

The Promise of His Appearing

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The
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of His
APPEARING
An Exposition of Second Peter

PETER J. LEITHART



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To Smith

*May you be among
Those who have insight
Who shine brightly
Like the bright firmament of heaven*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the course of preparing this brief commentary, I realized that I have spent more time with 2 Peter than with any other New Testament book. Though I have not devoted exclusive attention to it for over fifteen years, I have returned to it again and again. Sometime in the murky *Urzeit* of the late 1980s, I first taught through the book in a Sunday School class at Cherokee Presbyterian Church in Woodstock, Georgia. It was the first book I preached through when I took a pastoral call in 1989 at the Reformed Heritage Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama, and I taught it again in a Sunday School class at the Cambridge Presbyterian Church, Cambridge, U.K. More recently, I delivered several lectures on the epistle at the 1999 Biblical Horizons Summer Conference, and finally taught the book to a group of friends in Moscow who have gathered for dinner and Bible study for the past several years. Peter's second epistle, in short, is an old friend, and I hope that these various opportunities to teach through the book have given me some measure of familiarity with and insight into its contents. But *judicet lector*.

In addition to the churches that have shown interest in my work on 2 Peter over the years, I wish to thank Doug Jones of

Canon Press, who continues to be far more generous and gentle with me and my books than either of us deserves. Jared Miller too has been an invaluable assistance, noticing incoherencies in my writing and forcing me to clarify, and Lucy Jones has also assisted in moving messy manuscripts to finished books.

Most of my books during the past several years have been dedicated to one of my children. The present volume is due to be dedicated to my sixth and, if present trends continue, my last son, Smith. It is deeply appropriate that this commentary on an “apocalyptic” epistle should be dedicated to Smith, who is no stranger to signs and wonders in the heavens. He was born in Huntington, England, while I was doing my doctoral work at Cambridge, and I’ll never forget tearing through the night in our uncertain Freight Rover, with the Hale-Bopp comet guiding us to the hospital. We considered working some reference to Hale-Bopp into his name but finally decided against it. Yet I have amused myself with the thought that the auspicious birth is a portent of greatness, but more importantly I trust that Smith will not be among the stars that fall from the heavens or the elements that melt with intense heat. I trust that he will instead be among those who shine brightly in the expanse of heaven, like a star forever and ever.

1

THE FIRST-CENTURY CONTEXT

This book is not a technical commentary on the Greek text of 2 Peter (though the Greek will be appealed to as necessary or when I want to show off), and it does not give a detailed exposition of every verse of the letter. Instead, it lays out a broad interpretation of the letter, and, more importantly, it lays out a broad interpretive *framework* for it. To do this I will focus on a set of specific issues within the letter, all of which are related in some way to the eschatological teaching of the book, which I argue is central to Peter's intentions. No doubt I have made some errors of interpretation on small and perhaps even larger issues, but I hope that this reading is plausible enough to make some contribution to the scholarship on the epistle and to shift the context for discussion of its contents.

A significant shift in orientation and context is, I believe, necessary to make sense both of 2 Peter and of New Testament eschatology generally. The sort of shift I hope for can be easily stated: I offer a preterist reading of 2 Peter and hope that this book will contribute to making the preterist framework of interpretation a more reputable player in New Testament studies. *Preterism* is the view that prophecies about an imminent "day of judgment" scattered throughout the New Testament were fulfilled in the apostolic age

by the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the event that brought a final end to the structures and orders of the Old Creation or Old Covenant. Within this framework, Peter is dealing with issues facing the churches of the first century as the day approaches when the old world will be destroyed. Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Mt. 16:28), and I argue that Peter wrote his second letter to remind the readers of that specific prophecy of Jesus and to encourage them to cling to that promise of His appearing.

For the purposes of this book, preterism is not merely a way of interpreting New Testament prophecy but also provides a framework for understanding New Testament theology as a whole. In part, this is nothing more than an effort to understand the New Testament in its historical context. The issues and debates that dominated the New Testament era were largely about the relation of Jews and Gentiles, and derived directly from the gospel’s announcement of a new people of God, within which circumcision and uncircumcision are equally meaningless. Preterist interpretation means trying to understand the New Testament in the light of this struggle without retrojecting post-Reformation debates into the text.¹ Further, an important goal of preterist interpretation is to reckon with the influence that the threat and promise of Jesus’ imminent coming, which affects nearly every book of the New Testament, had on the shape of New Testament theology. For example, a preterist framework generates such questions as “Is it possible that the typology of the church in the wilderness (in Hebrews, for instance) had specific reference to the first-century situation?” and “What is unique about the organization, worship, and life of the church in the period between A.D. 30–70?” and “What unique role

¹This does not mean that the New Testament has nothing to say about post-Reformation debates, only that those debates were not the same as the debates of the New Testament era itself.

did the first-century church play in redemptive history, and how is this related to the fall of Jerusalem?”

