

## 7 2 Peter - Christian Virtues for a Renewed Green World

### Outline

Greeting, 1:1-2

Two transfigurations (and God's liberating justice):

of Christians: the virtues, gifts of God, 1:3-11

of Jesus: testimony of Peter and the prophecies, 1:12-21

False teachers (and God's punishment of oppressors), 2:1-22 // > Jude 4-19

Jesus' Second Coming: Why the delay? 3:1-16

Exhortation and doxology, 3:17-18

Almost all scholars now conclude that 2 Peter does not originate from Peter himself but from an author after the martyrdom of the Apostle in Rome (64/65 AD). However, even if 2 Peter does not come directly from the hand of Peter, it may well include traditions from the Apostle preserved in Petrine circles in Rome, where it probably was written, around 80-90 AD. 1 Peter uses the place name Babylon as a symbol and metaphor for Rome (5:13; cf. Revelation 17:5, 18). 2 Peter uses the personal name of Simon Peter to communicate the apostolic message to a later generation, a literary procedure common to the era (see Mark 9:13; Matthew 11:13-14; 17:12; cf. the rejection of literalism in John 1:21; Luke 1:17). The language and teaching of 2 Peter is not similar to that of 1 Peter. However, 2 Peter 2:1 --3:3 is characterized by a close parallelism of ideas and expressions with the letter of Jude, which was probably written before 2 Peter and served as its source. The person who wrote 2 Peter, claiming the name and spirit of

Simeon Peter (including the Hebrew name Simeon), sought to be faithful to the apostle's teaching but aimed to communicate the Petrine tradition to communities, perhaps in Asia Minor, threatened more by their own greed and seducers within, rather than oppressors without.

1. Hebrew Apocalypticism, Christianity and Hellenism 2 Peter adapts the very Jewish perspective of Jude to more Hellenized congregations of a later generation. Specifically, 2 Peter juxtaposes Hebrew apocalypticism with the Hellenism of a post-apostolic generation, which gives the letter its special character.<sup>1</sup> This Hellenism of 2 Peter is manifest in 1:1-11, where Hellenistic readers would have found especially appealing the emphasis on sharing the divine nature (v. 4), eight virtues, including knowledge (vv. 5-8) and escape from the world (v. 4) to enter into Christ's eternal kingdom (v. 11). The relationship between this Hellenism and the Hebrew and Christian traditions is especially evident in the list of eight virtues in 1:5-7, where the typically Greek virtues (goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance and piety) occur in a list that begins with faith and ends with mutual affection and love, virtues characteristic of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Greek virtue of knowledge (vv. 5-6) becomes supremely the Hebrew "knowledge of God" and the Christian "knowledge of Jesus Christ" (1:2-3, 8; see below). This list seeks to avoid creating a dichotomy between Christian praxis (practice) and the admirable aspects of the lives of other human beings created in God's image.

Similarly, a Greek anthropology may be suggested by the concept of the body as a "tent" to be left behind at death (1:13-14, NIV), the reference to Lot as a "tortured soul" (2:7-8) and the description of animals as "irrational" (2:12, 22; cf. "man" [but not woman] as a rational being in Aristotle). The Hebrew concept of time in 3:8 (Psalm 90:4) has a Hellenistic counterpart in 3:18 ("the day of eternity"). Above all, Hellenistic influence is evident in the consigning of sinning angels to "Tartarus" (2:4) and in 1:4, which affirms that we "may become participants of the

divine nature,” language lending itself to an impersonal pantheistic interpretation, but probably intended only to stress gaining immortality.

However, the apocalyptic hope of Jesus’ Parousia has not disappeared in 2 Peter, since the letter is directed to readers who still expect to witness Jesus’ Second Coming (1:19; 3:14). The apparent delay in the final judgment of oppressors is not a sign of God’s weakness, but of a goodness, love and patience that seeks the repentance of all persons (3:8-9; see below).

