” Sarah is singled out as one such model or type (v.6). It is specifically noted of Sarah that she “obeyed Abraham and called him her master,” an allusion to

Genesis 18:12 and Sarah's response to childbearing in spite of her age. While nothing in the Genesis narrative suggests exemplary obedience, rabbinic tradition developed the idea of Sarah's obedience and submission to Abraham. Peter appears to be borrowing from extrabiblical tradition in his weaving together of several important subthemes in the letter—holiness (1:2, 5, 19, 22; 2:5), hope (1:3, 21; 3:15), and respect undergirded by humility (2:13–3:12). Sarah is useful in weaving these strands together.

Christian wives who model Sarah's attitude become "her daughters" to the extent that they "do what is right" and "do not give way to fear." This image of Sarah seems a counterpart to Abraham, who is a model (cf. Ro 4:12). Doing right and not being governed by fear constitute a call to be active, constructive, and hopeful in the married relationship rather than being passively acquiescent, to which many might be inclined. From the Genesis narrative it can be reasonably asserted that Sarah was "forced" to trust the Lord; i.e., the path on which the Lord was directing her was *not of her own choosing*; nevertheless, it was a path she ultimately embraced by faith (Heb 11:11). Further, Peter's admonitions to wives resist modern interpreters' attempts to read into the text the notion that 1 Peter is oppressive. The writer is attuned to the difficulties women would have experienced in the domestic context, particularly in a mixed marriage.

7 Following his exhortations to wives, the writer addresses husbands. Four requirements are noted. The first of the four is strikingly suggestive, with the text literally reading, "living together according to knowledge" (*synoikountes kata gnōsin*), hence, "being considerate." In the context of day-to-day marital relations, this imperative is sweeping. Living with a woman "according to knowledge" stands in marked contrast to living with a woman out of "sheer thoughtlessness" (so Barclay, 223). Waltner, 99, encompasses the full range of female needs when he writes that this exhortation "constitutes a call to respect the full personhood of the woman in a marriage relationship."

Second, husbands are to "treat [their wives] with respect as the weaker partner" (*hōs asthenesterō skeuei tō gynaikeiō*). How the woman is "weaker" is the subject of varied—and fancied—explanation by commentators. Whether *asthenēs* ("weak," GK 822) has physical, psychological, or emotional application is debatable but beside the point. Marshall, 103–4, strikes a reasonable balance: husbands, cognizant of the

wives' situation, are to treat them with courtesy; given their station, they are more vulnerable. Christian faith has a revolutionary effect not only on the way men treat women but also on how they view them. What is incontestable about the plight of married women in the ancient world is that they possessed no authority and influence beside their husbands. Hence, Christian husbands are doubly sensitive to this "weakness," consequently treating them with *timē*, "honor" (NIV, "respect"; GK 5507). This social reality also explains why the verb *hypotassō* ("submit," GK 5718), appearing in 2:13; 2:18; 3:1 (and later in 3:22; 5:5), is not used in 3:7, since husbands already exercise a natural social authority over their wives. This authority, in the Petrine scheme, must be accompanied by deference and courtesy. Husbands are to honor rather than exploit, since exploitation likely is the norm.

Third, husbands are to keep in mind that their wives are "heirs with [them] of the gracious gift of life" (*synklēronomois charitos zōēs*). If indeed wives, in the social scheme of antiquity, were without rights and considered of inferior status, Christian faith elevated the status of women, so that in Christ male and female are coequal (1Co 12:13; Gal 3:28). The full blessing, peace, and welfare that arise from Christian faith are shared by both husband and wife. They are partners in the riches and benefits of the gospel (similarly, 2Pe 1:1). There exist equality and complementarity within the social scheme of things.

The fourth quality issues out of the prior three. A husband who is inattentive to his wife, failing to show her consideration, honor, and respect, finds that a barrier is erected between him and his God. For this reason, husbands are to be attentive to the needs of their wives, "so that nothing will hinder your prayers." Advice of a similar nature is given by Paul to the Corinthians in the sphere of marital relations (cf. 1Co 7:4–5). Harmony in the relationship is predicated on a principle enunciated by Jesus: if our relationships are not right, we are to "leave [the] gift there in front of the altar" (Mt 5:24; cf. also 18:15) until the block has been removed. This is all the more applicable in marital union and is likely the principal rationale for calling men "everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer" (1Ti 2:8; cf. 1Co 11:29).

NOTES

1–7 Lohse, 37–59, and Marshall, 83–84, have clearly and concisely framed the issue of honor and respect as it touches the role of husbands and their wives. That husbands do not submit to their wives, given the existing social scheme in the first century, would have been understood. That “all of you”—the final group addressed by Peter (v.8)—are admonished toward unity, sympathy, and humility suggests a sort of “mutual submission” at work within the community.

REFLECTIONS

The extent to which Christian faith dignified the status of women of antiquity is mirrored in the pages of the NT. Women figure prominently in the ministry of the fledgling church (e.g., Ac 16:11–15; 18:1–4, 18–28) and in the ministry of the apostle Paul (e.g., Ro 16:1–16; 1Co 1:11; 16:19; 2Ti 4:19–21). Indeed, within the church, social distinctions that existed in surrounding society fell away (e.g., Ro 11:17–21; 1Co 12:13; Gal 3:28). By contrast, women to whom Paul was writing were without legal rights and protection according to Roman law. Marriage merely moved a woman from the authority of the father (*patria potestas*) to that of a husband, to whom she was now absolutely subject. Given the social restrictions on women fully apart from religion, it is exceedingly difficult for the modern reader—at least in many parts of the world—to visualize and empathize with a woman’s problems if she became a Christian and thereby refused her husband’s loyalties, religious or otherwise. Without any rights in the technical sense, life for Christian wives of unbelieving husbands may have seemed unbearable.

While the amount of instruction directed at wives might give the impression of unevenness on the part of the writer, appearances are deceiving. In relatively little space the writer has much to say to admonish husbands, who “in the same way”—i.e., reciprocally—have important obligations toward their wives. Respect, the thread linking each constitutive element in the household code with the others, is measured by Peter for husbands in four tangible ways: showing understanding, showing deference to the “weaker” partner, treating her as a joint heir in the faith, and acting in such a way that one’s prayers are not hindered. It becomes immediately apparent to the reader that Peter maintains equality within the existing social conventions.

d. A Christian Response to Unjust Treatment (3:8–12)

⁸Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. ⁹Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.
¹⁰For,

“Whoever would love life
and see good days
must keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from deceitful speech.

¹¹He must turn from evil and do good;
he must seek peace and pursue it.

¹²For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their prayer,
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

COMMENTARY

8 Peter signals the conclusion of the household code admonitions with “finally, all of you.” The concluding exhortation is addressed to everyone in the community. What applies specifically to individual groups regarding respect and harmony applies to the community. The Christian ethic will exhibit unity, sympathy, brotherly affection, compassion, humility, and nonretaliation. Together these six qualities possess a corporate character that will strengthen the Christian community’s witness to society.

To be of the same mind (*homophrōn*, GK 3939; NIV, “live in harmony with”) is to be on guard against divisions that would hinder Christian unity. Because of the imperative of unity as witness to the world, Jesus prays, on the eve of his crucifixion, for his disciples to realize a degree of unity that he and the Father have shared in eternity (Jn 17:1–5). Jesus’ prayer is “that

all of them may be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21). The accent on Christian unity is found throughout the NT (e.g., Ac 4:32; Ro 12:4–5, 16; 1Co 1:2, 10; 3:5–9, 21–23; 10:17; 12:4–7, 12–13; 2Co 13:11; Eph 4:4–6; Php 1:27; 2:2; 4:2). Unity does not require uniformity; being of the same mind is not predicated on simple agreement with others. It is, however, founded on a common Lord, a common confession, and a common goal of witness to the world. No Christian can live the Christian life in isolation, but only as he or she is joined, with one mind, to other members of God’s church, living stones that together comprise one building. The church is not church if there is no inherent, manifested unity. If the readers are encountering hostility from society around them, Christian unity is no luxury; it is critical for survival.

A related attitude is that of being sympathetic (*sympatheis*, GK 5218). It is the essential nature of the human body to be “sympathetic” (cf. 1Co 12:26), to which Peter calls his readers. Sympathy, as Barclay, 227, reminds us, is the opposite of self-absorption, the ability to identify with the sufferings and pains of others. To share in the sufferings of others is both the cause and effect of Christian unity. The believers’ model once again is Christ, the high priest, who sympathizes with [*sympathēsai*] our weaknesses (Heb 4:15). Significantly, sympathy is not merely a Christian virtue; it was also held in high esteem by Hellenistic moralists (e.g., Plutarch, *Mor.* 432; Strabo, *Geogr.* 6.3.3). Like unity, sympathy strengthens Christians in the world.

Furthermore, being “affectionate” (NIV, “love as brothers”; *philadelphos*, GK 5789), “compassionate” (*eusplanchnos*, GK 2359), and “humble” (*tapeinophrones*, GK 5426) all stand in direct relation to sympathy and Christian unity. Moreover, all are vital to the community’s survival in a hostile environment. Brotherly affection is also included in the catalog of virtues appearing in 1 Peter 1:5–7, where it is related to—though distinct from—love (*agapē*, GK 27). While the distinction should not be pressed too far, the former is a virtue valued by pagans, appearing frequently in Stoic virtue lists, for example. A practical test in any cultural context is whether the Christian will love his fellow human. Moreover, a hearty affection for one’s brothers and sisters in the community will attest to the vibrancy of the community’s faith. *Philadelphia* has a notably *social* trajectory.

The word rendered “compassionate,” *eusplanchnos*, vividly conveys feeling and emotion. Deriving from *splanchna* (GK 5073), one’s inner organs, the term by extension conveys deep, intense emotion. Its only other NT occurrence is in Ephesians 4:32, contextualized in Pauline admonitions toward tenderheartedness, though the verb form is found in the Synoptic Gospels, notably in depicting the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:33), who “took pity,” and the father of the prodigal (Lk 15:20), who on seeing his son returning home “was filled with compassion.” And it finds its fullest expression in Jesus himself (Mk 1:41), who is said by the evangelist, when approached by a leper, to have been “filled with compassion.”

Among secular Hellenistic moralists, to be “humble” was not considered a virtue, given the primacy of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*, GK 894). Hence it is a peculiarly Christian ethical distinctive. The Christian ethic reorients and transforms one’s outlook. Humility springs in part from an awareness of our creatureliness and thus of our utter dependence on the Creator. But this contrast is not intended to be demeaning, provided that the creature draws on divine provision (i.e., grace). Humility that acknowledges and appropriates grace is a humility that does not humiliate; rather, it is buoyed by gratitude (cf. 1:6–9, 18–21) and results in attitudes and actions that are active rather than passive.

9 As it pertains to the readers’ situation, being humble will lead to an active and redemptive response toward the wrong being directed toward Christians. It will result in “not repaying evil with evil or insult [*loidoria*, GK 3367] with insult.” The true test of character—and Christian faith—is how the believer responds when treated with contempt, since out of instinct humans tend to retaliate (cf. Mt 5:39–42). Mounce, 48, cogently identifies the rub, since repaying insult with insult, evil with evil, is fundamental to human nature: “But isn’t that the essence of Christian conduct—acting contrary to our old and fallen nature?”

Rather than a response of insult or retaliation, the Christian is admonished, on the contrary, toward “blessing” (*eulogeō*, GK 2328) others, i.e., acting graciously toward them. This advice is strikingly reminiscent of that given by Paul, who writes in a similar context, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Ro 12:14). Indeed, Peter writes that Christians have been “called” (*eklegomai*, GK 1721; note again the language of election, as in 1:1, 15; 2:4, 9, 21; 3:9; 5:10) to extend goodwill,

even to those who oppose or mistreat them. Why? Peter's rationale is that the saints themselves have been recipients of divine mercy; therefore, it is within them to extend the same to fellow human beings—teaching that lies at the heart of the Christian gospel (e.g., Mt 5:38–48; Lk 6:27). Jesus' instructions concerning prayer are guided by a similar principle (cf. Mt 6:12, 14–15).

Peter's further rationale for dealing graciously with others is pragmatic: "so that you may inherit a blessing." Earlier, Peter had reminded his readers of the incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading inheritance (*klēronomia*, GK 3100) that was theirs through the new birth (1:3–5). Peter here uses the verbal form, *klēronomēsēte*, to encourage them: if they bless, they will inherit a blessing.

10–12 As he has done throughout the letter, Peter buttresses his paraenetic teaching by citation, and once more he appropriates Psalm 34, adapting it for his present purposes. Important points of contact between the psalm and the readers' situation are worth noting: keeping the tongue from evil and the lips from deceitful speech, turning from evil and doing good, seeking and pursuing peace, as well as divine omniscience and attentiveness to their cares (thus G. L. Green, "The Use of the Old Testament for Christian Ethics in 1 Peter," *TynBul* 41/2 [1990]: 278–82). The citation from Psalm 34 has the effect of instilling the fear of the Lord in the reader, with its concluding reminder that the Lord's face is set against anyone who does evil. Thus the Christian is compelled to pursue good.

REFLECTIONS

The biblical understanding of authority is that all earthly forms of power inhere in and derive from a heavenly source. This is evidenced in the OT, whether through Pharaoh (e.g., Ex 7:3; 14:17–18; cf. Ro 9:17) or Nebuchadnezzar (e.g., Jer 28:14; 25:8–11; 27:6–7; 43:10–13) or Cyrus (e.g., Isa 44:28; 45:1). One exceedingly exemplary member of the OT Diaspora community reveals his own understanding of authority as follows: "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever, wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them" (Da 2:20–22).

The same understanding of authority is found in the NT. The apostle Paul writes to the Christians living in the imperial seat of Rome to reassure them

that the governing authorities are appointed by God himself and possess no authority apart from what is granted to them (Ro 13:1–7). On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus confesses this very reality. When Pilate reminds him that he has the authority to release or crucify Jesus, Jesus' response is telling: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (Jn 19:11). The Great Commission, recorded at the end of Matthew's gospel, leaves no room for uncertainty: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [Jesus]" (Mt 28:18). This absolute authority cannot be "given" unless it resides already in the Father, the sovereign Lord.

It is exceedingly difficult for the modern reader to read the social obligations enumerated in 2:13–3:12 without raising a multitude of questions. At the very least, the political and social structures of life in the twenty-first century appear so radically different from those of the first century that we are tempted to impose modern presuppositions on the text. One interpretive approach to be avoided is to assume that the NT writers are naive or indifferent to political, social, and familial relationships and, consequently, impose contemporary values and categories on the biblical text. Another mistaken interpretive approach is to marshal 1 Peter in support of contemporary values. Thus this epistle should not be made to support totalitarian or oppressive authority, but neither should it be made to explain away or ignore the implications of *hypotassō* (GK 5718). To illustrate: thoroughly unacceptable is Barclay's claim, 206, contextualized in his comparison of democracy and dictatorship, that "submission" only has to do with the authoritative state that demands "absolute obedience." Distortions of this kind have more to do with faulty notions of what constitutes submission than with different types of government. It is my position that no interpreter comes to the text in a "neutral" fashion, but also that the text must be permitted to speak in its political, social, and cultural context, thereby forcing the modern reader to scrutinize certain cherished assumptions. The perspective of 1 Peter is that faith works through—rather than invalidating—social conventions. Moreover, submission on an earthly level, while voluntary, is rooted in a submission to the heavenly Master and balanced by a strong emphasis on God's authority, judgment, and providential care. Properly conceived, submission is a sign of respect, not servility (so Senior, 49, 58). Further, "submission" is within the bounds of what God wills, requires, and commands; hence the language of *submission to divine authority* that laces its way throughout the household code: e.g.,

“for the Lord’s sake” (2:13); “God’s will” (2:15); using freedom as “servants of God” (2:16); “fear God” (2:17); “because he is conscious of God” (2:19); “commendable before God” (2:20); “in God’s sight” (3:4).

D. Christian Suffering Due to Righteous Living (3:13–5:11)

1. A Christian Perspective on Suffering (3:13–4:6)

a. Preparing a Christian Response to Suffering (3:13–17)

OVERVIEW

There is a shift in the writer’s focus beginning with 3:13. It is not a shift from the theoretical to the practical; Peter has very practically illustrated that Christian witness and transformation work its way through existing social conventions. Rather, it is a shift to address the theme of suffering head-on and expressly exhort the readers in the midst of their hardships. (While the household code of 2:13–3:7 does not address suffering directly, it is nevertheless in the background, as J. L. de Villiers, “Joy in Suffering in 1 Peter,” *Neot* 9 [1975]: 65, observes.) Consistent with the rest of the letter, Peter does not engage in a “theology of suffering” per se. Neither does he wrestle with the nagging question of *why* the righteous suffer or *why* a good and loving God can permit it. From this point forward, the emphasis is essentially threefold: (1) to be prepared for it, (2) to look once more to Jesus as our model, and (3) to entrust oneself into the hands of a just God, who will both vindicate and judge. In the material that follows, these three strands are effectively interwoven.

¹³Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.” ¹⁵But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

COMMENTARY

13 Peter opens with a rhetorical question intended to cause reflection: Who among those accosting (*ho kakōsōn*, in most translations rendered “harming” or “doing evil,” GK 2808) the saints succeeds “if you are eager to do good”? The immediate answer, “No one,” based on Peter’s previous argument of eternal perspective (i.e., the past, present, and future), is that nothing can detract from their inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1:3–9). Peter’s focus, however, remains the same as before: *doing good*. While it is possible to be passionate or misguided about the wrong things, being zealots of the good cannot be faulted. Peter’s admonition has the ring of Paul, who describes Christians as a people “zealous for good deeds” (*zēlōtēn kalōn ergōn*, Tit 2:14 NASB). Moral integrity, in the end, cannot be impugned.

14 But in cases where Christians indeed do “suffer for what is right” (*paschō dia dikaiosynēn*), they are declared, as Jesus announced, to be “blessed.” This suffering, it should be emphasized, is not some hypothetical situation, as some commentators have assumed; rather, we can presume that the readers are, in reality, suffering in their present situation, a situation already intimated in 1:6. Peter’s response to suffering “for what is right” is to reiterate the words of his master: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:10). In taking up Christian discipleship, one learns that persecution is unavoidable, as Jesus states without ambiguity (Mt 10:34–39; Jn 15:18–22).

14–16 Peter forthrightly tells his readers that awareness of one’s status before God (*makarios*, GK 3421) does not guarantee an absence of intimidation and fear of consequence. His exhortation consists of four elements—two parts negative and two parts positive. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened [or intimidated]” are the two negative requirements, while “set apart Christ as Lord” and “always be prepared to give an answer” are the positive rejoinders. In the heat of conflict, it is impossible for human nature, apart from divine grace, to respond redemptively and with self-composure to evil intentions; fear and intimidation are natural. As before on multiple occasions, Peter marshals support for his paraenesis from the OT—this time from Isaiah 8:12, the context of which finds Judah discouraged as it faces an impending Assyrian

invasion. In extracting this citation, Peter is not merely casting about for OT promises; he is identifying with a persecuted community in the old covenant, and concerned moreover to transfer honor and lordship to Christ. “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord,” furthermore, is not merely a call to pious devotion; it is intended to underscore the *public* ramifications of Christ’s rule—a rule, as the writer will accent, that culminates in his exaltation, “with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” (3:22).

Accordingly, the awareness of the cosmic dimension of Christ’s rule/lordship allows the believer—indeed, frees the believer—to be ready with an apologetic for “everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” That is to say, a mind-set rooted in Christ’s uncontested lordship produces *boldness*—boldness both to resist intimidation and to offer an apologetic. Carrying over certain elements of the legal term *apologia* (GK 665), Peter (as Paul in Php 1:7, 16) exhorts his readers toward readiness in laying out a formal defense of their faith, whenever and wherever it might occur. Significantly, the apologetic is described by Peter as a defense of Christian hope, consistent with what has been an important leitmotif throughout the epistle (1:3, 13, 21; 3:5). Only because they are hopeful can the readers face and overcome persecution. Those commentators who view this admonition as referring to a general posture rather than a particular crisis situation correctly grasp the thrust of this paraenesis. Michaels, 188, expresses it this way: “Peter sees his readers as being ‘on trial’ every day as they live for Christ in a pagan society.” The defense, moreover, is one that is reasonable, sustained, accessible, and well articulated, as any courtroom presentation would have to be in order for it to be credible.

A reasonable defense of Christian hope, however, while anchored in a boldness that alone finds its source in Christ’s cosmic lordship, nevertheless must be done “with gentleness and respect” (Barclay, 231, “with winsomeness and love”). Note again that the attitude of human *respect*—the attitude that undergirds each element of the household code—is the Christian’s baseline motivation. Hillyer, 109, aptly notes that a quiet dignity is far more effective than argument and belligerence. Christians must learn to supply a defense of the faith without being “defensive” in the way they present themselves. This is especially important in dialogue with pagans, who will tend to be suspicious of the Christian community. The Christian

defense, moreover, is to issue out of a “clear conscience” (the second such appeal to conscience in the letter; also in 2:19; 3:21). That conscience is related to right conduct and personal integrity, as most commentators observe, is certainly true, but the present context relates conscience to the Christians’ response to abuse and reviling (vv.9, 16). The sense in which “clear conscience” is applicable appears similar to what Peter had in mind earlier: seeing your goodness the pagan will “glorify God” on the judgment day (2:12) and be “silenced” in shame (2:15). Peter’s reasoning (“so that”) here—“those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed [*kataischynō*, GK 2875, also used in 2:6] of their slander”—follows his earlier line of reasoning that doing good would “silence the ignorant talk” of foolish people (2:15).

17 But what if the abusers do not have a change of heart? What about unjust suffering? After all, there is no guarantee that the believer’s integrity under trial will “silence” or stop the offender. In such cases, then, “it is better ... to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” This advice is precisely the same as that given earlier to slaves who encounter abusive masters (2:20–21). Given the alternatives before the believer in such situations, one can either respond by “doing evil”—and suffer the (just) consequences—or respond by doing good—in which case Peter has already said that the offended, like Christ, is to entrust himself “to him who judges justly” (2:23).

NOTES

13–17 It is difficult at this juncture not to read into Peter’s admonition regarding “readiness” the possibility that in the back of his mind is lodged his own failure years earlier. The fourth gospel captures with a sense of tragic irony this failure on the part of the impetuous disciple to offer up a defense: upon following Jesus after Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, Peter wholly disavows his Lord (Jn 18:15–18). This occurs, it will be remembered, despite his vigorous assertion made only hours before that he would be willing to die for his Master (Mt 26:30–35; Mk 14:26–31; Lk 22:31–34). Doubtless, a lifetime could not erase such a bitter memory (Lk 22:62).

REFLECTIONS

The writer's full rationale for *not* responding in kind to abusers has yet to be developed. In the material that follows (3:18–4:19), suffering as a Christian (i.e., suffering for “doing right”) is qualified with an important eschatological reality: those who endure unjust suffering can expect vindication. This vindication is as sure as *Christ's* vindication (3:18–22) and as sure as the fact that God is a God of judgment (4:1–19). To be fully convinced of future vindication and not lapse into despair, one must lay hold of an eschatological perspective that is firmly anchored; neither emotional experience nor religious feelings will hold in the heat of persecution. Reassuring his readers that vindication in fact *does* await the innocent sufferer is the task at hand. Once more, the writer points to the example of Christ, whose destiny should encourage the disconsolate.

b. Christ's Suffering and Vindication (3:18–22)

OVERVIEW

In all the NT, 1 Peter 3:18–22 is considered one of the most difficult and enigmatic passages to interpret. Martin Luther's perplexity was thusly expressed: “This is as strange a text and enigmatic a saying as there is anywhere in the New Testament, so that I do not yet know exactly what St. Peter means” (*Luther's Works* 12.367). The history of its interpretation is characterized by wildly divergent assumptions and understandings of what it purports to teach. These complexities notwithstanding, 3:18–22 represents something of a climax in the unfolding of the Petrine case regarding suffering. For this reason, our determination of both its function in the epistle and its teaching for the church cannot be overemphasized. We must therefore attempt to arrive at a basic understanding of the text by paying careful attention to its place in the Petrine argument. The judicious words of Dalton, 7–9, from whose thorough investigation of these verses any student of the NT would benefit, are worth repeating: “The difficulty of the text lies not in the thought of the author, which is neither odd nor fantastic, but in our ignorance of his background and field of reference.... Studies in later Jewish apocryphal writings and in early Jewish-Christian literature reveal a whole world of ideas which was powerfully at work, all the more so because simply taken for granted, in the writers of the New Testament.”

In these verses we pass from Christ's suffering, a central theme of the letter, to Christ's triumph, both of which relate to his saving work. In 3:8–17 the author had traced the psychology of the believer's suffering for Christ in a pagan and hostile world. Now he views the effects of Christ's work in terms of its results, for Jesus goes into heaven and is enthroned at the right hand of God, with all powers subject to his rule. The writer wishes to comfort his audience with the reassurance that (1) Christ is their "captain," the one who went before them and also suffered, and (2) there is nothing in the cosmos that remains outside the conquest and reign of Christ. Insofar as 4:1 resumes discussion of the prior theme ("Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body ..."), 3:18–22 may be viewed as a parenthesis. In this parenthetical thought, the writer wishes to inform the readers that not everything that Christ's death entails meets the eye. Those who henceforth take refuge in Christ, the Victorious One, come through the flood of divine retribution.

Structurally, the declarations contained in 3:18–22, as evidenced by their symmetry and hymnic form, are generally assumed by commentators to mirror the early church's creedal affirmation. The symmetry takes on an ABA'B' design: Christ died, Christ rose, Christ descended, and Christ ascended:

- A He was put to death in the body.
- B He was made alive by the Spirit.
- A' He descended and preached to the spirits.
- B' He ascended and rules over the spirits.

Indeed, one might go a step farther, as S. E. Johnson did ("The Preaching to the Dead [1 Peter 3.18–22]," *JBL* 79 [1960]: 48–51), in detecting in the structure of this "hymn" a chiasmic or reversed symmetry:

- A He suffered and was put to death.
- B He was made alive and went and preached to the spirits
- C who were disobedient
- D in the building of the ark, in which a few were saved.
- D' This pattern corresponds to baptism that now saves you,
- C' not a washing of dirt from the body, but a stipulation toward God
of a good conscience

B' through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

A' Therefore, since Christ suffered ...

¹⁸For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ²⁰who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

COMMENTARY

18 Immediately preceding this verse, the writer stresses the Christian response to persecution. Believers are thus to look to their Lord: “For Christ suffered ...” (NIV, “died”; *paschō*, GK 4248, used twelve times in 1 Peter, roughly one-third of all its occurrences in the NT). This suffering, moreover, was vicarious, for the sins of others; it was substitutionary atonement—“the righteous for the unrighteous,” unique and once-for-all (*hapax*, GK 562) in character (Heb 7:27; 9:28; 10:11–12; cf. Jude 5). This was done, writes Peter, “to bring [*prosaḡō*, GK 4642] you to God.” Accessibility to the divine throne, where Peter ends in this parenthetical insertion (3:22), is of critical importance to the readers psychologically if they are enduring considerable hardship in the present cultural context.

That Christ was “put to death [*thanatōō*, GK 2506] in the body” establishes immediate and crucial identification with the readers. Both share a common existential experience (lit.) “in the flesh”: both suffer. But this is not the end; the story progresses. While Christ was put to death in the flesh, on the one hand, he was also and subsequently “made alive by the Spirit”

(*zōopoieō pneumatī*). This flesh-Spirit contrast serves several purposes. At one level, it counters any divorce or dichotomizing of the two that would have typified Hellenistic thinking (cf. 1Jn 4:2). The scandal of the early church's preaching was its Christology: Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine (cf. Col 1:19). At another level, it reminds the audience that, while "the body is weak," indeed, the Spirit is willing (cf. Mt 26:41). The same Spirit who sanctifies (1:2), grants revelation (1:11), makes us holy (1:15–16), and raised Jesus from the dead (3:18) also quickens the believer. The Spirit helps us transcend our earthly limitations.

19–22 In the realm of the Spirit, according to Peter, Christ "went and preached to the spirits in prison." Two problems surface in this somewhat cryptic declaration: the identity of "spirits in prison" (*en phylakē pneumasin*) and the identity of the message "preached" (*kēryssō*, GK 3062). Two prominent interpretations of "imprisoned spirits," enjoying support both in the patristic period as well as today, vie for our consideration. One is that these are contemporaries of Noah, a reading that seems plausible in light of v.20. The second alternative is that this a reference to OT saints, i.e., righteous persons who died before Christ.

Several remarks about both possibilities—"spirits" as deceased humans—are in order. Among the arguments cited in support of rendering *pneumata* in 3:19 as human souls are: (1) the occurrence in v.18 of *pneumatī* and in v.19 *pneumasin*; (2) the low probability that Peter's readers, who are scattered through Asia Minor, would understand any allusion to a Jewish pseudepigraphal work such as *1 Enoch*; (3) "preaching" that is addressed to humans in 4:6; (4) a similar *sarx/pneuma* (GK 4922, 4460) dualism found in 4:6; (5) reconciling the time and place of preaching to fallen angels with the clause "when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built"; (6) the emphasis in Genesis 6 on human disobedience as the cause of divine judgment; and (7) the emphasis in 1 Peter on *human*, not demonic, sources of persecution.

According to the first view, Christ in his preexistent state is said to preach through Noah to Noah's generation, which was "imprisoned" by spiritual blindness. Despite the allusions to Noah and to disobedience that follow in the text, it is not clear from the context why only the generation of Noah would be singled out by Peter. The most that can be said about this reading is that Noah's contemporaries are paradigmatic. "Prison" and

“spirits” in this interpretation, then, must be understood metaphorically. Also and more importantly, this view fails to do justice to the contextual link extending to v.22, at which point Christ is said to rule over the angelic, and specifically the demonic, realm. Finally, Christ’s preaching through Noah evaporates any notion of a “descent.”

The second interpretation, that “spirits” represent OT saints before Christ, suffers from similar weaknesses. It violates the contextual flow and represents something of a digression in the writer’s argument. Thus when Tertullian (*An.* 55.2) writes that “Christ descended into hell in order to acquaint the patriarchs and prophets with his redeeming mission,” he does so with total disregard for the contextual and thematic development of 1 Peter’s argument. Further, it does not accord with the sense of “imprisonment”—that is, forced restraint and confinement—that *phylakē* suggests.

On the whole, both views fail to give account of the fact that *pneumata* in the NT normally designates angelic beings (e.g., Mt 8:16; 10:1; 12:45; Mk 1:27; 3:11; 5:13; 6:7; Lk 4:36; 6:16; 7:21; 8:2; 10:20; 11:26; Ac 5:16; 8:7; 19:12–13; 23:8–9; 1Ti 4:1; Heb 1:7, 14; 12:9; 1Jn 4:1; Rev 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6; 16:13–14).

Even though an understanding of “spirits” as demonic angels probably would have been taken for granted in the first century due to its prominence in Jewish apocalyptic literature, the view that the “spirits” were humans, whether deceased righteous ones or contemporaries of Noah, seems to have prevailed among many church fathers. One wonders whether the human interpretation of “spirits” among them owed to the same reason documents such as 2 Peter and Jude encountered difficulties in being accepted in some parts of the church, namely, due to an increasing wariness of apocalyptic and pseudepigraphal writings. Such works, particularly those in the mold of *1 Enoch*, are fantastic and fanciful to the extreme in their depiction of the demonic realm and its interaction with the material world.

In identifying the “spirits,” we have already suggested that a proper interpretation of 3:18–22 must be in accordance with—and not violate—the contextual flow of the writer’s thought. That the work of Christ touches the *angelic world* is by no means tangential to the epistle. The holy angels curiously long to peer into the mysteries that surround redemption (1:12). Moreover, the result of Christ’s work is that angelic powers, not mere

mortals, are in submission to Christ (3:22). Finally, readers are admonished to be alert, since “your enemy the devil,” the prince of demons, desires their ruin.

Although biblical literature contains no systematic explanation of the spirit world, the language of “imprisoned spirits” appears elsewhere in the NT. Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4 afford a tantalizing—albeit cryptic—glimpse at the demonic realm. Both texts incorporate the fallen angels in a catalog of disobedient, wicked paradigms that were befallen by divine judgment. Similarly, the apocalyptic visions contained in Revelation 18 and 20 help clarify the identity of “imprisoned spirits.” Neither text describes a place of departed souls; rather, both visions depict punishment and banishment. “Babylon” in 18:2 is referred to as “a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit,” while 20:1–3 depicts an angel coming down out of heaven with a key to the “Abyss,” wherein Satan is “bound,” “thrown,” and “sealed.” An “Abyss” is also mentioned in Luke 8:31; Romans 10:7; Revelation 9:1–2, 11; 11:17; and 17:8. In each of these contexts, it connotes demonic confinement, in stark contrast to “Abraham’s side” (Lk 16:22) and “paradise” (Lk 23:43). The similarity of imagery in 1 Peter 3 to Jude 6, 2 Peter 2:4, Revelation 18:2; and 20:1–3 suggests, at minimum, a common religious thought-world.

Yet another important text that supplements our understanding of “imprisoned spirits” is found in Colossians. The apostle notes that God through Christ cancelled the debt of sins that stood against us, “nailing it to the cross.” Thereby, he “disarmed the powers and authorities” and “made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:14–15). Two images are combined in this text, ever so briefly, to illustrate the extent of Christ’s work: a legal metaphor and a military metaphor. The latter concerns the effects of Christ’s sacrifice in the spirit world—effects illustrated by means of the image of a Roman triumphal procession. This picture, immediately transparent to the readers, finds a transferring of the military conquest by Rome and subsequent public humiliation of the vanquished throughout the streets of the city to the work of Christ and his foes in the spirit realm. Christ is conqueror and parades the vanquished foes—demonic powers—before the onlooking universe (cf. 1Co 15:24–27; Php 2:10).

The vocabulary of the unseen world utilized by Paul comports precisely with that used in 1 Peter 3:22, which describes Christ as having subjugated every *angelos* (GK 34), *exousia* (GK 2026), and *dynamis* (GK 1539). Elsewhere Paul alludes to the consummation of all things by declaring that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Php 2:10). The description “under the earth” is a reference to the demonic realm.

Closely related to the objects of Christ’s preaching is the message being preached. That the verb *euangelizomai* (“to preach the gospel,” GK 2294) is not used here, as it is in 4:6, is instructive. Rather, Peter uses the verb *kēryssō* (GK 3062); i.e., Christ announces his triumph over the powers of evil. Scripture never depicts Christ as “evangelizing”—or redeeming—the spirit world. The burden of 1 Peter, it should be reiterated, is the endurance of Christians, not the salvation of “spirits” (however one might define them).

The point of Christ’s preaching to the spirits, then, the notion of which reaches a climax in v.22, is to show that Jesus has triumphed over and exposed *the very powers of evil themselves*—forces that are hostile to Christ and Christ’s disciples. More to the point, Jesus Christ, the innocent sufferer, was vindicated. If our interpretation is correct, the idea that Christ—the new Enoch, the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Righteous One—triumphed over the powers should serve to *greatly* encourage the readers. This message of encouragement represents a “crystallization of various Jewish traditions” (so Pearson, 198)—traditions corroborated by other important NT texts—and reminds Peter’s audience of the utter conquest of evil.

If 1 Peter is depicting Christ as an “end-time” Enoch who has proclaimed judgment over the fallen spirits, a similar literary strategy is applied by using Noah, who in Jewish apocalyptic tradition is the type par excellence of a righteous man (e.g., *1 En.* 10:1–4; 67:1; *2 En.* 35:1; *Jub.* 5:19; 7:20–39; 8:10–11; 10:1–13; 39:24; *Wis* 10:4; *Sir* 44:17–18; *2 Esd* 3:11; *4 Macc* 15:31; *T. Naph.* 3:5; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.3.2). The early church appears to have had keen interest in Noah and the flood narrative. Its mention in Matthew 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–27; Hebrews 11:7; 2 Peter 2:5; and 3:5–9 would suggest it was the subject of much midrashic interpretation in the Christian community—an element doubtless inherited from the early Christians’ Jewish forebears. The clause “when God waited patiently in the days of

Noah while the ark was being built” is normally understood to mean *contemporary with* Noah. However, it could also be construed to mean, as Mounce, 57, suggests, that the angels were still in a state of disobedience when the men of Noah’s era were testing God (even though the angels fell long before Noah). The words *en hēmerais Nōe* (“in the days of Noah”) would be considered representative, since the flood was *the* great judgment of the ancient world. The very wording used here—“when God ... in the days of Noah”—is illuminated by the language of Enochic literature, even when the NT writers do not import Enochic theology.

In these verses, a parallel exists between the age of the flood and the present, expressed by the words “God waited patiently” (cf. Ge 6:3a). Both the fallen angels and the flood typology are analogous to the situation being addressed by 1 Peter. Both are types of final judgment (hence, the “preaching” of v.19 cannot be salvific). Noah’s contemporaries refused to repent during the period of the construction of the ark, and those persecuting the Christians in 1 Peter refuse to believe (*apeitheō*, GK 578). The parallel that “a few people ... were saved” also has clear implications for Peter’s audience. Perhaps they feel a sense of inadequacy, the sense that they are a mere “eight in all” amidst a sea of scornful onlookers. They can take courage that, in fact, the few righteous indeed “were saved through water.” Hence for them the “antitype” of baptism is significant: the waters of the flood were a preview, a prefiguring, a type of reality to come—water symbolizes baptism.

But how is the somewhat problematic statement that baptism “now saves you” to be understood? Can Peter be interpreted as advancing baptismal regeneration? A twofold qualification follows: (1) baptism as an antitype expresses an inner state of conscience before God, and (2) this transformation is realized through union with the resurrected Christ. Just as the cleansing properties of water pertain to removal of dirt but not to a pure heart, by the same token identification with the crucified and risen Christ is the substance of salvation (cf. 1Co 15:14, 17). The “good conscience toward God” (*eperōtēma eis theon*) does not express mere removal of dirt from the physical body; rather, it cleanses internally by means of one’s being united with the resurrected Christ. The baptismal “pledge” marks the faithful; it elicits utter loyalty to God and constitutes a very real and intensely relevant assurance of salvation to a persecuted minority. Baptism, therefore, “saves” insofar as it *declares* publicly Christ’s uncontested

lordship. The link between baptism and suffering is that baptism is “the sign of voluntary self-commitment to the Christian way” (so D. Hill, “On Suffering and Baptism in 1 Peter,” *NovT* 18 [1976]: 184–85). At baptism, the consequences of Christian discipleship are acknowledged, including a willingness to suffer.

In addition to the parallels in the text that result from typology at several levels—Christ and Enoch, Noah and the church, the flood and baptism—a further instance of parallelism is to be noted. Jesus’ “going” (*poreutheis*, GK 4513), expressed as descent in v.19, is completed in v.22: Christ, who has suffered and was raised, now “has gone into heaven,” where he rules over all angelic powers. This is the language—and imagery—of vindication. “With angels, authorities and powers in submission to him,” Christ’s example serves to encourage the readers greatly. Because he is their captain, they will experience vindication as well. Vindication expresses itself in the form of judgment, and it is the eschatological outlook that must now be stressed.

Verses 18–22, then, constitute something of a climax in the thought of the writer. The creedal community is thereby declaring the full effects of its salvation, the basis of which is described in 1:3–12. The new identity of God’s people is spelled out in 1:13–2:10, with 3:13–22 enhancing the role of Christ, who is present with the readers in their suffering and who, as innocent sufferer, has been vindicated for all the cosmos to behold.

NOTES

18–22 The hymnic character of 3:18–22 is fairly well acknowledged. See, e.g., Cross, 156–68; Lohse, 37–59; Dalton, 96–102; Johnson, “Preaching to the Dead,” 48–51; Brooks, “1 Peter 3:21,” 290–305.

The history of interpretation of these verses shows no clear consensus regarding the identity of the imprisoned spirits. And it must be conceded that serious exegetes have supported one or the other “human” explanation—among them, C. E. B. Cranfield, “The Interpretation of 1 Peter iii.19 and iv.6,” *ExpTim* 69 (1957/58): 369–72; J. S. Feinberg, “1 Peter 3:18–20, Ancient Mythology, and the Intermediate State,” *WTJ* 48 (1986): 303–36; W. Grudem, “Christ Preaching through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19–20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature,” *TJ* 7 (1986): 3–31.

REFLECTIONS

Intriguing parallels in Jewish apocalyptic literature, albeit fantastic, are worth mentioning, while needing some qualification. They are significant, not because the NT writers adopt their theological assumptions—indeed, they reject the apocalyptic framework in favor of a *prophetic* perspective—but rather because they mirror a common religious thought-world, one vividly on display in documents such as Jude, 2 Peter, and Revelation. Imprisoned fallen angels are a favorite theme of Jewish apocalyptic. One exemplary work, *1 Enoch* (first century BC–AD first century?), deserves mention, since at least one NT writer, Jude, indicates close familiarity with its traditions (cf. Jude 14–15, a near-verbatim citation of *1 En.* 1:9), while 1 Peter displays notable features that are standard for apocalyptic literature (enumerated by Davids, 15–17). Relating to our text is the description in *1 Enoch* 12–14 of the imprisonment of the fallen angels and the commission given to Enoch to go and preach to them. The modern reader would also do well to note that in Jewish tradition, two paradigms of righteousness stand out: Enoch and Noah. On the Noah paradigm in Jewish tradition-material, see J. P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), as well as the essay by James VanderKam (“The Righteousness of Noah,” in *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms*, ed. J. J. Collins and G. W. E. Nickelsburg [Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980], 13–32).

c. Christ’s Example as Motivation for Living (4:1–6)

¹Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. ²As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. ³For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. ⁴They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. ⁵But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be

judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.

COMMENTARY

1 The material in 3:18–22 may strike the reader as “an unusually complicated digression” (so Mounce, 61) into unusually complex theological speculation. Indeed, 3:18 (“[Christ] suffered [NIV, was put to death] in the body”) and 4:1 (“Christ suffered in his body”) appear to be bookends in a theologically intriguing—but unnecessary—excursus! But for the writer, this perspective should arm the readers with knowledge, while it strengthens their courage. And the purpose of this knowledge? It is that we might not “live the rest of [our] earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.” How one lived in the past, which is to say, how pagans conduct themselves, is illustrated through a catalog of vices that follows (v.3).

As applied to the readers’ particular situation, there is a peculiar theological reality at work: the person who suffers in the flesh “is done with sin.” The notion that suffering purifies, perhaps offensive to the rationalist, materialist mind, is amply supported throughout both OT and NT. “Blessed is the man you disciple, O Lord,” writes the psalmist (94:12). The writer of Hebrews endorses this view: “The Lord disciplines those he loves” (12:6). A parallel of limited proportions is part of Peter’s thought: Christ suffered “once for all” for sins (cf. 3:18) to put an end to sin; thus the readers are to have the same mentality and put away sin (cf. 2:1). As the sinless one, Christ took upon himself our sins (2:22, 24). Whereas he had no need of purging, suffering has in the believer the effect of purification, which is important to the development of the writer’s overall argument (1:2, 7, 22; 2:1; 3:21).

3–4 The material in this passage offers strong evidence of the readers’ social situation and serves as a reminder of their former life—a life characterized by a litany of vices—“debauchery” (*aselgeia*, GK 816, also in 2Pe 2:2, 7, 18), “lust” (*epithymia*, GK 2123, also in 1:14; 2:11), “drunkenness” (*oinophlygiai*, GK 3886, from *oinos*, “wine,” plus *phlyō*, “to bubble up”), “orgies” (*kōmoi*, GK 3269, also in the lists of Ro 13:13 and

Gal 5:19), “carousing” (*potoi*, GK 4542), and “detestable idolatry” (*athemitoi eidēlolatriai*, GK 116, 1630).

This catalog of vices has the rhetorical effect of producing shame and highlighting the contrast between Christian and pagan conduct. To the same end, Peter’s choice of words heightens this contrast: he speaks of “what pagans choose to do” (*boulēma* [GK 1088] *tōn ethnōn*) on the one hand (v.3) and the “will of God” (*thelēmati* [GK 2525] *theou*) on the other (v.2). The ethical standards could not be more opposite. What is conspicuous is this: the pagan lifestyle revolves around indulging one’s appetites, “a flood of dissipation” (*asōtias anachysin*, GK 861, 431), so that pagans “think it strange that you do not plunge with them ...” The Christian ethic, in notable contrast, is characterized by bridled passions (1:14; 2:11), purity (1:22), and a good conscience (3:21). That the surrounding pagans are said to “think it strange” (*xenizō*, “to astonish,” GK 3826) conveys more than mere amazement or wonder. As evidenced by their response, “they heap abuse” (*blasphēmeō*, GK 1059), which is to say, they are expressing *outrage and resentment* (cf. 2:12, “they accuse you of doing wrong”; also 3:16, “they speak maliciously”). Part of the experience of normative Christian suffering is to be vilified for not participating in the hedonistic lifestyle of pagan culture; not to participate is to provoke resentment.

5 But this is not the last word. Peter wishes in the next breath to remind his readers that those who so abuse them “will have to give account to him who is ready to judge [both] the living and the dead.” As he has reminded them before in the letter (1:17; 2:12), now he does so again, but more forcefully: this will be a day of moral reckoning. God stands “ready” (*hetoimōs*) as an impartial judge (cf. 1:17), knows all (1:2), and cares for those who have entrusted themselves to him (2:23, 25; 4:19). The phrase “the living and the dead,” moreover, expresses the universal scope of the coming judgment, so that, past or present, none can evade that fearful reality. Interestingly, Peter uses the same expression (*krinai zōntas kai nekrous*) to describe judgment when he preached God’s counsel to Cornelius at the home of Simon the tanner (Ac 10:42).

6 But what about the dead? Peter has mentioned that Jesus died (3:18), and he speaks of judgment that touches the living and the dead (4:5). How is death to be put in perspective? Many explanations of this verse fall short of being satisfactory, and, like the difficult verses that precede it, 4:6 has

been the subject of varied interpretation. “For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead” raises important questions. Initially it is important to note that, unlike 3:19, here the verb *euangelizomai*, not *kēryssō*, is employed, with the implication that Peter is returning to the human from the angelic sphere. But how is “preaching the gospel” to be understood? Does it modify the statements preceding it or statements that follow? If the former, does it refer to the judgment of v.5 or the reality of a changed life in vv.1–5? If we interpret the preaching of the gospel as the “reason” for judgment, the sense is that judgment exists as a *basis* for the gospel, but this seems to place the cart before the horse. Theologically speaking, the teaching of the NT is that judgment is predicated on *the gospel*, not vice versa—i.e., people will be judged according to how they responded to the gospel, the “good news,” of Christ.

If we interpret v.6 as pointing forward, i.e., referring to material that follows, we find a point of contact with the reference to judgment in 4:17–18. However, what immediately follows (vv.7–16) would then appear to be a digression in the writer’s thought—material devoted to the saints’ corporate life (vv.7–11) and recapitulating thoughts on suffering (vv.12–16). Contextually, the most natural link unites 4:6 with material that preceded (vv.1–5), namely, the reality of a changed lifestyle. “For this is the reason” can be understood in the sense of “For the purpose of a transformed life.” Moreover, Peter wishes to affirm that *all* the righteous—those alive and those deceased—will be vindicated. As Achtemeier, 291, puts it, death has overtaken no one. The rhetorical and theological emphasis is this: just as there is vindication at the *spiritual* level (3:22), there is also vindication at the *human* level (4:6).

Thus, just as the message being preached in 4:6 stands in contrast to that of 3:19, its audience differs as well: the “living and dead” are humans who will “give account.” The question of identifying precisely who are the “dead” who are “quickened according to the Spirit [NIV, live according to God in regard to the spirit]” remains. Alternative explanations present themselves. One view is that *all* people, in the end, are reconciled to God. This view, however, fails to make any distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous on the judgment day (Mt 25:31–45; Rev 20:11–16). A second possibility is that these are dead in a spiritual or figurative sense. But this interpretation fails to the extent that Peter is not resorting to allegory anywhere in the letter. Those who are “dead” are so *en sarki*,

“according to the flesh [NIV, in the body”], which has established the context since 3:18. Death in 4:6 is physical and literal. Yet a third view might seem plausible, i.e., that the physical “dead” are righteous saints through the ages, those whose faith in God commended them (e.g., Heb 11:4–40). But the NT makes clear that OT saints were justified by faith (Ro 4; Gal 4:21–31; Heb 11); therefore, there is no further need for justifying them as though they wait in a sort of spiritual limbo.

Hence a fourth view is to be preferred: v.6 refers to converts to Christ who have died since hearing and embracing the gospel. Indeed, Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians presents strong evidence that the question of those who die before Christ’s return was a quandary for the early church (1Th 4:13–14; cf. Ac 1:9–11). Most commentators, in observing the symmetry of the verse—being “judged according to the flesh like men” and being “quickenened according to the Spirit before God”—believe this represents an early unit of Christian creedal confession. Indeed, evidence from the NT itself seems to support this; thus Paul’s hymnic declaration to Timothy on the “mystery of godliness” (1Ti 3:16) displays some similarity to 1 Peter 3:18–22. Peter’s teaching is simply this: whereas all humans are destined to taste death and face judgment, those who are found righteous will be vindicated for their faithfulness.

2. Eschatology and Christian Ethics (4:7–19)

a. Eschatology and Christian Relationships (4:7–11)

OVERVIEW

In this section, numerous admonitions are listed that corroborate the quality of relationships for which the Christian community is to be known. These collective duties are to be motivated by an eschatological conviction that “the end of all things is near.” Present in the teaching of Jesus and in the literature of the NT is evidence of the belief, pervasive in the early church, that the consummation (*telos*) of all things was imminent (e.g., Jn 9:4; Ro 13:11–12; Php 4:5; Heb 10:25; Jas 5:8; 1Jn 2:18; Rev 22:20).

Doubtless the disciples, on witnessing Christ’s ascension, developed the expectation, based on the angels’ testimony (Ac 1:10–11), that they would personally witness the return of the Lord in their lifetime. Indeed, every

generation since then has entertained the same expectation. In considering the exhortations toward watchfulness and readiness that were a part of Jesus' teaching (e.g., Mt 24:45–25:13; Mk 13:33–37), one is struck by the sheer force this eschatological outlook (in this case, a sense of immediacy) exercises on ethics. And certainly in 1 Peter, eschatology motivates ethics (1:4–5, 8–9; 2:12; 4:5, 17–18). It goes without saying that Peter's emphasis on vindication (3:18–22) and judgment (4:5–6) would induce his readers to think about "the end."

While the eschatological question of the Lord's return—and the "end of all things"—intrigues and perplexes every generation, we are left to confess that we can only "see through a glass darkly." To some "early Catholic" theologians who reflected on the return of the Lord, the early church was mistaken in its expectation. A more plausible explanation of the tension that arises out of imminence-yet-delay is that human beings' understanding of the temporal element is fallible and limited. Second Peter 3:9 serves as a reminder in this regard for those who await judgment as vindication, for the "delay" in the second advent is ascribed to divine forbearance (NIV, "patience"; *makrothymia*, GK 3429).

⁷The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. ⁸Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. ⁹Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

COMMENTARY

7 What may be said, then, as we reflect on the eschatological tensions inherent in the statement "The end of all things is near" is the very thing

Peter seems to presuppose throughout the entire letter: believers are to live with a heightened sense of eternal values.

What qualities will be on display as a result of this heightened sense of eternal perspective that Peter wishes to inculcate? In the light of future realities (“Therefore”), for Peter, how one thinks, how one acts, and specifically how one serves others are essential to the Christian social ethic. Every admonition contained in 4:7b–11 is accompanied either by a justification or a qualification.

Two qualities mirror a Christian mind-set. Believers are to “be clear minded” (*sōphroneō*, GK 5404) and “self-controlled” (*nēphō*, GK 3768, also in 1:13). To think in a sober and self-controlled manner is to adopt precisely the opposite mind-set that characterizes surrounding society, i.e., irrationality and frivolity. Spiritual reality makes us alert to the fact that the human flesh wars against the spirit (Ro 7:21–25; 8:1–17). To the unbeliever, spiritual things are foolishness, since they are spiritually discerned (1Co 2:14–15). Thus the human need is for the Spirit to reign over the flesh (Ro 8:1–17), for as a person thinks, so he or she truly is. An important reason for this alertness is offered: “so that you can pray.” This appears to reiterate the principle noted earlier: husbands possess the ability to have their prayers “hindered” (1Pe 3:7), and this specifically through the attitudes of insensitivity and lack of respect toward their wives.

8 In the mind of Peter, proper thinking will lead to proper action, and a distinctly Christian social ethic is the embodiment of love. Love for others, “above all,” is to characterize the Christian community, and such love is to be tenacious, full-bodied, intense, deep (*ektenēs*, GK 1756). If the NT teaches anything, it teaches the primacy of love in accord with the teaching of Jesus (Mk 12:31; Lk 10:27; Jn 13:34–35; 15:12; 1Co 13:1–13; Eph 5:1–2; Php 2:2; Jas 2:8; 1Jn 2:10; 4:7–11, 19–21). Moreover, in the face of extreme social hostility, love will be necessary for spiritual survival. For Peter the primacy of love is accompanied by a qualification, and this qualification is a partial citation of Proverbs 10:12 similar to James 5:20 —“love covers over a multitude of sins,” rather than magnifying the faults of others. After all, love is patient and doesn’t keep a record of wrongs (1Co 13:4, 5).

9 A related admonition concerns hospitality, a trait that would validate the Christian community’s faith claims. Early Christians were known for

their hospitality (Ro 12:13; 1Ti 5:10; Heb 13:2), and it is doubtless for this reason that the gospel spread with such rapidity in the church's formative years. Missionary preachers, evangelists, and house churches (Ro 1:5; 1Co 16:19; Tit 1:8; Phm 2) were dependent on hospitality, and unquestionably the early Christians took to heart the words of Jesus himself: "I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Mt 25:35). Ultimately, hospitality might be thought of as the best bridge between believer and unbeliever. Peter's qualification that no "grumbling" should accompany hospitality reminds them that love will be attentive to the needs of others, even though such may entail inconvenience on our part.

10–11 Hospitality is a vehicle of *service* to others, and it is a serving attitude that undergirds the exhortations that follow. Serving, of course, is predicated on the notion of stewardship—stewardship of divine grace—i.e., the Christian has received mercy and grace and therefore is entrusted with passing that on to others. Peter is in agreement with Paul in observing that Christians are stewards, "household managers" (in keeping with the theme of *oikos* [2:18–3:7]) of the grace of God. Grace, of course, is imparted in "various forms" (cf. Ro 12:3–8; 1Co 12:4–11), two examples of which are delineated in 1 Peter: speaking "as one speaking the very words of God," and serving "with the strength God provides." The manner in which God provides is suggested vividly by the Greek term *chorēgeō* (GK 5961; see [commentary at 2Pe 1:5, 11](#)).

Although 4:7–11 resembles the language and logic of 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, causing most commentators to assume that the reference to *charisma* (GK 5922) in v.10 concerns corporate congregational life, this is not required of the text. Spiritual gifts, which are intended to serve others, may be more broadly understood as applying to Christians *as a community* (as opposed to an assembly in worship). Thus the language may simply be an extension of the household theme, with stewardship providing the link. Hospitality, Christians' relationships, and their service one to another are critical components of community if they are to survive in the context of their social location.

These qualities, when they are manifest, are said to glorify God through Jesus Christ in all respects, just as it was expressed earlier that doing good glorifies God (2:12). Here Peter reiterates not merely that these things are necessary for Christian witness but also that they bring glory to God.

Fittingly, this block of exhortations concludes with doxological praise: “To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen” (cf. Ro 16:27; Jude 25). While to some commentators the insertion of doxological praise here rather than at the end of the letter seems unnatural, Kelly, 182, is correct to suggest that such is an expression of the author’s “awe and devotion” in the face of God’s majesty.

NOTES

7–11 Admonitions toward mental-spiritual alertness occur in the Pauline letters, e.g., Col 3:1–4 (setting one’s mind on “things above, not on earthly things”) and Eph 4:17–32 (esp. vv.22–23), the structure of which resembles Peter’s argument (putting off the old self and putting on the new). Evidence exists elsewhere in the NT that actions and attitudes are capable of hindering prayer. An example is Paul’s admonition to men in the congregation to “lift up holy hands” in worship (1Ti 2:8), with the suggestion that “anger and disputing” serve to impede their prayers. This principle represents “practical theology” at its best: one’s prayer life is directly related to one’s thought life and actions.

REFLECTIONS

From the divine perspective, God is long-suffering in terms of his relationship to fallen humanity. Seen humanly, the divine purpose must run to its appointed *telos*, the timing and nature of which remain to us every bit the mystery. Each generation that confesses creedally the return of Christ wrestles with the tension of present-future realities—the “already and not yet” of God’s kingdom. In this sense every generation lives like the first generation of Christians, cognizant that the NT calls us simultaneously to watchfulness as well as to occupation. Two extremes are to be avoided. On the one hand, if we focus *solely* on Christ’s return and fail to wrestle with the present complexities of engaging culture, we make the mistake of withdrawal and isolation from society, resulting in the creation of a religious subculture divorced from the cultural mainstream. Such breeds a severe attenuation of Christian witness, of which Peter would not approve; cut off from society, Christian faith lacks any public demonstration of relevance. The other extreme, toward which the contemporary church is

perhaps more inclined as we navigate the twenty-first century, altogether relaxes the tension between faith and culture. The result is a capitulation to and absorption into culture, so that the church loses any prophetic presence in its social location; of this danger Peter is fully aware.

b. Eschatology and Christian Suffering (4:12–19)

OVERVIEW

In this final exhortation on suffering, Peter recapitulates by bringing together each of his perspectives on suffering that surfaced earlier in the letter. The readers are reminded (1) of their union with Christ (1:6–9; 2:21–25; 3:18–22); (2) of the coming revelation of Christ’s glory (1:7–8; 5:4); (3) that they are blessed if they suffer for the name of Christ (3:9, 14); (4) that suffering for Christ glorifies God (2:12); (5) that they are not to suffer for doing wrong (2:12, 20; 3:17); (6) that they should not be ashamed of suffering for Christ (2:6); and (7) that those who suffer are to commit themselves to the care of their faithful Lord while continuing to do good (2:23, 25). This summarizing of Petrine perspectives on suffering concludes with a reiteration of a future day of moral reckoning—one that touches both believer and unbeliever. The promise of judgment serves as a promise of vindication. Knowing that God the Judge is the “great leveler” should encourage the saints who suffer so that in the end they can entrust themselves to God. The reiteration of Petrine perspectives invites reconsideration on the part of the reader.

¹²Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸And,

“If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

¹⁹So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

COMMENTARY

12 In what follows, the writer returns to the theme of suffering with a final admonition regarding his readers' particular situation. Herewith he addresses them affectionately and intimately (*agapētoi*, GK 28) as a father figure. His concern is to adjust their perspective on suffering: "do not be surprised [*xenizō*, GK 3826; also in 4:5] ... as though something strange were happening." After all, the human inclination is to question the "necessity" of suffering. "Where are you, God? Why is this happening to me?" But despite the tendency to question—or rebel against—suffering, Christians are not to be "surprised" when, in the form of hostility, ostracizing, and persecution, suffering visits. Jesus himself promised as much: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (Jn 15:20). For this reason, John can affirm: "Do not be surprised ... if the world hates you" (1Jn 3:13). In the end, persecution will reveal whether our faith is genuine.

But even when the writer understands suffering as "normative" in the Christian life, he does not belittle its impact on the lives of Christians; suffering is very real, as suggested by the vocabulary—"suffering" (*pathēmata*, GK 4077), "painful trial" (*pyrōsei pros peirasmon*, GK 4796, 4280, lit., "a purifying by fire"). Suffering in any context is painful, and the pain endured by the readers in their present situation is very real and not to be diminished.

13 Rather than be shocked or surprised at suffering, the readers are told to rejoice. The writer is not hereby glibly suggesting that one rejoices in suffering qua suffering. It is rather "in the Lord" (Php 4:4) that one rejoices. Believers "participate in the sufferings of Christ" (cf. Php 3:10, which speaks of "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings"), based on the believer's union with Christ, and therefore can emit a response of "rejoicing." The believer is *united* with Christ in his death as well as his resurrection (Ro 6:5–14), not in the sense of paying for our sins, as only the Son of God could do, but in the sense that "our old self was crucified with him ... that we should no longer be slaves to sin ... but alive to God" (Ro

6:6, 11). Rejoicing and shock stand at opposite ends, and a deep awareness of our union with Christ—and all that it entails—preserves the Christian from surprise that metastasizes into disenchantment and disillusionment. To expect suffering, it should be emphasized, is not to welcome it in some blindly fatalistic way; it is, however, to be realistic about our union with Christ.

The attitude of rejoicing in the context of suffering is further magnified by the cognizance of the coming revelation of Christ's glory. Peter writes, "so that you may be overjoyed [lit., 'that you may rejoice exultingly'] when his glory is revealed," using the same strengthened form of "rejoice" (*agalliaō*, GK 22) as earlier (1:6, 8), and in the same context (Christ's return). His theological rationale squares with that of Paul: "if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Ro 8:17); "if we endure, we will also reign with him" (2Ti 2:12). Suffering for Christ is a privilege and not a penalty (so Barclay, 258). In Petrine thinking, eschatology informs Christian ethics.

14 Peter further reminds his readers that they are "blessed" if they are "insulted [*oneidizō*, GK 3943; used of Jesus' experience on the cross, Mk 15:32] because of the name of Christ." His assertion is expanded with the somewhat strange statement that "the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." This language is frequently used in the book of Exodus to describe the glory of the Lord as it descended on Mount Sinai (24:16), in the desert (16:10), on the tabernacle (29:43; 40:34) and ark (Lev 16:2), or when it filled the temple (2Ch 7:3). Indeed Paul resorts to similar language and imagery in describing the glory of the new covenant (2Co 3:7–18). Significantly, Stephen's countenance is depicted in this way in Luke's account of his martyrdom (Ac 7:55; cf. 6:15). Peter would seem to be suggesting that the presence of God is particularly notable in those times when the saints are being persecuted. The Spirit glorifies Jesus (Jn 16:14); therefore, as believers experience persecution on account of Christ, they are filled with the Spirit's presence, and in so doing they are glorifying God.

15 Earlier in the letter, Peter intimated that not all suffering is because of Christ; it is possible to suffer because of wrongdoing (2:14, 20; 3:17). For this reason the believer is called to self-examination, in order that no one suffers "as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler." Three of the four categories of wrongdoing are specific, but,

more important, the list moves from heinous crime to common fault, i.e., “meddling” (*allogotriepiskopos*, GK 258) in the affairs of others. Suggested in this descending order is the fact that we all can easily become open to criticism by actions or attitudes that undermine our faith—criticism that in fact is deserving.

16 Nevertheless, some instances of suffering are undeserved, such as our identification with the name of Christ. In such cases, that person should not “be ashamed, but praise [i.e., glorify] God that you bear that name.” And among the early disciples, it is Peter who knows—agonizingly so—the truth of this fact: there is *honor* in the name. The painful memories, though lying many years in the past, serve to motivate the Christian elder statesman: do not be ashamed (as I was as a young man), but glorify God in the present context. Believers will need to be reminded that persecution, as Goppelt, 322, has pointed out, is due not so much to particular behaviors per se as to faith and character.

17–18 The link between eschatology and ethics in 1 Peter reaches a climax in the writer’s summary exhortation: “It is time for judgment to begin” (v.17; cf. Eze 9:6; Mal 3:1–3). It begins, says Peter, with the “household [NIV, “family”; *oikos*] of God.” Herewith Peter utilizes a further variation of the household cluster of images (*oikos* in 2:5; 4:17; *oikonomos* in 4:10; *diakoneō* in 1:12; 4:10–11) that has been extremely effective up to this point. Peter compares the judgment of God’s elect with that of the ungodly, borrowing from Proverbs 11:31. This contrast, framed in the form of a rhetorical question, is intended not to say that the righteous will scarcely be saved but rather that judgment will be indescribably cataclysmic for the unbeliever. For this reason persecution, which purifies, will result in the saints’ vindication, sparing them the awesome fate that awaits those who carry out the persecuting.

19 In conclusion, the readers are once more admonished (“So then”) to “commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” Entrusting oneself into divine care has been a crucial subtheme of 1 Peter (2:23; 4:19; 5:7), as has doing good (2:12, 20; 3:13, 17; 4:19). It is fitting that the two should interlock at this point. Moreover, the one to whom the saints commit themselves is “faithful,” able to be trusted by those who “cast all [their] anxiety,” since “he cares for [them]” (5:7). What is more, Peter is quite conscious that the readers’ hardships are not arbitrary; rather, they are

part of God’s overall plan, hence his framing of both suffering and doing good in terms of “God’s will” (2:15; 3:17; 4:2, 19)—a conviction that presses to the fore throughout the entire letter.

Mounce, 78–79, summarizes this closing advice well: “Committing oneself to God is not passive submission. It involves active well-doing. While believers will certainly endure hostility of an unbelieving world, there is no place for a martyrdom mentality. Suffer in silence but get on with the job of living an active life of good deeds. Christians should be known for what they do, not for what they suffer. Fixation upon the difficulties of life robs the believer of the opportunity to display his concern for the welfare of others.”

3. Christian Leadership in the New Diaspora Community (5:1–11)

OVERVIEW

Having finished his comments on Christian suffering, the writer concludes with remarks directed at the several specific groups: (1) those with oversight of the community, to whom most of his comments are addressed; (2) those who are younger in the community; and then (3) all members of the community. Most commentators observe in this division a pattern similar to that of the household code appropriated earlier. This pattern once again mirrors the writer’s conviction that relationships within the Christian community must be ordered and respectful; otherwise the witness of Christians will be weakened.

a. Challenge to the Elders (5:1–4)

¹To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ²Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; ³not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

COMMENTARY

1 The first of the three groups, the elders, receives the bulk of instruction, and fittingly so, since spiritual oversight of a church called to suffer requires sensitivity, selflessness, and leadership by example. In appealing to them, however, Peter establishes common ground in several important ways. He appeals to them as a “fellow elder” (*sympresbyteros*, GK 5236), as “a witness of Christ’s sufferings,” and “one who also will share in the glory to be revealed.”

As a “fellow elder,” Peter takes seriously and shares in the responsibility of pastoral care. His own pastoral sensitivities doubtless are piqued by memories of Jesus’ sober, poignant, and penetrating challenge to him, in the context of being called anew to “follow” Christ (Jn 21:15–19). As a “witness of Christ’s sufferings,” Peter is in a position to supply moving eyewitness testimony to Jesus’ passion. This includes his own inability to “watch and pray” during Jesus’ trial in the garden (Mt 26:37–46; Mk 14:32–42; Lk 22:39–46), his cutting off the guard’s ear in the garden (Mt 26:47–54; Mk 14:47; Lk 22:47–53; Jn 18:26), and his following (at bay) a condemned Jesus, who was led away to interrogation by the high priest (Mt 26:57–75; Mk 14:53–72; Lk 22:54–62). The latter episode is particularly agonizing in the Lukan narrative, where immediately after Peter’s third denial, “the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.” As a result, Peter “went outside and wept bitterly” (Lk 22:61, 62). Doubtless the “look” of Jesus still pierced Peter’s heart as an older man. Yet to be an eyewitness is no mere sentimental reality; it also conveys authority—authority that inheres in the apostolic office.

Peter’s third qualification is that he, too, shares in the glory yet to be revealed. This self-designation is important for several reasons. The coming revelation of Christ’s glory has been a subtheme throughout the letter (alluded to in 1:5, 7; 4:13; 5:1, 4). It is a theological reality that anchors Peter’s eschatology as well as his ethic. The reality of Christ’s reign is “already and not yet”—a present reality, though not fully consummated. But another reason impels the writer, and once more it is deeply personal. Along with James and John, Peter was privileged to witness an “inbreaking,” as it were, of Christ’s glory on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17:1–13; Mk 9:1–8; Lk 9:28–36; cf. 2Pe 1:16–18). Of all people it is Peter, James, and John who are granted the high privilege of beholding the

transcendent glory of the second Person of the Trinity as he spoke with Moses and Elijah. Moreover, just as Christ suffered and was glorified (1:21; 3:18–22), so it is with those who follow in his steps: for “when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (5:4).

2–3 Peter’s exhortation to those entrusted with spiritual leadership in the community is marked by great care and pastoral sensitivity. He is careful to emphasize *how* the elders exercise their oversight. He does this in a manner consistent with the sheep/shepherd imagery appropriated earlier (1:19; 2:22–25) and so frequently used in the OT to depict the relationship between God and his people (e.g., Ge 48:15; 1Ki 22:17; Pss 23:1–6; 80:1; 100:3; 119:176; Jer 3:15; 23:1–4; 31:10; 50:6; Eze 34:2, 11; Mic 5:4; Zec 9:16; 10:2). Peter’s charge is, “Be shepherd of God’s flock that is under your care”—language reminiscent of Paul’s charge to the Ephesian elders (Ac 20:28). Implicit in the shepherding metaphor is a concern for the flock’s total well-being, constitutive elements of which are feeding, watering, protecting, and guiding. Such attentiveness to the flock’s needs is by no means arbitrary, for the flock belongs to God. Hence they have been entrusted by the Lord himself; in the end, shepherds are accountable stewards (cf. 4:11). And certainly an extra measure of passion lies behind Peter’s directive to shepherd the flock, given Jesus’ post-resurrection charge to him: “Feed my lambs.... Take care of my sheep.... Feed my sheep” (Jn 21:15–17).

How precisely are the elders to “serve as overseers”? Three qualifications follow, each consisting of a negative and positive exhortation to form a contrast: (1) not by compulsion, but willingly (cf. 1Ti 3:1); (2) not for dishonest gain, but eagerly (cf. 1Ti 3:8; 6:6–10; Tit 1:7; cf. 1Co 9:7–11); and (3) not lording it over others, but as examples (cf. Mk 10:35–45; Php 3:17; 2Th 3:9; 1Ti 4:12; Tit 2:7).

All three speak to the issue of personal motivation. All three strike at the essence of human nature. The exercise of authority, given the human predicament, tends to be coercive, self-centered, and domineering. Jesus’ warning to the disciples at a crucial point in his ministry is poignant: “Not so with you” (Mk 10:43). Rather, Jesus’ prescription is that the true leader “must be your servant.” And this is the spirit of Peter’s admonition. By overseeing in this manner, the elders will be examples (*typoi*, “types,” GK

5596) to all. One leads not by asserting but by serving the needs of others. A self-serving shepherd is a contradiction in terms.

4 Furthermore, in so leading they will “receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” when “the Chief Shepherd appears.” Whereas in 2:25 Christ is “Shepherd,” in 5:4 he is “Chief Shepherd” (*archipoiḗn*, GK 799). By virtue of his rule, he will dispense rewards appropriate to one’s service. Although there are many shepherds, there is one “Chief Shepherd”—the very idea expressed in Hebrews 13:20, which calls Jesus “that great Shepherd of the sheep.” The idea of a crown as reward saturates the NT (e.g., Jn 19:2, 5; 1Co 9:25; 2Ti 2:5; 4:8; Heb 2:7; Jas 1:12; Rev 2:10; 3:11; 4:4; cf. Isa 28:5; Jer 13:18), mirroring Hellenistic culture’s practice of bestowing honor on citizens for distinguished public service as well as on victorious athletes. According to Peter, this “crown,” as the inheritance described in 1:4, will never “fade away” (*amarantinos*, GK 277), unlike victory wreaths that were made of ivy, flowers, or vines. And consistent with the stress in 1 Peter on accountability, this is part of divine *vindication* as well.

b. Challenge to the Young Men (5:5a)

⁵Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older.

COMMENTARY

5a Peter then turns away from “elders” and addresses “young men” (*neōteroi*). This designation in the Greek text is somewhat ambiguous. Who precisely are these young men? Are they potential leaders or simply the younger people in the community? Peter admonishes these individuals to “be submissive” to older people “in the same way.” But in what way? Given the earlier pattern in the household code, which calls for submission at several levels (cf. the admonition to wives, “in the same way be submissive” [3:1]), a natural interpretation of 5:5a is that younger people in the community must order themselves after the older out of respect for them. Mounce, 85, captures the spirit of this admonition: “The point is that

submission to those who are older (and presumably wiser) is socially appropriate for young men.”

c. Challenge to All (5:5b–9)

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,

“God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble.”

⁶Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

⁸Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

COMMENTARY

5b Following the words of instruction to elders and young men, a call to humility is presented to everyone in the community. As has been his custom throughout the epistle, Peter supports this exhortation with a citation from the OT; here he borrows from Proverbs 3:34: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” One is justified in calling humility the “law of the community,” as Barclay, 258, does. The admonition to “clothe yourselves with humility” is vivid, for it calls to mind the servant putting on an apron, such as Jesus, in fact, did as an example to the disciples (Jn 13:4–5, 14–15).

6–7 Humility, however, is not mere self-effacement; it is an awareness of the greatness of God in comparison, as well as the realization that the humble one day will be exalted: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.” James, also drawing inspiration from Proverbs 3:34, makes similar application; the

common elements in both letters are (1) divine resistance to pride, (2) the bestowal of grace, (3) submission to God, and (4) the acknowledgment of a spiritual enemy (cf. Jas 4:6–7). The attitude of humility before Almighty God allows those who face hardship and hostility to cast all anxiety on him because he indeed cares for them.

Peter’s language in v.7 is remarkably similar to Psalm 55:22: “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you” (ESV). Psalm 55, it should be noted, is devoted to the complaint of the righteous and the cry of deliverance. In submission, one genuinely is set free from fear and anxiety; to be in the arms of God is to know divine provision and care. The psychological release that comes from “casting” (*epiriptō*, GK 2166, a strengthened form of *riptō*, “to cast down” or “throw”) our cares on the Lord is admirably described by Mounce, 87: “Anxiety follows when we forget that God is the One who cares for us. We are not left adrift on the sea of chance facing shipwreck on the shoals of an impersonal destiny. We are under the care of a sovereign God who controls the course of history and is intricately involved in the everyday life of each of his children.”

8 To entrust oneself fully to divine care is not to conclude that we have no role to play. Peter continues, “Be self-controlled and alert.” The reason for this is “your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.” While the profile of “Satan” in the OT is (relatively speaking) low, in 1 Chronicles 21:1; Job 1:6–12; 2:1–8; and Zechariah 3:1–2, he manifests the character of an accuser (*diaballō*, “to press charges” or “accuse,” GK 1330) and provoker—a role amplified in the NT (Mt 4:10; 13:37; 16:23; Jn 6:70; 1Co 7:5; 2Co 11:14; 12:7; Eph 4:27; 6:11; 1Ti 3:7; 1Jn 3:8; Rev 12:9; 20:2, 7, 10). Vigilance is being accented by Peter as he prepares to conclude his letter—and with good reason, for he no doubt agonizes over the *lack* of it at a critical time leading up to the crucifixion of his Lord (Mt 26:38–46; Mk 14:32–42; Lk 2:39–46).

Often in the OT, persecutors are compared to a crouching lion waiting to attack and devour (e.g., Ps 7:2; 10:8–10; Jer 4:7; Eze 19:6; Na 2:11–13). Because in Scripture the image of a devouring lion is not infrequently associated with the persecutor, this image is effective in the thought of Peter.

9 The readers, however, are not called to fear the devil; they are called to opposition. Peter’s response is simple: “Resist him”—a strategy also found

in James (4:7; cf. also Eph 6:10–13), remaining “firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers [and sisters] throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” Solidarity with those whose experience is the same creates an extraordinary bond and motivation to persevere. Whether people share suffering or joy, this common fellowship (what the NT calls *koinōnia* [GK 3126] breeds uncommon motivation.

d. Benediction and Doxology (5:10–11)

¹⁰And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. ¹¹To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

COMMENTARY

10 Peter understands well the bonds of *koinonia* that encourage perseverance in the faith. And the end of the matter, after the saints “have suffered a little while,” is that the Lord, “the God of all grace,” the one “who called [*kaleō*, GK 2813, also in 1:15; 2:9, 21; 3:6, 9] you to his eternal glory in Christ,” will respond in four ways: he will “restore” (*katartizō*, GK 2936), he will “make firm” or establish (*stērizō*, GK 5114), he will “make strong” (*sthenōō*, GK 4964), and he will “make steadfast [like a foundation]” (*themelioō*, GK 2530). That is, the Lord himself will make things right, he will place them squarely on their feet, he will impart new strength and firmness, and he will settle their hearts and lives, freeing them from anxiety and allowing them to persevere. This is his promise.

11 It is only fitting that this rousing and passionate confession of the Lord’s provision conclude with a second outburst of doxological praise: “To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.” God’s promises rest on his mighty power (*kratos*, GK 3197); hence his title in Scripture—*ho pantokratōr*, “the Almighty.” Confession of the Lord as *pantokratōr* is critically important for those who go through severe hardship.