Though preterist interpretations have been around for several centuries,² only in the past several decades has this view been endorsed by Protestant interpreters. A number of conservative Reformed commentators, notably J. Marcellus Kik, Kenneth Gentry, David Chilton, Gary DeMar, R. C. Sproul, and James Jordan, have defended some variety of preterism, and in mainstream New Testament studies a preterist interpretation of Jesus’ “little apocalypse” (Mt. 24; Mk. 13; Lk. 21) has been promoted by G. B. Caird, N. T. Wright, Marcus Borg, and others.³ These commentators all agree that Jesus describes the end of the Old Covenant order or Judaism by using language of cosmic collapse, and several argue that John does the same in Revelation.

The prophecies of 2 Peter 3 have also been interpreted as foretelling the final collapse of the Old Creation in A.D. 70. For example, centuries ago John Owen linked the language of 2 Peter 3:8–13 with the prophecy of Isaiah 65 to argue that Peter was not predicting the end of the physical universe but the end of the Old Covenant order.⁴ David Chilton followed Owen in this conclusion,⁵ and more recently John Noe and others have presented similar

² See Arthur Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 63–64, for a brief discussion of the preterist interpretation of Revelation.

³ Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler: ICE, 1989); Chilton, *Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Tyler: Dominion Press, 1987); Jordan, *A Brief Reader's Guide To Revelation* (Niceville: Transfiguration Press, 1999); Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996); Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, [1984] 1998).

⁴ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols. (London: Banner of Truth, 1965–68), 9:134–135.

⁵ Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, 540–545.

arguments.⁶ Mainstream evangelical and liberal commentators on 2 Peter, however, continue to be almost completely unaware of preterism as an interpretive option.⁷

In a sense, mainstream scholarship's failure to consider preterist treatments of 2 Peter is the understandable result of the weaknesses of the preterist readings of the book that have generally been offered. David Chilton's treatment, for example, focuses exclusively on 2 Peter 3, since that is the chapter which is most overtly eschatological. To be fair, it should be said that Chilton's discussion takes place in the context of a commentary on Revelation 21:1, so he can hardly be expected to treat the entire book of 2 Peter. Yet, this same narrow attention to chapter 3 is characteristic of preterist treatments I have seen elsewhere. The important question of whether 2 Peter 3 predicts an event that took place in the first century has overshadowed the equally important questions of how chapter 3 fits with the rest of Peter's letter and whether the whole of the letter might be understood preteristically.

⁶Noe, *Beyond the End Times* (Bradford, Penn.: Preterist Resources, 1999). A number of web sites also offer preterist readings of NT prophecy: preterist.org, planetpreterist.com, preteristhomepage.com, and preteristarchive.com. The content of these sites is very diverse. Alongside much insightful material, many articles endorse a heretical version of preterism that denies the future return of Christ.

⁷In his solidly evangelical commentary, Douglas Moo (*2 Peter, Jude* [NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996]) occasionally refers to passages that use the imagery of cosmic collapse to describe historical events, but this plays virtually no role in his discussion of the letter as a whole. Late in the book, Moo acknowledges that "many early Christians looked eagerly for Christ to return and take them to glory" and that "Peter himself encouraged believers to recognize that 'the end of all things is near' (1 Peter 4:7)" but fails to consider seriously the possibility that Peter was writing about an imminent event. The same goes for Norman Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude* (New International Biblical Commentary; New Testament Series no. 16; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992), and Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; rev. ed.; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1987). Richard Bauckham raises the possibility of something like a preterist interpretation at a number of points but rejects it (*Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary no. 50 [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983]).

Another difficulty with Chilton's treatment is that he is content to point to passages where the destruction of the "heavens and earth" is obviously used to describe an historical event, the collapse of a political-religious order. It is increasingly acknowledged among New Testament scholars that this language can be used in this metaphorical sense, but it also has to be established that Peter is using this terminology in this way. The language of resurrection, to take a parallel example, can be used to describe Israel's national resurrection (e.g., Ezek. 37), but the church has never taken the resurrection of 1 Corinthians 15 in this sense. I cannot say that this commentary moves from possibility to absolute certainty, but I hope to show that within 2 Peter the probability that Peter is using the terminology metaphorically is quite high.