2. The Oppressed, Weak and Poor: a. “The Way.” Although markedly more Hellenistic than Jude, the Hebrew character of 2 Peter is evident in its avoidance of the Greek philosophical categories of “ethics” and “morals” and its insistence in the priority of praxis, describing life in terms of a “way” (--> 1-3 John, on the “the way” and walking in the light/truth). “The way” is a favorite biblical metaphor for divine actions in history and for the praxis of God’s people and of individuals in collaboration with God’s purpose and project in history. In 2 Peter the way is characterized by “truth” (2:2) and as the “straight path” of liberating justice (2:15, 21; cf. Balaam’s “way of exploitation/oppression,” 'adikías, 2:15; the violent “way of Cain,” Jude 11).

b. Oppression as violence. While Jude (v. 5) maintained the fundamental character of the Exodus paradigm, in 2 Peter 2:5 the Flood story replaces the Exodus. 2 Peter thus reverts to the chronological order of Genesis 6 and 19: (1) sinning angels, 6:1-4; (2) flood, 6:5ff., (3) Sodom, 19. However, just as the sin of oppression was fundamental in Exodus, so violence (the extreme expression of oppression in the Hebrew Bible) is the fundamental sin provoking the judgment of the flood and Sodom (2 Peter 2:5-6). This connection tends to be lost in translations that prefer to translate the Greek root 'aseb weakly as “impious/ungodly.” However in the Genesis narrative, the cause of the flood clearly is “violence” (Hebrew hamas, 6:11, 13). The Septuagint here rendered “violence” by 'adikías (injustice, oppression), but in the Septuagint 2 Peter’s preferred 'aseb root also commonly translates the Hebrew term violence.<sup>2</sup>

c. Oppression as injustice. In addition to linking the violent oppression that brought on the divine judgments of the flood and Sodom's destruction, 2 Peter also refers to oppression with the Greek root ádik (injustice, oppression: 2:9, 13 [twice], 15), total four times. Especially instructive is the affirmation that "The Liberator God knows how to deliver the pious from trials and to keep oppressors (adíkous) under punishment until the day of judgment" (2:9). 2 Peter 2:13 indicates that the false teachers are characterized by injustice and oppression and will be paid back with harm for the injustice they have done. 2 Peter 2:15 qualifies Balaam's sin as "loving injustice/ oppression, suggesting that even when we "love" (agapáo) this may prove sinful if wrongly directed. 2 Peter 2:7 describes just Lot as "being oppressed" (kataponóúmenon 2:7), a word used elsewhere describing an Israelite slave whom Moses delivered from violence (Acts 7:24; cf. Exodus 2:11)--thus reminding us of Lot's immigrant, marginalized status in Sodom.

d. Oppression and covetousness. Injustice and oppression are also related to 2 Peter's repeated condemnations of greed (épthumía, 1:4; 2:10; 3:3 and pleoneksía, 2:3, 14), prohibited in the Ten Commandments (#10, Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5). After the just distribution of land to all (Joshua 13--21), to covet and plot to acquire a neighbor's property was condemned as injustice and oppression. Such sin is also characterized as "excess" (ásélgeia, 2:2, 7, 18), especially with reference to violence, oppression and harm to neighbor in the sexual sphere. Adultery was a consequence of coveting a neighbor's wife. Originally it was conceived as a sin involving the sexual property of another male in a patriarchal society, since a woman was the property of her father or husband. For 2 Peter the most fundamental sin is precisely such "greed" or "covetousness" (1:4), whether of humans generally, or perhaps interpreting Adam and Eve's original sin. Pride leads us to imagine that we may freely appropriate our neighbor's goods, leaving them deprived of life's necessities (1:3).

e. Justice that liberates from oppression In the light of the emphases on the “way,” violence, injustice and oppression, in 2 Peter justice basically refers--as in the entire Bible--to liberating justice exercised on behalf of the weak and oppressed (2:7-9; the “Exodus paradigm”). Although 2 Peter substitutes the flood for Jude’s reference (v. 5) to the Exodus, liberating justice flows as a powerful stream through 2 Peter (1:1, 13; 2:5, 7, 8 [twice], 21; 3:13 [total eight dik-terms--“righteousness” is the misleading common English translation; cf. also the four references to oppression/injustice with ’adik terms). God’s liberating justice is linked to the “equality” (’isótimon) in status enjoyed by later Gentile readers in the inclusive community, where they share equal status with Jewish apostles like Peter (1:1). Noah heralds God’s liberating justice that delivered him and his household from their violent contemporaries (2:5). Lot’s justice and solidarity (2:7-8) were expressed in his hospitality to the visiting angels and by his efforts to protect them from the attempted gang rape by the men of Sodom (--> below, “women”).

