

2PETER

The Second Letter of Peter

Introduction

The author identifies himself as ‘Simeon Peter’(1:1). He gives no identification of those to whom he is writing except to say that they share his faith (1:1), and that he has written to them once before (see 3:1). It has been revealed to him that he is about to die (1:14), and he wants them to have this letter to strengthen them against erroneous ideas that he knows will seek to undermine their faith.

The majority of scholars agree that the author is not Peter the apostle. The author has considerable rhetorical skill and his Greek is among the best of the New Testament writers. However, in the light of the widespread use of Greek in Palestine in the first century, neither the author’s style nor his mastery of the Greek language are necessarily beyond the ability and education of an intelligent Galilean fisherman committed to a mission that took him beyond the boundaries of his native land. More persuasive is the fact that the author claims to know Paul’s letters which he speaks of as part of the tradition which his readers can trust (see 3:15-16). This sounds like the kind of thing a second or third generation Christian leader might write. In *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Doubleday, 1997), Raymond Brown sums up the conclusions of modern scholarship when he states that the case for 2Peter being a pseudonymous writing is clearer than for any other New Testament book. On the subject of pseudonymity we refer the reader to the Introduction to 1Peter. 2Peter fits one of the classical types of pseudonymous writings: the final testament of a famous patriarchal figure. However, though all the evidence points to Peter the apostle not being the author, we would do well to join tradition in hearing Peter’s voice echoing in that of one of his disciples.

The ideas against which he writes were widespread in the Hellenistic world. Many writers attempted to counter them as they were judged to undermine religion generally. One of the main movements judged responsible for the irreligious teaching was that of the Epicureans, who considered that pleasure was the main goal in living and that religion, on the whole, was an obstacle to people’s attaining maximum pleasure. They were certainly not advocating living a life without discipline. On the contrary, for experience soon teaches anyone that lack of discipline does not lead to sustainable pleasure. Nor did they deny the existence of a divine realm. Their argument was that if the gods were to live in bliss, they could not afford to be distracted by human good or evil, or have the duty to reward the one and punish the other. In any case, so they argued, it is so obvious that evil often prospers, that it is folly to assume that there is a rational order behind the universe as we experience it. Things are the way they are. Things happen by chance and in a random fashion, not by a divinely ordained pattern. The best we can do is to seek pleasure, and to live in a way that is as free from fear as possible. Thoughts of an afterlife are a distraction, as are claims to prophecy. Seeking rewards and attempting to avoid punishment can only result in fear and anxiety.

There is abundant evidence of the presence of these and related ideas in the Roman and Greek worlds of the first century of our era. That they were also known in the Jewish world is also clear, as is indicated by the following Aramaic targum on the Cain-Abel narrative of Genesis 4. In it Cain says:

I know that the world was not created by love, that it is not governed according to the fruit of good deeds ... There is no judgment. There is no Judge. There is no other world. There is no gift of good reward for the just, and no punishment for the wicked.

The author appears to be prophesying the coming of errors which are going to trouble his readers at a future time. We should probably work on the assumption that they are actually already troubling the community, and that our anonymous author is writing in Peter's name to highlight for his readers the apostolic tradition which these errors are undermining. He chooses to write in Peter's name, not only because of Peter's leading role among the apostles, but also because prophecy and revelation are at the heart of the problems which he is addressing, and the gospel record frequently presents Peter as the subject of special revelations. One thinks of Peter's recognition of Jesus as the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi, to which Jesus replies: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven' (Matthew 16:17). One thinks of the Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:1-7), which is explicitly recalled in the letter (see 1:17-18). Peter was among those to whom Jesus had foretold the advent of false prophets (see Matthew 24:11,24), something that is also mentioned here (2:1-3). Jesus revealed to him also the matter of the parousia (see Matthew 24:8,29-31,36) and that judgment would come 'like a thief in the night' (Matthew 24:43). These matters are central to the argument of the letter (see 3:8-13). According to Matthew's account, it was in response to a remark by Peter that Jesus spoke about 'the renewal of all things' (Matthew 19:28). The author wishes to speak of this as well (see 3:11-12).