III. LETTER CLOSING (5:12–14)

¹²With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. ¹³She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark. ¹⁴Greet one another with a kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

COMMENTARY

12 Peter concludes his letter by indicating that the “faithful” Silvanus (NIV, Silas) has played a part in the epistle: *Dia Silouanou hymin ... oligōn egrapsa*. The role that Silvanus/Silas plays has already been discussed at length in the introduction to the commentary. Peter’s final word of exhortation and encouragement is to testify or declare emphatically (*epimartyreō*, GK 2148) that “this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.” He has exhorted and admonished, aroused and encouraged. The rest is up to them. God’s grace (mentioned ten times in the letter) is, in the end, sufficient.

13 The letter’s conclusion contains two greetings and two exhortations. The greetings issue, somewhat cryptically, from a party designated “she who is in Babylon, chosen [*syneklektē*, GK 5293] together with you” and from “my son Mark.” It is widely believed that the second gospel narrative was compiled by Mark and based largely on Peter’s reconstruction of the ministry of Jesus. The reference to Babylon, generally understood to mean Rome, is likely intended to encourage the readers insofar as all Christians are exiles in this world.

14 The admonition to “greet one another with a holy kiss [NIV, kiss of love]” (also in Ro 16:16; 1Co 16:20; 2Co 13:12; 1Th 5:26) mirrors a practice common in Near Eastern culture and certainly common among early believers when assembled. The epistle ends as it opened (1:2)—with the wish that the readers be rooted in the peace of God.

2 PETER

J. DARYL CHARLES

Introduction

1. History of Interpretation: Dating and Composition
2. Canonical Considerations
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4. Literary Relationship of 2 Peter to Jude
5. Recent Petrine Scholarship
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1. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION: DATING AND COMPOSITION

Apart from the epistle of Jude, described by one NT scholar as “the most neglected book in the New Testament” (D. J. Rowston, “The Most Neglected Book in the New Testament,” *NTS* 21 [1974–75]: 554–63), one might legitimately argue that 2 Peter has perhaps suffered more misunderstanding—not to mention its own share of neglect—than any other NT document. Traditional commentary on 2 Peter tends to be highly derivative in character and unified in its belief that the letter is not authentically Petrine. This is for several reasons: (1) the letter’s struggle to achieve canonical status in the early church; (2) the obvious literary relationship to Jude; (3) the letter’s relationship to 1 Peter and our difficulty in reconciling the language and style of 2 Peter with the NT portrait of the apostle; and (4) the predominance of an “early Catholic” reading of the epistle, with its governing historical-theological assumptions.

For roughly a century and a half the governing presupposition of NT scholarship has been that in 2 Peter (and Jude) a second-century church at war with the forces of Gnosticism is on display. A perusal of most standard introductions to the NT quickly identifies prevailing assumptions regarding

this document. Willi Marxsen resolutely states what is a *sine qua non* for critical scholarship:

So long as we assume the traditional idea of canonicity and accept as permanently normative only what derives from the apostles or the disciples of the apostles, as did the early Church, “not genuine” is a serious charge to make.... But if we admit its pseudonymity we are far more likely to place the letter in its particular historical context and to be able to understand it. Whether we draw the line [of composition] at the beginning of the second century or earlier is simply a matter of choice. If we make the cut at the beginning of the second century, we are faced with a relatively compact body of literature. We could perhaps exchange 2 Peter for the *Didache* and Jude for *1 Clement*, but this is of no significance as far as basic [interpretive] principles are concerned, and we should therefore not make it a problem.¹

In 1958 Marxsen published a seminal work on early Catholicism in the New Testament, this at a time when Marxsen joined other influential NT scholars such as Ernst Käsemann in training an emerging generation of theologians and exegetes who would influence NT interpretation up to the present day. In describing the life-setting of 2 Peter, Marxsen writes the following:

This document gives us a glimpse of the situation of the Church at a relatively late period. The eschatology which looks to an imminent End has fallen into the background, and one has to adjust oneself to living in the world (cf. esp. the Pastorals). The Church is in the process of becoming an institution.... In the post-Pauline period—long after Paul, in fact, for he has already become a “literary entity” belonging to the past—the futurist eschatology of the Church is attacked by the Gnostics. “Where is the promise of his coming? For from the day that the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the

creation” (iii.4). Though far removed from the beginnings of the Church, the author is seeking to remain in continuity with these beginnings and sets out an “apologia for the primitive Christian eschatology” in its apocalyptic form.²

While an “early Catholic” reading of the NT is by no means confined to 2 Peter, it is here that it is applied in its most concentrated form. The epistle is almost universally assumed to be the latest of the NT writings,³ mirroring second-century developments in the life of the church. Ferdinand Hahn summarizes the underlying assumption of most commentators in approaching 2 Peter: “Even though the implications might not yet be clearly seen, there is a practical awareness that the apostolic era is surely closed and that the immediate postapostolic period is soon ending. Hence, now the present tradition-material must be preserved in its basic meaning and form.”⁴ K.-H. Schelkle’s verdict is unequivocal: “The letters [2 Peter and Jude] say themselves that the generations of the church are past.... The Apostolic era is closed and lies behind.”⁵

The term “early Catholicism” is understood to represent the period of transition from earliest Christianity to the postapostolic church—a transition completed with the disappearance of the imminent expectation of the parousia, or second advent; a growing institutionalization of the church and need for a teaching office (which replaces the charismatic work of the Spirit); the codification of beliefs into creedal confessions for the purposes of defending the faith against Gnostic heresy; and the increasing dichotomy of priests and laity. Because 2 Peter, in the words of James D. G. Dunn, is “a reaction to the repeated disappointment of apocalyptic hopes [in Christ’s return],” it “is a prime example of early Catholicism.”⁶

It is inevitable for NT scholarship that the presence of “early Catholic” phenomena undermines the notion that 2 Peter can be authentically Petrine. Thus Käsemann, 156–57, can describe the epistle as “dubious” and displaying irreconcilable theological contradictions, while Gunter Klein thinks it inconceivable that 2 Peter is authentic and in the same league as the epistles of Paul: “This writer could not have dreamt that his own letter would join—and in fact follow—in the same canonical collection the letters of Paul, whose writings he held to be suspect.... For this reason, the clearly inescapable question puts our assurance of faith to the test, namely, whether

we can ultimately consider the epistle of 2 Peter, with its conceptualization of canon, to be canonical.”⁷

The effect of an “early Catholic” reading of 2 Peter (and other NT documents) has been to create a “canon within the canon,” i.e., to view certain writings of the NT as authentic reflections of the early church’s identity (e.g., the genuinely Pauline epistles), and thus of highest theological import, and other NT documents against the background of this supposed authenticity. Because writings such as 2 Peter judged less than authentic nevertheless have been retained in the NT canon by the church, assessments such as the following are not atypical, even when rather remarkable:

The author ... wants to restore the fragile doctrine of last things to a new credibility, but he is only able to destroy it yet further. In spite of how vigorously he asserts himself, he is basically helpless.... The defender of Christian hope has had his feet pulled out from under him.... The dubious manner with which he treats his subject is a clear reflection of the writer’s own lack of self-assurance.⁸

Even when the epistle [2 Peter] is lacking in theological depth and spiritual energy ... it is not simply worthless. Above all, it mediates historical insights into the church’s crisis resulting from second-century heresy.⁹

I would want to insist that in not a few compositions Martin Luther and John Wesley, for example, were as, if not more inspired, than the author of II Peter.¹⁰

Given this half-embrace by biblical scholarship, it goes without saying that writings such as 2 Peter and Jude have labored under a heavy load. Thus, any initial attempt to interpret 2 Peter must begin with an assessment of the “early Catholic” thesis. It should be stressed that the problem with “early Catholicism” is not in its observation of second-century ecclesiastical phenomena. That these developments emerge in the subapostolic era is indisputable. Nor can it be denied that the NT contains foreshadows of “early Catholic” theological tendencies that come to full bloom in the second and third centuries. Rather, the problem lies with its starting point.

“Early Catholicism” begins with the assumption that apostolic authorship presents an “obstacle” to NT exegesis.¹¹ Being presupposed, as we have seen, is that (1) the writer is far removed from the beginnings of the church; (2) pseudonymity allows us for the first time to grasp the full meaning of the letter; and (3) writings such as the *Didache* or *1 Clement* or *Barnabas*, with no theological significance, can be substituted in the canon for 2 Peter or Jude. In the end, what this means for 2 Peter is that we can say, along with James D. G. Dunn, that Luther’s insights are at times more “inspired” than those of our epistle.

An important step in helping correct the distortion of the historical situation being mirrored in 2 Peter was the 1983 publication of Richard Bauckham’s rich commentary on Jude and 2 Peter. Bauckham, 8, was moved to observe, “The whole concept of ‘early Catholicism’ as New Testament scholars have used it to illuminate the history of first-century Christianity is ripe for radical reexamination. It has undoubtedly promoted too simple a picture of the development of Christianity.”

What is it in the “early Catholic” reading of 2 Peter that necessitates a “radical reexamination”? As to the “early Catholic” assumption that the church has abandoned the hope of the parousia, quite the opposite would seem to be on display in 2 Peter. The writer avows with great earnestness that the eschatological day of reckoning is *certain*. That a pastorally sensitive explanation for the “delay” is given (3:8–13) cannot legitimately be construed to mean that hope for the parousia is fading; rather, the author attributes this delay to divine long-suffering: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (3:9). Moreover, to the false teacher, the false prophet, and the moral skeptic, the second advent is not a hope but a *threat*.¹²

But if, for the sake of the argument, the NT does give evidence of an “early Catholic” church evacuating hope in an imminent parousia, a more serious issue emerges. Given Jesus’ confident assertions about a possible imminent return, the church surely would have been tempted to abandon its allegiance to him after the “cardinal error” had been exposed. If Jesus was speaking only apocalyptically with a temporal nearness in mind for the purposes of encouraging his flock, his expedience leads to quite delusory—and pastorally deleterious—results.¹³ Not infrequently, critical scholarship’s

reconstruction of the so-called “early Catholic” scenario tends to cast the church as spiritually dull and undiscerning.

Witnesses as diverse as I. Howard Marshall (“Is Apocalyptic the Mother of Christian Theology?” in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne and O. Betz [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987]) and Jaroslav Pelikan (*The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971], 1:123–24, 130–31) have written that, while the imminence of the second advent was indeed part of Jesus’ teaching, it is not what “early Catholic” proponents have made it out to be. With regard to succeeding generations, Pelikan believes it is more accurate to speak of a *shift within the polarity* of the “already/not yet” tension inherent in the Christian message; a renewed appreciation for ethical imperatives that address the church’s relationship to the world is being realized.

Our reconsideration of the NT’s eschatological perspective leads us to rethink basic “early Catholic” assumptions. Does “early Catholicism”—with its supposed “delay” in the parousia hope and second-century reconstruction—imply *a priori* a wrong exegetical or theological starting point, an interpretation that is *imposed on* rather than *drawn from* the text?

In 2 Peter, as in Jude, no reference to church officeholders appears—required if the letter is mirroring second-century developments. To the contrary, the flock is admonished to guard itself. The readers are exhorted to “make every effort” to strengthen the ethical underpinnings of their faith (1:5–9). Whereas it is assumed by “early Catholic” proponents that doctrine is being guarded by an office or institution, a more plausible explanation—and one that issues out of the text itself—is that the audience, planted in a Gentile and broadly pagan cultural environment, is struggling with the ethical requirements that betoken vital Christian faith. Second Peter is a call for the community to guard itself.

Similarly, the assumed need for ecclesiastical control over doctrine does not manifest itself in 2 Peter in the way that “early Catholic” exegetes have maintained. In fact, it is the silence of the ecclesiastical voice that strikes the reader. Not an institution, not an office, but the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is at work in the people of God (1:21b). Rightly understood, 1:20–21 has nothing to do with scriptural interpretation, the church’s official teaching office, or a primitive type of church magisterium; the issue at

hand, supported by the letter's contextual flow, is *prophetic and authoritative speech*. The author, who is claiming to be an eyewitness of the transfiguration (1:16–18), is vigorous in his assertion: “And we have the word of the prophets made more certain” (1:19), for which a better translation might be, “Thus we have the prophetic message attested.” It is the inspiration of the Spirit that is said to convey authority.¹⁴

If we are to assume, along with proponents of the “early Catholic” thesis and mainstream critical scholarship, a late dating of the epistle (i.e., one that is generations removed from the apostles),¹⁵ then it follows that the author and readers would long have had access to all of Paul's letters, in which case the statement in 3:15–16 makes less sense if penned by a pseudepigrapher. Michael Green's observation, 158–59, in this regard is worth repeating. To “Peter,” Paul is a “beloved brother”; to Polycarp, several generations removed, he is “the blessed and glorious Paul.” In the second century one tended to view Paul either as an arch-villain (given the maturity of heretical teachings) or as the apostle par excellence; it is, however, highly dubious that Paul would have been referred to as a “dear brother” by later generations.

2. CANONICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Of the seven canonical documents denominated “catholic,” or general, epistles, only 1 Peter and 1 John were not considered to be “disputed writings” by the early church. Yet, in his compendium of early church history, Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25) informs the reader that, even when the other five were disputed (James, 2 Peter, Jude, 2 John, and 3 John), they were not unknown but were recognized by many. Of the seven general epistles, 2 Peter appears to have had the greatest difficulty being accepted, for reasons explained by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.3), who writes that, though many have thought it valuable and have honored it alongside the other Scriptures, much of the church has been taught to regard it as noncanonical. In the case of other writings attributed to the apostle (e.g., *The Acts of Peter*, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, and the gospel carrying his name), we have no reason whatsoever, according to Eusebius, to include them among the traditional, and nowhere in the church are they cited.

Eusebius further acknowledges that Clement of Alexandria (late second century) offered commentary on all the catholic epistles (*Hist. eccl.* 6.14). Other early witnesses paint an incomplete picture. Origen writes of one “acknowledged” letter of Peter and mentions a second that is “doubted” (*Comm. Jo.* 5.3), yet he himself accepts it as one of Peter’s “twin epistles” (*Hom. Josh.* 7.1). Didymus the Blind (PL 39.1742, 1811–18) comments on all seven general epistles but considers 2 Peter to be a forged document (*esse falsatum*). Didymus of Alexandria, by contrast, several centuries later cites 2 Peter as authentic and thus authoritative.¹⁶ The authors of the spurious *Apocalypse of Peter* and *Acts of Peter*, both second-century documents, show evidence of having known of 2 Peter’s existence. That resistance to an acceptance of 2 Peter was greater in some areas—among Syrian churches, for example—may be related to the fact that the spurious pseudepigraphal works bearing the apostle’s name were in circulation in these parts. This would reasonably explain why early patristic evidence supporting 2 Peter is scant. Second Peter nevertheless was recognized as canonical by the late fourth century.¹⁷

One of the challenges facing those who consider 2 Peter to be authentically Petrine is that its language, imagery, and tone differ markedly from that of 1 Peter. Given the acknowledgment in 1 Peter that the apostle is using a secretary (5:12), one solution is to suggest a different secretary, or amanuensis, at work, such as Jerome posited (*Epist.* 120.11). Nonetheless, modern scholarship has broadly rejected the epistle as authentic, even when all would concede that it is worlds removed from the spurious writings of the second century that bear Peter’s name; thus, Bray observes the following in his overview of the early Fathers’ attitudes:

The Fathers all recognized that there are great differences between the first and second letters attributed to Peter, but they explained these variations in different ways. Some of them rejected the authenticity of the second letter and refused to accept it as part of the canon, but the majority were unwilling to go that far. They recognized that although there were many differences between the two letters, they were not as great as the differences between the letters, on the one hand, and other writings attributed to Peter that were known to be spurious, on the other.¹⁸

Indeed, although 2 Peter is the least well-attested book in the NT, its attestation far exceeds that of any of the noncanonical books.

Robert Picirilli's extensive study of possible allusions in early patristic literature ("Allusions to 2 Peter in the Apostolic Fathers," *JSNT* 33 [1987]: 57–83) concludes that the epistle is *probably* being alluded to, though without decisive proof. He names twenty-two possible sources, including *1 Clement*, *Barnabas*, and *Shepherd of Hermas*. At the very least, what NT scholarship *cannot* dogmatically contend is that there are unquestionably no references to 2 Peter in the apostolic fathers. Authenticity, therefore, will have to be debated on grounds other than whether postapostolic fathers knew and used the epistle.¹⁹

The argument for 2 Peter's authenticity is further buttressed by several features. One is the notably personal style, evidenced by the opening salutation in which the author reverts to his original name, Simon, as though the author finds it necessary to verify his "signature" as one of the inner circle of apostles. Not insignificantly, it is "Simon Peter" who recognizes and confesses Jesus in his messianic fullness (Mt 16:13–20; cf. Jn 1:42). Hence the author's personal reminiscence, recorded in 2 Peter 1:16–18, is all the more deceptive if, as most commentators assume, the writer is pseudonymous. How does 2 Peter withstand the test of authenticity? Can one hold to the view that the NT writings are divinely inspired and sacred yet inauthentic?²⁰

3. EPISTOLARY DESTINATION, AUTHORSHIP, AND THE QUESTION OF PSEUDONYMITY

The absence of names and places renders it difficult to be conclusive about the identity of the recipients of 2 Peter and the context out of which the letter arose. While the provenance and destination of the letter elude any certainty, numerous textual indicators point to a particular social location in which the readership finds itself, making it likely that the letter is addressed to Christians in Greece or Asia Minor, where Paul's letters had already circulated (3:15–16).²¹

In contrast to *Jude*, which reflects a distinctly Palestinian Jewish-Christian milieu, 2 Peter suggests an audience in pagan Gentile

surroundings. Among such indicators are the allusion to equality (1:1), an important political virtue to the Hellenistic mind; the mystical-philosophical language of partaking in the “divine nature” (1:4); employment of a catalog of virtues (1:5–7), a common rhetorical device among Stoic moral philosophers; frequent paraenesis (moral exhortation) in the face of apparent ethical lapse (e.g., 1:12–15); use of the term “eyewitnesses” (1:16), a technical term in classical Greek used to describe those who had achieved the highest degree of Eleusinian mystery-religion experience; a reference to “hell” (Gk. *Tartarus*; 2:4), the subterranean abyss and place of punishment in Greek mythology; the allusion to Noah’s generation (2:5); comparison to Lot’s predicament in Sodom (2:6); use of Balaam typology (2:15–16), which suggests apostasy and moral decay; common and pagan proverbial images to depict apostasy (2:20–22); a moral apologetic against radical relativists (3:3–7); and multiple allusions to the Hellenistic virtue of “godliness,” or piety (1:3, 6, 7; 3:11).

Although the epistle carries the name of “Simon Peter,” critical scholarship, with its “early Catholic” reading and assumed postapostolic dating, is virtually unanimous that Peter himself was not the author. Bauckham, 146–47, 161, while calling for a much-needed “reexamination” of the “early Catholic” thesis, nevertheless believes that 2 Peter is “fictionally represented as written shortly before Peter’s death” and is most probably an emanation of a Petrine “circle” of Christian leaders in Rome. Indicative of most critical scholars, Bauckham, 158, believes that “language alone ... makes it improbable that Peter could have written 2 Peter.” The “fictional” character of the epistle, which according to Bauckham, 134, is “entirely *transparent*,” is “decisively reinforced” by its literary quality. In the end, evidence that 2 Peter is not authentic is conclusive for Bauckham, 159 (emphasis his): “The evidence which really rules out composition *during Peter’s lifetime* is that of literary genre ... and that of date.... Either of these might be fatal for any degree of Petrine authorship. Together they must be regarded as entirely conclusive against Petrine authorship.”²²

But is the evidence in fact “entirely conclusive”? Neyrey, 118–20, suggests otherwise. He makes the observation that the unusual vocabulary of 2 Peter that is so problematic for many commentators may stem from the sources used by the writer and need not be adduced as “proof” that the epistle is not Petrine.²³

In addition to dating and linguistic considerations, evidence of the “fictionality” of 2 Peter is thought to be further compounded by the author’s use of the literary convention of a last will or testament (1:12–15).²⁴ Hereby it is understood that the name and influence of significant leaders in the church were perpetuated by their circle of disciples, and a posthumously published “farewell address” constitutes an appropriate way of transmitting the apostle’s vision. Moreover, writing in the name of a leader is assumed to pose “no ethical problem for the ancients, and especially in farewell addresses” (so Craddock, 92). Thus one is left to conclude that the literary genre to which 2 Peter belongs makes it abundantly clear—to its initial readers and to contemporary readers—that the letter was pseudepigraphal. Green, 34–35, has adopted this critical stance regarding 2 Peter, seeing it as “both a letter and also an example of the type of work we meet in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.” He goes on to make these observations:

The author’s aim was to defend apostolic Christianity in a subapostolic situation, and this he does, not by having recourse to his own authority, but by faithfully mirroring apostolic teaching which he adapts and interprets for his own day. “Peter’s testament” formed the ideal literary vehicle for his plans.... Nobody ever imagined it came from Peter himself. The literary convention of the testament was too well known. Such is the theory.

Because “the testamental function of the farewell speech in no way proceeds from the [apostolic] witness and guarantor of [apostolic] tradition himself,”²⁵ the genre of the farewell speech or testament is understood to reveal an attempt by later generations to “guarantee” the apostolic tradition faithfully.²⁶ What is assumed by critical scholarship is that the authors of pseudepigraphal testaments, who are chronologically removed from the apostles, nevertheless take a necessary (though secondary) place alongside the apostles and prophets (cf. Eph 2:20) in guarding and transmitting the apostolic tradition to the subapostolic church. In the words of Frederick Danker (“2 Peter,” in *The General Letters*, ed. G. Krodel [Minneapolis:

Augsburg, 1995], 84), “In most cases there was no attempt to deceive the public, but to say, ‘If N.N. were living, this is what N.N. would say to us.’”

But such a verdict, with its necessary supporting assumptions, is open to challenge. How can it be so confidently asserted that 2 Peter was intended to be entirely transparent fiction, as mainstream scholarship has done? And are later generations in fact “guaranteeing” the apostolic tradition? While a thorough treatment of pseudepigraphy cannot be undertaken in the present discussion, the testamental thesis in 2 Peter, because of biblical scholarship’s commitment to this hypothesis, requires some comment.²⁷

To state the heart of the matter bluntly, as Michael Green has done, proponents of pseudepigraphy in 2 Peter—and the testament in particular—adduce evidence for the existence of a phenomenon in Christian literature that has never been shown to have existed.²⁸ While the amount of literature devoted to the question of Christian pseudepigraphy is massive,²⁹ discussion frequently falls short of satisfying answers to questions such as those posed by Bruce Metzger (“Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha,” in *New Testament Studies—Philological, Versional and Patristic* [Leiden: Brill, 1980], 1–22):

From an ethical point of view, is a pseudepigraphon compatible with honesty and candor, whether by ancient or modern moral standards? From a psychological point of view, how should one estimate an author who impersonates an ancient worthy ... ? Should we take him seriously, and, if we do, how does this bear on the question of his sanity? From a theological point of view, should a work that involves a fraud, whether pious or not, be regarded as incompatible with the character of a message from God?

In addition, one of the broader methodological problems associated with the testamental hypothesis—and pseudepigraphy in general—is the open-ended and rather hopeless task of reconciling the fictive with the *real* occasion.³⁰ Ultimately, the problems affiliated with a testamental hypothesis in the case of 2 Peter are not easily dispelled, since both the identity of the author and the social location of the audience must be reconciled to the text

of the epistle itself.³¹ To what extent is the testamental hypothesis imposed on, as opposed to *leading from*, the text?

Standard testamental or “valedictory” address is thought to contain notice of one’s imminent death, paraenesis or moral exhortation, eschatological predictions mediated through dreams or visions, an historical overview, a transfer of authority, and blessings or curses.³² Examples of farewell speeches recorded in Scripture (notably Dt 34:1–4; Lk 22:24–30; Jn 13–17; Ac 20:17–37) on examination would seem to borrow from but not be confined to this pattern.

But how does 2 Peter conform to the pattern of testamental literature? More broadly, it must be stated that 2 Peter is free of legendary and apocryphal elements that characterize spurious documents—e.g., Jewish apocalyptic testaments as well as Petrine pseudepigrapha of the second century. With regard to particulars, the contrast is equally telling. Wholly absent from 2 Peter are apocalyptic dreams or visions and the element of blessings or curses, both of which are salient features of the standard testamental genre. The stamp of the epistle, by contrast, is decidedly and explicitly *prophetic*—“we have the word of the prophets made more certain” (1:19a)—rather than apocalyptic. Also absent is the characteristic transfer of authority, which Kurz, 50, calls the “primary function” of the biblical farewell address to “describe and promote transition from original religious leaders ... to their successors.” Second Peter, moreover, begins with substantial didactic material, which tends *not* to be a part of pseudepigraphal farewell speeches. Finally and significantly, the allusion in 2 Peter to the writer’s death (1:14) is not immediate, neither is it prominent; rather, it is injected only parenthetically *after* the substantial paraenetic and didactic portions of the letter—and this only in a veiled manner. The special appeal of the farewell address, it should be remembered, is the relationship of the audience to the one standing before death (as Jn 13–17 well illustrates).

Furthermore, rather than transfer authority, 2 Peter contains testimony to the author’s own authority, given the urgency of community’s present needs. The writer’s presence on the holy mountain is not some “cleverly invented story” for the purpose of deceiving others;³³ rather, it serves as an apostolic imprint that is left behind for the sake of the church: “We were eyewitnesses of his majesty.... We ourselves heard this voice” (1:16, 18).³⁴

The absence of one stylistically exemplary sample from antiquity of qualified testamental writing, coupled with the aforementioned difficulties, places the testamental hypothesis on shaky ground. Moreover, it should be emphasized, as Ellis, 220, has done, that early Christian writers knew how to transmit the teachings of an authority figure without engaging in pseudipigraphy. The writer of 2 Peter, if the epistle is a pseudepigraphon, clearly shows evidence of a deceptive intent, given the emphatic language being employed: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories ... , but we were eyewitnesses” (1:16); “We ourselves heard this voice ... when we were with him” (1:18); “Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you” (3:1).

In the end, the broadly accepted assumption that “Second Peter bears so many marks of the testament genre ... that readers familiar with the genre must have expected it to be fictional” (Bauckham, 134) requires some moderation. In truth, several significant qualifying marks are absent. As a result of his exhaustive study of the language of 2 Peter, Starr, 4, is led to observe that “2 Peter is often described as belonging to the tradition of Jewish ‘testaments,’ but these at best exhibit only a tenuous similarity of genre to 2 Peter.”³⁵

The ethical dilemma of why the church would sanction the use of pseudepigraphy in the service of advancing Christian orthodoxy does not evaporate as readily as critical scholarship might contend, given the apostles’ role in the church’s foundation (Eph 2:20; 3:5). The function of the apostolate was in fact *dynamic*, *authoritative*, and *binding* in nature; “friends of the apostle,” including next-generation disciples, were not accorded apostolic authority. Apostolic witness is not merely personal testimony that accords with what the apostle himself would have said. It is, rather, “infallibly authoritative, legally binding deposition, the kind that stands up in a law court. Accordingly, that witness embodies a canonical principle; it provides the matrix for a new canon, the emergence of a new body of revelation to stand alongside the covenantal revelation of the Old Testament.”³⁶

The implication of apostolicity as it relates to the possibility of pseudonymity in the NT is this: strictly speaking, “apostolic pseudepigrapha” is a contradiction in terms, since not even well-intended literary motives expressed under the name of an apostle warrant apostolic

authority.³⁷ Given the role of the apostle in the early church, Ellis, 224, has argued that “scholars cannot have it both ways. They cannot identify apostolic letters as pseudepigrapha and at the same time declare them to be innocent products with a right to a place in the canon.”³⁸

However, *that* an epistle such as 2 Peter might issue from the apostle in the historical setting illuminated from within the text is not to say *how* it might issue from him. At some point the question must be addressed as to whether 2 Peter suggests (or even *allows for* the remote possibility of) some sort of scribal help via an amanuensis. E. I. Robson (“Composition and Dictation in New Testament Books,” *JTS* 18 [1917]: 296) invites modern readers to make allowances for dictation in the NT, for “when an ancient writer wanted to write, his one anxiety seems to have been how he could best avoid writing; and the convenience of the slave-amanuensis enabled him so to avoid it, by allowing him to declaim, talk, even babble garrulously, at will, hardly feeling that he was making any special literary effort.”

This neglected perspective, which would account for significant differences between the language and style of 1 and 2 Peter, is amplified by G. J. Bahr, “Paul and Letter Writing in the First Century,” *CBQ* 28 (1966): 475–76: “The influence of the secretary would be even greater if he were left to compose the letter himself along general lines laid down by the author. The result would be that the letter might represent the basic thought of the author, but not necessarily his terminology or style.... It may be that the discrepancy between what Paul wrote and what he spoke was due to the abilities of a secretary who was expert in the composition of letters.”

Given the secretary’s freedom to insert a salutation or postscript, do his own revising of material, or add stylistic and literary artifice, the modern reader might do well to allow greater room for the work of an amanuensis in the NT epistles than we might customarily allow.³⁹ The differences in vocabulary and style between 1 and 2 Peter reasonably suggest the use of different secretaries.

An underlying presupposition of all pseudonymity theory is that, because a work ultimately found acceptance by the church as canonical, pseudonymity in the end is accepted. Any authority the writer possesses—whether he is a member of a “Petrine school,” a “Petrine agent,” or some individual several generations removed from the apostle—inheres in the

fact that he is “faithfully interpreting” the apostolic tradition. We are asked to believe that because a work was “orthodox” and the writer’s motives were noble, the work was accepted by the church. In his evaluation of Jewish and Hellenistic attitudes toward literary pseudepigraphy, Roger Beckwith (*The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 274–433) gently chides biblical scholarship for hypotheses propounded in order to avoid drawing the conclusion that Jews and Christians did not reckon pseudepigraphy as an acceptable literary device.⁴⁰ It is precisely the concern for pseudonymity that seems to underlie Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians not to be shaken “by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us” (2Th 2:2). The implication is that others were not averse to using his apostolic pedigree.

While it is true, as Chester and Martin, 147, write, that the status of 2 Peter “as part of the New Testament canon with normative value is both an ancient and a modern challenge,” this challenge should not be overstated. One of the unfortunate by-products of contemporary scholarly thinking about 2 Peter is that the epistle has been marginalized in mainstream biblical studies, thus joining Jude’s “most neglected” status.

J. Ramsey Michaels (“Second Peter and Jude—Royal Promises,” in *The New Testament Speaks*, ed. G. W. Barker et al. [New York: Harper and Row, 1969], 351) is correct to note that the case against authenticity in 2 Peter has been overstated; and he is correct in his observation that “most of its content is perfectly credible as early tradition, oriented primarily to the apostle’s own lifetime.” In the end, the pseudepigraphal hypothesis, when scrutinized, asks far too much of us.⁴¹ And in the end, the pseudepigraphal hypothesis, even when applied with noble intentions, would seem to have contributed significantly toward 2 Peter’s marginalization.

4. LITERARY RELATIONSHIP OF 2 PETER TO JUDE

In addition to the question of 2 Peter’s authenticity, its literary relationship to Jude has tended to dominate historical-critical examination of the letter. Starr, 7, has stated the matter well: “Scholarly research on 2 Peter has more than anything else been an investigation of parallels.” The notable lexical and conceptual similarities in Jude and 2 Peter—of the twenty-five verses in Jude, parts or all of nineteen verses are found in 2 Peter—have led scholars

to posit four options regarding literary dependence: (1) Jude borrows from 2 Peter;⁴² (2) 2 Peter borrows from Jude;⁴³ (3) both 2 Peter and Jude borrow from a common third source;⁴⁴ or (4) 2 Peter and Jude stem from one and the same author.⁴⁵ The question of literary dependence involves arguments that are both external and internal to the text. External factors—e.g., the “early Catholic” hypothesis—arise from attempts by scholars to identify the historical and theological scenario behind 2 Peter. Internal factors would include indicators such as borrowed tradition-material, vocabulary, rhetorical technique, or prevailing verbal tense.

Regarding the problem of literary dependence, Neyrey, 122, issues a helpful cautionary note: although NT scholarship has weighed in regarding the above four possibilities (and Neyrey himself joins an impressive list of scholars who prefer the priority of Jude), none of the aforementioned options are conclusive. Redactive interests differ in 2 Peter and Jude, and it may be the differences rather than similarities that in the end serve as our most useful clue as to who borrowed from whom. But any certainty regarding the matter eludes us.

Certainly the parallels between the two epistles, both in vocabulary and in concept and imagery, are striking:

- Both authors describe themselves as “servants” of Jesus Christ (1:1; Jude 1).
- Grace and peace are to be multiplied to the readers (1:2; Jude 2).
- The readers have a received faith (1:1; Jude 3).
- Both epistles understand Christian faith in terms of a divine “call” (1:3, 10; Jude 1).
- The opponents deny Christ’s lordship (2:1; Jude 4).
- Destructive heresies have been secretly brought in (2:1; Jude 4).
- The opponents are licentious in their ways (2:2; Jude 4).
- The opponents’ condemnation has been declared long ago (2:3; Jude 4).
- The fallen angels serve as a moral paradigm (2:4; Jude 6).
- The fallen angels are held in darkness for judgment (2:4; cf. Jude 6).
- Sodom and Gomorrah serve as a moral paradigm (2:6; Jude 7).
- The opponents walk according to the flesh, indulge in their lusts, and do not hesitate to despise authority (2:10; Jude 8, 18).

- God’s angels exhibit restraint in contrast to the opponents (2:11; Jude 9).
- The opponents are compared to brute beasts, irrational by nature (2:12; Jude 10).
- Balaam serves as a moral type (2:15–16; Jude 11).
- The opponents are portrayed as blots or blemishes (2:13; Jude 12).
- The opponents have erred, forsaking the right way (2:15; Jude 11).
- The opponents are compared to clouds (2:17; Jude 12).
- Blackest darkness has been reserved for the opponents (2:17; Jude 13).
- The opponents are boastful, lustful, and seductive (2:18; Jude 16).
- The apostasy of the opponents has been predicted (3:2–7; Jude 17–19).
- Scoffers in the last days were predicted (3:3; Jude 18).
- Jewish-Christian eschatological thinking is present (3:5–10; Jude 14–15).
- The readers are admonished to be without spot or fault (3:14; Jude 24).
- The readers are admonished toward stability (3:17; Jude 24).
- For the readers to fail to persevere is described in terms of “falling” (1:10; Jude 24).
- God is understood as “Savior” (2:7, 9; Jude 25).
- Doxological praise is ascribed to Jesus Christ as both Lord and Savior, now and forever (3:18; Jude 25).

Paying attention to the unique redactive interests of each writer, however, will reveal a unique literary-rhetorical strategy at work in each work. Thus it is helpful to observe the dissimilarities in the two epistles.

- The author of 2 Peter claims apostleship, whereas Jude identifies himself as a brother of James.
- Jude’s language and imagery reflect a Palestinian Jewish-Christian milieu, whereas 2 Peter mirrors a more pervasively Gentile social environment.
- Jude exhibits a rampant use of triplets, a pattern not conspicuous in 2 Peter.

- Whereas Jude plunges immediately into theological controversy, in 2 Peter the controversy is reserved for later in the epistle.
- 2 Peter uses the moral paradigms to emphasize both deliverance and judgment, whereas in Jude the paradigms categorically announce judgment.
- Paradigms and tradition-material are employed in Jude that would be meaningful to readers with a Jewish background (e.g., the archangel Michael, the *Assumption of Moses*, *1 Enoch*, Cain, and Korah), whereas tradition-material utilized in 2 Peter is more meaningful for an audience surrounded by Gentiles.
- Jude speaks of the fallen angels as being kept in chains in darkness, whereas in 2 Peter they are said to have been cast into hell (Gk. *Tartarus*).
- Jude cites verbatim an extrabiblical text (*1 En.* 1:9), whereas no direct citations are utilized in 2 Peter.
- 2 Peter is a tract consisting primarily of exhortations toward virtuous living, spelling out the contours of Christian ethics; Jude is a tract announcing condemnation.
- The reference to Sodom and Gomorrah in Jude is unqualified, whereas in 2 Peter the emphasis is on Lot's struggle with surrounding wickedness.
- 2 Peter shows evidences of both a personal relationship to the readers and challenges to the author's authority.
- 2 Peter contains an expanded Balaam typology.
- 2 Peter suggests future developments among the apostate, whereas Jude suggests that these developments are present and matured.
- "Knowledge" and "godliness" are important catchwords in 2 Peter.
- 2 Peter mirrors possible circulating arguments that deny moral accountability and thus proffers a moral "apologetic" by incorporating eschatological typology.
- The author of 2 Peter gives the impression of personal relationship to the apostle Paul, reflecting on Pauline epistles that have been circulating.⁴⁶

What might be gleaned from these nuances? Despite the obvious literary relationship between the two epistles, one encounters cumulative evidence of a unique social setting in both letters. This distinctiveness deserves our

careful attention. Material is chosen and structured as literary “brick and mortar” for the purpose of addressing the needs of the community according to the peculiar social context. The *mode* of the Christian message is indivisible from its *content* and is informed by the pastoral needs in the community. Hereby we begin to appreciate the distinctiveness of the two epistles.

5. RECENT PETRINE SCHOLARSHIP

The publication in 1977 of Tord Fornberg’s *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society* was significant inasmuch as it challenged the exegetical starting point of traditional commentary on 2 Peter. Fornberg’s work attempted to reconstruct the social location of the epistle’s readership by paying attention to the numerous social indicators lodged within the text. He argued that the readers were immersed in a pervasively pagan social environment—perhaps in Asia Minor, Syria, or even Rome—in contradistinction to the conspicuously Jewish audience being mirrored in Jude. The effect of this study, which focused on textual markers rather than external theological presuppositions, was to call into question the prevailing assumptions of “early Catholicism,” namely, that 2 Peter mirrors the church’s battle against Gnosticism in the second century.

Following the publication of Fornberg’s study, J. H. Neyrey (“The Form and Background of the Polemic in 2 Peter,” *JBL* 99 [1980]: 407–31) also dared to question the operating assumptions of the “early Catholic” hypothesis. Responding to the criticisms of Käsemann, 194–95, that parts of 2 Peter were disconnected and “embarrassing,” Neyrey, 407, contended that these criticisms were misplaced because Käsemann’s analysis “did not attempt to understand 2 Peter in its proper historical context.” By presenting fresh comparative materials dating roughly contemporary with emergent Christianity, Neyrey contributed toward the furnishing of a new starting point by which to reassess 2 Peter—a contribution richly on display in Neyrey’s fine Anchor Bible commentary (see [bibliography](#)).⁴⁷

In addition to Neyrey’s work, three other essays deserve mention—two in particular because they move the discussion of ethics and eschatology in 2 Peter in a helpful direction by calling attention to similar apologetic parallels from pagan literature. Rainer Riesner (“Der zweite Petrusbrief und

die Eschatologie,” in *Zukunftserwartung in biblischer Sicht*, ed. G. Maier [Basel: Brunnen-Verlag, 1984], 124–43) compares the description in 2 Peter 3 of cosmic conflagration with the Stoic doctrine of the same (*ekpyrōsis*). Herein a fundamental difference in worldviews is apparent: there is a radical discontinuity between Judeo-Christian understanding of the cosmos and its Stoic counterpart, even when the former is depicted in Stoic categories.⁴⁸ Employing a similar interpretive trajectory, C. P. Thiede (“A Pagan Reader of 2 Peter: Cosmic Conflagration in 2 Peter 3 and the OCTAVIUS of Minucius Felix,” *JSNT* 26 [1986]: 79–96) supplies further evidence from both pagan literature and the early church fathers to suggest that on display in 2 Peter is argumentation that mirrors contemporary pagan-Christian philosophical debates over cosmology and cosmic conflagration. E. Lövestam (“Eschatologie und Tradition im 2. Petrusbrief,” in *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of B. Reicke*, ed. W. C. Weinrich [Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press, 1984], 2:287–300) also concerns himself with the eschatological question in 2 Peter. The focus of his study is the Jewish model of flood typology as an apologetic response; also considered are parallels from intertestamental literature, rabbinic literature, the Synoptics, and Jude.⁴⁹

The 1983 publication of Richard Bauckham’s highly acclaimed commentary on Jude and 2 Peter brought welcome attention to these two neglected NT books. Moreover, it suggested the inadequacy of the “early Catholic” rubric being imposed on the text. After all, Bauckham, 8, cautioned us by citing Martin Hengel: “If we want to, we can find ‘early Catholic traits’ even in Jesus and Paul.” Bauckham correctly noted the absence in Jude and 2 Peter of early Catholicism’s primary distinguishing features—e.g., a fading of hope for the parousia, the increasing institutionalization of the early church, and a crystallizing of faith into set forms or formulas.⁵⁰

The last fifteen years have witnessed marked interest in literary-rhetorical structures of the NT. Duane Watson’s rhetorical criticism of 2 Peter and Jude (*Invention, Arrangement, and Style: Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter* [SBLDS 104; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988]) seeks to apply the canons of ancient rhetorical practice to these two documents. The strength of Watson’s work is its premise that the writings of the NT did not occur in a cultural vacuum; rather, theological truth is clothed in literary arguments

of the day.⁵¹ More recent work in 2 Peter has assumed or made necessary refinements in Watson's rhetorical-critical study of the epistle.

My *Virtue amidst Vice* sought to extend and probe the line of thinking begun by Fornberg's *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society*, namely, that in 2 Peter literary strategy mirrors a pervasively pagan, Gentile context. Therein I have attempted a critical reassessment of the reigning assumptions of "early Catholicism," while at the same time identifying a literary strategy at work in the epistle that sets it apart from Jude. It is the book's thesis that 2 Peter offers a window into the moral world and philosophical discourse of Greco-Roman paganism—a world in which moral relativism and moral skepticism, consummating in a denial of moral accountability, are on display.

In my book, I argue that a key element in 2 Peter's hortatory strategy consists in the application of Christian paraenesis by borrowing contemporary Hellenistic moral ideals and categories. At the heart of this strategy of moral persuasion is the writer's adaptation of a catalog of virtues (1:5–7), which is intended to counter ethical lapse in the community. The fact that the believer has been a recipient of divinely imputed righteousness (1:1) and a full knowledge of God (1:2)—indeed, of "everything we need for life and godliness" (1:3)—constitutes no guarantee of a moral life. The challenge set before the community is to validate its profession with virtuous living—this amidst a cultural climate that can only encourage vice. Thus I contend in the book that the burden of the writer of 2 Peter is less doctrine (presupposed by the "early Catholic" hypothesis) than *ethics* and *virtuous living*.⁵²

One further monograph deserving mention is likely to receive limited attention in the United States because it originated in Sweden. James Starr's *Sharers in Divine Nature: 2 Peter 1:4 in Its Hellenistic Context* (see [bibliography](#)) provides the reader (in English!) a rich treasure of background information by which to appreciate the linguistic and philosophical concepts that surface in 2 Peter. The book's title is a bit misleading, insofar as its contents extend well beyond the limits of one verse. It may well be the best resource for placing 2 Peter in its Hellenistic milieu. Furthermore, it is sensitive to theological as well as historical and cultural threads that must converge in responsible NT interpretation, unlike much commentary on 2 Peter. In the end, Starr's book interacts sufficiently

with mainstream biblical scholarship and yet is blessedly free of methodological constraints that impinge on the text of 2 Peter. Starr, 50, correctly notes that this letter is concerned to “shape the events of the present in view of the inevitable future judgment of the individual’s character,” while calling to the reader’s attention the “ever-present danger in the narrative structure of 2 Peter ... the possibility of moral collapse.”⁵³

6. PURPOSE AND PROMINENT THEMES

The traditional “early Catholic” reading of 2 Peter proceeds on the assumption that the church is having to counter the forces of Gnosticism as they emerge in the second century; thus, Kelly, 231: “We are ... justified in overhearing in these letters the opening shots in the fated struggle between the Church and Gnosticism which was to feature large in the second century.”⁵⁴ Consequently, historical-critical scholarship has assumed that doctrine—and specifically false doctrine—is the chief burden of the writer.

Probing a literary-rhetorical strategy at work in 2 Peter that distinguishes the epistle from Jude requires a sharpening of our focus. What is the intent behind the writer’s choice of literary “brick and mortar”? Why the use of language, image, and concepts that would appeal to a more Gentile audience? Why the sustained use of paraenetic language and ethical categories, particularly in the early part of the letter? And precisely what is it that should be so urgently recalled by the readers (1:12–15)?

The writer’s burden is that his readers cultivate an ethos that offers proof of a virtuous lifestyle—proof both to the one who has provided abundant resources for life and godliness (1:3–4) and to the moral skeptic (3:3–7). *What kind of people ought you to be in terms of holy conduct and piety?* (3:11) is the ringing question the leaders are left to ponder.

Following the epistolary greeting, the accent of which is received righteousness and grace, a catalog of virtues (1:5–7) is introduced by means of philosophic and conspicuously pagan religious formulations (1:3–4). This catalog, which outlines the contours of Christian “life and godliness” and contains standard features of Stoic ethical lists, is designed to compel the readers toward moral progress.⁵⁵ To possess these virtues is to prevent an ineffective and unfruitful life (1:8–9); to lack them, conversely, is analogous

to blindness resulting from a neglect of truth. At issue is moral self-responsibility.

This emphasis is abundantly clear in the language of paraenesis throughout 2 Peter 1—“for this very reason” (v.5); “if you possess these qualities” (v.8); “if anyone does not have them” (v.9); “if you do these things” (v.10); “so I will always remind you of these things (v.12); “I think it is right to refresh your memory” (v.13); “remember these things” (v.15). The rhetorical effect of this language, though easily lost on the modern reader, would have been unmistakable to its intended audience. Theirs is not a faith void of the moral life; rather, the distinctly Christian ethic is to shine forth in bold contrast to surrounding culture. Tragically, in the view of the author, some have disregarded the divine “promises” (1:4; implied in 1:9, 12, 15) and as a result of their intercourse with surrounding culture have “forgotten that [they have] been cleansed from [their] past sins” (1:9). Worse yet, some are even aggressively propagating that there is *no moral authority* before which they must give account (2:1; 3:3–5).

Moral typology and a detailed sketch of the opponents are prominently featured in 2 Peter 2. The allusion to “false prophets” and “false teachers” in connection with “heresies” in 2:1–3 is a sure indication for most exegetes that 2 Peter was written for the purpose of combating heresy, i.e., false (Gnostic) doctrine. While I discuss this choice of terms in detail elsewhere,⁵⁶ the writer’s extensive ethical vocabulary exhibited throughout 2 Peter 1 and 2 indicates the nature of the pastoral problem being addressed. This vocabulary strongly suggests that the problem is not first and foremost *doctrinal*:⁵⁷ “reveling in their pleasures,” “shameful ways,” “slaves of depravity,” “corrupt desire of the sinful nature,” “despise authority,” “bold and arrogant,” “brute beasts,” “lustful desires,” “eyes full of adultery,” “experts in greed,” “springs without water,” “returning to its vomit,” and “wallowing in the mud.” Alas, on closer inspection 2 Peter appears to be a textbook for Christian ethics.⁵⁸

Three prominent motifs can be detected throughout 2 Peter 1. The first of these relates to a godly lifestyle and virtuous character (1:3–11). The author, by way of introduction, places notable emphasis on the fact that divine resources are available to the Christian for living a godly life. Divine power and promises have been provided so that the readers might escape moral corruption in the world around them. This demarcation, the writer takes

great pains to point out, depends not merely on the promises themselves (great as they are) but on the ethical response of the Christian. To this end, the author employs a Hellenistic rhetorical device, a catalog of virtues, to exhort his readers to a higher ethical plane. Verses 3–7 have been said to constitute a page out of “current pagan textbook morality,” as Kelly, 306, puts it. The net effect of the catalog, which suggests moral progress, should not be lost on the reader: human cooperation with God, while it does not *cause* righteousness, nevertheless “confirms” or validates the believer’s “calling and election” (1:10). “Godliness,” one of the important catchwords in 2 Peter (1:3, 6–7; 2:9), expresses generic “reverence” and occurs in both religious and nonreligious contexts. The NT seems to carry both Christian and broader Hellenistic connotations: the term serves to accent a particular way of life and behavior that is worthy of praise. The soul of religion, after all, is its practice. In 2 Peter, piety stands in direct and conspicuous opposition to moral “corruption” (*phthora*, GK 5785; 1:4; 2:12 [twice; NIV, “destroyed,” “perish”]; 2:19 [NIV, “depravity”) and “evil [corrupt, lustful] desires” (1:4; 2:10, 18; 3:3).

A second motif expressing itself through pastoral concern is seen in the surplus of “reminder” terminology (1:12–15) as well as in the use of the catchword “knowledge” with related verbal forms (*epignōsis*, *gnōsis*, GK 2106, 1194 [1:2–3, 5–6, 8, 16, 20]).⁵⁹ The writer intends “to always remind [them] of these things,” even though the readers already “know them and are firmly established in the truth [they] now have.” He deems it necessary to “refresh [the] memory” of his audience and seeks to “make every effort” in admonishing them “to remember these things.” Knowledge—and specifically, the knowledge of God (1:2–3; 3:18)—is important to the writer. Not insignificantly, knowledge and grace both open and conclude the epistle, forming something of an *inclusio* for rhetorical effect.⁶⁰

The third emphasis in ch. 1 is the accent on the writer’s own moral authority. If it is assumed from the outset that the letter is from someone other than the apostle, 2 Peter is then read with a view of ferreting out evidence that would support the notion of pseudepigraphy. The result is, among other things, that the self-referential allusions such as one finds in 1:1 (“Simon Peter, ... apostle”) and 1:16–18 (eyewitness testimony of the transfiguration event) are to be viewed as literary hubris at best and forgery at worst. In the end, one is left with the majority of NT scholars to

hypothesize about postapostolic scenarios and make inferences about a theologically inferior NT document.

If, on the other hand, the writer is defending himself and the integrity of the Christian gospel (as Paul was forced to do on occasion),⁶¹ his own authority rests on nothing less than his historical relationship to Jesus. That (1) the writer seems not to be dependent on the Synoptic accounts of the transfiguration and (2) the pseudepigraphal *Apocalypse of Peter* makes use of 2 Peter together have been interpreted as casting doubt on 2 Peter's authenticity. Despite the overwhelming consensus of biblical scholarship in rejecting Petrine authorship, satisfactory explanations of the "eyewitness" language in these verses have yet to be offered. Green, 93, calls attention to "the apostolic 'we'" in "we were eyewitnesses"—indeed, a necessary accent *if* Christian truth is being undermined (cf. 1Co 15:3–8, 12–34; 1Jn 4:1–3). It is supremely difficult to envision moral authority resting in the literary product of one who, even though well intentioned, must resort to specious statements such as "we were there with him on the holy mountain." Such requires too much from the reader.

Whereas the use of moral typology in Jude is designed to underscore categorical judgment alone, in 2 Peter 2 it has a dual function—namely, to underscore both judgment *and* salvation. In Jude, God is Judge; in 2 Peter, however, he is both Judge and Savior.⁶² Both epistles, to be sure, express the reality of coming judgment in terms and imagery that strike the reader as fierce and unrelenting. In 2 Peter 2 the judgment theme initially appears as a condemnation of the opponents. It is then substantiated in the author's reciting of historical types. But whereas in Jude moral typology functions to announce only judgment, in 2 Peter it also reminds the readers of the reality of divine mercy. Hence, Noah and Lot—not mentioned in Jude—are depicted as righteous amidst their contemporaries (2:5–9a). In addition, Balaam typology, abbreviated in Jude, is expanded in 2 Peter to illustrate the moral accountability that accompanies abandoning the knowledge of God (2:15–16). To abandon knowledge of the truth, i.e., apostasy, is not foremost a doctrinal issue; rather, it is ethical.⁶³ The knowledge motif is reiterated in 2 Peter 2 by means of two proverbial images—a dog returning to its vomit and a pig returning to the mud. To have had knowledge of the truth and then to deny that truth is depicted in rather severe terms (2:20–22).

In 2 Peter 3 the motifs of virtue, judgment, and the knowledge of God surface in the writer's apocalyptic exhortation to the moral skeptic (3:3–7) and in the concluding admonitions toward perseverance and virtuous living (3:8–18). Insofar as the ethical life has been the burden of the writer, thus shaping his literary-rhetorical strategy on display in 1:3–2:22, it remains for him to expose and critique those individuals who by reason of moral license and moral skepticism actually call into question the very existence of a created moral order.

Given the dominance of the “early Catholic” thesis and the presumption that Gnosticism is being combated, traditional commentary broadly assumes a doctrinal-eschatological argument in 2 Peter 3 that purports to counter a “parousia delay.” Closer attention to literary strategy, however, suggests that the material belongs to a foremost ethical argument and qualifies as a type of “moral apologetic.”

Logically, apostasy breeds the necessity of returning to cosmological “first things.” Carried to its end, apostasy manifests itself in wholesale denial of all authority—local as well as universal. It is the latter, the more fundamental denial, that would appear to lie behind the caricature of the moral skeptic in 3:3–7. This process entails an eventual—and calculated—denial of divine intervention in history (3:5–6).

The effects of the moral skeptic on the believing community are by no means benign. Given the chance, they undermine one's faith and expectation in the Lord, one's ability to live righteously, and one's capacity properly to discern divine judgment (3:8–10). Cosmic catastrophe in the past serves as a foreshadow of moral reckoning to come. Moreover, it indicates that there are divine limits as to what the Creator and Judge of the whole earth, morally speaking, will permit. Bauckham, 302, expresses it in this way: “The final phrase [the exhortation contained in 3:7] reveals that although in this passage the author is certainly concerned with catastrophic upheavals in the physical world, which amount to the destruction and creation of worlds, he is not concerned with these for the sake of mere cosmology, but with their interpretation in a worldview which sees them as occurring by the sovereign decree of God as instruments of his judgment on humanity.”

The apocalyptic flavor of the material in 2 Peter 3 serves to rebut the assumption of the moral skeptic that there is no judgment, no moral

accountability, in the temporal order. It is designed to counter the individual advancing a pagan view of life, according to which one should seek pleasure (2:18b) and “freedom” (2:19) in the present life, with no permanent consequences for one’s actions. Having been reminded that God indeed does judge the unrighteous, the readers are admonished to live a life that is worthy of their calling as they await the final day of moral reckoning.

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

See also the [bibliography](#) listed in 1 Peter (pp. 294–95).

The following is a selective list of commentaries and monographs on 2 Peter available in English, confined for the most part to those referred to in the commentary (they will be referred to simply by the author’s name [and initials only when necessary to distinguish two authors of the same surname]). References to other resources will carry full bibliographic details at the first mention and thereafter a short title.

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8. OUTLINE

I. The Writer and His Audience (1:1–2)

II. Purpose for Writing and Authority (1:3–21)

- A. Resources Available for the Ethical Life (1:3–4)
- B. Catalog of Virtues (1:5–7)
- C. Admonition to Confirm an Ethical Calling (1:8–11)
- D. Prophetic Reminder to Recall (1:12–15)
- E. Prophetic Testimony Regarding Moral Authority (1:16–18)
- F. Nature of Prophetic Authority (1:19–21)

III. Profile of Apostasy (2:1–22)

- A. Prophetic Denunciation of the Apostate (2:1–3)
- B. Moral Paradigms (2:4–10a)
- C. Portrait of the Apostate (2:10b–18)
- D. Profile of Apostasy (2:19–22)

IV. Exhortation to the Faithful (3:1–18)

- A. Exhortation to Recall (3:1–2)
- B. Caricature of the Moral Skeptic (3:3–7)
- C. Promise of Universal Moral Accountability (3:8–13)
- D. Final Exhortation and Doxology (3:14–18)

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1. Willi Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 12–13.
 2. Willi Marxsen, *Der 'Frühkatholizismus' im Neuen Testament* (BibS(N) 21; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1958), 244.
 3. Critical scholarship in the main tends to favor a dating of the epistle that ranges from the late first or early second century (e.g., Bauckham, 157–62), and thus roughly a generation removed from the apostles, to the late second century (e.g., A. Vögtle, “Die Schriftwertung der apostolischen Paradosis nach 2. Petr 1, 12–15,” in *Neues Testament und Geschichte* [Zürich/Tübingen: Theologischer Verlag/Mohr, 1972], 297–305), during which time the NT canon was taking shape. There exists a virtually unanimous consensus among NT scholars that the epistle is postapostolic. Notable exceptions include E. M. B. Green, *2 Peter and Jude* and *2 Peter Reconsidered*; Guthrie, 805–58; Hillyer, 9–12; Charles, 11–75.
 4. F. Hahn, “Randbemerkungen zum Judasbrief,” *TZ* 37 (1981): 209–10 (my translation).
 5. K.-H. Schelkle, “Spätapostolische Briefe als frühkatholisches Zeugnis,” in *Neutestamentliche Aufsätze für J. Schmid*, ed. J. Blinzer et al. (Regensburg: Pustet, 1963), 225 (my translation).
 6. J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Earliest Character of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 351.
 7. G. Klein, “Der zweite Petrusbrief und der neutestamentliche Kanon,” in *Ärgernisse: Konfrontationen mit dem Neuen Testament* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1970), 112 (my translation).

8. Ibid., 111–12.
9. H. Balz and W. Schrage, *Die katholischen Briefe* (NTD 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), 123 (my translation).
10. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 374–86.
11. Alignment with the church’s historical consensus constitutes a major stumbling block for many historical-critical scholars. For evangelicals, it is a necessary precommitment in the exegetical task and something they are prepared to do. To defer to the church’s consensual exegesis historically is not to be obscurantist; rather, it is to acknowledge the limitations of both the interpretive community and the exegete.
12. Thus Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 27. The primary issue, from the standpoint of the writer, is not *timing* but the *fact* of a day of reckoning. Those who would ascribe to 2 Peter a late date due to a “fading parousia hope” fail to note that the earliest NT letters we possess—1 and 2 Thessalonians, address this issue. Both early and later NT documents mirror the same eschatological tension—e.g., Heb 10:36–39; Jas 5:8; 1Pe 4:7; 2Pe 3:1–10; Rev 22:20. Even in subapostolic writings, this is still the case—e.g., *Did.* 10:6; *1 Clem.* 23:5; *2 Clem.* 12:1, 6; *Barn.* 4:3; *Herm. Vis.* 3:8, 9.
13. So Ernst Käsemann: “We have to state clearly and without evasion that this hope proved to be a delusion and that with it there collapsed at the same time the whole theological framework of apocalyptic” (*New Testament Questions of Today* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969], 106). Franz Mussner (“Die Ablösung des Apostolischen durch das nachapostolische Zeitalter und ihre Konsequenzen,” in *Wort Gottes in der Zeit* [Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1967], 169–70, translation mine) concurs: “The detachment [from the apostolic period] represents a vacuum in the church’s history that almost gives the impression of a ‘fracture’.... One must imagine oneself in that situation, with the burning question that confronted them: The apostles are dead. What now?”
14. This interpretation is confirmed when we consider the basic motifs and solutions to the church’s threat mounted by Ignatius, Clement, and the Shepherd of Hermas in the postapostolic period, e.g., calling the bishop, through whom Christ’s authority is necessarily channeled; securing the church’s authority by doing everything according to the proper order; and proclaiming penance and rationed forms of grace.
15. J. A. T. Robinson (*Redating the New Testament* [London: SCM, 1976], 327–35) believes that 2 Peter may have been cited in *1 Clement*, which has been dated as early as AD 95.
16. See the textual evidence in B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 213. An extensive summary of early patristic awareness of 2 Peter can be found in Bigg, 204–10, and Mayor, cxv–cxxiii.
17. Thus Augustine (Doctr. chr. 2.12). Cyril of Jerusalem and Athanasius include 2 Peter in their catalogs of catholic epistles. Significantly, the fourth-century councils of Hippo, Laodicea, and Carthage, while accepting 2 Peter, reject the letters of Clement of Rome and Barnabas, both of which previously had been held in high esteem. Mayor, cxv–cxxiii, painstakingly examines possible allusions to 2 Peter in the writings of the early Fathers.
18. G. Bray, ed, *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude* (ACCS 11; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000), 129.
19. In a fascinating essay, F. W. Farrar (“The Second Epistle of St. Peter and Josephus,” *ExpTim* 3.8 [1888]: 58–69) argued over a century ago that “an isolated Christian tract” such as 2 Peter could well have gained the notice of Josephus, particularly one written with such stylistic and rhetorical force.
20. While Erasmus rejected the epistle, Calvin and Luther reflect misgivings about 2 Peter, but for reasons different from those of modern scholars. For Luther, the epistle was not sufficiently

- christological and thus of an inferior quality. But the same essential bias in Luther extended to James and Jude as well, serving as a precursor to the unfortunate designation in modern historical-critical inquiry of a “canon within a canon.” Calvin’s assessment (and the Reformer was not uncritical regarding the matter of Petrine authorship) was that “if 2 Peter be received as canonical, we must allow Peter to be the author,” and this based on (1) the name attached and (2) the testimony of personal experience with Christ. Calvin, 363, did allow for a disciple of Peter to do the writing, though not one removed from the apostle himself.
21. If one assumes 2 Peter to be authentic, it is likely to have been written from Rome shortly before the apostle’s death (1:15).
 22. In response to Bauckham, Brevard Childs (*The New Testament as Canon* [Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1994], 467–68) argues that (1) there is no clear evidence 2 Peter was intended to be fiction and (2) Bauckham does not do justice to the problems and inconsistencies of pseudonymity theory.
 23. Bauckham, 135–36, notes the high percentage of *hapax legomena* in 2 Peter. Unusual vocabulary, however, might issue out of specific sources used, or an amanuensis, and not simply the author’s formal education or a high degree of literacy. Neyrey, 120, considers the author of 2 Peter to be of “solid, but by no means aristocratic ... eloquence.”
 24. Jewish exemplars of such include the *Testament of Job*, the *Testament of Moses*, the *Testament of Adam*, and the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*.
 25. Thus O. Knoch, *Die “Testamente” des Petrus und Paulus* (SBB 62; Stuttgart: KBW, 1973), 28 (my translation).
 26. On the genre of the testament in the NT, see Kurz, *Farewell Addresses*.
 27. Reicke, 146–47, appears to have been the first to posit the testamental hypothesis for 2 Peter. Commentary since has assumed this starting point; thus, e.g., Bauckham, 131–35; Watson, 327–28; and more recently, Kraftchick, 73–76.
 28. Green’s argument is developed in both *2 Peter Reconsidered* and *2 Peter and Jude*. See also D. Guthrie, “The Development of the Idea of Canonical Pseudepigrapha in New Testament Criticism,” in *Vox evangelica I*, ed. R. P. Martin (London: Epworth, 1962), 43–59.
 29. A comprehensive bibliography of literature up to 1965 is found in W. Speyer, *Die literarische Fälschung im heidnischen und christlichen Altertum* (Munich: Beck, 1971). A more recent survey of the literature is found in J. D. Charles, *Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude* (Scranton: Univ. of Scranton Press, 1993), 81–90. For a more recent attempt to justify the use of pseudepigraphy in the NT, see D. G. Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon: An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition* (WUNT 39; Tübingen: Mohr, 1986). A helpful response to Meade’s position can be found in Ellis, 212–24.; T. D. Lea, “Pseudonymity and the New Testament,” in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 535–59; T. L. Wilder, “Pseudonymity and the New Testament,” in *Interpreting the New Testament*, ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 296–335; in addition to the earlier arguments set forth by Green and Guthrie that are yet to be answered plausibly.
 30. In fact, Meade, 127, has argued that if indeed pseudonymity exists in the NT, then it is a “double pseudonymity”; i.e., we are confronted with the dilemma of both pseudonymous *author* and *audience*.
 31. We cannot assume, along with Fornberg, 10–11, that 2 Peter was written “when the church became aware of the distance to the first Christian generation, and therefore wished to hold fast to the leading personalities of the first generation in order to solve problems of her own

- time.” This assumption, originating outside the text and not required by the text itself, is insufficiently free of restraints imposed on the text by an “early Catholic” reading.
32. See Kurz, 48–52; Knoch, *Die “Testamente” des Petrus und Paulus*, 28–31.
 33. Consider the apostle Paul’s own words in this regard, as though attune to the possibility of apostolic imitation, that his readers are “not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way” (2Th 2:2–3a).
 34. The reminiscence of the transfiguration experience, frequently thought by commentators to render the epistle inauthentic due to its differing from the Synoptic version, serves two purposes. First, it establishes a thematic link to the parousia in chapter 3. It is a foreshadow not only for the apostles but for all believers of “the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:16; cf. 3:4, 8–10). Second, and more immediately, it testifies to the writer’s own authority.
 35. Paul’s “valedictory” speech to the elders of the church at Ephesus (Ac 20:17–37) may serve to illustrate that a farewell speech may adopt characteristics of a “last will” or “testament” without being restricted to the pseudepigraphal genre.
 36. Thus R. B. Gaffin Jr., “The New Testament as Canon,” in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate*, ed. H. M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 176.
 37. A postbiblical source of no less stature than Tertullian (Bapt. 17) informs us that the writer of the pseudepigraphal work *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, regardless of the best of intentions in seeking to pass off his work under the name of the apostle Paul, was punished as a forger by being defrocked as a presbyter.
 38. It is not at all unreasonable to conclude with Guthrie, 821, regarding 2 Peter, “It did not require much foresight for an old man to suggest that his end was not far away. Moreover, a pseudepigraphist writing this would not appear to add anything to the information contained in the canonical sources, in spite of writing after the event.”
 39. In the view of Bauckham, 158, the language alone “makes it improbable that the apostle could have written 2 Peter.” By contrast, for Jerome (Epist. 120.9) the difference in style and expression between 1 and 2 Peter could be accounted for on the basis of different amanuenses. Antedating the Pauline epistles by a century, Cicero (Fam. 3.6; Att. 2.23; 7:138.12; 13.9; 14.21; 16.15) frequently at the end of his letters—and occasionally in the middle—offers explanations for writing with his own hand or dictating. Similarly, the apostle Paul shows evidence of both practices in his letter writing. His epistles are stated to have been written with his own hand (especially as he came to the end of his letters) as well as dictated (Ro 16:22; 1Co 16:21; Gal 6:11; Col 4:18; 2Th 3:17; Phm 19).
 40. The resiliency and unrelenting character of pseudonymity theory has prompted J. A. T. Robinson (*Redating the New Testament*, 186) to remark that among biblical scholars “there is an appetite for pseudonymity that grows by what it feeds on.”
 41. It is entirely fair to say that neither the protracted treatment of external evidence in support of 2 Peter’s authenticity (e.g., Guthrie, 805–38) nor the extensive examination of the evidence undertaken by Green (*2 Peter Reconsidered*) has yet been satisfactorily challenged by proponents of pseudonymity theory; see also more recently my *Virtue amidst Vice*, 49–83.
 42. So Bigg, 216–23; T. Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 2.250–51.
 43. So Mayor, i–xxv; Sidebottom, 95; Fornberg, ch. 3; Bauckham, 142; Neyrey, 122; Chester and Martin, 139.
 44. So E. I. Robson, *Studies in the Second Epistle of St. Peter* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1915); Reicke, 189–90; Hillyer, 13.

45. So Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, 192–95.
46. See the first three chapters in Mayor for a nearly exhaustive discussion of literary convergence and divergence in the two epistles.
47. Neyrey furnishes parallels between 2 Peter and Plutarch (Sera), who purportedly mirrors an Epicurean polemic against divine providence with its denial of afterlife and, by extension, divine judgment. There is much in Neyrey’s argument to commend. Indeed, 2 Peter contains many evidences of being an apologetic response designed to counter strains of Epicurean worldview that might have been adopted by some. The danger in their view is that they assume freedom from moral accountability; Christian theism cuts to the heart of Epicurean detachment from a moral universe.
48. Significantly, Riesner suggests a dating for 2 Peter that might fall within the apostle Peter’s lifetime.
49. What is missing from Lövestam’s treatment of eschatology and ethics is a discussion of the literary, social, and theological distinctives that set 2 Peter apart from Jude. In what specific ways does the polemic in 2 Peter distinguish itself from that of Jude?
50. And as we have contended, to Bauckham’s argument can also be added a cardinal assumption made by “early Catholic” exegesis: presumption that the Spirit’s charismatic work resides in an office. Both 2 Peter and Jude mirror quite the opposite: in 2 Peter the Spirit inspires prophetic utterance (1:21); in Jude the Spirit inspires persons (v.19) and prayer (v.20), distinguishing authentic from inauthentic believers (v.19).
51. The weakness of Watson’s volume is that it makes no attempt to tie literary-rhetorical, sociological, and theological perspectives together for the sake of the overall interpretive enterprise. Starr, 53–58, provides a helpful, even-handed, nuanced, and highly qualified evaluation of Watson’s rhetorical analysis.
52. I also advance this argument in two essays—“The Language and Logic of Virtue in 2 Peter 1:5–7,” *BBR* 8 (1998): 55–73; “On Angels and Asses: The Moral Paradigm in 2 Peter 2,” *PEGLMBS* 21 (2001): 1–12. See also my comments on 2 Peter in Waltner and Charles, *1–2 Peter, Jude*.
53. While monographs on 2 Peter remain few and far between, the last decade has witnessed a number of commentaries on the epistle (see [bibliography](#)), including Neyrey (1993), Perkins (1995), Lucas and Green (1995), Knight (1995), Craddock (1995), Moo (1996), Watson (1998), Charles (1999), Kraftchick (2002), and Schreiner (2003).
54. More recently, Chester and Martin, 146, have identified the error as “Gnosticizing” in character, though with some qualification.
55. For a fuller discussion of the contrast between Christian and Stoic ethics, see my *Virtue amidst Vice*, 99–111.
56. See *ibid.*, 37–43.
57. The priority of ethics over doctrine in 2 Peter does not minimize the relationship between belief and practice, which is one of organic unity. It is rather a question of emphasis.
58. On display in 2 Peter is an ethical concern and not metaphysical/doctrinal dualism. The implications of a wrong exegetical trajectory, whereby doctrine and not ethics is the focal point, are significant and extremely unfortunate. The lack of attention among biblical scholars, theologians, and laypeople to ethics in 2 Peter is to be lamented precisely because of the contribution 2 Peter can make to the subject of NT ethics. The tragic nature of this omission can be seen at the textbook level, where there is a curious absence of 2 Peter in virtually all discussions of NT ethics.

59. “Knowledge” and “knowing” receive particular emphasis in 2 Peter 1 not because of a purported second-century Gnostic threat (contra Moffatt, 361–63, and others) but because of the grace the Christian believer has *already received* (1:1–4).
60. A second set of subthemes—life and godliness (1:3; 3:11)—enhances the rhetorical effect of this *inclusio*.
61. First Corinthians 4 is one such striking example.
62. Apocalyptic eschatology is utilized in both Jude and 2 Peter, though in the latter it functions as part of a moral apologetic directed at the radical moral skeptic whose worldview is pagan.
63. Here I am making a distinction between “apostasy,” i.e., the departure from what one knows to be true, and “heresy,” which is false or errant teaching based on doctrinal distortions.

Text and Exposition

I. THE WRITER AND HIS AUDIENCE (1:1–2)

OVERVIEW

The epistle opens with what is a typical form for NT letters (“A to B ... grace”), though without the formal thanksgiving prayer that characterizes many of the Pauline epistles. Both the epistolary and homiletical character strike the reader. The epistolary opening contains several key words or ideas that, thematically, are developed more fully in the writer’s stated purpose for writing (1:3–11) as well as throughout the letter—e.g., equality or impartiality, righteousness, knowledge of God, and deliverance. As in 1 Peter, the author of 2 Peter identifies himself as the apostle. Moreover, the author also expresses the same wish for his readers, namely, that “grace and peace be multiplied to you” (NIV, “be yours in abundance”; *charis hymin eirēnē plēthyntheiē*). The two letters differ, however, in their opening address to the extent that 1 Peter names a geographically specific group of believers, whereas the addressees in 2 Peter are undesignated—“To those who ... have received a faith as precious as ours.”

Although the origin and destination elude certainty, it is plausible that this letter was written in Rome shortly before the apostle’s martyrdom. This lack of concrete evidence, however, stands in sharp contrast with the character of the epistle, which contains clear indications of a concrete local situation in which pastoral needs are present. The letter is clearly addressed to a particular congregation or community where serious problems are already established. In this sense, then, the designation “general epistle” for 2 Peter, which by definition is broader or “catholic” in scope, is misleading.

¹Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior
Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours:

²Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

COMMENTARY

1 The use of *Symeōn* (Simon), appearing with the nickname “Peter,” is reminiscent of the gospel narratives (e.g., Mt 16:16; Lk 22:31) and Acts 15:14, both of which suggest a Palestinian setting. Here, however, it strikes the reader as unexpected. Commentators who hold 2 Peter to be inauthentic are inclined to regard the allusion to *Symeōn* as a “deliberate archaizing touch by a pseudonymous writer” (so Bauckham, 166–67) who is seeking the mark of authenticity. Admittedly, one would expect an opening similar to that of 1 Peter 1:1: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Rejecting Petrine authorship, Bauckham, 167, suggests that *Symeōn* may reflect a writer who was part of a “Petrine circle” in Rome that included Mark and Silvanus (Silas; cf. 1Pe 5:12–13) as well as other Jewish-Christian leaders.

A more plausible explanation, assuming the writer to be the apostle and not an imposter or a “Petrine agent,” lies with a first-century pastoral situation that requires denunciation, rebuke, and correspondingly strong exhortations, not unlike the scenario one encounters in Jude. The writer is thus in a position of having to “present his credentials” (so Green, 67). *Symeōn* was involved in the formal process of the Jerusalem Council (Ac 15), a situation that required the church’s authoritative voice. Here he is at another point in his life when apostolic authority must be brought to bear on the Christian community—in this case both apostolically and prophetically (1:16–21) and not merely as a pastorally minded elder (cf. 1Pe 5:1). The double name would remind his readers of both past and present; a transformation has occurred in the life of this “elder statesman” of the Christian community.

The present letter, it must be emphasized, gives *precise* credentials. The writer is said to be a “servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.” This twofold self-description very much resembles the introduction of Jude, in which passionate denunciation of the ungodly and affirmation of the faithful stand side by side. The strong nature of the prophetic word in 2 Peter, as the rest of the epistle indicates, mirrors a local situation calling for a vigorous application of spiritual authority rooted in the apostolic office. Yet,

significantly, in both 2 Peter and Jude deep humility clothes the one who speaks with prophetic force. As a “servant” or “bond slave” (*doulos*, GK 1528) of Jesus Christ, the writer shows evidence of being a seasoned man of God tempered by divine dealings, much as one finds in 1 Peter: “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (1Pe 5:5). It is also possible that the twofold designation “servant and apostle” might be a faint recollection of Jesus’ words to Peter during the Last Supper (so Hillyer, 158), given the latter’s rather impetuous reactions to Jesus’ servanthood (Jn 13:6–19, esp. v.16).

The readers are described as those “of equal [*isotimos*] standing who have received faith [NIV, “a faith as precious as ours].” Some commentators (e.g., Mayor, 81) see in this formula a Jewish-Gentile factor—i.e., a faith that is equally accessible to both groups. However, a closer reading of 2 Peter 1 suggests that the issue of equality is not one of ethnic inclusion; nor is this opening concept designed “to communicate the apostle’s teaching to a postapostolic generation” (contra Bauckham, 167). Instead, stress is laid on the fact that God’s grace is open and accessible to all, which is to say to apostles and nonapostles. This reading is confirmed by what follows: “His divine power has given us everything we need.... Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises” (1:3–4). This common provision, available to all, has been made on the basis of the righteousness of God (1:1); accordingly, no impartiality exists in the salvation issuing from the Savior, Jesus Christ. Divine righteousness secures the believers’ equal standing.

The phrase “the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” might be understood in one of two ways. Taken together with the doxology to Jesus Christ in 3:18, the two statements serve as an *inclusio*, i.e., a set of bookends for the epistle, in depicting the exalted status of Christ. Viewed another way, the expression may simply be intended to identify Jesus as the full manifestation of God’s saving righteousness; coupled with 1:2, God and Jesus “our Lord” are together the content and the focus of the believer’s *knowledge*.

2 The salutation “grace and peace be yours in abundance,” similar to the greeting in 1 Peter 1:2, is not “in fact copied from 1 Peter” (contra Kelly, 298). Rather, it is one of the numerous points of contact between the two

epistles. In 2 Peter, the key ingredient in receiving God's grace is the *full knowledge* of God and Christ. There is room for speculating with Green, 70, that "knowledge," a catchword in the letter, has something of a rhetorically polemical edge (see also my *Virtue amidst Vice*, 132–34). The author is likely reclaiming the word to oppose those who misuse it. As employed by the author, "full knowledge" (*epignōsis*, GK 2106) reflects an understanding of the grace of God at work in the believer's life. Armed with this knowledge, the Christian community is kept from moral lapse and, ultimately, apostasy. With all believers having equal access to this grace through knowledge of Christ, all are on equal footing and therefore without excuse.