f. Liberating justice and the knowledge of God. 2 Peter thus appears to reflect Jeremiah’s teaching (22:13-16): to practice liberating justice manifest in solidarity with the weak and oppressed is “to know Yahweh,” the liberator-God. To refuse to practice liberating justice results in not being acknowledged and honored by God (see Matthew 7:21-23; 25:31-46). Personal knowledge of God and Christ in 2 Peter, then, is closely related to the praxis of liberating justice (1:2-3, 8; 2:20-21; 3:18). Such knowledge is not equivalent to the later Gnostic emphasis on knowing secret truths, nor is it equivalent to the concept of “knowing” orthodox doctrines, the common emphasis in so much of traditional Christianity. For 2 Peter, fully knowing Jesus Christ involves following faithfully the way of liberating justice (2:20-21). And just as Isaiah envisioned the new earth as characterized as becoming “full of the knowledge of the Liberator God as the waters cover the sea” (11:9), so 2 Peter anticipates a new earth characterized by liberating justice (3:13).<sup>3</sup>

g. Liberating justice and the hope of the poor. 2 Peter's Jewish roots are clearly evident in its "materialism" and its emphasis on God's promises (1:4; 3:13) that describe the historic divine project: a new just world order. Such a just order is not an escape from this world to live in a "spiritual" (in the later sense of "nonmaterial") celestial sphere, but "a renewed heaven and a renewed earth...characterized by liberating justice" (3:13; Matthew 5:4; Romans 4:13; 8:20-22). This Hebrew "apocalyptic" hope is distinct from the individualistic and spiritualized hope of elitist Greek philosophy (the liberation of the spiritual "soul" from the material body).

In the light of 2 Peter's reaffirmation of the fulfillment of God's promises regarding material hopes for a new earth, we may properly understand what the implied author means by speaking of his death as an "exodus" (1:15). This "exodus" involves a metaphorical use of the literal exodus referred to by Jude (v. 5), but in the context of 2 Peter's apocalyptic hope for a new earth, it cannot be interpreted as an individualistic, spiritualizing reductionism. Rather it must be understood as similar to Paul's affirmations of individual immortality, as an anticipation (not a substitute) of the resurrection of the body (Philippians 1:21-23; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57; 2 Cor. 5:1-10); cf. Jesus' death as an Exodus, Luke 9:31). Modern readers will recognize that 2 Peter includes in its vision mythical elements concerning the creation of the world out of water and a future cosmic conflagration that destroys the "elements" (3:5-10).<sup>4</sup>

On dealing with the false teachers (2:2), 2 Peter in 2:1--3:3 uses the letter of Jude as a source but adapts it for the later historical context. The false teachers in 2 Peter's churches appeared to have much in common with elitist Epicurean philosophy, which denied life beyond the grave and divine judgment and promoted the search for pleasure (hedonism, 2:13) in this life. 2 Peter omits the references in Jude concerning aspirations of possessing the Spirit and receiving revelations (Jude 8, 19) and also the reference to a perversion of grace (Jude 4). The characteristic that the false teachers in 2 Peter seem to have in common with those of Jude is

covetousness (Jude 16, 18). The elitist false teachers in 2 Peter demonstrate an eschatological skepticism that led them to mock God's promises to the poor (2 Peter 3:3-4, 13; 1:11 "richly"; see Matthew 5:3 // Luke 6:20) and to reject God's judgment against oppressors (2:9).

2 Peter responds that the same God who judged the world in the past (2:3-16) also will judge present oppressors (2:17-22). Delay in God's judgment does not signal divine weakness but reveals the patience and love of God, who desires that all repent (3:8-10). Surprisingly, in both 2 Peter and in Jude the false teachers are present at the very heart of the community, regularly participating in the Lord's Supper. Despite the strong language against them, however, 2 Peter does not recommend that the false teachers be expelled from the community (Matthew 13; cf. Paul in 1 Corinthians 5), but even appears to maintain hope for their repentance (3:9).

3. Women and "Early Catholicism" Some feminist scholars criticize 2 Peter for not giving explicit attention to women in the text. True, 2 Peter focuses on the transfiguration of Jesus, where he appeared in a glorified form, together with Moses and Elijah, and was accompanied by three male apostles (1:16-18; see Luke 9:28-35). However, 2 Peter does not focus on the transfiguration in order to exclude women but because this event, witnessed by Peter, strengthens hope for a time of crisis, presenting Jesus as already installed by God and at work to establish God's new just order. In addition, the Hebrew Scriptures included not only the Law ("of Moses") and the Prophets (such as Elijah) but also a third component, the sapiential (wisdom) writings, where the feminine figure of Sophia/Wisdom is central. (See also the prophetesses in the Bible and in the early churches.) Any reader of the Gospels will recall how the male apostles abandoned Jesus at the end (see Peter's triple denial), while the women disciples were faithful and end up proclaiming the good news to the male apostles.