Peter was known to Origen. The oldest complete manuscript copy is papyrus Codex P⁷² from c.300AD. Early in the fourth century Eusebius includes it, along with Jude, as among the 'disputed books' (*History of the Church*, 3.25.3). It is included in the fourth century parchment codexes Vaticanus and Sinaiticus and in the fifth century parchment codex Alexandrinus.

Structure

Opening address	1:1-2
Introduction	1:3-15
1. Prophecy of the parousia	1:16-18
2. Interpretation of the prophecy	1:19-21
3. Divine judgment	2:1-10a
Digression	2:10b-22
4. The divine word of judgment	3:1-7
5. The delay of judgment	3:8-13
Conclusion	3:14-18

Lectionary Readings

1:1-7	9th Monday of Ordinary Time, Year II
1:16-19	Feast of Transfiguration (6th August)
3:8-14	2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B
3:12-15a,17-18	9th Tuesday of Ordinary Time, Year II

¹Simeon Peter, a servant [‘slave’] and apostle of Jesus Christ,

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

²May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

‘Simeon’ (Greek: $\square\square\square\square\square$) is a transliteration of the Semitic form of the personal name which is more commonly expressed in Greek as ‘ $\square\square\square\square$ ’ (Simon). It is found only here and in James’s address to the Jerusalem Assembly (see Acts 15:14). The letter is being written in the name of ‘Simon, who is called Peter’ (Matthew 4:18), the leader of the Twelve. When he speaks of himself as a ‘slave of Jesus Christ’, he is claiming Jesus as his ‘lord’ to whom he is committed heart and soul. He is also thinking of Jesus as the ‘Servant of the Lord’, the humble and self-giving one who gave himself totally to obedience to his Father’s will. At the same time, it is a claim to official status. Like Moses, Joshua, David and the other great leaders and prophets of Israel, who are also described as ‘servants’, he has been chosen to act for God in the affairs of the people. It is this official ministry that is reinforced when he refers to himself also as ‘apostle’. He is one of those whom the risen Christ commissioned to carry on his mission to the world (see Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:8), and he is writing this letter with the authority given to him through that commission.

He speaks of his own ‘faith’ and the faith of those to whom he is writing as something ‘precious’, a word he will use later of God’s promises (1:4). He is immediately signalling the main topic of his letter, for it is this faith that is being threatened by ideas that could undermine the community and rob them of a gift from God that is worth more than anything else, for it is their hope for an eternal communion of love with God.

The source of the gift of faith is, of course, God. However, God has chosen to redeem us from sin and death through Jesus who is referred to here as our ‘Saviour’. Luke also refers to Jesus as ‘Saviour’ (2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:25), as does Paul (Ephesians 5:23; Philippians 3:20; Titus 1:4; 3:6; 2Timothy 1:10) and John (4:42; 1John 4:4). Later our author will refer to Jesus as ‘our Lord and Saviour’ (1:11; 2:20; 3:2,18).

It is possible that the author distinguishes between God and Jesus in verse one as is normal in the New Testament and as he does in verse two. However, it is also possible that in verse one he is speaking of Jesus not only as Saviour, but also as ‘God’. From the Gospel of John and from the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, it is clear that by the end of the first century Jesus was being referred to as ‘God’. This was happening within the context of absolute monotheism, and was an expression of the complete communion in love that exists between the risen Christ and the God he spoke of as ‘Father’.

The author focus particularly on Jesus' 'righteousness'; that is to say on the fact that he can be relied on always to judge and to act according to who he is. Here, too, he is indicating what will be the main theme of the letter, for it is precisely the justice of God that is being denied in the false teaching against which the author is writing. God is just. God can be relied on to keep his promises. God cannot be deceived and the choices which we make to welcome or to reject grace really matter. Our eternal destiny depends upon our choices, for we will, indeed, reap their fruit, by either enjoying with Christ or not enjoying with him the communion of love which we have been promised. We will either experience eternal salvation, or we will be eternally trapped in an existence of separation from the divine love for which we were created, for which Christ gave his life, and for which our souls crave.