Finally, I should note that many of the preterist interpretations of Peter's letter have been offered by commentators who believe that *all* New Testament prophecies were fulfilled in A.D. 70, even the resurrection of the dead that Paul predicts in 1 Corinthians 15.⁸ This book will not address this viewpoint in any detail, but I must register here my strongest disagreement with it, since I consider it heretical. Though commentators sometimes twist 1 Corinthians 15 into a prophecy of the national resurrection of Israel or a description of bodiless life after death, it is perfectly evident in the context that this is not what Paul is talking about. To come to the latter conclusion, one must thoroughly overturn the common biblical understanding of "resurrection," turning it into what N. T. Wright has recently called "a new and exciting way of speaking about death."⁹ But the structural premise of Paul's entire argument is the parallel between Jesus' resurrection and ours, and Jesus was at pains to show His disciples that He rose from the dead with a

⁸ See, for example, Max King, *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ: The Two Dimensions of One Age-Changing Eschaton* (Warren: Parkman Road Church of Christ, 1987).

⁹ *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

body that could consume food, that had bones, that could be touched and felt (e.g., Lk. 24:39). Resurrection, to cite Wright again, is not “life after death” but “life after life after death.”¹⁰

Nor can 1 Corinthians 15 be a description of the national resurrection of Israel, the formation of a “New Israel” during the first century. While such a resurrection of Israel did occur in the first century, Paul is not talking about that in 1 Corinthians 15. The resurrection that Paul describes will occur at the “end,” when all rule and authority has been subjected to the reign of Jesus and when the “last enemy,” death, has been defeated (vv. 24–26). Again, if language means anything at all, this cannot be a description of something that happened in the first century, for it is too obvious to mention that death has not been defeated. Paul is not talking about what John calls the “first resurrection” (Rev. 20:5), whatever that might be, but about the resurrection that takes place after the Millennium, the resurrection to judgment, the resurrection followed by the final evacuation of death and Hades (Rev. 20:11–15).

Further, the “hyper-preterist” must reduce the Millennium of Revelation 20 to a symbolic description of a forty-year period between the resurrection of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem. Whatever the difficulties of Revelation 20, one clear conclusion is that the “thousand years” symbolizes a significant period of time. When not used literally, the number one thousand is used consistently to describe things that are literally far more than one thousand:

For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. (Ps. 50:10)

For a thousand years in Thy sight are like yesterday when it passes by or as a watch in the night. (Ps. 90:4)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

He remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations. (Ps. 105:8)

It is nonsense to use “one thousand years” to symbolize a generation.

By arguing that the entire letter is about Jesus’ prophecy concerning the coming crisis of Jerusalem and Judaism, therefore, I hope to bolster the preterist interpretation of chapter 3 and make the preterist framework more plausible to students of 2 Peter. To gain a hearing, however, I aim for much more than a hearing, for I will argue that the argument of the letter is only coherent if it is interpreted in a preterist framework. Along the way, therefore, I highlight five reasons (bold-faced, indented, and labeled as “Knock-Down Arguments” for the reader’s convenience) why the letter *must* be interpreted preteristically if it is going to be accepted as a genuine letter at all. By the end of the book, I expect the opposing views to be lying on the canvas in a state of semiconsciousness. But the best argument for a preterist interpretation of 2 Peter will be the sense it is able to make of the letter as a whole. Persuasion, if it comes, will come more through abduction than deduction.

WHO WROTE 2 PETER TO WHOM?

Questions of authorship, date, and original audience can seem like the tedious preoccupations of theological nerds. There is a good reason for that perception: these discussions are often tedious when they are not far worse. Yet several introductory questions are relevant to my interpretation of 2 Peter and require some attention. This section might be labeled “Please Bear with the Nerd.”

Even in the early church, the letter’s authenticity was questioned. Although Origen referred to it without hesitation, Eusebius mentioned that Peter left one “disputed” epistle. Nowadays it is common, even among evangelical commentators, to see the letter as an example of *pseudepigrapha*—a work written under the name of an authoritative figure by someone else. Scholars deny

Peter's authorship for various reasons. Some understand the personal allusions contained in the book as a literary device common in ancient pseudepigraphic writings. The self-identification of the author as "Sim[e]on Peter" rather than "Peter" (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1), it is argued, is an obvious attempt by the author to link himself with the Simon Peter of gospels. The claim to be an eyewitness on the Mount of Transfiguration (1:16–18) is another of the author's clumsy attempts to cloak himself in Peter's mantle, but to the discerning modern scholar the phrase "holy mountain" (1:18) gives him away as a second-century Christian who was interested in shrines and holy spaces in a way that the real Peter could not have been. The author gives himself away again in 3:16 by referring to "all" of Paul's letters as a fixed collection, which reveals again that he is living much later than the middle of the first century. And he blunders royally in 3:4, when he describes the first generation of Christians as "fathers" who have "fallen asleep," for how can he be Peter if the apostolic generation is dead? Some have argued, furthermore, that the situation described by the epistle is too late for Peter's day (Peter died c. 65), since the heresies described in 2 Peter 2 are like second-century gnosticism, and it is of course impossible that there could be any first-century movements like them. Other scholars have pointed to the marked difference in style between 1 Peter and 2 Peter, pointing out (rightly) that the Greek style of the latter is far more stilted and ornamented than that of the former, and recognizing that it is improbable that a single writer could write, say, *both* children's tales about adventures in a world called Narnia *and* erudite historical studies of English literature. In content, finally, the book employs a number of Hellenistic terms and concepts that would have been over the head of a Galilean fisherman.