NOTES

1–2 W. G. Doty (*Letters in Primitive Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973], 4–8) notes the variety of epistles that circulated in the first century—business, official, public, fictitious/pseudonymous, and discursive. On ancient letter writing in general, see J. L. White, *The Body of the Greek Letter* (SBLDS 2; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1972); J. L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

II. PURPOSE FOR WRITING AND AUTHORITY (1:3–21)

A. Resources Available for the Ethical Life (1:3–4)

OVERVIEW

The writer’s intent is to call the Christian community to a higher ethical plane. Rhetorically, the strategy consists initially of a review of the provisions available for Christian living (1:3–4), followed by exhortation to ethical rejuvenation through the use of a catalog of virtues (1:5–7). It concludes with the reassurance that these promises are sufficient for the ethical life (1:8–11). The Petrine formula for this provision is rooted in the “knowledge” of God (1:2). This full knowledge of him who has called us through his own moral excellence is the total sufficiency for a godly life (1:3). The result is, stated negatively, that the readers might escape “the corruption in the world caused by evil desires,” and stated positively, that they might “participate in the divine nature” (1:4).

³His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

COMMENTARY

4 It is not uncommon in ancient literature for writers to use the language of union with God and divine immortality. Although commentators differ as to the precise function of *theias koinōnoi physeōs*, the language of divine union occurs in Hellenistic mystical philosophy and is particularly pronounced in pagan mystery religions, whose initiates understood themselves as being absorbed gradually into deity. Given its currency in the religious-philosophical thought of the day (e.g., Philo, *Somn.* 1.28;

Abraham 107: *logikēs koinōnoi physeōs*), the author’s language is calculated and suggestive of his readers’ social location.

In what sense, then, does the Christian believer “participate in the divine nature”? The reference is not intended to be primarily eschatological (contra Bauckham, 182), since it is contextually qualified by the believer’s behavior in the *present world*. Rather, in 2 Peter the concept is markedly temporal and christocentric: our union with Christ, based on grace, enables us to resist worldly corruption and live lives that are reverent and morally excellent. The “divine nature,” then, in which believers are to participate, corresponds to qualities associated with Christ’s nature (thus Starr, 45; Green, 74; Moo, 44).

NOTES

3–4 Use of similar metaphysical language ranges from 4 Maccabees 18:3 to Josephus (*Ant.* 8.107; *Ag. Ap.* 1.232) and Philo (*Decal.* 104; *Abraham* 144) to Plutarch (*Def. orac.* 10). The most comprehensive study of this notion as found in both Hellenistic and Jewish sources is J. M. Starr’s *Sharers in Divine Nature* (see [bibliography](#)). Starr, 47, captures the proper sense of 2 Peter 1:4: “At length ... 2 Peter makes plain that the flight from the world’s corruption is *not* accomplished *in death nor in the parousia*, but in the Christ-believer’s *past*” (emphasis mine). Eschatology in 2 Peter 3 is designed to bear on the present: “What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives” (3:11).

REFLECTIONS

The author’s appeal in ch. 1 is above all a call, a decree, to holy living. The admonition is based on both the divine provision (“His divine power has given us everything we need ...”) and human cooperation (“so that through them you may ... escape the corruption”). In the epistle there is no overemphasis on a predestination that circumvents human moral agency. Neither is there a doctrine of human perfectibility divorced from grace. Both the gracious promises of God as benefactor *and* human moral responsibility are part of the ethical equation. On the one hand, the divine provision covers every conceivable contingency for the purpose of moral growth; on the other hand, development of moral character is contingent on

one's willingness to grow. In 2 Peter, the emphasis is clearly placed on the side of our responsibility, as summarized by Starr, 50: "Second Peter is concerned to shape the events of the present in view of the inevitable future judgment of the individual's moral character, as ... noted in 1:1–11.... The ever-present danger in the narrative structure of 2 Peter is the possibility of moral collapse, which will lead to the believer's fall and the loss of his call (1:9–10; 2:14, 18–20; 3:17)."

B. Catalog of Virtues (1:5–7)

OVERVIEW

Having established the accessibility of divine resources, the writer wishes to accent moral self-responsibility. For this reason, the readers are to apply themselves fully, "making every effort" (*spoudazō*, GK 5079) to respond to the ethical task at hand (1:5a). That this verb appears three times in 2 Peter 1 (vv.5, 10, 15) is highly instructive. It reflects the seriousness of the community's situation as well as the pastoral strategy in addressing the readers. Theirs is the challenge of exhibiting moral character amidst pagan amoral culture. This requires willingness and determination, both of which at the present may be lacking.

A catalog or listing of particular virtues shows the contours of the moral effort the readers are to make.

The significance of the ethical catalog lies in its rhetorical effect and mirrors a discussion of virtues commonplace among Hellenistic—and specifically Stoic—moral philosophers (so G. Kidd, "Moral Actions and Rules in Stoic Ethics," in *The Stoics*, ed J. M. Rist [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978], 247–58); my *Virtue amidst Vice*, 99–148). The ethical catalog reproduced in 1:5–7 shows notable affinities to contemporary secular usage—similar to the Stoic *prokopē*, or scheme of moral development—with the notable exception of *agapē* ("love") and a qualified use of *pistis* ("faith"), the bookends of the Petrine catalog.

If 2 Peter is addressed to the Christian community in a Gentile social setting, the concepts of virtue, faith, and love would be an appropriate means of countering immorality or amorality in a skeptical environment. In fact, borrowing from the Stoic view that virtue is a corollary of knowledge

(a corollary that some in the community are flatly negating), the writer is able to “sanctify” the foundations of pagan ethical thought and appropriate them for his own purposes. Viewed in this way, an ethical list or catalog would be a fitting way of countering a deterioration of the moral life in the community, given its relevance in popular usage.

The Christian ethical distinctive is that one’s faith is a response to divine grace and the reception of that grace. Hence, one’s motivation is in the direction of demonstrating through one’s works a lifestyle of gratitude that pleases God. That 2 Peter 1 is not promoting a “works righteousness” is made clear by the epistle’s very introduction: the letter is addressed to “those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith ...” (1:1). Righteousness has been *received*; it is a gift imparted by God through Christ. The important Petrine theme of *righteousness* (1Pe 2:24; 3:12, 14, 18; 4:18; 2Pe 1:1; 2:5, 7–8 [twice], 21; 3:13) is foundational to a proper understanding of Christian ethics. The secular ethic, by contrast, wholly misses this fundamental understanding of righteous faith. On this foundation believers are to supply a repository of confirming virtues, thereby manifesting a virtuous life.

Hence the picture presented in 2 Peter is pregnant with meaning and implication: God, in his infinite glory and kindness, has covered, through his Son, the cost of provisions necessary for a life of holiness. On the basis of this exceeding generosity, the readers are to build, ethically speaking. In corresponding fashion, the readers are to be lavish in the way they invest themselves in the development of moral character, striving to offer the world the best window for viewing God’s grace. As Hillyer, 165, observes, this approach to the Christian life is far removed from the cynicism that views the Christian experience as “an initial spasm followed by chronic inertia.”

⁵For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

COMMENTARY

5 The supply of virtue, couched in an ethical catalog, is presented to the reader of 2 Peter in language that is evocative and adds much color to our reading of the text, even though the richness of the picture is lost in its translation. The verb translated “add” is *epichorēgeō* (GK 2220), a strengthened form of *chorēgeō* (“to add, supply, supplement,” GK 5961). Originally, *chorēgeō* possessed the sense of “to lead a chorus”; in time it came to denote “defraying the expenses of something” (BDAG, 1087; cf. Josephus, *J.W.* 1.625). Typically, Greek theater proceeded on the generosity of a wealthy local benefactor, the *chorēgos*, who saw to it that actors, musicians, and dancers were paid. The relative extravagance attached to these productions is conveyed by the verb *chorēgeō*. The readers are not merely to “add” or “supply”; they are to *contribute extravagantly* to their own moral development, and this based on extravagant resources already provided by God, the wealthy Benefactor.

In contrast to the *pistis* (“faith,” GK 4411) that normally conveys trust or loyalty in common (secular) parlance, in 2 Peter it is subjective trust placed in the gospel, a faith produced *en dikaiosynē tou theou hēmōn kai sōtēros Iēsou Christou* (“through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ”). This faith, in the Petrine scheme of things, results in *virtue* (NIV, “goodness”; *aretē*, GK 746), i.e., moral excellence. In its earlier, classical usage, *aretē* denotes excellence or renown. Over time it was applied to the sphere of ethics, to which it became more or less restricted. Commonly employed in Stoic ethical lists, virtue is *the* quality of life, and not surprisingly the centerpiece of classic pagan morality. It is moral goodness toward which all humanity strives. For the Christian, virtue is tangible evidence of the reality of saving faith.

Moral excellence, in turn, supplies *knowledge* (*gnōsis*, GK 1194). Knowledge frequently begins or concludes pagan ethical lists. Its placement in the catalog following virtue reflects the Stoic belief, confirmed in Christian thought, that there is an organic and indivisible link between the two qualities (to the Stoic, all vice is rooted in ignorance). Where Christian and Stoic views differ is that the former strips knowledge of its technical nuance so that *it is not a goal in and of itself* (1Co 8:1–4); hence, it is proper to speak of a chastened knowledge. In contrast with speculative philosophy, by which *gnōsis* underpins the acquisition of all virtues, in the

Petrine progression it is an extension and not the *sole basis* for one's faith and virtue. Hereby, with some qualification, the intellectual element of belief is affirmed. A knowledge that is perceptive and desirous to know wisdom and truth can never harm the true seeker. For the Christian, knowledge perceives the proper and indivisible relationship between faith and virtue.

6 By the logic of virtue, knowledge motivates and moves the individual toward *self-control* (*enkrateia*, GK 1602). A quality highly prized (and thus "cardinal") among Greek moral philosophers, *enkrateia* knows an organic connection to *gnōsis* that is not incidental; both elements go together just as their opposites, ignorance (*agnoia*, GK 53) and lust (NIV, "evil desires"; *epithymia*, GK 2123), find an irrepressible linkage, both in pagan ethics and the NT (1Pe 1:14; cf. *TDNT* 1:339–42). As a pagan virtue, knowledge is equated with mastery over one's lusts and appetites. True knowledge, therefore, leads not to license but to self-mastery. Herein an expressly Christian faith distinguishes itself: A system of belief divorcing content from ethics and severing belief from practice demonstrates itself as wrong teaching, and hence inauthentic. True knowledge, by contrast, will tend toward self-restraint, not libertinism. This is especially important for the fledgling Christian community dispersed throughout Hellenistic culture.

Self-control, in turn, supplies *perseverance* or endurance. Self-mastery and discipline have the effect of producing the ability to endure, literally to be patient under the weight of adversity. In its classical usage, *hypomonē* (GK 5705) denotes brave resistance, in this way bringing honor (Plato, *Theaet.* 117b; cf. *TDNT* 4:581–88). Thus endurance, rightly understood, is active rather than passive. It is the mark of maturity (Jas 1:3–4), since superficial faith will not endure. Moreover, it has two sides: it expresses itself toward the world and toward God. Far from being the exercise of mere willpower, by which the Stoic deadened his sensibilities, endurance for the Christian issues out of a deep awareness of and confidence in God's sovereignty (so Paul, "Love always perseveres" [1Co 13:7]; also, Calvin, 363). In this way a Christian understanding of endurance distinguishes itself from its pagan counterpart insofar as it is not fatalistic or cynical. Because of this deep-rooted awareness, it can hold out, persisting in adverse circumstances (cf. 2Pe 3:9, 15).

The connection between self-control, endurance, and *godliness* or piety (*eusebeia*, GK 2354)—the next link in the Petrine catena—is transparent and logical in the Christian ethical progression. Given the common occurrence of *eusebeia* in pagan ethical lists, it is best to interpret the term in its broadest sense. Godliness entails both vertical and horizontal duties. It is simultaneously reverence toward deity and a sense of duty toward people. In late Hellenism it expresses reverence in this general sense and occurs in both religious and nonreligious contexts—e.g., in the sense of reverence toward the gods, toward family, and toward tradition and the social order (cf. *TDNT* 7:175–85; also Starr, 42). Not insignificantly, all the occurrences of *eusebeia* in the NT are confined to the Pastoral Epistles (ten times) and 2 Peter (1:3, 6–7; 3:11). *Eusebeia* comes to expression most completely in the Christian community.

7 In the Petrine progression, piety leads in the direction of *philadelphia* (GK 5789), mutual or brotherly affection. That is, godliness expresses itself in our relationships with others—particularly with those of the Christian community. Behind the term *philadelphia* stands the Greek ideal of friendship, suggesting duties that attend our filial and familial relationships. For the household of faith, however, it acquires a special meaning, though it can be taken for granted. It constantly needs to be refined by the work of the Spirit (e.g., Ro 12:9–10; Eph 4:1–3; Php 4:2, 5; Col 3:12–15; 1Th 4:9; Heb 13:1; 1Pe 1:22; 1Jn 5:1).

The catalog achieves its climax in *agapē* (GK 27), which distinguishes the Christian ethos and without which it would be incomplete. Thus it is fitting to speak of *agapē* (“love”) as the “crown” of moral development (so Green, 80; Bauckham, 187), i.e., in Christian terms, the ultimate expression of Christian belief (1Co 13:3) and the fruit of genuine faith (Gal 5:6; Jas 2:14–26). Christian morality is distinctly the morality of charity, whereby one demonstrates gratitude through actions for the experience of divine grace. Inasmuch as *agapē* is the fount and the goal of Christian virtue, therein lies the difference between the Christian and pagan ethos.

While vice and virtue lists in the NT are not of the same compositional variety, one peculiar feature absent from pagan catalogs is the occasional movement toward crescendo or decrescendo. Second Peter 1:5–7 features an ethical progression that builds toward a climax in *agapē*. The virtues do not stand in random or unrelated juxtaposition. Together they represent the

fruit of the life of faith, whereby each facilitates the next, though all comprise an organic unity. Mayor, 93, aptly summarizes the progression and interconnectedness of the virtues: “Faith is the gift of God already received; to this must be added (1) moral strength which enables a man to do what he knows to be right; (2) spiritual discernment; (3) self-control by which a man resists temptation; (4) endurance by which he bears up under persecution or adversity; (5) right ... behavior toward God [godliness]; (6) toward the brethren [brotherly kindness]; [and (7)] toward all [love].”

NOTES

5–7 On the secular usage of the ethical catalog, see my *Virtue amidst Vice*, 112–27 (for a discussion of its rhetorical function, see ch. 5 [“The Ethical Catalog as a Pedagogical Device”]). The use of the ethical catalog by NT writers is considerable and derives from its function in Hellenistic and Hellenistic-Jewish literature. In the NT, both strands—Hellenistic form and Jewish theological assumptions—merge in the Christian paraenetic or ethical tradition. See, in its NT usage, B. S. Easton, “New Testament Ethical Lists,” *JBL* 51 (1932): 1–12; N. J. McEleney, “The Vice Lists of the Pastoral Epistles,” *CBQ* 36 (1974): 203–19.

Because the ethical contours of Christian thought were molded against the backdrop of Greco-Roman moral-social conditions, points of contact between Stoic discourse and the NT are numerous and to be expected. While the two systems differ radically in the way they perceive the *means* to the ethical life, they share common ethical categories. It is in the broader context of Paul’s “natural theology” in Romans 1, for example, that a stereotyping of pagan moral depravity and an ethical catalog are employed. The vice list in 1:29–31—the lengthiest in the NT—is intended both to encompass every stereotype of human corruption possible and to mirror conditions in the imperial seat. There are no theoretical components to Paul’s discussion of ethics in Romans. It is flatly assumed that all people “know” (ἐπιγινώσκω, *epiginōskō* [GK 2105], 1:28, 32) the truth; the result is that all are guilty.

The Stoic view of moral actions and moral progress stands in contrast to its Christian counterpart. Pagan ethics knows nothing of the conceptual realities of sin, guilt, and redemption. To the extent that wisdom, temperance, prudence, justice, and courage are lauded, they are understood

as the extension of a naturalistic ethic and rational reflection. They presuppose human autonomy and self-sufficiency, whereas the Christian ethic is rooted in divine grace propelling human action (see my *Virtue amidst Vice*, 99–127).

One unusually striking parallel to 2 Peter 1:5–7 comes from a first-century Asia Minor inscription in honor of Herostratus son of Dorcalion. Listed in this catalog, respectively, are πίστις, *pistis* (faith); ἀρετή, *aretē* (virtue, or goodness); δικαιοσύνη, *dikaiosynē* (righteousness, GK 1466); εὐσεβεία, *eusebeia* (piety, or godliness, GK 2354); and σπουδή, *spoudē* (diligence, or effort, GK 5082). Given the underlying Stoic belief that moral excellence was the result of human achievement (as opposed to righteousness and obedience through the Torah), without any consequence for the afterlife, the occurrence of ἀρετή, *aretē*, in the LXX is understandably rare, even when it does occur in literature reflecting a more Hellenistic Judaism (e.g., in Philo, Wisdom of Solomon, and 4 Maccabees).

Contra Bauckham, 184–85; and Moo, 45, the progression of the eight virtues listed in 2 Peter 1:5–7 is not “largely random” or “haphazard,” wherein “only two virtues have a clearly intelligible place in the list.” Escalation can also be detected in Romans 5:1–5, where the trajectory of grace moves from suffering to hope. Similarly, the list of hardships encountered by Paul recorded in 2 Corinthians 6:6 moves from general (afflictions and hardships) to specific (sleepless nights and hunger).

C. Admonition to Confirm an Ethical Calling (1:8–11)

⁸For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

¹⁰Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, ¹¹and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

COMMENTARY

8 The context of bearing fruit ethically “in [the] knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” by means of a virtuous lifestyle stands in contrast to the ineffectual life, which is described in terms of nearsightedness, blindness, and forgetfulness. The presence of the catalog of virtues leads to the following conclusion: “For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In short, to be ineffective and unproductive is to cause a Christian scandal. The scandal consists in the fact that extraordinary provisions have been granted by God himself for the ethical task at hand. Faith received, far from being passive in nature, requires of the believer active cooperation with God’s grace. The scandal is further caused by the coexistence of futility and fruitlessness alongside *epignōsis*, the knowledge of God; such is a blatant contradiction (cf. Col 1:10).

9 The metaphor of blindness is simple yet striking and coincides with the images of 2 Peter 2—slavery, a dog returning to its vomit, and a pig returning to the mud (2:19, 22). The blindness metaphor is an integral part of the Christian paraenetic tradition (Mt 15:14; 23:16; Jn 9:40–41; Rev 3:17–18) and is reminiscent of the imagery used in Revelation 3:14, 17–18 of the Laodicean church. While a flat translation of *typhlos estin myōpazōn* (“blind and short-sighted”) loses its force, the more nuanced rendering of *myōpazō* (lit., “to close the eye”; GK 3697) by Mayor (lxii) and followed by Green, 82, captures the correct sense, namely, that of willful blindness. The emphasis here is on moral self-responsibility. Some have shut their eyes to the truth, resulting in a blindness that is not inherited but cultivated. In 2 Peter the blindness is characterized by denial (2:1), deception (v.3), boldness and willfulness (v.10b), a lust for sin (v.14a), and seduction (vv.14b, 18). Those individuals possessing these traits are cast as antitypes of Balaam (vv.15–16), who was seduced by pagans with a view to lead the Israelites astray.

Astonishingly, some in the community have “forgotten” that they were forgiven and cleansed of their past. The text literally reads, “having received forgetfulness” (*lēthēn labōn*), which offers the faint suggestion of a voluntary acceptance of their deceived and darkened condition. Indeed,

forgetting one's cleansing from past sins is the beginning of all apostasy (so Green, 82).

10 This moral reasoning is followed by a strengthened conclusion: “Therefore, ... be all the more eager [*dio mallon spoudasate*] to make your calling and election sure.” Hillyer, 170, captures the urgency contained in this imperative: “Determine to put in all the more effort.” Repetition is important at this point, inasmuch as *spoudē* (GK 5082) appeared in the context of moral progression in 1:5. The tone has now intensified from teaching to exhortation, from didactics to warning.

The notion of confirming one's calling and election is a prominent feature of the Pauline epistles. To confirm one's calling is to offer proof—or disproof—of one's profession. As Calvin, 377, aptly puts it, “Purity of life is not improperly called the evidence and proof of election, by which the faithful may not only testify to others that they are the children of God, but also confirm themselves in this confidence.” Moreover, the ethical tension contained in the phrase “make your calling and election sure” illustrates the way in which 2 Peter blends sovereignty and moral agency, divine grace and human cooperation, even when emphasis is given to one side of the equation. While unmerited grace has been extended to the believer through Christ's righteousness, the believer must show evidence of this reality by means of virtuous living. On the one hand, great and precious promises have been provided to the believer—indeed, all the possible resources necessary for a life of godliness (1:3); on the other hand, the believer is to supply (“add”) a calculated response that is measured over time in terms of ethical quality (1:5–7). The burden clearly rests on the shoulders of the readers to hold up their end of the covenantal agreement. If they are *willing*, they will never stumble. The guarantee is not that they will not sin, only that they will not *fall*.

11 The final “promise” extended by the gracious Lord and Savior is to “lavishly provide” (NIV, “receive”; once more, *epichorēgeō*) entrance into his eternal kingdom. This reward awaits those who have confirmed their calling through a virtuous life worthy of the divine name. Entrance is not earned, lest the Petrine ethic be misconstrued; rather, it is predicated on grace, all grace, lavishly provided by the divine Benefactor.

NOTES

10 The theological conundrum of whether election and apostasy are compatible is not taken up in 2 Peter. The emphasis of this letter is human effort and the cultivation of a virtuous life. Note, in this regard, the use of the middle voice, ποιῆσθαι, *poieisthai* (GK 4472), as the readers are to make sure for themselves.

REFLECTIONS

F. W. Danker (“2 Peter 1: A Solemn Decree.” *CBQ* 40 [1978]: 64–82) and Neyrey, 145–46, 151, see in 1:3–11 the language of a decree of honor, whereby it was customary for civic officials to pass special resolutions in honor of the said benefactor or patron. This language is applied here to God. God’s “clients” are exhorted to honor God as patron with virtuous lives and piety. The glorious nature of divine promises bestowed invites a response of confirmation rather than forgetfulness.

D. Prophetic Reminder to Recall (1:12–15)

OVERVIEW

Much like Jude, 2 Peter uses a conspicuous “reminder terminology.” Rhetorically speaking, repetition serves an important function. Mindful of both his apostolic duties and limited time yet to live, the writer reemphasizes the basics; hereby the purpose of the letter is clarified.

Frequently, the role of the Christian teacher or preacher is to remind the audience of what they already know, to exhort them in the truth they already possess. The metaphor of the body as tabernacle (cf. 2Co 5:1–4), used in the context of the writer’s personal reflections, speaks of the transitory nature of life for Israel of old and the readers in the present. The readers of 2 Peter, like Israel of old, need to be reminded that they are pilgrims on a journey.

¹²So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. ¹³I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, ¹⁴because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our

Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. ¹⁵And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.

COMMENTARY

12–15 Two interpretive options present themselves here, as the earlier discussion of authorship has shown. Either the apostle Peter is reflecting on his approaching death, borrowing elements from the literary convention called a “farewell speech” or “testament,” or the “farewell speech” as a pseudepigraphic convention is being employed in the postapostolic period.

For most commentators, the testamental character of the epistle is one of the clearest indications of its post-Petrine setting. The language used here, however, is reflective; it is that of an eyewitness of the Lord, not one writing a generation or generations removed from the apostolic era. The writer recalls the striking prophecy of Jesus years earlier (Jn 21:18–19; cf. Jn 13:36). Concerning Peter’s death, the drama contained in the admonition of 2 Peter 1:12–15 is captured by Green, 87–88: “There may be something poignant in his use of the word *established* to describe his hesitant and wavering readers. For that is the word which Jesus used of him on one memorable occasion when, although so fickle, he was sure that he was established in the truth and could not possibly apostatize (Lk 22:32). It seems to have become a favorite word of this turbulent man who now really was established. He uses it in his final prayer at the end of 1 Peter (5:10), and a similar word occurs in a significant context in 2 Peter 3:17.”

Painfully aware of what it means to waver in the faith and disown the Lord, the apostle reminds his audience with great earnestness of Christian “first things.” Inasmuch as they are presently “established in the truth,” apostasy—i.e., ethical lapse and denial of the faith—is the present danger, not heresy or wrong teaching per se.

E. Prophetic Testimony Regarding Moral Authority (1:16–18)

¹⁶We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were

eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” ¹⁸We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

COMMENTARY

16–18 The issue of authority presses to the fore as the author’s focus is sharpened. The clash, in the mind of the writer, is nothing less than between error—“cleverly invented stories”—and truth—“we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, [and] we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” That the author can make these declarations validates the assertion that he indeed is one of the apostles.

Particular developments in the Christian community that demand a prophetic-pastoral response require that the writer exert his authority. This is achieved by his testimony as an “eyewitness” (*epoptēs*, GK 2228) of the Lord’s glory. The use of *epoptēs* here is the sole appearance of the word in the NT. It normally designates those who had been initiated into the highest grade of mysteries in Hellenistic mystery cults (BDAG, 388; cf. Col 2:18). The most memorable, transforming event in Peter’s life, a theophany described in the Synoptic Gospels, was on the Mount of Transfiguration.

The revelation and resulting perception of honor and glory bestowed by God the Father on Jesus doubtless left a permanent mark on Peter and remains etched in his memory throughout his life. In this revelatory moment, the eyewitnesses on the mountain were made to understand the unique relationship between the Father and the Son: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Mt 17:5). Of the disciples assembled on the mountain, it was especially for Peter’s sake that the command “Listen to him!” was given. Peter, it will be remembered, had rebuked Jesus for his teachings that the Son of Man must suffer and be killed and then rise again (Mt 16:22).

18 The language of self-witness in 1:12–18 (esp. vv.16–18) is both earnest and emphatic. It heightens the personal nature of the writer’s testimony: “We ourselves heard this voice ... when we were with him on the sacred mountain” The significance of this autobiographical witness

should not be lost on the readers. It reinforces his authority before he proceeds to censure the morally corrupt and offer a moral apologetic.

With this mark of apostolicity, the writer understands the prophetic message to be abundantly verified. More immediately, the writer wishes to stress solidarity between the prophetic message of the past and that of the present. In the present it is a message carried by the apostles.

NOTES

16–18 Neyrey, 175, understands the allusion to “stories” or “myths” in terms of rationalist rejection of punishment. While this may well apply to the material in 2 Peter 3, the immediate context suggests that the issue in question is one of *authority*. It is the solemn character of statements recorded in 1:16–18 that pseudepigraphy hypotheses fail to address adequately. To take seriously the writer’s testimony, which is intended to be autobiographical, and yet claim that “Petrine authorship was intended to be entirely *transparent* fiction,” as Bauckham, 134 (emphasis his), asserts, simply asks too much of the reader. The author claims authority to speak precisely *because of firsthand knowledge*, and not second- or third-hand knowledge or reporting. “We heard” and “we saw” cannot legitimately be said by a “Petrine agent” or pseudepigrapher.

REFLECTIONS

The writer appears to be keenly aware of the uniqueness of apostolic authority. Apostolic preaching, i.e., proclamation issuing from eyewitness testimony of the resurrected Lord that initially brings the reader to the place of faith, is rooted in and flows out of historical events. Specifically, it is grounded in one’s relation to Jesus and one’s witness to the resurrection. This experience qualified an individual to preach the Christian message firsthand, thereby bestowing “apostolic authority.”

F. Nature of Prophetic Authority (1:19–21)

OVERVIEW

Most discussions of vv.19–21, especially conservative commentary on v.19, assume an overarching thesis of correct interpretation of the Scriptures. Commentators read into this text a scenario in which the Scriptures are being read amiss, apart from illumination of the Holy Spirit. This reading, however, ignores the contextual flow of the material preceding and following. The fact that authority is being asserted in vv.12–18 strongly suggests that it is being denied by some. What was received from the prophets of old was taken to be the authoritative word of God. This same norm, confirmed by apostolic witness, is to continue to be the Christian’s guide.

The true sense of these verses has to do with authentication of the prophetic voice, not interpretation of the Scriptures, as many commentators think (Green, 101, being one of the few to discern the correct sense). We may assume a background to 2 Peter in which Peter’s apostolic authority is being denied, or at least being called into question. His response, which serves as a necessary introduction to chs. 2 and 3, is that prophetic speech originates with God, even when spoken by human agents. The OT Scriptures are inspired and prophetic; thus they come to the reader as the “word of God.” Presently, the writer wants his readers to know that he *speaks from God*.

Needed in the present situation is the application of apostolic authority for the purposes of countering certain influences injurious to the Christian community: doubt, hostility, mockery, hardness to truth, and consequent moral decrepitude. Perhaps Christian truth-claims are being derided; perhaps the apostle himself is being ridiculed. In essence, the writer is saying that to deny Simon Peter’s apostolic authority is to deny the OT and the prophets themselves.

¹⁹And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

²⁰Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. ²¹For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

COMMENTARY

19 For the second time in ch. 1 the writer uses the term *bebaios* (“firm, sure, certain, well established,” GK 1010). In 1:10 it occurs in connection with confirming one’s call (make “sure”); here, used comparatively, it describes the confirming—i.e., infallible and thus authoritative—character of the prophetic word (made more “certain”).

The references to light shining in a dark place and the “morning star” rising are intriguing and defy any precise interpretation. The context suggests that the prophetic word is a torch that lights our way in a dark environment; for the readers this may well be a continuation of the exhortation to persevere morally. The Greek term *phōsphoros*, “light-bearer,” is rendered “morning star” and finds expression in both pagan and Christian contexts. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is hailed as the “Offspring of David” as well as the “bright Morning Star” (Rev 22:16; cf. Nu 24:17), which seems to combine both popular and religious notions. In 2 Peter the readers are admonished to persevere in the awareness that full light and revelation will be revealed eschatologically.

III. PROFILE OF APOSTASY (2:1–22)

A. Prophetic Denunciation of the Apostate (2:1–3)

OVERVIEW

Second Peter 2 continues the allusion to the OT introduced in 1:20–21. Central to the OT story are both true and false prophets, those who uphold the truth and those who actively suppress the truth. With this transition, the writer shifts the focus to his adversaries.

Commentators disagree on the identity of Peter’s opponents. Kelly, 229–231, and Cranfield, 183, are among those who see here doctrinal shortcomings and ethical libertinism of second-century Gnostics, given the combative tone of much of the epistle and use of the catchword “knowledge.” Such a reading, however, proceeds more from the assumption of a late dating imposed on the text than from the text itself. A closer reading of 2 Peter suggests that an ethical rather than doctrinal departure lies at the root of the opponents’ behavior (cf. M. Desjardins, “The Portrayal of the Dissidents in 2 Peter and Jude,” *JSNT* 30 [1987]: 89–92). Consider the typical pattern when religious beliefs are rejected: (1) apostasy manifests itself via behavior that demonstrates a rejection of the truth; (2) thereupon follows heresy, i.e., doctrinal error, which has the effect of justifying one’s actions. Peter’s opponents are, first and foremost, sexual libertarians, as confirmed by the portrait that follows (2:2, 6–7, 10, 14, 18–20, 22) and the previous accent on moral virtue and self-control (1:5–7). The danger confronting the Christian community is one of being molded by the outside world.

¹But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. ²Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.

³In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have

made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.

COMMENTARY

1 In the present argument, the writer does not designate his adversaries as “false prophets”; rather, the term *pseudoprophētai* (GK 6021) is applied to deceivers who arose “among the people,” i.e., Israel of old. What the text does say is that “there will be false teachers among you.” The verbal tense is important, for it suggests that the Christian community will need to be on guard *in the future*.

Against the tendency of traditional scholarship to locate 2 Peter in the early or mid-second century, this description fits well in a mid-sixties scenario in the first century. Ethical lapse has visited the church as it seeks to take root in Gentile culture. Such occurs long before the noted (Gnostic) heretical schools of the second century are established. The appearance here of the term *haireseis* (GK 146), from which we derive the word “heresy,” has further fed the misconception that 2 Peter mirrors a late date—a date in which heresy is already widespread. However, Paul, writing in about the year AD 55, also uses the term in the sense of “factions” or “divisions” (1Co 11:18). The phrase “destructive heresies” can be understood in the sense that the opinions or teachings of Peter’s opponents lead ultimately to their own ruin (so Bauckham, 239–40).

The slave-market metaphor, also in 2:19, is employed in v.1: “even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them” (cf. Jude 4, where the same language is used of Jude’s opponents). What sort of denial might this be? As with Jude’s adversaries, these people have apparently made a confession of faith at one time and now have departed from the faith. The denial, as Green, 107, observes, is primarily ethical and not intellectual in nature. The slave metaphor, reappearing in 2:19, confirms this suspicion.

2 Tragically, these individuals appear to be apostate former believers who have disowned their Lord. Not doctrine but the fact of their “shameful ways” and entrenched immorality constitutes the root of their apostasy and subsequent judgment. Moral skepticism and a resulting lapse into pagan ways have solidified into apostasy. The charge that because of these “the way of truth” will be brought “into disrepute” is reminiscent of Paul’s

condemnation in Romans 1:18–32, where sexual immorality is rooted in a suppression of the truth, and in Romans 2:24. Such an indictment is nothing short of scandalous. Sexual immorality gives Christianity a bad name in surrounding culture. Given the hostility of pagans toward Christians to begin with, this ethical scandal is all the more reprehensible.

3 The writer states further that the opponents are deceptive in their use of “stories they have made up.” His response is several-fold: he announces that their condemnation “has long been hanging over them” (*to krima ekpalai ouk argei*) and that their “destruction has not been sleeping” (*hē apōleia autōn ou nystazei*). This declaration serves two purposes. It displays the language of foreknowledge and predestination so characteristic of the Jewish-Christian mind-set, and it may serve as a flat rebuke of the opponents’ skepticism toward divine judgment (so Neyrey, “Form and Background of the Polemic,” 415–16; Bauckham, 247).

NOTES

1–3 Cf. esp. Jude 4, 14, 17, where the same language is used. A feature not uncommon to OT and apocalyptic literature is the notion of names written in heavenly books (see, e.g., Ex 32:32–33; Pss 40:4; 56:8; 69:28; 139:16; Rev 3:5; 5:1–5, 7–8; 10:8–11; 20:12; *1 En.* 81:1–2; 89:62; 90:14; 104:7; 108:3, 7; *Jub.* 5:13; 6:31; 16:9; 23:32; 28:6; 30:9; 32:21; *2 Bar.* 24:1). These books reflect a religious self-understanding fundamental to Jewish thought, namely, that the divine purpose, though hidden from human view, is predetermined and revealed in history. See [commentary at Jude 4](#).

REFLECTIONS

The nature of apostasy is such that it works covertly, negates Christ’s lordship, is characterized by ethical lapse, denies the truth, and inevitably exploits others. Because of apostasy’s cumulative negative effect on the body of Christ, the condemnation of the faithless is announced in no uncertain terms. At the same time, a righteous remnant is promised preservation.

[B. Moral Paradigms \(2:4–10a\)](#)

⁴For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment; ⁵if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; ⁶if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; ⁷and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men ⁸(for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)—⁹if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment. ¹⁰This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority.

COMMENTARY

4 The allusion to the fallen angels in 2 Peter, as in Jude, is somewhat veiled. Yet subtle nuances in language are worth noting and reflect in minor ways on the pastoral need in the community and thus on the purpose of the letter. Whereas Jude notes that they “did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home” (v.6), the emphasis in 2 Peter is placed on the fact that God “did not spare angels when they sinned.” Already in the first of three moral types, the tension between judgment and deliverance begins to emerge.

The Petrine allusion to the angels is further distinguished by reference to “hell” (Gk. *Tartarus*), the subterranean abyss and place of punishment in classical Greek mythology. The writer is sensitive to the social environment of the readers and borrows imagery without endorsing Greek mythology itself. Jude, by contrast, seems to presuppose a Palestinian social setting.

Second Peter, like Jude, does not identify the precise sin of the angels, only that they sinned and have consequently been reserved for judgment. The shocking nature of this illustration is not to be lost on the readers: the exalted ranks of angels themselves were not immune to rebellion and its eternal consequences. Even the angels God “did not spare” (*ouk epheisato*).

5 A second precedent of not having been spared is cited, a precedent curiously absent from Jude. This illustration of catastrophic judgment, unlike the first, exhibits an important bifurcation. The writer states that while God “did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood,” God did rescue “Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others.” (Although the OT does not explicitly state that Noah preached to his generation, he is accorded this role by diverse strands of Jewish tradition; see J. P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* [Leiden: Brill, 1968]). The generation with which this righteous preacher is compared is depicted in Genesis 6; Noah, by contrast, is portrayed as a “righteous man, blameless among the people of his time” (Ge 6:9). In Ezekiel 14:12–23 Noah stands alongside Daniel and Job as a paradigm of faithfulness amidst a generation facing inescapable judgment.

Similarly, the days of Noah are alluded to in Jesus’ teaching on watchfulness (Mt 24:36–44; Lk 17:22–27), where Noah’s generation teaches a moral lesson as a model of contemporary skepticism. Hebrews 11, another catalog of historical examples, salutes Noah as one of eight persons saved in the ark in the context of divine judgment. By heeding the divine warning to build the ark, Noah thus “condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith” (Heb 11:7). In 1 Peter 3:18–22 the days of Noah are described as a time when “God waited patiently,” at the end of which eight persons “were saved through water.” The biblical account is unified in its portrait of Noah as a model of righteousness and faithfulness.

In 2 Peter, attention is drawn both to judgment befalling the world of the ungodly and to the salvation of Noah and his family. This dual emphasis resonates with the readers, encouraging them to remain faithful in the midst of their own seemingly overwhelming social challenges. Thus Noah serves as a symbol to the Christian community of faithfulness in spite of overwhelming obstacles. In this epistle, attention is drawn twice (2:4–5; 3:3–7) to the flood God brought on the world as well as to the deliverance of a righteous remnant. The pastoral implications are clear: the readers are admonished to remain faithful in their present situation in spite of difficult cultural circumstances.

6–8 The third example also incorporates motifs of both judgment and salvation. It is instructive insofar as it exploits comparison for a notably pastoral effect. Because God reduced the cities of the plain to ashes, “making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly,” punishment for Peter’s opponents is certain. What is striking, however, about Peter’s contrast is that Lot, depicted in Genesis 19 as morally tainted, is called “righteous” (*dikaios*) three times. He is cast as a victim of surrounding cultural licentiousness, one whose righteous soul was tormented day after day “by the lawless deeds he saw and heard.” Thus Lot is righteous not by example, as Genesis 19 makes clear, but by comparison to surrounding debauchery. The clause “if God rescued Lot” confirms this comparative picture: Peter’s audience should take heart in the throes of their present social context. If they find it difficult confronting pagan immorality, Lot had it even harder.

NOTES

4 Two of Jude’s examples of judgment appear in 2 Peter. One of these, the fallen angels, is depicted in notably similar terms. Lists of historical paradigms depicting hard-heartedness appear in Jewish literature—both apocryphal/pseudepigraphal as well as rabbinic—with relative frequency (e.g., 3 Macc 3:7; Sir 16:5–15; *1 En.* 1–36; *T. Naph.* 2:8–4:9; *Jub.* 20:2–7). Among the most commonly cited in these lists are apostate Israel, Sodomites, Assyria, the giants, the generation of the flood, Korah, the Canaanites, and the fallen angels. Both 2 Peter and Jude borrow from this common exegetical tradition and enlist the use of moral paradigms for typological purposes (see my “Noncanonical Writings, Citations in the General Epistles,” and “Old Testament in the General Epistles,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament*, ed. R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997], 814–19, 834–41).

4–5 Surely it is not coincidental that in this epistle Noah and the fallen angels appear together in the same context. In apocalyptic literature, the flood is bound together with the elaborate story of the fall of “the Watchers,” i.e., the fallen angels (e.g., *T. Naph.* 3:5). Significantly, too, the reference to the days of Noah in 2 Peter has a notable and fascinating parallel in 1 Peter (3:18–20), where the demon hosts are subjugated to the rule of Christ (3:22). The allusion to Noah in both 1 and 2 Peter has a

similar effect: it is intended to promise retribution and to comfort the righteous remnant.

5–9 The flood typology, conspicuously absent from Jude, joins fire typology in 2 Peter 2 and is intended to be prototypical of eschatological judgment. Noah and Lot become types of faithful Christians who, despite enormous social obstacles, expect God to bring deliverance (ρύομαι, *rhyomai*, GK 4861; 2:7, 9). The catchword “savior,” occurring five times in the epistle (1:1, 11; 2:20; 3:2, 18), has more than a christological thrust; God *saves* a righteous remnant. The theme of righteous rescue, introduced in the second moral paradigm, is magnified in the third.

REFLECTIONS

Noah and Lot are instructive in the writer’s thinking. They illustrate the fact that God is not indifferent toward the moral challenges of his people. Particularly for those living in a pluralistic Hellenistic environment, this reminder is crucial. Although Noah and Lot are worlds apart in terms of their personal ethical example, both are objects of God’s redeeming and unmerited favor. Given the fact that Lot’s character, based on the Genesis narrative, leaves much to be desired, the readers of 2 Peter can take courage. Sensuality and skepticism conspire against their faith as well. Yet, despite his weaknesses, Lot was the object of divine rescue, in this way joining the fellowship of Noah.

The message of 2 Peter, unlike Jude, is not mere condemnation. Instead, it is the assurance from the midst of the cultural “furnace” to the righteous who exhibit faith. Important points of contact exist between the social environment of the readers and the days of Noah. Hillyer, 188–89, captures the sense of these verses: “Peter thus maintains his pastoral purpose of encouraging his readers to keep faith with God in their own situation. Such a loyal stand will neither go unnoticed nor fail to attract a similar divine protection from the consequences of sin of the godless ... , so the same God will protect believers who remain faithful to him in later generations.”

C. Portrait of the Apostate (2:10b–18)

OVERVIEW

Structurally and stylistically, these verses bear notable similarity to Jude—down to minute detail. The obvious literary relationship has occupied NT scholarship considerably, as noted previously. In both letters, a portrait of the ungodly contains a litany of descriptions and accusations and follows the writer’s use of historical paradigms. The present focus is on moral character. The individuals under indictment are initially compared with the angels.

Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings; ¹¹yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not bring slanderous accusations against such beings in the presence of the Lord. ¹²But these men blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like beasts they too will perish.

¹³They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you. ¹⁴With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! ¹⁵They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness. ¹⁶But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey—a beast without speech—who spoke with a man’s voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.

¹⁷These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. ¹⁸For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error.

COMMENTARY

10b–12 Whereas angels, “although they are stronger and more powerful, do not bring slanderous accusations against such beings in the presence of the Lord,” these persons, in their boldness and blasphemy, “are not afraid to

slander celestial beings,” the fallen, evil angels. This statement by the author, a probable reference to a lost ending of the Jewish apocryphal work *Assumption of Moses* (see Jude), is less a theological assertion about angels than it is a simple and startling comparison that presupposes knowledge familiar to the readers: the apostate have no reverential fear that inhibits them; they “blaspheme” what “they do not understand.” Moreover, these people are “brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed.”

13–16 The description of the adversaries, while containing significant parallels to Jude, is differentiated by an expansion of the Balaam typology. The moral corrosion that characterizes these individuals is breathtaking. They act as irrational beasts, they slander, they revel in their corruption. They are boastful, lustful, irreverent, disobedient, full of greed, and scornful. They are adulterous and insatiable in their appetite for sin; they actively seduce others. As apostates, they “have left the straight way and wandered off” and are reminiscent of Balaam, who “loved the wages of wickedness.” Indeed, so entrenched in a moral stupor was Balaam, so overcome by “madness,” that he had to be restrained by a donkey speaking with a human voice.

Only a brief standardization of this typology appears in Jude (“Balaam’s error,” v.11). However, in 2 Peter these individuals are more fully developed as a model. The language of “abandoning,” “wandering off,” and “loving wickedness” is the language of apostasy, and Balaam is the prototype of this mold. In Revelation, Balaam’s name is associated with idolatry and sexual immorality (Rev 2:14). In Jewish tradition, Balaam becomes a paradigm of self-seeking and greed; for this reason Jezebel and Balaam, given the character of related OT narratives, are symbols for apostasy in the early church. According to 2 Peter, Balaam is prototypical of some in the community. Along with Balaam, these individuals are said to “love the wages of wickedness.”

16 The point of emphasis here is that it took an ordinary, dumb (i.e., speechless) beast, Balaam’s donkey, speaking “with a man’s voice,” to “restrain the prophet’s madness” (compare the language to 2:12, which depicts the adversaries as “brute beasts” and “creatures of instinct”).

NOTES

15 Some commentators see in “Balaam son of Beor” (Gk. *Bosor*) a play on words: the Hebrew *bašar* denotes “flesh”; in effect, Balaam is called “son of the flesh” (so Bauckham, 267–68).

On the variations of the Balaam tradition in Jewish and early Christian exegesis, see M. S. Moore, *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development* (SBLDS 113; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); J. T. Greene, *Balaam and His Interpreters: A Hermeneutical History of the Balaam Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

15–16 Two strains of tradition exist in the OT concerning the Midianite prophet who led Israel astray. On the one hand, he is viewed as a villain, corrupt and seductive. On the other hand, he is depicted as a tragic hero. The narrative in Numbers 22–24 offers a mixed review. Most of the related OT texts tend to portray him as a strictly negative memorial, as a self-seeking practitioner of divination who was hired to curse and lead Israel astray (e.g., Nu 31:15–16; Dt 23:4–6; Jos 13:22; Ne 13:2).

REFLECTIONS

The downfall of a prophet of God is a singular phenomenon and one that is highly instructive. Over time, Balaam became ethically divorced from the message that he bore. The psychology and character of apostasy are such that moral skepticism and cynicism lead one to be indifferent to, if not loathe, what was formerly embraced. In the end, one “loves the wages of wickedness.” Such a tragic case is a possibility that can befall the individual; it is also a cancer that threatens everything around it.

D. Profile of Apostasy (2:19–22)

OVERVIEW

One recurring description of Peter’s opponents is that they deceive, entice, or seduce others (1:16; 2:1, 3, 14, 18). It is moral depravity that afflicts the community. False doctrine or heresy is no doubt present, but the fact that some “deny the sovereign Lord who bought them” (2:1), coupled with the language of moral reasoning that pervades the entire epistle, points foremost to an ethical dilemma affecting the community. What’s more, the opponents are not content merely to apostatize; they seek to seduce and take

others with them. Central to the apostates' rhetorical strategy is the promise of liberation. Yet they themselves are "slaves of depravity" (2:19).

¹⁹They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him. ²⁰If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. ²¹It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. ²²Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud."

COMMENTARY

19 Ultimately, as proverbial wisdom shows (cf. Jn 8:34; Ro 6:16), people are slaves to whatever rules them, even to their own bombastic nonsense (cf. 2Pe 2:18). The slave imagery was suggested already in 2:1. These persons apparently utilize the catchword "freedom," with all of its seductive attraction. Their error is first and foremost ethical; they insist on "freedom"—a freedom from moral restraint (1:4; 2:12 [twice]; 2:19) and divine activity (3:1–7).

20 Two vivid pictures from the natural realm sum up the state of the apostate, i.e., those who in the past "escaped the corruption of the world" but had become "entangled in it and overcome." Both images communicate actions that fit "brute beasts" and "creatures of instinct" (2:12). Common though these images are, they have the effect of shocking the readers when applied to the realm of faith. If people return to the world's defilement after rescue through knowledge of Jesus Christ, they enter a state said to be worse for them than the first. It would have been better, the writer declares, that they had never known the truth to begin with than to disavow what they knew (cf. Mt 12:43–45). In relative terms, ignorance of "the way of righteousness," at least according to the apostle's logic, is better than apostasy from it. Disavowing the truth is serious business.

21 Green, 131, perceptively concludes from the text that the initial stage of apostasy is the rejection of the category of law, given the allusion to “the sacred command.” Moreover, by using “command” in the singular (*entolē*, GK 1953), the writer demonstrates that he is contending for the general function of the law (which is to restrain sin) and not the detailed prescriptions of pentateuchal law. Because God is holy, he commands that his people be holy as well (Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:26; 1Pe 1:16). Orthopraxy (right action) flows out of orthodoxy (right belief); ethical living must validate one’s religious convictions. Bold, willful, presumptuous, and blasphemous, the apostate intuitively seeks to be released from the moral constraints of law. Lawless deeds (2:8) characterize the spirit that prides itself in being beyond moral authority. Rejection of God’s law, then, can be seen as the initial and necessary step in rejecting God’s authority.

22 The common proverbial imagery depicting two unclean animals is in continuity with the previous “bestial” imagery and mirrors the sobering fact that God gives us over to that which we choose (cf. Ro 1:18–32): the dog returning to its vomit (cf. Mt 7:6; Rev 22:15, wherein dogs stand in association with idolaters and the sexually immoral) and the pig to its mud. The writer draws attention to two disgusting habits of these creatures, one of which finds its parallel in the OT. The fool in Proverbs is likened to a dog that returns to its vomit (Pr 26:11). This dog, moreover, is the *kyōn* (GK 3264), the wild scavenger of the streets, not the *kynarion*, the house dog (Mt 15:26–27). Similarly, the proverb of the pig finds its analogue in the Egyptian pseudepigraphal work *Ahiqar*: “My son, you were to me like a pig which had been in a hot bath ... and when it came out and saw a filthy pool went down and wallowed in it.”

The rhetorical effect of the imagery is to jolt the readers into seeing the folly of reverting to the moral squalor of pagan culture from where they came and were washed. The proverbs serve a dual purpose. They cinch the earlier argument that the opponents are “brute beasts” (2Pe 2:12), not unlike the prophet gone mad (2:16). And they further suggest that the opponents have formerly been “washed” and were clean. The combined effect is to sober the audience into seeing the utterly tragic nature of apostasy, which is a willful departure from revealed truth.

IV. EXHORTATION TO THE FAITHFUL (3:1–18)

A. Exhortation to Recall (3:1–2)

OVERVIEW

The material of 2 Peter 2 focuses sharply on the apostate. Now the writer returns to the faithful, who are in the throes of a dilemma and in need of a reminder. From the beginning of their spiritual sojourn they have been forewarned of the perilous nature of moral skepticism. The writer now blends pastoral insight and apologetic force in an attempt to exhort the faithful as they struggle to reconcile God's seeming indifference to their lot with the challenges of living in a radically skeptical environment.

Most commentators, in their interpretation of 2 Peter 3, are predisposed to view the material as a theological treatise on eschatology. While the eschatological element is present, the focus is not eschatology but ethics. The eschatological serves to reinforce the ethical; hence the material in ch. 3 is to be read in continuity with the material in chs. 1 and 2.

The readers are here urged to recall foundational Christian teaching; in fact, this is said to be the second such letter written by the apostle. Whether we have here a reference to 1 Peter or another unknown writing is unclear (cf. 1Co 5:9). What is certain is that the author is writing again, reiterating the apostolic basics. In the present context, this is meant to invoke authority for the purpose of drawing out the moral implications of Christian faith.

¹Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking.

²I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

COMMENTARY

1–2 The material in ch. 3 finds the writer revisiting his reason for writing. He must remind his readers of the apostolic “first things.” The language here is strongly motivational: “I have written ... as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking.” It is a call to moral purity, to be unmixed and untainted. This exhortation follows on the heels of a stern warning (2:1–22). Like Noah and Lot, the readers are challenged to remain uncontaminated.

2 Once more, as in 1:19–21, the writer states that there is continuity between the OT prophets, who prefigured Christian discipleship, and the apostles who have spoken “the command given by our Lord and Savior.” This view accords with the Pauline statements that the apostles and prophets constitute the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20) and that the mystery of the gospel has been revealed to and imparted through the apostles and prophets (Eph 3:5–6). They are the ones to whom the gospel message has been entrusted. One cannot speak of an authoritative “word of God” apart from the concept of apostolicity and the apostolic tradition (1Co 15:3–7). The apostle is authoritative inasmuch as he stands in direct relation to Jesus and thus is a deputized representative (cf. the close link between Peter’s confession [Mt 16:13–20] and his experience of Jesus’ transfiguration [2Pe 1:18]). The implications of the apostolic office are weighty.

One need not regard, with Kelly, 354, the reference to “your apostles” as something that “inadvertently betrays that the writer belongs to an age when the apostles have been elevated to a venerated group who mediate Christ’s teaching authoritatively to the whole Church.” Rather than suggesting a setting one or more generations removed from the apostles, as is broadly assumed by critical scholarship, “your apostles” may be understood as “the apostles whom you ought to trust” (so Bigg, 290), with a present and not a future emphasis. The author speaks of “your apostles” through whom the Lord has spoken. Set in contradistinction to the apostate, the apostles are those “who preach the gospel to you and founded the churches in your area” (Green, 137). Apostolic leadership preserves the community; when truth is being sacrificed, apostolic authority is needed to redirect the local situation. Second Peter offers strong evidence that precisely such a situation exists, with the corresponding need for authority to be exercised.

NOTES

1–2 Michael Green’s analysis of the similarities and differences between 1 and 2 Peter—both in language and thought—is one of the more useful treatments of the subject (*2 Peter Reconsidered*, 14–23; *2 Peter and Jude*, 17–23). For an examination of the similarities between the two letters, see Mayor, lxviii–cv.

Considerable speculation characterizes traditional scholarship as to the identity of the “second letter.” While this allusion naturally suggests 1 Peter as its predecessor, those who view 2 Peter as the work of a later writer using Peter’s name dismiss 1 Peter as the intended reference. Accordingly, they take 2 Peter 3:1–2 as a transparent mark of forgery. Kelly, 353, states that this reference is “only another prop in the apparatus of pseudonymity.” The contents and style of 2 Peter make it at least quite possible that 3:1–2 is an allusion to another, unknown epistle.

B. Caricature of the Moral Skeptic (3:3–7)

³First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” ⁵But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. ⁶By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. ⁷By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

COMMENTARY

3 The reference to “the last days” is intended to reflect on the local situation, characterized by scoffing, indulging in lust, and moral skepticism. The readers are to understand both the rationale of the hardened moral skeptic and the end of such hardened thinking. Cynical, carnal, and law-mocking individuals provide a justification for moral corruption. Their denial of what is true is what sets them apart and makes them dangerous.

Self-indulgence, rooted in nihilistic hedonism, undercuts moral absolutes at the most basic level.

4 Contained within the apologetic that unfolds in ch. 3 is the caricature of the moral skeptic who denies a universe with moral accountability. Consider the method of reasoning employed by radical moral skeptics: They say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” Peter’s opponents, in essence, are denying any divine intervention in human affairs.

5–7 To this assertion of moral relativity, the apostle responds with a cosmological argument—an argument based on the creation of a moral universe. And it incorporates the Jewish-Christian eschatological perspective by marshaling flood typology and fire typology. The lesson of the flood is above all a moral lesson. Water was the means by which judgment came initially (cf. 1Pe 3:19–20); fire and not water is the means by which eschatological judgment will proceed (cf. Ge 8:22).

NOTES

3–7 Neyrey (“Form and Background of the Polemic”) considers parallels between 2 Peter and an Epicurean polemic against divine providence (Plutarch, *Sera*). The polemic is examined according to four constituent parts—cosmology, freedom, unfulfilled prophecy, and injustice—which function as subthemes in 2 Peter. Neyrey’s reconstruction is helpful, insofar as the four pillars of Plutarchian apologetic fit naturally into the schema of 2 Peter without causing the reader to become overly speculative. For example, “freedom” is promised by Peter’s opponents—a freedom that is nothing short of a new slavery (2:19). For more on the Epicurean polemic, see [Introduction](#), p. 374 n.47.

7 Touchpoints between ch. 3 and Stoic cosmology make an alternative interpretation plausible. Destruction of the cosmos by fire, alluded to here in v.7 and again in vv.10–13, mirrors quite possibly the Stoic belief that the universe underwent periodic renewal by means of burning. This restoration was understood to take place over and over. Without endorsing Stoic cosmology, the writer may be borrowing Stoic ideas and vocabulary for the sake of his argument. This would be relevant particularly if his opponents are challenging the very stability and moral order of the universe. A helpful discussion of the nature and origins of Stoic cosmology is found in D. E.

Hahn, *The Origins of Stoic Cosmology* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1977), esp. 200–215.

REFLECTIONS

A main premise of traditional commentary on 2 Peter is that doctrine—specifically, false doctrine—represents the chief burden of the writer. The material in ch. 3 has been thought to support this argument. Accordingly, the opponents are said to have promulgated an eschatological viewpoint that must rationalize the “embarrassment” of a parousia that has been delayed (so Käsemann, 170). This delay is typically accompanied by the assumption that the writer is removed from the apostolic era. If one assumes that 2 Peter is a second-century tract to bolster the morale of the church, then the “problem” of the epistle takes on a decidedly doctrinal cast. If, however, it is written to counter first-century moral skepticism and ethical lapse, it becomes less a tract to affirm doctrinal orthodoxy than a passionate exhortation toward virtuous living. The burden of 2 Peter is not the timing of the Lord’s coming or chronology per se; it is the fact of the Lord’s coming as a *day of moral reckoning*.

C. Promise of Universal Moral Accountability (3:8–13)

OVERVIEW

At this point the writer shifts focus. He follows the counterargument that judgment foreshadowed by the past is being reserved for the ungodly by interjecting pastorally sensitive admonition. The faithful may be perplexed, however, by the delay in divine judgment and vindication of the righteous. Surfacing here are points of contact with Noah’s and Lot’s circumstances (cf. also 1Pe 3:20, where the patience of God is associated with the flood.) A delay in God’s action calls for reassurance that the faithful have not been forgotten, even when it appears from the human standpoint that God is not intervening in human affairs. For this reason it is necessary to address the readers once more as “dear friends” (*agapētoi*, GK 28; 3:1, 8).

⁸But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.
⁹The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

¹¹Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹²as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

COMMENTARY

8–9 In stressing both the relativity and significance of time, the author appeals to the character of God. One aspect of the Godhead that distinguishes the divine from human nature is the attribute of forbearance, or patience. In reality, the Lord is “not slow in keeping his promise,” even though it may seem that way. Instead, at the heart of the issue of “delay” is divine patience (*makrothymia*, GK 3429; v.9). The object of this patience is people; *all* persons are given the opportunity to bow the knee and make room for “repentance” (cf. also 1Ti 1:16). Here again a central motif of 2 Peter—human moral agency—is emphasized. While a day of judgment is reserved for the ungodly (3:7), it is not God’s will that they perish; rather, these have brought condemnation on themselves. Divine sovereignty does not cancel out human freedom to make moral decisions or the need to cultivate the moral life. It should be emphasized that 2 Peter eludes both Calvinist and Arminian attempts to systematize and isolate divine and human action.

10 This patience, however, should not be misconstrued as divine indifference. Mercy and not impotence is the reason for the delay. Delay in

no way suggests nonfulfillment (cf. Mt 24:42–44; Lk 12:39; 1Th 5:2, 4; Rev 3:3; 16:15). Fulfillment, however, will come “like a thief” in the night. With this coming, the ungodly will be judged, with full disclosure of the deeds committed by humans.

To counter any distortions about the ultimate nature of divine judgment, the writer expresses the day of the Lord in cataclysmic terms. It is sudden, decisive, cosmic, and final in its nature. The “thief” motif underscores the fact that (relatively) few will be prepared for this event; it will be unexpected and without warning, like a thief breaking into a house. Destruction of the cosmos by fire (*pyroomai*, “to melt with fire,” GK 4792), alluded to in vv.10–13 (cf. v.7), may be thought to utilize language related to the Stoic doctrine of cosmic conflagration (*ekpyrōsis*), by which a reconstituted cosmos was anticipated (cf. *SVF* 2.617), and to coincide with the OT depiction of the coming of the day of the Lord. It would appear that in 2 Peter the writer engages the Hellenistic outlook on immortality and moral accountability. Epicureans wholly rejected the notion of an afterlife, while Stoics viewed human life as eventually reabsorbed into the cosmos. Regardless of the precise version of paganized cosmology he is mirroring, the writer adjusts this with the Jewish-Christian apocalyptic, eschatological framework (cf. Mal 3:2–5; 4:1; 2Th 1:8; Heb 10:27). And here eschatology is not in the service of theology proper, as commentators are inclined to interpret it; rather, eschatology in 2 Peter 3 is in the service of ethics.

11 In the teaching of 2 Peter, eschatology and ethics are indivisible. The certainty of judgment and the inevitability of “that day” (thus, e.g., Ob 1:8; Joel 2; Mic 4; and Zep 1) of moral reckoning prod believers on to holy living. Christians by nature are future-oriented rather than being fixed solely on the present. Creation and all of life point to a climax in the purposes of God. Outside the community of faith, from the perspective of nihilism and self-indulgent living, there is nothing ultimately to live for. Therefore, it matters how the readers of 2 Peter orient their lives.

13 From the Christian perspective, the passing of everything in this age unveils the reality of the coming age, all in accordance with God’s promise. The writer closes out his eschatological exhortation, just as he introduced his letter, with the catchword “righteousness” (cf. 1:1; 13; 2:5, 7–8, 21): the new home (cf. Isa 65:17 and 66:22) to be anticipated is one “where righteousness dwells.” The goal is transformation.

REFLECTIONS

While skeptics mock the fundamental notion of being called to account for their deeds, the faithful are to reflect on the ways of God in the past as he touched human affairs. For the readers, a proper perspective toward God's dealings is crucial. This entails the realization that God's purposes are a mystery. Many of the psalms articulate the agony of the human perspective: Why do the wicked prosper? And how long must the righteous endure suffering? Why does God refuse to act? Why is God lax concerning his promises?

If believers are to persevere in faith amidst social decay and moral skepticism, they need to recognize the difference between the human and divine perspectives. The plight of human beings, as least from an earthly perspective, is framed vividly by the psalmist in Psalm 13:1–2:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and every day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

The apostolic wisdom applied to this vexing quandary is rooted in an adjusted perspective—the divine perspective. To the Lord, a day is like a millennium, and a millennium like a day. This language, reminiscent of Psalm 90:4 and surfacing in several intertestamental Jewish texts, is not chronological but comparative in its function. A prayer ascribed to Moses, Psalm 90 is a meditative reflection on the transient nature of our days: “they quickly pass, and we fly away” (90:10c). This contrasts with the Lord's dwelling in eternity: “from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (90:2b).

Significantly, not only the relativity of time but also its importance are integral parts of Psalm 90. This may be why 2 Peter 3:8 restates Psalm 90:4: “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” After the psalmist observes that our days pass quickly and we fly away, he offers this prayer: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps 90:12).

D. Final Exhortation and Doxology (3:14–18)

¹⁴So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. ¹⁵Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. ¹⁶He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

¹⁷Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. ¹⁸But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

COMMENTARY

14–16 In the saints’ present struggle to discern God’s timing and patience, Peter’s audience is to “make every effort” (*spoudazō*, also in 1:10, 15; GK 5079) in striving toward three aims: (1) being spotless and blameless (cf. Jude 24); (2) being at peace with the Lord; and (3) viewing God’s long-suffering as leading to the salvation of others. While the reader may not automatically see a connection between these three imperatives, they hinge on one another.

The first priority is foundational and affects one’s ability to realize the other two. The saints are called to—and remain in—an impure, vulgar world. In spite of seemingly overwhelming cultural obstacles facing the Christian community, everything for life and godliness has already been provided, based on God’s grace (1:3–4). The resources are there; what remains to be determined is the saints’ willingness.

It is no coincidence that the same language employed earlier in the epistle to characterize those troubling the community occurs again. Those following their corrupt desires and despising authority (2:10a) are portrayed as “blots and blemishes” (2:13). Peter’s concluding exhortation is that the

faithful, in contrast, be without blot or blemish (3:14; cf. 1Pe 1:19). Christian truth-claims are only as authoritative as the vessels bearing them.

The second and third priorities relate to the first. The human tendency is to question God: “Where are you, God? How long, Lord?” Hence at the heart of the ethical imperative lies the challenge of finding the place of God’s peace, bearing in mind that others’ salvation is lodged within the heart of God. The Lord, after all, does not want anyone to perish (3:9). The day of the Lord is a day of both justice and vindication. Yet, since God’s timing and purpose are beyond human comprehension, believers are challenged to find the place of rest and peace as they await his activity and struggle with the mystery of divine purpose.

Meanwhile, this will entail enduring hardship as disciples of Christ, and this in a world at cross-purposes with its Creator. To endure is to manifest Christian virtue, to be godly in character (1:6). Human perseverance is born out of the deep conviction that God perseveres on our behalf: the Lord wants none to perish. God takes into account human freedom and does not restrict it.

Here it is not Peter the theologian who is speaking; it is rather Peter the pastor and apostle. Paul was the acknowledged theologian: “just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him ... speaking in [all his letters] of these matters—i.e., about the nature of salvation (*sōtēr* [GK 5400], a key word in the letter: 1:1, 11; 2:20; 3:2, 18) and the long-suffering of God. It is true, Peter grants, that these mysteries are “hard to understand,” causing some to distort and pervert them for their own purposes.

17 The faithful, however, stand in bold contrast; they are prepared for these distortions and in steadfastness refuse to be carried away by the error of the wicked. As he concludes his letter, Peter reminds his readers once more that indeed it is possible for them to be affected by the lawless and thereby “fall from [their] secure position.” If the angels, who were exposed to incomparable glory, fell from that exalted position (2:4), then the lesson is clear: the community must take moral agency seriously and be vigilant. They are responsible and accountable; therefore, they are to “be on [their] guard” (*phylassō*, GK 5785).

It is possible to be exposed to the truth, as Peter had this utmost privilege years earlier (1:16–18; cf. Mt 17:1–8; Mk 9:2–8; Lk 9:28–36), and yet

negate that truth, as Peter is personally and painfully aware (Mt 26:69–75; Mk 14:66–72; Lk 22:54–62). This denial of the truth may happen through fear, self-centeredness, or immorality. The man writing knows whereof he speaks; his is a poignant, lifelong memory of confession followed by denial (cf. Mt 16:13–20; 26:69–75). Thus the Petrine admonition has a decided ring of authority, an authority fashioned out of painfully difficult experience through the years: “Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away ... and fall from your secure position.”

18 Fittingly, the antidote to this possibility is repeated in the letter’s concluding statement, just as it had appeared in the greeting (1:2): the readers are to grow in the “grace and knowledge” of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The epistolary conclusion reveals a double inclusio: “making every effort” (1:5//3:14) and “grace and knowledge” of the Lord (1:2//3:18). The letter ends somewhat abruptly and without the customary epistolary features one might expect to find—personal wishes, greetings, instructions, requests, and so forth. The doxology “to him be glory both now and forever!” is ascribed to Christ alone and is thought unusual when contrasted with other NT doxologies.

NOTES

17 The use of φυλάσσω, *phylassō* (GK 5875), applies to a soldier, while its nominal form, φυλακή, *phylakē* (GK 5871), is the generic term for “prison.” Most commentary that assumes 2 Peter not to be authentically Petrine fails to take seriously the personal and autobiographical element in the epistle, and 3:17 (“be on your guard”) is an example. The writer’s authority (and passion) issues out of the agony he himself has carried his whole life since his denial that he knew Jesus.

The term “secure position” (στηριγμός, *stērigmos* [GK 5113] is the antithesis of the opponents, who are described as “unstable” (ἀστήρικτος, *astērikτος* [2:14; 3:16]). In Luke 22:32, the verb στηρίζω, *stērizō* (GK 5114), is applied to Peter himself by Jesus: “When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

18 For Hillyer, 226–27, the concluding doxology is an indication of an early rather than late date for the letter: “If the letter had been written later than Peter’s lifetime, a more stereotyped liturgical doxology would have been expected.... Before the end of the first century, stereotyped formulas

to round off doxologies were commonplace, so Peter's unusual expressions ... offer evidence for its authenticity."

1 JOHN

TOM THATCHER

Introduction

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3. Historical Setting of 1–2–3 John
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1. OPENING COMMENTS

The three epistles of John preserve the history and beliefs of Johannine Christianity, a distinct branch of the early church. While 1–2–3 John bear many similarities to Acts and the Pauline letters, they reveal a community with a unique experience and a unique perspective on Christian life and teaching. This community struggled with a number of serious difficulties arising from both external pressures and internal problems. As a result, Johannine thought often challenges the perspective of modern Christians who have grown comfortable in their faith.

The Johannine literature (the fourth gospel and 1–2–3 John) is perhaps the most loved and least understood section of the NT. Passages such as John 3:16, the “Good Shepherd” (Jn 10), and “God is love” (1Jn 4:8) have become slogans for the contemporary portrait of Christianity as a religion of charity and benevolence. Ironically, the warm universalism implied in these verses contradicts the main thrust of Johannine thought. While John is obsessed with God’s love and the need for Christians to show love, he is also careful to distinguish those who should receive this love from those who should not. For this reason, the perspective of the Johannine letters is harder and more skeptical than that of Paul, being fueled by a dualism that rigorously discriminates between truth and falsehood. Because John believes that only true believers should enjoy the love of God and the

fellowship of the church, 1–2–3 John are dominated by the themes of true faith and discipleship.

The author of 1–2–3 John hopes to guide believers to true faith and to protect them from falsehood. All three letters offer objective tests that Christians can apply to distinguish true believers from the rest of the world. True Christians, in John’s view, can be identified by what they “know,” which in these letters includes both doctrine and lifestyle. Following the adage “by their fruits you will know them,” John suggests that true believers will adhere to certain confessional statements and will live in accordance with the implications of those statements. This produces a discussion that focuses heavily on obedience and offers grace only to those who think and walk within prescribed boundaries.

While it is always necessary to consider the historical background of a book before proceeding to exegesis, such considerations are particularly important to the analysis of 1–2–3 John. A careful introductory study of the historical setting of these letters will simplify many interpretive problems.

2. AUTHOR OF 1–2–3 JOHN

Like Hebrews, 1 John does not name its author and audience, and the author of 2 and 3 John refers to himself only as “the Elder.” The authorship of these books must therefore be deduced from the limited internal evidence offered by the letters themselves, along with the testimony of the church fathers.

It is clear that the author of 1–2–3 John wishes to maintain a pastoral relationship with his audience. John refers to his readers as “[my] children” (*teknia*, GK 5451, or *paidia*, GK 4086) seven times (1Jn 2:12, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21) and “beloved” (*agapētoi*, GK 28; NIV, “dear friends”) six times (2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11). In 1 John 3:13 he calls them “brothers” (*adelphoi*, GK 81), the term used throughout the letter to characterize the relationship between all Christians (cf. 2:9–11; 4:10–17). This familial terminology emphasizes the author’s love for the audience but also, as elsewhere in the NT, implies an expectation of their loyalty (cf. Phm 1, 20; 1Ti 1:1–2; 2Ti 1:1–2, 2:1; Tit 1:4; 2Pe 3:1–14). This is particularly evident in 3 John, where the Elder refers to his addressee, Gaius, as “dear friend” (“beloved”) before each exhortation (vv.2, 5, 11) and says that he is pleased

with reports of Gaius's obedience because he is always glad to hear that "my children are walking in the truth" (v.4). The pastoral authority claimed by the Elder seems to be transcongregational, extending to many individual churches and their leaders. He feels confident to command both "the chosen lady" and Gaius, apparently leaders of their respective churches, to reject certain teachers and accept others (2Jn 10–11; 3Jn 12), and plans to take disciplinary action against another leader, Diotrephes, who has not followed his instructions (3Jn 9–10). The Elder also claims the right to visit individual churches to instruct and encourage them (2Jn 12; 3Jn 14). In exchange for his loving patronage, then, the author expects to enjoy the audience's obedience.

a. The Traditional View of Authorship

Beyond this very general profile based on internal data, the only other ancient evidence for the authorship of 1–2–3 John comes from the church fathers. Because the author of these letters, or at least of 1 John, was apparently also involved in the composition of the fourth gospel, ancient testimony concerning that book is helpful here also. It is clear that these writings were associated with the apostle John, a member of the "inner circle" of Jesus' disciples (Mk 5:37; 9:2; 14:33), by the end of the second century AD. The editors of the Muratorian Canon (1.34–35; ca. AD 200), a list of books considered sacred and authoritative by the church in Rome, associated 1 John with the fourth gospel and said both were written by the apostle John:

When his fellow-disciples and bishops urged him [to write a gospel, John] said: "Fast with me from today for three days, and what will be revealed to each one [of us] let us relate to one another." In the same night it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that, whilst all were to go over [the gospel], John in his own name should write everything down.... What wonder then if John ... adduces particular points in his epistles also, where ... he confesses (himself) not merely an eye and ear witness [1Jn 1:1–3], but also a writer of all the marvels of the Lord in order.

Further support is offered by Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons. In a treatise written about AD 180, Irenaeus relates the apparently widespread belief that “John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned upon his breast [Jn 13:23], did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus.” Later in the same work, Irenaeus quotes both 1 and 2 John and attributes these letters to John the apostle as well (*Haer.* 3.1.1; 3.16.5, 8). At about the same time, Clement of Alexandria (AD 190s), Origen’s teacher, offered the theory, still popular today, that John the apostle wrote a “spiritual Gospel” as a theological supplement to the Synoptics (cited in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.7). By the end of the second century, then, the Johannine letters were widely associated with the fourth gospel under the common authorship of John the apostle. This position may therefore be referred to as the “traditional view” of the authorship of 1–2–3 John.

While the early testimony supports the apostolic authorship of 1–2–3 John, one major variation of the traditional view, also based on patristic evidence, should be mentioned. The debate centers on an obscure statement by Papias, one of the earliest postapostolic sources available. According to early Christian tradition, Papias was a disciple of the apostle John in Ephesus at the end of the first century. The “Anti-Marcionite Prologues,” introductory notes to a mid-second century canon, even suggest that Papias wrote the fourth gospel for the apostle John by dictation. Unfortunately, Papias’s writings no longer exist, but several quotations from his work were preserved by the church historian Eusebius (AD 320s). Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.2–6) did not accept the popular legends about Papias and attempted to disprove them from Papias’s own writings (the quotation from Papias appears in italics below):

Papias himself, according to the preface of his treatises, makes plain that he had in no way been a hearer and eyewitness of the sacred apostles but teaches that he had received the articles of the faith from those who had known them [i.e., from disciples of the apostles], for he speaks as follows: “*And I shall not hesitate to append to the interpretations all that I ever learnt well from the presbyters and remember well, for of their truth I am confident. For unlike most I did not rejoice in them who say much, but in them who teach the truth, nor in them who recount the*

commandments of others, but in them who repeated those given to the faith by the Lord and derived from truth itself; but if ever anyone came who had followed the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the presbyters, what Andrew or Philip or Peter or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, had said, and what Aristion and the presbyter John, the Lord's disciples, were saying. For I did not suppose that information from books would help me so much as the word from a living and surviving voice." It is here worth noting that he twice counts the name of "John," and reckons the first "John" with Peter and James and Matthew and the other Apostles, clearly meaning the evangelist, but by changing his statement places the second ["John"] with the others outside the number of the Apostles, putting Aristion before him and clearly calling him a "presbyter."

In its original context, Papias's statement was intended to stress the validity of his own teaching (which included comments on 1 John and Revelation) on the basis that his doctrine had been shaped by people with a close connection to Jesus. His wording, however, is obviously unclear and seems to include two distinct lists of people whose teaching he solicited: "the Lord's disciples," people such as Andrew and Peter, and "the presbyters," people such as Aristion. Both lists include a "John." Since Papias's Christian training occurred in Ephesus, this raises the possibility that there were two early Christian leaders in Ephesus named "John," one the apostle and one the presbyter or "Elder."