The author repeats the blessing-prayer from 1Peter: 'May grace and peace be yours in abundance' (1Peter 1:2; see the commentary). He goes on to explain that it is by acknowledging 'God' and by acknowledging 'Jesus our Lord' that we open ourselves to the grace and peace which is being offered in abundance to us.

³His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence [NRSV 'goodness'].

God is not only the source of our existence, giving us life, but is also continually involved with us 'giving us everything needed for life'. As noted in the Introduction, and as will become clear as the letter proceeds, this was something which was being scoffed at by the teachers who were undermining the faith of the community. They acknowledged that God created the world, but claimed that, having created it, God left it to its own resources: 'all things continued as they were from the beginning of creation'(3:4).

For our author, God is not only constantly providing what we need for life, but is also giving us 'everything that is needed for 'godliness'(Greek: *eusebeia*). 'Godliness'(Latin: *pietas*) was considered of the utmost importance in the Roman world, as it consists in an attitude of reverence for the gods shown in religious worship and in respect for the order that is sanctioned by the gods. It is close to our concept of 'religion'. It occurs three more times in this letter (1:6,7; 3:11), but not in 1Peter.

Though the Hebrew 'fear of the Lord' is normally translated literally in the Septuagint, in three texts it is translated by *eusebeia* (Proverbs 1:7; Isaiah 11:2; 33:6). The spirit that is given to the Davidic king includes 'the spirit of knowledge and *eusebeia* (fear of the Lord)'(Isaiah 11:2). It is found also in Sirach where the original Hebrew is *ḥsd*. King Josiah is praised because he 'kept his heart fixed on the Lord; in lawless times he made godliness (*eusebeia*) prevail'(Sirach 49:3).

The Jewish authors were attempting to build a bridge between the Jewish faith and the surrounding culture. We might surmise that our author is doing the same, recognising the importance of 'baptising' the Roman 'pietas', by directing it to the true, living God as revealed in Christ. The key point being asserted here is that it is God who initiates our relationship to him, and who is continually gracing us to respond and to enjoy divine communion. God is very much involved in our lives at every level. We must reject the teaching of those who claim that God does not relate to us and who deny therefore God's divine power over creation (see 3:4), God's promises (see 1:19-21) and God's judgment (see 2:3; 3:9).

It is essential that we acknowledge God's call and God's excellence (Greek: *aretē*), and that this acknowledgment draws us to praise God by our lives. *aretē* is a favourite word among Greek moralists, often used as the equivalent of our 'virtue'. Apart from its use here we find it in the New Testament only in 1Peter 2:9 and Philippians 4:8.

In verse four, the author paints a picture of the alternatives between which we must choose. We can give in to ‘lust’ (Greek: epithumia), and, led by desire, exist in a condition described here as ‘corruption’ (Greek: phthora). He will give a striking, indeed horrible, picture of this kind of existence later in the letter, when he describes those who are ‘slaves of corruption, for people are slaves to whatever masters them’. They have let themselves be ‘entangled’ and ‘overpowered’ by desire, and are like dogs returning to their vomit, or sows wallowing in mud (see 2:19-22).

Do we really want to live like this? Through Jesus, God has not only rescued us from such corruption, but has promised us a life in which we are ‘participants of the divine nature’. John declares: ‘our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ’ (1John 1:3). The divine nature is, by definition, ‘incorruptible’. We recall Paul’s words:

The dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability (aphtharsia), and this mortal body must put on immortality.

– 1Corinthians 15:52-53

The divine nature is ‘incorruptible’ because it is communion in the pure love which we see revealed in Jesus. If we discipline our desires and welcome the redemption from slavery that God is offering us through our Saviour Jesus, we will ‘lead lives of holiness and godliness’ (3:11) now, and enjoy what God has promised when Jesus comes in glory to welcome us into the fullness of life for which we are created.