I will not take time to defend Petrine authorship in any thorough way, though I trust the reader has caught the drift of my views from the sarcastic tone of the preceding paragraph. Still, several points

need to be addressed more directly. Clearly, a preterist reading of 2 Peter—one that claims that the letter is concerned with the end of the Old Creation in A.D. 70—has an investment in the authorship question. If, as is commonly believed, Peter died under Nero in the mid-60s and if Peter wrote the letter, then the letter must have been written before the fall of Jerusalem. Assuming that Peter died before A.D. 70, there are a number of logical possibilities: (A) Peter wrote the letter prior to A.D. 70; (B) Someone wrote the letter under Peter's name prior to A.D. 70; (C) Someone wrote the letter under Peter's name after A.D. 70.

Options A and B could support a preterist interpretation (though neither requires a preterist interpretation), but option C implies either that the letter is not about A.D. 70 or, if it is about A.D. 70, it is not a prophecy (since it was written after the fact). Most contemporary scholars prefer Option C, but there is one decisive reason why this must be rejected, and this same reason establishes Option A as the only possibility (assuming that the writer is the least bit honest). In 1:16, Peter assures his readers that the prophecies he reminds them about are reliable, since he was an eyewitness of the majesty of Christ on the “holy mountain” of the Transfiguration. The problem here is not simply a moral one—i.e., the fact that if the writer is not Peter, he is lying about being an eyewitness to the Transfiguration. Commentators normally dodge this objection by saying that all the readers would have recognized the pseudepigraphic nature of the letter and would have “played along.” The author's claim to have been with Jesus on the mountain would have been no more a lie than Lew Wallace's claim that Ben Hur witnessed the crucifixion. Fiction is not subject to the same standards of truth and falsity as a historical record.¹¹ We suspend disbelief and play along.

¹¹ Bauckham, who claims that 2 Peter is pseudepigraphal, says of 1:16: “it is . . . beside the point to connect the emphasis on eyewitness testimony with the

The idea that pseudepigraphic writings were common and commonly accepted in the early church is in fact untrue. Church fathers frequently condemned pseudepigrapha as forgeries and without any authority. The more serious problem, however, is internal to 2 Peter: the argument of chapter 1 simply collapses if Peter is not Peter. Peter cites his presence at the Transfiguration to prove that “the prophetic word” can be relied on. If Peter was already dead and someone else was writing under his name, the writer’s opponents have an obvious response: “No, you weren’t!” The mockers who are denying the “promise of His coming” (1:16; 3:4) would not be impressed with a claim that the promise of Jesus’ coming was backed up by an eyewitness who was not really an eyewitness.¹² I’m with the fathers: if the writer was not Peter, then he was an unscrupulous liar who is not worthy of our confidence in any other respect.

Neither Option B nor C can handle Peter’s affirmation in 1:16. If the letter has a persuasive and coherent argument at all, then it must have been written by Peter, and if Peter wrote the letter, then it must have been written before the fall of Jerusalem.

But to whom?

pseudepigraphical nature of the letter. The author is not trying to bolster his own authority by claiming, falsely, to be an eyewitness of the Transfiguration. He is simply adducing Peter’s testimony as evidence that the event took place as he narrates it, and puts it in the first person form because of the literary convention he is following. In another sort of literary work he could have reported Peter’s testimony in the third person, to the same effect” (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 216). To the first point: Bauckham notwithstanding, it is surely the case that the writer is bolstering his own authority by claiming to be an eyewitness. Anyone who says of an event “I saw it happen” is attempting to support his competence to report on the incident. To the second point: third-person testimony does *not* have the same effect as eyewitness testimony, as even the least competent lawyer could have told Bauckham.

¹²This point is all the stronger when we recall the significance of witnesses in biblical law and Israelite social life. The Ten Words condemn a witness who gives false testimony, and false witnesses were severely punished (Deut. 5, 19).

