

# Theological Section

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## The Role of Jesus Christ for Salvation (1.1—2.7)

### Chapter 1

1. Brothers, we must think of Jesus Christ as of God, as of “the Judge of the living and the dead.” And we ought not to undervalue our salvation,
2. for when we undervalue him, we also hope to receive little. And those who listen as if it is a little matter are sinning, and we also are sinning if we do not recognize from where and by whom and to what place we were called, and what great suffering Jesus Christ endured for our sake.
3. What repayment, then, should we give to him, or what fruit should we offer that is worthy of what he has given us? And what holy deeds do we owe him?
4. For he gave us the light, as a Father he called us “sons,” he saved us when we were perishing.
5. What praise, then, will we give him, or what repayment for what we received?
6. We were maimed in our understanding, worshiping stones and wooden objects and gold and silver and copper, the products of men, and our whole life was nothing else than death. We were thus covered with darkness, and our sight was filled with mist, but we have received our sight, and by his will we have cast off the cloud that covered us.
7. For he had pity on us and saved us by his mercy, even though he had seen in us great error and destruction, when we had no hope of salvation except what comes from him.

8. For he called us when we did not exist, and out of nothing he willed us into existence.

### *Literary Structure*

The first chapter develops in three movements. The first section (1–2) is an exhortation to think about Christ as God and the resulting importance of thinking correctly about him. The second section (3–5) communicates by two questions the repayment that believers are to render to Christ because of being called his sons, even though “we” (first person plural) were perishing. The third section (6–8) graphically describes the dismal and lost condition of “our” idolatrous past from which we are saved. We did not exist, but he willed us into existence.

### *Comments*

The familial address to the hearers as “brothers” (ἀδελφοί) is repeated an additional fourteen times in the discourse (in 12.5 it is singular and not used as a form of address). The noun later appears combined with “and sisters” (καὶ ἀδελφαί) in 19.1 and 20.2. Holmes translates the word in 1.1 as “brothers and sisters.”<sup>1</sup> While this translation does reflect the generic nature of addressing the congregation in this way, the rendering blurs the conscious difference in addressing these hearers by the two nouns in 19.1 and 20.2. Familial language such as this is also employed in direct address in other writings from the period (see, for example, 1 Clem. 1.1; 4.7; 13.1; 14.1; Ign. Eph. 16.1; Ign. Rom. 6.2; Ign. Philad. 3.3; Barn. 2.10; 3.6; 4.14; 5.5), and often by James and Paul in the NT (for example, Jas 1:2; Rom 12:1). Clement makes no claim to authority here nor anywhere else but appeals to the salvific experience of his congregation, including himself, and will later base that experience on scriptural texts as the basis for his appeal (2.1–7). He rarely uses a first person verb (15.1), and he utilizes the first person plural in his appeals beginning with 1.5. No apostolic appeal to authority, which often appears in NT epistles, is evident here. “This is an intra-community discourse, not a polemical attack on those regarded as ‘outsiders.’”<sup>2</sup>

While commentators often observe that 2 Clement clearly affirms the deity of Jesus,<sup>3</sup> even this bold opening sentence is expressed by the language

1. Holmes, ed., *Apostolic Fathers*, 139. See also 5.1; 7.1; 10.1; 13.1; 14.1; 16.1.

2. Tuckett, *2 Clement*, 128.

3. Tuckett refers to the “apparently very high Christological claim” (Tuckett, 2

of exhortation, not instruction: “we must think of Jesus Christ as of God” (οὕτως δεῖ ἡμᾶς φρονεῖν). The use of the impersonal verb δεῖ, while not abundant, appears elsewhere also in hortatory contexts (2.5; 4.4; 6.6; 7.4; 9.3; 17.1). This reference is the only time the exhortation is to “think” (φρονεῖν) about something. The reason for this language is that 2 Clement, from the very beginning, is concerned about making a behavior-related statement, namely, that if we “undervalue” Christ, we will undervalue our salvation and thus lessen the importance of our “repayment” to him through correct behavior, a theme that he will take up as early as 1.3. Translators have basically rendered the expression μικρὰ φρονεῖν in 1.2–3 two different ways, namely, “think little”<sup>4</sup> or “belittle.”<sup>5</sup> Rothschild has argued that such translations reflect outdated language and should be revised in light of the arguments of James Kelhoffer about 2 Clement indicating ancient patronage.