Several modern scholars have developed this possibility that there were two "Johns" associated with Ephesus. Commenting on the passage cited above, Martin Hengel (*The Johannine Question* [Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989], 28–31) argues that "whereas the first group of seven well-known names [mentioned by Papias] belongs in the rather distant past [i.e., before Papias's time], the two disciples of the second group [Aristion and John] come from the time of the author." Stressing this distinction, Hengel argues that the second John, the Elder, was the one known to Papias. It is this person, in Hengel's view, who wrote the gospel of John and the Johannine letters, which explains why he refers to himself as "the Elder" in the

introductions to 2 and 3 John. This variation of the traditional view, then, suggests that the Johannine letters were written by John the Elder of Ephesus, who may have been a disciple of Jesus or possibly a disciple of one of the apostles but who was not himself an apostle.

b. The “School” Approach of Authorship

The traditional view has been challenged in recent years by those who see the Johannine literature as the product of a group of unknown teachers. These scholars prefer to think of a “Johannine school” rather than a single author. This “school” consisted of the founder of the Johannine community (“John”) and his disciples, who helped promote and develop his teaching. The identity of the founder of this school, perhaps the “Beloved Disciple” of the fourth gospel, cannot now be determined, but he probably died before the epistles were written (cf. Jn 21:20–23). The notion of a Johannine school has received significant support from the “developmental approach” to the composition of the Johannine literature. Advocates of the developmental approach believe that the fourth gospel was gradually “developed” through a series of revisions by “John,” and later by his disciples, to keep its material relevant to immediate community concerns. 1–2–3 John were written sometime during or just after the gospel’s development in response to a specific doctrinal crisis in the Johannine community. Most advocates of this position insist that the actual author(s) of 1–2–3 John was not a disciple of Jesus, although some believe that the founder of the community (“John”) may have had some contact with the historical Jesus. Most recent commentaries adopt some version of the Johannine school approach to explain the authorship of 1–2–3 John.¹

c. Conclusion on Authorship

A key passage in the debate between the traditional view and the school approach is 1 John 1:1–3. There the author says that the orthodox Christian witness about Jesus concerns that “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched ... which was with the Father and has appeared to us.” Proponents of the school approach believe that the word “we” in these verses refers to a group of Johannine teachers who claimed to preserve the true and authoritative

doctrine promoted by their dead founder. Since none of these teachers were actual disciples of the historical Jesus, the apparent references to a physical experience are simply intended to stress the authority of this “corporate tradition.” As Rensberger, 47, puts it, the author of 1 John uses these references to stress that he “or the group [of teachers] that he represents, is a link in the chain of testimony extending from the events of the revelation of eternal life in Jesus to the readers of 1 John.” Further, the emphasis on physical experience—“heard,” “seen,” “touched”—is intended to stress the human physicality of Jesus against a heretical devaluation of his humanity and a denial that the Christ came in the flesh (cf. Brown, 159–61; Lieu, 23–27; Johnson, 26–27). From this perspective, the prologue to 1 John accomplishes two things at once: stressing the authority of the author’s doctrine while staging his attack on heretical Christology.

While this interpretation is reasonable, three pieces of evidence must be weighed against it. First, the author of 1 John uses verbs that refer to a physical experience of Jesus seven times in 1:1–3, all in the first person (“we”). His “testimony” (*martyreō*, GK 3455) and “proclamation” (*apangellō*, GK 550) are connected to verbs of sight and hearing in vv.2–3, and his authority is based on the claim that he has “heard,” “seen,” and “touched” something concerning “the Word of life.” Second, as will be seen below, it is clear that the author’s authority has been challenged by rival teachers with a different view of Christ. These other teachers, whom the author calls Antichrists, seem to disagree with him on key points of the Johannine Jesus tradition and have apparently persuaded some Johannine Christians to accept their position. Third, most scholars would agree that the Johannine Jesus tradition was still in a fluid state at the time the epistles were written. Whether or not the writing of the fourth gospel was complete by this time, the letters reflect a setting in which oral teaching about Jesus was still seen as equally authoritative to written gospels. In light of these three considerations, 1 John 1:1–3 seems to be a claim that the author is an actual witness to the life of the historical Jesus. Authority in oral cultures is established by age and experience, and it would be natural for the Elder to validate his version of the gospel by claiming to have been an actual eyewitness to the major points of the story. He therefore stresses that his information about “the Word of life” is firsthand, because he has heard, seen, and touched the historical Jesus who is at the core of the tradition.

While these considerations lend credence to the view that 1–2–3 John were written by a person who claimed to be a disciple of Jesus, they do not prove or even suggest that this person was the Beloved Disciple—the apostle John—or John the Elder of Ephesus. They also do not discount the many indications from the letters themselves that numerous teachers were at work in the Johannine churches. The view adopted here therefore combines elements of the traditional view and the school approach.

Behind the Johannine literature, there seems to have been a group of teachers united by common adherence to the founder of the Johannine community. The authority of the founder, the Elder, was based on his claim to be a disciple of the historical Jesus, and this person was probably the source, if not the author, of the material in the fourth gospel. The absence of any specific identification within the letters themselves and the uncertainties surrounding the evidence from the early church make it impossible to reach a dogmatic conclusion on the Elder’s identity. The ancient evidence points to John the apostle. If John is not the author, his name was probably attached to these letters in the mid-second century to enhance their prestige during the early debates over canonicity. For convenience, the author of 1–2–3 John will be referred to as “John” or “the Elder” throughout this introduction and commentary.

3. HISTORICAL SETTING OF 1–2–3 JOHN

The audience of 1–2–3 John seems to have been members of a group of house churches with local independent leaders who look to the author as their superior and patron. Several of these local leaders—Gaius (3Jn 1), the “chosen lady” (2Jn 1), and the rebellious Diotrefes (3Jn 9–10)—are mentioned in the letters. Similar to the Pauline system of administration, this network of churches was managed by a group of John’s disciples, including Demetrius and “the brothers” mentioned at 3 John 5–6, 12. From ancient times, scholars have situated these churches in western Asia Minor, with John’s headquarters in Ephesus (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.4; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.1.1; 3.23.3–4; 3.39.6; Hengel, *Johannine Question*, 30–31). Recent scholarship has focused on the experiences of these churches as keys to the tone and content of 1–2–3 John.

a. “The World” and “the Jews”

The Johannine literature promotes a dualistic worldview. “Dualism” may be loosely defined as the belief that there are two forces at work in the universe, one “good” and the other “evil.” These forces are absolute and completely opposed, so that no person or thing can participate in both at the same time. The dualistic perspective often expresses itself in the use of labels that imply polar oppositions: “good/evil,” “light/dark,” “white/black,” “true/false,” and “love/hate.” A convenient illustration of Johannine dualism appears at John 3:16–21. This section opens with the famous statement that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,” implying that God intends to bring salvation to everyone. Indeed, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” But Jesus immediately clarifies that “whoever does not believe stands condemned already,” for such people “love darkness instead of light.” “Light/dark,” “love/hate,” and “saved/condemned” are key oppositions in Johannine dualism, ways of labeling people to clarify their place in the cosmic scheme of things. Jesus is the “light” and all those who believe in him “walk in the light” and enjoy forgiveness of sins (1Jn 1:7), while those who do not believe are lost in a satanic darkness. There are no innocent bystanders in this battle between light and darkness, for all people either “love” the light and “hate” the darkness or “love” the darkness and “hate” the light. Such language indicates a dualistic worldview.

From this dualistic perspective John sees that there are two types of people. The first group, those on the side of God and light, are the “children of God” who have been “born again” (Jn 1:12; 3:3–5; 1Jn 4:7). Logically one would expect John to call the second group “children of the devil,” but instead he refers to those who reject Jesus as “the world.” Although God loves the world, this love is unrequited, for the world hates Jesus and rejoices over his death (Jn 7:7; 16:20). Because the disciples are “not of the world,” Jesus warns them that the world will hate them also (Jn 15:18–19; 17:14–16). There is hope for believers, however, for Jesus has overcome the world (Jn 16:33), and they may also overcome the world by keeping their faith in him (1Jn 5:4–5). In John’s view, every person in “the world” operates in willful rejection of, and open hostility toward, all that Jesus represents. While it is impossible to know for certain why John felt this

way, it is reasonable to conclude that he had experienced persecution at some point from nonbelievers, making him suspicious of “the world” and suggesting that all those in “the world” are enemies of Christ and the church.

The key to this experience of suffering may lie in another dualistic label that appears frequently in the gospel of John, namely, “the Jews.” It is clear that John does not use the term “Jews” in the obvious sense to describe people of a specific ethnic or religious background. For example, in John 5:15, the man whom Jesus heals at Bethesda “told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well,” and in 13:33 Jesus tells his disciples, “as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.” In both cases “the Jews” are in a separate category from Jesus and the disciples, despite the fact that both Jesus and the disciples are Jewish by race and religious heritage. Similarly, John’s Jesus several times refers to the OT as “your own Law” when debating with “the Jews” (Jn 8:17; 10:34), even though Jesus, as God incarnate (1:1–4), presumably authored the Scriptures.

This distinction between “Jews” and disciples does not mark a friendly coexistence. The disciples are “born of God” (Jn 1:12–13; 1Jn 3:1; 4:7), while the Jews are children of the devil, who is a “murderer” and “liar” (Jn 8:44). Not surprisingly the Jews constantly seek to do the devil’s work of harassing those who might accept Jesus (Jn 9:22; 19:38–39). In John’s vocabulary, “the Jews” seem to be Jewish people who reject Jesus and subsequently abuse his disciples. Because they reject Jesus, all “Jews” are also members of the world.

The Johannine presentation of the Jews probably derives from John’s own experience of persecution from Jewish people who refused to accept the gospel. Jesus warns his disciples that they will be outcasts from the synagogue (Jn 16:1–4), perhaps alluding to an excommunication John and his audience had already experienced by the time 1–2–3 John were written. Removed from the relative safety of the Jewish community, the Johannine Christians would be left alone to face a hostile and unbelieving world on their own, without enjoying the rights and privileges granted to Jews in the Roman Empire.

b. The “Antichrists”

John's division of all people into two groups—"disciples" versus "the world/the Jews"—suggests that the Johannine churches faced persecution and alienation from outsiders. Many passages from 1–2–3 John suggest that another danger was lurking within the Christian community itself. These texts relate to a group of people whom John calls "Antichrists" (1Jn 2:18). While John reveals very little about this group, many theories on the nature of their doctrine and origins have been suggested. It will be helpful to examine the limited internal evidence from the letters before reaching a conclusion about the identity of John's rivals.

The Antichrists are first mentioned at 1 John 2:18, where the Elder warns his "children" that "as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many Antichrists have come." The name John gives them reveals his major contention with them. The Greek prefix *anti-* can mean both "against" and "in place of," so that an Antichrist is apparently a person who advocates another doctrine of Christ "in place of" the doctrine John teaches. The Antichrists disagreed with John about the relationship between the human and divine aspects of Jesus' nature. In John's view the divine Christ was incarnate in the human Jesus (Jn 1:14), so that the divine Christ, "who came by water and blood" (1Jn 5:6), could be seen and touched (1Jn 1:1–2). Jesus was, then, both fully human and fully divine at the same time. The Antichrists, however, held that the human Jesus and the divine Christ must be kept separate, with primary emphasis being placed on his divine nature. They therefore disputed John's claim that "Jesus [the human being] is the [spiritual] Christ" and that "Jesus [the] Christ has come in the flesh" (1Jn 2:22; 4:3; 2Jn 7). Because they did not accept his "witness," John refers to the Antichrists as liars and deceivers (1Jn 2:22; 2Jn 7).

Despite John's polemical protests, it is clear that the Antichrists, unlike "the world" and "the Jews," were an *internal* threat to the community. John's admission that "they went out from us" (1Jn 2:19) indicates that even he considered them Christian at one time, and it seems that Diotrephes, a congregational leader, prefers their doctrine over that of John (3Jn 9–10). The Antichrists were probably former disciples of John, Christian teachers who departed from the traditional Christology. Because they were known to and accepted by members of John's churches, it was easy for them to secure a following. The Elder therefore goes to pains to specify that true believers must accept the orthodox view, for "no one who denies the Son [Jesus] has the Father [God] also" (1Jn 2:23).

The Antichrists' distinction between the human Jesus and the spiritual Christ has led many to conclude that they were Gnostics. The theory that John wrote in response to a Gnostic heresy originates with the church fathers. Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.26.1; 3.3.4) records an encounter between the apostle John and Cerinthus, an early teacher associated with the Gnostic movement. Cerinthus seems to have taught that "the Christ," a divine spiritual being, descended on the human Jesus at his baptism and "possessed" him until his crucifixion, departing from Jesus just before his death.

The Antichrists have also been associated with another early branch of Gnosticism called "Docetism." Docetists, from the Greek *dokeō* ("to seem," GK 1506), believed that "the Christ" was a purely spiritual being who only "seemed" to have a human body (Jesus), thus denying the incarnation. The writings of Ignatius (AD 115; *Trall.* 9–10; *Smyrn.* 2–7) indicate that Docetists were active in western Asia Minor not long after the Johannine literature was produced. Although the suggestion that the Antichrists were Gnostics offers a quick and convenient historical backdrop for the Johannine letters, it is important to stress that "while striking parallels can be adduced between early known heresies and the epistles of John, none of these heresies perfectly mirrors the false teachings of 1 and 2 John" (Thompson, 18; cf. Rensberger, 22–24). The origins and development of Gnostic thought are far from certain, and the available evidence suggests that the Gnostic movement was composed of a large number of independent teachers whose views were similar but distinct. The label "Gnostic" is therefore not especially helpful and can, in fact, be detrimental to analysis of 1–2–3 John, especially since the Antichrists' doctrine does not seem to bear all the characteristics of Gnostic thought.

Whether or not the Antichrists were Gnostics or part of a larger "incipient Gnosticism," two questions must be answered. First, why did the Antichrists distinguish between the spiritual Christ and the human Jesus? Second, on what basis could the Antichrists successfully dispute the Elder's authority, especially since the Elder's position on Jesus seems to represent the established beliefs of the community? The answer to both questions may lie in John's own teaching about Jesus.

Most scholars today believe that the major points of the Johannine Jesus tradition, and perhaps of the fourth gospel, had been thoroughly established

before the writing of 1–2–3 John (see R. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* [New York: Paulist, 1979], 106–7, 138–44; Smalley, xxvi–xxvii; von Wahlde, 114–22; Rensberger, 24). According to this established tradition, Jesus made a number of specific promises to the disciples during the Last Supper concerning the coming of the Holy Spirit, or “Paraclete.” It is clear from these “Paraclete Sayings,” preserved now in the fourth gospel’s farewell address (Jn 13–17), that the Johannine Christians understood the Spirit to be Jesus’ living presence in the community and also understood that the Spirit would continue to offer the teaching and guidance provided by the human Jesus. Indeed, Jesus himself would “come to you” in the form of the “Spirit of truth,” who would “live with you” and “be in you” (Jn 14:16–18). As such, the Paraclete would “teach you all things” (14:26) and “guide you into all truth,” speaking not his own words but the words given to him by Jesus (16:13).

These passages suggest that every individual Christian receives the Spirit and enjoys the continuing presence of Jesus through the Spirit’s work. For this reason, the author of 1 John can assure his audience that “we know that he lives in us ... by the Spirit he gave us” (3:24) and can remind them that the Spirit testifies to Jesus as the Son of God (5:7). In fact, even the message of the Antichrists originates in the spirit realm, although the spirit that guides them, the “spirit of falsehood,” is “from the world” (1Jn 4:1–6; cf. 1Co 12:1–3). It seems, then, that the Johannine community believed strongly in the continuing work of Jesus through the Holy Spirit and in the work of other “spirits” that led people to oppose God and truth.

From John’s perspective, this teaching about the Paraclete establishes a close connection between the human Jesus of the past and the divine Spirit of God who continues to operate in the community after Jesus’ death. But it seems that the Antichrists interpreted Jesus’ words about the Spirit in a different way: if the resurrected Lord, through the Spirit, continues to speak and act in the church, there is little need to worry about the life and teachings of the human Jesus. In fact, if the same divine Word that appeared incarnate in the human Jesus continues to speak through believers, there is really not so much difference between Christians and Jesus himself.

From this perspective, there would be no point in stressing that “Jesus [the man] is the [spiritual] Christ,” for every believer possesses the spiritual Christ in the form of the Paraclete. Further, from the Antichrists’

perspective, anything that the Spirit seems to be saying *now* would be just as authoritative as anything the human Jesus said *then*. Following this principle, the Antichrists could freely modify or reinterpret the established Jesus tradition in the light of new revelations. Rensberger, 24, notes, “If the opponents claimed that their ideas were inspired by the Spirit ... , they would not hesitate to offer *new* concepts built up from their basic interpretation of the tradition” (cf. Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 138–42; Gary Burge, *The Anointed Community* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 218–19). These new concepts, of course, would be of equal authority with the Elder’s teachings.

This reconstruction of the Antichrists’ position answers both questions raised above. Their own experience of the Spirit made it unnecessary for them to differentiate between the human Jesus and the spiritual Christ, who continued to speak and act as the Paraclete. To defend this position, they could interpret the tradition now preserved in John 14:18 to mean that Jesus’ human body was only a temporary abode for the Word of God, who now dwelt within all believers. This first conclusion would naturally answer the second question, for those who are guided by the Spirit of God would have no need to submit to the Elder or anyone else in regard to their judgments about life and faith. For this reason the Antichrists posed a serious threat to John’s authority and to the orthodox understanding of Jesus’ life and teaching.

4. STRUCTURE

While 2 and 3 John follow standard epistolary formats, the genre of 1 John is difficult to determine. Although 1 John seems to address the needs of a specific group of believers, it lacks the formal introduction and conclusion typical of ancient letters, and its structure does not follow a standard epistolary outline. First John has therefore been variously described as “an essay or sermon or enchiridion or church order” (Rensberger, 30), and one commentator compares it to “a musical reprise” (Johnson, 15).

Whether or not 1 John can be ascribed to a specific genre, it seems likely that the book was a circular intended to be read aloud in meetings of the various house churches under John’s jurisdiction. It was probably delivered to the various churches by John’s disciples, “the brothers” mentioned in 3

John 5–8. To help local leaders distinguish between “the brothers” and the Antichrists, the Elder presumably sent letters of recommendation with his official envoys. Third John is probably one such letter. The bearers of these recommendations most likely read 1 John to the gathered churches and explained its implications to them.

First John breaks down into two major sections, reflecting the two major conflicts John faced. After a brief prologue that introduces the christological issue and establishes the need to create boundaries (1:1–4), the first major section (1:5–2:17) distinguishes those who are “in the world” from those who have “overcome the world.” The second major section (2:18–5:21) further distinguishes true disciples from Antichrists. Within each section, John presents a series of tests that will help the audience determine who is “in” and who is, or who should be, “out” of true fellowship with God. These “tests” take the form of the oft-discussed “slogans” of 1 John, statements that sort individuals into absolute dualistic categories based on their beliefs or behaviors. Both 2 and 3 John present warnings and encouragement, while stressing the Elder’s desire to maintain fellowship with the recipients.

5. SUMMARY

1–2–3 John were written to a church facing external and internal pressures. Forces outside the community—“the world” and “the Jews”—brought the threat of persecution, challenging believers to abandon the faith. In the face of this hostility, the leadership of the group had fragmented. The founder of the community, John, was being opposed by some of his former disciples. These opponents, claiming the Spirit’s guidance, had reinterpreted the community’s Jesus tradition and created a new Christology, which focused on the divinity of Christ while rejecting his humanity. 1–2–3 John are intended to encourage Christians to endure the persecution and to discourage them from accepting the doctrines of the Antichrists. In the process, John must reassert his own authority as a witness to the Jesus tradition and restate in the strongest possible terms the marks of true Christianity.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following is a selective list of commentaries and monographs on 1–2–3 John available in English, confined for the most part to those referred to in the commentary (they will be referred to simply by the author's name [and initials only when necessary to distinguish two authors of the same surname]). References to other resources will carry full bibliographic details at the first mention and thereafter a short title.

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7. OUTLINE OF 1 JOHN

- I. Prologue: Setting the Boundaries (1:1–4)
- II. Tests to Distinguish True Disciples from the World (1:5–2:17)
 - A. Test #1: Walking in the Light (1:5–10)
 - B. Test #2: Keeping His Commands (2:1–6)
 - C. Test #3: Loving Your Brothers (2:7–11)
 - D. Test #4: Loving the World (2:12–17)
- III. Tests to Distinguish True Disciples from Antichrists (2:18–5:21)
 - A. Test #5: The True Confession (2:18–27)

- B. Test #6: Living without Sin (2:28–3:24)
 - C. Test #7: The True Spirit (4:1–6)
 - D. Test #8: Perfect Love (4:7–21)
 - E. Test #9: True Faith (5:1–13)
 - F. Test #10: Sin That Leads to Death (5:14–21)
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1. Current versions of the developmental approach originate with J. Louis Martyn's *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), which provided the interpretive rationale for the theory. Many scholars who currently adopt this position avoid the term "school" due to uncertainties about the nature of philosophical and religious schools in the ancient world.

Text and Exposition

I. PROLOGUE: SETTING THE BOUNDARIES (1:1–4)

OVERVIEW

The prologue to 1 John draws a boundary between the author’s group and his enemies—“the world” and the Antichrists. This boundary is ideological, categorizing people on the basis of whether or not they accept John’s teaching—“the Word of Life.” People in John’s group enjoy a fellowship with God and Jesus that brings joy, and those who wish to enter this fellowship of joy must accept John’s testimony unconditionally. Consistent with Johannine dualism, there is no compromise position: the reader must choose fellowship with John *or* fellowship with the world and must accept the consequences of that choice.

¹That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ²The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴We write this to make our joy complete.

COMMENTARY

1 As in the gospel of John, the opening sentence of 1 John is based on Genesis 1:1, but with a slightly different application. John 1:1 emphasizes the deity of Jesus by placing him at the “beginning” (*archē*, GK 794) of time, when God’s creative Word spoke the universe into being. First John 1:1, however, emphasizes the humanity of Jesus by stressing that the one

who existed from the “beginning” (*archē*) of time more recently appeared in human form. This focus is evident in the emphasis on the Word’s empirical existence. Four verbs referring to sensory experience are used here to emphasize that the “Word of Life” is not only mystical and spiritual but also physical and tangible. This dual emphasis immediately distinguishes John’s teaching from that of the Antichrists. While the Antichrists would argue that the church is guided by a mystical experience of the Holy Spirit, John insists that faith is founded on objective realities from a real moment in human history.

The Greek of 1:1–3 is notoriously complicated. One major set of problems concerns the meaning of *tou logou tēs zōēs* (“the Word of life”) at the end of v.1. It is difficult, first of all, to determine whether *logos* (“word,” GK 3364) refers to Jesus personally or to John’s message about Jesus. Since John elsewhere uses *logos* as a title for Christ (Jn 1:1–4; 14:6), many commentators understand “the Word” at 1 John 1:1 to be Jesus himself, the one who has been heard, seen, and touched. On the other hand, since the opening sentence includes the verb *apangellō* (“we proclaim,” GK 550, v.3), it may be that *logos* refers more generally to “the message” that “we proclaim,” i.e., the gospel. Since John is stressing the validity of his own teaching, and since Jesus is clearly referred to as “the Life” in v.2, it seems most likely that “the Word” in v.1 is John’s message about Jesus.

In what sense, then, is this a message “of life”? The genitive *tēs zōēs* (GK 2437) may be translated “the word *which is life*” (appositive genitive), “the *life-giving* word” or “the *living* word” (descriptive genitive), or “the word *about life*” (objective genitive). John is probably using the term in the third sense to describe the substance of his message. The “word” that he proclaims is about “the Life,” which was revealed in the specific form of the human Jesus. In John’s view, the “word” of the Antichrists is wrong because it fails to recognize that this Life could be heard, seen, and touched.

2 Before finishing the thought of v.1, John pauses to elaborate the subject of his preaching, “the Life” (*hē zōē*, GK 2437). “Life” is a key term in Johannine thought, appearing thirty-six times in the fourth gospel and thirteen times in 1–2–3 John. In the fourth gospel, *zōē* is an aspect of Christ’s divine identity that he shares with the Father (Jn 1:4; 6:57; 14:6). As such, *zōē* has an eternal quality (Jn 3:16–17) that distinguishes it from *psychē* (GK 6034), biological life. While all living things have *psychē*,

Jesus has come into the world so that human beings may have *zōē*, divine life, as well (John 3:16; 11:25–26). Hence Jesus will “lay down his [physical] life [*psyche*]” so that his sheep may have spiritual “life [*zōē*] ... to the full” (Jn 10:10–11). This abundant life is available to those who “know God,” i.e., those who accept Jesus as the one whom God has sent (Jn 17:3). The offer of life continues in the true Christian preaching, which proclaims the signs of Jesus’ deity so that all those who “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God ... may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31).

The emphasis on “life” in the fourth gospel may have contributed to the problem John is addressing in 1 John. The Antichrists could easily interpret these references to mean that the physical body of Jesus was expendable, a temporary inconvenience that had to be eliminated before he could share true spiritual life with his people. John affirms the fourth gospel’s teaching, while countering the Antichrists’ argument, by stressing that “life” is not a subjective experience but rather the person of Jesus himself. Although the Life was “with the Father,” John states twice in v.2 that “it has appeared to us” (*phaneroō*, GK 5746), so that it was “seen” in the form of the human Jesus. In John’s view, the church’s witness and testimony are based on the fact of this manifestation. The eternal life that Christians enjoy originates in the physical life of Jesus and cannot be separated from it.

3 It is clear that John wishes to create a sense of solidarity with the reader at the beginning of the letter by differentiating between two groups—“us” and “them.” The boundary between the two groups is the message (“word,” v.1) that John proclaims. Only those who accept John’s teaching that Life manifested itself in the human Jesus “may have fellowship with us.” As noted in the introduction, there has been considerable debate over the identity of the “we” in 1:1–4. These verses include eleven first-person-plural verbs (“we do x”) and seven occurrences of the pronoun *hēmeis* (“we/us”). Some scholars interpret “we” here to be the entire Johannine community or a group of orthodox teachers within the community, making these verses a rallying cry to defend the “corporate tradition” against the Antichrists (see [Introduction](#)). This view does not, however, adequately account for fact that the pronoun “you” (*hymeis*) is also used four times in these verses to distinguish the reader from the author. Since “1 John is probably not a missionary tract for unbelievers but a communication with those who belong to the church” (R. A. Culpepper, *The Gospel and the Letters of John* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1998], 255), “we” (the author) and

“you” (the audience) must be co-members of the Christian community who are different in some way. The point of difference seems to be that “we” have heard, seen, touched, and witnessed Jesus, while “you” have not. “We” must therefore refer to the collective group of witnesses to the life of Jesus, of whom John claims to be a member. This witness puts John in a special category with those whose testimony cannot be refuted, a status the Antichrists do not enjoy. Only those Christians among “you” who accept John’s witness may remain in fellowship with him.

3a The Greek word *koinōnia* (GK 3126) is translated “fellowship” in the NIV. While the English word “fellowship” is used to describe everything from a deep friendship to a potluck dinner, *koinōnia* refers to a bond of partnership in a common enterprise or experience. Luke uses this term to refer to the sharing of possessions in the early church (Ac 2:44; 4:30), and Paul speaks of the *koinōnia* he enjoys with the Philippians due to their common commitment to the gospel (Php 1:5). To have *koinōnia* with someone means to share a sense of community with that person. Brown, 170, therefore refers to *koinōnia* as “both the dynamic *esprit de corps* that brings people together and the togetherness that is produced by that spirit.” John hopes that his audience will be united with him on the basis of their common faith in Jesus.

3b The second half of 1:3 elevates the basic distinction between “us” and “them” to absolute terms with ultimate consequences. John’s word gives him fellowship “with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ”; logically, those who refuse to accept John’s witness put themselves out of fellowship with Christ and God and therefore render themselves ineligible for eternal life. Ironically, the Antichrists, by focusing too much on their present experience of Christ through the Spirit and rejecting John’s witness about Jesus’ past, have placed themselves out of fellowship with God.

4 Following the adamant exclusivism of vv.1–3, John suddenly adopts a pastoral tone. This shift highlights an apparent paradox in 1 John. Marshall, 105, notes, “At first sight he [John] appears [in the prologue] to be addressing them [the readers] as if they were not Christians ... yet later on in the writing it is quite certain that he is writing to Christian believers.” John’s wavering posture toward his audience is probably the result of his recent experience. Though most of his audience have been loyal in the past, the doctrinal crisis presented by the Antichrists and the desertion of leaders

such as Diotrephes seem to have left John uncertain of his audience's loyalties. While John demands that his audience choose either to stay with him or to leave, he holds on to the hope that they will remain. Indeed, their fellowship would increase the joy he receives from his own fellowship with the Father. But it is probably too much to say that "even the author's fellowship with God is not fully satisfactory without the reader's incorporation" (Rensberger, 47). In Johannine thought, "joy" is a gift from God that transcends the difficulties of life in the world, because it recognizes God's continuing love in the face of the world's hatred (Jn 15:11; 16:20–22). Jesus therefore prays that his disciples "may have the full measure of my joy within them," despite the fact that he is sending them into a hateful world (Jn 17:13). In this sense, John's joy will continue, whether or not the audience makes the right decision, but their positive response would "fulfill" (*plēroō*, GK 4444; NIV, "make complete") his joy by granting him the satisfaction of success as a witness.

II. TESTS TO DISTINGUISH TRUE DISCIPLES FROM THE WORLD (1:5–2:17)

OVERVIEW

In a context of divisions and conflicting loyalties, John calls on Christians to reassert their faith in the true Word and to examine their lives. Those who wish to remain in fellowship with “us,” the true believers, must distinguish themselves from enemies without, “the world,” and enemies within, the Antichrists. But in light of the doctrinal confusion brought on by the Antichrists, how can believers tell who is in which group? After establishing the basic boundaries and his own credentials in the prologue, John proceeds to offer a series of tests that will distinguish the true children of God from the world and the Antichrists. The logic of each test follows an “if x, then y” format, wherein the “if” clause describes particular beliefs or actions a person might exhibit, and the “then” clause describes the necessary conclusion to be drawn from these observations.

A. Test #1: Walking in the Light (1:5–10)

⁵This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

COMMENTARY

5 John opens the first series of tests with a foundational principle: “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” This being the case, those whose lives are filled with darkness cannot be in fellowship with God. The means by which one identifies a life full of darkness are indicated in vv.6–10.

John assumes that this theological principle (“God is light”) cannot be denied because it comes “from him,” apparently the living Jesus of whom John is a witness. The statement “God is light” is introduced in the Greek text by *hoti*, which would seem to indicate that John is directly quoting something Jesus said (“God is light”). But no such statement appears in the fourth gospel, and although the Johannine Jesus refers to himself as “light” on several occasions (Jn 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35, 46; see also 1:4–5), he never speaks of God in this way. This apparent discrepancy has led many scholars to suggest that the *hoti* introducing “God is light” indicates indirect discourse (“we declare to you *that* God is light”), meaning that the statement in some way summarizes Jesus’ teaching about God’s moral nature (so NIV, NAB, NEB, NRSV, NKJV). Some scholars who take this view, noting the above references to Jesus as “the light” in John’s gospel, suggest that John is not referring to Jesus’ verbal teaching, but to the actions of Jesus that revealed God as light to the world. From this perspective, “God is light” summarizes “what they learned [about God] from Jesus from observation of his life” (Johnson, 29). This would be consistent with John’s insistence that he proclaims what he has “seen” Jesus do (1Jn 1:1–3). Other scholars who take this view suggest that John has combined a number of traditional statements and concepts into a composite saying (so Brown, 227–29; Rensberger, 51). This is a reasonable proposition, especially since the Johannine tradition seems to have been preserved primarily in the form of the oral testimony of teachers in the community at this time. In such a setting, it would be easy for John to summarize several ideas from the accepted Jesus tradition into one creedal statement supporting his argument.

While the above solutions are reasonable, the formula that introduces “God is light” suggests that John thinks of the statement as a saying of Jesus. He refers to it as the “message” (*angelia*, GK 32) that “we heard from him,” and he uses *anangellō* (GK 334; “we declare”) to describe his current proclamation of the same message “to you.” While John has previously insisted that he saw and touched the Life (1:1–3), the terms in 1:5 all refer to hearing and speaking, even though it would be more logical

to refer to “seeing” that “God is light.” In this context it seems most likely that the *hoti* at 1:5 indicates direct discourse (“And this is the message we heard from him and declare to you: ‘God is Light.’”). In support of this conclusion it should be noted that, while the fourth gospel gives no evidence that Jesus spoke of God as “light,” the underlying structure of the argument at 1 John 1:5–10 is formally similar to passages in the fourth gospel where Jesus is attempting to prove a point. In any case, even if John has combined several traditional sayings or motifs into one creed, he seems to be presenting the statement here from the platform of his authoritative witness to Jesus.

6–7 The first test in the first series of tests builds directly on the statement that “God is light.” The Greek word *koinōnia* (“fellowship”) is used again, suggesting that two parties “have something in common” (Marshall, 105). This being the case, *if* anyone walks in darkness, *then* that person cannot be in fellowship with the God in whom “there is no darkness at all” (1:5). Those who claim to have fellowship with God but “walk in darkness” are therefore liars who cannot be members of John’s group because they do not enjoy the same fellowship with God that John does (1:3). The positive converse is stated as a second test at verse 7: *If* someone “walks in the light,” *then* that person has fellowship with God and John because, again, God is “in the light.”

These two tests follow a pattern that will continue throughout 1 John. First, all the tests John offers are objective and observable, designed to reveal a person’s true intentions apart from verbal claims. Deeds are the test for words, and while words can be false John seems to believe that a person’s actions reveal his or her true nature. Second, many of John’s tests follow the “if ... [but] ... then” pattern evident here, giving them an absolute quality consistent with his dualistic stance. This presentation effectively eliminates any gray area, for a single premise (“if”) always leads to a single conclusion (“then”), irrespective of any contingent circumstances (“but”). Here, “if” one claims to have fellowship with God “but” walks in the darkness, “then” he is a liar; on the other hand, “if” one walks in the light, “then” her sins are forgiven, granting fellowship with God. There are no exceptions.

What does it mean, then, to “walk in the light” or to “walk in the darkness”? Since vv.8–10 stress the need to acknowledge sin, it is

reasonable to understand vv.6–7 in ethical terms. Marshall, 110, observes that “to live in the darkness means to live without the benefit of divine illumination and guidance and so to live in sin.” Similarly, Brown, 230–31, is surprised that “the first overt attack on dangerous ideas [in 1 John] is in the moral sphere. One might have expected the author to begin with the Christological errors that are so much on his mind.” It may be, however, that Brown’s expectation is more accurate than his conclusion. While vv.8–10 clearly address the problem of sin, “walking in the darkness” is not typically used in this way in the fourth gospel. In John 8:12, for example, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” During his final public appeal in Jerusalem, Jesus urges the Jews to believe in him and “walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going” (Jn 12:35; cf. 11:9–10). Each time Jesus refers to “walking in darkness,” he does so in the context of a claim that God’s “light” is available, and 1 John 1:5–7 also explicitly contrasts “walking in the darkness” with the claim that “God is light.” These texts suggest that “walking in the darkness” refers to a failure to accept the revelation of God through Jesus. To “walk in the light” presumably means to accept John’s teaching about Jesus, which is why he and such people “have fellowship with one another.” This fellowship is based on a common experience of forgiveness of sins, which in John’s view only true Christians enjoy.

The question remains as to whom John wishes to distinguish with this first set of tests (1Jn 1:5–10). Many scholars believe that his remarks are aimed at the Antichrists, whose life and doctrines indicate that they “walk in the darkness.” Most who hold this position detect echoes of the Antichrists’ teaching in the tests John offers, suggesting that they used slogans, such as “we have communion with him” (v.6) and “we do not have sin” (v.8), which John wishes to refute (so Marshall, 110–13; Brown, 231–32; Culpepper, 16–18; Johnson, 29–32; Rensberger, 49–50). While this is certainly the case later on in the letter (2:22; 4:1–3), there is no way to tell whether or not the Antichrists advocated the doctrines mentioned here. It is clear that they did not share John’s view of the human nature of Jesus, but this belief would not inherently lead to the conclusion that Christians have no sin or that people who “walk in the darkness” can have communion with God.

On the other hand, John states on numerous occasions that “the world” is guilty of unrepentant sin and that those who are of the world, particularly the Jews, have serious misconceptions about their relationship with God. The world does not recognize Jesus (Jn 1:10; 12:47–49; 14:31; 17:25) and rejects him because his “light” exposes their evil deeds (Jn 3:19–20; 7:7; 16:8–11), and the Jews, who “do not have the love of God in [their] hearts” (Jn 5:42), have misunderstood Jesus and thereby rejected God (cf. Jn 1:5, 11; 5:39–47; 6:26, 36; 7:28–29; 8:14–15; 10:25–26, 34–38). The Jews, in fact, continue to cling to the false notion that salvation may be found in the Scriptures, Moses, and their lineage from Abraham, even after witnessing Jesus’ signs (Jn 5:39, 45–46; 6:32–33; 8:31–44). It seems more likely that John is speaking of these people rather than the Antichrists when he refers to those who “walk in the darkness.” Christians can easily distinguish themselves from such people on the basis of their faith in Jesus. Those who do not have faith—the world and the Jews—cannot be in good fellowship with God because their sins are not cleansed by Jesus’ blood.

8–9 John has just mentioned at the end of v.7 that those who have fellowship with God are cleansed of sin by Jesus’ blood. He now offers another test that further distinguishes those who receive this cleansing from those who do not. The new test follows the same formula as that in 1:6: “*If* we claim to be without sin, [*then*] we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Verse 9 restates this test from a positive perspective: “*If* we confess our sins, [*then*] he ... will purify us from all unrighteousness.” The latter test is again undergirded with an undeniable principle about God’s nature. Not only is God “light,” he is also “faithful and just” and will therefore respond to our admission of guilt by forgiving our sins.

There is an important shift from the singular *hamartia* (“sin,” GK 281) to the plural *hamartias* (“sins”) between vv.8 and 9. The singular “sin” appears in v.8 with *ouk echomen*, “we have no sin” (NIV, “we claim to be without sin”). John elsewhere uses the phrase “to have sin” to emphasize the guilt that is accrued by committing sinful acts (cf. Jn 9:41, where the NIV translates *hamartia* as “guilt”; 15:22–24, where the NIV translates “not have sin” as “not be guilty of sin”; 19:11, where the NIV translates “has greater sin” as “is guilty of a greater sin”). Rensberger, 53, notes that John always uses this phrase of “people hostile to Jesus.” While many scholars would again suggest that John is addressing a doctrine of the Antichrists, it seems more likely he is referring to the world’s disregard for Jesus’

proclamation. Both Jesus and the Spirit insist that the world is guilty of sin (Jn 12:47–48; 15:22–24; 16:8–11), but the world, by refusing to accept Jesus, denies this claim. Jesus has very low regard for such people and tells the Pharisees on one occasion that “if you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin [lit., would have no sin]; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt [lit., sin] remains” (Jn 9:41).

The same complex of ideas underlies 1 John 1:8–9. While John is a dualist, he is not a perfectionist. All people—the world, the Jews, and believers—are guilty of sin. Christians are different from the rest in that they acknowledge this fact and receive forgiveness, but those who deny their guilt only deceive themselves. John seems to be thinking here of the initial experience of Christian conversion, when those in the world admit their sin, accept Jesus, and subsequently receive “the right to become children of God” (Jn 1:12).

John’s dualistic perspective is evident in the promise that those who confess their sins will be “cleansed” (*katharizō*, GK 2751; NIV, “purify”). John has already used this term in v.7 to indicate that those who walk in the light are “cleansed” by Jesus’ blood. The Greek *katharizō* reinforces the language of “light” and “darkness” by distinguishing people as “clean” or “unclean.” Those who do not confess their sins are unclean and alienated from God, whereas those who do confess are made pure, thereby allowing fellowship with him. Cleansing is necessary because, in a further dualistic distinction, God is “just” (*dikaios*, GK 1465) while sinners are “unjust” (*adikos*, GK 94; NIV, “unrighteous”). This injustice is eliminated only through the mercy of a just God.

It is interesting to note that John associates God’s forgiveness with his justice (*dikaios*) rather than his mercy (*eleos*, GK 1799) or grace (*charis*, GK 5921). The terms “faithful and just” echo OT covenantal language, stressing that God keeps his promises (cf. Dt 7:9; 32:4; Ps 145:13; Mic 7:18–20). The promise John has in mind seems to be connected with God’s sending his Son into the world to take away sins—an act that allows us to “rely on the love God has for us” (1Jn 4:16; cf. Jn 3:16–17). This act of love should give Christians comfort and confidence about their salvation and their unique relationship with God (1Jn 5:13–15).

10 John now offers a test that logically extends vv.8–9. Verse 8 addressed the person who claims to have no sin, i.e., who claims not to be guilty of sin

before God. Verse 9 spoke of the person whose guilt is removed through the confession and forgiveness of individual “sins.” To complete his argument, John offers a test to distinguish those who falsely claim that they are not guilty of “sin” because they have never committed individual “sins.” The “if” clause in this case is comprehensive, using the perfect tense of *hamartanō* (“we have never sinned”) to characterize a certain lifestyle: “If we say we are not sinners ...” Many scholars again see this as a veiled reference to the teachings of the Antichrists (so Marshall, 114; Brown, 211–12; Culpepper, 19; Johnson, 33), but it seems more likely that John is condemning the moral indifference of the world. Those who deny their sinfulness and refuse to accept their sinful guilt show they have no fellowship with God.

Those who refuse to acknowledge their sinfulness “make him out to be a liar” and prove that “his word is not in them” (NIV, “his word has no place in our lives”). This terminology implies that such a claim is incompatible with something God has said. Culpepper, 19–20, suggests that John is thinking of the “word of God” revealed in OT texts on sin such as 1 Kings 8:46 and Proverbs 20:9. Others point to the general Christian proclamation that all people are sinners in need of redemption through Christ (so Dodd, 23; Marshall, 114–15; Johnson, 33–34). While the OT texts Culpepper mentions may be in the background, the latter interpretation seems more likely. John opened this first series of tests by citing a traditional saying (1:5) and now closes it by making another appeal to his Jesus tradition. Here again it is unclear what specific teaching John has in mind. The Johannine Jesus has very little to say about “sins” beyond the major sin of rejecting his revelation of God (cf. Jn 15:22–24; 16:8–11). Further, the formula for introducing the teaching at 1 John 1:10 is much less specific than that at 1:5, suggesting that John is now referring to a general theme in Jesus’ teaching: all people are sinners in need of divine redemption. Perhaps John is thinking of statements such as John 8:24, where Jesus tells the Jews that unless they accept him, “you will indeed die in your sins,” or 8:34, where Jesus says that “everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” In John’s view this teaching is not subject to reinterpretation. Those who refuse to accept it portray God as a “liar” because they deny the truth of what Jesus has clearly said.

NOTES

5 In certain passages in the fourth gospel, Jesus makes a definitive statement about God and then uses that statement as a “given” to support his argument. For example, in his discussion with the Samaritan woman on the proper place of worship Jesus first states the principle “God is spirit” to support the conclusion that “his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:24). In John 10:34–36, Jesus defends his right to be called “God” by first citing the word of God in Psalm 82:6, a Scripture that “cannot be broken” and that therefore functions as an indisputable premise in his argument. Similarly, 1 John 1:5 states the principle that “God is light” to undergird the tests of fellowship introduced in the following verses.

5 “Light” was a common metaphor for deity in ancient religions. The Johannine usage probably builds on the OT, where God is associated with light to stress his guidance and redemption (Pss 27:1; 36:9; Isa 9:1–2; 60:1–2) or his perfection and holiness (Ps 104:2). The fourth gospel usually applies the metaphor to Jesus in the former sense, stressing the revelation of God available through him (Jn 1:4–5; 8:12; 12:35). Ironically, this light resulted in both redemption and judgment, for many who saw the light did not recognize him (Jn 1:5; 3:19).

6–7 The understanding that vv.6–7 refer to a doctrinal rather than an ethical test of fellowship is consistent with John’s dualistic presentation (see [Introduction](#)). The dualistic perspective generally associates “light” and “darkness” with the inner nature of the person rather than with his or her visible behavior. This perspective is evident in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which categorize individuals either as “children of light” or “children of darkness” (see 1QS 3–4). Similarly, John can refer to all those who reject Christ as “the darkness” without commenting on their ethical behavior (Jn 1:5) and can differentiate people’s behavior from their “love of darkness” or “love of light” (Jn 3:19–21). “Walking in the darkness” refers not so much to what people *do* as to what they *are* by nature, which is revealed, in John’s view, by whether or not they accept Jesus. Those who do not accept him deceive themselves if they claim to have fellowship with God.

8–9 Many scholars believe that the doctrine of the Antichrists included a radical revision of orthodox Johannine ethics. Thompson, 15, provides a convenient summary of this view, with supporting texts from 1 John. She argues that the Antichrists “held the view that those who were the ‘children of God’ (3:1–2) attained a spiritual status by being ‘born of God’ (3:9–10)

that not only delivered them from the guilt and power of sin but actually rendered them sinless. They claimed to be without sin and to have attained a state of perfect righteousness (1:8, 10)” (cf. Dodd, 21–22; Brown, 80–83, 233–34; F. Segovia, *Love Relationships in the Johannine Tradition* [SBLDS 58; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982], 77–79; Culpepper, 17–18; Johnson, 32; Rensberger, 25, 53). This hypothesis, while intriguing, relies on a number of passages from 1 John that touch on Christian ethics without specifically mentioning the Antichrists. The ethical teachings of John’s rivals are therefore difficult to reconstruct.

REFLECTIONS

John’s first group of tests has identified those whose beliefs do not coincide with key teachings of Jesus on the relationship between God and the world. Jesus teaches that God is light, making “liars” of those who claim fellowship with God while walking in darkness. Jesus teaches that all people sin and bear the guilt of sin, making those who are morally indifferent to be enemies of God. Such people are not cleansed by Jesus’ blood and therefore cannot be in fellowship with John and his community. These tests thereby distinguish believers from “the world.” It is difficult to overlook the exclusive tone of John’s remarks. In his view there is no hope of salvation apart from faith in Jesus and participation in the true community of God’s people.

B. Test #2: Keeping His Commands (2:1–6)

OVERVIEW

Now that John has established the basic *doctrinal* difference between believers and the world, he turns to tests that will distinguish the *behavior* of believers from outsiders. While the first set of tests focused on nonbelievers, John now highlights the life of the Christian. Consistent with the emphasis on tradition in ch. 1, believers are distinct because they “obey his commands” (2:3), i.e., they live by the teachings of the historical Jesus.

¹My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ²He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

³We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. ⁴The man who says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. ⁵But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: ⁶Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

COMMENTARY

1 John has just stressed that all people have sinned and bear the guilt of this sin, and he has told believers that God will cleanse them if they confess their sins (1:8–10). Lest this be taken as a license to sin, John immediately clarifies that he is writing “so that you will not sin.” Recognition of God’s grace and forgiveness should lead to obedience, not to further sinning.

Continuing the thought of vv.8–10, John introduces Jesus as the advocate (*paraklētos*, GK 4156) of Christians who sin. The term *paraklētos*, which appears in the NT only in the Johannine literature, is used in the fourth gospel exclusively in reference to the Holy Spirit. *Paraklētos* literally means “one called alongside” to help someone, highlighting the Spirit’s ministry of teaching and guiding the disciples (Jn 14:26; 16:13), empowering their testimony (15:26), and vindicating Jesus’ self-revelation (16:8–11). Even in the fourth gospel, however, there is a close connection between Jesus and the Paraclete, for the Spirit is the form in which Jesus will come to the disciples and remain with them (14:16–18). For this reason Jesus refers to the Spirit as *allos paraklētos*, “another Paraclete” (NIV, “another Counselor”), like himself. The Greek *allos* means “another” of the same type or category, emphasizing the continuity between Jesus and the Spirit. John prefers this term over the Greek *heteros*, which would indicate “another” helper of a different kind.

2 John's discussion of Jesus' relationship with sinners suddenly shifts from a legal motif to a sacrificial motif. The word translated "atoning sacrifice" is *hilasmos* (GK 2662; KJV, "propitiation"). Considerable debate surrounds this term and its theological significance (cf. Marshall, 117–18; Brown, 218–22). While *hilasmos* is rare in the NT, it was commonly used in pagan literature to refer to a sacrifice made to appease the wrath of an angry deity. Some have therefore concluded that this verse means that Jesus' death as "the Righteous One" expends the anger God feels toward those who confess their sin (so Marshall, 118). Those who take this view focus on God's wrath and the need for Christ to take action that will quench this wrath. Dodd, 25–27, has challenged this view, arguing that *hilasmos* refers not to the propitiation of God's wrath but to the "expiation" of the believer's sin. In some contexts, the verbal form of *hilasmos* means "to perform an act by which defilement [ritual or moral] is removed" from a person. If this is the meaning at v.2, John is arguing that Jesus, as our advocate, restores our relationship with God by removing our sin and defilement. Those who take this view focus on the believer's sin and Christ's action to remove that sin.

The issue is difficult because both interpretations of *hilasmos* fit the context of v.2. On one hand, believers have, by their own admission, sinned against God and bear the consequent guilt of that sin (1:8–9). This guilt is removed by the blood of Jesus (1:7), stressing his sacrificial death to appease God's wrath. On the other hand, John describes the removal of sin as "cleansing" twice at 1:7–9, suggesting that the believer's impurity is the primary obstacle to her relationship with God. Forgiveness is granted not because God's wrath is appeased but because he is "faithful and just," keeping his promises to pardon those who are penitent (1:9). It may also be that John has both meanings of *hilasmos* in mind. The NIV reflects this possibility by translating *hilasmos* as "atoning sacrifice." "Atonement" focuses on the removal of impurity and the restoration of our relationship with God, while "sacrifice" highlights the death of Jesus in place of believers to absorb God's wrath toward sin. Both are critical aspects of Jesus' work as advocate.

John's reference to Jesus as the "atoning sacrifice" for the sins of *the whole world* seems "remarkably inclusive ... for the otherwise often closed and world-rejecting 1 John" (Rensberger, 57). It may be, though, that John is still thinking in exclusive terms. Although Jesus did die on behalf of the

world, John has already established that the world walks in darkness, refusing to confess sins so as to receive forgiveness (1:5–10; cf. Jn 3:16–20). Consequently, no person can hope for atonement while remaining in the world. All people must come to Jesus in order to appease God’s wrath, but most will never do so, and there is no other way to experience redemption. First John 2:2 thereby eliminates any possible hope of salvation for the vast majority of human beings by insisting that Jesus is the single, universal sacrifice for sins.

3 John now introduces the principle that supports the two tests (vv.4–5) in this section: “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.” In John’s view, “knowing God” is not only a confession or a mystical experience but also a lifestyle that follows the teachings (“commands”) of the historical Jesus. Forgiveness does not negate the real need for obedience. Christians are distinct from the world in that their sins are forgiven, but they are also to be distinct from the world in that they avoid sin in the first place.

The idea that true believers may be identified by what they “know” pervades 1 John. Special knowledge distinguishes those who “walk in the light” from those who “walk in the darkness,” ignorant of God and their own true nature. According to John, Christians “know”:

- “that we have come to know him” if we obey his commands (2:3)
- “him who is from the beginning” (2:13–14)
- “the truth,” that “Jesus is the Christ,” and that anyone who says otherwise is an Antichrist (2:20, 22)
- “that everyone who does what is right has been born of [God]” (2:29)
- that when Jesus appears, we will be like him (3:2)
- that Jesus came to take away sins (3:5)
- that “we have passed from death to life” (3:14)
- that if we believe that Jesus is the Son, we have eternal life (5:13)
- that God hears our prayers (5:15)
- that Jesus keeps those “born of God” from sin, that believers are “of God” while the world belongs to Satan, and that Jesus came so we could understand the true God (5:18–20)

As will be seen, many of these knowledge statements are connected to specific tests. For example, because Christians know “the truth,” they should be able to distinguish Antichrists from true believers (2:20–22); and because Christians know that Jesus “appeared so that he might take away sins,” they should realize that no one who keeps on sinning “lives in him” (3:5–6).

4–5 John now offers two tests that will obliterate any claim that “knowing God” is a purely intellectual activity. The first test is negative: *If* someone says, “I know him,” *but* “does not do what he commands,” *then* one must conclude that this person is a liar. The reference to such people as liars echoes the language of 1:6, 10. Like 1:10, this test seems to compare something that someone might say to something Jesus has said—a “command.” John is probably thinking of sayings such as John 14:15, 21–24 (“if you love me, you will obey what I command”). Since Jesus said these things and since his word is truth, anyone who would dispute such teaching is a “liar.”

The positive counterpart to the negative test at v.5 has notoriously complex grammar, making it difficult to determine whether the phrase “this is how we know we are in him” goes with the statement that precedes it or with the one that follows. The NIV places this phrase with v.6, but it seems more likely it properly belongs with the test in v.5 (so KJV; cf. Brown, 258; Culpepper 24; Johnson, 40). The grammatical confusion in this case results from the fact that John draws two conclusions from one condition: “*If* anyone obeys his word” [= obeys the teaching of Jesus], *then* (1) “God’s love is truly made complete in her,” and (2) “we know we are in [Jesus].”

The statement that “God’s love is truly made complete” in the person who obeys his word has generated considerable controversy. The genitive *tou theou* (“the love of God”) could be objective or subjective. If subjective, the phrase would mean that God’s love *for us* becomes complete when we obey him, perhaps because the barrier of sin is removed; if objective, it would mean that our love *for God* becomes complete when we obey him, stressing that faith must be combined with action. The context suggests that the genitive here is objective: John is thinking of our love for God as that love which expresses itself in obedience. Love of God is thus parallel to knowledge of God in v.3, the two terms reflecting different aspects of a single Christian experience. The verb *teleioō* (NIV, “made complete”)

suggests that the goal of this experience is a life of obedience. The Johannine Jesus utters this word with his dying breath to indicate that he has finished everything God sent him to accomplish (Jn 19:30).

6 While the language of this verse is grammatically similar to that of v.4, it seems John is now offering a maxim to validate the two tests in vv.4–5. While v.3 focused on the need to obey Jesus’ teaching, v.6 emphasizes the need to live by his example. The person who claims to remain in Jesus “ought to walk just as he walked” (NIV, “must walk as Jesus did”), meaning that the true believer’s life will be patterned after the example of Jesus.

The maxim in v.6 describes the person who “claims to live in him.” The Greek word *menō* (NIV, “live”; GK 3531) is a key term in Johannine thought. *Menō* literally means “remain,” “stay,” or “abide,” and John sometimes uses the term in this general sense to imply endurance or durability (cf. Rensberger, 62–63). He warns believers, for example, to “see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you” in the face of the threat of the Antichrists (2:24) and tells the “chosen lady” that “the truth which remains in us will be with us forever” (2Jn 2; NIV, “the truth, which lives in us ...”).

Other passages indicate that *menō* is a codeword for several key points in Johannine theology. It is frequently used in the fourth gospel to describe “the relationship of mutual indwelling of the Father, the Son, and the believer” (W. L. Kynes, “Abiding,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel Green et al. [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992], 2). The Father abides in Jesus, empowering his work (Jn 14:10), and will also abide in those who love Jesus and obey his teaching (14:23). The disciples, in turn, must abide in Jesus, apparently meaning that they must live by his word in order to maintain their relationship with him. It is through this process of mutual indwelling that Jesus gives believers life and power to accomplish his work (15:4–9). This special relationship gives an eschatological dimension to Christian experience. Those who remain with Jesus faithfully throughout their lives will “abide [NIV, live] forever” because they have escaped from the world and its desires (1Jn 2:17). First John 2:6 highlights the ethical obligation that follows from this relationship: if we truly abide in Jesus, this will be evident in the way we live our lives. All those who do not live this way “abide in death” (1Jn 3:14; NIV, “remain in death”).

NOTES

1 While there is some debate over the precise historical background of “Paraclete” in the fourth gospel, “in the present context [1 Jn 2] the word undoubtedly signifies an ‘advocate’ or ‘counsel for the defense’ in a legal context” (Marshall, 116; cf. Dodd, 24–25; Brown, 215–17; Culpepper, 20; Rensberger, 56). The reference to Jesus as the παράκλητος (*paraklētos*; NIV, “one who speaks in our defense”) follows from the legal terminology introduced in the preceding section. Thinking of the divine courtroom, John contrasts the person who pleads “not guilty” to charges of sin (1:8) with the person who confesses (ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*, GK 3933) his sins before the God who is “just” (δίκαιος, *dikaios*; 1:9). While the former person is found to have no truth in himself, the latter has his injustice (ἀδικία, *adikia*) cleansed. Those who confess also enjoy the intercession of Jesus as their advocate (παράκλητος, *paraklētos*), who is able to appeal to a just God because he himself is also just (2:1).

3 John’s emphasis on knowledge might suggest that the primary distinction between Christians and nonbelievers is intellectual. Several of the knowledge statements in 1 John obviously refer to the cognitive aspect of faith, representing the believer’s consent to certain creeds (2:20–22; 3:5; 5:13). But the Greek γνῶσις, *gnōsis* (“knowledge”; GK 1194), and its cognates have both intellectual and experiential components, and it is clear John has both types of knowledge in mind. For example, the statement that believers know “him who is from the beginning” (2:13, 14) clearly refers to an experience that goes beyond intellectual assent to a proposition about God’s existence. Other knowledge statements in 1 John clearly refer to subjective points of faith: that God hears our prayers (5:15); that we will be like Jesus when he appears (3:2); that believers have eternal life (5:13). To have “knowledge” in 1 John summarizes a wide range of Christian experiences. It seems that John thinks the believer starts with cognitive knowledge of the proper doctrinal abstracts, moves on to a faith experience of God, and then gives evidence of that experience in her behavior. All three aspects of Christian knowledge are evident in 2:3: “We know [cognitive awareness] that we have come to know him [have had an experience of God] if we obey his commands [behavior].” Lifestyle thus becomes the test of knowledge.

6 This second set of tests (2:1–6) seeks to weed out pseudo-Christians within the community. This is evident from the language of v.6. While μένω, *menō*, is a key term in Johannine thought, John’s usage is “virtually unique ... not only in the New Testament but in Hellenistic religious literature in general” (Rensberger, 62). Presumably, then, only a Christian would “claim to abide [live] in him.” Those who make this claim but do not live by it are, in John’s view, “liars” who belong in the same category as the world.

REFLECTIONS

Prior to 1 John 2:6, John’s remarks have focused exclusively on Jesus’ teaching as the measure of faith. Verse 6 stresses that the traditions about Jesus’ life are also essential to Christian ethics. This sudden change in emphasis is somewhat surprising, for the fourth gospel does not present Jesus as a moral example. While the Synoptic Gospels highlight Jesus’ imitable qualities, such as kindness, mercy, compassion, and freedom from greed, the works of Jesus in John’s gospel highlight ways in which human beings *cannot* imitate Jesus by revealing his divine identity (e.g., Jn 5:36; 10:25–26). Since the ethics of 1 John center on the need for believers to love and serve one another, John may be thinking here of episodes from Jesus’ life such as the footwashing (Jn 13:1–17), where the disciples are specifically commanded to follow Jesus’ example, and Jesus’ general portrait of his death as a sacrificial act for those he loves (Jn 10:11; 12:23–27; 1Jn 3:16). True believers are distinct from the world in that they live the same life of sacrificial service that Jesus lived.

C. Test #3: Loving Your Brothers (2:7–11)

OVERVIEW

John’s first set of tests (1:5–10) distinguished true Christians from the world on the basis of their faith and confession. The second set of tests (2:1–6) narrowed the field further by eliminating those who claim to have faith but do not live by the teaching and example of Jesus. The third set of tests specifies which teachings of Jesus John has in mind. In John’s view,

Jesus' ethical teaching is centered around the love command (Jn 13:34). True Christians are distinct in that they show true love for one another.

⁷Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. ⁸Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

⁹Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. ¹⁰Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. ¹¹But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

COMMENTARY

7 Before offering a new test, John insists that there is nothing innovative in what he is about to say. His doctrine is consistent with “the message you have heard” “since the beginning” and should therefore only be a rehearsal of what believers already know to be true. Because the tests in this section focus on love among believers (vv.9–10), it seems that John is referring to John 13:34, where Jesus informs the disciples that he is giving them a “new command” to “love one another.” While this command was “new” when Jesus delivered it, it is not “new” to John’s audience, but rather the same “old” message they have heard before. Indeed they have “had [it] since the beginning.” The word for “beginning” here is *archē*, which refers, as in 1:1 (see [comment](#) there), to the beginning of the Jesus tradition. John thus asserts that his remarks are in complete accord with the teachings of Jesus and therefore cannot be disputed.

8 This verse is notoriously difficult, for John seems to be contradicting what he has just said. The sentence opens with *palin*, which normally means “again” but here probably functions as a conjunction. The NIV translates it, “Yet I am writing you a new command.” Does John intend to repeat an old command (v.7) or write a new one? And if he only intends to

repeat the love command, how can it be both “old” and “new” at the same time?

Most scholars believe that John is still thinking here of the love command from v.7. If this is the case, his words carry a note of irony. The audience should be well aware of Jesus’ command to love, but their lack of concern for one another makes it seem as though they have never heard it before. If so, John may be commenting on the doctrinal divisions that had arisen in his churches in conjunction with the Antichrists. Most commentators, however, pointing to the statement that “the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining,” detect an eschatological tone in John’s remarks. The command to love is “old” (*palaiā*, GK 4094, v.8) in the sense that it goes all the way back to Jesus, but it is “new” (*kainē*, GK 2785) in the sense that it describes life in the new age of the Messiah (cf. Dodd, 34–35; Marshall, 129–39; Brown, 266–67, 286–87; Culpepper, 29–30; Johnson, 43; Rensberger, 64).

While this interpretation is reasonable, it may be that John is actually indicating he is about to say something new in v.8—something different from the love command, which his audience already knows. Brown, 287, notes that the fourth gospel suggests the Spirit will both remind the disciples of what Jesus had said and “tell you what is yet to come” by speaking what he continues to hear from Jesus (Jn 14:26; 16:13–15). It may be, then, that John wishes to distinguish what he is about to say from the community’s established Jesus tradition. Paul uses a similar device to distinguish his own remarks from the words of Jesus at 1 Corinthians 7:10, 12, 17, 25. While the “old command” is apparently the love command, the “new command” would be the statement in v.8 introduced by *hoti* (NIV, “because”): “The darkness is passing ...” This statement is a “command” in the sense that John is delivering it by the Paraclete’s authority but is “new” in the sense that it did not originate with Jesus.

John’s new teaching is “true in [Jesus] and you.” The phrase “which is true in him” (NIV, “its truth is seen in him”) cannot refer directly to the “command” itself, for the Greek word *entolē* (“command,” GK 1953) is feminine in gender, while the phrase “which is true” (*ho estin alēthes*) is neuter. Rensberger, 65, notes that this probably means “the *content* of the commandment is true.” In what sense, then, is the statement that “the darkness is passing” “true in him and you”? It is “true in him” in the sense

that Jesus' incarnation marked the opening of a new age in which "a true light shone forth on the earth offering people a choice between light and darkness" (Brown, 287). It is "true in you" in that those who live by the love command are already living as "children of light" in a dark age (Jn 12:36). Jesus' advent proved that a new age was dawning—a fact verified by those who follow the command to love one another.

9 Now that John has situated the love command in his broader dualistic system, he offers two tests to distinguish true believers from those who do not walk as Jesus walked (v.6). As before, the negative test is stated first: *If* someone "claims to be in the light" *but* also "hates his brother," *then* that person "is still in the darkness," irrespective of any claims he may make to the contrary. The word "still" translates the Greek phrase *heōs arti*, which literally means "until now" but which here has the force of "all along." The person who confesses Jesus and follows most of his ethical teachings but does not obey the love command has actually been in the darkness "all along," deceiving herself and others about her true nature (cf. 1:8).

10 The positive counterpart to this test appears here: *If* someone "loves his brother," *then* that person "lives in the light." There is a notable difference in the formulation of the "if" statements in these two tests. The first test considers a person who *says* something (*ho legōn en tō phōti einai*, "claims to be in the light"), while the second considers a person who *does* something (*ho agapōn ton adelphon*, "loves his brother"). This reflects John's position that true love expresses itself in actions, not words (3:18).

11 John closes this brief section with another maxim (cf. 2:6), which restates the test at v.9 in stronger terms. The one who hates his brother "walks around in the darkness," meaning that John classifies that person with people of the world (see [comments at 1:5–6](#)). This principle is a logical extension of John's view that the world hates believers (1Jn 3:13; see [Introduction](#)). Since the world hates and persecutes believers, and since Jesus says that Christians are to love one another, it must be the case that those who claim to be Christians but do not love their fellow believers are deceiving themselves. John therefore says that such a person "does not know where he is going." The darkness of hatred has blinded such people to reality, making them believe that they can continue in God's favor while breaking his commands. Jesus uses similar imagery in the fourth gospel to

describe those whose wickedness prevents them from accepting his claims (Jn 9:39–41).

NOTES

8 John’s “new” teaching situates the love command in the dualistic framework he has been developing to differentiate believers from the world: “The darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.” Love, like truth and purity, is a distinguishing characteristic of those who walk in the light.

8 Although this teaching is “new” in the sense that it is not a direct quotation of Jesus, it faintly echoes a number of statements from the fourth gospel in which Jesus speaks of “day” as the sphere in which he and his people operate (Jn 8:12; 9:4–5; 11:9–10; 12:35–36, 46).

10 John’s emphasis on love for one’s “brother” has faint echoes of the second commandment of the Synoptics: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk 12:31 and parallels). It is clear, however, that John uses “brother” in a much more exclusive sense than the Synoptics’ “neighbor.” While popular contemporary theology appeals to the universal “brotherhood of humanity,” John’s “brothers” are those Christians who are in good fellowship with him (cf. 3Jn 5–8). Culpepper, 31, notes that “1 John does not extend the duty of love to one’s enemies or to all human beings; it focuses narrowly on the new commandment, that Christians love one another. They are *brothers* in the sense that they are now all children of God through faith ... (see Jn 1:12; 20:17; 21:23).” John does not expect cordial relations between believers and the world. He does, however, expect those who claim to be Christians to treat other Christians as Jesus commanded.

D. Test #4: Loving the World (2:12–17)

OVERVIEW

This section concludes the first part of 1 John by offering a final broad test to identify true Christians. John challenges believers to recognize the distinction between themselves and the world and to ally themselves with God. The challenge is undergirded by a rallying cry of slogans and

traditional sayings (vv.12–14) that remind believers of their past faithfulness.

¹²I write to you, dear children,
because your sins have been forgiven on account of
his name.

¹³I write to you, fathers,
because you have known him who is from the
beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, dear children,
because you have known the Father.

¹⁴I write to you, fathers,
because you have known him who is from the
beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God lives in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

¹⁵Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

COMMENTARY

12–14 These verses are based on a tight grammatical formula, which is reflected by the poetic format in the NIV. John makes six parallel statements, each of which opens with *graphō* (“I write,” GK 1211), followed by *hymīn* (“to you”) plus a term of address (“children,” “fathers,” “young men”), then *hoti* (NIV, “because”), then a descriptive phrase. Two general questions must be answered before the particular details of each verse can be considered. First, what is the function of *hoti* in this formula? Is it causal (“because you ...”), or does it introduce indirect discourse (“that you ...”) or direct discourse (quotation: “you are ...”)? Second, what is the significance of the various terms of address John uses? Four such terms appear in these verses: *teknia* (GK 5448, v.12; NIV, “dear children”); *pateres* (GK 4252, vv.13–14; NIV, “fathers”); *neaniskoi* (GK 3734, vv.13–14; NIV, “young men”); and *paidia* (GK 4086, v.13; NIV, “dear children” [“I write to you, dear children” in v.13 of the NIV appears in v.14 in the Greek New Testament (UBS, 4th ed.); the NIV citation will be used throughout this discussion]). Are these general references to all believers, or does each represent a specific group within the church?

On the first question, some commentators believe that *hoti* has causal force in this section (“because you”). Marshall, 136, concludes that “John is writing the Epistle *because* certain things are true of his readers; consequently, they need the further instruction and are capable of obeying the injunctions which he is giving them” (emphasis added; cf. Westcott, 58; Rensberger, 71; so NIV, NASB, NEB, NRSV, NKJV). Others believe that *hoti* has declarative force in this section, introducing indirect discourse (“I write to you *that* you ...”). Culpepper, 34, for example, feels that this reading is more consistent with the historical setting of 1 John: “The Elder is not writing to the community *because* these things are true; he writes to assure them in the face of opposition *that* they are indeed the ones who have been forgiven, who know the Christ, and who have overcome the evil one.”

As a third possibility, *hoti* may be used here to introduce direct discourse, a series of quotations (“children, ‘You are ...’”). This position is supported by three pieces of evidence. First, John has already used *hoti* six times to introduce direct discourse (1:5, 6, 8, 10; 2:4, 6; see [comments at 1:5](#)), and nothing in the present context suggests that a different usage is intended. Second, up to this point John’s arguments have depended heavily on direct and indirect allusions to his community’s Jesus tradition (1:1–3, 5, 10; 2:7–

8); it is logical he would use a similar technique here to introduce the test at 2:15, which distinguishes believers from the world once and for all. A concentrated citation of familiar sayings and slogans would function as a rallying cry for group loyalty and solidarity. Third, as is often observed, the *hoti* statements at 2:12–14 largely summarize points John has already made. That believers’ “sins have been forgiven” was established at 1:9; that they “have known him who is from the beginning” was established at 2:3; that “the word of God lives in” believers reflects the language of 1:10 and 2:5. John seems to be summarizing these points and stressing their validity by attaching them to traditional sayings and slogans. It seems, then, that 2:12–14 includes five traditional sayings or slogans that undergird John’s final, comprehensive test to distinguish believers from the world (2:15). Malatesta, 166, thus refers to this section as “a strong declaration of the content of the author’s message.”

But to whom are these slogans addressed? Two of the four groups, *teknia* and *paidia*, are clearly synonymous, so that the NIV translates both as “dear children” (2:12, 13). John tells this group that their “sins have been forgiven on account of his name” and that they “have known the Father.” “Fathers” (*pateres*) are reminded that they “have known him who is from the beginning.” John has somewhat more to say to the “young men” (*neaniskoi*): they “are strong,” “the word of God lives” in them, and they “have overcome the evil one.”

While these terms might seem to divide the audience into three age groups, John typically uses “children” as a general designation for his entire audience (see [Introduction](#)). Commentators are therefore generally agreed that *teknia/paidia* refers to “the whole Johannine Community that is in *koinōnia* [fellowship] with the author” (Brown, 298; cf. Culpepper, 34–35; Rensberger, 70). But who are the “fathers” and “young men”? Dodd, 38–39, sees no distinction, arguing that all three terms represent various facets of a single Christian experience: “all Christians are (by grace, not nature) *children* in innocence and dependence on the heavenly Father, *young men* in strength, and *fathers* in experience.” It seems more likely, however, that John uses “fathers” and “young men” to divide the larger Christian community into two groups on the basis of age. Brown notes that John’s reminder that older believers “have known him who is from the beginning” is more appropriate for people who “have been Christians a long time,” and even Dodd admits that “it is natural enough that young men should be

congratulated because they are strong” (see discussion in Brown, 300; Dodd, 38; Culpepper, 35; Houlden, 70–71 [who offers the novel thesis that “fathers” and “young men” represent two church offices in the Johannine community equivalent to the Pauline “elders” and “deacons”]). The same basic division of God’s people into two age groups appears in the OT and the Pauline literature. In any case, while John probably does have a broad age distinction in mind, the slogans he addresses to “fathers” and “young men” reflect general Christian qualities that should characterize members of both groups.

12 The first of John’s five slogans/sayings, addressed to his “children,” recalls the theme of 1:9–2:2: “your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.” Because this is clearly a comment on the salvific work of Jesus, and because it refers to Jesus in the third person, John is most likely citing a community slogan rather than a saying of Jesus (some have suggested this slogan is cited from an ancient baptismal formula; so Brown, 302–3, 320–21; Culpepper, 35; Rensberger, 71–72).

While 1–2–3 John and the fourth gospel have surprisingly little to say about forgiveness (cf. Jn 20:23; 1Jn 1:9–2:2), the “name” of Jesus is an important point of Johannine thought. Jesus’ “name” represents his divine identity and power, so that “belief in his name” means acceptance of John’s claim that Jesus came from God (Jn 1:12; 3:18; 1Jn 3:23; 5:13). Those who act in Jesus’ name enjoy various benefits, including the expectation that the Father will answer their prayers (Jn 16:23–26), the hope of eternal life (Jn 20:31), and (here at 1Jn 2:12) forgiveness of sins. Marshall, 139, notes that John may be reminding his readers of the forgiveness they received when they first accepted the name of Jesus at conversion. The perfect tense of *aphiēmi* (GK 918; NIV, “your sins *have been* forgiven”) focuses on the continuing effect of a past event (Johnson, 49). The experience of forgiveness should motivate them to remain faithful.

13a John’s second statement is another slogan that affirms the community’s common faith: “you have known him who is from the beginning.” The language here reflects both John 1:1 and 1 John 1:1, suggesting that “him” refers to Jesus, who existed from the beginning of time and whose life and death mark the beginning of Christian faith. The “fathers” “know” Jesus in the sense that they have accepted John’s witness and are now enjoying a relationship with God. By reminding his audience

that their experience of Jesus is real and authentic, John hopes to encourage them to keep themselves distinct from the world.

13b, 14 John next reminds the “young men” that they “have overcome the evil one.” The language of this statement is somewhat surprising, for the Johannine literature has notoriously little to say about Satan. When the Johannine Jesus does speak of Satan, he refers to him as “the devil” (*ho diabolos*, GK 1333), who is a “murderer” and a “liar” (Jn 8:44), or “the prince of this world” (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). John himself also calls Satan “the devil” (Jn 13:2) but refers to him as “the evil one” (*ho ponēros*, GK 4505) when associating him with murder (1Jn 3:12) or describing his rule (5:18–19). The language of 2:13, then, seems to be closer to that of John than Jesus, suggesting that this statement is another community slogan. This slogan affirms that believers achieve victory over the devil through their faith.

But what does it mean to “overcome [*nikaō*, GK 3771] the evil one”? A clue is offered at v.14, where John repeats this slogan but connects it to another slogan—“the word of God lives in you”—and conditions both statements by assuring the “young men” that “you are strong.” The “word of God” refers to the demands God makes of believers, which are encapsulated in the teachings of Jesus (see 1:10). This teaching “abides” (*menō*; NIV, “lives”) in them, suggesting that it empowers believers, making them “strong” (*ischyros*, GK 2708) so that they may overcome sin. While this language of spiritual victory has eschatological overtones, John is probably focusing on the “moral effects” of Christian experience (cf. Malatesta, 168–70, who attempts to minimize the ethical implication; Brown, 305–6, suggests that John is thinking primarily of the ethical demands of the love command). Believers share in Jesus’ victory over the devil when they, like Jesus, avoid temptation and obey the Father’s word (Jn 4:34; 5:19; 8:28–29; 17:4).

13c The last *hoti* statement in this section appears at the end of v.13. Not only have believers known Jesus, they have also “known the Father.” From John’s perspective, these are synonymous concepts, for “anyone who has seen [Jesus] has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). Why, then, does John differentiate between “knowing the Father” and “knowing him who is from the beginning”? The distinction may be stylistic, especially if John is already thinking of the “fathers” he is about to address in the next line. It

may also be that John is here citing a traditional saying of Jesus rather than a community slogan. The Johannine Jesus frequently makes statements that closely parallel 1 John 2:13. For example, after declaring himself “the light of the world,” Jesus says to the Pharisees, “If you knew me, you would know my Father also” (Jn 8:19); later he tells the disciples, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him” (Jn 14:7; cf. 7:28–29; 8:54–55). John clearly believes that Jesus referred to true disciples as those who “know the Father” and by quoting such a saying seems to be reminding his readers that they enjoy this status.

15 John prefaces his fourth test with a comprehensive admonition. Again following his dualistic framework, John draws a boundary between God’s people and everyone else: “*If* anyone loves the world, [*then*] the love of the Father is not in him.” Love “of the Father” here seems to be, as at 2:5, an objective genitive (love “for the Father”). As John 3:16 indicates, God loves everyone, including the world, but those who are of the world and those who love the world do not love him.

16 John has just referred to “loving the world” and to the fact that Christians must not do this. Does this mean Christians are to take a hostile posture toward nonbelievers and isolate themselves from them? And if such is the case, how could John’s remarks be consistent with the teaching of Jesus at John 3:16? To clarify his point, John now specifies the things “of the world” that Christians must avoid. Two issues must be addressed in considering this verse. First, what is the function of the *hoti* that introduces John’s statement? The NIV, in an effort to remain neutral, translates *hoti* as “For”: “*For* everything in the world ...” Is this the most natural reading? Second, what does John mean by “the world” here? Is he referring to people, to things, or to something else?

On the first question, the NKJV and NEB treat *hoti* as an insignificant connective particle, omitting the word in English translation. The NIV, NASB, and NRSV suggest that *hoti* has causal force, so that the test at v.15 is valid *because* nothing in the world is from the Father. It seems, however, that John is once again using *hoti* to introduce direct discourse, reminding his audience of a familiar slogan about the world. In the light of John’s general posture toward the world, it is reasonable to conclude that slogans similar to the one in v.16 were used by Johannine preachers to encourage believers to keep themselves separate from worldly things.