ALIENS OF THE DIASPORA

The recipients of 2 Peter are not named in the book, but there are several hints and clues that help to identify them, at least in general terms. In 2 Peter 3:1, Peter says, “This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder.” Possibly Peter means a letter no longer extant, but it is more likely that he is referring to the letter that we have in our Bibles as 1 Peter. The strongest evidence for this comes from a comparison of the phrasing and themes of the two letters. John H. Elliott’s summary is worth citing:¹³

<i>1 Peter</i>	<i>2 Peter</i>
1:1 “Peter”	1:1 “Peter”; cf. 3:1
1:1 etc. “elect”	1:10, “election”; cf. Jude 2
1:2 greeting	1:2; cf. Jude 2
1:3, 17 “Father”	1:17
1:7, 13; 4:13; 5:1, 4	1:16, revelation, coming of
1:7 etc. “glory”	1:3 etc.
1:10–11 “prophets”	1:20–21; 3:2
1:14–16, etc. “holy”	3:11, 14; Jude 20
1:15, 19 [spotless]	3:14
1:17; 4:5, 17 “judgment”	3:7
1:19 [spotless]	3:14; cf. 2:13
1:22; 2:17; 3:8; 4:8; 5:9 [love]	3:7
2:12; 3:2 <i>epoptueo</i>	1:16
2:16 [freedom]	2:19
3:19 “disobedient angel-spirits”	2:4; cf. Jude 6
3:20, Noah, Flood	2:5; 3:6
4:2–4 [dissipation of unbelievers]	2:5; 3:6

¹³ *1 Peter*, Anchor Bible, vol. 37B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 141. Elliott does not accept Petrine authorship of 2 Peter and cites these parallels merely to establish “affinities” between the two books, suggesting that “both documents are products of different authors of a Petrine circle in Rome” (141). See the similar list of parallels in Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, 15.

4:7 [end of all things]	3:10
4:11d [doxology]	3:18b
4:19 “creator”	3:5

The fact that both letters deal with Jesus’ coming is of particular importance for my purposes. Peter says specifically that he had earlier taught his readers about “the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:16), and in chapter 3 he reminds them of teaching them about events of the “last days” and the promise of a “new heavens and new earth” (3:3, 13). In both cases, Peter says that he was simply reminding readers of what he had already told them, in the first letter at least and perhaps also in other ways (3:1). The “last days” and the coming “day” of judgment are themes of 1 Peter. As Elliott’s list indicates, a coming judgment or revelation is mentioned several times in 1 Peter:

[You are] protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1:5)

In this [affliction] you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various temptations, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1:6–7)

Gird the loins of your mind for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1:13)

[The Gentiles] are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you; but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. . . . The end of all things is at hand. (4:4–5, 7)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. (4:13)

For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (4:17)

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you. . . . And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading wreath of glory. (5:1, 4)

In several of these passages, Peter explicitly states that there is an event on his readers' immediate horizon (1 Pet. 1:5; 4:4–5, 7, 17). Even some of the passages that lack an explicit time reference refer to an event that is about to happen. The “revelation of Jesus Christ” in 1 Peter 1:7 and 1:13 is doubtless the same event as the coming of “a salvation . . . to be revealed in the last time” in 1:5, and therefore the time reference of 1:5 (“ready to be revealed”) applies also to the manifestation of Jesus in verses 7 and 13. The revelation of Jesus, moreover, is likely the same event as the appearance of the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4). Given these passages, it makes sense for Peter to say that he has already “made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:16) and that his “second letter” is written to remind his readers of “words spoken beforehand . . . by your apostles” (2 Pet. 3:1), including Peter himself.

The connection between 1 and 2 Peter makes a *prima facie* case for a preterist interpretation of the latter. If 1 Peter is about a revelation that is “ready” to come, about an “end of all things” that is “at hand,” about a judgment that is “ready to begin” at the house of God,

then 2 Peter, which is a reminder of things taught in the previous letter, must be about the same topic. Anyone reading the second letter with a knowledge of the first (which Peter assumes) would naturally assume that he was talking about the *same* imminent “coming” that he talked about in the earlier letter.

Knock-Down Argument #1:

Peter wrote his second letter on the theme of the coming of Jesus, which he says was also a theme of his first letter, which is 1 Peter. Since 1 Peter’s teaching about the “coming” of Jesus highlights its imminence, 2 Peter must be dealing with the same looming event.