In verses five to seven, therefore, the author speaks of a moral life in terms of eight qualities (seven for fullness, and eight as a recommencing of a continuous circle). He begins with ‘faith’ (see commentary on James 1:3), for everything depends on our openness to and welcoming of grace, and he ends with ‘love’ (see commentary on James 2:8), which, being our ‘sharing in the divine nature’, makes all the other qualities true expressions of life (compare Romans 5:1-5; 1Corinthians 13). A number of the virtues named here were highly valued in the Hellenistic world: ‘excellence’ (Greek: ἀρετή, see 1:3); ‘self-control’ (ἐπισημότητα, see Galatians 5:23; 1Corinthians 9:25; Titus 1:8); ‘godliness’ (θεοσεβεία, see 1:3); and ‘mutual affection’ (ἀγάπη, see commentary on Hebrews 13:1).

⁴Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises,

so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust,

and may become participants of the divine nature.

⁵For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with excellence [NRSV ‘goodness’], and excellence [NRSV ‘goodness’] with knowledge,

⁶and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness,

⁷and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.

⁸For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁹For anyone who lacks these things is near-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins.

¹⁰Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble.

¹¹For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

¹²Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. ¹³I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, ¹⁴since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. ¹⁵And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

For the third time the author speaks of 'knowledge'(Greek: $\sigma\upsilon\lambda\lambda\omicron\gamma\eta$; see 1:2,3). It includes the way we think—hence the importance of correct teaching, upon which the author will insist throughout the letter. It goes beyond thinking, however, for it includes 'acknowledgment', which is a matter of lifestyle and of gratitude and praise. More intimately, it picks up the Hebrew notion of 'knowing' in the sense of being in communion with someone in love. The author wants his readers to remain in this communion with 'our Lord Jesus Christ', and so with God. He does not want their lives to be 'ineffective and unfruitful'. We would do well to reflect here on what Paul calls 'the fruits of the Spirit' (Galatians 5:22-23). The author would want us to recall Jesus' solemn warning: 'I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom' (Matthew 21:43).

Can they possibly have forgotten what their lives used to be like, and what it meant to have been cleansed of their past sins? Do they want to go back to all that? They have been called and especially chosen for the privilege of living Jesus' life. If they listen to the erroneous ideas that are trying to undermine their faith, if they fail to acknowledge what God is doing among them, and if they fail to bear fruit in love, they will stumble and fall. If they discipline themselves to live as disciples of Jesus they are assured of what God has promised, and will 'enter into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'. This is something which the provident God has promised and which God will 'richly provide for you'.

Verses twelve to fifteen present this letter as the final testament to the church of the leader of the Twelve. In offering this testament, Simeon Peter is presented as following the example of the other 'servants of the Lord', Jacob (see Genesis 49), Moses (see Deuteronomy 33), Joshua (see Joshua 34), and, most importantly, Jesus himself (see John 14-17). A disciple of Peter, knowing the respect in which this great apostle was held, is attempting in this writing to present the apostolic tradition faithfully in order to secure third generation Christian communities against the scepticism and ridicule with which their beliefs are being treated.

We come here to the central issue. One effect of the resurrection of Jesus was to give rise in the minds of Jesus' disciples to an expectation that the goal of history was imminent. They eagerly awaited 'the coming (Greek: parousia) of our Lord Jesus Christ', with all that is implied about the faithful being taken into eternal life, the dead being raised, and our undergoing judgment according to the way we have chosen to live. Many documents of the New Testament witness to the adjustment in thinking that was forced upon the early Christians as time dragged on.

The whole idea of parousia and judgment is being ridiculed as another 'cleverly devised myth' by those who were also mocking the myths of Homer and of the other religious movements that were growing tired by the early second century. Christians were clearly feeling vulnerable to such scoffing.

While making no attempt to offer a temporal schedule for Christ's coming, the author is insisting on the permanent truth contained within the traditional teaching. Jesus will come. The dead will rise. People will be judged by a just judge, and human behaviour matters, eternally.