In the style of Luke, 2 Peter balances the proverb of a dog (masculine gender) with a pig (feminine gender; 2:22; see Proverbs 26:11). In addition, 2 Peter (2:15-16) points out how God

used a donkey (neuter in Greek but feminine in Hebrew in the narrative in Numbers 22:21-35) to reprimand the unfaithfulness of the prophet Balaam. Notably, in Numbers the donkey (as so many women in all ages) accuses the man of violence against her: “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?” (Numbers 22:28). It does not require much imagination to see in the donkey, which according to its animal nature should be irrational (2 Peter 2:12) and mute (1 Corinthians 14:34-35), the figure of abused women, whose voices demand justice, like the blood of Abel.

Although some scholars consider 2 Peter to be an example of “early Catholicism” with its institutionalization of the faith, in fact the letter contains not a word about ecclesiastical offices. Instead the direct and personal knowledge of God is open to all (3:18) and all may even become partakers of the divine nature (1:4; see John 1:9). The only leadership 2 Peter mentions is that of the prophets and teachers, who could be either false or authentic, men or women (2:1). 2 Peter speaks of certain uninformed and weak persons in the faith who “twist” the Scriptures, which by that time included some of Paul’s letters (3:15-16), but does not single out women as especially prone to misinterpret Paul. This reference to a collection of Paul’s letters represents a first step in the formation of the New Testament canon. (2 Peter’s elimination of references in Jude to two non-canonical Jewish books is also pertinent.) Although Peter himself suffered a rebuke from Paul (Galatians 2:11-20), 2 Peter insists on the fundamental unity between Paul (properly interpreted) and Peter. The letter insists that Paul’s teaching concerning justification by faith and Christian freedom should not be misinterpreted (“twisted”) as libertinism.

Many understand 2 Peter 1:20 to insist on the need for an orthodox, official interpretation by church authorities (“early Catholicism”) and oppose the right of individuals to interpret the Scriptures according to personal criteria. However, 1:20 may refer to the origin of prophecies,

not to their interpretation: “...no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of humans, but men and women spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (1:20-21; see NIV and NRSV note on 1:19).<sup>5</sup> True, New Testament authors start from the concept of their base communities, not with modern individualism. But even if we accept an alternative (“At the same time we must be most careful to remember that the interpretation of scriptural prophecy is never a task for the individual”; see The Jerusalem Bible), an interpretation guided by the Spirit and by fidelity to apostolic tradition may be carried out by the entire community, women included (1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 John 2:20, 26-27), and not by some assumed ecclesiastical authorities. 2 Peter anticipates later Catholicism only in this general sense of affirming the fundamental unity between Peter and Paul and of achieving a certain unity also between Hebrew apocalypticism and Hellenism. However, this is a Hellenism of a Judaism already adapted to its Greek cultural context, especially outside of Palestine.

4. Sexual Sins and Sexual Minorities. Despite the misleading language of many translations and commentaries, 2 Peter says little explicitly regarding the sexual sphere. 2 Peter 2:4 refers to the angels who sinned (the “sons of God” of Genesis 6:1-4) but does not specify that their sin consisted in having sexual relations with women (“giants” resulting in the Genesis myth, a unique kind of sexual minority!). Although 2 Peter omits Jude’s explicit reference to the men of Sodom going after “strange flesh” (of angels), 2 Peter 2:5-6 links the violence that provoked the flood with the violence that brought judgment on Sodom (aseb). This would remind readers that the sin of inhospitable Sodom involved attempted gang rape of the visiting angels (the sin of violence--not of “homosexuality,” as in popular homophobic misinterpretations).