If Peter wrote both letters to the same Christians, who *are* these recipients? 1 Peter 1:1–2 describes them as “those who reside as aliens, scattered” throughout Asia Minor. “Aliens” is a literal description of their geographic and political condition, rather than a description of a spiritual condition. They are residing in an alien land rather than in their homeland. Peter also describes them as being “scattered,” employing a Greek word related to *diaspora*. By Peter’s time, *diaspora* had become a technical term for the dispersion of the Jews from the time of the Babylonian captivity, and so it is possible that Peter is writing to the scattered Jews, living as aliens outside the land of promise. If so, these are Jewish *believers*, not Jews in general. They are a chosen people, as Israel was, but they are chosen to “obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood,” and they are awaiting the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:7). Peter may be writing, then, to diaspora Jews who converted to Christ through the preaching of various apostles, perhaps including Paul (1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 3:15).

That the recipients are Jewish believers may be supported by Peter’s use of Old Testament terms and phrases to describe them

and their relationship with Jesus. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone laid “in Zion” (1 Pet. 2:6). Those who are outside the community are “Gentiles” (1 Pet. 2:12; 4:3), and therefore the recipients are to think of themselves as “Jews.” Even the description “not being a people” (1 Pet. 2:10) is drawn from Hosea’s description of the adultery and restoration of Israel. According to Hosea, Yahweh treated them as “not a people” but then wooed them back to become His people (Hos. 1:10; 2:23).¹⁴ Yet commentators on 1 Peter almost all agree that the letter was written to *Gentiles* and give several arguments to support this conclusion. One is that Peter describes his readers as formerly being controlled by lust and ignorance, committed to a “futile way of life inherited from your forefathers” (1 Pet. 1:14, 18). These seem to describe people who have formerly been worshippers of “vain” or “futile” idols. Further, 4:3–4 recall that the readers have engaged in “abominable idolatries.”¹⁵

I do not find these arguments for a Gentile audience persuasive. Peter recognized that the Jews were “ignorant” in regard to Christ (Acts 3:17), and even Peter’s description of the “futile way of life” inherited from their forefathers and their “idolatries” might reasonably be applied to Jews. For many centuries, after all, Israel had been a nation of idolaters, setting up high places, worshiping Baals and Asherah, burning incense to golden calves. Paul certainly was capable of describing Israel’s history as a history of futility and idolatry. In Romans 1, he brings God’s case against humanity in general, but his indictment includes a sharp attack on Jews in particular. When Paul says that foolish men have “exchanged the glory

¹⁴The famed early church historian Eusebius understood 1 Peter as a letter addressed to the Jews of the dispersion.

¹⁵Hillyer’s summary is concise: “The readers Peter had in mind seem to have been a mixed group, though mainly Gentile Christians, for he refers to their pre-conversion days in terms of ignorance of the true God (1:14), their earlier way of life (1:18), previous spiritual darkness (2:18), and pagan vices (4:3–4)” (*1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, 4).

of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” (Rom. 1:23), he is quoting from Psalm 106, which is a poetic description of the golden calf incident. Israel, as much as the Gentiles (or more), had “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25).¹⁶ Jews as much as Gentiles became “futile in their speculations” (Rom. 1:21), and the word “futile” here is the verb form of the noun used in 1 Peter 1:18 (*mataios, mataioo*). More generally, it is not at all unusual for Scripture to describe the Israelites’ idolatry as leading to futility,¹⁷ even futility inherited from the fathers:

Thus says Yahweh, “What injustice did your fathers find in Me, that they went far from Me and walked after emptiness (LXX: *mataios*) and became empty (LXX: *mataioo*)?” (Jer. 2:5)

Thus says Yahweh, “Do not learn the ways of the nations . . . for the customs of the peoples are futility (LXX: *mataios*); because it is wood cut from the forest, the work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool.” (Jer. 10:2–3)

Every man is stupid, devoid of knowledge; every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols; for his molten images are deceitful, and there is no breath in them. They are worthless (LXX: *mataios*), a work of mockery; in the time of their punishment they will perish. (Jer. 10:14–15)

These references from Jeremiah are particularly important: Jeremiah was warning Judah and Jerusalem of an impending catastrophe because of their devotion to futility; Peter, an apostolic Jeremiah as well as an apostolic Moses (see below), does the same.

¹⁶Thanks to Kevin Bywater for this suggestion.

¹⁷Thanks again to Kevin Bywater, who suggested these connections in a phone conversation, May 19, 2003.