He reminds them that this was the teaching of no one less than 'Simeon Peter', the recipient of many revelations (see the Introduction). Here he recalls the scene which we are accustomed to call the Transfiguration (see Mark 9:2-8), though the words spoken by God are found in Mark's portrayal of Jesus' Baptism (Mark 1:11). Because of the way it is used in the synoptic gospels, we are also accustomed to locating it in the middle of Jesus' ministry.

First, we must remember that the gospels do not set out to be chronological records. We must look beyond chronology to discern the reason for the placing of events. Secondly, there is another tradition, found in the non-canonical work 'the Apocalypse of Peter', which places this scene on the mountain of the ascension. Writing before the canon was fixed, our author may well be thinking of this as a post-resurrection appearance. In any case, the synoptic gospels present it as a prophetic scene preparing the disciples for the resurrection. Whichever way we read it, Peter has seen the glory of the risen Christ, and it is Peter who assures us that this same Jesus will come in glory, 'just as you saw him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11).

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.

¹⁷For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

¹⁸We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

¹⁹So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

²⁰First of all you must understand this,

that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation,

²¹because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

The prophetic message to which the author is referring seems to be the one he has just mentioned, concerning 'the power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ', the idea of which is being scoffed at by those whose teaching the author is opposing. It is being 'more fully confirmed' because not only is it something revealed by God himself, but they have the testimony of Peter himself who witnessed it.

They are living in a 'dark place', amid 'the corruption that is in the world'(1:4). Simeon Peter's word is a word from God, a prophetic message which they can trust, given them by the leader of the apostles, and so by one who is guaranteed to be faithful to the tradition handed down by Jesus himself. The day, that is to say, 'the day of judgment'(2:9; 3:7), 'the day of the Lord'(3:10), 'the day of God'(3:12) will dawn. It will be issued in by the morning star (Greek: *phōsphoros*; Latin: *lucifer*), Christ himself coming in glory. We recall the promise of his earlier coming, announced by Zechariah: 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace'(Luke 1:78-79). We recall also Paul's words: 'Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you'(Ephesians 5:14).

Some interpret verses twenty to twenty-one as referring to interpretation of scripture by those reading it. In context, it seems more likely the author is referring to the word spoken by the prophet, in this case by Peter. The author is reminding his readers that the author of this prophetic word spoken by the prophet, Simeon Peter, is the Holy Spirit speaking from God. It is the same with all the other prophetic words that have come down to them through the tradition. They contain, not the private thoughts and interpretation of the prophets, but the word of God which is speaking through them. They would do well to be attentive to such words 'as to a light shining in a dark place'.

Though the author does not seem to be referring here to how we, the readers, should interpret scripture, we should remember that he did not live in an age of individualism. He would surely have assumed that we would interpret the inspired word within the community of faith that is the church. He would also surely expect that communal interpretation would be done 'in the Spirit'. The whole thrust of this letter is that interpretation of sacred scripture should be done in a way that is faithful to tradition.

The Old Testament scriptures witness to the fact that there are those who claim to be prophets but who are not ‘moved by the Holy Spirit’ (1:21). Jeremiah is always warning the people in this regard. Our author, writing from the perspective of Peter looking forward, describes the situation of the community in terms of a prophecy uttered by Peter in this his last testament. There are echoes here of warnings uttered by Jesus himself: ‘False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect’ (Mark 13:22). The bulk of the rest of the letter is concerned with correcting the ‘opinions’ (Greek: *haireisis*) of these ‘false teachers’, opinions which lead only to ‘destruction’. Those perpetrating these ideas may not consciously set out to deny God or to deny Jesus, but that is what they are doing by behaving in ways that show no fear of divine judgment from him who is their ‘Master’. They act as though they are masters of their own lives and can do as they wish. This is the same kind of practical atheism that is criticised in the psalms:

In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, ‘God will not seek it out’; all their thoughts are, ‘There is no God.’