What, then, does this slogan suggest about “the world”? Elsewhere in the Johannine literature “the world” clearly refers to people who do not accept Jesus (see [Introduction](#)). The description of “the world or anything in the world” offered here, however, suggests that John is thinking of the lifestyle of those who are guided by their instincts rather than the Spirit. He characterizes this lifestyle with three broad statements (translated rather loosely in the NIV): “the lust [*epithymia*, GK 2123] of the flesh” (NIV, “the cravings of sinful man”); “the lust of the eyes” (NIV, “the lust of his eyes”); and “the pride of life” (NIV, “the boasting of what he has and does”). It seems clear that John is now switching from the objective genitive of v.15 to the subjective genitive, nominating three sources of “lust” and “boasting” (flesh, eyes, and pride). The “lust of the flesh” is thus “lust which comes from the flesh” or originates with the flesh, i.e., physical desire. The “lust of the eyes” (Rensberger, 74, calls it “an unusual phrase, not clearly related to biblical, Jewish, or general Hellenistic moral teaching”) seems to refer here to a faulty spiritual perception. In a similar way the Johannine Jesus says that the Pharisees are “blind” because they do not accept him (Jn 9:39–41; see also 12:40), and the Synoptic Jesus occasionally uses sight as a metaphor for spiritual judgment (Mt 5:29; 6:22–23; 7:3–5; Lk 11:34). Combined with “lust of the flesh,” “lust of the eyes” describes the faulty moral perception arising from a value system that is not centered on the revelation of God in Jesus. The “pride of life” uses *bios* (GK 1050) instead of the more typically Johannine *zōē* (GK 2437), referring specifically to biological life rather than spiritual life (see [comment at 1Jn 1:2](#)). The term *bios* can also have connotations of material wealth (i.e., “making a living,” “living the good life”), so that the NIV translates the same word as “material possessions” at 3:17. Those who take pride in such things, placing their confidence either in social position or money, are not motivated by the Father’s commands.

Brown, 326, notes that “not the sinful but an absence of the otherworldly is what characterizes the three factors” mentioned here. John expects believers to distinguish themselves from the world, and he concludes that those who are not sufficiently distinct are “not from the Father.” Those whose lives are directed by such lusts cannot truly have love for God within themselves (v.15). John here touches on a theme, common in the teachings of Jesus, that Christian ethics often contradict natural human intuition.

17 John closes the first section of the book with a word of encouragement for believers who pass the tests. Because the things of the world do not originate with God, they are, like the darkness (2:8), “passing away,” while those who do God’s will “abide [NIV, live] forever.” The Greek *menō* (“abide”) emphasizes the permanence of the believer’s relationship with God, extending from this world into the next. The nominal form of *menō* (*monē*) is used in John 14:2 to describe the many dwelling places (NIV, “rooms”; KJV, “mansions”) Jesus has prepared for his followers in heaven. Those who keep his word will have a place with him forever, long after the world has faded away into oblivion.

NOTES

12–13 The first three statements here use the present tense of γράφω, *graphō*, while the last three use the aorist ἔγραψα, *egrapsa*. The variation seems to be purely stylistic, with ἔγραψα, *egrapsa*, functioning as an epistolary aorist, referring to what John has been saying up to this point in the letter in a summary fashion. John uses the epistolary aorist in similar fashion at 2:21, 26; 5:13. Because the epistolary aorist is synonymous with the present tense, the NIV translates all six usages as “I write to you.”

16 Intense debate has centered on the meaning of the term “flesh” (σάρξ, *sarx*, GK 4922) in the NT. The NIV reflects the view that σάρξ, *sarx*, refers to a natural inclination to sin, indicated by the translation here “sinful man” (cf. Ro 7:5; Gal 5:13; Col 2:11; Marshall, 144–45). Whether or not this is the true Pauline sense of the term, σάρξ, *sarx*, clearly has a more neutral connotation in the Johannine literature. John is adamant that Christ came in σάρξ, *sarx* (see Jn 1:14; 1Jn 4:2; 2Jn 7, where the NIV translates it “flesh”), apparently referring simply to his physical humanity. The phrase “lust of the flesh” here touches on the broader Johannine dualism. John divides the universe into two realms—“above” and “below,” where “above” refers to the realm of God and “below” to the realm of weak humanity (Jn 8:23). Jesus therefore tells Nicodemus that those who wish to enter the kingdom must be born “from above” (ἄνωθεν, *anōthen*; NIV, “again”; Jn 3:3–13). Highlighting such references, Brown, 326, concludes that “‘flesh’ is not a sinful principle in John or a synonym for sex; rather, ... it is human nature incapable of attaining to God unless it is re-created by His Spirit.” The “lust

of the flesh” refers, then, to all human desires that originate from a worldly perspective without regard for God’s commands.

III. TESTS TO DISTINGUISH TRUE DISCIPLES FROM ANTICHRISTS (2:18–5:21)

OVERVIEW

As I noted in the introduction, the audience of 1–2–3 John was caught between a rock and a hard place. Persecution and hostility from “the world” and “the Jews” challenged believers to abandon the faith. John responds to this threat by offering the series of tests in 1:5–2:17. These external threats were accompanied by internal tensions that were dividing, or had already divided, John’s churches. The second major section of 1 John (2:18–5:21) addresses this problem. John offers a series of tests that distinguish true believers from Antichrists, people who do not accept John’s witness about Jesus (see [Introduction](#)). The beliefs and actions of the Antichrists are explored, along with the consequences of such beliefs. John’s hope is that believers will separate themselves from both the world and the Antichrists so that they may have fellowship with him and with God.

A. Test #5: The True Confession (2:18–27)

¹⁸Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. ¹⁹They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

²⁰But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. ²¹I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. ²²Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. ²³No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

²⁴See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.

²⁵And this is what he promised us—even eternal life.

²⁶I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. ²⁷As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.

COMMENTARY

18 John immediately stresses the urgency of the situation by bringing the doctrinal conflict to an eschatological arena. He labels his opponents Antichrists and says that their appearance coincides with “the last hour.” Both terms seem to be drawn from a community slogan, which John has split in order to create a chiasm. The two halves of the slogan are indicated by the repetition of *hoti*, which again introduces direct discourse: “you have heard, ‘Antichrist is coming’”; “we know ‘it is the last hour.’”

In the last hour

Antichrist is coming

[now] many Antichrists

[therefore]

have come

it is the last hour.

The original form of the slogan epitomized what must have been a more extensive eschatological doctrine: “In the last hour Antichrist is coming.” John applies it to the present situation to demonize his opponents.

While the terms “last hour” and “Antichrists” seem to be drawn from a community slogan, their precise meaning is unclear. Neither term appears outside 1 and 2 John, and despite the tendency for eschatological labels to intermingle in popular Christian thought (i.e., “last hour” = “last days” = end times; “Antichrist” = “Man of Sin” [1Th 2] = “the Beast/666” [Rev 13]), it is not clear whether any real synonyms may be found. Barker, 323–24, draws a parallel between “the last hour” and the more frequent “the last days/times.” The NT authors sometimes use “last days” to refer to “the new

age that they associated with the advent of Jesus,” says Barker, and so he concludes that “the last hour” is a general reference to “the fulfillment of time, the time of redemption and salvation,” inaugurated by Jesus’ death and continuing to the present. The motives for this conclusion are, however, clearly apologetic. Barker admits that “last days” is also commonly used “to designate the last days before Christ’s return,” but he refuses to see this meaning in 1 John 2 because it leads to the conclusion “that the author was mistaken,” since Jesus did not return in the wake of the Antichrists’ activity (cf. Stott, 107–9). Most commentators, however, agree that “the last hour” “must be taken in its obvious sense: the end of time is at hand” (so Rensberger, 77; cf. Dodd, 48–49; Brown, 330–32, 364–65; Culpepper, 44).

The Johannine Jesus uses “the last day” on several occasions to refer to the end of time, when the dead will be resurrected to enjoy eternal life or suffer judgment (Jn 6:39–44, 54; 12:48; cf. 11:24; 5:24–30). Does this mean John was mistaken in his estimate of the divine plan? The NT writers make no pretense to special knowledge about the time of Christ’s return, consistently emphasizing that human beings are not privy to God’s eschatological timetable (cf. Mt 24:36; 1Th 5:1–3; 2Pe 3:8–10). Looking at his situation, it seemed to John that the world was going from bad to worse, with godless people and heretics gaining ground on all sides. In light of the general ancient view that the forces of evil would gather at the end of time to make a final stand against God’s people, John could reasonably conclude that “the last hour” was at hand. The focus is not on a timeline but on the urgency of a situation in which Christians must fight to preserve their identity.

John’s proof that “the last hour” has come is provided by the Antichrists. As noted in the introduction, in 1–2–3 John this title functions as a technical term for the Elder’s opponents. The plural “Antichrists” (*antichristoi*, GK 532) is an extension of the original community slogan, where the term apparently appeared in the singular (*antichristos*; hence the NIV, “the Antichrist”). While “Antichrist” literally means “against Christ” or “in place of Christ,” its precise nuance is difficult to determine; Rensberger, 78, notes that “the notion of *Antichrist* ... is not found at all in Jewish literature, nor in Christian literature except where it is dependent on 1 and 2 John.” While the OT and other Jewish writings do occasionally anticipate the appearance of a leader of evil at the end of time, this figure is always set in opposition to God, not the Messiah (see Brown, 332–36, for a survey of

possible backgrounds for the concept of Antichrist). In any case, John clearly expects his audience to be familiar with an eschatological figure who would oppose God and Christ, and he associates his opponents with this figure to highlight their treachery. The teachings of these people are, in fact, inspired by “the spirit of the Antichrist” (4:3), suggesting that they promote a substitute Savior distinct from the Jesus proclaimed by the community. Believers must therefore urgently resist such people and separate them from Christian fellowship.

19 The Greek text of this verse consists of three statements that reveal John’s feelings toward the Antichrists and indicate that he no longer considers them to be in fellowship with him. But what were the Antichrists’ feelings toward John? Each statement can be read in two ways, depending on the Antichrists’ posture toward the Elder at the time 1–2–3 John was written. Because this issue is significant in reconstructing the historical setting of the letters, both readings will be explored before a conclusion is reached.

The first statement—“they went out from us, but they did not really belong to us”—is difficult in the Greek. A more literal reading highlights the apparent paradox of John’s words: “from us they went out but they were not from us.” The genitive *ex hēmōn* (“from us”) appears twice, apparently with ablative force both times to indicate source or point of origin. The first phrase, “from us they went out,” indicates that the Antichrists were once members of John’s circle and were apparently in good standing with him. The second phrase, however, seems to deny this by insisting that the Antichrists “were not from us.” This apparent discrepancy arises from John’s dualistic perspective. In John’s view, all people are by nature either “of light” or “of darkness” (see [comment at 1Jn 1:5–6](#)), and each person’s true identity is revealed by her actions (1:9–10; 3:17–18; 5:2; Jn 8:39–47). Although the Antichrists once appeared to be genuine Christians, their subsequent behavior has revealed that they were actually full of darkness all along. The NIV reflects this perspective by translating the second phrase, “they did not really belong to us,” suggesting that they were never really genuine Christians.

John’s use of the ablative or “genitive of source” (“from us”) raises two possibilities about the motives of the Antichrists. It may be that they returned John’s hostile feelings. Perhaps his rejection of their views led to a

doctrinal conflict, which they resolved by rejecting John and leaving his community. If this is the case the phrase “they went out from us” is equivalent to “they stopped coming to my church,” perhaps seeking the fellowship of Christian leaders like Diotrephes who were more tolerant of their views (3Jn 9–10). As a second possibility, it may be that the Antichrists were a group of the Elder’s protégés who “went out” on a preaching tour to the Johannine congregations but who began teaching things John did not accept. If this is the case, their “going out” would not necessarily imply any hostility toward the Elder. They may have considered themselves to be in good fellowship with John and presented themselves as his disciples to the churches they visited. This would make the Antichrists especially dangerous because it would seem that they came with the Elder’s authority, thus explaining the urgency of his rebuttal.

The second and third statements in 2:19 are consistent with either interpretation of the Antichrists’ motives. To prove that the Antichrists were false brothers all along, John points out that “if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us.” “Remain” here is *menō*, which carries the sense of constancy and permanence (see [comments at 1Jn 2:5–6, 14](#)). If John is thinking of the Antichrists as a hostile group who left his church in anger, this second statement reemphasizes the first: the fact that they did not remain in John’s fellowship shows that they were never really dedicated to the community in the first place. If John is thinking of the Antichrists as a group of itinerant teachers who still consider themselves faithful, their failure to “abide” relates more specifically to their doctrine. Even if the Antichrists thought they were helping John, the fact that their teachings did not “remain” within the confines of John’s witness shows that they were ignorant of the truth in the first place.

The third statement here is much stronger in the Greek text than the NIV suggests. John now attaches a purpose clause with *hina* to *exēlthan* from the first statement to explain the reason why the Antichrists “went out”: “so that it should be manifest ...” (NIV, “their going showed ...”). “Manifest” (*phaneroō*, GK 5746) is followed here by *hoti*, which seems to introduce a slogan John has developed in the course of the Antichrist conflict: “not everyone is from us,” or “not everyone is one of us” (NIV, “none of them belonged to us”). The fact that the Antichrists did not “remain” with John makes the truth of this slogan “manifest,” validating in his mind the view that some who call themselves “Christian” are not to be trusted. If John is

thinking of the Antichrists as a group who left his churches, this slogan supports the exclusivism engendered in the tests in the first section of the book. Christians must be tested to separate the true from the false, because not everyone who claims to “abide in him” actually does. If John is thinking of the Antichrists as a group of itinerant teachers, the slogan stresses the need for such people to have proper credentials, because not everyone who “goes out from us” is really “one of us” (see 2Jn 7–10).

While any conclusion about the Antichrists must remain speculative, a combination of the two views creates the most likely hypothesis. It seems that the doctrinal conflict envisioned in 1–2–3 John was in its initial stages when these letters were written. A group of teachers had left on a preaching tour of John’s churches with his authorization, but after they departed, John learned that their doctrines did not “remain” within orthodox boundaries. This created confusion and division in the churches, which John attempts to rectify by writing 1–2–3 John. By this time the Antichrists may have recognized their differences with John but continued to seek converts to their position, winning over leaders such as Diotrephes (3Jn 9–10). John interprets this, perhaps correctly, as a hostile act and accuses his opponents of violating the love command, stressing that their treachery shows they were never loyal to him. The tests he offers in the remainder of 1 John are intended to draw clear lines between these traitors and true members of the community.

20 John now introduces the key term in this section—*chrisma* (“anointing,” GK 5984). True believers are different from Antichrists because they have a special anointing from God that gives them “knowledge.” The contrast is highlighted in the Greek text by a wordplay that cannot be translated. The Antichrists (*antichristoi*) claim to know the truth about Jesus, whereas it is actually believers who have an anointing (*chrisma*) that gives them true knowledge. Both terms derive from the verb *chriō*, which means to rub or smear with oil. By opposing Christ (*christos*, “the Anointed One”), the Antichrists lose the anointing (*chrisma*) that would grant true knowledge.

In the light of John 14:26 and 16:13, many commentators have concluded that the “anointing” to which John refers is the Holy Spirit, “who guides you into all truth” (so Brown, 345–47, 370; Culpepper, 147; Johnson, 57–58; Rensberger, 79–80). Dodd, 61–63, however, argues that the *chrisma* “is

the Gospel, or the revelation of God in Christ, as communicated in the [Johannine] rule of faith to catechumens” (cf. Lieu, 28–31). The broader context suggests that Dodd’s reading is more accurate, making *chrisma* (“anointing”) and *oidate* (“you know,” GK 3857) in v.20 synonymous. In support of this conclusion, it may first be noted that the Paraclete sayings (Jn 14:26; 16:13) suggest that *all* Christians receive special instruction from the Spirit. It would therefore do John little good to argue that Christians are guided into truth by the Spirit, for the Antichrists could make the same claim to justify their own views and perhaps did so (see [Introduction](#); von Wahlde, 126–27). The Antichrists could not, however, claim that their revelations from the Spirit were consistent with John’s witness—a point stressed at 1 John 4:1–6. Here as elsewhere John’s point is “not that doctrine must be tested by inspiration, but that inspiration must be tested by the Gospel” (Dodd, 62). Whether or not they possess the Spirit, the Antichrists do not pass the doctrinal test.

21 Further evidence that the “anointing” of v.20 refers to established tradition rather than the Spirit’s guidance appears in vv.21, 24, and 27. Returning to the formula of 2:12–14, John uses *hoti* here to cite a sarcastic reversal of John 8:32. Jesus did not say, “You *do not* know the truth”; rather, he said, “You *do* know it [the truth].” A second *hoti* introduces a maxim that extends the application of this saying in dualistic terms (cf. 1Jn 2:7–8): “no lie comes from the truth.” Since both Jesus and the Spirit are “truth” (Jn 14:6, 16–17), anyone who contradicts what John has witnessed about Jesus through the Spirit’s power must be a liar.

At v.24, John again stresses that “what you heard from the beginning,” the true teaching about Jesus, must “remain in you” if you wish to “remain in the Son and in the Father.” The anointing also “remains in you” and “teaches you about all things” (v.27). Since both “the anointing” and “what you heard” are to “remain in you,” it is reasonable to suggest that the anointing and the tradition are synonymous in this context. John therefore associates the anointing with an ongoing catechetical process, using *didaskō* (“teach,” GK 1438) three times in v.27 to stress that those who already know the truth about Jesus need not learn anything more.

22 Verse 22 offers the first test to distinguish true believers from Antichrists. The point of all such tests is to demonstrate that the Antichrists do not have the anointing, i.e., they do not adhere to orthodox teaching

about Jesus. John uses *hoti* to introduce a central christological tenet and then draws two conclusions about those who reject this creed: *If* someone denies that “Jesus is the Christ,” *then* that person (1) is a “liar” and (2) “denies the Father and the Son.” “Deny” here is *arneomai* (GK 766), used elsewhere in the NT to describe formal rejection of Jesus and willful apostasy from the Christian faith (see Lk 12:9; 2Pe 2:1; Jude 4). The Johannine Jesus uses this term in reference to Peter’s denial on the night of the arrest (Jn 13:38). The belief that “[the human] Jesus is [also] the [divine] Christ” is, in John’s mind, a core issue of Christian faith that is not subject to debate. Those who do not accept this principle have effectively removed themselves from Christian fellowship, whether they realize it or not.

23 While John has already established that those who reject his witness are “liars” (1:6; 2:4), the claim that those who deny that “Jesus is the Christ” also “deny the Father” requires explanation. Verse 23 elaborates the logic of this statement by offering two maxims based on traditional sayings that stress the unity of God and Jesus (see Jn 5:19–20; 7:28–29; 8:19, 29, 38, 42; 10:30, 36; 14:9–11; 17:5). Since Jesus and the Father are one, “no one who denies the Son has the Father”; on the other hand, “whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father.” The Father and Son come together in a single package, so that those who refuse John’s witness about Jesus cannot have a proper view of God. The Antichrists are therefore no better than pagans (see [comment at 3Jn 7](#)).

24–25 After exhorting the audience to allow what they “heard from the beginning” to “remain in [them],” John presents the positive version of the test of v.23: *If* “what you have heard from the beginning remains in you,” *then* “you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.” Similar language is used in the farewell section of the fourth gospel, where “remaining” in Jesus and the Father has the idea of maintaining a permanent relationship with them (Jn 14:23; 15:4–9). The tests in 1 John 2:18–27 make this relationship contingent on a creedal confession: those who do not accept John’s orthodox teaching cannot be in fellowship with the Father. The benefit for those who do hold to this confession is mentioned in v.25, namely, “eternal life” (see [comment at 1Jn 1:2](#)).

26–27 These verses encourage believers to pass the test and cling to the rule of faith so that they are not “[led] astray.” Everything they need to

know has been provided by the “anointing,” the true gospel they have already received, which teaches them “all things.” Those who suggest that they have something to offer beyond this teaching are therefore deceivers. Of course, the Antichrists did not think of themselves in this way, and John is probably referring to their doctrine rather than their motives. They would insist that their views are a legitimate extension of what John taught. John therefore emphasizes that the anointing is “real, not counterfeit”; nothing can be true that is not consistent with it. Orthodox tradition must be the standard for measuring new revelations and personal spiritual experience.

NOTES

18 Rensberger, 78, sees a possible parallel between the Johannine Antichrist and Jesus’ warning about “false christs” at Mark 13:21–22, suggesting that John may be thinking of a false Messiah who would appear at the end of time (cf. Marshall, 150–51). If this is the case, John must be using the same concept with a very different nuance. The “false christs” of Mark 13 and Matthew 24 seem to be political figures, messianic pretenders associated with events leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. It is not clear whether the term “Christ” is ever used in the Johannine literature with this sort of political implication, even in passages that reflect the views of nonbelievers (cf., e.g., Lk 23:2 with Jn 18:33 and 19:12).

19 Both views of the Antichrists’ motives can be supported from the language of v.19. Most commentators conclude that the Antichrists were secessionists who were openly hostile toward John. For example, Marshall, 151–52, says they “had once been members or adherents of the church, but had now departed from it, presumably to set up their own group.... It is a case of the voluntary departure of those who held views opposed to those of John.” These people had previously accepted John’s witness but “were now openly campaigning against it,” attempting to increase their number by proselytizing in John’s churches, persuading the faithful to join them (cf. Malatesta, 201; Brown, 338–39, 366–67; Smalley, 101–3; Culpepper, 45; Thompson, 75–76; Johnson, 56–57; Rensberger, 78–79). Because the Antichrists abandoned the fellowship rather than staying and working out the doctrinal differences, John makes failure to love other Christians the ultimate test of faith (1Jn 3:10–18; 4:7–12, 19–21). This position assumes

that the conflict with the Antichrists is some time past, with the battle lines clearly drawn before the writing of 1 John.

The second position—that the Antichrists considered themselves to be in good fellowship with John and his churches—is less popular. This position assumes the conflict with the Antichrists is in progress or just beginning, with many Christians (including possibly the Antichrists themselves) still unaware of the problem. This view’s most notable proponent is Rudolf Bultmann, 36, whose position is supported by several pieces of evidence from 1–2–3 John. First, John’s statement that the Antichrists “went out from us” does not necessarily imply a hostile parting. Parallel with 1 John 2:19, ἐξέρχομαι, *exerchomai* (“go out,” GK 2002), is used at 2 John 7 of the “deceivers” John wishes the church to avoid. But at 3 John 7 the same word is used of “the brothers,” associates of the Elder, who left on a preaching tour with his blessing and who may have delivered 1 John to the churches. The Johannine Jesus also uses ἐξέρχομαι, *exerchomai*, on several occasions to describe his departure from the Father (“I came from God”; Jn 8:42; 16:27–28; 17:8). It seems, then, that “went out” is a neutral term in John’s vocabulary that refers to the process of embarking on a mission. Second, it is clear from the letters that many Christians were not yet aware of the conflict. At least two Christian leaders, Gaius (3Jn 1) and the “chosen lady” (2Jn 1), need to be told which teachers they ought to receive, suggesting that the doctrinal crisis is still in the initial stages, when reports are beginning to circulate and party lines are just developing. Third, the fact that the Elder needs to stress the distinction between true believers and Antichrists in 1 John, and to demand that all of his churches recognize this distinction in 2 and 3 John, suggests that the Antichrists still enjoyed access to John’s churches. This is most easily explained if they claimed to be John’s envoys preaching under his authorization.

20 The words “the truth” in the NIV do not appear in the Greek text, which literally reads, “You have an anointing from the Holy One and you all know.” The translators have attempted to stress that believers know what is true, i.e., what is consistent with John’s witness, while the teaching of the Antichrists is false.

REFLECTIONS

Culpepper, 52, rightly characterizes John's debate with the Antichrists as an expression of "the tension ... between the conservative principle and the liberal, the need to preserve and the need to adapt." The Antichrists took the position that the gospel was plastic and subject to expansion under the Spirit's guidance. John, however, insists that Christians are identified by their adherence to core creeds about Christ. The tests he offers in this section make acceptance of these central tenets essential to a genuine relationship with God.

B. Test #6: Living without Sin (2:28–3:24)

OVERVIEW

Like the Antichrists, true believers live and act in an eschatological age. Cognates of *phaneroō* are used four times at 1 John 2:28–3:10 to situate Christian experience between Jesus' first "appearing" in flesh and his second "appearing" at the end of time. Believers face many hardships during this interim period, but God knows his children and will distinguish them from the world and the Antichrists when he comes to judge. In the meanwhile, true Christians can be identified by the fact that they do not sin.

John's teaching on "sin" (*hamartia*, GK 281) is notoriously difficult, and it will be helpful to establish the general thrust of his argument before proceeding. On several occasions John makes extreme statements about sin that seem to contradict one another, sometimes even within the same passage. At times he seems to advocate a rigorous ethical perfectionism, arguing that true Christians do not sin at all (3:9–10), while elsewhere he insists that everyone sins and that anyone who denies this fact is a liar (1:8–10). Urgent ethical admonitions appear alongside gentle pastoral assurances that those who confess their sins enjoy Christ's advocacy (2:1–2, 12; 2:28–3:3). This tension between obedience and grace is epitomized at 5:16–18, where John says that Christians should pray for "brothers" who sin but then immediately emphasizes that no one "born of God" (presumably a "brother") sins (NIV, "continues to sin"). Many theories have been offered to explain the apparent paradoxes in John's discussion of sin, and it will be helpful to survey several before analyzing 2:28–3:24 (commentators rarely adhere to a single approach, making it difficult to categorize the major

views; cf. Smalley, 159–62; Marshall, 178–81; Brown, 411–16). As will be seen, the debate centers around two verses from this section, 3:6 and 3:9.

One popular interpretation, generally associated with the Wesleyan tradition, understands 3:6, 9 in the most literal, moral sense. From this perspective, Christians can reach a point in their faith experience where they no longer “sin,” i.e., they no longer commit acts that violate God’s commands. Ethical perfection is achieved, however, only after an existential experience of sanctification, in which the Holy Spirit forcefully reorients the inner moral compass of the believer. Those who are “wholly sanctified” lose their desire to sin, wishing only to obey God’s will. It should be stressed that proponents of this view do *not* claim that those who are sanctified never violate God’s moral law. They would, however, suggest that the sins of the sanctified person are committed unwillingly, originating not in the believer’s will but in the power of sin itself (Ro 7:13–23). John therefore stresses that even sanctified believers must confess their sinful acts and receive forgiveness (1Jn 1:8–2:2). The historical origins of this view are reviewed in I. Howard Marshall, “Sanctification in the Teaching of John Wesley and John Calvin,” *EvQ* 34 (1962): 75–82.

A second major interpretation of these two verses is reflected in the NIV. John’s extreme statements on sin in these verses contain present-tense Greek verbs. If John is using the present tense to imply continuing action, he may be arguing that the Christian *lifestyle* is not characterized by willful disobedience. The NIV thus translates the phrase “no one who is born of God does sin [*hamartian ou poiei*],” at 3:9 as “no one who is born of God will *continue to sin* ...; he cannot *go on sinning*” (emphasis added). By contrast, at 2:1 John uses the aorist tense, implying completed past action, to assure his audience that Christians who occasionally violate God’s commands have Christ as their advocate (NIV, “if anybody does [commit a] sin, we have one who speaks to the Father”). From this perspective, then, John acknowledges that Christians sin from time to time, but he insists that they cannot continue in a lifestyle of habitual sinning (cf. Stott, 35–36; Johnson, 74–75).

A third interpretation, closely related to the second, explains John’s view of sin by analogy with Paul’s teaching. John, like Paul, believes that Christians commit sins but does not believe they are “sinners” in God’s eyes, because they enjoy grace through Christ. While John focuses on the

implications of grace for Christian lifestyle, Paul focuses on the status believers enjoy before God. Smalley, 164, who notes parallels between John and Paul and cites Luther's maxim that the believer is *simul justus et peccator* ("at once innocent and guilty"), states that "it is the potential state of sinfulness which John has in view throughout the present passage [1Jn 3]; and the actual occasions of sinfulness which he treats in chapters 1 and 2." These two views explain the tension in John's remarks by highlighting the paradox of grace: Christians are expected to abide by God's commands, but John realizes that they will break them from time to time, compelling them to appeal to Christ for help.

A fourth approach is provided by those commentators who focus on the rhetorical function of 3:6, 9 within the broader historical setting of 1 John. These scholars contend that the Antichrists advocated a doctrine of moral indifference, teaching that Christians, by their nature as God's children (3:1–2, 9; Jn 1:12), are unable to sin, regardless of their behavior. Brown, 431, suggests that the Antichrists saw "divine childhood [as] a once-for-all gift and not [as] a life that has to express itself in the behavior of the Christian" (cf. Brown, 81–83, 430–31; Dodd, 79–81; Culpepper, 63–64). Some who support this interpretation associate the Antichrists' position with the material dualism of later Gnostic thought: since the human body is material, evil, and unredeemable, ethics are irrelevant to the believer (so Barker, 331–32). To counter such teaching, John insists in the strongest terms that even God's children are subject to regulations for ethical purity. Passages such as 1 John 3:6, 9 are thus taken as hyperbole, with the more moderate statements on confession and forgiveness representing John's true perspective.

A fifth major interpretation situates 3:6, 9 in the broader context of John's eschatological dualism. Advocates of this position may focus on the *spatial* (here versus there) or *temporal* (now versus then) dimensions of John's dualistic thought. Those who focus on the spatial dimension stress John's distinction between "us" and "them," between his community and the hostile world. In John's view, the world is under the sway of "sin," an abstract cosmic power that controls the thoughts and motives of those who walk in darkness. Those who enter the community and experience rebirth as God's children are freed from this power, enabling them to truly obey God (Jn 1:5, 12–13; 3:3–6; 8:34–36). Christians thus "belong to the sphere

where sin has no place”; they may, however, still choose to violate God’s commands, even though such acts go against their new nature (Lieu, 36).

Those who focus on the temporal dimension see John’s teaching on sin as the outworking of a realized eschatology. For example, Thompson, 91–92, highlights 1 John 3:1–3, noting that these verses stress that, although believers are truly God’s children now, our transformation will not be complete until “he appears,” for only then will we “be like him.” When John describes Christians as those who “do not sin,” he is imposing this future status on our present experience to highlight the goal of Christian life. Thompson writes, “In speaking of the present reality, John anticipates the promised transformation.... The power that is at work in the children of God in the present is the same power that shall transform them at the return of Christ.” The believer’s present obedience is thus a foretaste of the impending eschatological renewal. For this reason, John can speak of Christian perfection despite our ethical failures. Brown, 431, who adopts a version of this position, believes that John is thinking of a process of spiritual maturation: “The divine seed abides and continues to transform the child of God into the image of God’s Son ... until at the final revelation we are like God himself. The more that this divine seed transforms the Christian, the more impossible it is for the Christian to sin.”

While all of these interpretations are reasonable, none are entirely satisfactory. Any attempt to soften John’s doctrine of sin runs aground on the hard language of 3:6, 9. Verse 6 literally reads, “Everyone who remains in [Christ] does not sin; everyone who sins has not seen him or known him.” Verse 9 is even stronger, insisting that the Christian “is not able (*ou dynatai*, GK 1538) to sin, because she has been born of God.” How is it, then, that John elsewhere says that anyone who denies his sin is a “liar”? It has already been noted that 1:8–10 most likely refers to the nonbeliever who refuses to confess his sins and enter the church (see [comment](#)), but this does not resolve the dilemma, for 5:16–18 clearly speaks of the “brother” who sins and needs prayer.

It seems most likely that John is using the term “sin” in a narrower sense at 3:6–10 than at 1:8–10, and that this narrower usage is related to the immediate context. The Greek *hamartia* (“sin”) literally means “to miss the mark,” to fall short of a standard God has set. As 1:8–10 indicates, no human being can claim moral perfection, for every person has fallen short

of at least one divine command in some way. But not every person has broken God's law at every point, and 3:6–10 highlights a particular point in which true believers *never* violate God's law. This point is the love command (Jn 13:34), which was introduced at 2:9–11 as a test of Christian identity and is forcefully restated at 3:10–11. True Christians do not “sin” against the command to love their brothers.

This reading resolves the apparent tension between 3:6, 9 and 1:8–10. From John's perspective, all people sin in various ways, but those who are true Christians *never* sin against the love command. Disobeying the command to love is, in other words, not among the sins that believers must confess. John uses the same logic in 5:16, 18, where he urges believers to pray for the “brother” who sins and then insists that no one born of God sins. Christians can commit certain sins that need forgiveness, while other sins indicate that one is not a Christian in the first place. John can therefore distinguish between sins that should be prayed for and the “sin leading to death.” Those who are “born of God” do not commit the “sin that leads to death” (5:16), even though a “brother” may need help with his moral failings. Similarly, only a person of the world or an Antichrist would need to confess to hating the brothers, for a true Christian perfectly obeys the love command. It seems, then, that in the context of 2:28–3:24, *hamartia* (“sin”) and its cognates are used exclusively to refer to violations of the love command.

²⁸And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.

²⁹If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.

^{3:1}How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. ³Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

⁴Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.
⁵But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins.
And in him is no sin. ⁶No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No
one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

⁷Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does
what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. ⁸He who does what
is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the
beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the
devil's work. ⁹No one who is born of God will continue to sin,
because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning,
because he has been born of God. ¹⁰This is how we know who the
children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone
who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone
who does not love his brother.

¹¹This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should
love one another. ¹²Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one
and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his
own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. ¹³Do not be
surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. ¹⁴We know that we
have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers.
Anyone who does not love remains in death. ¹⁵Anyone who hates his
brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal
life in him.

¹⁶This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his
life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷If
anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has
no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸Dear children,
let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.
¹⁹This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we
set our hearts at rest in his presence ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn
us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

²¹Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have
confidence before God ²²and receive from him anything we ask,
because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. ²³And this
is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and
to love one another as he commanded us. ²⁴Those who obey his

commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

COMMENTARY

2:28 John restates the admonition to “continue [*menō*] in him” and now situates it in an eschatological context. As in 2:19, *menō* refers to faithfulness to the orthodox view of Jesus and his teaching. Those who live by this teaching will not be ashamed at Jesus’ *parousia* (“coming,” GK 4242), a common NT word for the second coming that highlights the implications of being in Christ’s “presence.” Those who deserve judgment fear the presence of the judge, while the innocent may approach the judge boldly. The Greek *schōmen parrēsian*, translated “be confident” in the NIV, is literally “to have plainness/boldness.” In the fourth gospel, *parrēsia* refers to language that is clear and direct (Jn 16:25–30). True believers, who have obeyed Jesus’ commands, will speak to Jesus this way at the second coming because they have nothing to hide.

29 Here John weaves together two community slogans, each introduced by *hoti*, to create the first test in this section: “If you know ‘He is righteous [*dikaios*],’” then you also know, “‘Everyone who does what is right [*dikaiosynē*] has been born of him.’” The logic of this test is based on the Johannine maxim that “the child imitates the parent” (Rensberger, 93). If God is indeed righteous—a premise John considers indisputable—then any person who is truly his child will act righteously.

It is clear, however, that John is using *dikaiosynē* in a highly nuanced way, related to the special meaning of *hamartia* (“sin”) discussed above. Since “righteousness” is the logical opposite of “sin” (note the contrast at 3:7–8), and since “sin” refers in this context to failure to love one’s brother, “righteousness” must refer to loving one’s brother in obedience to the love command. John has already hinted at this usage at 1:9, stressing that God forgives sinners because he is “faithful and just [*dikaios*],” and at 3:10 he specifically associates godly righteousness with love for one’s brothers. The righteous person, then, is the one who loves other believers the way God loves them.

3:1 The first three verses of ch. 3 elaborate the status of the person who passes the test of love at 2:29. Childhood has both disadvantages and

eschatological benefits. The disadvantages are explored at 3:1 in language that echoes several passages from the fourth gospel, most notably the prologue (Jn 1:1–18) and the farewell (Jn 13–17). Jesus came to his own, but the world did not “know him” (Jn 1:10; 1Jn 3:1) and does not know his disciples either. Because of this ignorance the world hates God and Jesus and will also hate anyone born of God (Jn 15:18–16:4; 17:14–15). The difficulties this creates for believers are, however, far outweighed by the eschatological benefits of childhood, which John explores in vv.2–3.

2 Many commentators have been struck by the language here, for at first glance it seems more Pauline than Johannine. Paul frequently speaks of the believer’s transformation at the second coming (1Co 13:12; 15:35–53; Php 3:20–21; 1Th 4:13–17), but the fourth gospel stresses that Christians have already been reborn to eternal life (Jn 1:13; 3:3–8; 5:24–26; 6:53–57; 14:23). Indeed, the Johannine Jesus has almost nothing to say about his return except that he will come to his disciples in the form of the Paraclete (cf. Jn 14:18–23 with Mk 13 and Mt 24–25). Rensberger, 89, therefore concludes that 1 John 3:2 is “closer to non-Johannine forms of early Christian eschatology” than to the fourth gospel (cf. Barker, 330–31; Marshall, 171–73; Johnson, 68). Going a step further, Stott, 119, attempts to harmonize John’s position with Paul’s, positing a threefold sequence of events: “he will appear; we shall see him as he really is; we shall be like him.” But the order of the two slogans at 3:2 suggests that John has not shifted from the realized eschatology of the fourth gospel. Contra Stott’s outline, John actually says that believers “shall be like him” *before* referring to their vision of Jesus. Believers will not be like Jesus because they will see him; rather, believers will see Jesus because they have been like him. As God’s children, true Christians are already “like him,” and Christ’s appearing will only confirm this established fact. Rather than shifting from the “realized eschatology” of the fourth gospel, then, 3:2 asserts that the second coming will only clarify what believers already know to be true about God and themselves.

3 While childhood has benefits, it also carries responsibilities. These are summarized, again in eschatological terms, at v.3. All those who hope to see Jesus must “purify” themselves because Jesus is “pure.” The Antichrists, who are “impure,” are not like Jesus now, and this will be clearly revealed when he appears. At 1:7–9 John used purity language to describe the state of those whose sins have been forgiven. Since the primary

sin under consideration in ch. 3 is violation of the love command, “purifying oneself” seems to refer to eliminating hatred from one’s heart. The word “hope” (*elpis*, GK 1828) here should not be taken in the modern English sense of uncertainty or wishful thinking but rather as a confident expectation about a future reality. There is no question that believers will “see him as he is” (v.2); the question is whether or not they will look like him. Those who love their brothers will look like him, while those who hate will not.

4–6 The second test in this section appears in v.6 and is supported by the assertions in vv.4–5. John first establishes a direct correlation between “sin” (*hamartia*) and “lawlessness” (*anomia*, GK 490). Although v.4 is apparently John’s own formulation rather than a communal creed (as indicated by the absence of *hoti*), he clearly expects his audience to appreciate the significance of this association. As a result, *anomia* is left undefined and unclear to modern readers. “Sin” and “lawlessness” are used synonymously in the LXX, but John seems to feel that the terms carry different nuances, so that “lawlessness” can be used to emphasize the seriousness of sin (cf. Brown, 398–99). Dodd, 72–73, suggests that John refers to sin as “lawlessness” to stress that “he is speaking of actual infraction of the moral law,” keeping the discussion strictly within the confines of ethical behavior and away from claims based on spiritual experience. Our status as “children of God” does not change the basic definition of sin, nor does it alleviate our moral responsibility. Sin is always “lawlessness,” whether committed by a child of God or anyone else. Other scholars believe that *anomia* derives from the broader eschatological thrust of 2:18 and 2:28–3:24. Several NT passages anticipate an outbreak of intense evil in the last days before Christ’s return (e.g., Mt 13:41; 24:11–12). Since John has already cited a slogan about the coming of the Antichrist, it is relevant to note that Paul refers to another eschatological figure as “the Lawless One” (2Th 2:3–10). Brown, 400, therefore concludes that “the author [of 1 John] is again appropriating the apocalyptic expectations of the final time to describe his opponents,” the lawless ones.

Both interpretations of *anomia* are reasonable, and perhaps both are correct. John clearly wishes to stress the eschatological urgency of the situation but perhaps also fears that his audience may be too lax in their attitude about sin. Since John is using “sin” to refer to a lack of love, he may need to stress that violation of the love command is of the same

category as other, more concrete ethical violations (murder, lying, etc.). There are no degrees of sin, and love is not optional. In the eschatological scheme of things, those who do not keep the love command are enemies of God.

5 After battling the Antichrists in the eschatological arena, John now suddenly shifts the venue back to Jesus' first appearing. Apparently citing a community slogan (*hoti*), John reminds his audience that Jesus appeared for the purpose of taking away sins, not for the purpose of allowing his children to revel in lawlessness. Verse 5 epitomizes John's unique perspective on Jesus' sacrificial work. While Paul would associate the removal of sins specifically with Jesus' death or resurrection (Ro 4:25; 5:6–10; 1Co 15:17; Gal 1:4; Eph 5:1–2; Col 1:21–23; 1Th 5:9–10), John's view is broader, highlighting the salvific significance of the whole incarnation. John can therefore say, with Paul, that Jesus' blood cleanses the sinner (1Jn 1:7), but he can also say more generally that Jesus' very incarnation took sins away. Further, while other NT authors would specify that Jesus was able to die as a sacrifice only because he was morally perfect (Heb 7:26–28), John does not stress this point—perhaps he sees it as self-evident. The NIV therefore correctly treats the phrase here, “And in him is no sin,” as a distinct thought. Taken together, the two sentences in v.5 emphasize the logic that underlies the test at v.6: Jesus has never had anything to do with sin—not then and not now. Since John is thinking of the love command, he may be touching on sayings such as John 15:9–13, which stress the purity and constancy of Jesus' love for his disciples.

6 The test at v.6 parallels that offered at 2:29. This time the positive scenario is stated first: *If* someone “lives [*menō*] in him,” *then* that person does not sin (NIV, does not “keep on sinning”). This is the logical implication of John's earlier remarks, for if Jesus has no sin in himself, those who abide in him will be sinless also. As noted earlier, John recognizes the impossibility of this statement in a moral sense, but he clearly expects true believers to be perfect in their love for one another. The negative version of this test therefore suggests that, *If* anyone sins (NIV, “continues to sin”), *then* that person has not “seen him or known him.” The idea that such a person has “not seen him” builds on the language of 1:1–3. Because John has, in fact, both seen and heard the teaching of Jesus firsthand, he challenges any claims to knowledge of Jesus that overlook the love command. To make this test inclusive of every contingency, John

introduces each scenario with the Greek *pas* (“all”). Every person who fails to love thereby proves she does not abide in Jesus, with no exceptions.

7–8 John continues the thought of vv.4–6 with two more tests at vv.7–8. These will prevent believers from being “led astray” by those who take a different view of the importance of love in the community. Since John has already identified the deceivers as the Antichrists (2:26), the tests may counter the Antichrists’ belief that they could remain in good fellowship with God (and John?) after abandoning John’s witness. First, *If* someone “does what is right,” *then* that person is righteous, just as God is righteous. In this context, John means that those who love the brothers the way God does are “righteous.” On the other hand, *If* anyone “does sin” (NIV, “does what is sinful”), *then* that person is “of the devil,” which means that those who do not show love are enemies of God.

8 Realizing the harsh tone of this condemnation, John attempts to defend it by appealing to a traditional saying, “The devil has sinned [NIV, has been sinning] from the beginning.” The fourth gospel situates a complex of similar sayings in the dialogue between Jesus and the Jews at the Feast of Tabernacles in John 8. As in 1 John 3, Jesus deduces that the Jews are children of the devil because they, like the devil, are guilty of the sin of hating him. Notably, whereas 3:8 says that the devil has sinned “from the beginning,” Jesus specifies that the devil was *a murderer* “from the beginning” (Jn 8:44). As 1 John 3:11–12 will indicate, to hate and murder one’s brother is the ultimate sin, for it obliterates the love command.

John’s dualism comes through strongly here in the absolute contrasts between God/Satan, righteousness/sin, and love/hate. There can be no friendly differences or agreements to disagree. The Antichrists, by leaving John’s doctrinal boundaries and stepping outside his fellowship, show themselves to be children of the devil. Indeed, if “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work,” how could God’s children peacefully coexist with the devil’s children?

9 John introduces his next test (v.10) with two premises supported by traditional statements. The first premise, that the person who is born of God does not sin, is supported by the slogan “God’s seed remains in him.” The second premise, that the believer is not able to sin (NIV, “go on sinning”), is supported by the statement “he has been born of God.”

The first slogan, “his seed remains in him,” has generated considerable controversy. The grammar of this statement is obscure and the thought is unique, with no direct NT parallels. One major difficulty relates to the intended reference of the pronoun *en autō* (“in him”). Most scholars prefer the NIV’s understanding that *en autō* means “in the believer,” so that God’s “seed” (*sperma*, GK 5065) is a genetic principle or quality that remains in those who are his children, following the metaphor of biological birth. Some scholars who hold this view understand God’s *sperma* to be the Holy Spirit, who regenerates believers at the point of conversion and remains in them to empower them not to sin (so Culpepper, 62–63; Johnson, 94–95; Rensberger, 91–92).

While this is consistent with John’s view of the Paraclete, it is relevant to note here other passages in which John says that something “remains in” believers. At 1 John 2:14, John says that “the word of God” remains in believers; at 2:24, Christians are exhorted to allow what they “heard from the beginning” to remain in them; at 2:27, the true “anointing,” a metaphor for the orthodox gospel (see [comment](#)), remains in believers; finally, at 2 John 2, “the truth,” later defined as the love command (2Jn 5–6), remains “in us and will be with us forever.” These references suggest that God’s “seed” is the tradition John has passed on to believers, a tradition that protects them from sin by teaching them what is right (cf. Dodd, 77–78; Malatesta, 247–50). Perhaps it is more important to stress what John does *not* mean here: God’s “seed” is clearly not a reference to a New Age or Gnostic “divine spark” in human beings. In this context, John has been speaking of the need for believers to obey the love command perfectly, and v.9 simply stresses that God’s true children are well acquainted with that teaching.

10 John has already highlighted the differences between the devil’s children and God’s children, and in v.10 he offers an absolute test to identify members of each group: *If* anyone does not do what is right, *then* that person is not from God. The next statement defines “doing right.” Unfortunately, the NIV has translated the *kai* (“and”) that connects these phrases as “nor,” implying that John is thinking of two types of people: those who do not do what is right and those who do not love. More likely, John is specifying that the sin he has in mind throughout this section is failure to love. The person who does not love his brother cannot be from God, because God is love (5:16).

11–17 The test at v.10 is followed by two examples, one the audience should emulate and one they will hopefully reject. The good example, Jesus (vv.16–17), represents the behavior of those who pass the test and are found to be God’s children. The bad example, Cain (vv.11–15), represents those who fail the test and show themselves to be children of the devil by hating their brothers. The language of the Cain illustration builds on the encounter between Jesus and the Jews in John 8:12–59, which is based, in turn, on the story of the first murder in Genesis 4. A brief review of both episodes will clarify John’s understanding of the difference between Christians and Antichrists.

Genesis 4:1–16 narrates a single incident involving an offering to the Lord. Abel brings God an animal sacrifice from “the firstborn of his flock,” whereas Cain brings “some of the fruits of the soil.” For unspecified reasons God accepts Abel’s offering but rejects Cain’s, advising Cain to bring a proper sacrifice and to control his anger. Instead Cain ambushes and murders Abel, bringing God’s curse on himself. The paucity of information here creates an aura of mystery, which allowed Cain to become a general symbol of evil in ancient Jewish and Christian writings (cf. Brown, 442–43). The early Christians apparently believed that Cain killed his brother out of envy, coveting the approval Abel had received from God, and allegorized the story to explain the Christian experience of persecution. Jesus says that those who harm his followers will be held responsible for all “the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah” (Mt 23:35). The author of Hebrews alludes to Cain twice, the first time commending Abel because he won God’s approval by offering “a better sacrifice than Cain did” (11:4), the second time comparing the blood of Abel to the covenantal blood of Jesus (12:22–24). Jude, in his tirade against heretics, says such people “have taken the way of Cain” because they “speak abusively against whatever they do not understand,” resisting those who teach the truth rather than repenting (10–11). These examples suggest that the story of Cain and Abel was used in early Christian rhetoric for apologetic purposes to explain why true believers suffer. Persecution occurs because the wicked (Cain) recognize that God has rejected them for their evil deeds and envy those who have won God’s approval through obedience (Abel).

The early Christian allegorization of Cain and Abel was well suited to John’s dualistic thinking. Within a matrix of absolute contrasts, Johannine

Christians could easily associate the children of light with Abel and the children of darkness with Cain, portraying the conflict between Christians and the world in terms of Genesis 4. One clear example of this rhetorical strategy appears in an encounter between Jesus and the Jews. Jesus portrays himself as “the light of the world,” who “stands with the Father” because he is “not of this world” (Jn 8:12, 16, 23). Like Abel, Jesus does not glorify himself but instead receives glory because God approves of his deeds (Jn 8:29, 54). The Jews, however, have been overpowered by sin, like Cain (Ge 4:7; Jn 8:34–35). They therefore resist Jesus’ claims and seek to kill him for telling the truth (Jn 8:37, 59), just as Cain killed Abel for offering the appropriate sacrifice. Because John variously refers to this same group of people as “Jews,” “Cain,” and “children of the devil” (1Jn 3:8–10), and because Cain is notorious as the first murderer, the Johannine Jesus can make the strange assertion that the devil (= Cain) “was a murderer from the beginning” (Jn 8:44) and can also portray the Jews’ rejection of his claims as an intent to murder him long before they actually express any interest in killing him (Jn 8:37, 40, 44, 59). It seems, then, that the Johannine Christians occasionally used images and terms from the story of Cain and Abel to describe the conflict between Jesus and those who rejected him.

11 John’s allegorization of Genesis 4 brings the extreme statements of 1 John 3:11–16 into focus. The section opens with a restatement of the love command (Jn 13:34), which they have “heard from the beginning” in the sense that it originates with Jesus.

12 From John’s dualistic perspective, those who do not “love” believers must “hate” them the way Cain hated Abel, leading him to murder his own brother. In the context of 1 John 3, Cain’s act of murder symbolizes the Antichrists’ departure from John’s fellowship. Of course, the Antichrists would dispute this association, either because they still consider John to be in their good fellowship or because they would blame John for severing the relationship. To counter such claims, John extends the analogy in dualistic terms, insisting that the Antichrists did not leave due to doctrinal disagreements but rather out of envy. They realized that John’s deeds, like those of Abel, were “righteous” (*dikaïos*, GK 1465) and therefore godlike (1Jn 1:9; 2:29; 3:7, 10), while their own were “evil” (*ponēra*, GK 4505), like Cain’s, because they originated with the “evil one” (*ho ponēros*; cf. Jn 3:20). Further, in order to stress the treachery of their departure John describes Cain’s act of murder by using the word *sphazō* (“murder,” GK

5377), which emphasizes the violence of Abel's death and the hostility of the Antichrists' actions.

13 Yet John is not surprised that the Antichrists would behave this way toward him, for Christians should expect the world to hate them. Verse 13, along with the [comment at 2:19](#) that the Antichrists “did not really belong to us,” indicates that John has separated the Antichrists from his fellowship and now considers them no different from other members of the world.

14 This verse contains the first of two tests to identify those who possess the spirit of Cain. The test at v.14 is based on two *hoti* phrases, the first of which introduces a community slogan and the second of which is causal, establishing the condition under which the slogan is true: *If (hoti) we love the brothers, then we know* “we have passed from death to life.” Those who fail this test “remain in death,” a gruesome image that serves as a logical counterpart to the Johannine emphasis on “abiding” (*menō*) in God and God's word. The perfect tense of *metabainō* (GK 3553; NIV, “have passed”) is synonymous with John's frequent use of the passive of *gennaō* (“to be born,” GK 1164), describing Christian conversion as a transformation of one's nature. In John's view, all people start out in the world alienated from God. Those who truly accept Jesus' claims are transformed into God's children (Jn 1:12–13), passing “from death to life” (see [comment at 1Jn 1:2](#)). Jesus discusses the same transition at John 5:24, indicating that this occurs when someone “hears my word and believes him who sent me.” In that context, emphasis is placed on accepting Jesus' self-revelation, but in 1 John 3 “my word” becomes the love command. Verse 14 thus specifies that true spiritual renewal does not occur at the point of faith but rather at the point of love for other believers. Christians are distinct from the world on the basis of their faith and distinct from Antichrists on the basis of their mutual love (cf. Jn 13:35; 17:21). Anyone who does not love the brothers, irrespective of her doctrinal claims, is not welcome in John's fellowship.

15 Realizing that some might object to such a narrow view of salvation, John returns to the Cain analogy with a second test at v.15. The all-inclusive proposition (*pas*; NIV, “anyone”) is undergirded by a condition: *If anyone “hates [miseō, GK 3631] his brother,” then that person “is a murderer.”* The significance of this conclusion is indicated by the next phrase, a slogan stating the apparently general belief that “no murderer has eternal life in

him” (cf. Ro 1:28–32). Although perhaps extreme, the equation of hatred with murder is consistent with John’s dualistic disposition toward “reducing an ethical issue to its most basic form” (Rensberger, 99). Because hatred is the root of murder (cf. Dt 19:11), those who hate are in the same category as Cain. The possible origins of the slogan John cites to make this point are intriguing. While “having life” is a typically Johannine moniker for salvation (e.g., Jn 3:16; 10:10), no such teaching on hatred appears in the fourth gospel, and many commentators have noted the remarkable similarity between 1 John 3:15 and Matthew 5:21–22. There Jesus, commenting on the sixth commandment (Ex 20:13), states that “anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.” It seems unlikely, however, that John is appealing to the tradition that underlies Matthew 5, for Matthew’s wording is different from John’s, and Matthew focuses on the need to control one’s tongue rather than the salvific status of believers who hate other Christians. John’s slogan more likely derives from the Cain allegory than from any specific teaching of Jesus. Matthew would, however, support John’s basic assertion that hatred and murder are cut from the same cloth. The Antichrists are thereby placed outside not only the sphere of John’s community but also the sphere of salvation.

16 Having vilified the Antichrists by analogy with Cain, John offers a positive example of true love: Jesus. The NIV’s colon renders the Greek *hoti*, which here introduces a paraphrase of John 15:13—“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (cf. Jn 10:11–18). “Lay down his life [*psychē*, GK 6034]” is a uniquely Johannine way of describing Jesus’ voluntary self-sacrifice, an act that represents the highest possible expression of love (Jn 15:13). The citation at 1 John 3:16 is introduced with the perfect tense of *ginōskō* (“we have known,” GK 1182), which probably refers both to mental awareness and emotional experience (see [comment at 2:2](#)). True believers “have known” of Jesus’ love not only in the sense that they have accepted John’s witness about Jesus but also in the sense that they have experienced divine love and forgiveness. Such an experience should motivate them to act in the same self-sacrificing way toward other believers.

John’s dualistic mind-set is evident in his narrow and absolute definition of love (*agapē*). There are no degrees of love: those who sacrifice themselves, like Jesus, show love; those who do not act this way show hate. The NIV reflects this emphasis with the translation “This is how we know

what love is.” Since there is only one kind of love, and since this one kind was modeled by Jesus, Christians, like Jesus, “ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” In the historical setting of 1–2–3 John (see [Introduction](#)), this might mean that some Johannine Christians had literally suffered martyrdom for the community, but the application of the principle in v.17 suggests that John is thinking of one’s material possessions. The person who does not sacrifice herself and her wealth for her brothers is no different from the Antichrists and Cain. If it seems too much to ask for this sort of love, John could point out that Jesus laid down his life not only for his friends (Jn 15:13) but even for the hostile world (Jn 6:51). Surely, then, Christians can at least love other Christians.

17 Up to this point, John’s discussion of love and hate has been rather abstract, focusing on vague generalities. Here he offers a direct and practical test that will identify selfless love. John states this test in the form of a sarcastic rhetorical question. The Greek text of the verse consists of four phrases loosely arranged in a brief narrative:

1. *If* someone has “the life of the world” (NIV, “material possessions”), and
2. *If* that person “sees his brother having need,” and (*kai*; NIV, “but”)
3. *If* that person “closes his heart to” (NIV, “has no pity on”) the needy brother,
4. *then* the love of God does not remain in him.

The opening statement in John’s illustration is considerably stronger in the Greek text than in the NIV. While the NIV translates *ton bios tou kosmou* (“the life of the world”; cf. Marshall, 194 n. 20) with the somewhat neutral “material possessions,” both *bios* and *kosmos* (GK 3180) have negative implications in Johannine thought. First John 2:16 refers to material wealth as the “pride of life [*bios*],” associating it with “the lust of the flesh” and “the lust of the eyes,” which do not proceed from the Father. The true origin of such things is indicated here in 3:17: they are “from the *kosmos*,” the hostile world that is alienated from God and hates Jesus (see [Introduction](#)). While modern Western Christians might be uncomfortable with the association, John suggests that material wealth is inherently worldly, making it almost unnatural for a believer to be possessed of excess

resources. This being the case, Christians should have no difficulty relieving themselves of money whenever a need arises.

Phrase 2 introduces the second character in John's scenario. The contrast between this person and the first person hinges on the repetition of *echō*, "has." While the first person "has life," the second person "has need." John uses *theōreō* ("sees," GK 2555), to describe the first person's realization of the second person's need. While poverty may indeed manifest itself visibly in the appearance of its victims, John probably wishes to stress that the person in question has firsthand information about his brother's need. In such a situation, the example of Jesus would call the wealthy brother to divest himself of his worldly goods and help the person who is less fortunate.

The plot of John's story, however, takes a tragic turn, for phrase 3 indicates that the wealthy brother has gone the way of Cain. The NIV dilutes the treachery of the wealthy man's deed by saying that he "has no pity," suggesting only a passive indifference toward the brother's need. In fact, John portrays the wealthy brother as one who actively distances himself from the situation by "closing his heart" to his brother. "Heart" here is *splanchna* ("the bowels," GK 5073), which the ancient Greeks saw as the seat of the emotions. The unusual image of "closing" (*kleiō*, GK 3091) one's affections probably builds on *theōreō* from phrase 2. The wealthy man's eye is open to his brother's need, but his heart is closed so he takes no action. He has failed the test.

Phrase 4 offers the conclusion that must be drawn in such a case. "Love of God" uses the objective genitive ("love for God") to stress a point that echoes a number of sayings in both the Synoptics and the fourth gospel: those who do not love their brothers do not love God either. Jesus set the standard for self-sacrifice, and those who disregard that standard cannot legitimately claim to love him (Mt 25:31–45; Mk 10:45). The Johannine Jesus stresses this point in the final moments with his disciples in the upper room. After washing their feet, Jesus tells them, "You should do [for each other] as I have done for you" (Jn 13:14–15). Shortly thereafter Jesus gives the disciples the "new command," that they must "love each other as I have loved you" (13:34; 15:12). Since Jesus commanded believers to treat one another in this way, and since only those who obey Jesus' commands remain in his love (15:9–14), John concludes that those who disobey the

command to love are not friends of Jesus, meaning that they do not truly love God. Caring for one's brothers becomes, then, a visible test of one's relationship with God. Those who fail this test remain in the world with Cain.

While the general ethical implications of this test are obvious (if painful), John's sudden emphasis on Christian benevolence, a subject he has not previously mentioned, seems abrupt. In what way does this test apply to the Antichrist situation, and how does it distinguish the children of God from the children of the devil (v.10)? The answer may lie in the distinction John makes between Gaius and Diotrephes in 3 John. Both 2 and 3 John suggest that the Johannine churches were held together by a network of itinerant teachers, protégés of John who spoke and acted on his behalf (see [Introduction](#); [comment at 1Jn 2:19](#)). Second John 10–11 and 3 John 5–8 indicate that John's representatives relied on the support and hospitality of local congregations to finance their travels. The test at 1 John 3:17 may be aimed at people such as Diotrephes, an apparent ally of the Antichrists, who "refuses to welcome the brothers [and] also stops those who want to do so" (3Jn 10). In such a setting, the wealthy person would represent the kind of inhospitable people (e.g., Diotrephes) who show hatred for their righteous brothers (John's representatives) by ignoring their needs and refusing to support them. Such hostile behavior proves in John's mind that Diotrephes and others like him do not truly love God. On the other hand, Christian leaders such as Gaius, who has shown hospitality to John's associates and has "sent them on their way in a manner worthy of God" (3Jn 6), prove their love for God by obeying the love command.

18 After blasting the Antichrists John suddenly shifts to a more pastoral tone to encourage his "children" (*teknion*), those who pass the test of love. Verse 18 summarizes vv.11–17 and also John's general view of Christian duty. Love does not express itself "with words or tongue" but rather "in deeds and truth" (NIV, "with actions and in truth"). This statement parallels John 4:24, where Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that true worshipers must approach the Father "in spirit and in truth." "In truth" has a doctrinal orientation, referring to a correct view of Jesus. Just as real worship depends on a proper recognition of Jesus' identity, genuine Christian ethics must also be based on John's orthodox witness. This verse epitomizes John's belief that all aspects of Christian life are grounded in Christology.

19–20 These verses discuss the benefits enjoyed by those who express their love “in deeds and truth.” The Greek text of these verses is difficult, being one long, convoluted statement that the NIV tries to clarify by breaking into two shorter sentences. At least three points of translation, all of which carry significant implications for exegesis, must be addressed. First, John uses *hoti* three times in these two verses. The first usage (v.19), clearly seems to introduce direct or indirect discourse (NIV, “that we belong ...”), but the function of the other two usages is far from certain. Second, the verb *peithō* (NIV, “set at rest,” GK 4275) permits of two possible translations, both of which are reasonable in this context. Third, the word “heart” (*kardia*, GK 2840), which also appears three times in these verses, carries a slightly different connotation in Greek than in English. Any exegesis of these verses must account for these difficulties and their implications.

The easiest of the three problems concerns the value of the Greek term *kardia*. The NIV translates the word literally as “heart,” but the English “heart” suggests a complex of ideas that are alien to John’s thinking. Popular English generally uses “heart” to represent the emotions, particularly the more tender feelings (love, compassion, grief, etc.). The NIV’s “we set our hearts at rest” suggests to the modern reader that John is speaking of freedom from feelings of guilt. But John has just used *splachna*, not *kardia*, in v.17 to refer to the feelings, and, as Marshall, 198 n.5, observes, “In Hebrew thought the heart is tantamount to the conscience.” John is thus not speaking about an emotional burden but rather about an objective self-evaluation of one’s moral standing. Neither John nor any other NT author suggests that Christians should respond to moral failure by plaguing themselves with feelings of guilt.

In what sense, then, do the consciences of true believers “condemn” (*kataginōskō*, GK 2861) them, so that they need to know that “God is greater than our hearts” (v.20)? At first glance the warm reassurance of vv.19–20 seems to contradict the apparent moral perfectionism of vv.4–10. After apparently insisting that Christians do not sin, John now seems to assume that Christians will violate their consciences and proceeds to assure them that God’s grace is greater than our sense of imperfection. The tension between these two passages may be resolved by stressing once again that “sin” in 2:28–3:24 refers exclusively to violation of the love command. The love command is in John’s view the core of the Christian life, making it an

absolute test of faith: those who do not love the brothers are not Christians in the first place. No true Christian, then, can have a bad conscience about the love command, for all who fail to love are not true believers. But true believers may commit other sins, and their consciences may rightly conclude that these actions are unacceptable in God's sight. It is these sins John has in mind when he says that "God is greater than our hearts." God knows that true believers desire to do what is right, and he forgives them when they fail to do so. But God's grace cannot cover the sin of breaking the love command, for grace is limited to true believers, and no true believer fails to love. While this may seem harsh, it is relevant to note that John's view is consistent with that of Matthew. The Matthean Jesus also limits the boundaries of grace ("Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors") and assures those who refuse to forgive that God will not forgive them either (Mt 6:9–15; 18:21–35). Similarly, John insists that God can overcome every violation of conscience except a failure to show love to others. In fact, John's view is somewhat more lenient than that of Matthew, for while Matthew's Jesus insists that his disciples must love even their enemies and, going far beyond John, "pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44), John demands only that Christians love one another. Those who do not love have little hope of forgiveness, while those who do can rest assured that all other sins are swept away.

The next difficulty in the Greek text of 1 John 3:19–20 relates to the proper translation of *peithō*. The NIV, consistent with the notion that "heart" refers to the emotions, translates the term, "we set our hearts at rest," suggesting that our fears and feelings of guilt are assuaged by our knowledge of God's greater grace (cf. Marshall, 197 n. 2; Johnson, 87–88). Brown, 455, however, notes that *peithō* normally means "'to convince, persuade, win over,' usually with the implication of persuading people to do something toward which they would not naturally be inclined, or of convincing them of something that is not obvious." While there is only a slight shade of difference between the two readings, the context suggests that Brown's understanding is technically more accurate. Since "heart" here refers to the conscience, and since the conscience is the moral prosecutor of each person's behavior, it seems that *peithō* builds on *kataginōskō* ("condemn") in v.20. Whenever the conscience reels under moral failure, our recognition of God's grace "persuades" our conscience that all is well. Again, this persuasion comes only to those who pass the love test at v.18.

Perhaps the most significant difficulty in the Greek text of vv.19–20 derives from the triple use of *hoti*. The NIV interprets the first *hoti* (v.19) as an introduction to indirect discourse: “This then is how we know *that* we belong to the truth” (Dodd, 92; Brown, 439; Smalley, 199–200; Johnson, 87–88; Rensberger, 103). Against this view, it should be noted that John generally combines *hoti* with verbs of “knowing” to introduce traditional sayings or community slogans (see [comments at 1Jn 2:3–4, 5, 29; 3:2, 5, 14, 15, 16](#)). The same appears to be the case here. The slogan “we are of the truth” builds on the title “children of God” in v.10 via John’s belief that Jesus is “the truth” (Jn 14:6) and his insistence that the orthodox Christian proclamation is true (1Jn 2:20–22, 27). In the light of v.18, “we are of the truth” asserts that those who obey the love command show themselves to be in line with John’s true witness, which gives them confidence “in [God’s] presence.” The sudden reference to God’s presence probably draws on the eschatological imagery John has been using throughout this section (cf. 2:28; 3:2; 4:17). The verbs *ginōskō* (“we know”) and *peithō* (“set at rest”) at v.19 are both future tense, indicating that our confidence awaits its final fulfillment. At the judgment, those whose beliefs and deeds are correct will have nothing to fear (cf. 3:1–3).

The value of the second *hoti* at the beginning of v.20 is more difficult to ascertain. Some commentators suggest that the Greek text, which reads *hoti ean kataginōskē*, should be corrected to *ho ti an kataginōskē*, understanding *hoti* as the neuter of the relative pronoun *hostis* (“who”/“which”). This gives the phrase the flavor of an indefinite condition, as reflected in the NIV: “we set our hearts at rest in his presence *whenever* [lit., *in whatever*] our hearts condemn us” (cf. Marshall, 196–97; Smalley, 200). Other scholars suggest that *hoti* introduces a parenthetical statement that continues the thought of v.19 by indicating the conditions under which our consciences would need to be persuaded. This makes the first *hoti* in v.20 a punctuation mark that does not translate into English: “we shall convince our heart that, if our heart condemns us, God is greater ...” (so Brown, 439, 456; Rensberger, 103–4). As a third possibility, *hoti* may be used here in a causal sense, indicating the reason we may convince our hearts. If this is the case, the phrase “whenever our hearts condemn us” is an interruption of John’s main line of thought, which is resumed by repeating *hoti* a third time, making the third *hoti* a punctuation mark. The NKJV takes this approach with the reading “by this we know that we are of the truth, and

shall assure our hearts before Him. *For* if our heart condemns us, God is greater ...” Although all three translations produce similar readings, in this context the third interpretation seems most likely. John has just indicated that Christians may have confidence in God’s presence and now explains that they enjoy this assurance “because” God’s knowledge overcomes our self-condemnation.

The third *hoti* in these verses introduces the statement “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” The creedal nature of this statement suggests that John is citing a community slogan, so that *hoti* in this case introduces direct discourse. The slogan is reminiscent of the story of Peter’s restoration. The resurrected Jesus questions Peter three times about the sincerity of his love in light of Peter’s failure to confess Jesus in the moment of trial (Jn 21:15–17; cf. Jn 18:15–18, 25–27). Peter realizes his treacherous actions have challenged his claim to loyalty, and he appeals in desperation to Jesus’ omniscience: “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you” (21:17). Similarly, the slogan at 1 John 3:20 reminds true believers that God is aware of their good intentions, allowing him to treat us more graciously than we treat ourselves.

21–22 These verses explore the condition of those whose consciences do not condemn them—true believers who recognize that God’s penetrating knowledge overcomes their moral failures. Such people “have *parrēsia*” (“have confidence”) before God, which allows them to “receive from him anything we ask.” *Parrēsia* is a particularly appropriate term here, for in the fourth gospel it refers to language that is forward and direct (Jn 16:25–30; see [comment at 1Jn 2:28](#)). Those whose consciences are clear may make requests with confidence because they have nothing to hide from God. The two reasons for this confidence are introduced by a *hoti* that carries, as the NIV indicates, causal force: *because* (1) we keep his commands, and (2) we “do what pleases him.” The phrases are synonymous, stressing the point that confidence in prayer comes from obedience.

22 This verse plays a key role in debates over the “health and wealth gospel” on the one hand and the “problem of evil” on the other. On the surface, John seems to suggest that believers can demand anything they wish from God and expect to receive it. Some modern Western Christians take this to mean that God will grant any material luxury they desire. From this perspective, unanswered prayer indicates that the supplicant is not truly

obedient to God, perhaps concealing some secret sin or lack of faith. At the same time, this verse can present a serious obstacle to Christian apologetics, for it makes it difficult to explain why God does not answer the legitimate prayers of those who are suffering and oppressed. It is also hard to reconcile John's confident assertions here with passages such as John 15:18–16:4, which suggest that alienation and pain are the norm of Christian experience and that God does not plan to answer prayers for relief.

The raw facts of life suggest that v.22 cannot be correct. How, then, can this verse be reconciled with “our humdrum and often disappointing experience” (Marshall, 199)? To understand John's perspective, we must recognize that v.22 builds on the same complex of ideas that underlies several passages in the fourth gospel. On three occasions during the farewell address (Jn 13–17), Jesus states that the disciples, as they pray by the authority of Jesus and in the confidence that this produces, will receive anything they ask for in his name (Jn 14:13–14; 15:7; 16:23–24). In these passages John clearly connects answered prayer with (1) obedience and faith (cf. 14:15; 15:5–6) and (2) the glorification of Jesus and/or the Father (cf. 15:8).

It seems, then, that at 1 John 3:22 John is thinking specifically of prayers for divine power and strength to proclaim the gospel. True believers “receive from him anything we ask,” the power and strength to overcome the world and the Antichrists, “*because we obey his commands.*” Similarly, John assures “you who believe in the name of the Son of God” (5:13) that “if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us” (5:14). Presumably the only concern of the true disciple is that God will be glorified, so that true disciples offer prayers in accordance with God's will. This condition automatically excludes prayers for material luxury or expectations that God will relieve suffering. In fact, since God commands us not to “love the world or anything in the world” (2:15), those who pray for fulfillment of their worldly desires automatically remove themselves from the provisions of these verses. They may, of course, receive the wealth they seek, but the source of such wealth is the world, not God (see [comments at 1Jn 3:16, 17](#)).

23 This verse epitomizes Johannine Christianity. John has insisted throughout this section that true Christians do not sin because they keep God's commands, and here he specifies the two commands he has in mind. The first relates to one's ideology: “believe in the name of his Son, Jesus

Christ.” True Christians, unlike the Antichrists, accept that the human Jesus was also the divine Son of God. While it may seem unusual to portray faith as an act of obedience, the same idea underlies John 6:29. There the Jews, after the miraculous feeding, ask Jesus to tell them what they must do to fulfill God’s desires. His reply replaces works of faith with faith itself: “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” John’s second command relates to one’s lifestyle: “love one another as he commanded us” (cf. Jn 13:34; 15:12). Although not stated as a test, these two characteristics distinguish true believers from the world (those who reject Jesus altogether) and from the Antichrists (those who claim to be believers but remain outside the community because they do not love [i.e., do not accept John’s teaching and authority]).

24 John concludes the present section and transitions toward the next (4:1–6). Up to this point, the discussion has focused heavily on what the individual must do to establish her status as a true child of God. John has emphasized sinlessness, correct beliefs, and expressions of love—all personal achievements—as the marks of a Christian. Verse 24 highlights the spiritual dimension of genuine Christian experience. Those who obey enjoy the mystical, mutual indwelling with the Father that Jesus requested for his disciples at John 17:20–23. To stress this point, John introduces a community slogan with the formula *ginōskomen hoti* (“we know”): “He remains [*menō*] in us” (NIV, “we know that he lives in us”). This proposition is validated by the Christian experience of the Spirit. John closely associates Jesus with the Spirit, so much so that Jesus will come to the disciples in the form of the Paraclete (Jn 14:15–18). The fact, then, that true believers have the Spirit proves that God is with them and that they have passed the tests. John’s implication that the Antichrists do not possess God’s Spirit suggests that belief, ethics, and union with God go hand in hand. Those who do not hold to a proper belief and do not live under Jesus’ commands cannot legitimately claim that God’s Spirit dwells in them. Rensberger, 107, notes that “although the possession of the Spirit and mutual abiding with God are interior events, they are validated by means that are ... thoroughly public.”

NOTES

3:9 Contra the majority view of ἐν αὐτῷ, *en autō*, as meaning “in the believer,” the Moffatt translation takes this to mean “in God,” with the idea that God’s “seed,” his children, “remain in Him,” making it impossible for those who are truly born of God to sin. Moffatt’s interpretation is supported by the fact that the fourth gospel uses σπέρμα, *sperma*, on several occasions to refer to physical descent (Jn 7:42; 8:33–37). Some commentators seek a compromise position, arguing that God’s σπέρμα, *sperma*, is “a divine principle of life which abides in the believer” and includes the influence of both the Spirit and the Word (so Marshall, 186–87; Brown, 409–11; Smalley, 173–74).

17 Scholars are divided on the implications of the genitive θεοῦ, *theou*. Some suggest it has ablative force, meaning that the love that comes “from God” does not flow through the person who does not love her brother. Brown, 450, for example, concludes that “the person described in 17abc is blocking the movement of divine love, which would lead him to treat his brother as Christ treated us, so divine love does not function in such a person” (cf. Bultmann, 56; Culpepper, 71; Stott, 144; Rensberger, 101). Others conclude, based on the analogy with Jesus’ self-sacrifice, that John means “the type of love shown by God,” a qualitative use of the genitive that is reflected in the NRSV rendering (so Smalley, 197; Johnson, 85).

REFLECTIONS

First John 2:28–3:24 opens on an eschatological note, but the tests in this section place Christian life squarely in the present. The eternal aspects of Christian experience are lived out now, in this world, and the future will only reveal what God and true believers have known all along. For John, “being a Christian” means believing in Jesus as the Christ and showing love to other Christians by remaining in the community. The benefits for those who pass these tests are available *now*, not just in a vague eschatological future: true life, confidence in prayer, and God’s presence through the Spirit. Likewise, the Antichrists reap the rewards of their wickedness in this life. By leaving John’s fellowship, they prove that they have not seen God or known him, that they are children of the devil, and that they do not have eternal life in themselves.

First John 3:23 introduces two hallmarks of genuine Christianity that John will explore in the next two sections: 4:1–6 explains what it means to

“believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,” while 4:7–21 clarifies what it means to “love one another.”

C. Test #7: The True Spirit (4:1–6)

OVERVIEW

John has just reminded believers that the Spirit’s presence confirms their relationship with God. While this assertion should give Christians confidence, it also touches on a key problem in John’s struggle with the Antichrists (see [Introduction](#)). Since both true and false teachers could claim to speak by the Spirit’s guidance, and since Johannine tradition could be taken to suggest that the Spirit may lead the church beyond the boundaries of established belief (Jn 16:12–13), how can one tell which teachers are telling the truth? In this section John affirms the spiritual dimension of all teaching, while offering a test to distinguish God’s Spirit from the Antichrists. In the process he clarifies that “believing in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ” (1Jn 3:23) has both subjective (spiritual) and objective (doctrinal) dimensions.

¹Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

⁴You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

COMMENTARY

1 John immediately introduces what will become the key term in this section, *pneuma* (“spirit,” GK 4460). Some believers have been led astray by those who falsely claim to speak by God’s Spirit, and John wishes to protect those who remain in his fellowship. Today such claims might be countered by denying that *any* teaching is “inspired” and by accusing those who make such claims of spiritualizing a natural process. John, however, clearly believes that the Spirit plays a key role in Christian instruction (cf. Jn 16:12–15), which leads him to insist that true orthodox teaching (such as his own) is inspired by God’s Spirit, while the Antichrists’ doctrines are not. Again, a modern approach would insist that the Antichrists have generated these false teachings from their own minds. John, however, consistent with his dualistic worldview, subscribes to the notion that *all* teaching, true or false, has a spiritual dimension. He can therefore acknowledge that both true teachers and Antichrists are inspired by spirits, but he warns his audience that they must not “believe every spirit.” The term “believe” (NIV) renders the Greek *pisteuō* (GK 4409), which here means “trust.” Not all teachers can be trusted, because some of them are driven by spirits that do not come from God.