The Jewish forefathers' way of life was "futile" in several ways. In Romans, Paul charges that they inherited futile idolatry and human traditions, following in the ways of their fathers, just as many of the kings of Judah and Israel walked in the ways of idolatrous predecessors. Furthermore, the Old Covenant itself did not achieve the end of final salvation and thus was ultimately futile. The law, weak through the flesh, could not bring the forgiveness of sins or the new life of the resurrection (Rom. 8: 1–4). While describing the readers as participating in Gentile lusts and idolatries, 1 Peter 4:3–4 clearly distinguishes between the readers and the "Gentiles." With these considerations in mind, I conclude that 1 Peter was addressed to Jewish believers who have been redeemed from Judaism by Christ.¹⁸

By focusing on Peter's use of *diaspora*, we can be more specific about the circumstances of the original readers. Though this term was used in Jewish literature to describe the scattering of Jews following the Exile, the New Testament uses the word predominantly for another "scattering." After Stephen was stoned, Jews led by Saul began persecuting the church in earnest, and because of this, believers in Jerusalem were "scattered." (In Acts 8:1 the word is the verbal form of *diaspora*, and 8:4 repeats the statement.) Acts 11:19 mentions others scattered by this persecution going out as far as Cyprus, Antioch, and Phoenicia, as if picking up on the story line of 8:1: "So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews alone." In the very next verse, we read of the first efforts to proclaim Jesus to Gentiles (11:20). Thus, the diaspora from Jerusalem led immediately to the Gentile mission, which emanated from

¹⁸ My preterist interpretation of 2 Peter does not, however, depend on this identification of the audience. Gentile believers scattered through Asia Minor would also have had interest in the impending destruction of the Old Covenant order.

Antioch.¹⁹ The New Testament records a diaspora of the Jerusalem church, scattered because of the attack of another “Babylon” (1 Pet. 5:13), which is Jerusalem. Like other descriptions of Israel (the people, seed of Abraham, sons of God, etc.), the New Testament applies *disapora* predominantly to the church.

This gives us an insight into the situation into which Peter wrote his second letter: the recipients are Jewish believers who are no longer living in Jerusalem, their home city, because of persecution. In 1 Peter, the apostle gives them hope and comfort in the midst of their sufferings, assuring them that a judgment is awaiting their persecutors, which will soon be carried out (1 Pet. 4:3–5, 7, 17; 5:4). Their suffering will be vindicated, the blood of the martyrs will be poured out upon the city, and the Avenger of blood will arise to take vengeance. In this context, 2 Peter 3:1–2 also makes sense—given the passage of time, it is important for Peter to write again to give reassurances. In his first letter, he had used strong language to convey the imminence of the judgment: the “end of all things” is near (1 Pet. 4:7), and it is “time for judgment to begin from the household of God” (4:17). But time passed and more and more of the apostles died, and nothing happened. Some, particularly the persecutors whom the church hoped would be judged, began to mock the Christians’ expectation and hope for vindication. They raise doubts that the judgment is going to happen at all, and some believers have broken under the pressure. An apostasy is beginning, and the focus is on the failure of Christ to return. Peter writes to assure his readers that what he predicted in his earlier letter *will* come to pass.

¹⁹ I take James 1:1 in the same sense: the “twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad” are Jewish believers who have been scattered by the persecution of Jews. In my view, the only New Testament passage that uses *diaspora* in the typical Jewish sense is John 7:35: “He is not intending to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks, is He?”

Though this reconstruction is admittedly too speculative to use as a basis for a preterist interpretation of 2 Peter, it is obviously consistent with such an interpretation.²⁰

STRUCTURE

2 Peter is laid out in roughly a chiasmic outline, a fact that will guide us at a number of points in our interpretation of the letter:

- A. Fruitfulness in knowledge of Christ, 1:1–11
- B. Reminder of the power and coming of Christ, 1:12–21
- C. False prophets, 2:1–3
- D. God knows how to protect the righteous, 2:4–10a
- C'. False teachers, 2:10b–22
- B'. Reminder of the day of the Lord, 3:1–13
- A'. Encouragement to perseverance, 3:14–18

²⁰ It also fits with portions of Revelation that highlight the unique role that Jewish believers, and their martyrdom, play in the coming of the New Creation. See Revelation 6:9–10; 7:1–8; 14:1–5, 14–20; 16–17. James Jordan's treatment of this theme in Revelation is highly compressed but gets matters exactly right (see *A Brief Readers' Guide to Revelation*, passim).

In the light of all this, the phrase “second letter” is significant. The Greek is “*deuteran . . . epistolen*,” which echoes with “Deuteronomy” (*deuteros nomos*)—the second giving of the law, and suggests that Peter sees himself in the situation of Moses in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy, Moses preached on the law and oversaw a “second giving” of the law for the generation that had grown up in the wilderness to prepare them to enter the land and conquer. The parallels with 2 Peter are numerous. Peter was writing to people who had not seen the “signs and wonders” that Jesus did while on earth. They were not on the “holy mountain,” the new Sinai (Exod. 19:23). They did not see the glory of the Lord revealed on the Mountain of Transfiguration. They did not hear the voice on the mountain, but Peter-Moses did, and he comes as a witness to tell them of things which they did not see or hear. Like Deuteronomy, 2 Peter is Peter's “last will and testament” (1:13–14). Because Peter knows that his earthly tabernacle is fading away, he sets down on paper what he has to tell the people, so that when he is gone they will be able to bring things to mind (v. 15). Similarly, Deuteronomy records sermons that Moses delivered at the end of his life. Just as Moses did not enter the Promised Land, Peter will not live to

In a chiasm, the corresponding sections (for example, A and A') share themes, content, or wording. Within 2 Peter, there are correspondences between the sections in at least the following ways.