– Psalm 10:4

Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds.

– Psalm 14:1

The word ‘Master’ (Greek: *despotēs*) comes from the language of slavery. The author introduced Peter as ‘a slave of Jesus’. Previously they were slaves to corruption, ‘for people are slaves to whatever masters them’ (2:19). Jesus gave himself in love for them, and so redeemed them from their former slavery (see 1Peter 1:18-19). He introduced them, as his slaves, into the household of God’s children, where they could enjoy divine communion in the freedom given them by love. They are denying their new Master and Lord. They are perpetrating in stealth destructive opinions, by denying judgment and God’s justice. They are behaving as though God was irrelevant to their lives. The author assures his readers that they will bring ‘destruction’ upon themselves, and swiftly. Their erroneous opinions go with their immoral lives, described in verses two to three in terms of being ‘licentious’ (Greek: *aselgeia*, ‘wanton’, ‘lawless’, ‘insolent’, see 1Peter 4:3), maligning ‘the way of truth’, motivated by ‘greed’ and practised in deception. There are echoes here of the words of Jude: ‘certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ’ (Jude verse four).

¹But false prophets also arose among the people,

just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions.

They will even deny the Master who bought them—

bringing swift destruction on themselves.

²Even so, many will follow their licentious ways,

and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligning.

³And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words.

^{3b}**Their condemnation, pronounced against them long ago, has not been idle, and their destruction is not asleep.**

⁴**For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into Tartarus [NRSV 'hell'] and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment;**

⁵**and if he did not spare the ancient world, even though he saved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood on a world of the ungodly;**

⁶**and if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made them an example of what is coming to the ungodly;**

⁷**and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the lawless**

⁸**(for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard),**

⁹**then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment**

¹⁰**—especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust, and who despise authority.**

Scholars describe these verses which form one single sentence in Greek as being 'elegant'. They also draw attention to the parallels here with the following from the letter of Jude:

The angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great Day. Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. Yet in the same way these dreamers also defile the flesh, reject authority, and slander the glorious ones.

– Jude 6-8

Both are drawing on a tradition that finds expression also in the Book of Sirach:

God did not forgive the ancient giants who revolted in their might. He did not spare the neighbours of Lot, whom he loathed on account of their arrogance ... Do not say, 'I am hidden from the Lord, and who from on high has me in mind?'

– Sirach 16:7-8,17

The author is drawing on these biblical examples to demonstrate that the wicked are punished and the just are rewarded. He uses examples for which there are parallels in Greek literature, as exemplified by his reference to Tartarus, recalling the defeat of the Titans in Hesiod (*Theogony*, 617-735).

Noah and Lot are presented to the readers as models, for they lived in a corrupt world, and retained their innocence and their faith in God. Those who 'despise authority', the authority of God, and so the authority of tradition, and, by implication, the authority of Simeon Peter, the leader of the Twelve, will suffer the effects of their behaviour, and will find themselves condemned on 'the day of judgment' which will certainly come.

The author has just accused the false teachers of denying the sovereign power of God and of despising those whom God has authorised to speak in his name. He now draws once again on the Letter of Jude, to accuse them of having the hide to insult those who will accompany the judge when he comes in glory (see Matthew 16:27; 24:31). They should learn from the angels: they do not slander and insult, for they know their place and leave judgment to God.

These dreamers also defile the flesh, reject authority, and slander the glorious ones. But when the archangel Michael contended with the devil and disputed about the body of Moses, he did not dare to bring a condemnation of slander against him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'

– Jude 8-9

In a manner that was expected in the debating procedures of the day, the author defends the honour of God by highlighting how dishonourable are those who are insulting God, even introducing their corrupting ideas at the agapē meal during which the community celebrated the Eucharist. Once again, he is drawing on and adapting Jude:

These people slander whatever they do not understand, and they are destroyed by those things that, like irrational animals, they know by instinct ... These are blemishes on your love-feasts.