Rather than warning believers against “thinking little of” or “belittling” Jesus and salvation, 1a exhorts addressees to estimate, reckon, or value Jesus as God and judge and, not to “underestimate,” “undervalue,” or “devalue” salvation. Low value assessments of Jesus or salvation—estimating, for example, that salvation costs Jesus little or affords believers insignificant rescue or reward—are based on wrong information about items affecting value and misrepresent a believer’s assets and liabilities. By undervaluing assets (e.g., σωτηρία), believers underestimate corresponding liabilities (e.g., ἀντιμισθία).<sup>6</sup>

A careful review of the subsequent verses about how much Jesus endured for our sake (1.2) shows that every believer’s debt is significant (1.5), and it is this repayment that cannot be undervalued in response. Through Rothschild’s suggested translation “the first two verses effectively set the stage for the upcoming tractate.”<sup>7</sup>

While this “thinking” about Christ as “God” appears as a rather bold theological declaration, the additional statement places it in a functional context. Clement does not describe Jesus as the second person in the Godhead (an incipient binitarianism) but invokes Jesus as God in his role “as judge of the living and the dead.” This title for Jesus can be traced to Acts

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Clement, 128).

4. Lake, *Apostolic Fathers*, I, 129; Ehrman, ed., *Apostolic Fathers*, I, 165; Brannan, *Apostolic Fathers*, 56.

5. Holmes, ed., *Apostolic Fathers*, 139.

6. Rothschild, “‘Belittling’ or ‘Undervaluing’ in 2 Clem. 1:1–2?,” 121. The arguments of Kelhoffer about patronage have been explained in the Introduction.

7. Rothschild, “‘Belittling’ or ‘Undervaluing’ in 2 Clem. 1:1–2?,” 123.

10:42, although it is difficult to assume that it is a direct allusion to that text (see also 1 Pet 4:5 and 2 Tim 4:1). Other texts, such as Barn. 7.2 and Pol. Phil. 1.3—2.2; 8.1—2; 10.1—3, may support the idea that this is a Petrine allusion or simply part of early Christian phraseology. This eschatological reference appears later as a motive for present behavior. This first of his four references to “salvation” (σωτηρίας ἡμῶν; see also 1.7; 17.5; 19.1), stresses its future nature, which leads at least one commentator to discern a “now” and “not yet” in our author’s soteriological thinking.<sup>8</sup>

This future orientation is continued in 1.2 as Clement refers to “what we hope to receive.” A future perspective will impact the present behavior of believers. To undervalue these things (or “think little about them”) is not simply a poor choice, but those who do so are “sinning” (ἁμαρτάνουσιν). He then makes the point more personal by switching to the first person: “and we also are sinning” (καὶ ἡμεῖς ἁμαρτάνομεν) when we do this. He follows this with a temporal, or possibly causal, participle: “because we do not recognize” (οὐκ εἰδότες) three important soteriological realities. These realities are (1) from where we were called, (2) by whom we were called, and (3) to what place we were called. He thus combines the past, present, and future blessings enjoyed by believers and then adds an insight into the relevance of the salvation experience by supporting behavior that he will advise throughout the discourse.

Finally, he closes this concise introductory appeal (1.1–2) with a reference to the salvific work of Jesus, again in a hortatory context. Those who sin because they undervalue their salvation also do not recognize “what great suffering Jesus Christ endured for our sake.” While some might desire that the speaker says more about the atoning death of Jesus, he is content with this plain statement about Jesus’s substitutionary suffering. No further reference is made in the discourse to Jesus’s death, because this forceful passage lays the groundwork for his main message, namely, the responsibility to repay the Lord for this costly salvation through ethical behavior. While some authors see a polemic against gnostic ideas here,<sup>9</sup> nothing in this language evokes Gnosticism as a target for these statements. The language is again not polemical but focuses rather on a soteriological basis for the life of obedience, which Clement will expound throughout the subsequent discourse.

In the second section in chapter 1 (1.3–5). Clement rhetorically asks a single question: (how can we repay the Lord for all these blessings?) through two similar questions. The questions are “what repayment *will* we return to

8. Lindemann, *Clemensbriefe*, 200. Such a suggestion may too quickly import a modern soteriological schema into our author’s theology.

9. See, for example, the comments in Donfried, *Setting*, 101–2. See also the Introduction to this commentary on “opponents” for further discussion of this issue.

him in the form of ‘fruit’ or ‘holy acts’ (1.3), and “what praise *should* we give as a repayment for what we have received?” (1.5).<sup>10</sup> The important noun ἀντιμισθία is mentioned at this point, both in 1.3 and 1.5. The comments by Danker on this noun are as follows: “so far found only in Christian writers . . . expresses the reciprocal (ἀντί) nature of a transaction as **requital based upon what one deserves, recompense, exchange**, either in the positive sense of *reward* or the negative sense *penalty*, depending on the context.”<sup>11</sup> Its “negative” sense (as reflected in Rom 1:27) does not occur in 2 Clement in its five occurrences, here in 1.3, 5 and also in 9.7; 11.6; and 15.2.