To stress the danger of the situation, John tells his audience that “many false prophets have gone out into the world.” The NIV is probably correct in translating the *hoti* that introduces this phrase with causal force (“because many false prophets ...”), as the presence of false prophets states the reason why Christians must exercise caution. At the same time, John may be introducing a slogan or a traditional saying with an eschatological flavor. Although no similar saying appears in the fourth gospel, the reference to false prophets going out into the world resembles Mark 13:22, where Jesus warns the disciples that false prophets will appear with the purpose of “deceiving the elect.” At 1 John 4:6, John associates the Antichrists with the “spirit of falsehood,” and his use of *exerchomai* (“go out”) in v.1 suggests that his opponents are on a mission to deceive (see [comment at 1Jn 2:19](#)). This again portrays the Antichrists as allied with the cosmic forces of evil; their teachings are inspired by the end-times spirit of false prophecy, which seeks to lead people astray (cf. 1Ti 4:1).

2–3 John says believers must “test the spirits” (v.1) to distinguish between true teachers and Antichrists. Strangely, this statement is

sometimes taken to refer to a mystical power of discernment or, in extreme cases, a technique of exorcism, despite the fact that John has very little to say about demons or spiritual gifts. The Greek *dokimazō* (“test,” GK 1507) suggests a more objective inquiry, and vv.2–3 offer the criteria for such an investigation. The positive version of the test (v.2) is introduced clearly with the statement “in this you know the Spirit of God” (NIV, “this is how you can recognize the Spirit of God”). “Know” (*ginōskō*) has a wide range of meanings in 1 John (see [comment at 2:3](#)), but here it refers to an objective conclusion based on empirical data. The NIV thus correctly translates the term “recognize.” “Of God” (*tou theou*) is genitive of source or ablative: the test will distinguish whether or not a person’s teaching comes from the Spirit that proceeds from God, the Paraclete.

The test itself is introduced by *homologeō* (“confess”; the NIV’s “acknowledge” is too weak here), which suggests that John is citing a creed most Johannine Christians would accept. Everyone who speaks by God’s spirit will assert that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” This confession is clearly important to the background of 1–2–3 John because it distinguishes John’s belief from that of the Antichrists, but regrettably the sentence is obscure in the Greek. The word translated “has come” (NIV) is actually a perfect tense participle (“having come”) that characterizes Jesus, and no other verb appears in the sentence. It is therefore unclear exactly what John thinks the Spirit will confess. Some scholars suggest that the words “Jesus” and “Christ” are used together here as a compound proper name. This can lead to one of two conclusions: (1) one must confess “Jesus Christ [the divine person] as having come in the flesh,” i.e., must accept that “there was a true union of the divine Word, the Son of God, with a human personality in Jesus Christ” (Marshall, 204–5); or (2) one must accept the confession “Jesus Christ come in the flesh,” i.e., one must accept the whole of Johannine Christology, which is summarized by this statement (so Brown, 492–93; Smalley, 222–23). As a third possibility, it may be that the word “Jesus” is the subject of the sentence. From this perspective, true teachers must confess two things about Jesus: that Jesus is “the Christ,” the divine Son of God, and that Jesus also “came in the flesh,” that he had a true physical body (so Dodd, 96–99; Houlden, 107).

All three readings are reasonable within the broader context of Johannine theology. The first two are supported by the fact that John occasionally uses the compound name “Jesus Christ” (e.g., 1:3; 2:1; 3:16, 23; 5:6) to refer to

the incarnate Son. Stronger parallels, however, may be adduced in support of the third reading. On four other occasions in 1 John, John presents absolute creeds that require true believers to confess that the human Jesus was also the divine Christ: 2:22, where the “liar” and “Antichrist” is the person who “denies [*arneomai*, the opposite of *homologeō*] that Jesus is the Christ” (*Iēsous estin ho Christos*); 4:15, where John says that anyone who confesses “Jesus is the Son of God” (acknowledging that the human Jesus and the divine Son are one) remains in God; 5:1, where the one who believes that “Jesus is the Christ” has been born of God; and 5:5, where the one who believes that “Jesus is the Son of God” has victory over the world.

It seems, then, that Johannine creeds tend to follow a formula in which the human Jesus is associated with the Christ who has come from God. From this perspective, 4:2 means that one must confess that Jesus was both a human being with physical flesh and the divine Christ. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the negative version of the test at v.3 mentions those who do not acknowledge “Jesus” rather than those who do not acknowledge “Jesus Christ.” True Christians must acknowledge Jesus as the Christ. If they do not, their teaching is not from God.

3 For John, then, the Spirit’s revelatory ministry does not go beyond accepted tradition. The negative version of the test follows from this principle: *If any teacher/“spirit” does not confess Jesus (i.e., does not accept John’s Christology), then one must conclude that such teaching does not originate with God.* This is a logical extension of John 16:13–15, where Jesus says that the Paraclete will “speak only what he hears” from Jesus and will “take from what is mine and make it known to you.” Since the Johannine Jesus clearly presents himself as the human Son of God, the Spirit must do the same. John thus makes personal religious experience subservient to doctrinal norms. The creed sets the boundaries for the Spirit’s work.

If the message of the true teachers comes from the Paraclete, where do those who disagree with John get their teaching? John might logically say Satan, but, continuing the eschatological motif, he concludes that such people are inspired by the Antichrist, the ultimate opponent of God. As at 1 John 2:18 (see [comment](#)), John cites the slogan “Antichrist is coming” but specifies that the power of the Antichrist is already at work in the world in the form of those who spread false notions about Jesus. Here again, in

John's application the "Antichrist" is not a person opposed to God, the Messiah, or the forces of good in general but rather one who specifically denies the Jesus proclaimed by orthodox Christians and opposes those who bear this witness.

4 Whether or not the Antichrists harbored hard feelings toward John (see [comment at 2:19](#)), John cannot allow a peaceful coexistence. In his view, the struggle between true believers and Antichrists is the visible expression of a cosmic, eschatological conflict between good and evil. Those who remain in John's fellowship may rest assured of victory. In fact, the perfect tense of *nikaō* indicates that believers "have overcome" the Antichrists already. The next phrase is introduced by *hoti*, which most translations interpret causally ("because the one who is in you ...") to indicate the reason or means by which victory has been secured (NIV, NASB, NRSV, NEB, NKJV). More likely, John is introducing a saying or community slogan that affirms his claim to conquest. Breaking from a pure dualism, the slogan asserts that real believers must inevitably defeat the Antichrists because the Spirit that drives them is inherently stronger than the spirit of Antichrist.

5 This verse attempts to account for the inconsistency between John's claim to victory in v.4 and the real-life experiences of those in his fellowship. If God is truly stronger than the devil, and if God's people have already conquered, why are the Johannine Christians suffering pain and humiliation at the hands of nonbelievers and Antichrists (see [Introduction](#))? John explains that, while the cosmic battle takes place in this world, the fruits of victory cannot be enjoyed here. The same tension pervades the farewell address in the fourth gospel, where Jesus promises God's strength and presence but also the world's hatred and abuse (Jn 15:1–16:4). From a human perspective, it seems that the spirit of Antichrist is winning, but truth *will* triumph in the end.

The Antichrists have fared better than John's party because they are "from the world." Since John has earlier revealed that they were actually once members of his group (2:19), the genitive here must be qualitative: the Antichrists are "worldly" and are therefore able to speak the language of the world—and the world listens to them. John's suffering results from the fact that he does not speak this language.

The dualistic idea that there are two languages, one of the world and one of true believers, derives from two episodes in the fourth gospel. In the first, Jesus, while arguing with the Jews at the Feast of Tabernacles, insists that his language is not clear to them because they are of the devil, making it impossible for them to understand the words of God. Confirming his analysis, the Jews conclude that Jesus is “a Samaritan and demon-possessed,” and shortly after that they attempt to kill him (Jn 8:42–48, 59). The reverse concept appears in John 10:1–21. There Jesus asserts that his true sheep will understand him and follow his voice, while refusing to follow the voice of the stranger or thief. Just as those in the world cannot understand God’s language, those who are “of God” cannot understand the world’s language. The fact that the Antichrists not only understand the world’s language but actually speak it would only confirm John’s belief that they were never true Christians in the first place (1Jn 2:19); those who truly “know God,” however, heed the true message proclaimed by John (4:6).

Since the Antichrists speak the language of the world, it is no surprise that “the world listens to them.” Most scholars believe that this phrase is a comment on the Antichrists’ evangelistic efforts. Rensberger, 113–14, for example, suggests that the Antichrists “were engaged in a successful mission to non-Christians” and winning more converts than John. Lest his followers interpret this as a sign of divine approval, John insists they are successful only because they compromise the truth (cf. Marshall, 209; Johnson, 98). But what aspect of the Antichrists’ message would make them so popular? Why would people prefer their version of Christianity over John’s? Some have suggested that the Antichrists promoted a less rigorous ethic than John, which made it possible for people to accept the message of Christ without adopting the Johannine lifestyle. Brown, 508, feels that the Antichrists’ message was more acceptable because it eliminated “all that is scandalous in the earthly career of Jesus” by avoiding problematic philosophical issues such as the incarnation and resurrection. While such theories are reasonable, it seems more likely John is referring to the *quality* of the Antichrists’ audience rather than its *quantity*, the *nature* of those who subscribe to their teaching rather than the *number*. In John’s view, any person who listens to the Antichrists shows by this positive response that she is “of the world.” “World” is thus used here in a way similar to “pagans” at 3 John 7 as a label for all who do not accept John’s teaching. Consistent with John’s dualistic perspective, those who are “of

God” seek teachers who are “of God,” while those who seek teachers who are not of God must be “of the world.” This would serve as a warning to believers who were attracted to the Antichrists’ teachings but had not yet accepted them.

6 John offers a second test to help believers distinguish the “Spirit of truth,” God’s Spirit (Jn 14:16–17), from “the spirit of deceit” (*planē*, GK 4415; NIV, “error”). The opening phrase here indicates that John himself is the basis for this test. “We are from God” establishes John’s faith and practice, which proceed from the Spirit’s power, as the measure of all spiritual experience. This being the case, *if* someone “listens to us,” *then* that person “knows God.” On the other hand, *if* someone “does not listen to us,” *then* that person is “not from God.” The referent of the term *ho* (“whoever”) is important here. Most scholars believe that John is categorizing all individuals on the basis of their response to his message —“whoever is of God” versus “whoever is not of God” (so Marshall, 209–10; Brown, 499–500; Smalley, 229–30; Culpepper, 82). While John has, indeed, just stated that those who listen to the Antichrists are “from the world,” the general concern of 4:1–6 is to distinguish true teachers from false teachers. It is therefore more likely that this test, like that in vv.2–3, is aimed specifically at the Antichrists and is not making a general statement. John uses *akouō* (“listens,” GK 201) with the genitive here in the sense of obeying a command. Those teachers who do not obey John’s commands, who have “gone out from us” (2:19) and who do not remain within the confines of John’s doctrine, thereby prove that they are actually inspired by “the spirit of falsehood.” True Christians should therefore avoid them, recognizing that they do not speak with John’s authorization.

This test, along with the one in vv.2–3, uses orthodox doctrine to set the boundary for the Spirit’s activity. While John cannot prove that the Antichrists’ teaching does not have a spiritual origin, he can point out that what they say is inconsistent with received tradition. This being the case, either the Antichrists or the tradition must be wrong, and since John knows that the tradition is based on a genuine witness (1:1–3), the tradition must be preserved. Verse 6 thus portrays the conflict between John and the Antichrists as a struggle between established belief and personal religious experience.

NOTES

2 Reading this verse to mean that one must confess Jesus Christ as having come in the flesh treats the perfect participle ἐληλυθότα, *elēlythota*, as an infinitive (“to have come”) and for all practical purposes makes “Jesus Christ” here the name of the preexistent member of the Godhead (cf. Culpepper, 79; Johnson, 94–95; Rensberger, 111–12).

2–3 The terms χριστός, *christos* (“Christ”), and υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, *huios tou theou* (“Son of God”), are synonymous in the Johannine literature when referring to Jesus’ deity (cf. Jn 20:30–31; 1Jn 2:22–23).

3 Paul, who has much more to say about the prophetic aspect of Christian teaching than John, uses the same rhetorical strategy at 1 Corinthians 12:3, telling the Corinthians they can distinguish true teachers from false in that “no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” Notably, this remark immediately precedes a discussion on revelatory gifts that consumes the next three chapters. Both John and Paul may be basing this restriction of the Spirit’s activity on Deuteronomy 13:1–5, where Moses says that any prophet who advises people to worship foreign gods in violation of the commandments must be put to death.

4–6 “The world” is clearly used in vv.4–6 to refer to those who reject Christ and who, in John’s experience, are hostile to Christians (see [Introduction](#)). Verse 4 implies that this opposition derives from “the one who is in the world,” presumably Satan. While John does not highlight the devil’s role in human affairs as much as other NT authors, he does refer to Satan as “the prince of this world” on several occasions (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. 2Co 4:4; Eph 2:2; Col 1:12–13). The relationship between Satan and the Antichrist in this context is not clear, and perhaps John did not distinguish them carefully. Both represent evil and opposition to God, so that either can be identified as the spiritual force that leads the world and the Antichrists away from truth.

REFLECTIONS

The message of 4:1–6 is particularly relevant to the modern church. Contemporary spirituality is characterized by a heavy emphasis on personal experience, often supported by claims that one’s beliefs and actions are

guided, and therefore validated, by the Holy Spirit. Texts such as John 14:26 and 16:13 have, ironically, contributed to this mind-set. But John insists that, while every believer enjoys the comfort and guidance of the Paraclete, the Spirit cannot operate outside the well-defined boundaries of orthodox belief, particularly christological belief. The failure to observe traditional boundaries, or indeed any boundaries, has led to the micro-fragmentation of the modern church. The letters of John were written in response to a similar situation. Without corporate parameters for individual experience, the vision of unity promoted in John 17 can never be realized.

D. Test #8: Perfect Love (4:7–21)

OVERVIEW

This section defines “perfect love” (*teleia agapē*; 4:18), the second pillar of Johannine Christianity mentioned at 3:23. The discussion here is a logical corollary to John’s remarks on the Spirit at 4:1–6. While the Antichrists may claim that their teaching is inspired by God, John insists that the Spirit’s presence can only be demonstrated by (1) orthodox doctrine and (2) perfect love. Regrettably for the Antichrists, “perfect love” is love that follows the pattern of God’s love shown in the incarnation of Jesus, a doctrine they reject. Even if the Antichrists act in a way that from a worldly perspective appears to be loving, *perfect love* can be shown only by those who accept John’s witness.

The language of 4:7–21 is strongly reminiscent of John 3. Several of the major themes in this passage seem to build directly on the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. First, Jesus informs Nicodemus that he must be “born again” in order to enter the kingdom of God and then contrasts the person who is “born of Spirit” with the one “born of flesh” (Jn 3:3, 5–6); similarly, 1 John 4:7–8 highlights spiritual “birth,” insisting that every person who loves has been “born of God.” Second, John 3:16–21 makes spiritual birth conditional on one’s acceptance that God sent Jesus into the world to grant salvation—indeed, “whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already” (3:18); similarly, 1 John 4:9 opens with an almost verbatim citation of John 3:16 and then proceeds (vv.10–21) to make faith in the Son and love of other believers the primary evidence that one has experienced rebirth (and

vv.17–18 explore the consequences of a lack of love in language reminiscent of Jn 3:17). Finally, John’s argument at 1 John 4:12–16 depends on the principle that “no one has ever seen God,” a maxim that derives from Jesus’ contention that “no one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man” (Jn 3:13). It seems, then, that 1 John 4:7–21 is an extension and application, in light of the Antichrist conflict, of the traditions that made up John 3.

⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. ¹⁶And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. ¹⁷In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. ¹⁸There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. ²¹And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

COMMENTARY

7 John opens this section by offering two tests (vv.7–8), one positive and one negative. Following his dualistic perspective, these tests sort people into opposite categories on the basis of love. Perfect love belongs to the “divine sphere” that is opposed to the world. Consequently, those who exhibit this love place themselves in God’s realm (Marshall, 211). Appropriate to this topic, John refers to his audience as *agapētoi* (“beloved,” GK 28). While the NIV’s “dear friends” treats this as a statement of John’s own affection, the latter portion of v.7 suggests that John is reminding them that they are “beloved of God” (cf. Brown, 263–64, 513). The experience of God’s love should motivate Christians to love (“let us love one another”), which implies that those who do not love do not know God’s love.

To support the admonition to love, John reminds his audience of a familiar slogan that is introduced by *hoti* (NIV, “for”): “love comes from God.” It is difficult to tell whether the original slogan ended here or whether it included the phrase that follows, “and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” The NIV suggests a break in thought by beginning a new sentence at this point (“Everyone who loves ...”). But since the theme of rebirth is common in the Johannine tradition, and since knowledge of God is a key element in John’s thinking about the Christian experience (see [comment at 2:3](#)), it is possible that the entire statement on love in v.7 is based on a familiar community slogan. Combining this creed with the admonition to love makes v.7 a test: *If* we love one another, *then* we are born of God and know God, *because* love is from God. Loving the brothers is a mark of genuine Christianity, one that the world and Antichrists do not bear.

8 The negative version of the test of love appears in v.8. Based on the principle that “God is love”—apparently another community slogan introduced by *hoti* (NIV, “because”)—John suggests that *if* someone does not love, *then* that person does not know God. The connection between love, knowledge, and rebirth in vv.7–8 follows the principle “the child resembles the parent.” By this reasoning, if God is love, all true children of God will also bear this trait. Therefore, no person can legitimately claim to have a relationship with the God who is love while at the same time withholding love from other believers. Brown, 515, 549, is probably correct

to suggest that v.8 is countering the Antichrists' claims to know God, thereby placing the Antichrists in the same category as the world and the Jews. It is not clear, however, that John is attempting to discredit some sort of esoteric theological "knowledge" that the Antichrists may have claimed to possess. *Ginōskō* ("know") seems to be used here in the experiential sense rather than the cognitive (see [comment at 2:2](#); cf. Schnackenburg, 207). The Antichrists, who do not show love to the brothers (see [comments at 3:11–15, 16–17](#)), do not "know" God in the sense that they do not have a relationship with him. The same reasoning underlies John 16:3, which refers to the hostile Jews, who are surely well acquainted with the OT teaching on God, as those who "have not known the Father," and also underlies 1 John 3:1, which says that "the world" does not know God either. "Knowledge" in these contexts is not a recognition of God's existence or special theological insight but rather a relationship with God based on faith in Jesus.

9 John now describes the specific kind of love that proves that God is present in one's life. While the NIV emphasizes the action by which God revealed his love to humanity ("this is how God showed his love"), the genitive *tou theou* ("the love of God") has almost attributive force here—"godly love" ("this is how *godly love* was shown"). While John does not deny that the world, the Jews, and the Antichrists do things that appear to be "loving" by some standards, his dualistic worldview distinguishes acts of love by their source or by the nature of the person performing them. Only those acts of love that reflect "godly love" manifest the presence of God in a person's life. This "godly love" is then defined by a traditional slogan introduced by *hoti*: God "sent his one and only Son into the world." The incarnation, then, is the pattern of godly love.

The language of v.9 is clearly reminiscent of John 3:16, and both verses establish the incarnation as the ultimate expression of God's love for humanity. In both contexts the connection between God's love and the incarnation is highlighted by the term *monogenēs* (GK 3666). This word literally means "only begotten" (NASB, KJV), but it is unlikely that John is thinking of "begotten" in the biological sense of the Christmas story. Rather, the focus is on the special relationship between God and Christ. Marshall, 214, notes that *monogenēs* "is concerned with derivation or kind ... rather than [physical] birth." Jesus is of the same *kind* as God (*-genēs*, cf. the English "genetic") and is also the *only one* (*mono-*) who is of

the same kind as God. The NIV thus captures the true intention of the term with the translation “one and only Son,” which highlights Jesus’ unique relationship with God.

In the context of v.9, John refers to Jesus as *monogenēs* for two reasons. First, contra the claims of the Antichrists, the term associates Jesus directly with God, uniting the human and divine aspects of his identity. Since Christ alone reveals God to the world, any denial of Jesus’ divine origin makes it impossible to receive God’s revelation (cf. Schnackenburg, 208). Second, *monogenēs* stresses the depth of God’s sacrificial love in sending his *only* heir into a hostile world. The accompanying *hina* clause, “that we might live through him,” stresses the salvific dimension of the incarnation. God sent the Son for the purpose of saving us through the Son, so that to deny the Son is to deny salvation.

By citing this familiar slogan, John attempts to rally the faithful around a statement of core beliefs and to connect the Christian social ethic directly to his own witness about the incarnation. While the Antichrists might perform acts that appear to proceed from genuine concern and compassion for others, such works do not prove that they have experienced rebirth. Indeed, even the world loves “its own” (Jn 15:19), but such love is not sufficient because its object is misdirected. The Antichrists’ love cannot come from God because they do not accept the ultimate expression of God’s love in the incarnation.

10 This verse extends the thought of v.9 by emphasizing the sacrificial dimension of the incarnation. The first phrase, “this is love,” would normally introduce a test in 1 John, but here it refers to the two statements that follow about the love of God (as the NIV, “This is love:”; cf. Brown, 518). The second of these two statements, both of which are introduced by *hoti*, is a slogan closely related to v.9 and to John 3:16, while the first statement is a sarcastic play on the true slogan to highlight God’s love in sending the Son.

John clues the reader that the first slogan is sarcastic by the introduction *ouch hoti*. John’s followers will recall that he did *not* teach them, “we loved God,” rather, he taught them, “*God* loved us.” The contrast between the two slogans is highlighted in the Greek text by a change in tense. In the first statement, the perfect tense of *agapaō* (“love”), which describes a state of being resulting from a past action, stresses that we did *not* love God *before*

he sent his Son. Indeed, since the world hates God and wants nothing to do with God (see [Introduction](#)), and since even true believers were members of the world before their rebirth (see [comment at 3:11–15](#)), there is no way to argue that believers loved God at any point before their conversion. The sending of the Son was, therefore, an act of purely benevolent love, not motivated by anything believers had done, and not God's requiting of a love they already had for him.

The second statement, however, which cites the true version of the slogan, switches to the aorist tense of *agapaō*, highlighting a specific act of love. The fact that “sent” (*apostellō*, GK 690) is also aorist suggests that the act of God's love John has in mind is the incarnation. Even though the world did not love God, God showed his love for the world at the moment when he sent his Son into the world. Indeed, the world did not know what “love” was until Jesus came.

11 With this verse, John begins to develop the ethical implications of the incarnation. Those who, unlike the Antichrists, accept God's love as expressed in the sending of the Son ought to love one another (cf. 1Jn 3:16). The logic of this conclusion is similar to that underlying John 13:12–17. After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus instructs them that they should do the same for one another because, if “I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet” (13:14). If Jesus served the disciples in a sacrificial way, they should follow his example by serving one another sacrificially. Similarly, if God has defined perfect love by sending his Son as a sacrifice, we should love other believers the way God does.

12 The opening phrase at first seems out of place. John has just cited several slogans about the incarnation, an event other Johannine passages clearly associate with human experience of God. In John 14:9, for example, Jesus tells Philip that “anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” Why, then, does John now suddenly assert that “no one has ever seen God”? Some suggest that John is countering the Antichrists' claim to a special revelation of the Father (so Marshall, 216; Grayston, 126; Schnackenburg, 217–18). It seems more likely that John is simply appealing to the accepted OT principle that “no one may see [God] and live” (Ex 33:20). While the fourth gospel does portray Jesus as the exclusive revealer of God, John is also clear that this revelation is not yet complete. The Johannine Jesus

therefore tells a crowd in Jerusalem that they “have never heard [God’s] voice nor seen his form” (Jn 5:37), even though he himself has said and done only what the Father commands. Similarly, the prologue to the fourth gospel, the highest extant Christological statement from the primitive church, insists that “no one has ever seen God,” even though the Word, which “was God,” “became flesh and ... we have seen his glory” (Jn 1:1, 14, 18). While Jesus reveals everything human beings may know about God, what humans may know is only a small portion of what is yet to be known (1Jn 3:2).

The assertion that God cannot be seen, whether directed to a specific belief of the Antichrists or simply expressing a general theological principle, introduces the second test in this section. Although God cannot be seen directly, his presence is evident in those who love. The condition of the test appears in an *ean* + subjunctive clause, which is followed by two conclusions: *If we love one another, then* (1) God remains in us, and (2) God’s love has been perfected (*teleioō*; NIV, “made complete”) in us. The logic of this test is similar to the “parent and child” principle at 4:7. Grayston, 126, notes that “like recognizes like”: if God loves other believers and we love other believers, we place ourselves in the same category as God. Even though we cannot see God himself, we can be certain that he is in us when we show love, because God is love (v.8). The fact of loving one’s brothers thus becomes a second form of objective proof (along with sound doctrine) of the Spirit’s presence, against the Antichrists’ subjective claims to an individual spiritual experience that cannot be evaluated by others (4:1–6).

13 This verse largely restates the thought of 3:24, which emphasizes that possession of the Spirit is proof that God “remains in us” (NIV, “lives in us”). Marshall, 219, suggests that John is here returning to the thought of 4:1–6 and is thinking of the Spirit’s presence as evident in charismatic gifts, which “need to be tested by their fidelity to the apostolic witness” mentioned in v.14. While doctrine and practice are closely intertwined in this section, it seems more likely that John has finished with the confessional issue and is now turning to a behavioral test of God’s presence. Having stressed at 4:1–6 that God’s Spirit may be distinguished from the spirit of Antichrist on the basis of doctrine, John will now stress that God’s Spirit is also distinct in the type of love he produces in true believers.

The opening phrase, “in this we know” (NIV, “we know that”), indicates that John is preparing to offer another test to distinguish real Christians from Antichrists on the basis of love. Two community slogans are cited, one representing the condition of the test and the other the necessary conclusion: *If* he has given us of his Spirit, *then* we remain (NIV, “live”) in him and he in us. The latter phrase is highly reminiscent of John 15:4–7, where Jesus exhorts the disciples several times to “remain in me, and I will remain in you.” First John 4 may be John’s attempt to interpret and clarify the traditional sayings that underlie John 15 in the light of the Antichrist conflict, clarifying the nature of this mutual indwelling. In v.12 John simply asserted that God “remains” in the believer, but now he specifies that this occurs through the presence of the Spirit (cf. Jn 14:17). Presumably, it is the Spirit’s presence that motivates believers to exhibit godly love. When believers allow the Spirit to influence them in this way, they in turn “abide/remain” in God in the sense that they obey his commands. Obedient love proves, then, that God’s Spirit is present in us, which in turn separates believers from Antichrists.

14 John has just asserted that “no one has seen God”; now he emphasizes what he himself has “seen” and “witnessed.” The plural forms of “see” and “witness” probably refer to the total group of people who had physical contact with Jesus, of which John claims to be a member (most scholars believe that “we” here refers to the general “witness” of the community rather than the group of living witnesses to Jesus [so Dodd, 115; Marshall, 220; Brown, 522–23, 557–58; Culpepper, 90–91]; see [comment at 1:3](#)). What John has seen has led him to the conclusion summarized by the creedal statement here, which closely parallels John 3:17: “the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.” Marshall, 220, notes that the term “Savior” is a logical extension of “atoning sacrifice” at v.10, for “it is through being the [sacrifice] that Jesus can be the [Savior].” While no one has ever seen God, John has seen the Son in the form of Jesus. Refusal to accept this witness leaves one with no means of salvation, for Jesus is also the Savior.

15 The language here is similar to that of v.12, offering the same conclusion about mutual indwelling but subtly replacing the test of love with a creed (“If we love one another” versus “If anyone acknowledges”). Schnackenburg, 219, therefore concludes that vv.14–15 are a digression from the main theme, shifting from an emphasis on love to an emphasis on

orthodox faith. It seems more likely that John is explicitly using the incarnation to tie godly love to the orthodox confession (introduced here by *hoti*) so that life and doctrine cannot be isolated from one another. John has already established that God remains in us if we love other believers, and now he further insists that *if* someone should confess, “Jesus is the Son of God,” *then* God remains in her and she in God. God’s presence, then, is dependent not only on mutual love among believers but also on the right *kind* of love, specifically, a love based on the premise that God sent his Son as Savior. Schnackenburg, 220, himself acknowledges this point by concluding that “faith and love as conditions and hallmarks of our fellowship with God simply cannot be separated from each other.”

16a The language here is subject to different translations with varying exegetical implications. The first difficulty relates to the meaning of the verbs *ginōskō* and *pisteuō*. The NIV’s “rely on” for *pisteuō* is strained, for John typically uses *pisteuō* (“I believe”) in the more literal sense of Christian faith. The translation “rely on” also implies that *ginōskō* (“I know”) refers in this context to a cognitive recognition of God’s love. It seems more likely that John is using *ginōskō* in an existential sense to describe the believer’s personal experience of God’s love and the confidence that arises from that experience. Further, the NIV translation does not reflect the fact that both verbs are in the perfect tense, indicating that a past action has had a continuing result in the present. The use of this tense suggests that John is thinking of the starting point of the believer’s present experience, the time when she first accepted “the love God has for us” (cf. Brown, 524). Since John has already specified that God’s love was revealed in the incarnation, *pisteuō* probably refers to the moment when the believer accepted John’s witness about Jesus, and *ginōskō* refers to the experience of God’s presence that followed that recognition. The first portion of v.16 should therefore be translated, “And we have experienced and have accepted the love ...”—where “love” refers to the coming of Jesus and all its benefits.

A second difficulty relates to the unusual phrase *hēn echei ho theos en hēmin*, “[the love] which God has in us.” The NIV’s “the love God has for us” is possible but would represent an obscure use of the dative case. The more typical meaning of the dative, however, still permits of two possibilities. Although *hēmin* (“us”) is plural, John may be using the term to refer to the sum total of individual believers, “God’s love *in* each of us.” If

this is the case, John is focusing on “the personal experience of [God’s] love in our hearts created by the Spirit” (Marshall, 221). On the other hand, *hēmin* may have collective force here, referring either to the entire Christian community (“God’s love *among* us [= believers]”) or even possibly to the entire world (those to whom God sent the Son as Savior; v.14). This reading can be supported by the context, for John has just been speaking of “God’s love” specifically as the incarnation, which occurred in the human sphere, “among us” (cf. Rensberger, 121). It seems, however, that the phrase “the love which God has in us” is an awkward restatement of v.9’s “the love of God in us,” which referred to the presence of God’s Spirit in the believer and the effect the Spirit has on one’s behavior (see [comment](#)). The first reading discussed above, then, is probably correct. “Among us” seems to refer to the universal Christian experience of God’s love in each person, which results from believing the incarnation.

16b As the NIV suggests, the latter portion of v.16 seems to introduce a new thought or paragraph. John repeats the creed “God is love” from v.8 and reiterates the points he has made at vv.7 and 12 to elaborate it. The verb *menō* (NIV, “lives”) appears three times in this sentence and carries two distinct meanings. In the first phrase, “the one who *remains* in love” (NIV, “whoever lives in love”) is the person who holds to the view that God’s love was revealed through the sending of the Son. Since John has already established that “love” in this context has explicit Christological implications, *menō* here relates primarily to doctrinal beliefs. In the second and third phrases, John uses *menō* to describe the unique relationship between God and true believers. Those who hold to the truth “remain in God” (NIV, “lives in God”) in the sense that they receive his approval while the world and the Antichrists are rejected, and they consequently enjoy the gift of God’s Spirit (“God *remains* in her”; cf. Jn 14:17). In this context, divine indwelling takes the form of love for the brothers and the inner witness of the orthodox creed.

17 John now returns to a theme introduced in v.12, the means by which God’s love is “perfected” (*teleioō*) in the believer’s life. The NIV suggests that the *en toutō* (“in this”; NIV, “in this way”) that opens this verse refers to what John has just said in v.16, so that to “live in love” and have “God live” in oneself is the most complete form of love (so Marshall, 223 n. 17; Brown, 526–27, 560; Culpepper, 92). It seems more likely that John is using this phrase to introduce the test that follows the *hoti* later in the verse

(so NRSV, NEB; Dodd, 119; Schnackenburg, 222; Rensberger, 121). Those who pass the test that John is about to offer can be assured that love is perfected in them. John uses *teteleiōtai* (“perfected”; NIV, “made complete”) here to distinguish orthodox Christian love from other expressions of love that he deems inadequate because they do not proceed from a proper view of Jesus.

Before offering the test of perfect love, however, John introduces a purpose clause that explains why the pursuit of perfect love is desirable: “so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment.” As he has done earlier (2:18–19, 28; 3:1–3), John thus situates the conflict between true believers and Antichrists in an eschatological arena. Those who pass the test will have nothing to fear from God in the judgment because they will be complete, lacking nothing (2:28). The Greek *parrēsia* (NIV, “confidence”) is used by John elsewhere to represent speech that is bold and direct (Jn 16:25–30; 1Jn 3:21). Those whose love is found adequate have nothing to hide from God and may therefore speak plainly to him about their deeds in the hour of judgment.

The test of perfect love measures the believer’s life against the example of the incarnate Jesus. While the NIV takes the *hoti* that introduces the test in a causal sense (“because in this world”), it seems more likely that John is either citing a slogan that summarizes community ethics or simply highlighting what he is about to say. The conclusion of the test is drawn from the preceding note of eschatological confidence. *If* we are like “that one is [*estin*]” in this world, *then* we may have boldness on the day of judgment. “That one” here must be Jesus, the one who was sent “into the world” (4:9; cf. 2:6; 3:3, 7). Why, then, does John use the present tense of *eimi* (“that one is”) in reference to Jesus? Brown, 529–30, suggests that John is thinking of Christ’s complete union with God, a present heavenly reality that believers can also enjoy while on this earth. In the context of the impending judgment, “the logic of the statement is that since we are already like Christ [in our relationship with the Father], we shall not be judged harshly.”

It seems more likely that John is using the “historic present,” referring to the past actions of Jesus in the present tense, in order to strengthen the analogy between Jesus’ life and the believer’s life. Johannine ethics typically portray Christ as a model of obedient service (Jn 4:34; 5:19; 6:38;

10:11–13; 12:25–28; 13:12–17), and the use of the present tense would simply stress the continuing validity of Jesus' example. Hence "in this world" refers both to the arena of current Christian behavior and to the arena in which Jesus modeled the ideal Christian behavior (1Jn 4:9–10, 14). Those who accept that Jesus was God in flesh and who follow Jesus' example may be confident of their salvation, because Jesus himself is the model of perfect love.

18 John now explores *phobos* ("fear," GK 5832), the opposite of the *parrēsia* (NIV, "confidence") enjoyed by those who pass the test of love. Bultmann, 73–74, suggests that "fear" here characterizes the present experience of those who do not have a positive relationship with God. The fact that "fear has to do with punishment" might indeed suggest that fear itself is the punishment unbelievers receive for rejecting God. While this may be an accurate observation of human psychology, John seems to be continuing the eschatological motif he introduced in v.17. "Fear" is not used here in the healthy sense of a respect and awe toward God, but rather in the negative sense of concern over God's impending wrath. "There is no fear in love" in the sense that those who follow Jesus' example need not fear God's future judgment (Marshall, 224; Schnackenburg, 225; Rensberger, 122). Hence, when one experiences *teleia agapē*, "perfect love," all fear is "cast out" because that person has passed the test. John's use of *exō ballō* ("cast out" NIV, "drive out") follows an exorcism motif, which is somewhat unusual in light of the fourth gospel's lack of interest in exorcism. But since "perfect love" is engendered in the believer by God's Spirit (v.13), John's dualistic perspective would lead to the natural conclusion that the fear resulting from lack of this love also has a spiritual dimension. For this reason, when perfect love enters the believer, the fear that results from imperfect love is naturally eliminated.

The exorcism of fear leads John to reflect on a principle introduced by *hoti*. It is difficult to tell whether this is a community slogan, but in any case the NIV is correct to see a causal relationship between this portion of the verse and what has preceded. "Fear holds punishment, *because* the one who fears has not been perfected in love." It is important to note that John does not make the presence or absence of fear a test of one's love. The fact that one's guilt has caused her to doubt her salvation does not mean such a person is in danger of God's judgment. The focus, rather, is on the status of the person whose love is imperfect. Such people have good reason to fear,

although, as John's experiences with the Antichrists would attest, they very rarely demonstrate this feeling. But things will be different in the day of punishment, when such people will experience the terrible fear of realizing that God finds them inadequate. John, then, is thinking of the person whose doctrine is not based on a proper understanding of Jesus and whose love is therefore incomplete because it is not supported by orthodox faith.

19 This verse summarizes vv.7–16 by concisely restating the principle that Christian love is based on the example of God's love. Despite its brevity, the verse is complicated by two translation issues. First, it is unclear whether the verb *agapaō* is indicative ("we love") or a hortatory subjunctive ("let us love") in this context. The NIV suggests the former (cf. Culpepper, 95; Marshall, 225 n. 26). Brown, 532, 562, believes that John is using the indicative to establish a contrast between Antichrists and true believers: while the Antichrists have "fear" (v.18), true believers have "love." Barker, 347, who also prefers the indicative reading, suggests that the usage here is "descriptive," characterizing true Christian love by analogy with God and Christ (i.e., "we love one another in the way that God and Christ love us"). It seems more likely, however, that *agapaō* is subjunctive, offering an exhortation. This reading creates an inclusio by returning to the parallel injunction at 4:7—"let us love one another" (cf. Schnackenburg, 225; Rensberger, 125).

The second translation issue relates to the object of the verb *agapaō*. What or who are believers told to love? Several ancient manuscripts include the words *ton theon*, or simply *auton*, to specify that John is thinking of the love Christians have for God (Marshall, 225; Rensberger, 125–26). But in the light of v.20 and the inclusio with v.7, it seems that John is returning to his original exhortation to love other believers (Schnackenburg, p. 225). Those manuscripts that supply the word *allēlous* ("one another") are therefore correct in spirit, even if they do not reflect the original reading. Since, as the NIV suggests, the *hoti* that connects the two clauses in v.19 has causal force, the statement is best rendered, "Let us love one another, for [God] first loved us." In other words, the experience of being loved by God should motivate believers to show the same love for one another.

20 Verse 20 closes this section with a final test that focuses on the social rather than the doctrinal dimension of perfect love. This test resembles several tests from the first portion of the book in that it contrasts people's

words with their actions to expose “liars” (1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 6, 9). *If* someone says “I love God,” *and if* that person hates her brother, *then* that person is a “liar,” i.e., she does not truly love God as she professes and consequently belongs to the realm of Satan (Jn 8:44–45).

To support this test, John offers an argument that again builds on the principle at v.12. The one who does not love a Christian brother whom he has seen cannot love a God whom no one has ever seen. The logic of this statement is unclear, and several explanations of John’s thinking have been offered. Brown, 564, suggests that the reference to “seeing” one’s brother may echo 3:17, where John condemned those who “see” a brother in need but refuse to help. Perhaps John is targeting the Antichrists, who may have been wealthy members of the community who now refuse to assist those allied to John. If one cannot show love to those who are in such need, how can one love a God she has never seen (cf. Culpepper, 95–96)?

A second solution also highlights the Antichrist context by analogy with the first portion of ch. 4. First John 4:1–6 offered a concrete doctrinal test to help believers determine which teachers are motivated by the Spirit of God. While anyone can claim divine inspiration, only those who hold to John’s witness can prove this claim. Similarly, anyone can claim to love God and can claim that her actions are motivated by godly love, because such claims cannot be directly disproved. One’s visible actions, however, will make it plain whether she loves other believers. John therefore suggests, on the basis of the rabbinic principle *qal wahōmer* (“the lesser to the greater”), that love for the brothers is tangible evidence of one’s love for God. If one cannot even show love for one’s brothers (“the lesser”), how can she achieve the greater work of loving God (“the greater”; cf. Culpepper, 95–96; Schnackenburg, 226; Rensberger, 126)? Dodd, 124, observes that this view does not suggest that loving one’s brothers is a simpler and preliminary task to complete love of God, but rather that the absence of concrete proof of one’s ability to love in general suggests that a person does not love God. Since godly love does not discriminate among its objects, the person who does not love a brother clearly has no godly love within herself and therefore has no love with which to love God (cf. Brown, 534).

A third and related possibility highlights John’s dualistic worldview. In John’s view, all people belong in one of two categories—God’s realm or the world. Because God is love, all those who love belong in the same category

as God. Continuing the principle that “like loves like” (see [comment at 4:12](#)), any person who loves God and loves true believers must therefore be a true believer herself. On the other hand, people who do not love true believers are in a different category—“the world”—and therefore inherently hate God (see [Introduction](#)). This extends the principle of love from the realm of doctrinal norms and personal experience of God to one’s relationship with other members of the faith community. Perfect love is thus dependent both on a proper understanding of Christ and on a proper understanding of one’s relationship to other believers.

21 The connection here between love for God and love for one’s brothers has led Dodd, 123–24, to conclude that John is referring “clearly to the tradition of the teaching of Jesus, as we have it in Mark xii. 28–31” (cf. Barker, 347; Rensberger, 126–27). While this is an intriguing possibility, it should be noted that elsewhere in 1 John the “commandment” relating to love is John 13:34 (1Jn 2:7–11; 3:23–24). Further, John 13:34 clearly demands that those who love God must also love their brothers—the point John has just stressed. In the context of the Antichrist conflict, the love command means that those who aspire to perfect love must (1) show love toward God by accepting John’s true witness about Jesus and (2) stay in good fellowship with other believers who make the same confession. The Antichrists have failed on both counts (see [comments at 2:18–27](#)) and therefore have reason to fear God’s judgment.

It is important to stress that the “love” which proves our relationship to God in 4:7–21 cannot refer merely to benevolent acts. From time to time, people of the world and the Antichrists act in a way that appears to be “loving,” but these acts alone cannot be taken as proof of God’s indwelling presence any more than a charismatic facade can prove that one is driven by God’s true Spirit (4:1–6). Real “love” proceeds from a belief in God’s ultimate act of love in sending the Son. Those who do not believe that the Son came through the human Jesus do not, in John’s view, have God dwelling within them, regardless of how they treat other people.

NOTES

8 This verse is often cited as proof that God by nature accepts and tolerates all people, regardless of their behavior, or as proof that anyone who shows love is therefore secure in her relationship with God. Ironically,

both conclusions entirely contradict the main thrust of Johannine thought. In the first place, as Marshall, 212, notes, John would insist that even the highest acts of human love “cannot be put into the balance to compensate for the sin of rejecting God.” Second, this perspective views “love” as an abstract quality or emotion that God possesses. John, however, is speaking from the ancient Jewish perspective of defining people and things by their actions (cf. Dodd, 107–8). Because “no one has seen God” (4:12), “If we ... ask what God is, the answer must be given in terms of what He does” (Rensberger, 117). “God is love” in the sense that he acts in a loving way toward his people. Further, it is clear from the following verses that John does *not* mean to suggest that “*all* [God’s] activity is loving activity” (Dodd, 110). God’s love is revealed exclusively through the incarnation and is therefore accessible only to those who accept John’s witness about the incarnate Christ. As a consequence, God’s tolerance and acceptance are limited to those who believe and obey him.

9 While v.9 and John 3:16 are clearly drawn from the same traditional unit, John probably did not understand this unit to be a saying of Jesus. Despite the NIV’s red-lettering, Jesus’ remarks in John 3 seem to end at v.15, with vv.16–21 representing John’s own reflections on the christological significance of the Nicodemus episode.

10 John’s use of the perfect ἠγάπηκαμεν, *ēgapēkamen* (“love”), rather than the pluperfect, portrays the experience of the world. Members of the world did not love God in the past and continue to hold this sentiment into the present, despite the fact that God loved them and sent his Son. The Christian experience would be represented by the pluperfect, indicating a past action that initiated a continuing state of being which has since ended. Presumably, John would say that Christians did not love God in the past and continued this sentiment up to the point when they believed that God sent his Son, at which point they experienced rebirth (Jn 1:12).

12 Two points of translation warrant special consideration. First, as the NIV indicates, the verb τελειόω, *teleioō*, probably carries the idea of “completion” throughout this section (also 2:5). While the complex of words associated with τέλος, *telos*, can have a broad range of meanings, from “perfect” to “mature,” John seems to be stressing that the person who shows godly love lacks nothing in her relationship to God or others. Second, contra the NIV’s “his love,” the genitive αὐτοῦ, *autou* (love “of

him”), probably does not indicate possession but rather source—“God’s kind of love,” or the love that flows from him to others through us (so Marshall, 217; Schnackenburg, 218; cf. [comment on 4:7](#)). When we show love to others, we prove that God is present in us, even though God cannot be seen.

REFLECTIONS

First John 4:14–15 indicates that John’s dualistic perspective has not left him entirely pessimistic toward the world. Despite the fact that the world hates Jesus, John does not limit Jesus’ salvific work to the faithful. Here, as at John 1:11–12 and 3:16–17, God did not send the Son only to those who believed in him but rather as Savior “of the world.” John continues to believe this, even though the world did not recognize or accept Jesus (Jn 1:10). It seems, then, that John’s Christology is both broad and narrow—broad in the sense that God sent the Son to be Savior of everyone, not just those who loved him, and narrow in the sense that one must accept John’s witness about the Son in order to enjoy the benefits of this act. Theoretically, then, anyone could accept John’s testimony and enjoy rebirth, but experience seems to have taught him that this does not happen very often.

E. Test #9: True Faith (5:1–13)

OVERVIEW

All commentators detect a break in 1 John somewhere near the beginning of ch. 5, but it is difficult to pinpoint where the preceding section ends and the new section begins. It is clear that 4:7–21 emphasizes love and that 5:6–12 emphasizes faith, but at the end of ch. 4 and the beginning of ch. 5 the two topics are closely intertwined. Rensberger, 125, writes, “Without noticing how, we simply find ourselves in the midst of an entirely different topic at the end of the section from the one at the beginning.” Several major theories on the outline of 1 John at this point have been advanced.

Some commentators extend the thought of ch. 4 into ch. 5 and end John’s discussion of love at 5:4. Marshall, 218–19, for example, believes that 5:1–4 explains John’s preceding exhortations (4:19–21) by assuring believers that faith gives them power to keep God’s commands. Brown, 543–44, further points out that after 5:4a the theme of “love” disappears altogether, suggesting that John is changing topics.

Some extend the section on love to 5:5. Dodd, 122, 128, argues for this position on the basis that 5:6ff. discusses the theological nuances of the incarnation with little concern for “faith” or “love” per se. Rensberger, 124–25, points out that 5:1 and 5:5 both include the phrase “the one who believes that Jesus is the Christ,” suggesting a close connection between these verses. Because the logic of 5:1 is parallel to that of 4:21, 5:1–5 seems to be grammatically connected to the preceding discussion.

Others believe that the chapter break follows John’s own outline, with 5:1 introducing a new section. This argument is supported by the repetition of the phrase “whoever believes that ...” at 5:1, 5, 10 (NIV, “Everyone who believes that ...”). The repetition of this formula unifies John’s remarks on faith, indicating that he has finished his discussion of love (Culpepper, 97). Contra Rensberger, Grayston, 132, concludes that the parallelism between 4:21 and 5:1 indicates that John is summarizing his remarks on love and introducing a new topic—faith (cf. Barker, 348).

The variety of opinions points to the most likely solution: John probably did not intend a strong break in thought between 4:7 and 5:13. While the

rhetoric of John's presentation moves gradually from love to orthodox faith, the two topics are not sharply distinguished in his thinking (see 3:23–24). The commentary here will follow the chapter break at 5:1 because 5:1–13 focuses on the more technical aspects of Christian doctrine, whereas 4:7–21 is more concerned with love for God and other believers. In modern Christian theology these two topics are generally discussed separately. The reader should keep in mind, however, that love and doctrine go together in Johannine thought.

¹Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ²This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. ³This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ⁵Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

⁶This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. ⁷For there are three that testify: ⁸the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. ⁹We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. ¹⁰Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. ¹¹And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

¹³I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

COMMENTARY

1 John opens this section with a doctrinal test: *If* anyone believes “Jesus is the Christ,” *then* that person has been born of God. Notably, the phrases *pas ho pisteuōn* (“everyone who believes”) and *pas ho agapōn* (“everyone who loves”) are parallel: confessing Jesus as the Christ and loving the Father are indistinguishable. The Antichrists’ claims to love are therefore inherently deficient.

The latter portion of the verse ties the orthodox confession of Jesus to the discussion of love at 4:7–21. As the NIV indicates, John suggests that “everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.” The Greek text here is open to several interpretations. First, the verb *agapaō* could be indicative (“she loves”) or a hortatory subjunctive (“she should love”). The NIV adopts the indicative reading, which makes the statement a proverb: as a rule, those who love the parent love the child (Dodd, 124; Marshall, 227; Schnackenburg, 227). Technically, John is probably thinking of the subjunctive to allow for possible exceptions to this rule. By the nature of things, “everyone who loves the one who gives birth *should love* the one born from him,” but some do not love the child and therefore do not truly love the parent either. According to John’s dualistic perspective, “like loves like” (see [comment at 4:12](#)). A person can only love people and things in the same category as herself and, further, *must* love people in the same category as herself. Following this principle, 4:7–21 established that one’s affections reveal one’s true nature. Logically, then, anyone who truly loves God will also love the one “born of God.”

Who, then, is “the one born from him” (*gegennēmenon ex autou*; NIV, “his child”)? One might think of Jesus. This would be consistent with the parallelism between the two phrases in v.1: the one who believes that “Jesus is the Christ” is the same person who loves Jesus, God’s “child.” Jesus is sometimes called God’s “son” in the fourth gospel, most notably in the purpose statement at 20:30–31 (also 3:16; 8:34–36). But it is difficult to see where the word *gegennēmenon* (“the one born,” GK 1164) would fit into Johannine Christology. The fourth gospel has no birth story, which would give the term a literal meaning, and almost suggests that Jesus came directly from heaven (Jn 1:1–4). On the other hand, John typically uses cognates of *gennaō* to describe Christian conversion. It seems more likely that “his child” in this context refers to other believers (Brown, 535–36; Culpepper, 99). While 1 John 4:21 follows the logic of “the lesser to the greater,” 5:1 follows the opposite principle—“the greater to the lesser.” Because the

parent is greater than the child, one who loves the parent should logically love the child as well. In the present context, this means that those who truly love God will *both* accept Jesus as the Christ *and* love other believers.

2 The introduction to v.2, “in this we know” (NIV, “this is how we know”), clearly indicates that John is preparing to offer a second test. The phrase that immediately follows this introduction, however, can be taken one of two ways, depending on the function of *hoti*. It could be that *hoti* simply introduces indirect discourse here, a summary statement of the conclusion of the test or what “we know.” The NIV’s “we know *that* we love” follows this reading. The historical context of 1 John, however, suggests that John is using *hoti* to quote a false claim to love, which he intends to satirize. The Antichrists would insist that they “love the children of God,” but John seeks to challenge this assertion by showing that they cannot identify God’s true children. In either case, the basic test that underlies this verse applies the parent/child principle of v.1 to John’s situation: *If* we love God, *then* we know that we love God’s children.

In view of the Antichrists’ claims, John feels it necessary to specify exactly what it means to “love God.” He achieves this with the last phrase in v.2: we show love for God when we obey his commands. The *kai* that connects love with obedience has the force of the English “even” here, equating two things. “Loving God” and “obeying God’s commands” are synonymous, so that obedience is the test of our love for other believers. The test in the first part of v.2 may therefore be restated: *If* we do what God commands, *then* we know that we love God’s children.

The logic of this test seems unusual. John normally appeals to one’s love for other believers as proof of one’s love for God, but here love for God seems to prove love for other believers. Brown, 537, summarizes the problem concisely: in the light of 4:20, “how can the love for God, which cannot be measured, become the criterion for knowing the much more measurable love for brother?” The test in v.2 is, however, consistent with John’s dualistic logic. If we love God, we are in the same category as God, and consequently we will also (1) love other people in the same category and (2) do what God desires. On the other hand, those who do not do what God desires—the Antichrists—are not in God’s category and therefore cannot exhibit true, godly love. If John’s logic here is not satisfying to modern readers, it is perhaps because modern religious thought carefully

distinguishes love for God from love for others in a way John would not accept.

3 Verse 3 further emphasizes the relationship between love and obedience. The genitive *tou theou* (“love of God”) here is probably objective—“love for God” (NIV, NEB)—rather than “God’s love” or “love which comes from God.” This verse parallels 2:4, which insists that one cannot “know God” apart from obedience. Since “knowing God” in 1 John describes a relationship with God (see [comment at 2:3](#)), and since “God is love” (4:8, 16), love and faith go hand in hand. The NIV suggests that the next phrase in v.3 goes with v.4: God’s commands “are not burdensome” because/for (*hoti*) believers have overcome the world (cf. Grayston, 133). It seems more likely that this phrase finishes the thought of vv.2–3. John is stressing that love means obedience, but he tempers this emphasis by insisting that God’s commands are easy to obey for any who care to pay attention to them. John may be alluding to Deuteronomy 30:11, where Moses, after rehearsing the stipulations of the Sinaitic covenant to the Israelites, reminds them that “what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.” God’s commands never surpass human ability to fulfill them.

4 Verse 4 builds on vv.2–3 by describing the benefits of obedience. All those who are born of God “conquer [*nikaō*, GK 3771] the world” (NIV, “overcome the world”). The conquest metaphor is consistent with John’s dualistic perspective, which sees a hostile relationship between the world and God’s children. But the precise meaning of *nikaō* here is open to debate, especially since it seems to contrast starkly with the real-life experiences of the Johannine Christians (see [Introduction](#)).

Some suggest that *nikaō* is used in an eschatological sense. Schnackenburg, 229–30, for example, sees here a reference to “the victory that Christ won once for all in salvation history,” the victory that is “repeated in the lives of the Christians.” By participating in the work of Christ, then, believers experience the future victory over evil in the midst of the pain of this world. Rensberger, 129, takes a somewhat similar view with the suggestion that John is touching on the notion that Satan is “the ruler of this world” (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Jesus has conquered the ruler of this world, and all those who believe share the benefits of this victory. Other commentators believe that John is thinking of the moral sphere of human

experience. Dodd, 126–27, for example, says that “the world” refers here to “the power of evil inclinations, false standards and bad dispositions.” “Victory” is achieved when believers choose to obey God and resist temptation (cf. Marshall, 228–29; Schnackenburg, 229).

While both of these views are reasonable, the most likely reference point for the believer’s “victory over the world” is John 16:33. First John 5:4 opens with a *hoti* clause that seems to introduce a traditional slogan or saying, and the phrase that follows is strongly reminiscent of Jesus’ words in the upper room. After assuring the disciples that they will be hated by the world, put out of the synagogues, and persecuted for his name (Jn 15:18–16:4), Jesus predicts that they will soon scatter and abandon him. Despite all this, they should not be discouraged, because “I have conquered the world” (NIV, “overcome the world”; 16:33).

Jesus’ “conquest” seems to consist of his resolution to obey God’s calling and suffer death. By analogy, 1 John 5:4 uses *nikaō* to describe the true believer’s willingness to serve God in spite of the world’s persecutions. Hence the conquest of the world may be reduced to “our faith”—the fact of holding fast to the orthodox confession in the face of pressure to abandon Christ. The verb *nikaō* is used with the same connotation in Revelation, where the believer’s “victory” is gained by overcoming the temptation to abandon the faith in the face of severe suffering and possibly death (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). If 1 John and Revelation were produced by the same person or by members of the same community, these references would also support the interpretation adopted here.

5 Verse 5 is a rhetorical question that identifies “the one who conquers the world” as the person who believes in the orthodox confession of Jesus as God’s Son. The language of this verse forms an *inclusio* with 5:1 by common reference to John 20:31. The fourth gospel was written so “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” First John 5:1 highlights the first portion of this statement, while 5:5 highlights the second portion in the light of John’s discussion of the Christian’s identity as a child of God.

6 John now turns from love to proper Christology. Verse 6 opens with the masculine form of *houtos*, “this one,” which here refers to “Jesus” in the creed at v.5. The remarks that follow are an attempt to prove John 20:30–31, as restated at 1 John 5:1 and 5, through a series of *ad hominem*

arguments based on the beliefs and traditions of the Johannine community. John's thesis appears in the phrase "[Jesus] came by water and blood." The emphasis that Jesus "did not come *by water only*, but by water *and* blood" suggests that the Antichrists took the position that "Jesus came by water." Unfortunately, the historical background of this conflict is far from clear, and 1 John 5:6 has been one of the more controversial NT verses from the very early days of biblical scholarship. Careful consideration will be given to this issue, as its resolution is essential to one's understanding of 5:6–12.

At least since the days of Ambrose and Augustine (early 4th century AD), some scholars have argued that "water" and "blood" are veiled references to the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. From this perspective, *dia* and *en* (both "by" in the NIV) should both be translated "with": Jesus came "with water and blood," bringing these sacraments to the church through his incarnation. Support for this position is garnered from John 3:5 ("born of water") and John 6:56 ("eat my flesh and drink my blood"), both of which are also interpreted as references to the sacraments. This was the dominant interpretation until the 1800s, but very few scholars today find this position convincing. Brown, 575, points out that *dia* and *en* do not normally mean "with," and Culpepper, 101, observes that John uses "water and blood" to "validate the manner of Jesus' coming," not to describe something effected or instituted by his ministry. The traditional view would also suggest that the Antichrists accepted baptism ("water only") but not the Lord's Supper, a position difficult to comprehend. Further, it is hard to see why John would suddenly make a veiled reference to the sacraments in the midst of a discussion of orthodox Christology. For all of these reasons, modern scholars have largely rejected the sacramental reading of 5:6.

As a second possibility, some scholars suggest that "water" and "blood" together represent a single entity. Perhaps John is stressing the physical incarnation of Jesus, so that "water and blood" is synonymous with "flesh" in 1 John 4:2 and 2 John 7. On the other hand, "water and blood" might refer more specifically to Jesus' death, for John 19:34 reports that these fluids flowed from the body of the crucified Jesus. Proponents of both versions of this view would argue that the Antichrists denied the physicality of Jesus' existence, perhaps insisting that his human body was only an apparition.

Most modern commentators resolve the problems of v.6 by highlighting the connection between water, blood, and Jesus' "coming" in the first line of the verse. The identification of Christ as "the one who came" (*ho elthōn*) suggests that "water" and "blood" refer to significant events from the life of the historical Jesus. From this perspective, "water" refers to Jesus' baptism, the moment when he was first revealed to the world as the "Lamb of God" (Jn 1:29–34), and "blood" refers to Jesus' sacrificial death (so Dodd, 130; Barker, 350; Marshall, 231; Brown, 578, 596–97; Schnackenburg, 233; Culpepper, 101–2; Rensberger, 132). This would mean that the Antichrists emphasized Jesus' baptism over his death ("water only"), and a variety of hypotheses have been offered as to how this would fit their theology. Many commentators suggest that the Antichrists subscribed to the doctrines of Cerinthus, a Gnostic teacher who argued that the divine spirit of Christ came on the human Jesus at baptism but abandoned him on the cross (Dodd, 130; Marshall, 232–33; Schnackenburg, 233). The Antichrists, then, would argue that the whole of the incarnation was accomplished at Jesus' baptism and would deny that his death was of any salvific significance. John counters this claim by stressing that Jesus' salvific work was completed "in the blood," i.e., through his death as a sacrifice for sins.

Given John's usage elsewhere of the term "blood" (*haima*) exclusively in reference to the physical aspect of human existence and when discussing Jesus in reference to the human physicality of the incarnate Christ (Jn 1:13; 6:54–56; 19:34; see Notes, 1Jn 5:6), it appears that "blood" is used at 1 John 5:6 to emphasize the physical nature of Jesus, perhaps highlighting his sacrificial death. In John's view, any confession of Jesus as "Christ" that does not understand his death in this way is inadequate. The Antichrists' denial of this principle ("water *only*") probably reflects their view that Jesus' death was of little significance, because salvation is granted through some other aspect of his ministry.

What, then, is implied by the phrase "he did not come *by water only*" (see note)? Could water in the most literal sense be the intended reference here? This possibility may be supported by John 3:5. There Jesus tells Nicodemus that he cannot enter the kingdom unless he is "born of water and spirit." Birth "of spirit" is apparently equivalent to birth "from above" (*anōthen*; Jn 3:3, NIV footnote). The opposite state is described in 3:6—"born of flesh" (*gegennēmenon ek tēs sarkos*, NIV, "flesh gives birth to flesh; GK 4922). It may be that John is suggesting that believers experience

two “births,” one of water/flesh and the other of spirit (“from above”). Similar imagery is used at John 1:12–13 to distinguish normal human birth from rebirth as a child of God. The “water” at John 3:5 could thus refer to the flow of water associated with physical childbirth. If “water” is used in the same way at 1 John 5:6, the notion that Jesus “came by water” would emphasize that Jesus experienced normal physical birth. This reading would support the theory that “water and blood” refers to Jesus’ birth and death, the totality of his human incarnation.

While this interpretation is reasonable, it is unlikely for three reasons. First, while there is no doubt that 1 John 5:6 is intended to support John’s incarnational Christology, the language of the verse itself suggests that “water” and “blood” are separate entities. The NIV translates the second sentence in v.6 as “he did not come by water only, but by water and blood.” The distinction between “water” and “blood” that this reading indicates is even sharper in the Greek text, where John includes the preposition (“in”) and the article (“the”) before both terms: Jesus came not only *en tō hydati* (“in the water”) but also *en tō haimati* (“in the blood”). It seems that the Antichrists accepted the proposition that Christ came “by water,” but John finds this confession insufficient. He therefore finds it necessary to distinguish “water” from “blood” in order to highlight the importance of each. Second, John shows very little interest in the birth of Jesus, and the fourth gospel does not include a Christmas story. It seems unlikely, then, that he would allude to Jesus’ birth in such a vague way, or even that Jesus’ birth would play an important part in his Christology. Third, it is difficult to understand why the Antichrists would accept that Jesus came “by water only,” i.e., that he was born a physical human being, while rejecting the notion of his physical death (“by blood”).

Most scholars today believe that 1 John 5:6 uses the term “water” to refer to Jesus’ baptism by John. While this view is reasonable, its primary weakness is evident in Barker’s admission, 350, that “John’s Gospel does not describe the water baptism of Jesus.” While the fourth gospel does include the Baptist’s testimony that the Spirit fell upon Jesus in the form of a dove (Jn 1:29–34), this event is not directly associated with Jesus’ baptism. Indeed, the Johannine Jesus is never specifically baptized at all. Of course, one could argue that the gospel of John avoids direct reference to Jesus’ baptism in response to the Antichrists’ overemphasis on that event or to avoid the implication that John was greater than Jesus. But since there is

no clear evidence that baptism was practiced by the Johannine community, it is difficult to conclude that “by water” at 1 John 5:6 refers to Jesus’ baptism.

This third use of “water,” as a symbol of the Spirit, is the most likely reference point for v.6, for it highlights the essential difference between John and the Antichrists. It has already been observed that the Antichrists apparently claimed that their teachings were inspired by the Spirit (see [Introduction](#); [comments at 2:20–21](#); [4:1–6](#)). These claims were likely based on sayings such as John 14:26 and 16:13, which specifically indicate that the Spirit will lead and guide the church in Jesus’ absence. The Spirit is, in fact, Jesus himself, who continues to be present to the community in the form of the Paraclete (Jn 14:17–18). In the light of these doctrines, the Antichrists could argue, via John 19:34, that the Christ “came through water” to his people in the form of the Spirit after Jesus’ death. Since they also apparently denigrated the physical aspect of Jesus’ existence (see [Introduction](#)), they could further assert that Jesus came “through water *only*,” i.e., that everything significant about Jesus is revealed in the present through the Spirit.

Against this background 1 John 5:6–12 would represent a brief summary of and response to the Antichrists’ doctrine. Notably, the absence of *hoti* in v.6 suggests that John does not intend to quote the Antichrists or to counter their teaching with a specific creed. While not denying the presence and power of the Spirit, John insists that Jesus also came “in the blood,” referring to his human physicality. In John’s view, the Spirit only reminds the community of what the human Jesus has already taught, without revealing new information (Jn 14:26; see [comment at 1Jn 4:2–3](#)). Throughout the epistle John has pitted himself against the Antichrists on the basis that his teachings are based on an actual observation of Jesus’ earthly ministry (see [comments at 1:1–3](#); [4:6, 14–15](#)). John therefore asserts that no teaching can proceed directly from the Spirit (“water”) unless it also takes into account the community’s Jesus tradition, which supports John’s own orthodox views about Jesus’ humanity (“blood”). Christ, then, came to the community not only “by water,” i.e., not only through individual revelations of the Spirit; Christ also came to the community “by blood,” i.e., through the established traditions about Jesus’ life and death, which are based on John’s “witness.”

The reading that “water” represents the Spirit while “blood” represents Jesus’ human life and death explains John’s sudden introduction of the Spirit in the last phrase of v.6, which the NIV translates, “And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.” The NIV is correct to suggest that *pneuma* here refers specifically to the Paraclete and is therefore to be capitalized. At the same time, however, this translation obscures the logic of the phrase by reading *hoti* causally: the Spirit testifies *because* the Spirit is truth. Marshall, 234 n.12, who also supports the causal reading, recognizes this problem and attempts to account for it by explaining that “John must mean that the Spirit is able to bear (true) witness because the Spirit is truth.” If this is correct, however, it is more likely that *hoti* should be taken as the introduction to a creed or community slogan about the Paraclete: “The Spirit is the one who witnesses; ‘the Spirit is the truth.’” The second phrase thus supports the value of the Spirit’s witness by insisting that the Spirit supports the truth, so that the community slogan would serve to strengthen the significance of the Spirit’s witness. In John’s mind this means that, even if Christ continues to come to the community via the Spirit, the teachings of the Spirit will be in complete harmony with the “truth,” the orthodox Jesus tradition that the community has supported all along.

Commentators are divided on the means by which the Spirit gives this “testimony” to the church. Marshall, 234, highlighting John’s use of the present tense (“the Spirit *testifies*”), suggests that “the Spirit presently testifies to us, in our inward hearts or through the preaching of the Word.” Dodd, 129, extending the theory that “water” refers to Jesus’ baptism, suggests that the Spirit’s “witness” represents the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at baptism as a “divine sign.” This witness continues into the present life of the church, where the activity of the Spirit primarily takes the form of “inspired or prophetic utterance ... by which the Church proclaimed and confirmed the truth of the Gospel.” The Spirit thus “witnesses” to Jesus’ sonship by preserving the church’s traditions about his life and baptism. Rensberger, 132–33, believes that the Spirit’s “witness” consists of nothing more than the community’s tradition about Jesus’ death, specifically passages such as John 19:34–35 that stress the “blood.” Since “water” seems to represent the Spirit here, and since John generally appeals to community tradition when making Christological points, Rensberger’s reading is the most accurate. John has already established that every person

speaking by God's Spirit will confess that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1Jn 4:2), and now he simply reaffirms that assertion in the context of the debate over "water and blood." This counters the Antichrists on their own ground, for the very Spirit they claim as their inspiration supports John's view rather than their own.

7–8 Those readers who are more familiar with the KJV may be surprised by the NIV text here. The KJV includes the "Johannine comma" at v.7: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." These words have been excluded from more recent translations because, as Dodd, 127 n.1, notes, they are "found in no Greek MS [manuscript] earlier than the fourteenth century, in no ancient Greek writer, in no ancient version other than the Latin, and in no early manuscripts of the Old Latin version or of Jerome's Vulgate." It seems most likely that the KJV formula was added to an early Latin version of 1 John as a marginal note, perhaps out of concern that no single NT verse directly supports the doctrine of the Trinity. The statement was gradually incorporated into the text, then translated from Latin to Greek and inserted into several Greek manuscripts in the early sixteenth century (cf. Marshall, 236 n.19). Even though the extended version of v.7 appears in some ancient Latin manuscripts, Brown, 781, notes that "all recent Roman Catholic scholarly discussion has recognized that the Comma is neither genuine nor authentic." In light of the overwhelming evidence that John did not compose this sentence, the NIV is correct to relegate it to a footnote.

Verse 7 opens with a *hoti* that, contrary to the NIV's "for," probably introduces a community slogan about the incarnation. According to this slogan, there are three witnesses to the orthodox creed about Jesus—"the Spirit, the water and the blood." That these three are "in agreement" is not surprising. First, as noted in the [comment on v.6](#) above, "water" probably symbolizes the Spirit in this context, so that the terms are synonymous. Second, the connection between Spirit, water, and blood proceeds naturally from John 19:34–35. In that passage, the Beloved Disciple "witnesses" (NIV, "testifies") that water and blood flowed from the crucified body of Jesus. John probably associated the Spirit's testimony with the community's Jesus tradition, so that the Beloved Disciple's "witness" was preserved by the Spirit (see [comment at v.6](#)). The Spirit, then, fully agrees that Jesus came "by water and blood." The Antichrists' attempt to divide this witness by denying that Jesus came "by blood" merely demonstrates, in John's

view, that they do not speak under the inspiration of the Paraclete (see [comment at 4:3](#)).

9 The Spirit, water, and blood together represent “the testimony of God” himself about Jesus. By nature of this fact, these witnesses are greater than “the witness of men” (NIV, “man’s testimony”), an allusion to the worldly notions of the Antichrists (see 4:5–6). It is somewhat surprising, however, that John makes this blanket assertion about human testimony, in light of his constant appeal to his own witness (see [comment at 1:1–3](#)) and the fourth gospel’s appeal to the witness of the Beloved Disciple. In fact, the community’s primary evidence for the “water and blood” comes from the Beloved Disciple’s human testimony (Jn 19:34–35). For this reason, v.9 cannot be understood apart from the slogan in v.7. “Water and blood” highlights the human witness at the heart of the community’s Jesus tradition. The Beloved Disciple’s observation that water and blood flowed from Jesus’ side proves that Christ died a physical death and that the Spirit (“water”) was given to the church through this death. This testimony is “greater” than the Beloved Disciple’s himself, however, because it is confirmed and preserved for the community by the Spirit. The unity of the Spirit’s witness with human testimony stresses once again that personal spiritual experience cannot validate doctrine apart from the church’s accepted traditions about Jesus (see [comments at 4:2](#); [4:6](#)). On the other hand, these traditions become more than mere history only through the Spirit’s influence.

10 This verse summarizes John’s remarks on water and blood in a test that demonstrates whether one has the true witness that proceeds from God. *If* anyone believes in the Son of God, *then* that person “has the witness within herself” (NIV, “has this testimony in his heart”). Negatively, one may also conclude that *if* someone does not believe God (i.e., does not accept God’s witness about the Son), *then* that person “has made [God] out to be a liar.” The similarity of the latter conclusion to 2:4 suggests that those who do not accept the Spirit’s witness about Jesus show that they are members of the world, just like those who deny that they have sinned. Since the Spirit, water, and blood represent a unified testimony, God’s testimony about Jesus is not distinct from John’s testimony, especially since the Spirit is the source of John’s testimony (4:6). To “believe in the Son of God,” then, means to accept John’s word that the human Jesus was God incarnate.

What does it mean for the believer to “have this testimony in his heart”? Many commentators conclude that John is speaking of an inner experience that comes from the Spirit. Those who take this position understand the “testimony” to be “an inward work of the Spirit in the believer which confirms outward kinds of experience. If a person believes in the Son of God, he experiences or develops an inner conviction that what he believes is verified in practice” (Grayston, 140). Barker, 352, believes that the “testimony” is “faith itself” and a subsequent “forgiveness of sins and inward establishment of the love of God,” both of which are gifts given by the Spirit in the move from “believing” to “receiving” (cf. Stott, 82). While this view is reasonable, it seems to suggest that John’s witness about Jesus requires a special work of God to become credible—the very point John has attempted to refute in vv.7–9 by stressing the harmony of the Spirit, the water, and the blood. Other commentators have sought to explain v.10 in more natural terms. Marshall, 241, argues that this verse simply indicates that “to believe in the Son of God is to accept and keep God’s testimony,” while rejecting the Son means rejecting God as a liar. “It is inconsistent to profess belief in God, as John’s opponents did, and yet to disbelieve what God has said.” This reading limits God’s “testimony” to the inspired, prophetic preaching of the church, which preserved and propagated the true witness about Jesus.

As a third possibility, v.10 may have both the natural and supernatural dimensions of faith in mind. Perhaps John does not distinguish these aspects of faith to the degree that they are distinguished in modern Christian theology. The most immediate parallel to the thought of v.10 appears in 2:20–21, 27. The “testimony of God” here seems equivalent to the “anointing” mentioned in that passage, and both terms probably refer primarily to the orthodox belief in Jesus’ literal, sacrificial death (see [comment at 2:20–21](#)). At the same time, John’s dualism complicates the process by which this testimony may be accepted. Dodd, 131–33, points out that 1 John 5:6–12 closely parallels John 5:19–47, both in its language and in its appeal to the same dualistic framework. In John 5 Jesus discusses the value of different types of “testimony” about himself, including John the Baptist’s witness, the Scriptures, and the power God has given him to do signs. The Jews cannot accept this overwhelming evidence, however, because God’s word does not “dwell in you” (5:38). It would therefore be against their nature to believe in Jesus, no matter how strong the testimony.

Similarly, although John's Christology is supported both by God's actions in the life of Jesus and by the Spirit's continuing testimony in the church's prophecy, the Antichrists cannot believe because God's word is not in them. They therefore must belong to the same category as the Jews and the world. Those who do accept John's witness, on the other hand, automatically demonstrate that they have God's testimony in themselves, i.e., that they are in the same category as God (see Jn 6:44; 10:3–4). This would suggest that the initial act of faith, crossing over from the sphere of darkness to the sphere of light, is based on obvious public facts but also has a supernatural dimension. Unfortunately, John does not describe the mechanisms of this transformation as carefully as modern theologians might wish.

11 Verse 11 summarizes the preceding verses by defining the "testimony" of God with a community slogan introduced by *hoti* (note the NIV's colon): "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." In John's mind, "Son" and "life" are synonymous terms, as indicated by the use of *didōmi* ("has given," GK 1443). God "gave" life just as he "gave" his Son (Jn 3:16); in fact, John would say that life was given to the world in the form of God's Son (Jn 1:4; 1Jn 4:9). Notably, this slogan furnishes the creedal content of God's witness without defining the means by which God has made this "testimony." As indicated in the [comment on v.10](#), John probably has in mind both the work of God through the life of Jesus and the continuing proclamation of Jesus in the church under the Spirit's influence.

12 Verse 12 offers a test of "eternal life" based on the preceding discussion of belief and witness. *If* someone "has the Son," *then* that person "has life." To "have life" is a typically Johannine way to describe salvation (see [comment at 1:2](#)), and the language of this phrase has influenced the somewhat unusual "has the Son" in the conditional statement of the test. In this context, to "have the Son" means to accept God's witness about Jesus, i.e., to accept John's teaching that Jesus came in both "water and blood." Negatively, *if* someone does not "have the Son," *then* that person "does not have life." The Antichrists, then, do not enjoy salvation, because they do not properly understand Jesus. For John, doctrinal issues are not tangential to Christian experience. One's actions cannot secure salvation apart from correct beliefs about Christ.

13 This verse is frequently referred to as the "purpose statement" of 1 John, summarizing "not just the preceding verses but the entire epistle"

(Culpepper, 107). The main verb uses an “epistolary aorist,” literally “I wrote these things” (NIV, “I write”). In this usage, the aorist tense represents the perspective of the reader, for whom the writing of the letter is a past event. John is therefore attempting to summarize what he has already written in 1 John. The language of this summary is notably similar to John 20:30–31, which indicates that the fourth gospel was written so that the reader “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” Unlike the fourth gospel, however, the purpose statement of this letter has a strong note of assurance for those who are already believers. Perhaps the pressures of heresy and persecution have left them uncertain, and John may fear that his rigorous tests of orthodoxy have shaken their confidence. He wants them, therefore, to “know” (*oida*, GK 3857) that they are in good standing with God, no matter what the world and the Antichrists tell them (cf. Marshall, 243; Brown, 633; Rensberger, 138–39).

John refers to his audience as those who believe “in the *name* of the Son of God.” Rensberger, 72, notes that the “name” of Jesus “refers to Jesus’ identity as such, his entire being,” making it a convenient catchword for John’s Christology. Jesus’ “name” is frequently used in the Bible as a symbol of his power and authority, especially in contexts relating to salvation (Lk 24:47; Jn 1:12; 20:31; Ac 2:38; 10:43; 22:16). In oral cultures, knowledge of a deity’s name often implies a special relationship with that deity, which gives the worshiper special rights, privileges, and powers. To believe in “the name of the Son” is to enjoy a relationship with Christ that grants true believers special privileges, specifically “eternal life.”