A/A': The two A sections are connected by verbal links ("be diligent," 1:10, 15; 3:14) and more generally by the fact that both are exhortations. They are also linked by the theme of "knowledge" (1:2, 3, 6, 8; 3:18) and by the fact that both contain blessings (in the greeting of 1:2 and in the farewell of 3:17–18).

B/B': These sections include language of remembrance and recollection (1:12, 13, 15; 3:1, 2). Both, moreover, employ the phrase "know this first of all" (1:20; 3:3), and both are concerned with the "day" (1:19; 3:12) and the "coming" of Jesus (1:16; 3:4). Substantively, both sections address doubts about the reliability of Jesus' promise to come to rescue His people.

C/C': These sections are linked by a common concern for false prophecy or false teaching. Chapter 2 begins with a reference to Israel's history of false prophecy (v. 1), and one of these false prophets, Balaam, is mentioned in verses 15–16. In both, Peter accuses his opponents of "sensuality" (2:3, 18), apostasy (2:1, 20–22), and false words or heresies (2:1, 18). Both sections employ the image of a "way" or "path" to describe a manner of living (2:2, 15), and both deal with the greed of the opponents (2:3, 14–15).

D: The central section of Peter's epistle contains his assurance, based on several Old Testament events, that the Lord will judge

see the "new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13). Peter wants to ensure that there is continuity from one generation to the next, which is certainly a key theme of Deuteronomy as well. As the apostolic generation (the generation that came out from "Egypt") dies out, he wants to encourage those who remain to take their inheritance. This setting makes an emphasis on approaching judgment enormously interesting to his audience. They have been scattered from Jerusalem, the blood of their brothers has been drunk by the harlot, and now Peter is saying that judgment is going to fall on Jerusalem, that she will not escape scot-free. Jerusalem is a new Jericho, as it is in Acts and Revelation, ready to fall at the coming of Peter's "God and Savior," Jesus.

and will rescue His own in the midst of judgment. The beginning of this section is fairly clear: verse 4 turns from a warning about the false prophets to an assurance that the Lord will judge. But the end of the section is more difficult to determine. Verse 9 is the conclusion to the series of “if” statements (vv. 4, 6, 7), but whether the first half of verse 10 concludes this section or begins another is difficult to determine. I have, based on grammatical considerations that we need not detail, divided verse 10 in the middle, following the NASB in seeing verse 10a as the concluding clause of verse 9 and verse 10b as the beginning of a new section of polemic against the false teachers.

One implication of this structure is that the letter is a connected whole, dealing with one main theme, namely, the power and coming of Jesus and false prophets who deny His power and coming. The issue of the “last days” or the “new heavens and new earth” does not arise for the first time at the end of the letter. Given the chiasmic connection between the beginning and end, if the timing of “day” at the beginning can be determined with some certainty, so might the other. If I can show that 1:12–21 is about an imminent day of judgment, it will follow that 3:1–13 is as well.

According to John Breck, chiasms not only function “statically” with balancing sections on either side of a central section, but also function “dynamically,” so that the text circles in toward a central point. The first of each pair of corresponding sections makes a statement, which the second of the pair amplifies; the writer says *A* and then, what’s more, *A*’.²¹ With regard to 2 Peter, the structure works as follows.

A/A’: Peter urges his readers to put on Christian virtue (*A*), and, what’s more, warns them before of the challenges they will face in living holy lives (*A*’).

²¹ Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1994).

B/B': Peter can testify to the truth of Jesus' promised coming (B), and, what's more, this promise will be fulfilled in spite of delays and mockery (B').

C/C': The mockers are not worth listening to because they have denied Jesus (C), and, what's more, they will themselves be destroyed (C').

D: We know that God can and will destroy the false teachers and mockers, and rescue His children, because He consistently has done this in the past.

In short, the central thrust of the book as a whole is not merely to give information about the coming day of God. Peter's main goal is pastoral, to prepare the flock for the difficulties ahead and to assure them that God, the Judge of all the earth, will do right and will not let the righteous perish with the wicked when He comes to destroy a new Sodom.