Although 2 Peter refers three times to Lot as exemplifying liberating justice (2:7-8), Lot's efforts to placate Sodom's rapists with the offer of his two virgin daughters, being part of his cruel patriarchal culture, goes unnoticed (see similarly Judges 19:24-26). In Genesis Lot's two virgin daughters return the father's "compliment" by getting him drunk and committing incest (19:30-38; see similarly Noah, evidently sodomized by his son, 9:18-27). 2 Peter 2:10 speaks of coveting (possibly a neighbor's wife), but not necessarily sexual "lust." In 2 Peter, sexual sin is explicit only in the metaphorical reference to "eyes full of adultery" (literally "of an adulteress"; 2:14), also the book's only explicit reference to a woman.

Although Peter as implied author was the only one of the twelve apostles known to be married, modern "family values" find no support in 2 Peter. The focus on the flood and Noah (one of the few Hebrew Bible heroes who was monogamous, not polygamous) might be cited in support of contemporary "family values," but this is more than offset by the emphasis on Lot's "justice" (despite trying to placate rapists by offering his virgin daughters and then fathering children by incest), and the elimination of Jude's sexual focus in describing Sodom's sin. The sexual sin of the infiltrating false teachers is specified as the (heterosexual) sin of adultery, while Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul (both single) are set forth as exemplary paradigms (1:1-2; 3:15-16) by 2 Peter's actual author, who like them may well have been unmarried.

Other references to sexual sin in 2 Peter are alluded to only in general terms of injustice, covetousness, oppression and violence, and the author refrains from imposing any detailed legal code (cf. Leviticus). Law in 2 Peter is used only in the singular (2:21; 3:2), perhaps with reference to Jesus' new command (John 13:34-35) or the "royal law" of love to neighbor (James 2:8; Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:35-37; Romans 13:8-10).

5. Doing Theology. Certainly one of 2 Peter's most important lessons is its theological method: a paradigm of creativity that seeks to be faithful to prophetic and apostolic traditions,

yet struggles to maintain and communicate faith in a new historical context. Faced with the threat of false teachers, 2 Peter first cites the experience of Peter at the transfiguration (1:16-18), supported by the Hebrew Scriptures (1:19-21) and by Paul's letters. By this time a collection of Paul's letters already had come to be reckoned as "Scripture" but they were characterized as "wisdom" for the way, not as inculcating "morals" or providing "ethical absolutes" (3:15-16).

We may ask ourselves, however, how we can be faithful to God after the Holocaust, where the Nazis murdered millions of Jews and thousands of homosexuals, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, communists and other minorities. Can we continue to insist with 2 Peter that God is the Lord of history and that soon God will punish the oppressors and the violent? When the Parousia (second coming) of Jesus has been delayed for not only two generations but for two millennia, can we still affirm that this is evidence of the patience and love of God who waits for all to come to repentance? Faced with an ecological disaster that threatens to make the planet uninhabitable, can we continue to hope for a renewed world characterized by justice? Those who today seek to follow Jesus in "the way" may sense as acutely as anyone the difficulties in their faith, but perhaps conclude that common alternatives present not difficulties, but impossibilities. 2 Peter reminds us that false "prophets" may speak of a "love" (2:15) and a "liberation" (2:19) that are spurious: "They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them." This encourages vigilance in the face of so much modern ideology and propaganda that promise paradise but deliver purgatory.

5. The Handicapped and the Sick. 2 Peter includes only a metaphorical reference to one who is "near-sighted and blind" and does not remember her/his purification (1:9, baptism?). Ancient rhetoric makes no provision for modern concerns about politically correct language in such cases. To refer more sensitively to the "visually challenged" here would contradict the

intent of the rhetoric (--> Babylon the “harlot,” not “sex-worker,” in Revelation 17). Although the divine promises (1:4) refer to virtues and holiness (1:5 -8), not to health, in the final analysis they include the redemption of the body from all uncleanness and “corruption” (--> Jude).

## Bibliography

Bauckham, Richard J. Jude, 2 Peter, Word Biblical Commentary 50. Dallas: Word, 1983.

Dow, Sharon. “2 Peter.” In The Women’s Bible Commentary, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992.

Elliott, John H. “Peter, Second Epistle of.” In The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman. Vol. 5:282-287. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Heide, Gale Z. “What is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3.” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 40 (March 1997), 37-56.

Neyrey, Jerome. H. 2 Peter, Jude. Anchor Bible 37C. New York: Doubleday, 1993.

Rakestraw, Robert V. “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis”, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 40 (June 1997): 257-269.

Rosenblatt, Marie-Eloise. “2 Peter.” In Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Vol. 2. New York: Crossroad, 1994.