NOTES

6 The Greek αἷμα, *haima*, (“blood,” GK 135), while not occurring frequently in the fourth gospel, is always used in a literal, biological sense. The first reference to αἷμα, *haima*, appears at John 1:13. John assures the reader that those who receive Jesus are given authority to become children of God (v.12); to emphasize the security of this new status, John stresses that God’s children “have not been born from blood nor from the will of flesh” (NIV, “born not of natural descent, nor of human decision”). “Blood” and “flesh” here are apparently synonyms, both referring to the physical

aspect of human conception. The human physicality and resultant pedigree of the natural birth process are irrelevant to one's status as a child of God. Continuing in this vein, v.14 stresses the physicality of Jesus' incarnation by insisting that "the Word became flesh."

The next reference to ἄιμα, *haima*, appears at John 6:54–56, a passage that parallels 1 John 4–5 at several points. Jesus tells the crowd, which has just witnessed the feeding of the five thousand, that anyone who "eats my flesh and drinks my blood" has eternal life, because his flesh is "true food" and his blood is "true drink" (NIV, "real drink"). In this context, Jesus' "flesh" is explicitly compared to the manna given to the Israelites in the wilderness; his "blood" may therefore represent the water that Moses provided from the rock. This metaphorical usage, however, does not obscure the fact that "flesh and blood" refers primarily to Jesus' physical body (6:52). In actuality, "eating" is a metaphor for belief, and "flesh" and "blood" are literal references to Jesus' person, with the idea that one must accept Jesus as the incarnate Son of God to receive salvation.

The final reference appears at John 19:34–35. When a soldier pierces Jesus' side to ascertain whether he is dead, "water and blood" flow out. These verses are clearly connected to 1 John 5:6, as both passages mention "water and blood," the "witness," and the need to "believe." John 19:34 is also the apparent background for 1 John 1:7. There John says that all those who "walk in the light" will have their sins cleansed by "the blood of Jesus, his Son," a reference to the sacrificial nature of Jesus' violent death. Like 1 John 5:5–6, 1:7 also connects Jesus' blood with his status as the "Son of God."

6 All usages of the Greek ὕδωρ, *hydōr* ("water," GK 5623) fall into one of three categories in the Johannine literature. First, John often uses the word "water" in the most literal sense, as the name of the common liquid found in wells and rivers and used for bathing and purification (Jn 2:7–9; 3:23; 4:46; 5:7; 13:5). The second usage is an extension of the first, representing the several occurrences of ὕδωρ, *hydōr*, in the testimony of John the Baptist at John 1:26–33. When asked about his authority to baptize, John explains that he baptizes "in water" but stresses that someone greater is coming after him. In fact, John baptizes "in water" solely for the purpose of revealing Jesus to Israel. This passage suggests that John's water baptism is inferior to Jesus' coming revelation of God (also Jn 3:22–30). A

third group of texts indicate that the Johannine community sometimes used “water” as a symbol for the Holy Spirit. In John 4, for example, the Samaritan woman comes to Jacob’s well to draw physical water, but Jesus offers her “living water” and promises that those who drink this water will never thirst again (4:10–13). The “living water” will, in fact, form a spring within those who drink it and will grant them “eternal life” (v.14). The most significant passage in this category is John 7:37–39. There Jesus promises that all who are thirsty may come to him and drink from the “living water” that flows from his belly. John immediately clarifies that this “living water” is the Spirit, which would be given to “those who believe in him” after Jesus’ “glorification.”

13 Many scholars take the epistolary aorist ταῦτα ἔγραψα, *tauta egrapsa*, to indicate a break in the text between v.12 and v.13 (so Barker, 353; Marshall, 242–43; Brown, 602, 630–33; Culpepper, 106; Schnackenburg, 246–47; Rensberger, 137–38). The reference to “eternal life” in this verse, however, clearly continues the thought of vv.10–12, while v.14 clearly shifts to the subject of prayer. The outline here is supported by Dodd, 133, and Grayston, 141–42.

REFLECTIONS

First John 5:1–13 is calculated to correct three erroneous approaches to religion, all popular in contemporary Christianity. Many people would insist that, because “God is love,” their own beliefs and behaviors are irrelevant to salvation. Judgment is considered to be foreign to God’s character, and tolerance is elevated as the supreme ethical principle. John flatly rejects this notion by insisting that “loving God” means keeping his commands. Failure to obey reveals that one has not been reborn and is therefore a member of the world.

But those modern Christians who would broadly agree with John on this point are often guilty of two other fallacies. Some believers emphasize doctrine over practice, being comfortable with the notion that those who accept the correct creeds find favor with God, whether or not they seriously attempt to obey God and love others; other Christians take the opposite approach and insist that doctrine is irrelevant as long as one follows the love command, making the church primarily an organ for social reform. John rejects both approaches by insisting that true Christianity consists of

correct beliefs *and* obedience to God’s commands, specifically the command to love. This approach requires a well-reasoned faith mixed with a passion for action—a rare combination in the modern church. Indeed, if John’s tests of doctrine and love were rigorously applied, one might have to conclude that most Christians today are Antichrists.

F. Test #10: Sin That Leads to Death (5:14–21)

OVERVIEW

The closing section of 1 John contains two of the most difficult verses in the epistle. John’s vague reference to a “sin that leads to death” (5:16) has long been the subject of theological debate, and the closing admonition to avoid idols (5:21) is abrupt and confusing. In fact, vv.16 and 21 are intertwined, and together they form the backbone of this section. It will therefore be necessary to identify the “sin that leads to death” and to define “idolatry” before commenting on the individual verses.

All commentators agree that 1 John’s closing statement, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols,” seems out of place. John has not mentioned idolatry previously in the letter, and it seems unlikely that his followers, who have been believers long enough to become involved in disputes over Christology, would still be tempted to return to paganism. “Idolatry” is therefore probably used in a metaphorical sense in v.21, but to what beliefs or practices does it refer? Brown, 627–28, outlines no fewer than ten major views on the issue. Three of the most popular will be summarized here.

First, some suggest that “idolatry” at v.21 refers to a general compromise with paganism. Since Greco-Roman culture was saturated with pagan traditions and practices, even mature Christians might occasionally fail to separate themselves from “idolatry” in the broadest sense. This view is most often associated with Dodd, 141, who paraphrases v.21 as “avoid any contact with paganism.” Idolatry thus includes “not only images of the gods, but all false or counterfeit notions of God.” A second major theory suggests, by analogy with the Dead Sea Scrolls, that “idolatry” symbolizes “sin as a satanic power.” John thus warns believers to avoid sin so that they can maintain their fellowship with “the true God” mentioned in v.20 (so Schnackenburg, 263–64). Marshall, 255–56, combines these two views,

concluding that “John urges his readers to have nothing to do with false ideas of God and the sins that go with them.”

While these theories are reasonable, “idolatry” most likely characterizes the teachings and practices of the Antichrists. John has just been discussing “the true God and eternal life” through Jesus (v.20). Because God is revealed through Christ alone, and because the Antichrists deny John’s true teaching about Christ, the Antichrist’s image of God is distorted. Their doctrines are “idolatrous” in the sense that all false images of God are idols (cf. Barker, 357; Brown, 629, 640–641; Grayston, 147–48; Culpepper, 114–15; Thompson, 148; Rensberger, 144–45). Throughout the latter half of 1 John, the author has offered criteria to distinguish true believers from Antichrists. This final admonition urges them to stay on the right side of these tests and cling to the “true God,” the Jesus John preaches, rather than the false notions of God propagated by the Antichrists.

Moving to the second problem, debate has raged for centuries over the “sin that leads to death” mentioned in v.16. Does God actually punish some sinners by killing them? The answer is not obvious, for numerous OT and later Jewish texts prescribe the death penalty for certain sins. Further, several NT passages indicate that some early Christians believed that God punishes sinners in a physical way. Paul, for example, warns the Corinthians that abuses of the Lord’s Supper have left many “weak and sick” (1Co 11:30). James 5:13–16 urges believers to pray for those whose sin has led to physical illness. The same type of thinking is evident at John 5:14, where Jesus tells the man just healed of a thirty-eight-year illness, “Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”

Most modern commentators, however, believe that John is using “death” in a spiritual or metaphorical sense in 1 John 5. Grayston, 144, says that “death” refers to “the world of darkness” from which Christians have escaped to receive “life.” Schnackenburg, 250, suggests that John is speaking of “spiritual, eternal death,” so that “mortal sin is an act God is bound to punish with exclusion from the divine realm of life.” Brown, 614–15, supports these spiritual interpretations on the basis that the Johannine literature has very little to say about physical death and nothing to say about physical death as a punishment for sin. While John’s language about a “sin that leads to death” may have a literal reference point, he is probably

referring metaphorically to an act that places the sinner outside the realm of salvation (“life”).

What type of “sin” leads to the spiritual death John is speaking of? Since the days of Thomas Aquinas, this verse has been used to support the distinction between “mortal” and “venial” sins—“mortal” sins being those that involve a deliberate turning from God and subsequent loss of grace (“leading to death”), while “venial” sins being those that do not deprive the soul of grace and therefore do not require formal confession or penance (“not leading to death”). Many modern commentators have rejected this paradigm in favor of the view that John is speaking not of different kinds of sin but different kinds of *sinner*s. Marshall, 247, highlights the OT distinction between willful and accidental sins. Those who sin accidentally have their sins resolved by sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, while conscious sins “could be atoned for only by the death of the sinner.” Thompson, 142–44, argues that those whose sin “leads to death” are members of the world, non-Christians, whose sins cannot be forgiven because they do not accept Christ. Those who “sin in the realm of life”—the weak brothers whom John urges other believers to pray for—enjoy forgiveness of sins through confession and repentance. It seems, then, that John may be thinking of a type of person rather than a type of action, specifically the nonbeliever who is not a “brother” (v.16).

Combining these preliminary conclusions, it seems that John’s reference to a “sin that leads to death” (v.16) builds on the condemnation of idolatry at v.21. Several OT passages pass the death sentence on those who practice idolatry and witchcraft (Ex 22:18; Lev 26:27–30; Dt 17:2–5; 18:9–13). Since “idolatry” here refers to the teachings of the Antichrists, John simply points out that the OT says that such people deserve death. Perhaps he is thinking particularly of Deuteronomy 18:20, which asserts that any prophet who speaks against the Law or advocates idolatry must be killed. But since these OT laws could not be literally enforced in John’s cultural setting, “death” takes on a primarily spiritual connotation. John has already asserted that the Antichrists “remain in death” because they do not love true believers (1Jn 3:14–15). The “sin that leads to death” is therefore a combination of false doctrine (“idolatry”) and the lack of love the Antichrists have shown by leaving the community over doctrinal issues (cf. Rensberger, 140).

¹⁴This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

¹⁶If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. ¹⁷All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

¹⁸We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him. ¹⁹We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. ²⁰We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

²¹Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

COMMENTARY

14–15 The closing section of 1 John summarizes the privileges enjoyed by true believers. Primary among these privileges is the ability to pray with “confidence” (*parrēsia*). John elsewhere uses *parrēsia* to describe speech that is clear and direct, hiding nothing (Jn 16:25–30). Believers will speak to God with *parrēsia* on the day of judgment because they have no fear (1Jn 4:17). The reason believers may pray in this way is indicated in v.15: God hears our requests and is ready to grant them. This being the case, we should hold nothing back in our prayers.

Sadly, these two verses have been much abused by advocates of the “health and wealth gospel.” This school of thought insists that God wants all believers to be healthy, happy, and prosperous. Christians can therefore expect to receive any material blessing they ask God to grant them. Such thinking can produce two dangerous extremes. On the one hand, it can sanctify materialism and greed by cloaking the objects of worldly desire under a divine blessing; on the other hand, it can engender deep guilt and

remorse in those whose prayers are not answered, under the logic that God is not listening because one's faith is insufficient. John would reject both conclusions. Those who believe that God desires for them to have a new car and designer clothes while others starve should recall 1 John 2:16—that such cravings come not from the Father but from the world. The Johannine Jesus promises his followers pain and persecution in this world, not health and wealth (Jn 15:18–16:4). And those who fear that God has rejected them because their whims have not been granted should recall 1 John 3:19–20, which assures believers that all who love and obey God “belong to the truth,” regardless of their circumstances.

As though anticipating these misunderstandings, John specifies that God hears us “if we ask anything according to his will” (5:14). A similar condition appears at 3:21–24, which says that believers may receive anything they ask for as long as “we obey his commands and do what pleases him.” Marshall, 246, notes that the reference to God's will at v.14 directs the reader's attention to the main point of this section in v.16. John is not offering a general principle about prayer but rather is urging believers to pray for sinning brothers. God's will is that all sinning believers confess and repent so that they may remain in fellowship with him. Barker, 355, is therefore correct to suggest that vv.14–15 have more the force of a command than a promise. While only God can forgive sins, intercessory prayers indicate the community's forgiveness and acceptance of the sinner and are therefore a critical aspect of complete restoration. To “ask according to his will” (v.15), then, means that we should ask for things that God wishes to achieve; it doesn't mean that God wants us to have whatever we ask for.

16–17 John's teaching on intercession here is remarkable in its historical context. Both paganism and ancient Judaism insisted that mediation for sinners is limited to priests, patriarchs, prophets, or other “holy men.” John, however, stresses that *any* person who believes can pray for a fallen brother and can have confidence that God will respond to that prayer. The ability to make petitions for others is a unique benefit of membership in the Christian community.

Notably, John does not command believers to pray for those who commit a “sin that leads to death”—the Antichrists (see [Overview](#) above). Does this mean that the doctrinal conflict has left him so bitter that he is no longer

concerned for their salvation? Brown, 613–14, thinks so, arguing that v.16 “means that the author does not want prayers for such sins” in order to “quarantine the secessionists so that they cannot further contaminate his audience” (cf. Culpepper, 111; Thompson, p. 143 n.). Scholars who take this position point to John 17:9, where Jesus refuses to pray for the world during his final prayer in the upper room.

Reacting to this sort of reading, Dodd, 137, suggests that John was perhaps “misled by a too rigorous exegesis of the sayings of Jesus [Jn 17:9],” or possibly he “misapplied them under the tension of a situation of extreme peril to the Church.” It is therefore necessary, in Dodd’s view, to ignore John’s teaching on this point. Dodd and Brown have read far too much into John’s remarks. While John does specifically urge that believers should pray for sinning brothers, nothing in the language of these verses prohibits prayers for the Antichrists. The NIV captures the neutral spirit of the verse: “I am not saying that he should pray about that [sin]” (v.16). John’s intention is to emphasize the need to pray for brothers, not to forbid prayers for unbelievers.

At the same time, John’s persistent dualism limits the scope of such prayers. Christians are to pray for brothers who sin under the presupposition that a true brother will confess and repent. The Antichrists, on the other hand, are persistent idolaters unwilling to accept that Christ died to remove sins (see [comment at 5:6](#)). Marshall, 249, observes that “when a person himself refuses to seek salvation and forgiveness, there is not much point in praying for him” to be restored to God, for such a person never enjoyed a relationship with God in the first place. The only prayers a believer could offer on behalf of an Antichrist are prayers for that person’s repentance and salvation.

18–20 John closes the letter with three affirmations of what believers “know.” Each opens with *oidamen* (“we know”) followed by a *hoti* clause, which suggests that John is rallying his audience around established community creeds. The nature of these statements indicates that *oida* is synonymous with *ginōskō* elsewhere in the letter (see [comment at 2:3](#)), representing not cognitive information but key aspects of Christian faith. Believers may be confident in their struggles with the Antichrists because they “know” they are on God’s side. Each statement also implies that

nonbelievers are categorically different from believers, reinforcing John's consistently dualistic presentation.

18 The first reminder of what believers "know" appears here: "anyone born of God does not sin [NIV, continue to sin]; the one who was born of God protects him [NIV, keeps him safe], and the evil one cannot touch [NIV, harm] him." The language of "rebirth" to describe Christian experience is typical of Johannine literature (Jn 1:12–13; 3:3–5; 1Jn 3:9; 4:7; 5:1–4), but three other aspects of this statement are confusing. First, the identity of "the one who was born of God" (*ho gennētheis*, GK 1164) is unclear. Is this person identical to the person described in the first phrase? In other words, do those who are "born of God" protect *themselves* in some way, or does someone else protect them? This issue was apparently troublesome to early Christian scribes as well, for some manuscripts read *heauton* ("himself") while others read *auton* ("him"). In the former case "everyone born of God protects *herself*," while in the latter case "the one who was born of God protects *her*," i.e., the one who was born of God protects others who have been born of God. Brown, 620–22, strongly advocates the former reading ("herself"), suggesting that the Christian is either protected from evil by her faith or that God protects her because of her faith. Most commentators, however, accept the latter view ("her"), understanding John to mean that "those who are born of God" (= Christians) are protected by "the one who was born of God" (= Jesus).

The latter reading is preferable for several reasons. First, the first phrase in v.18 describes the believer with a perfect participle of *gennaō*, focusing on the present status that has resulted from past acceptance of the truth: "everyone who *has been born* of God" continues to enjoy that status; the second phrase shifts to an aorist participle of *gennaō*, which suggests that John is now thinking of a person with a specific past experience of divine birth, most likely Jesus. Further, John 17:11–15 suggests that Jesus and God protect believers from "the evil one," and 1 John 3:5–8 states that Jesus came to do away with sin and destroy the works of the devil. First John 5:18 thus stresses the fraternity between true believers and Jesus by reminding the reader that Jesus is able to protect those who believe in him.

A second problem in v.18 relates to John's statement that those born of God "do not sin." The NIV takes "sin" in the conventional sense of violations of God's law and emphasizes the present tense of the verb

hamartanō to avoid the implication of moral perfection: “anyone born of God does not *continue to sin*.” This translation allows that believers may violate specific moral commands as long as their lives are not characterized by sinfulness. While this interpretation is consistent with Christian experience, John is more likely returning to the nuanced meaning of “sin” developed in 1 John 3 (see [Overview at 2:28–3:24](#)). For John, the greatest “sin” is to leave the fellowship of the community because one rejects the truth. The fact that the Antichrists have left John’s fellowship, i.e., have “sinned,” proves that they are not born of God, while those who accept Christ (i.e., who “do not sin”) thereby prove that they are God’s children.

The third problem in v.18 relates to the verb *tēreō*, “protects” (NIV, “keeps safe”; GK 5498). If the subject of this verb is Jesus, “the one who was born of God,” in what sense does Jesus “protect” believers from the devil? John might be thinking of Jesus’ continuing presence in the church as the Paraclete, in which form he teaches believers “all things” and “guides you into all truth” (Jn 14:26; 16:13). This interpretation would be consistent with the fact that 1 John 5:20 mentions a special “understanding” that the Son has given to believers, perhaps suggesting that Jesus protects true Christians from falsehood through the continuing illumination of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, John’s use of the aorist participle to refer to Christ as “the one *who was born of God*” suggests that he is thinking of Jesus as a historical person who lived in the past. In this connection, the Johannine Jesus uses *tēreō* in his final prayer to assert that he has “protected” the disciples in the Father’s name (Jn 17:12). First John 5:18 therefore probably means that those who accept John’s witness that Jesus the human being was God incarnate are protected from falsehood by this “knowledge.”

The last phrase in v.18 describes the benefits of Jesus’ protective care. The word *haptō* (GK 721), translated “harm” in the NIV, literally means “touch” or “grasp.” The same word is used at John 20:17 when Jesus urges Mary not to “hold on to” him when he appears to her at the tomb. The NIV understands *haptō* as a description of the injuries the devil might inflict on people. John, however, is probably using *haptō* to contrast the state of believers with the state of the lost. Those who are not born of God are, in John’s view, members of the world and therefore in the grasp of the devil, who rules this world (Jn 12:31). Believers escape his clutches by accepting John’s witness.

19 John's second statement of what believers "know" uses terms synonymous with those in v.18 to make explicit his earlier implication about "the world." Believers may be certain that they are "from God" (NIV, "children of God"), while "the whole world" lies under the power of the devil.

20 John's third statement of what believers "know" summarizes the two major themes of the epistle: the identity of Jesus and the difference between true believers and the world/Antichrists. Jesus is the Christ, the Son, and the "true God" in contrast to the false "idols" (v.21) promoted by the Antichrists. Jesus "has come" for the purpose of giving those who accept him a true understanding of God. The perfect tense indicates that this understanding was not only for those who witnessed the human Jesus but also extends to those who now accept authentic testimony about him. The same point is made at John 1:18, where it is stressed that no human being, not even Moses, has ever seen God, so that only Christ, "who is at the Father's side," can reveal God to the world. Of course the "understanding" (*dianoia*, GK 1379) God gives is synonymous with John's witness about Jesus, so that knowing God means accepting John's Christology. As a consequence, anyone who denies Jesus has a distorted view of God.

In what sense has the Son "given us understanding"? If v.20 parallels verses such as John 14:26 and 16:13, one might conclude that John is thinking of a supernatural revelation of religious truth through the work of the Spirit. However, the focus of 1 John 5:18–20 is not on a mystical ascent to knowledge of God but rather on the knowledge of God that came through the descent of Christ to earth. Most likely, then, "the moment of the giving of the *dianoia* (understanding) or revelatory insight is surely the moment when the author's readers became Christians" (Brown, 639). In conjunction with John's teaching on the "anointing" at 2:27, 5:20 suggests that those who accept John's witness already have a complete and full knowledge of God, which the world and the Antichrists cannot enjoy.

NOTES

18 Contra John thinking of "the one who was born of God" as Jesus, Brown, 622, points out that John nowhere else describes Jesus as "begotten by God." While John does not refer to Jesus elsewhere as ὁ γεννηθεὶς, *ho gennētheis* ("born," GK 1164), he does identify Christ with the cognate

term μονογενής, *monogenēs* (“only begotten,” GK 3666; NIV, “one and only”), on several occasions (Jn 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1Jn 4:9).

REFLECTIONS

First John 5:14–21 offers tests to reassure believers that a correct view of Jesus separates them from the world and the Antichrists. While this is the dominant theme of the entire epistle, the closing section stresses the benefits believers enjoy because of this special status. From a worldly perspective, faith has led the Johannine Christians to persecution and doctrinal division (see [Introduction](#)), but from John’s perspective these disadvantages are far outweighed by the privileges of membership in the covenantal community. True believers enjoy complete confidence when they approach God in prayer, the assurance that they are God’s children, and protection from false idols. In turn for their suffering, John offers them the truth and reminds them that a relationship with the true God is worth any price.

2 JOHN

TOM THATCHER

Introduction

1. Summary
2. Bibliography
3. Outline of 2 John

1. SUMMARY

The background and authorship of 2 John have been discussed in the [introduction to 1 John](#). Second John presents warnings and encouragements, while stressing the Elder's desire to maintain fellowship with the recipients.

Unlike 1 John, both 2 and 3 John follow standard conventions for ancient letters. Their introductions and conclusions use common formulae, and their tone and themes would be widely recognized in the ancient world. These epistolary features will be highlighted in the analysis that follows.

2. BIBLIOGRAPHY

See the [bibliography](#) listed in 1 John (p. 424).

3. OUTLINE OF 2 JOHN

- I. Greeting (1–3)
- II. Protecting the Truth (4–11)
- III. Farewell (12–13)

Text and Exposition

I. GREETING (1–3)

OVERVIEW

John L. White (*Light from Ancient Letters* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 198) notes that “the general nature of the relationship between reader and recipient is conveyed by the opening and closing” sections of the ancient letter. For this reason, the introduction and conclusion to ancient letters are particularly important in analyzing the type of relationship that existed between the author and reader(s). Within the generally accepted conventions of style, modifications to the typical elements reveal the author’s estimate of herself and her audience. Second and 3 John clearly follow this pattern.

The “opening” of an ancient private letter generally includes a prescript, “health wish,” and prayer. The prescript takes the formula “X (in the nominative case) Y (in the dative case) *chairō*” (“greetings,” GK 5897), where “X” is the sender and “Y” the recipient. A typical prescript formula might be translated, “Paul to Timothy: Greetings!” Embellishment of the names or the basic greeting serves to clarify the relationship between the two parties. The “health wish” expresses concern over the reader and/or reports on the writer’s condition. The prayer follows naturally from the health wish as a thanksgiving for good health or a request for good health.

Two basic elements appear in the closing section of Greek letters: secondary greetings and a closing word. Greetings, which typically open with the verb *aspazomai* (NIV, “send greetings,” GK 832; 2Jn13), could be from the writer to parties with the reader or to the reader from parties with the writer.

The opening verses of 2 John clearly follow the typical epistolary formula. The author introduces himself in the nominative case as “the Elder” and refers to the reader in the dative case as “the Elect Lady” (NIV, “chosen lady”). Verses 1–2 express the author’s warm feelings for the recipients and explain the basis for this affection. Verse 3 is a prayer for the

reader's well-being, here with a specifically Johannine flavor. The overall tone of the introduction indicates that John wishes to establish a relationship of common belief, love, and loyalty between himself and the audience.

¹The elder,

To the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth—²because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever:

³Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love.

COMMENTARY

1 Verse 1 raises two significant issues for the background of the Johannine Epistles. While the author's means of identifying himself and his audience complies with typical Greco-Roman epistolary conventions, the names he uses have generated considerable controversy. Before proceeding to exegesis, it will be necessary to discuss the significance of the self-designation "the Elder" and the identity of the "Elect Lady" to whom the letter is addressed.

The Greek word *presbyteros* ("elder," GK 4565) occurs sixty-five times in the NT but only twice in Johannine literature (2Jn 1; 3Jn 1). *Presbyteros* is elsewhere used as a title for officers who hold the highest level of leadership in the Pauline and Jerusalem churches (Ac 11:30; 14:32; 15:2–6, 22–23; 16:4; 20:12; 21:18; 1Ti 4:14; 5:1, 17–19; Tit 1:5). The "elders" of these congregations, who are distinct from the apostles, seem to have been responsible for the church's vision, mission, and doctrine, as is evident from the synonymous term *episkopos*, "overseer" (GK 2176). Some scholars have interpreted 2 John 1 in this Pauline sense, understanding the author to mean that he functions as an "elder" in a particular congregation (so Smalley, 317). Because the author of 2 and 3 John claims an authority that extends to several congregations, Houlden, 4, suggests that "'Elder,' in the usage of the Johannine community, signifies one ... who writes and visits and from the setting of his own congregation exercises supervision over a number of others," similar to early bishops such as Ignatius and Polycarp.

A closer examination reveals that the NT authors do not limit the term *presbyteros* to a specific church office. The word seems to have been borrowed from Judaism, for the Gospels and Acts typically refer to the leaders of the Jewish community as “elders.” The Jewish elders are to be found in the company of the high priests (Mt 27:12, 20–23; 28:11–12; Lk 22:51; Ac 4:23; 22:5; 23:14; 24:1; 25:15), scribes (Mt 26:51; Mk 11:27; 14:53; Lk 20:1; Ac 4:5; 6:12), and sometimes both high priests and scribes (Mt 16:21; 27:41; Mk 8:31; 14:43; 15:1; Lk 9:22). In several of these contexts, the “elders” are apparently members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Judaism. When they appear by themselves, they are normally designated *presbyteroi tou laou*, “elders of the people,” or *presbyteroi tōn Ioudaiōn*, “elders of the Jews.” In Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:3–5; and Hebrews 11:2, however, the “elders” are the forefathers of the Jewish nation, including heroes from the OT and famous rabbis.

In other cases, *presbyteros* is used synonymously with *presbytēs* to refer to someone simply as an “old man.” Luke 15:25 refers to the brother of the prodigal son as the “elder” brother, and Acts 2:17 borrows the term from the LXX version of Joel 2 to promise that “old men will dream dreams” in the last days. Notably, the only occurrence of *prebyteros* in the fourth gospel falls into this category. John 8:9 indicates that when Jesus disrupted the plot of those who prosecuted the adulterous woman, the “older men” left the scene first. An interesting interplay between the various nuances of the term may be seen at 1 Peter 5:1–5. The author, presumably the apostle Peter, addresses the leaders of the congregation as “elders” and refers to himself more generally as *sympresbyteros* (GK 5236), a “fellow elder,” despite the fact that he does not hold a specific office in the church to which he writes. Then in v.5, Peter urges young men to show respect “to those who are older” (*presbyteros*). In this context, “elder” refers variously to an apostle, a local church leader, and men of a certain age.

In summary, *presbyteros* is used in at least four distinct ways in the NT: (1) It may refer to those in the upper echelon of religious and political authority in the Jewish community; (2) in a usage adapted by Christians, *presbyteros* also became a technical term for an officer in the Pauline churches; (3) *presbyteros* is sometimes used as a title of respect for the Jewish forefathers; and (4) most generally, *presbyteros* may be synonymous with *presbytēs* to describe an elderly man.

The self-designation “the Elder” in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1 clearly does not fit the first or third categories above. The second option is possible, especially if one assumes that the Johannine churches, being located in the vicinity of Ephesus (see [Introduction](#)), had adopted the Pauline model of leadership. If this is the case, however, it seems odd that John does not call on “the elders” specifically to protect the congregation from Antichrists, a responsibility the Pauline elders seem to have held. Further, Titus 1:5 and Acts 14:23 suggest that the authority of Pauline elders was limited to the local congregation, whereas the author of 2 and 3 John feels himself privileged to instruct other churches. The fact that congregational leaders are addressed directly by name or by honorary epithet in 1–2–3 John (2Jn 1; 3Jn 1, 5–7, 9, 12) may indicate that the Johannine churches did not use official titles for their officers. While the familiar Pauline usage is certainly possible, there is not enough evidence to conclude that the author of 2 and 3 John thinks of himself as an “elder” in the Pauline sense.

The fourth possibility, that the author calls himself *presbyteros* as an indication of age, is attractive. First, the only use of the term elsewhere in the Johannine literature (Jn 8:9) carries this implication, although the textual problems surrounding John 7:52–8:11 make the origins of that verse uncertain. Further, 1 John 1:1–3 indicates that the author thinks of himself as a direct witness of Jesus (see [comment](#)) and uses this status as the platform of his authority against the Antichrists. If, as most scholars suggest, 1–2–3 John dates from the late first century, any living witness of Jesus would necessarily be “an old man” by this time. Notably, the term “elder” is used in just this sense by the church father Papias to refer to those authorities on Jesus who were still living at the turn of the second century (see Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4). In the same vein, 1 Peter 5:1 refers to the apostle Peter as both a “witness” (*martys*, GK 3459) of Jesus and a “fellow elder” (*sympresbyteros*). If the same sense underlies 2 John 1, the title “the Elder” establishes the author as a person old enough to have been an associate of the historical Jesus. Because this claim would form the basis of the author’s authority and status in the church, the word “elder” had probably developed unique connotations in the Johannine community. Houlden, 4, therefore suggests that “[the elder’s] role may be more personal and charismatic.... Instead of being an embryonic provincial metropolitan [bishop] ... perhaps he was a man valued for qualities in relation to which his age was more significant” than his office. Because the author is an

“elder” in this sense, he has taken on a role in the Johannine churches parallel to that of the Jewish forefathers and rabbinic authorities in Jewish life and thought. The Johannine usage would thus represent a unique adaptation of *presbyteros* from the Jewish background parallel to, but not dependent on, the Pauline application.

The name used for the recipients of the letter, “the Elect Lady and her children,” is difficult for two reasons. First, it is unclear whether John is referring specifically to an individual or metaphorically to an entire congregation. The Greek *eklektē kyria* (GK 1723 + GK 3257) could literally mean “to the elect Kyria” or “to the lady Electa,” both proper names, or could be an honorary nickname for a Christian woman (“the Elect Lady”). Plummer, 132, advocates this last option, arguing that the reader is a female Christian and the literal mother of the “children” John mentions. In his view, this explains the author’s “somewhat informal [self-] designation” as “the Elder” (cf. R. B. Edwards, *The Johannine Epistles* [NTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], 27–29). In support of this interpretation, one might note Romans 16:13, where Paul refers to his friend Rufus as “elect [NIV, chosen] in the Lord.” Most modern commentators, however, conclude that “the Elect Lady” is a general reference to an entire congregation, so that “her children” are the individual members of that congregation (so Houlden, 142; Culpepper, 117; Marshall, 60–61; Stott, 203–4; Rensberger, 148). This reading is supported by the closing verse of 2 John, where the Elder sends greetings from “the children of your elect [NIV, chosen] sister,” apparently the congregation of which John is a member (v.13). While it is possible that both congregations were led by individual Christian women, it seems more likely that the terms “lady” and “sister” are used metaphorically to portray a familial relationship between the two churches. Outside the Johannine literature, the NT frequently portrays the church as a woman or bride as the counterpart to Jesus (2Co 11:2; Eph 5:22–32; Rev 19:6–9). Smalley, 318, thus correctly emphasizes the absence of the definite article at 2 John 1 with the translation “to *an* Elect Lady,” i.e., the church.

The reference to believers as “elect” (*eklektos*) is more typical of Paul than John (see Ro 8:33; 16:13; Col 3:12; 2Ti 2:10). Revelation 17:14 refers to the faithful as “elect” (NIV, “chosen”) and “called” (*klētos*, GK 3105), but many modern scholars doubt that Revelation and 2 John were written by the same person. In any case, although the terminology is somewhat

unusual, the notion that believers are God’s chosen people is typically Johannine (Jn 1:12–13; 6:37–39, 43, 65, 70; 10:14–16, 27–29; 13:18; 15:16, 19; 17:6, 9, 24). In all these cases, John uses election language to emphasize that believers are God’s unique community in spite of the world’s denial of this status. Because they have been chosen by God, even persecuted Christians may be certain that their salvation is secure.

John’s affection for his readers is indicated by the epithet “whom I love in the truth.” The phrase *en alētheia* (“in truth,” GK 237) could be dative of manner, indicating that the Elder “truly” loves them, that his affection is sincere (NASB; NEB). But the NIV is more likely correct in emphasizing the definite article: “whom I love in *the* truth.” Throughout the Johannine literature, “truth” normally refers to Jesus or to John’s witness about Jesus as a body of doctrine (Jn 1:14, 17; 8:32; 14:6; 16:13; 1Jn 2:21; 3:19; 2Jn 2, 4; 3Jn 3). “In the truth” refers to the mutual faith that binds believers together. For this reason, the readers are also loved by “all who know the truth.” “Know” (*ginōskō*, GK 1182) is used here in the specifically Johannine sense of an experience of God through Christ that transcends cognitive knowledge (see [comment at 1Jn 2:3](#)).

2 John now reveals the *reason* for his love for the readers. According to Johannine dualism, “like loves like” (see [comments at 1Jn 4:12, 20](#)). Because John and his associates accept the truth, they in turn love all others who accept it. The word translated “lives” in the NIV is *menō* (GK 3531), the same term Jesus uses to describe the relationship between himself and those who obey him (Jn 15:4–10). Such truth “will be with us forever” because it comes from the “Spirit of Truth” who will “be with you forever” (Jn 14:16) and because its acceptance leads to eternal life.

3 John’s prayer for the reader combines Jewish and Greco-Roman customs. Greek letters typically include a “grace” greeting (*charis*, GK 5921), while “mercy” and “peace” (*eleos*, GK 1799, and *eirēnē*, GK 1645) are customary Jewish salutations. In most ancient letters, the prayer formula implies a subjunctive verb (“*should* be ...”), indicating that the author hopes his wish will be granted for the reader. John, however, uses the future indicative of *eimi*, which represents, as the NIV indicates, a promise that these things “will be” with those who have faith. In light of the experience of the Johannine Christians (see [Introduction](#)), it may seem odd that John would promise “peace” as well as “grace” and “mercy.” He is probably

thinking of “peace” as a positive relationship with God, irrespective of the difficulties presented by the world and the Antichrists. Throughout the Johannine literature, peace with God is the flipside of the world’s hatred (Jn 15:18–16:4; 17:14).

The function of the last phrase in v.3, *en alētheia kai agapē* (“in truth and love”), is uncertain. Marshall, 64, suggests that these qualities go along with “grace, mercy and peace” as specifically Johannine benefits of faithfulness. Similarly, Dodd, 147, believes that all five terms describe facets of the same experience, “because the grace of God is shown in that revelation of Himself which is the Truth, and in the divine charity expressed in the work of Christ ... and takes effect in the true belief and mutual charity of Christians.” The NIV, on the other hand, suggests that the phrase “modifies the way in which grace, mercy, and peace indwell” (Brown, 659), i.e., these blessings “will be with us in truth and love” (NIV). Brown, 682, believes that the phrase conditions the entire preceding greeting, so that the believer’s receipt of grace is contingent on her commitment to the “truth” of John’s message and subsequent good fellowship (“love”) with the community. Another possibility is suggested by the fact that John has positioned the phrase immediately after the words “the Father’s Son.” “In truth and love” may refer to the relationship that exists between Jesus and God, for God is referred to as *ho patros* (“the father”), and Jesus is then redundantly called “the Father’s Son.” The Johannine Jesus uses cognates of *agapē* (GK 27) to describe his relationship with God on several occasions (Jn 3:35; 10:17; 14:31), and John consistently advocates the “truth” of Jesus’ claims to this relationship. If this is the case, Jesus is the Son “in love,” in the sense that he and God love one another, and “in truth,” in the sense that this doctrine is true. In any case, “‘truth and love’ provide the transition to the next section, where they become the chief topic[s]” (Barker, 362).

II. PROTECTING THE TRUTH (4–11)

⁴It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. ⁵And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. ⁶And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

⁷Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. ⁹Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. ¹¹Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.

COMMENTARY

4 The verbs in v.4 may reveal something of the background of the letter. The word translated “to find” in the NIV is in the perfect tense (lit., “to have found”), while “it has given me great joy” is aorist. This suggests that John is responding to a positive report he has received about this congregation. Perhaps some of his associates had visited the church and informed him that the Antichrists had not yet infiltrated their ranks.

The exact content of that report is, however, unclear. The word “some” in the NIV does not appear in the Greek but may be reasonably implied from the genitive *ek tōn teknōn sou* (“from your children”). Scholars who support this reading conclude that John has learned that only a portion of the congregation “goes about in truth,” while the rest have been drawn away by the Antichrists (so Dodd, 147; Bultmann, 110; Barker, 362–63). It is also possible that John means simply “those from your children,” which would

imply that all members of the congregation have remained faithful. Marshall, 65, who takes this view, suggests that John had perhaps met with representatives of the congregation and gathered from them that the entire church was healthy (cf. Brown, 661; Culpepper, 119–20). This situation would indeed give John “great joy” and would also explain his warm affirmations.

“Walking” (*peripateō*, GK 4344) is a common metaphor in Greco-Roman moral rhetoric to describe adherence to a particular lifestyle. Paul frequently uses *peripateō* in discussions of Christian conduct (see Ro 14:15; Gal 5:16; Eph 4:17; 5:2, 15; 1Th 2:12; 4:1), and the same metaphor underlies modern idioms such as “the Christian *walk*” or “*walk* the talk.” The phrase that follows, *en alētheia* (“in truth,” GK 237), could be adverbial, indicating that believers go about “truly” (so Bultmann, 110), but the NIV is more likely correct to suggest that “in truth” refers to orthodox Christian belief (cf. Barker, 363; Marshall, 66; Brown, 662). To go about “in the truth” is, as the next line indicates, to obey the command from the Father.

5 The “command” in question is specified in v.5—“love one another”—which John seems to cite from the same community tradition that underlies John 13:34 and 1 John 4:21. The love command is “from the beginning” in the sense that it originates with Jesus and is therefore foundational to Christian faith. Since John defines “love” as remaining in fellowship with those who accept his witness (see [comments at 1Jn 3:11–20](#)), “going about in love” should be seen as an exhortation for believers to stick together in the face of the threat from Antichrists.

6–7 These verses function together as an objective test, similar to those in 1 John, whereby believers can immediately identify any Antichrists who might come into their midst: *If* someone loves [God], *then* that person will “walk in obedience to his commands.” Consequently, those who do not obey the commands clearly do not love God. Verse 7 specifies the test by offering a creed that indicates which “command” John has in mind: *If* anyone “does not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh,” *then* that person “is the deceiver and the Antichrist.” Such clear guidelines will leave the “Elect Lady” with little doubt as to whose doctrine is authentic.

6 Verse 6 is a commentary on the command of Jesus cited in v.5. John uses a circular argument to highlight the close connection between love for God, obedience to God, and love for brothers. Christians are commanded to

love others, and to love God is to follow this command. The latter principle is drawn from Jesus' teaching that his "friends," those who love him, will obey his teachings (Jn 14:15; 15:14). As a result, love for God and the command to love others are one and the same, so that a deficiency in one area shows a failure in the other as well. John is probably again thinking specifically of the Antichrists, who have shown that they do not love God by failing to remain in the fellowship of the community.

Verse 6, along with v.5, takes pains to stress that John's teaching, unlike that of the Antichrists, is not new or innovative. While the Antichrists have led many astray with new doctrines, John grounds his position firmly in the teaching of Jesus and the community's creeds. The things he writes are not "new" (*kainē*, GK 2785), in the sense that they are not different from what believers have heard all along. (In contrast with *neos* [GK 3742], *kainē* refers to something that is new in kind, not necessarily in age, as when one buys a used automobile and refers to it as "my new car.") While the Antichrists may teach a new kind of doctrine, John only repeats "*his* [Jesus'] command," which has existed "from the beginning," so that he needs only to remind them of what "you have heard" already. This emphasis is consistent with the conservative tone of 1 John, which strongly prefers traditional truths over new religious experiences (see [comments at 1Jn 4:2–3, 6](#)).

7 The *hoti* that opens this verse is omitted by the NIV, perhaps because its significance is unclear (cf. Grayston, 154). It may be that the word has a mild causal force, indicating that believers must hold to the command "*because* many deceivers ... have gone out" (so Marshall, 69; Brown, 668; Culpepper, 121). It is also possible that *hoti* here introduces an eschatological community slogan used proverbially to stress the danger of the situation. Similar language appears at Matthew 24:24, where Jesus warns that in the last days false christs and false prophets will "deceive [*planaō*, GK 4414] even the elect [*eklektos*]"—the same term John uses to refer to believers at 2 John 1 and 13. The notion that the Antichrists are "deceivers" who have "gone out" closely parallels Revelation 20:8, which describes Satan leaving the pit as he "goes out to deceive the nations." Revelation 12:9 and 20:10 both refer to the devil as *ho planōn*, "the deceiver." In conjunction with the term "Antichrist," which itself seems to be drawn from a community slogan of unknown origin (see [comment at 1Jn 2:18](#)), the phrase "many deceivers have gone out into the world" is probably

John's adaptation of a familiar eschatological creed. As with the creed cited at 1 John 2:18, John has shifted the tense of the statement to apply it to the immediate situation, so that the future *exeusontai* ("deceivers *will go out*") has become the aorist *exēlthon* ("deceivers *have gone out*"; both are forms of *exerchomai*, GK 2002).

The adaptation of a familiar creed to the Antichrist crisis allows John to portray the danger of the situation in absolute eschatological terms. Just as the believers were clearly warned about the coming of the Antichrist (1Jn 2:18), they have also heard that deceivers will come in the last days. Both prophecies have, in John's view, been partially fulfilled with the appearance of the Antichrists. As in 1 John, an "Antichrist" is a person who promotes a doctrine of Christ that differs from that taught by John (see [Introduction](#)), specifically refusing to confess "Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh."

The wording of this christological confession at v.7 differs somewhat from that at 1 John 4:2. In the latter verse, John says that every teacher who truly comes from God will support the confession "Jesus Christ *has come* in the flesh." In the Greek, "has come" is *elēlythota* (GK 2262), a perfect tense participle. At 2 John 7, however, John shifts to the present tense participle *erchomenon*, which gives the reading indicated by the NIV—"Jesus Christ *as coming* in the flesh." The potential significance of this shift is the topic of considerable debate. Dodd, 149, notes that the most natural implication is that the Antichrists denied that "Christ is coming," i.e., they denied the second coming of Christ. From this perspective, the confession parallels the community slogan about the coming of the Antichrist cited at 1 John 2:18. Some scholars, however, see the present tense as an emphasis on "the timeless character of the event" of the incarnation (so Bultmann, 112; Barker, 364). Stott, 212, notes that Jesus' "two natures, manhood and Godhead, were united already at his birth, never to be divided. The combination of the present and perfect tenses (in 1 Jn. 4:2 and here) emphasizes this permanent union of [two] natures in the one person." Marshall, 70–71, who takes this position, suggests that John may be countering the Gnostic doctrine that the "Christ" was a heavenly power that descended on the human Jesus at baptism, used his body for several years, and then returned to heaven just before Jesus' death on the cross. A third group of scholars regard the shift in tense from 1 John 4:2 to 2 John 7 as insignificant. Since John is generally concerned to demonstrate that the incarnation was a real historical event of the past, the two verses are seen as

alternative wordings of the same christological creed (so Brown, 670; Culpepper, 122; Rensberger, 153–54). From this perspective, the two verses are virtually synonymous.

All three positions are reasonable, and it is difficult to ascertain which most accurately represents John’s thinking. The first position, that the Antichrists denied the second coming, is supported by the grammar of the verse and by the fact that the parallel slogan about the Antichrist in 1 John 2:18 seems clearly to imply a future event (see [comment](#) there). Just as the readers have heard that “Antichrist is coming,” they have heard that “Jesus Christ is coming [again] in the flesh.” This position is generally rejected for lack of evidence that a denial of the parousia [second coming] presented a problem in the early church or to the readers of John’s letters in particular (so Smalley, 329; Stott, 212). Such an argument, however, begs the question, for if v.7 indeed refers to the Antichrists’ denial of the second coming, the verse itself would become evidence for such a “problem.” Further, Paul warns the Thessalonians about those who teach that “the day of the Lord has already come” (2Th 2:1–2), apparently denying a future parousia on the basis that Christ has already returned to the church in the form of some spiritual experience. It is very possible that the Antichrists used a similar line of reasoning to argue that Christ “comes” in the form of the Paraclete, so that the experience of the incarnate Jesus was not radically different from the experience of all Christians (see [Introduction](#); [comment at 1Jn 5:6](#)).

The second position—that John wishes to emphasize the continuing reality of the incarnation—would seem to be counterproductive to his argument. The Antichrists have degraded Jesus’ humanity by overemphasizing his spiritual nature (see [Introduction](#)), and it is this very point that John wishes to counter. It is unclear how he could do this by spiritualizing the human nature of Jesus to the point that “in the flesh” refers to the present state of Christ’s existence in heaven. Such a statement would support the position of the Antichrists, who would say that Christ’s past earthly state was no different from his present divine state.

The difficulties associated with these first two solutions make the third position most attractive. While the participle *erchomenon* is present tense (“is coming”), its force here is primarily substantive, characterizing Jesus as “the one coming *in flesh*,” the very point the Antichrists would deny. Rather

than highlighting Jesus' continuing deity, John is stressing his past humanity, the fact that he lived and acted as a real human being in human history. Verse 7 may therefore be paraphrased, "Many deceivers have gone out into the world, who do not confess that Jesus [the human being] is the divine Christ who came to earth in physical flesh." The verse is therefore parallel in thought, if not in wording, to 1 John 4:2.

8 Having portrayed the readers' situation in eschatological terms, John now warns them to stay on the right side of the conflict. The verb translated "lose" in the NIV is *apollymi* (GK 660), which means "destroy" or "ruin." Those who hold to the truth will receive, as children of God, "grace, mercy and peace" (v.3), while those who do not will have their hopes ruined.

The specific nuances of this verse are complicated by a difficult textual variant. The NIV follows the reading *eirgasasthe*, the aorist second person plural of *ergazomai* (GK 2237): "do not lose what *you* have worked for." There is strong manuscript evidence, however, for the alternative reading *eirgasametha*, the first person plural, which would render the meaning of the phrase, "do not lose what *we* have worked for" (NASB, NRSV, NEB; cf. Marshall, 72). Barker, 364, assuming that the Elder is John the son of Zebedee, supports this alternative reading on the grounds that "the apostles could not help but feel completely involved in the lives of their charges." If this is the case, John would have a sense that his apostolic mission had failed if the readers fell away—a sense similar to Paul's sentiments at Galatians 4:11; 2 Corinthians 7:5–16; and 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:9. But even aside from the obvious uncertainty as to whether "the Elder" was an apostle, this argument is inconsistent with John's general feeling toward those who fall away. While the Antichrists themselves were once members of John's fellowship, he nowhere expresses remorse or a sense of failure about their departure. The fact that they and others have fallen away does not reveal that John has failed, but rather that such people "did not belong to us" in the first place (see [comment at 1Jn 2:19](#)). Even if the reading "what we have worked for" is correct, it is more likely John is speaking collectively of all Christians and attempting to stress his solidarity with the reader (so Brown, 671; Rensberger, 154). All Christians are working toward a common goal; John is confident he personally will receive his reward, and he hopes the same will be true of others. From this perspective, either reading is acceptable, and both would stress that the efforts of John and the readers are wasted if they should leave the true faith.

9 This verse largely summarizes the arguments of 1 John 4–5, which stress the complete unity of the Father and Son. Jesus claims to be one with the Father (Jn 10:30; 14:9), so in John’s mind denial of Christ (i.e., denial that the human Jesus was the divine Christ incarnate) amounts to denial of God as well. It is unclear, however, what John means by “the teaching of Christ.” If the genitive *tou christou* is objective, John means “the teaching *about* Christ which you heard from me” (so Bultmann, 113; Marshall, 72; Smalley, 332). On the other hand, if the genitive is subjective, John means “the teaching *from* Christ” or “Christ’s teaching” (so Brown, 674–75; Stott, 214). Some who take the latter position equate “Christ’s teaching” with the love command in v.5 (so Houlden, 146). Both translations are reasonable, and the difficulty is complicated by the fact that *didachē* (GK 1439) is not a typically Johannine way of referring to a body of doctrine (in Jn 7:16–17, Jesus refers to “my teaching” [*hē emē didachē*] but says this teaching also comes “from God”; the only other Johannine occurrence of *didachē* appears at Jn 18:19, where Annas questions Jesus “about his disciples and his teaching”). In the light of the broader context, 2 John 9 probably refers to Jesus’ own teaching about love and God as preserved by John’s witness.

The Antichrists have, in John’s words, “run ahead” and deviated from the authentic tradition. The origin of the term *proagō* (GK 4575) is debated. Some believe that “John is almost certainly borrowing from the vocabulary of the heretics” (Stott, 13). If this is the case, the Antichrists would have claimed that their doctrine was more sophisticated or advanced than John’s. Whether or not they did so cannot now be determined, and even if the Antichrists did think or speak of themselves this way, it would not necessarily represent hostility toward John. They may have seen their views as a logical and legitimate extension of Johannine tradition (see [comment at 1Jn 2:19](#)). In any case, it seems more likely that “run ahead” is John’s own term, used here as a complement to the metaphor “walk in obedience to his commands” in the test at v.6. There John asserted that true love for God is evident when one walks within the confines of the orthodox confession. Verse 9 offers the negative version of this test: *If* “anyone runs ahead and does not continue [to walk] in the teaching of Christ,” *then* that person “does not have God” either. On the other hand, *if* someone “continues [to walk] in the teaching,” *then* one may conclude that that person “has both the Father and the Son.”

Dodd, 150, interprets this verse to mean that John is stigmatizing “any kind of ‘advance’ as disloyalty to the faith,” thereby “condemn[ing] Christian theology to lasting sterility.” A number of scholars have reacted strongly to Dodd’s position, insisting that John means only that Christian theology must be continually reconstructed within clearly defined parameters (Brown, 687–89; Culpepper, 123–24). Admittedly, the language of v.9 is very narrow. John elsewhere emphasizes that personal experience and new theological ideas are to be judged exclusively in reference to established tradition (see [comment at 1Jn 4:6](#)). Dodd’s negative interpretation, as well as the attempts of others to soften it, only emphasizes the difference between John’s dualistic perspective and the ecumenical tone of dialogue in the modern church.

10 At this point, John shifts from pastoral exhortations to an explicit command to protect the church from heresy. “You” is plural, suggesting that John envisions a congregation that meets in a member’s home, perhaps that of the “Elect Lady” (see [comment at v.1](#)). “This teaching” would refer to the “teaching of Christ” in v.9. Those whose doctrine is inconsistent with traditionally accepted beliefs should not be allowed to speak in church meetings. John literally demands of believers, “Do not say ‘welcome’ [*chairein*] to them.” The fact that John elsewhere makes benevolence a mark of Christian love (see [comment at 1Jn 3:16–18](#); [3Jn 5–8](#)) shows that he believes his opponents are not Christians and therefore are unworthy of the church’s support.

11 While the language of this verse is guarded, the context makes the tone clear. John fears that open dialogue between believers and Antichrists might lead some of his flock to error, and against this possibility he demands absolute separation. In such a situation, one must be considered guilty by association. The text literally reads, “The one who says ‘Welcome’ to him [an Antichrist] shares in his wicked work.” The leaders of the church should therefore understand that John will hold them responsible if heretics are allowed to infiltrate the congregation.

NOTES

8–9 There is some debate over the implication of the warnings and consequences described in vv.8–9. Barker, 364–65, suggests that John envisions three possible responses to the Antichrist situation: (1) an

avoiding of the errors of the Antichrists and thereby securing the full promise of grace (v.3); (2) some being partially deceived and therefore not attaining their full reward (v.8); and (3) “a more radical departure from the faith” leading to a complete “loss ... of God himself” (v.9).

Barker’s reading relies heavily on the terms μισθὸν πλήρη, *misthon plērē*, “full blessing” (GK 655 + GK 4441; NIV, “rewarded fully”), and προάγων, *proagōn*, “run ahead” (GK 4575), which he takes to imply varying degrees of apostasy and reward. Such a distinction seems too fine, and Barker’s argument entirely overlooks the fact that John’s dualistic way of thinking eliminates the possibility of “degrees” of loyalty or reward. Those who do not fully accept John’s witness are “liars” (1Jn 2:22; 5:10) who “love darkness” (Jn 3:19). The notion of a partial falling away and partial reward are alien to the main lines of Johannine thought (see [Introduction](#)).

REFLECTIONS

John’s remarks in vv.10–11 clearly contradict the ecumenical tone of dialogue in the modern church, making it difficult to apply his precedent to contemporary realities. Dodd, 151–52, noting the serious nature of the Antichrist crisis, allows that “if we could imagine ourselves in such a situation, we could better understand [John’s] fierce intolerance.” Not being in such a situation, however, “we must doubt whether this policy [of segregation] in the end best serves the cause of truth and love,” and therefore “we may ... decline to accept the Presbyter’s ruling here as a sufficient guide for Christian conduct.” Culpepper, 125, suggests that “emergency regulations make bad laws for less troubled periods,” and Brown, 693, warns that “fierce exclusiveness, even in the name of truth, usually backfires on its practitioners.”

On the other hand, some commentators applaud John’s unwillingness to compromise. Barker, 366, believes that the readers of 2 John were not yet strong enough to defend themselves against the “active and aggressive promotion of perversions of truth and practice” propagated by the Antichrists; modern Christians should realize that “we today are the beneficiaries of the spiritual discernment and moral courage of John and others like him.” Similarly, Stott, 216–17, feels that “if John’s instruction still seems harsh, it is probably because his concern for the glory of the Son and the good of human souls is greater than ours.”

From a purely historical perspective, there is no doubt that Barker and Stott accurately assess John's own feelings. John's dualistic approach to religious truth leaves very little room for "dialogue" in the modern sense of the term. The "truth" of the orthodox creed is based on his own eyewitness experience of Jesus (see [comments at 1Jn 1:1–3](#)), and he thus sets the limits of Christian dialogue at "what you have heard from the beginning." This leaves him unable to tolerate other positions, especially those that depend on subjective or charismatic claims to spiritual insight. Thus, it is difficult to agree with Smalley, 334–35, who states that "the presbyter is pleading simply for a maintenance of the truth, with which tolerance ... is not incompatible. John's method of maintaining truth by drawing dualistic boundaries is, in fact, radically intolerant.

The real question for the modern church, then, is not John's own meaning but the extent to which his historical precedent can inform theological dialogue in a culture that places a high value on tolerance. Even those who applaud John's response to the Antichrists are cautious in their application of his methods to modern situations. For example, Stott, 216, tempers his general remarks by specifying that "John is referring to teachers of false doctrine about the incarnation, and not to every false teacher," so that 2 John "gives us no warrant to refuse fellowship to those ... who do not agree with our interpretation ... in every particular." In this way, scholars attempt to limit John's precedent to modern debates over Christology, thus allowing room for discussion on other theological and ethical issues. But John is notably adept at portraying *all* aspects of Christian faith in terms of the christological conflict and seems unable to conceptualize other doctrinal issues apart from his doctrine of Christ. At 1 John 3:16–20, for example, he connects Christian benevolence with Jesus' self-sacrifice and then makes the Antichrists' refusal to help his allies evidence of their association with Cain. Similarly, the Spirit's role in the life of the believer is established and authenticated in reference to the confession "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1Jn 4:1–3). John interprets the community's eschatological creeds in terms of the Antichrist conflict (see [comments at 1Jn 2:18](#); [2Jn 7](#)), and the rare direct allusion to Christ's return (1Jn 2:28–3:3) stresses that those who wish to "see him as he is" must "continue in him" and "purify themselves," i.e., must accept John's version of Jesus' nature and ethical teaching. Attempts to limit the implications of 2 John 10–11 to modern christological

debates require historical reconstructions of John's situation that seem inconsistent with the broader evidence.

The varying attempts to relate vv.10–11 to modern life betray the different ways of constructing truth claims in ancient and modern churches and between different groups within the modern church. Modern Christian dialogue, both between denominations and between Christians and members of other religions, is informed by a concept of “orthodoxy” much broader than John's. Two reasons (among many) may be noted for this difference. First, John's dualistic worldview has been largely rejected by most mainline Christian groups as archaic and unenlightened. Since John cannot conceptualize a theological “gray area,” it is impossible for him to understand the value of entering into dialogue with those who disagree with him (Antichrists) unless the dialogue would result in their complete conversion to his position. In modern ecumenical dialogue, “light and darkness” have been replaced with shades of gray. Second, modern Christians are more open to constructions of truth based on subjective religious experience than John appears to be. Since our experience of Christ is limited to worship, the Holy Spirit, and the traditions of the church and Scriptures, we may be lacking the certainty that comes from the Elder's claim to a firsthand experience of Jesus. It will not do, however, to recognize these differences between John and us and then pretend that John's views are compatible with our own.

Each church and each believer must determine which doctrines and practices are *sine qua non* for those who wish legitimately to call themselves “Christian.” The tests of 1 and 2 John are intended to provide a clear limit for this title. In John's view, “Christians” are people who (1) accept John's witness that “Jesus is the Christ who came in the flesh” and (2) accept Jesus' teaching as the foundation of Christian faith and practice. These two beliefs are to be *accepted*, not debated, and the very desire to debate them reveals that one is no longer a true member of the community. Any real application of 2 John to the situation of the modern church must recognize that John would consider dialogue on these two issues to be dangerously illegitimate. A strict application would place grave limitations on dialogue between Christians and members of other religions, and it is doubtful that John would see such restrictions as anything but positive.

III. FAREWELL (12–13)

¹²I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

¹³The children of your chosen sister send their greetings.

COMMENTARY

12 The closing section of 2 John follows common conventions for ancient Christian letters. Verse 12 is a notable example of the “apostolic *parousia*” (“presence”), a rhetorical technique typical of Paul’s epistles. At the surface level, the author appears to express a warm desire to visit the readers and enjoy their fellowship, but these anticipated visits interact with the complex social dynamics of physical presence in the Greco-Roman world. In a culture where personal status was based on relationships with one’s superiors, public shame or blame from a patron could have significant social implications. The possibility that an angry patron might suddenly appear and catch one doing something wrong was a powerful motivation for good behavior.

Within the early church, the apostles and their associates were seen as spiritual patrons of local congregations and the church at large. In light of this fact, direct public censure from an apostle could bring great disgrace to members of local churches and severely reduce their status in the congregation. Paul often capitalizes on this fact to offer subtle warnings against disobedience, appearing on the surface to express a genuine desire for the fellowship of the readers, but at a deeper level warning that he expects to find that they have followed his instructions (cf. 1Co 16:5–7; 2Co 13:10). Perhaps Paul’s most skillful use of the “apostolic *parousia*” appears at Philemon 22, where he instructs a church leader, Philemon, to release a slave, Onesimus, who had robbed him and fled to Rome. After assuring Philemon that he is confident of his obedience and knows that he will do even more than Paul asks (v.21), Paul goes on to tell him to prepare

for an upcoming visit from Paul (v.22). While the news of this pending visit would surely bring joy to Philemon, he could not fail to see this announcement as a veiled threat that Paul intends to determine exactly how “obedient” his friend has been.

Similar to the Pauline usage, at one level the Elder’s desire “to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete” (2Jn 12) “suggests an intimacy which requires personal presence” (Barker, 366). But it is also plain that this “joy” will come only to those who have not fraternized with the Antichrists (vv.8–11); those who have will share their condemnation (v.11), suggesting that they will be excommunicated. While John seems hopeful that his readers will remain loyal to him, he subtly warns them of his intention to come and see just how loyal they are.

13 Second John closes with a typical epistolary farewell. Secondary greetings are sent from “the children of your chosen sister,” probably the members of John’s own congregation (see [comment at v.1](#)). Aside from general courtesy, the greeting reinforces the doctrinal solidarity of two churches that are geographically separated. John wants his readers to remember that they are members of a larger faith community, and he hopes they will remain loyal to that community.

NOTES

12 The motif of public shame from a patron forms the basis of several of Jesus’ parables: the wicked servant (Mt 24:45–51), the ten virgins (Mt 25:1–13), the talents (Mt 25:14–30), and the watchful servants (Lk 12:35–38). All of these parables assume that the Christian audience would not want to be found slacking if Jesus should suddenly return.

3 JOHN

TOM THATCHER

Introduction

1. Summary
2. Bibliography
3. Outline of 3 John

1. SUMMARY

The background and authorship of 3 John have been discussed in the [introduction to 1 John](#). Third John presents warnings and encouragements, while stressing the Elder's desire to maintain fellowship with the recipients.

Unlike 1 John, both 2 and 3 John follow standard conventions for ancient letters. Their introductions and conclusions use common formulae, and their tone and themes would be widely recognized in the ancient world. These epistolary features will be highlighted in the analysis that follows.

2. BIBLIOGRAPHY

See the [bibliography](#) listed in 1 John (p. 424).

3. OUTLINE OF 3 JOHN

- I. Greeting (1–4)
- II. Commendation of Gaius (5–8)
- III. A Bad Example: Diotrephes (9–10)
- IV. Recommendation for Demetrius (11–12)
- V. Farewell (13–14)

Text and Exposition

OVERVIEW

Third John is an excellent example of a Greco-Roman recommendation letter. Itinerant teachers were a common fixture in the life of the early church, and recommendations were frequently used to indicate a person's doctrinal credentials. At Acts 18:27, for example, the church at Ephesus sends a recommendation to Corinth on behalf of Apollos, a recent convert brought to Christ by Priscilla and Aquila. The entire letter of Philemon is a recommendation on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus, whom Paul hopes will be forgiven of his crimes. In some cases it seems that the brief recommendation letter was intended to introduce its bearer, who would in turn deliver a longer message to the congregation. The letter sent to the Gentile churches by the Jerusalem Council opens with a brief recommendation for Barnabas, Paul, Judas, and Silas, the men who were sent to deliver it, and then briefly summarizes the Council's decisions with the understanding that these men "will confirm by word of mouth what we are writing" (Ac 15:27). Such recommendations would indicate that a newcomer enjoyed the blessing of his previous congregation, implying that he should be allowed full fellowship with the new church.

Recommendation letters were a widely recognized genre in the ancient world, with established guidelines for proper form and content. One of the best-known discussions of the recommendation appears in *Epistolary Types*, a first-century AD work attributed to Demetrius of Phalerum. Demetrius refers to the *systatikos*, or "commendatory" letter, as one written "on behalf of one person to another, mixing in praise." Demetrius gives the following hypothetical example of a letter of recommendation (cited in Abraham Malherbe, "Ancient Epistolary Theorists," *OJRS* 5 [1977]: 31):

So-and-so, who is conveying this letter to you, has been tested by us [the author] and is loved on account of his trustworthiness [*pistis*]. You will do well to deem him worthy of hospitality, both for my sake and his, and indeed

for your own. For you will not be sorry if you entrust to him, in any matter you wish, either words or deeds of a confidential nature. Indeed, you, too, will praise him to others when you see how useful he can be in everything.

Several themes from Demetrius's typical recommendation letter appear prominently in 3 John. Like Demetrius's example, 3 John is a private letter written to an individual named Gaius rather than to an entire church (cf. 1 and 2 John). Its purpose is to recommend to Gaius a certain Demetrius (v.12), who appears to be one of John's envoys, in hopes that Gaius will extend hospitality to him. Demetrius is praised as a person of high reputation, and John clearly intimates that Gaius will benefit from the relationship, at least inasmuch as it will keep him on good terms with John (v.11). The need for such a recommendation is apparent when one considers the background of 1–2–3 John (see [Introduction](#)). Although Gaius does not seem to know Demetrius, John's primary goal is to establish Demetrius's credentials so that Gaius will allow him to speak to the church. It is possible that John had sent Demetrius to deliver 1 John to the congregation.

The fact that 3 John is written in the form of a recommendation has led many scholars to conclude that it is a purely personal letter with little theological concern (so Rensberger, 161, who notes the preponderance of "non-Johannine and even non-Christian language" in the document. Indeed, 3 John never mentions Jesus or Christ, and it is concerned primarily with praising Gaius, discrediting Diotrephes, and commending "the brothers" and Demetrius. While this may be case from a purely formal perspective, it is doubtful that the Elder would think of the letter and its underlying controversies in these terms. John sees benevolence and hospitality toward his allies as touchstones for loyalty in the Antichrist conflict (see [comments at 1Jn 3:11–20](#)). The reasons why Gaius accepted John's envoys and Diotrephes did not were presumably related to doctrine, and John praises Gaius solely on the basis of the fact that he supports orthodox missionaries. While the doctrinal concern is less explicit, 3 John highlights the social implication of the christological debates that were rending the Johannine churches.

I. GREETING (1–4)

¹The elder,

To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

²Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. ³It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. ⁴I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

COMMENTARY

1 Like **2 John**, the opening of **3 John** follows typical Greco-Roman epistolary conventions (see [Overview at 2Jn 1–3](#)). The author first identifies himself as “the Elder” (see [comment at 2Jn 1](#)) and addresses the recipient of the letter in the dative case. Demetrius and the brothers (vv.5–8, 12) are recommended to Gaius, probably the leader of a house church or a group of small congregations. Gaius is referred to as *agapētos*, “the beloved” (NIV, “dear friend,” GK 28). This might mean “beloved of God,” but the NIV is probably correct to see the term as an expression of John’s feelings. The NIV also correctly maintains the Greek dative of the phrase “in the truth,” which does not mean that John “truly” loves Gaius (so Bultmann, 96) but rather that the basis of their relationship is a commitment to common beliefs (so Marshall, 82; Brown, 703; see [comment at 2Jn 1](#)).

2 Verse 2 is a classic example of the epistolary “health wish.” Although John literally refers to “your *psychē* getting along well,” the NIV correctly leaves *psychē* (GK 6034) neutral (cf. Dodd, 157–58; Brown, 704; Grayston, 159). The English “soul” evokes spiritual connotations, but the Greek word refers more generally to the biological force in living things, especially in the Johannine literature where it is the physical counterpart to *zōē* (GK 2437), spiritual or eternal life (see [comment at 1Jn 1:2](#)). Marshall, 82–83,

suggests that Gaius had been ill and that John is hoping for a change in his circumstances. There is little evidence for this conclusion, though, and the Greek text actually implies that Gaius has been doing well and that John simply wants his health to continue. John's wish for Gaius's well-being continues the tone of love and concern suggested in the affectionate moniker *agapētos* ("beloved").

3 John quickly reveals the basis of his love for Gaius and the reason he feels confident in writing to him. It appears that a group of believers returned from Gaius's church and reported that they had received a favorable reception. The precise identity of these "brothers" is uncertain. Marshall, 83–84, notes that *adelphoi* (GK 81) normally refers to "ordinary Christians" in the NT and understands the present tense participle *erchomenōn* (NIV, "to have some brothers come") to mean that several different groups of Christians had commended Gaius's hospitality (cf. Barker, 371–72; Smalley, 346–47). Most scholars, however, accept the conclusion of E. Earle Ellis ("Paul and His Co-Workers," *NTS* 17 [1970/71]: 448) that, by analogy with the Pauline usage, "III John presents the brothers as a circle of traveling workers, probably preachers or teachers associated with or led by the Elder" (cf. Dodd, 159–60; Brown, 704–5). The fact that John refers to these emissaries as "brothers" may suggest that the Johannine congregations used familial titles for their officers or perhaps were not as tightly organized as the Pauline churches. The brothers "testified" (*martyreō*, GK 3455; NIV, "tell about") that Gaius is "walking in the truth," a phrase that elsewhere in the NT is used to describe an ethical lifestyle but here probably means that Gaius has remained faithful to John's true teaching (see [comment at 2Jn 6](#)).

4 Verse 4 closely parallels the thought of 1 John 1:4. In the difficult situation created by the Antichrists, John's primary source of joy and comfort came from the knowledge that some people had remained loyal to him.

II. COMMENDATION OF GAIUS (5–8)

OVERVIEW

In this section, John thanks Gaius for entertaining his envoys (“the brothers”) in the past and encourages him to do so again. On the basis of this precedent, and in contrast with the bad example of Diotrephes, John will request that Gaius accept Demetrius into his home.

⁵Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. ⁶They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. ⁷It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. ⁸We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.

COMMENTARY

5–6 These verses offer a clue to John’s strategy in assessing and addressing the Antichrist conflict. The “brothers” seem to have been sent out on a preaching tour to ascertain which churches had fallen into heresy. When they returned, they made a public report of their findings. The NIV’s “they have told the church” is somewhat weak here, as John literally says, “they testified ... before the congregation” (*emartyrēsan enōpion ekklēsias*), implying a more formal meeting to review their findings (cf. Stott, 225).

John summarizes the brothers’ report on Gaius by saying that he “sent them on their way in a manner worthy of God.” In conjunction with *axiōs* (“worthy,” GK 547), *propempō* (“send on their way,” GK 4636) probably implies both proper respect and financial support (Dodd, 159–61; Rensberger, 161). The principle that Christian teachers should be supported by those to whom they minister was established by Jesus (cf. Mk 6:8–11,

where Jesus sends the Twelve on a preaching tour and instructs them to take nothing along; Lk 10:1–16, where Jesus tells the Seventy not to take money or extra clothing but to depend on the hospitality of those to whom they preach). In both cases it is clearly implied that failure to support the missionaries represents a rejection of the message and, in fact, a rejection of Jesus himself (“he who rejects you rejects me,” Lk 10:16).

Shortly after the time of 3 John, an early Christian manual known as the *Didache* (lit., “teaching”) offers similar instructions. The author of this document urges that “every true prophet who wishes to stay with you is worthy of his food” (13:1), but at the same time he gives careful instructions on how to determine which prophets come from the Lord and which are simply seeking free lodging (11–14). Third John extends this principle to the conclusion that supporting an orthodox teacher is an indication of godliness, while harboring a heretic reveals that one is of the world.

John is especially pleased with Gaius because the brothers were “strangers” to him. Although hospitality is touted as a key Christian virtue throughout the NT, Gaius’s support for the brothers is especially significant because it must have been based solely on their association with John and/or their faithfulness to John’s teaching. By receiving and supporting them, Gaius has shown himself to be John’s ally.

7–8 These verses paint the backdrop against which Gaius’s hospitality becomes significant. “For the sake of the Name” refers to the name of Jesus and, by extension, to John’s teaching about Jesus. The brothers, John’s envoys, set out on a tour to proclaim the truth, depending solely on the support of people such as Gaius because they received “nothing from the Gentiles” (*apo tōn ethnikōn*; NIV, “no help from the pagans”). The wording of this condemnation is somewhat unusual, for John very rarely refers to anyone as a “Gentile.” The only other usages of *ethn*- cognates in the Johannine literature appear at John 11:48–50 and 18:35, and in both cases *ethnos* (GK 1620) refers to the Jewish people collectively as a “nation.”

Further, if the Johannine churches were indeed located in the vicinity of Ephesus, it must be assumed that many of their members would be of non-Jewish heritage, making them “Gentiles” by race. This would certainly include Gaius, Demetrius, and Diotrephes, all of whom have Greek names. It seems most likely, then, that “Gentile” is used here in a nonracial sense as

a label for those who are opposed to God, making the word synonymous with “the world” in John’s vocabulary (cf. Brown, 713; Culpepper, 131–32). Paul uses *ethnos* in a similar sense to characterize people by their godless lifestyle rather than their race (Eph 4:17 [NIV, “Gentiles”]; 1Th 4:5 [“heathen”]). The NIV is therefore correct to translate *ethnikōn* as “pagans” here at v.7, implying opposition to the “true God” (1Jn 5:20) and true believers.

Who, then, are the “Gentiles” John has in mind? If the term refers to the nonbelieving people of the world, it would seem superfluous for John to note that his evangelists do not receive support from such people. Further, the brothers in question seem to have been sent on a pastoral visit to Christian congregations rather than on an evangelistic mission. The “Gentiles” are therefore probably Christian leaders such as Diotrophes who refuse to support John’s envoys. The logic here would be similar to that underlying 1 John 4:5–6. There John argues that those who listen to the Antichrists show themselves to be members of the world by the very fact that they listen to the Antichrists. Similarly, those who reject John’s envoys and their teachings thereby demonstrate that they are “pagans,” people opposed to the true God and his work.

8 This principle of “identity by association” becomes explicit at v.8. Gaius should continue to support the brothers because in so doing he demonstrates that he is their “fellow worker in truth” (NIV, “work together for the truth”). Since the brothers promote God’s truth, anyone who supports them must be on God’s side as well. Financial support is a real and legitimate form of participation in Christian missionary activity, making it important for believers to reflect carefully on the missions they support. Those ministries that glorify God and are doctrinally sound will bring a reward to those who support them, while those that promote falsehood will bring judgment on everyone involved with them.

III. A BAD EXAMPLE: DIOTREPHESES (9–10)

OVERVIEW

It is doubtful that John hopes to bring Diotrephes to repentance with this brief condemnation. Since 3 John is a personal letter to Gaius, Diotrephes is mentioned only as an example of the bad behavior the Elder wants Gaius to avoid. John does not want Gaius to reject the brothers and probably means to imply that, should he do so, he will get the same treatment Diotrephes is going to receive when John comes to visit.

⁹I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. ¹⁰So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

COMMENTARY

9–10 These verses are clearly significant to the historical setting of 1–2–3 John, but it is difficult to reconstruct the situation they envision. In contrast to his praise for Gaius, John wishes to condemn a certain Diotrephes for disloyalty, but Diotrephes’s identity and specific crimes are unclear. If *ti* in the opening phrase (*egrapsa ti*) is taken to mean “something,” v.9 indicates that John “has written something to the church” which Diotrephes has not accepted. But to which church and when? And how are Gaius and Diotrephes related?

A key term here is *egrapsa*, the aorist form of *graphō* (“I write,” GK 1211). It is possible that *egrapsa* (“I wrote”) is an epistolary aorist. In this usage, an author refers to the writing of a document from the reader’s perspective, making the act of writing a past time event. When *egrapsa* is used as an epistolary aorist, it refers to remarks the author has already made in the same letter and is best translated with the English perfect tense, “I

have written” (cf. 1Co 5:9). If this is the case at 3 John 9, “I wrote” refers to the exhortation to support the brothers in vv.7–8. The *alla* (“but”) that opens the second phrase in v.9 would then contrast Diotrephes with Gaius, indicating that John does not expect Diotrephes to honor the brothers, because he “loves to be first.” Most scholars, however, believe that *egrapsa* refers to a different letter, one that John had previously written to the congregation and that Diotrephes had disregarded (so Culpepper, 133–34; Stott, 228; Rensberger, 161–62). John seems to have sent a previous recommendation on behalf of the brothers, a letter that Diotrephes had ignored, refusing to allow John’s envoys to speak to his congregation (cf. Dodd, 161; Marshall, 88).

But by what authority could Diotrephes prevent John’s associates from speaking to the church? Considerable debate has been waged on the precise role Diotrephes played in his congregation, particularly whether he functioned as a ruling bishop in a primitive monarchical episcopacy. Countering this reading, some commentators insist that Diotrephes did not hold an appointed office but simply assumed authority within one of the Johannine churches (so Smalley, 356; Culpepper, 133). It seems unlikely, however, that Diotrephes could successfully challenge John’s authority solely on the basis of a dominant personality. Further, Diotrephes has clearly taken steps to establish martial law in his congregation, excommunicating those who support John’s allies (v.10). His leadership therefore seems to have been more formal, whether or not he is a true example of the emerging bishopric described by Ignatius (cf. Dodd, 162–64; Houlden, 153–54; Marshall, 89–90; Brown, 737–38). The pattern of evolving church polity throughout the second century is consistent with 3 John’s presentation, for it appears that monarchical bishops arose in response to the same type of external political pressures and internal doctrinal conflicts that threatened the Johannine community. Diotrephes is therefore probably the official leader of a house church under John’s jurisdiction, whether or not a true Pauline “elder” or a “bishop” in the sense described by Ignatius.