– Jude 10,12

In popular literature, Balaam was noted for his lying, his seduction, his avarice and greed. The false teachers are presenting themselves as the rational ones who ridicule the foolish 'myths' to which their Christian brothers and sisters are clinging. Our author likens them to brainless animals, which is another link with Balaam whose donkey showed more sense than he (see Numbers 22:28,30). Jude, too, declares that those troubling the church

abandon themselves to Balaam's error for the sake of gain.

– Jude 11

^{10b}Bold and willful, they are not afraid to slander the glorious ones,

¹¹whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not bring against them a slanderous judgment from the Lord.

¹²These people, however, are like irrational animals, mere creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed. They slander what they do not understand, and when those creatures are destroyed, they also will be destroyed,

¹³suffering the penalty for doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation while they feast with you.

¹⁴They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children!

¹⁵They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong,

¹⁶but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

¹⁷These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm; for them the deepest darkness has been reserved.

¹⁸For they speak bombastic nonsense, and with licentious desires of the flesh they entice people who have just escaped from those who live in error.

¹⁹They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them.

²⁰For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first.

²¹For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment that was passed on to them.

²²It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "The dog turns back to its own vomit," and, "The sow is washed only to wallow in the mud."

In the style of contemporary debate, the author continues the counterattack, and once again, he draws on and adapts Jude:

They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds ... for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved forever ... These are grumblers and malcontents; they indulge their own lusts; they are bombastic in speech, flattering people to their own advantage.

– Jude 12,13,16

They deny God's judgment, but are themselves to share the fate of the sinful angels who are being kept for judgment 'in deepest darkness' (2:4). Their behaviour is as dissolute as that of Noah's contemporaries (see 2:7,10,13).

In verses nineteen and twenty the author's striking imagery brings home the lack of freedom experienced by those who have freedom as their catch cry. They are slaves of the most degenerate kind, 'slaves to corruption'. They have no experience of true freedom being 'entangled' and 'overpowered' by their own uncontrolled desires.

The worst part of all this is that the author is speaking of people who have experienced conversion and whom he has just described as continuing to feast with the Christian community. They think of themselves as Christians, but in denying providence, and in defining freedom in terms of being able to do what one likes with no fear of divine judgment, they are in effect as arrogant as the fallen angels. They will suffer the same fate. He echoes Jesus' words: 'the last state of that person is worse than the first' (Matthew 12:45).

Our author quotes from the book of Proverbs: 'Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly' (Proverbs 26:11). He goes on to speak of the sow. It is interesting to recall Jesus' statement in which he, too, though in another context, speaks of dogs and swine: 'Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine' (Matthew 7:6).

The author seems to be alluding here to the letter which we know as the First Letter of Peter. Earlier he referred to Peter's approaching death (see 1:14). Now, as the letter draws to a close, he urges his readers to remember the founders of the church, referred to here as 'prophets' and 'apostles'. Again he echoes Jude:

You, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; for they said to you, 'In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts.'

– Jude 17-18

Those who handed on to them the words of Jesus told them of the Lord's coming in judgment. They also warned them that scoffers would come who would ridicule the idea of divine judgment. The author reminds them of the first judgment when the world was all but destroyed by water. At that time God made a covenant with Noah: 'I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth' (Genesis 9:11). Our author, therefore, joins the prophetic tradition by speaking of judgment in terms of the other great destructive element, fire (compare Hebrews 10:27),

Beyond the imagery, stands the truth that there is judgment by the Creator who 'calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Romans 4:17), and that the 'godless' (Greek: *asebēs*) will 'perish' and experience 'destruction'.

¹This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you

²that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour spoken through your apostles.

³First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts

⁴and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!'

⁵They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water,

⁶through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished.

⁷But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless.