This conclusion in turn raises several possibilities about the relationship between Gaius and Diotrephes. Gaius may have been a member of the congregation over which Diotrephes had assumed authority. If this is the case, Gaius perhaps went against Diotrephes’s orders and supported John’s envoys. Marshall, 88–89, who takes this view, suggests that Gaius lived at

some distance from the main meeting place of the congregation and was in poor health, making him unaware of what Diotrephes had done. Perhaps Diotrephes had withheld John's earlier letter from the congregation, and John is now attempting to communicate to the church indirectly via Gaius. In support of this view, it is notable that John refers to "*the church*" in the singular (v.10), suggesting that only one congregation is under consideration.

Other scholars believe that Gaius was not directly involved with Diotrephes's group. Brown, 731–32, suggests that Gaius was a wealthy Christian who was not a member of Diotrephes's house church, but neither was he the head of another house church. As a member of a pro-Johannine congregation, Gaius was using his resources to support John's envoys financially on an informal basis. Brown's reading is supported both by the fact that John deems it necessary to inform Gaius of what Diotrephes has done, as though Gaius is unaware of these developments, and also by the fact that John literally says Diotrephes "loves to be first *among them*" (*autōn*; see NASB), implying that Gaius is not a member of the same group. Another major view has been promoted by Abraham Malherbe ("The Inhospitability of Diotrephes," in *God's Christ and His People*, ed. Jacob Jervell and Wayne Meeks [Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977], 226–29), who suggests that Gaius, like Diotrephes, was the leader of another house church in the same general area. The letter mentioned in v.9 had been sent to both Gaius and Diotrephes, probably being delivered by the brothers whom Gaius received and Diotrephes rejected. John is now recommending Demetrius to Gaius and informing his friend of the cold reception his people had received from Diotrephes. To allay Gaius's concerns, John promises in v.10 that he will soon come to resolve the situation among the churches in that area. While certainty is impossible, some version of Malherbe's theory seems most likely.

NOTES

9 It is possible that "Diotrephes" is a sarcastic moniker rather than the person's actual name. Brown, 716, notes that the name appears in a few Greek literary works and inscriptions but is somewhat rare. Since it literally means "nurtured by Zeus" (Zeus being the head of the Greco-Roman pantheon of gods), John may have labeled this person "Diotrephes" to

portray him as the leader of the ἔθνικῶν, *ethnikōn*, “Gentiles” (NIV, “pagans”), in v.7.

REFLECTIONS

The most difficult puzzle presented by 3 John 9–10 is the nature of the relationship between John and Diotrephes and the Antichrists. Most scholars today conclude that Diotrephes was not directly involved with the Antichrists and that his rejection of John’s envoys resulted from political rather than doctrinal concerns. In support of this position is the fact that the christological concerns of 1 and 2 John are notably absent from 3 John, even to the point that the words “Jesus” and “Christ” never appear in the letter.

Some scholars conclude that Diotrephes’s lust for power was the primary cause of the problem. Stott, 229–31, noting John’s statement that Diotrephes “loves to be first among them,” concludes that “the motives governing the conduct of Diotrephes were neither theological, nor social, nor ecclesiastical, but moral.” Marshall, 90, sees in Diotrephes a lesson for Christian leaders, a “standing warning against the danger of confusing personal ambition with zeal for the cause of the Gospel.” On the other hand, Brown, 738, believes that Diotrephes’s motives were more admirable: in light of the dangers presented by the Antichrists, Diotrephes concluded that the safest course was to forbid any traveling preacher—even those sent by John—from speaking to his congregation. From this perspective, Diotrephes may not have harbored any hostile feelings toward John.

The key to the relationship between John and Diotrephes perhaps lies in the relationship between Diotrephes and the Antichrists. While it is true that John does not explicitly refer to the Antichrists or their doctrines in 3 John, most scholars would agree that the situation described somehow arose from the Antichrist conflict. Within this historical context, and within the context of John’s dualistic thinking, one must question the common distinction between “doctrinal” and “ecclesial” disputes. Since John’s authority is based on his claim to be a “witness” to key elements of the Johannine tradition (see [comments at 1Jn 1:1–4](#)), any challenge to that authority would inherently imply doctrinal deviation. John tends to portray all social and doctrinal issues in dualistic terms and is inclined to categorize people on the basis of both their beliefs and their actions. Even if Brown is correct that

Diotrephes bears no hard feelings toward John, John clearly does not see things that way. In his view, Diotrephes has slandered him with “evil words” (NIV, “gossiping maliciously”). This is not dissimilar to his response to the Antichrists, who may have seen themselves as John’s allies (see [comment at 1Jn 2:18](#)). Although some modern commentators might want to portray Diotrephes as a person of good intentions but misguided actions, or as a person with sound theology but sinful pride, John’s dualistic mind-set offers only two categories in which to place people: dark and light. Since John belongs in the category of light and truth, and since he knows that Diotrephes has made moves to resist complete association with him, he can only conclude that Diotrephes “walks in the darkness.” This being the case, it is hard to see that John would see any difference between Diotrephes and the Antichrists, even if they were not formally allied. Indeed, anyone who does not accept the authority of John’s witness for any reason is no better than a “pagan” (see [comment at vv.7–8](#)).

IV. RECOMMENDATION FOR DEMETRIUS (11–12)

OVERVIEW

John now arrives at the main point of the letter: recommending Demetrius to Gaius’s hospitality. Demetrius is a devotee of the Elder who seems to have appeared at Gaius’s house bearing 3 John, and perhaps 1 John as well. Later Christian legends associate him with the silversmith named Demetrius (Ac 19:24), and the *Apostolic Constitutions* claim that John later appointed him bishop of Philadelphia. There is, however, little reason to believe these accounts, and it seems more likely that Demetrius was one of John’s otherwise unknown representatives, perhaps functioning in a way parallel to Timothy and Titus in the Pauline circle. John hopes that Gaius will continue to show goodwill by allowing Demetrius to speak before Gaius’s congregation.

¹¹Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. ¹²Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.

COMMENTARY

11 First John presents a series of tests by which true believers can distinguish themselves from the world and the Antichrists. Following an exhortation to imitate good rather than evil, John now offers a similar test of character: *If* anyone does good, *then* he is from God. On the other hand, *if* anyone does evil, *then* that person “has not seen God.” In this context, “doing evil” clearly means rejecting John’s associates, as Diotrefes has done, while “doing good” means to continue supporting orthodox teaching. As in vv.7–8, one’s nature is revealed by the people with whom one associates.

12 This verse gives a brief résumé of Demetrius’s credentials. He enjoys the recommendation or “witness” (NIV, “is well spoken of”) of John and of “everyone,” which here must mean everyone allied to John and not people such as Diotrephes. Remarkably, Demetrius even enjoys the recommendation of “the truth itself.” Bultmann, 102, suggests that “truth” is used here as a personification for “the divine reality or its revelation,” meaning that God and Christ testify for Demetrius. Most scholars, however, accept Brown’s suggestion, 723–24, that John is thinking of “the truth that abides in the Christian (2Jn 2) and to which the Christian belongs (1Jn 3:19)”; this would mean that “in Demetrius’s case the truth that abides in him finds expression in the holiness of his life and the soundness of his preaching.” In other words, Demetrius’s doctrine and lifestyle will speak on his behalf (cf. Dodd, 167; Barker, 376; Stott, 233).

V. FAREWELL (13–14)

¹³I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. ¹⁴I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

COMMENTARY

13–14a These verses strongly resemble 2 John 12 in their use of the “apostolic *parousia*” (see [comment](#) there). While John’s visit would presumably be pleasant to Gaius, his travel plans carry an underlying threat. In v.10 John makes clear that he intends to confront Diotrephes for rejecting his envoys, and Gaius may expect to receive the same treatment if he does not accept Demetrius. The meeting will therefore be joyous only if John discovers that Gaius has followed his instructions.

14b As is typical of Greco-Roman letters, 3 John closes with an *aspazomai* (“greeting”) section. Those with John greet Gaius’s church, and he asks that Gaius greet the members of his congregation on John’s behalf. More distinctive is the brief closing greeting: “Peace to you.” The peace wish is a typical feature of Pauline greetings but always appears at the beginning of the letter rather than the end (Ro 1:7; 1Co 1:3; 2Co 1:2; Eph 1:2). Similarly, 2 John opens with an assurance that the reader will receive “grace, mercy and peace” (v.3) but closes only with the general greeting on behalf of other members of the congregation (v.13). As many scholars have noted, *eirēnē* (“peace”) is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *shalōm* (GK 8934) that was used both as an introductory greeting and a farewell (see 1Pe 5:14). The *shalōm* greeting would have taken on special significance in the Johannine community, for “peace to you” (*eirēnē hymin*, the plural form) is the greeting the resurrected Jesus gives to the disciples when he first appears to them (Jn 20:26). If this is the case, John is reminding Gaius that their fellowship is based on a common belief in Christ.

If, however, “peace to you” was a common Johannine farewell formula, one must ask why the phrase does not appear at the end of 1 and 2 John as well. While it might be argued that 1 John does not include the typical opening and closing conventions of ancient epistles, 2 John clearly betrays a concern with proper style. It is possible that John’s inclusion of “peace to you” at the end of 3 John reflects the background of the letter. Since Gaius had apparently never met John or Demetrius, he might be concerned that the recommendation was counterfeit, leading him to unwittingly forbid Demetrius to speak to the church without any hostility toward John. Indeed, some have suggested that Diotrophes had rejected “the brothers” on an earlier occasion for a similar reason (see [comment at vv.9–10](#)).

It is possible, then, that “peace to you” is the Elder’s autograph. In the ancient world, where no more than 10 percent of the population could read and even fewer could write, most letters were composed orally by dictation. To verify the accuracy of the contents of the document, the author would normally sign the letter at the end, often using a personal moniker. The NT book of Romans, for example, was written down by a scribe named Tertius (Ro 16:22), and Paul closes the epistle to the Galatians with a brief summary in his own large handwriting (Gal 5:11–18). Since 3 John was written in a period of extreme turmoil, it may be that John felt it necessary to sign the letter personally to indicate that its contents were authentic. “Peace to you,” the words of the resurrected Lord, would be a fitting signature for John, whose whole purpose was to witness on behalf of Jesus.

JUDE

J. DARYL CHARLES

Introduction

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1. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION: AUTHORSHIP, DATING, AND EPISTOLARY DESTINATION

Scholarship has traditionally considered Jude to be of pseudonymous authorship,¹ a reflection of the subapostolic era, and thus assigns a relatively late date to its composition. This dating has ranged from the late first century to mid-second century. Several factors have contributed to this scholarly consensus: Jude's literary relationship to 2 Peter (normally viewed as second century), the lack of historical indicators in the epistle, the strident nature of Jude's warnings against antinomians, and the assumption that Jude exemplifies a second-century response to Gnosticism. The general consensus has been that the adversaries of Jude are Gnostic—and thus are to be located in the second century²—or proto-Gnostic in nature, in keeping with the “early Catholic” line of interpretation.³ The view of Mayor, cxlv (1907), is representative: “The communications of the Apostles had now ceased, either by their death or by their removal from Jerusalem.”

In light of the amount of the epistle (vv.5–19) that focuses on denouncing the unfaithful, some have concluded that Jude reflects a later period, when the church is encountering mature forms of heresy. Plentiful allusions to OT characters and intertestamental Jewish sources, however, such as we find in

Jude, would be relatively insignificant in the second century, considering the church's expansion in the Gentile world. In a first-century Palestinian environment, on the other hand, these would be pregnant with meaning.

While an “early Catholic” interpretation of Jude and 2 Peter has been broadly assumed by NT scholars,⁴ nothing in Jude requires this sort of reading of the epistle. The character of Jude's dispute with the opponents, thought by many commentators to mirror second-century Gnostic heresy, is more one of *moral* obligation than doctrinal heterodoxy.⁵

For its notable brevity, Jude is theologically rich—particularly due to its lordship Christology (vv.4, 9, 14, 17, 21, 25). The readers are eagerly to await the appearance of Christ's mercy and eternal life (v.21). The hope of the Lord's return (the parousia), as it turns out, is very much alive in Jude, contrary to the supposition of most scholars who read Jude through an “early Catholic” lens. Hence, the language of lordship and the focus on the Lord's return naturally place Jude squarely within a first-century NT environment, alongside writings such as the Corinthian and Thessalonian correspondence.

Correlatively, Kraftchick, 21, correctly notes that the call to “remember what the apostles ... foretold” (v.17) suggests only that Jude's audience was familiar with the early Christian tradition; it does not tell us about when these predictions were made. It neither proves that the apostolic era is past nor that the readers are converts of the apostles.⁶ Thus the statement in Jude 17–18 does not provide a basis for a dating, whether early or late.

Finally, all the exhortations in the epistle are addressed to the *hearers*. Not a word is present that indicates the need for ecclesiastical officials to intervene, as one would expect in the second century. It is Jude's readers who are to deal with the problem at hand; *they* are to keep *themselves* in God's love and mercy (v.21). Such stands in notable contrast to the institutionalization of the postapostolic church, which is broadly assumed of 2 Peter and Jude. An “early Catholic” reading of Jude, in the final analysis, has little to commend itself.

At the advent of the Christian era, the name Jude (Gk. *Ioudas*) was commonplace among the Jews. The writer identifies himself as “a brother of James” (v.1). Several Jameses are mentioned in the NT—James son of Zebedee (Mt 10:2); James son of Alphaeus and one of the Twelve (Mt 10:3); James, the brother of Jesus (Mt 13:55); James, the younger and son

of Mary (Mk 15:40); James, the father of Judas the apostle (Mt 10:3; Lk 6:16; Ac 1:13); and James, the author of the NT epistle (Jas 1:1). Given the linkage between a James and Jude in Matthew 13:55 (“his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas”), the James of Jude 1 is more than likely the brother of Jesus, who according to tradition (cf. also Ac 12:17; 15:13–21; Gal 2:9; 1Co 15:7) became a leader in the Jerusalem church and was stoned by the Sanhedrin in AD 62 (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.200). If Jude was younger than James, a date of composition falling in the sixties or seventies is not unlikely.

Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 3.9) tells us that the author of this epistle is Jude, the brother of James, the Lord’s brother. The same claim is made by Origen, Athanasius, Jerome, and Augustine. Given Paul’s allusion in Galatians 1:19 to “James, the Lord’s brother,” it is a reasonable assumption that the Lord’s brothers were widely known, particularly in Palestine.

Eusebius relates a story about the grandsons of “Jude the brother of the Lord” who had been accused by the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96) of being revolutionaries (*Hist. eccl.* 3.19–20). The grandsons, according to the narrator Hegesippus, eventually became bishops in the church. Commentators favoring a second-century composition of the letter have used this as evidence to support the claim that Jude, the Lord’s brother, would not have lived long enough to be the author. Nevertheless, this tradition related by Eusebius does square with NT chronology. Mayor has showed that Jude could have been in his early seventies at the beginning of Domitian’s reign. In the end, the epistle of Jude mirrors no inherent conflict with NT chronology.

The epistle of Jude is an impassioned exhortation to a church that finds itself living in the midst of ethical lapse and doctrinal compromise. The writer’s foremost burden, while it has doctrinal implications, is ethical in nature. Posing a threat to the Christian community is a self-indulgent group that spurns spiritual authority, perverts grace into licentiousness, and at the same time arrogantly appropriates its own authority.

The reader finds it impossible to identify with precision who these schismatics might be or who the recipients of the letter were. The markings of the letter, however, indicate that Jude is addressed to a particular situation. Jude grants us some insight into the danger posed by the schismatics. They retain a religious guise while supporting a lifestyle of

licentiousness. Jude further assumes among his readers a minimal acquaintance with Jewish apocalyptic tradition that is characteristic of the intertestamental period. For this reason, the fate of the ungodly is spelled out in apocalyptic terms. And to this end the writer employs themes rooted squarely in the OT—election, predestination and divine foreknowledge, apostasy, theophany, judgment by fire, the day of the Lord, and divine kingship. The literary and theological features of the epistle strongly suggest that its readers belong to a Palestinian-Jewish milieu.

2. CANONICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The epistle of Jude is cited by writers as early as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, with possible traces in Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Barnabas, and the *Didache*. Coupled with its mention in the Muratorian Canon, evidence strongly suggests that Jude was viewed as sacred Scripture in the early church. The fact that Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.3) includes it among the so-called “disputed” books (*antilegomena*) is less an argument against its authenticity than it is a reflection in some parts of the church that apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works were in relatively wide circulation. This of itself would account for the fact that it did not enjoy universal acceptance, especially given the writer’s use of apocryphal traditions.⁷

3. LITERARY COMPOSITION

The message and world of Jude are strangely unfamiliar to the modern reader. Whether among laypeople, pastors, teachers, or seminarians, this unfamiliarity is conspicuous. With good reason the letter of Jude has been called “the most neglected book in the NT” (D. J. Rowston, “The Most Neglected Book in the New Testament,” *NTS* 21 [1974/75]: 554).⁸ Most readers of the Bible, puzzled by cryptic references to Enoch, the archangel Michael, the devil, and a slate of OT characters, are best acquainted with the letter’s doxology. Whereas most of the NT epistles mirror something of the historical situation and pastoral needs lying behind their writing, Jude offers little in the way of clues.

Given these challenges, it is not surprising that the epistle has languished in the backwaters of NT interpretation. Comprehensive neglect extends even to serious students of the NT. In the main, biblical scholarship has bypassed a thorough treatment of the letter. Where it is studied, Jude is usually lumped together with the other “catholic” (“universal”) epistles or subsumed under the study of 2 Peter, given the parallel material in the two letters. The assumption typically follows that Jude and 2 Peter reflect nearly identical historical occasions, with the later writing—normally held to be 2 Peter—presumably exhibiting either a considerable lack of literary originality or the need to “smooth out” particular features in Jude.

In its own right, however, Jude is a remarkable piece of literature. Rich and original in style and vocabulary, this short letter, “filled with flowing words of heavenly grace” (Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 17.30), not only displays astounding brevity but a thorough acquaintance with and calculated use of Jewish literary sources. The literary milieu of Jude is very much Palestinian Jewish-Christian. Extracanonical source material—notably, *1 Enoch* (mid-second century BC–AD first century?) and the *Assumption of Moses* (first or second century)—as well as OT figures are marshaled in a concise, well-conceived polemic that simultaneously exhorts the faithful and warns the unfaithful.

Although not a single explicit OT citation is found in Jude, the letter is nonetheless replete with OT prophetic typology. No fewer than nine subjects—unbelieving Israel, the fallen angels, Sodom and Gomorrah, the archangel Michael, Moses, Cain, Balaam, Korah, and Enoch—are employed against ungodly “antitypes” who have “wormed their way in” (Kelly, 248) among the faithful and thus pose a danger to the believing community. It is these unfaithful (vv.4, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 19) who are the focus of Jude’s invective.

Not unlike commentary on the OT found in the *pesharim*, or commentaries of the Qumran community (thus Ellis, 226; Bauckham, 4–5, 46–47), the epistle of Jude links types from the past with corollaries in the present in order to confront—prophetically and pastorally—needs within the community. This is achieved logistically by the use of catchwords—e.g., “these,” “keep,” “godless/ungodly,” “judgment,” “error,” “slander/speak abusively against”—which form the links in Jude’s polemical argument.

Equally important as the message of Jude is its literary form. Effective literature embodies meaning in a way that allows the reader to experience it. With passion and great eloquence, Jude engages his audience. He exploits with remarkable effectiveness the imaginative and sensory dimensions of language. His writing style is energetic and vivid, reflecting a high degree of moral tension inherent in the social setting of the recipients. The moral tenor is that of a prophet more than a pastor, though both elements are present. His few words carry intensity and urgency, bearing the inflection of authority. Allusions not only to historical lessons, embodied in the moral typology, but to apostolic, received teaching enforce (and reinforce)—haggadically and authoritatively—moral truth needed in the present situation. Taken together, graphic symbolism, wordplay, frequent alliteration, parallelism, typology, midrash, woe-cry, and the use of triplets all serve to add force to the writer’s burden as he seeks to address pastoral needs of the Christian community. The reader, alas, is witness to a literary-rhetorical artist at work⁹—all this within the remarkably brief span of only twenty-five verses—an artist who authoritatively delivers what generically might be classified as a “word of exhortation.”¹⁰

4. LITERARY RELATIONSHIP OF JUDE TO 2 PETER

Commentators have traditionally focused attention on both the notable literary parallels in Jude and 2 Peter and on the order in which these appear, an extensive listing of which appears in the introduction to 2 Peter (p. 372). Since Jude might appear more or less to be an abstract of 2 Peter, most commentators favor the latter’s use of the former, rather than vice versa, to explain the parallel material. There are those, however, who hold to third and fourth views, namely, that both epistles employ a common written source and that both stem from one and the same author.¹¹

While there is a measure of plausibility to each of these explanations, it is nevertheless important to observe that the tradition-material utilized in Jude functions in a slightly different way from that of 2 Peter. One survey of this literary dependence has shown that, of the total number of words in both epistles, 70 percent of the vocabulary is different (Guthrie, 925). This observation would lend support to the notion that the historical situations behind Jude and 2 Peter and the intent of each writer are unique. Copying a

literary source while in the process of editing 70 percent of the material would seem rather unlikely. Furthermore, two different social situations are indicated by the epistles—one Palestinian-Jewish and one pagan Gentile. Evidence of the former includes Jude's reference to "James," his rampant use of the OT and Jewish tradition-material (notably the pseudepigraphal *Assumption of Moses* and *1 Enoch*), his strongly apocalyptic tone, the language of divine foreknowledge and predestination, and his rampant use of triplets. In addition, whereas the message of 2 Peter is both *judgment* and *the assurance of rescue* from amid the cultural furnace, the message of Jude is categorical judgment.¹²

5. RECENT SCHOLARSHIP ON JUDE

Truly it can be said that the last decade of the twentieth century began to rectify the neglect of Jude lamented by Rowston in 1975. Much of the impetus for the beginnings of this reversal can be attributed to an important 1978 essay by E. Earle Ellis, "Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Jude,"¹³ and to Richard Bauckham's masterful commentary on Jude and 2 Peter, which appeared in 1983.¹⁴ While a significant number of works relating to Jude were published by German NT scholars in the 1970s, virtually all fell into two categories: (1) arguments for pseudepigraphy in the NT and (2) one-volume commentaries that treated all the General Epistles together. Hence the quality of Jude commentary, with some exceptions, was unoriginal, furthering the standard "early Catholic" interpretation of Jude that has reigned for the last century and a half.

Two trends in Jude scholarship spanning the last two decades can be detected. One is the sheer volume of commentaries published since 1990 (see [bibliography](#)). Second, a number of monographs on Jude have appeared—a remarkable development in and of itself, since one is hard-pressed to identify a single monograph before 1990 devoted solely to the interpretation of Jude (see the [bibliography](#) for works by J. D. Charles, Landon, Reese, and Jones). Significantly, each of these works concerns itself with a particular aspect of the literary-rhetorical character of Jude, which suggests that literature is incarnational in character. A work of literature does not merely impart information to the reader; rather, it embodies meaning, combining precept with paradigm, with the aim of

creating in sufficient detail a scenario in such a way that allows the reader to *experience* it. Good writers exploit imagination and the sensory dimensions of discourse. Happily, the much-maligned and “neglected” Jude is beginning to get its due.

6. PURPOSE AND PROMINENT THEMES

The epistle of Jude mirrors a sharp and calculated polemic against certain opponents (“these,” *houtoi*; vv.4, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 19) who are posing a threat to the community (“you”; *hymeis*; vv.3, 5, 12, 17, 18, 20). By means of an unusual verbal economy, apocalyptic force, strategic use of catchwords and wordplay, an ungodly-faithful antithesis, and triadic illustration, the writer associates past paradigms of ungodliness with his opponents of the present. There exists throughout the short epistle a fundamental tension between the ungodly and the faithful. Both poles of this contrast are said to be “kept,” or “reserved” for their appointed end—the *houtoi* for divine retribution and the *hymeis* for divine inheritance. Jude’s purpose is to underscore the certainty of judgment.

Both triads of moral types in Jude (vv.5–7, 11) share a common feature. In both there is a movement from privilege to dispossession. As a group, the Israelites of old, the angels who fell, and the cities of the plain were utterly disenfranchised, while the second threesome, united by means of a woe-cry, moves from deception (Cain) to error (Balaam) to destruction (Korah). This is the movement, both past and present, of apostasy. Thus from a reading of Jude we may posit the centrality of “keeping”—or, more precisely, “safekeeping.”

This safekeeping, moreover, has multiple sides: it is both past and present, and it applies to both the ungodly and the faithful. The same destiny that applies to ancient paradigms of wickedness, which have been “kept” for judgment on the great day (e.g., the disenfranchised angels), awaits their contemporary counterparts. But more important, the sovereign Lord also “keeps” the faithful. In fact, “safekeeping” forms something of an *inclusio* in the letter’s opening and closing. Those to whom greetings are extended in the introduction are described as “called,” “loved,” and “kept” (*tēreō*, GK 5498) by God himself (v.1). And the writer concludes with doxological praise for the glory and majesty of this God “who is able to

keep” (*phyllassō*, a strengthened form of keeping, i.e., to safeguard; GK 5875) the saints (v.24). All told, “keeping” as a verb occurs six times in twenty-five verses of text, confirming the centrality of *preservation* in the writer’s theological outlook.

Subordinate themes in Jude that support the writer’s argument for “keeping” in addressing the adversaries are all in debt to OT motifs and a Palestinian-Jewish matrix. To be noted in Jude are the conspicuous juxtaposing of the ungodly and the faithful, theophany and the day of the Lord, judgment by fire, divine foreknowledge, and divine glory. The contrast of doom and glory is accentuated in Jude. While the fate of the apostate is clearly and graphically illustrated through types from the past, Jude’s readers, in remaining established in the faith, can be assured of future glorious presentation before the Lord.

7. STRUCTURE

In considering the structure of Jude, one is struck by the writer’s repeated use of particular catchwords. These terms are not arbitrary; rather, they are rhetorically significant (so Bauckham, 3–6; cf. my *Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude*, 30–32). In a mere twenty-five verses, nine terms occur five times or more, with five of these appearing seven or more times. Consider the following survey of vocabulary (based on occurrences in Greek):

godless/ungodly:	vv.4, 15 [3x], 18
you:	vv.3 [3x], 5 [2x], 12, 17, 18, 20 [2x], 24
keep/reserve:	vv.1, 6 [2x], 13, 21, 24
these:	vv.4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 19
Lord:	vv.4, 5, 9, 14, 17, 21, 25
holy/without fault:	vv.3, 14, 20 [2x], 24
love/dear friends:	vv.1, 2, 3, 12, 17, 20, 21

mercy/show mercy: vv.2, 21, 22, 23

judgment/condemnation: vv.4, 6, 9, 15

A conspicuous use not only of catchwords but also conjunctions reflects conscious deliberation on the writer's part in the structuring of his material. Consider the logical progression of Jude's argumentation within sections of material as well as between them:

vv.1–2, greeting

vv.3–4, occasion/purpose [For] certain men have slipped in

vv.5–19, illustrative paradigms, reminder [Now] I want to remind you
[for] the Lord destroyed
[and] the angels who did not keep
[but] abandoned
[just as] Sodom and Gomorrah gave themselves up
[Yet] in the very same way these dreamers pollute
[But] Michael did not dare
[but] said
[Yet] these men speak abusively
[for] they walk
[Indeed] Enoch ... prophesied
[but] you, dear friends, remember
[for] they said

vv.20–23, exhortation [But] you, dear friends, build
[and] be merciful
[and] snatch
[and] save

8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

See also the bibliographies listed in 1 Peter (p. 294–95) and 2 Peter (p. 380).

The following is a selective list of commentaries and monographs on Jude available in English, confined for the most part to those referred to in the commentary (they will be referred to simply by the author's name [and initials only when necessary to distinguish two authors of the same surname]). References to other resources will carry full bibliographic details at the first mention and thereafter a short title.

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9. OUTLINE

I. The Author, His Audience, His Purpose for Writing (1–4)

II. Profile of the Apostate (5–19)

A. Tales of Woe—Part 1: An Intolerable Triad (5–7)

1. Unbelieving Israel (5)
2. The Fallen Angels (6)
3. Sodom and Gomorrah (7)

B. Marks of the Apostate—Part 1 (8–10)

C. Tales of Woe—Part 2: An Intractable Triad (11)

D. Marks of the Apostate—Part 2 (12–13)

E. Judgment of the Ungodly (14–15)

F. Marks of the Apostate—Part 3 (16–19)

III. Profile of the Faithful (20–23)

A. Personal Obligations (20–21)

B. Obligations toward Others (22–23)

IV. Tribute to the One Who Keeps (24–25)

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1. The matter of pseudonymity in the NT has been dealt with at length in the [commentary on 2 Peter](#) in this volume.
 2. Ferdinand Hahn (“Randbemerkungen zum Judasbrief,” *TZ* 37 [1981]: 209–10 [my translation]) is convinced of a second-century dating for Jude, since heresy requires a “fixed confession of faith”: “Even though the implications might not yet be clearly seen, there is a practical awareness that the apostolic era is surely closed and that the immediate postapostolic period is soon ending. Hence, now the present tradition-material must be preserved in its basic meaning and form.”

3. Walter Grundmann (*Der Brief des Judas und der zweite Brief des Petrus* [THKNT 15; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1967], 31 [my translation]) is representative: “In the ancient church up through modern exegesis, there have not been enough attempts to correlate the false teachers of the epistle of Jude with a particular Gnostic system.... It is with precursors ... that we have to do in Jude, yet the fundamental nature of this conflict is already apparent.”
4. On which, see 2 Peter.
5. The seeds of Gnosticism (which in the second and third centuries developed into sophisticated schools of thought) were already evident by the mid-first century. Ample evidence for this can be found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Furthermore, Jude alludes to what the apostles had *said* (*legō*) and not what they had *written* (*graphō*). Nothing in Jude requires a considerable chronological gap between the apostolic and subapostolic era.
6. Contra Kelly, 281; Krodel, 108; and others.
7. On patristic witnesses to Jude, see Bigg, 305–8; Mayor, cxv-cxxxiv, cxlvi-clii; Guthrie, 901–2.
8. Whether or not this neglect is “benign,” as J. H. Elliott (*I–II Peter/Jude* [ACNT; Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1982], 161) suggests, is debatable.
9. See D. F. Watson, *Invention, Arrangement, and Style: Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter* (SBLDS 104; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 29–79; T. Wolthuis, “Jude and the Rhetorician,” *CTJ* 24 (1989): 126–34; my “Literary Artifice in the Epistle of Jude,” *ZNW* 82/1 (1991): 106–24; my *Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude*, 25–48.
10. Thus v.3: “I felt I had to write and urge you to contend” (*anankēn eschon grapsai hymin parakalōn epagōnizesthai*). On the word of exhortation (*logos parainētikōs/paraklēseōs*; cf. Ac 13:15), see K. Berger, “Hellenistische Gattungen im Neuen Testament,” in *ANRW* II.25.2, ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1984), 1049–1148; L. Wills, “The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity,” *HTR* 77 (1984): 277–99; C. C. Black, “The Rhetorical Form of the Hellenistic-Jewish and Early Christian Sermon,” *HTR* 81 (1988): 155–79.
11. For representatives of the four positions, see the [introduction to 2 Peter](#), p. 371.
12. On which distinction, see my “On Angels and Asses: The Moral Paradigm in 2 Peter 2,” *PEGLMBS* 21 (2001): 1–12.
13. Earlier scholarly work that sought to identify the outworking of midrash in the NT serves as something of a precursor to more recent scholarship in the General Epistles, which broadly assumes the presence of *peshet* and midrashic interpretation. See, e.g., W. H. Brownlee, “The Background of Biblical Interpretation at Qumran,” in *Qumran: sa piété, sa théologie et son milieu*, ed. M. Delcor (Paris: Duculot, 1978), 183–93; J. Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1954); J. A. Fitzmyer, “The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament,” *NTS* 7 (1960/61): 297–333; A. G. Wright, “The Literary Genre Midrash,” *CBQ* 28 (1966): 105–38, 417–57.
14. Also deserving mention are two important 1988 essays by Bauckham: “James, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 303–17, which analyzed literary tendencies in these four epistles and built on the interpretive insights of Ellis; and “The Letter of Jude: An Account of Research,” in *ANRW* II.25.5, 3791–3826.

Text and Exposition

I. THE AUTHOR, HIS AUDIENCE, HIS PURPOSE FOR WRITING (1–4)

¹Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James,

To those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ:

²Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.

³Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. ⁴For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

COMMENTARY

1 A curious ingredient in the opening verse is the choice of descriptions the writer uses to identify himself—“a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.” If he is in fact the brother of the Lord and Messiah, why not derive authority by writing “brother of the Lord Jesus”? Yet this confession of humility, remarkable for someone who was a skeptic before the resurrection (Jn 7:5), illustrates the nature of paradox inherent to the Christian faith. Servanthood brings freedom, abandonment yields blessing, humble submission grants authority. Out of humility, neither Jude nor James (cf. Jas 1:1) make any reference to their blood kinship with Jesus.

The three designations given to Jude’s audience—“called,” “loved by God the Father,” and “kept by Jesus Christ”—are not chosen at random. Together they strengthen the believers’ confidence in God to fulfill his purpose. Bauckham, 25, suggests that these three derive from the Isaianic

“Servant songs,” and Jude applies them eschatologically to the church. Two of the three—“loved” and “kept”—are perfect participles, with the implication that divine love and keeping power, having been once and for all bestowed, remain in force for those who are called. This is especially important if Jude is to counter any element of apostasy at work within the community by reminding his readers of their high privilege.

2 The triad of virtues listed in v.2—mercy, peace, and love—is imparted by divine grace alone. Jude’s prayer is that his readers abound in these, that they receive them in abundance. Despite the letter’s seemingly harsh tone, both mercy and judgment are highlighted in Jude. While those who choose to depart incur certain judgment, those who choose to be “kept” can anticipate mercy. Both elements reflect God’s character and are not antithetical. As noted by Michael Green (*2 Peter and Jude* [TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 170), one could hardly imagine a more comprehensive greeting than the fullest measure of mercy, peace, and love.

3 The statement “I had to write,” which follows his original intention to write on a common theme, suggests that Jude is under constraint to write due to an urgent need. His prior intention to enlarge on a theme of salvation more than likely was eclipsed by news of problems in the Christian community. His imperative has a ring of urgency to it: the readers are to “contend [earnestly]” (*epagōnizesthai*, a strengthened form of “agonize”; GK 2043) for the faith. Here Jude employs an athletic metaphor—specifically, one from the gymnasium. The image calls to mind a wrestling match. For the believers the implication is that they are presently engaged in an intense moral struggle over truth. With “all the energy and watchfulness of an athlete in the arena” (so A. Plummer, *The General Epistles of St. James and St. Jude* [New York: Armstrong & Son, 1893], 387), they should “agonize” over the Christian faith.

The “faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” is the Christian teaching handed down to the Christian community by way of apostolic tradition, a teaching that is normative. This apostolic deposit establishes what is authoritative Christian truth, not what is currently theologically fashionable. This “once for all” character is eternally bound up with the nonnegotiables of the historic Christian faith—the self-disclosing, transcendent Creator-God; the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, future judgment, absolute lordship of Christ. Because divine revelation has been

historically mediated, apostolic witnesses are central to the unique and *once for all* quality of Christian claims. The test, then, of Christian character is faithfulness to the apostolic witness.

4 The reason Jude's audience must wrestle earnestly for the faith lies in the subtle method of the opponents. Certain individuals have utilized stealth in attaching themselves to the community. They have crept in virtually unnoticed; the sense is that a spy or crook is at work by way of infiltrating action (so Bauckham, 35). The identity of these individuals is not known, although commentators normally attribute to them an itinerant ministry (cf. *Did.* 11–12; Ignatius, *Eph.* 9:1; both are early second-century writings). With three examples of prototypical rebellion following in vv.5–7, the implication is that these are apostate believers.

An intriguing depiction of the ungodly is given: those “whose condemnation was written about long ago.” Keeping in mind the Palestinian Jewish-Christian milieu represented by Jude, the reader may best interpret this description along the lines of standard apocalyptic genre. A feature not uncommon to the OT and intertestamental apocalyptic literature is the notion of names written in heavenly books (e.g., Ex 32:32–33; Pss 40:4; 56:8; 69:29; 139:16; Isa 4:3; Jer 22:30; Da 7:10; 12:1; Mal 3:16; *1 En.* 81:1–2; 89:62; 90:14, 17, 20, 22; 104:7; 108:3, 7; *T. Ash.* 7:5; *2 Bar.* 24:1; cf. Rev 3:5; 5:1, 7, 8; 10:8–11; 20:12). These heavenly books reflect a religious self-understanding that is basic to Hebrew thought, namely, that the divine purpose, though hidden from human view, is predestined and revealed in history. They point to the divine foreknowledge by which *the chosen* (of Israel and now the church) have been called as God's own possession.

Casting his opponents as ungodly antitypes for which judgment, long since prescribed, has already been appointed “on the great Day” (v.6), Jude views judgment as fulfilled in his adversaries. Their appointed end, just as that of the past unfaithful, is sure.

NOTES

1–2 Most of the NT letters conform to the pattern normative in ancient letter-writing. The typical threefold introductory formula “A to B ... grace” was in broad use from the third century BC until the third century AD (so F. X. J. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter* [Washington, D.C.:

Catholic University of America, 1923], 61–62). We find this pattern in numerous NT epistles, including Jude: “Jude, ... to those who have been called, ... loved ... and kept ... , mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.”

1–2 One of the primary stylistic features of the epistle is Jude’s propensity for using triplets. Not two but three elements combine to define, illustrate, or underscore truth. The writer’s self-designation (“Jude, a servant ... a brother”), the attributes ascribed to his audience (“called ... loved ... kept”), and elements in the greeting (“mercy, peace and love”) are but several among the extraordinary *twenty* sets of triplets in a mere twenty-five verses (see my “Literary Artifice in the Epistle of Jude,” *ZNW* 82/1 [1991]: 107–9). Stylistically, the writer begins in a thoroughly calculating fashion.

1–2 Verses 1–2 and 24–25 (the doxology) form a literary device of inclusion, which effectively reminds the audience of God’s ability to preserve. Although divine action in no way negates the element of human responsibility, the faithful can be encouraged. God preserves them for their appointed end; their inheritance is secure. “Keep” is an important catchword throughout the epistle, occurring six times in twenty-five verses—τηρέω, *tēreō* (GK 5498), in vv.1, 6 (2x), 13, 21, and φυλάσσω, *phylassō* (a strengthened form of “to guard”; GK 5875), in v.24.

3 Jude’s exhortation against antinomianism and moral laxness finds numerous parallels in the Pauline epistles. The antinomian spirit, which leads to ethical compromise, is a perversion of the Christian gospel. Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth primarily addresses ethical lapse within the Christian community. This lapse is scandalous, for it negates the objective reality of Christ’s lordship.

4 The essence of the verb προγράφω (*prographō*; NIV, “was written about”; “to mark out in former times,” GK 4592) in Jude is juridical, as in Malachi 3:16 (“A scroll of remembrance was written ...”) and Jeremiah 22:30 (“This is what the Lord says: ‘Record this man ...’”). It carries a specific penal sense—that of a public accusation against criminals. This verb, προγράφω, *prographō*, also corresponds in tone and meaning to the verbs προεφήτευσεν, *proephēteusen* (“prophesied”), in v.14, and προειρημένων, *proeirēmenōn* (“foretold”), in v.17. The past speaks

prophetically to the present, and in Jude it finds fulfillment in the ungodly who are presently threatening the community.

II. PROFILE OF THE APOSTATE (5–19)

A. Tales of Woe—Part 1: An Intolerable Triad (5–7)

OVERVIEW

One of two sets of triplets (vv.5–7 and v.11) is employed here as a paradigm or model of ungodliness leading to destruction. In vv.5–7, unbelieving Israel, the rebellious angels, and the cities of the plain serve to illustrate catastrophic loss through divine judgment. Three examples of disenfranchisement in these verses underscore the fact that wickedness has both human and superhuman antecedents. All three are linked by their rejection of the normative and subsequent loss in the present life.

1. *Unbelieving Israel (5)*

⁵Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe.

COMMENTARY

5 Jude’s interest in the first of three illustrations of ungodly examples is Israel, God’s “chosen.” Allusion to the OT covenantal community would suggest that the opponents in view are the formerly “orthodox,” who had experienced divine redemption. Note the emphatic terminology. The readers already know “all this”; for this reason Jude wishes to call to mind Israel of old. Accounts of Israel’s unbelief in the wilderness, after miraculous deliverance from Egypt, are found in Numbers 11; 14; 26; and 32. Throughout the OT there is a constant prophetic reminder of Israel’s deliverance—and severance—from Egypt. Yahweh had delivered Israel “once for all” (*hapax*) in the old covenantal scheme; “later” (“on a second occasion,” *to deutron*) he did not deliver—rather he judged.

By implication Jude is saying that the same applies to those who threaten the community. Those having formerly experienced redemption who have denied the Lord (v.4) will be judged at Jesus' second coming. The contrast before the readers concerns two divine acts—one of mercy and one of judgment. The present need calls for a prophetic reminder: “you already know all this.”

NOTES

5 This verse contains the first of a triplet of ungodly examples. Such lists belonged to popular Jewish tradition. Similar catalogs are found in writings of both mainstream and sectarian Judaism. All typically occur in a literary context dealing with hard-heartedness, apostasy, or disregard for the Torah. A few examples of apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings will illustrate these lists. In Sirach 16:5–15, the writer provides a catalog of historical examples that includes Korah, Assyria, giants, Sodomites, Canaanites, and unbelieving Israel. The context of 3 Maccabees 2:3–7 is a prayer for Israel against a Ptolemaic ruler that lists Pharaoh, Sodomites, and giants. In the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (*T. Naph.* 2:8–4:3), the writer draws lessons from the flood, “the Watchers,” Sodom, and the Gentiles.

On the text of Jude 5 and variant readings, see C. D. Osburn, “The Text of Jude 5,” *Bib* 62 (1981): 107–15; C. Landon, *A Textual-Critical Study of the Epistle of Jude* (JSNTSup 135; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

2. The Fallen Angels (6)

⁶And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.

COMMENTARY

6 The angels are said to have “abandoned” their heavenly home. (Note the prefix *apo-* in the participle *apolipontas*, denoting movement away.) They fell from a domain of divine liberty and light to imprisonment and

darkness. Jude's readers are to be mindful of the lesson of the angels: punishment is proportionate to privilege. In heavenly realms the angels were exposed to great light; now they are consigned to the gloom of darkness. Having chosen not to "keep" their unique and exalted status, they are consequently *being* "kept" in chains of darkness awaiting a fate—"the great Day"—which should cause humans to shudder. Like Israel of old, they departed from their "allotted" place. Apostasy in the Christian community has both earthly and heavenly antecedents.

Neither the OT nor the NT makes any explicit statements as to the fall of the rebellious angels. The NT implies at most that Satan, a fallen angel chief among many (cf. Eph 2:2), was hurled down (Lk 10:18; Jn 12:31; Rev 12:4, 7, 9, 10), yet it gives no clear time or explanation for the fall. Some hold Jesus' words in Luke 10:18 to refer to an original fall; others interpret the statement to be a dramatic way of expressing Satan's certain ruin (so G. Aulen, *Christus Victor* [New York: Macmillan, 1956], 111). Still others view the fall as coinciding with Jesus' earthly ministry (so G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1965], 31).

Virtually all commentary—past and present—has related Jude 6 (and 2Pe 2:4) to Genesis 6:1–4 in some way or another. This interpretation of "the sons of God" (Ge 6:2), following the lead of Clement of Alexandria, is largely due to two reasons: (1) a mistaken linking of the angels in Jude 6 with Sodom and Gomorrah in v.7 and (2) the association of demons with Genesis 6:1–4 that began to emerge in second-century BC Jewish interpretation. In *1 Enoch* (second- first century BC?), for example, we find perhaps the most elaborate expansion of this connection between the angels' fall and sexual promiscuity.

The sin of the angels, though veiled to humans, was very real. The point of Jude's witness, however, is not the precise *nature* of their sin. Rather, the angels of v.6, mentioned parenthetically, share something in common with Israel of v.5 and the cities of the plain in v.7, namely, a radical disobedience and total disenfranchisement. The reader must be careful to note what Jude, in his borrowing of apocalyptic motifs, stresses and what he omits. Contrary to the view of numerous commentators, there is nothing concerning angels in Genesis 6 that is mentioned in Jude; rather, the conceptualization of the angelic realm in Jude is simply an extension of that which emerged during the intertestamental era. The Jewish apocalypticist was inclined to

assimilate pagan mythology into his conceptualization of the angelic world. Biblical writers, on the other hand, by nature were nonmythological, i.e., they wrote from a divine revelatory and prophetic posture, even when they utilized the apocalyptic literary mode for their own purposes.

Jude employs apocalyptic motifs without necessarily embracing Jewish apocalyptic theology. The central point of his illustration involving the angels is the *fact* that they were dispossessed, not *how* or specifically *why* they were dispossessed. This basic interpretive premise is confirmed by the grammar and syntax of v.6. The issue at hand is *apostasy*, not fornication (see my *Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude*, 108–16). All three examples in Jude 5–7 underscore the fact of *enduring loss*. Any speculation as to the particular nature of the sins of the angels, intriguing as it may be, is of secondary importance. The point of Jude’s allusion to the angels is that they exercised their free will wrongly—to their own discredit.

NOTES

6 While angels in the OT figure prominently in certain historical narratives, during and following Israel’s exile they acquire increasing importance and a more clearly defined function (e.g., Eze 9:2.; 40:3.; 43:6.; Da 3:28; 4:13; 6:22; 7:16; 8:13; 10:5–6.; 12:1; Zec 1:8; 2:1; 3:1 4:1; 5:5; 6:4). In Jewish intertestamental literature, the depiction of angels becomes far more systematic, with a particular number having their names and functions expressly stated, a prime example being *1 Enoch*.

6 Corresponding typology to the fallen angels of Jude might well be drawn from several prophetic oracles in the OT—oracles serving as graphic illustrations of fall or ruin: Isaiah 14:5–23, a taunt against the king of Babylon; Isa 24:21–22, a symbolic representation of Yahweh’s judgment; and Ezekiel 28:1–19, a prophetic funeral dirge against the king of Tyre. The oracles in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 reflect, as in Jude, utter fall from glory. Significantly, several elements are present in all three sources: (1) there is a conspicuously abrupt transition from the earthly plane to the heavenly; (2) a correlation is made between the earthly and heavenly realms; and (3) the objects of condemnation all tumble from the heavens as “stars” (cf. v.13). Falling from glory, whether it is an arrogant king or those to whom truth has been committed, has an extraordinary antecedent in the heavenly realm.

6 The imprisonment of spirits, undefined in the OT, is a prominent theme in Jewish apocalyptic literature (notably in *1 En.*; *2 Bar.*; *Jub.*) and surfaces in the book of Revelation. Within the apocalyptic tradition, a frequent pattern tends to emerge: (1) war erupts in heaven, often depicted in astral terms; followed by (2) a spilling over of this rebellion to earth; culminating in (3) ultimate vindication and punishment by the king of heaven (see P. D. Hanson, “Rebellion in Heaven, Azazel, and Euhemeristic Heroes in 1 Enoch 6–11,” *JBL* 96 [1977]: 208).

3. Sodom and Gomorrah (7)

OVERVIEW

According to the rabbis, there were seven groups that had no portion in the coming world: the generation of the flood, the generation of the Diaspora, the spies who brought back evil reports of the land, the generation in the wilderness, the congregation of Korah, the ten tribes, and the men of Sodom (*m. Sanh.* 10:3). For Jude, Sodom and Gomorrah are the type par excellence for the finality of divine judgment. Three times in Genesis 18–19 there occurs the cry of the anguished oppressed, mandating divine visitation. The Abraham narrative takes great pains to show that God is absolutely just. By Jude’s account, the fate of these cities is continually open to exhibit. In the first century, Philo (*Abraham* 140–41; *Moses* 2.56) and Josephus (*J.W.* 4.483) indicates that later generations are to learn from the example of Sodom and Gomorrah. And even though the sin of Sodom is linked in several apocryphal Jewish sources to the fallen angels, Jude’s intention is to link Sodom with both the angels and with Israel.

⁷In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

COMMENTARY

7 Whereas the Jewish apocalypticist was inclined to explain the state of the world in unseen, angelic terms, Jude, in line with the OT prophetic

tradition, focuses on the *human* face of evil. Moreover, his qualification “In a similar way” speaks not to the nature of sin but to the same *end* met by Israel, the angels, and Sodom and Gomorrah. A suitable translation for v.7 would be as follows: “ ... just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities in the same manner as these—who have given themselves to utter sexual immorality and perversion—are an ongoing example of those undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.” This rendering, it should be stressed, does justice to the context of vv.5–7; all three examples display an *unnatural rebellion*. Taken together, they characterize the opponents of Jude who are despising normal life and perverting the good.

NOTES

7 Consistently throughout OT and Jewish literature the example of the cities of the plain (Ge 19) stands out. Sodom’s overthrow is reiterated again and again (e.g., Dt 29:23; 32:32; Isa 1:9–10; 3:9; Jer 23:14; 49:18; 50:40; La 4:6; Eze 16:49–59; Am 4:11; Hos 11:8; Zep 2:9; *Jub.* 16:5, 6, 9; 20:5; 22:22; 36:10; Wis 10:6–7; Sir 16:8; *T. Ash.* 7:1; *T. Naph.* 3:4; 3 Macc 2:5; *Gen. Rab.* 27:3; *m. Sanh.* 10:3; *m. ’Abot* 5:10). What is most striking about the OT’s depiction of Sodom is the city’s flaunting of sin, as well as the permanent nature of its judgment. The prophet Jeremiah enunciates that no person would henceforth live there (Jer 49:18; 50:40). In intertestamental Judaism, Sodom remains the classic Jewish example of immorality and a model of certain and consuming divine judgment.

7 Several types from the past appear with regularity in Jewish extrabiblical lists—most notably, Sodom and Gomorrah, the fallen angels or “Watchers,” giants, the flood, and unbelieving Israel. In similar fashion, vv.5–7 of Jude represent evidence—exhibits A, B, and C—compounded against the guilty.

B. Marks of the Apostate—Part 1 (8–10)

OVERVIEW

The motif of spiritual warfare, vaguely hinted at in similar OT passages and developed broadly by NT writers, is assumed by Jude in his polemic against the apostate. Jewish traditions that grew out of the OT account of

Moses' death are employed by Jude to underscore the corrupt and brutish nature of those he is opposing. Their denial of the lordship of Christ is plainly manifest in their insubordination, rebellion, antinomianism, and despising of spiritual authority. They, too, have a heavenly antecedent.

⁸In the very same way, these dreamers pollute their own bodies, reject authority and slander celestial beings. ⁹But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" ¹⁰Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals—these are the very things that destroy them.

COMMENTARY

8 The contextual flow begins in v.8 with a portrait of Jude's opponents—a portrait drawn from the preceding historical antecedents. The opponents carry three identifying marks: moral defilement, rejection of authority, and shocking irreverence. They resemble Sodom and Gomorrah in their sexual practices, and they bear resemblance to the angels who, astonishingly, chose to rebel against heaven's authority and consequently were disenfranchised. Michael (v.9) is meant to stand in stark contrast to these. Although he who *was* in fact superior could have railed at the prince of darkness, he declined. Contrarily, the unfaithful of v.8, though considering themselves superior, are in actuality *inferior*.

9 The contextual link between Jude 8 and 9 is significant. The writer continues, "But even the archangel Michael ...". Building on the implied notion of demonic conflict, Jude assumes his readers' acquaintance with an apocryphal tradition concerning angelic dispute over Moses' body. We learn first from Origen (*Princ.* 3.2.1) that this tradition was contained in the apocryphal *Assumption of Moses* (for a fuller treatment of the traditions behind the *Assumption of Moses*, see Bauckham, 65–76). Here, as elsewhere, the traditions surrounding the burial of Moses serve Jude's overall polemic.

9 This verse is framed in the language of legal disputation. In light of the accusation raised by the devil, Michael appeals to the Lord’s judgment, not his own authority: “The Lord rebuke you!” The implication of Jude 9, which portrays the devil in an accusatory mode, is consistent with both OT and NT portraits of the prince of darkness. His role is foremost that of an accuser or prosecutor (e.g., Job 1–2; 1Ch 21:1; Zec 3:1; Mt 4:1–11; Mk 1:12–13; Lk 4:1–13; 2Co 2:11; Rev 2:9; 12:10).

NOTES

9 The Moses tradition proliferated within mainstream as well as sectarian Judaism. Philo (*Moses* 2.291) and Josephus (*Ant.* 4.326) both allude to the event; Philo writes that Moses was buried by angels. The OT background for the tradition is found in Deuteronomy 34:5–6 and Numbers 27:12–13. Imagery from Daniel 10:4–21; 12:1; and Zechariah 3 is also incorporated; in Zechariah 3, Joshua the high priest is standing before the angel of the Lord, with Satan rising up to accuse him. While a Targum on Deuteronomy 34 and several rabbinic sources bring the reader a bit closer to the background of Jude’s illustration, they do not inform us that Satan and Michael fought over Moses’ body.

9 What is striking about the few OT allusions to Satan is that he would seem to fall into the same category as the “sons of God” who are part of the heavenly council (the book of Job offering a prime example). Yet, in several other OT passages the reader finds faint traces of hostility orchestrated against God. The serpent in Genesis 3, for example, is endowed with a peculiar cunning, doing more than merely acting as one of Yahweh’s “court lawyers.” Indeed, he contradicts God’s statements and in the end wages war against the woman’s seed (cf. Rev 12:13–17). First Chronicles 21, a slight variation on 2 Samuel 24, finds David tempted to number Israel. According to the chronicler, the influence of this “accuser” is not neutral. Before all is said and done, seventy thousand of Israel’s men have died.

C. Tales of Woe—Part 2: An Intractable Triad (11)

OVERVIEW

A second triplet of OT paradigms or deserting types appears here. Cain, Balaam, and Korah are the object of a woe-cry, i.e., a prophetic denunciation. Each of the three, notably, is signified by a formula—"the way of Cain," "Balaam's error," and Korah's rebellion"—giving the appearance of a standardization of type having already been formulated in intertestamental and first-century Judaistic and Christian circles. Having blasphemed and rejected authority (v.8), the opponents have brought themselves under divine curse. Together with vv.5–7, this set of triplets serves to underscore the realities of divine fiat—both to the Christian community and those who pose a threat. These paradigms emphasize the progressive nature of apostasy: first one departs, but eventually one perishes.

"Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion.

COMMENTARY

11 Genesis 4:3–4 tells us that Cain brought as an offering to the Lord the "fruits" (*pěri*, GK 7262) of the earth, while his brother Abel brought "firstfruits" (*běkōr*, GK 1147; NIV, "firstborn"). The Lord consequently looked with favor on Abel but not Cain. To the Jewish mind, Cain represents the epitome of wickedness, the ungodly man par excellence. He is the first individual in the Hebrew Scriptures to defy God and despise man; hence he is prototypical. Interestingly, the rabbis, taking note of the wording of Genesis 4:10 ("your brother's blood cries out"), charge Cain with destroying a whole world, for the Scriptures specify "both his blood and the blood of his succeeding generations" (*m. Sanh.* 4:5). In the words of Philo (*Posterity* 38), Cain is type and teacher of ungodliness.

11 Numbers 22–24 is the account of Balaam son of Beor (see [2 Peter commentary](#)). These three chapters offer a mixed review of the Midianite prophet. In several OT passages (Nu 31:16; Dt 23:4–5; Jos 13:22; 24:9; Ne 13:2; Mic 6:5), Balaam is portrayed chiefly as a negative memorial for his role in betraying Israel. While being consumed with greed, he more

significantly led Israel into idolatry and immorality at Peor (cf. Nu 31:16). To the rabbis, Balaam constituted the antithesis to Abraham (*m. 'Abot* 5:22). “Balaam’s error” is the error of selfish profit (Kelly, 268). Balaam typically loved the wages of wickedness (2Pe 2:15).

11 The third of this prophetic triad, Korah, is perhaps the most arresting illustration of insubordination in all the OT. It is he who challenged the authority of the man of God (Nu 16). Moreover, siding with him were some 250 men (Nu 16:17, 35) among Israel’s leaders. Along with the men of Sodom, Korah and his following, according to the rabbis, would find no place in the world to come (*m. Sanh.* 10:3). In effect, Korah’s fate is commensurate with his deed.

Cain, Balaam, and Korah are united in Jude by means of a woe-oracle. The woe-cry in the OT is found in several contexts: a call for attention (e.g., Zec 2:6), mourning for the dead (e.g., 1Ki 13:30; Jer 22:18), a cry of excitement (e.g., Isa 55:1; Zec 2:10), a cry of revenge (e.g., Isa 1:24), and the announcement of doom (e.g., Isa 3:9, 11; Jer 13:27; Eze 13:3, 18; Hos 7:13; Am 6:1; Mic 2:1). The vast majority of incidents fall under the latter heading.

NOTES

11 In the minds of the prophets, to whom the primary use of “woe,” *hōy* (GK 2098), is restricted, the promise of judgment was synonymous with judgment itself. Initially derived from a funerary setting (so R. J. Clifford, “The Use of *hōy* in the Prophets,” *CBQ* 28 [1966]: 458–64; W. Janzen, *Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle* [BZAW 125; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1972], 83–87), the woe-cry came to incorporate a vengeance pattern. For Jude’s purposes, the trio of v.11 foreshadows the fate of those who rebel and blaspheme (vv.8, 10). With a cry of condemnation and threat of divine vengeance hanging over their heads, Jude’s opponents await the execution of irrevocable judgment.

11 On the variations of the Balaam tradition in Jewish and early Christian exegesis, see M. S. Moore, *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development* (SBLDS 113; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); J. T. Greene, *Balaam and His Interpreters: A Hermeneutical History of the Balaam Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

D. Marks of the Apostate—Part 2 (12–13)

OVERVIEW

In these two verses the writer piles metaphor upon metaphor to express his indignation over the apostates: they are dangerous, self-absorbed, deceptive, and doomed.

¹²These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. ¹³They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.

COMMENTARY

12 The double meaning of *spilades*—“spots,” or “blemishes,” and “rocks” (GK 5070)—may account for the differences in translations of v.12. Both fit the context. On the one hand, Jude is concerned about pollution and defilement of the faithful in the community (vv.8, 23, 24) by the apostate. On the other hand, the metaphor of shipwreck due to hidden rocks is equally fitting, since Jude’s opponents pose unseen dangers to the faithful. Inasmuch as it is impossible for the faithful to avoid the faithless, the former stand in peril.

Describing the adversaries as “clouds without rain” reveals their lack of true substance. They disappoint; they promise but do not deliver (cf. Pr 25:14). Describing them as “late autumn trees, without fruit trees and uprooted—twice dead” has elicited a wide range of interpretations. “Late autumn” has commentators divided: some suggest that this is the very end of the harvest, while others argue that in the Mediterranean region harvest comes well before late autumn, preferably in the late summer. At the very minimum, “late autumn” would suggest diminishing expectation of fruit and the approach of winter. While the appellation “twice dead” also finds no unified interpretation, the metaphor would seem to possess eschatological

significance, not unlike Matthew 7:19; 15:13; John 15:5. It too speaks of barrenness, a chief element in Jesus' preaching. If, in fact, the adversaries of Jude are apostate from the faith, then the imagery is pregnant with meaning. Regeneration is offered once; after that, people await the second death (Rev 21:8). Given the "once for all" (*hapax*) and "second time" (*to deuteron*) language associated with Israel in v.5, this interpretation is consistent with Jude's purpose.

13a Mayor, 43, sees the images here as progressive, depicting the specious profession of the faithless, their true condition, their shamelessness, and their eventual fate. Following the Aphrodite tradition, the apostates are waves that bring to the shore the vile state to which they, in fact, have returned. In pagan mythology, Aphrodite is not merely associated with love. There is a dark side to her as well: wantonness and sexual perversion. In Jewish-Christian apocalyptic terms, the opponents of Jude are "wandering stars, for whom the blackest darkness has been reserved forever." Jude's imagery here, while it raises a host of interpretive questions for the modern reader, is suggestive and meant to conjure up an extremely graphic portrait of the opponents. They have an antecedent—in Israel's past but also in pagan mythology. There can be no doubt as to their true nature.

NOTES

12a Mention of the "love feasts" here (cf. 2Pe 2:12–13) has normally led commentators to conclude that Jude reflects a second-century milieu, since the love feast is first mentioned in subapostolic literature. The meal evidently became independent of the Eucharist, perhaps because of its corruption and dilution, as suggested by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 3.2). In the *Didache* (11.9), a subapostolic writing contemporary with the epistles of Ignatius, the character of a "true prophet" is described in relation to the "meal," somewhat reminiscent of Jude and 2 Peter. Nevertheless, defilement of the Lord's Table as reflected in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 was a mid-first-century problem.

12b Some commentators (e.g., C. D. Osburn, "1 Enoch 80:2–8 [67:5–7] and Jude 12–13," *CBQ* 47 [1985]: 296–303) see traces of the book of Enoch in Jude at this point; in the former both rain (80:2) and fruit (80:3)

are linked together. With explicit reference in Jude 14 to *1 Enoch* 1:9, this connection is well possible.

13 These images are reminiscent of those found in Greek mythology. J. P. Oleson (“An Echo of Hesiod’s *Theogony* vv 190–2 in Jude 13,” *NTS* 25 (1978/79): 492–503) has suggested that the “wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame” constitutes a reference to the grotesque account of Aphrodite’s birth in *Theogony*, literature dated 730–700 BC. By this ancient account Kronos, a son of Mother Earth, castrates Uranos (the Sky) using a sickle. The severed genitals are then thrown into the sea, where they are covered with foam (ἀφρός, *aphros*, GK 931). Out of the foam Aphrodite is nurtured, the protectress of sailors at sea. The foam then washes her ashore.

E. Judgment of the Ungodly (14–15)

¹⁴Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: “See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones ¹⁵to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

COMMENTARY

14 The expression “the seventh from Adam” also occurs in *1 Enoch* 60:8; 93:3 and in rabbinic literature (*Lev. Rab.* 29:11); the OT does not call Enoch “the seventh from Adam,” although it can be inferred from a reading of Genesis 5. Thus we seem to be dealing with a Jewish literary convention roughly contemporary with the NT writings.

14–15 These verses—a citation of *1 Enoch* 1:9—use the language of theophany and judgment associated with the Day of the Lord. Patterned after numerous similar statements in the OT (e.g., Dt 33:2; Jdg 5:4; Pss 18:9; 46:8–9; 68:17; 76:9; 96:13; Isa 19:1; 31:4; 40:10; 66:15; Jer 25:31; Da 7:10; Am 1:2; Joel 3:2; Mic 1:3; Hab 3:3; Zep 1:7–9, 12; Hag 2:22; Zec 3:8; 9:14; Mal 3:3–5), this prophetic denunciation serves as a reminder to Jude’s readers that the Lord comes to judge the ungodly. The fate of the faithless is certain. For more on Jude 14–15 and theophany in *1 Enoch*, see

my “Jude’s Use of Pseudepigraphal Source-Material as Part of a Literary Strategy,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 139–44; my *Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude*, 153–62.

NOTES

14–15 The Enoch prediction can be understood as “prophecy” in the same way as a Cretan poet is a “prophet” in Titus 1:12 and “some of your own poets” (Ac 17:28) is cited by Paul authoritatively before the Council of the Areopagus. Viewed as such, Jude 14–15 is a citation of *1 Enoch* not so much based on Jude’s veneration of the work as on its potential impact on Jude’s audience. Given the Jewish-Christian character of the epistle, it is possible—indeed, most likely—that Jude’s readers are products of a distinctly Palestinian religious-cultural milieu. Thus allusion to a popular sectarian Jewish work, while not necessarily viewed by Jude as “inspired,” nevertheless is cited strategically for “inspired” usage, i.e., to suit Jude’s particular theological/ pastoral purpose. Similar circumstances may well stand behind the theophanic statement of *1 Enoch* 1:9 and Jude 14–15: “See, the Lord is coming ... to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.” For this reason, the literary strategy and the pastoral agenda of Jude call for vigilance and repentance.

REFLECTIONS

The engaged reader discovers numerous points of contact between Jude and Jewish sectarian literature of the late intertestamental period. The letter’s apocalyptic mode, its reinterpreting of Israel’s past history for the present, and the use of Jewish tradition are several such examples.

The book of *1 Enoch*, parts of which are dated to the second century BC, requires further discussion. *First Enoch* was Palestinian in origin and in use at Qumran roughly concurrent with the emergence of the Christian church. It is quite plausible that the work was well known in the early Christian community, particularly in the region of Judea. While Jude is the sole NT writer to quote directly from *1 Enoch*, its author and the writers of the NT,

broadly speaking, share a common world of thought—even when their theological orientation differs drastically.

Jewish literature of the second century BC, especially that which reflected a Palestinian milieu, was fervently anti-Hellenistic in character and frequently took on the literary form of apocalypses or testaments. At the time of the Maccabean revolt (167/166 BC), we find the “assembly of the pious,” the “Hasidim,” as a clearly defined Jewish sect (cf. 1 Macc 7:13; 2 Macc 14:6). The Hasidim are significant for two reasons: (1) they are thought to be the common root of both the Essenes and the Pharisees and (2) their theological agenda is mirrored in the earliest parts of *1 Enoch*, dated roughly to this time. The deep crisis emerging from Hellenistic reform is explained by the conviction of the pious that this was a period of apostasy. Thus Enoch is depicted in this apocalypse as a messenger of repentance and judgment sent to call God’s people back to the faith. Numerous statements to this effect are found in the pseudepigraphal *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, also dated to around the second century BC.

In similar fashion, Jude passionately exhorts his audience to fiercely “contend” against the apostate, who have perverted the faith “once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). These “godless men” v.4)—*asebeis* (GK 814) is an important catchword in the epistle—furnish a notable parallel between *1 Enoch* and Jude. Thus a statement found in *1 Enoch* 1:9, shaped by conditions that helped birth a pre-Christian “repentance” movement, rings prophetically true: “Behold, he comes with myriads of his holy ones in order to execute judgment upon all, and he will destroy all the ungodly and will reprove all flesh on account of all their ungodly works which they have done and for the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

F. Marks of the Apostate—Part 3 (16–19)

¹⁶These men are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.

¹⁷But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. ¹⁸They said to you, “In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.” ¹⁹These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

COMMENTARY

16–19 Consistent with the Israel and Korah typology, the adversaries are “grumblers” and “faultfinders.” Jude seeks to underscore the pernicious nature of sowing discord within the community of faith. The fate of Israel in the wilderness was not ambiguous; they perished. That Jude’s opponents are “scoffers” (v.18) strengthens my premise that apostasy is the prime issue at hand.

Furthermore, moral law and self-restraint are for Jude’s opponents cast aside. As sensual persons, these libertines hold the constraints of moral law in wholesale contempt. And, though claiming to have the Spirit, they are in truth devoid of it, as evidenced by their carnal state (cf. 1Co 2–3).

17 The exhortation to “remember what the apostles ... foretold” is often assumed by commentators to reflect a distance of several generations between Jude and the apostles of the first century (thus, e.g., Kelly, 281). This assumption, however, does not derive from the text. Attention in Jude is given to what the apostles “say,” not what they “write.” What is significant here is the reality of *authoritative, prophetic speech* and not a chronological distance. Jude himself is not one of the chief apostles, given his somewhat late conversion (see Jn 7:5). For him, then, the antidote to faithlessness is the sure anchor of apostolic teaching, just as it was for the apostle Paul (e.g., Ro 16:7; 1Co 12:28; 15:9; 2Co 8:23; Gal 1:17, 19; Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11). Remembering what the saints first believed and what the apostles have said is the urgent and ongoing need, for discipleship entails pressing on, while reaffirming the all-important foundations. Spiritual foundations, not earlier generations, are that which is to be recalled.

The opponents are guilty in both word and deed. Most likely, the verbal sins that have accrued—being grumblers and malcontents and engaging in bombasting and selfishly flattering others (v.16)—stand in relation to the opponents’ rejection of authority and lustful indulgence (vv.16, 18). In bold

contrast to this profane speech stands the word of the apostles, through which the believers were grounded in the faith. The faithful are to remember the foundational teaching given to them. Reminder terminology plays an important role in both 2 Peter and Jude. As with Israel of old (v.5), the tendency toward forgetting God's commands, though typically human, is nevertheless inexcusable.

NOTES

16 Allusion in the *Assumption of Moses* (see esp. 7:7, 9) to the malcontent and to “bombastic speech” further suggests Jude’s acquaintance with this work and its appropriateness to the occasion.

REFLECTIONS

The effect of moral typology is to comfort, exhort, and warn. The end, though in some respects hidden and unannounced, is certain. Those who pervert and blaspheme the truth go to their appointed end. In Jude, examples from the past are marshaled chiefly to warn against the cancer of apostasy. The past explains the present and thus can serve as a token for the future.

The pattern found in vv.5–19 is type and explanation and constitutes a form of “midrash” or commentary on the fate of the ungodly (so Ellis, 221–36; Bauckham, 4–5). Jude is skillful in reworking OT and Jewish tradition-material, whereby he makes application of those traditions in relevant ways for his readers. Not unlike Jewish apocalyptic writers (and, similarly, the writer of the book of Revelation), Jude alludes to OT characters or events without formal citation. The relating of OT tradition-material prophetically to the situation at hand, (2) the modifying of the text to suit the peculiar needs of the present, and (3) the use of particular catchwords to form rhetorical links in the polemic are all features of a Jewish-Christian “midrashist.” His audience clearly belongs to a distinct cultural milieu—that of Palestinian Jewish-Christianity.

Jude 5–19 marshals evidence against those who, according to the writer, have “secretly slipped in” (v.4) and, consequently, have had a corrosive effect on the community. The opponents are condemned in no uncertain

terms; theirs is a fate that is sealed—indeed, a fate foretold (vv.4, 17). Very artfully and with almost breathtaking precision, Jude describes this fate.

Typology is integral to the sometimes knotty question of the NT's use of the OT. Apostolic preaching reflects the underlying premise that the OT points beyond itself, finding completion in the NT. For the first-century Jew, it was entirely natural to view past episodes in Israel's history as a shadow of the future, to view the significance of the present in terms of the past. By means of typology, the NT writers apply a deeper, often christological sense of present truth. A type presupposes a purpose in the linear movement of history; it bears out a spiritual correspondence and historical connection between people, events, or institutions.

Typological interpretation grows out of the conviction that, contained within Israel's history—history that is inscripturated—are all the principal forms of divine activity pointing to God's ultimate purposes. The theological "center" of this is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ much of what constituted OT institutions, events, and offices is fulfilled. Beyond christological typology, however, lies moral typology. OT characters or events project themselves in ways that allow them to serve as paradigms or models in the Christian moral tradition. It is the abundance of the moral type that makes the General Epistles such a rich and distinct contribution to the NT canon.

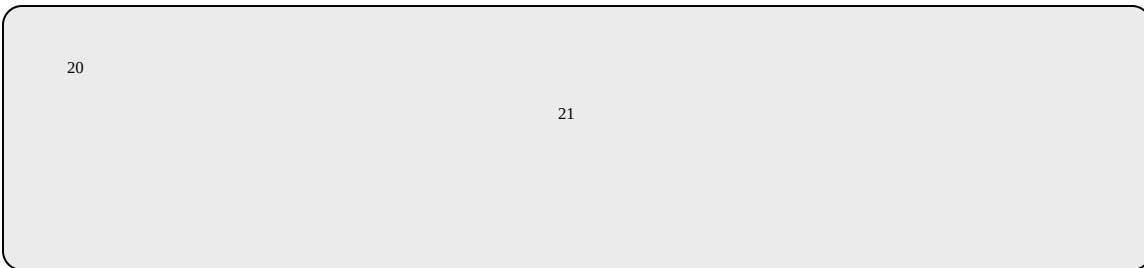
The best resources on typology in the NT remain G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1957), and L. Goppelt, *Typos. The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). On the moral typology that pervades the epistle of Jude, see my essays "'Those' and 'These': The Use of the Old Testament in the Epistle of Jude," *JSNT* 37 (1990): 109–24; "The Angels under Reserve in 2 Peter and Jude," *BBR* 15 (2005): 39–48.

III. PROFILE OF THE FAITHFUL (20–23)

OVERVIEW

A. Personal Obligations (20–21)

OVERVIEW



COMMENTARY

20–21

tēreō

5498

morally

REFLECTIONS

B. Obligations toward Others (22–23)

COMMENTARY

22–23

eleaō 1790*eleaō**en phobō**Assumption of Moses*

NOTES

22–23

eleaō 1790

⁷² *JTS*

ZNW
New Testament Textual Criticism

IV. TRIBUTE TO THE ONE WHO “KEEPS” (24–25)

OVERVIEW

Having called forth past examples of divine judgment and exhorted the faithful to realize their part in being a disciplined community, Jude concludes by offering an exalted tribute to the One who preserves them. This is done in the form of a doxology, a “proclaiming of glory.” Several basic patterns of speech to God tend to emerge from the OT: petition, praise, and thanksgiving. Hymnic material that offers praise and glorification of God can assume the form of any of these. The origin of doxology is owing to a distinctly Jewish matrix. The early Christian doxology, in style and content, resembled that of the Jewish synagogue and was not infrequently accompanied by an eschatological deliverance call. Normally framed in the third person (as in Jude 24—to *de dynamenophylaxai* ...), the doxology functioned to proclaim God’s praise (“To him who is able ...”) as well as to affirm his eternality (“before all ages, now and forevermore.”)

²⁴To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—²⁵to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

COMMENTARY

24 The epistle concludes with a benediction praising God for his attributes that express themselves in his power to preserve the saints. This doxological benediction reiterates in the active voice what the author stated in his salutation through the passive voice: his readers are called, loved, and kept by God. The introduction and conclusion of the letter thus form a rhetorical *inclusio* by opening and closing with the same theme: the saints are kept by the power of God. The conclusion follows a series of eight

exhortations to the faithful that are to serve as antidotes to apostasy in the light of the previous condemnations (so Marshall, 166). The saints are to remember, build themselves up, pray, keep themselves, anticipate, convince, save, and have mercy (vv.17–23).

The rhetorical effect of the doxology, following the rather brief but rapid-fire hortatory section, is deliberate. After all has been humanly done to safeguard against the cancer of apostasy, it is the power of Almighty God our Savior mediated through Jesus Christ that is “able to keep you from falling.” Exploiting a prominent catchword in the epistle, the author uses a strengthened form of “preserve”—*phyllassō* (GK 5875)—to describe divine action: God is able, literally, to “guard [safely] as a prison.” Moreover, he is able not only to safeguard the saints against falling but even cause them to stand “before [God’s] glorious presence without fault and with great joy.” In the end, then, it is not mere persistence or the great investment of human energy that is ultimately responsible for the saints’ salvation; rather, it is the saving and keeping power of God.

25 It is to this God our Savior alone that the following attributes are ascribed—glory, majesty, power, and authority. The cumulative force of these resources is the surpassing might of the one who called us (cf. v.1). With precise calculation, Jude employs the language of sovereignty. The saints need not be shaken by the sobering instances of God’s judgment in history if, in fact, they have a genuine desire to be established in the faith.

Finally, praise is due this Almighty Savior “before all ages, now and forevermore.” Although throughout the epistle Jude draws on the language and imagery of Jewish apocalyptic familiar to intertestamental literature, in his concluding doxology he aligns himself with a decidedly OT prophetic view of history, i.e., the past, the present, and the future are all seen as working toward the consummation of the divine purpose.

NOTES

24–25 Structurally, the doxology is normally positioned at the conclusion of kerygmatic or hymnic material and consists of three parts: the person named; an expression of praise often comprised of two or more elements, including the term δόξα, *doxa* (GK 1518); and a formula for time. Jude conforms to this standard pattern. The Jewish doxology typically concluded with the affirmation ἀμήν, *amēn* (“indeed, it is so”; “so be it”; GK 297).

Equally common to the OT and rabbinic milieu, ἀμήν, *amēn*, reinforces that declarations, confessions, or oaths are valid. At times ending a prayer (e.g., Ne 8:6; 1Ch 16:36) and frequently a psalm (e.g., Pss 41:14; 72:19; 89:53; 106:48), ἀμήν, *amēn*, can also be doubled in the OT for emphasis (e.g., Nu 5:22; Ne 8:6). In extracanonical apocalyptic literature, ἀμήν, *amēn*, often appears with eschatological statements. In the synagogue it constituted the most common benediction pronounced by the rabbi. It is only natural that the ἀμήν, *amēn*, found its way into the liturgy of the early church.

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