⁸But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

⁹The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

For all that, the parousia has not come as soon as was expected, and the delay needs some explanation. The author makes two points. The first is that we cannot limit God to our way of measuring time. We already find this expressed in similar terms by the psalmist: ‘A thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night’ (Psalm 90:4). His second point is that what appears to us a delay is in fact a sign of God’s being patient (Greek: *makrothumeō*). God keeps on loving because God ‘does not want any to perish, but all to come to repentance (Greek: *metanoia*)’. We are reminded of Paul’s description of ‘God our Saviour who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2:4). This understanding of God is central to the picture of God given us by Jesus. However, as Paul also says:

Do you imagine ... you will escape the judgment of God? Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one’s deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.

– Romans 2:3-8

The author here makes the same point. Those who argue from the apparent delay of judgment to its nonexistence are very much mistaken. In imagery familiar to Jews and also to those educated in the Stoic tradition, he assures his readers that there will be a judgment. Jesus, too, warned that we must remain alert even in the face of apparent delay (see Matthew 24:48; 25:5); ‘if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake’ (Matthew 24:43). Paul picked up this same image when he wrote: ‘you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night’ (1 Thessalonians 5:2).

When God decides ‘the day of the Lord will come’ and ‘everything done on the earth will be disclosed’.

The author continues what is necessarily a symbolic presentation of what judgment means: necessarily symbolic, for he is describing something that is not within the realm of present empirical experience. Through the traditional imagery of dissolving heavens, of the elements melting in the fire (of judgment) and of the ‘new heavens and a new earth’, he makes a number of eminently practical, but profound points. However we imagine the unimaginable, certain things are clear. What we do matters, eternally. We will stand judged on the basis of the decisions we have made to either accept grace and bear in our lives the fruits of love, or to resist grace and follow our own uncontrolled desires. We either live by the truth and in love, or we choose to exist in the darkness of error and deceit.

The leader of the apostles would call us to lead lives that are ‘holy’ (Greek: *hagios*), characterised by ‘godliness’ (Greek: *eusebeia*). We have been called by God who alone is holy into the sacred realm of God’s very being, into the intimacy of the divine love-communion experienced in the heart of the risen Christ, and which we are invited to share. We must allow grace to burn away whatever impurities prevent this sacred communion. Our lives, therefore, must be characterised by an acute sensitivity to the sacred and a profound reverence for God and for all that God has done and is doing in our lives, including the gifts that come to us in the community of faith that is the church. We must remain faithful to the traditions that have been handed down to us through the apostles and prophets.

We must remain alert, awaiting (Greek: *prosdokaō*) the coming of the day of God. We find this word ‘awaiting’ three times here in verses twelve to fourteen. Our hearts long for the fullness of communion that has been promised us when we are with the Lord forever, secure in his love and at last secure against the seductions that tempt us in this world. Then, at last, ‘righteousness’ will be at home, for it will be our joy to exist in perfect and incorruptible conformity with the loving will of God our Saviour.

¹¹Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness,

¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire?

¹³But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish;

¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,

¹⁶speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.

¹⁷You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability.

¹⁸But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

It is clear from Paul's letters and, from the Acts of the Apostles, that not all Jesus' disciples agreed on the implications of being a follower of Jesus, especially as regards relations with Judaism and with the Gentile world. We would expect tensions in matters of such complexity. It may be that the teachers who are undermining the faith of the communities to whom our author is writing were exploiting differences in the approaches of Peter, the apostle of the Jews, and Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles. It may be for this reason that our author speaks here of Paul, acknowledging that there are difficulties in his writings, but claiming him, too, to support the teaching contained in this letter. He is right to make such a claim as the reference to Romans 2:3-8 quoted on the previous page amply demonstrates.

It is this claim to know 'all his letters' that helps persuade scholars that the author is not Simon Peter himself but a Christian from a later generation when Paul's letters could be referred to in this way.

After a final warning not to be carried away by the errors of those who show no respect for the traditions of the community, he prays as he did in the address where he referred to 'our God and Saviour Jesus Christ' and prayed: 'May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord' (1:2). He concludes with a doxology, praising God whose providence is being ridiculed by the arrogant and ignorant teachers against whose influence this letter has been composed.