The importance of this concept cannot be overestimated. The Introduction of this commentary explained this word as embodying the central message of 2 Clement, namely that believers are expected to render a “pay-back” or “repayment” in the form of “works,” as the proper response to God’s gracious act of salvation. The fact that believers cannot *fully* repay such an act of grace is conveyed by it being expressed by two questions at this point. Later references (9.7; 11.6; 19.1) convey the idea by an assumed affirmation. This positive response to these questions on the part of the believer will comprise the main message of the following chapters.<sup>12</sup> Before he declares the divine mercies in 1.6–8, the speaker in 1.4 mentions three salvific deeds as the basis for our responsibility to offer “repayment.” (1) God gave us light in our darkness; (2) he called us his children; and (3) he saved us while we were perishing. This is a clear expression of “salvation by grace.” The verb ἐχαρίσατο and the verb ἔσωσεν in the first and third statements reflect word groups with abundant NT examples (see the summary expression in Eph 2:8–9). The idea of “saving” (the verb σώζω) appears throughout the book in both past and future manifestations (1.7; 2.5, 7; 3.3; 8.2; 9.2, 5; 13.1; 14.1; 17.2; 19.3). We “have been saved” in the past (as here) “that we may be saved” in the future (14.1). The second description of believers as “sons of God” reflects the teaching of a number of NT texts, from Jesus (Matt 5:45) to Paul (Rom 8:14) and John (John 12:36; 1 John 3:1). The third section of the chapter (1.6–8) is a rhetorically powerful description of the state we were

10. The italicized words *will* and *should* reflect a variant reading. The Constantinople text (H) has the future indicative δώσομεν in both verses, while the earlier Alexandrian text (A) has the subjunctive δώσωμεν in 1.5. While Ehrman (*Apostolic Fathers*, I, 164) adopts the indicative δώσομεν, Holmes (*Apostolic Fathers*, 138) favors the subjunctive δώσωμεν since it is earlier and the Syriac version favors it also. Tuckett (2 *Clement*, 84) adopts δώσομεν but does not comment on the relevance of the Syriac version. Lightfoot adopted the subjunctive δώσωμεν (*Apostolic Fathers*, 2:43).

11. BDAG, s.v. ἀντιμισθία, 90 (italics, boldface, and boldface italics are original to BDAG).

12. Strangely, Donfried has no discussion of ἀντιμισθία at the location, where it would be expected (*Setting*, 102–5), and only prints the word in a quotation on page 38.

in and from which we were “saved.” Donfried argues that in this passage, including 1.4, we have a sort of “hymnic confession,” and he lays out the poetic structure and some of what he thinks are unique grammatical examples. On the basis of this structure he concludes that the “hymn” expresses ideas foreign to the author/speaker, reflected in the congregation he is addressing.<sup>13</sup> While this is a creative analysis, Donfried’s description, in this writer’s opinion, is greatly overdrawn. Donfried has not succeeded in demonstrating how these ideas are foreign to the rest of the discourse.<sup>14</sup>

This passage is filled with an abundance of metaphors and verbal images that describe the serious nature of our “lostness” prior to being saved. The characteristics pile upon each other through circumstantial participles that describe us as “maimed” in our understanding and “worshiping” dead objects while our life was nothing but “death.” The rare adjective translated “maimed,” *πηροί*, is absent from both the LXX and the NT. Furthermore, the word appears only here in the corpus of the Apostolic Fathers. It is further defined as “crippled, mutilated, ineffective, mad, foolish” and derives its specific meaning from the context.<sup>15</sup> Thus here it is “blind in mind” due to the following *τῇ διανοίᾳ*.<sup>16</sup> Other participles describe our presalvation state as “wrapped” in darkness and “filled” by a thick mist, but we recovered our sight when we put away that cloud in which we were wrapped.

The graphic language exceeds even the desperate state of the unsaved described in the NT in such passages as Rom 1:18–32 and Eph 4:18–19. The diatribe against idolatry rivals some of the OT prophetic denunciations of this practice by the “Gentiles” (Isa 44:9–20; see also Dan 5:4–23). Our author in this entire passage (1.6–8) strongly suggests that at least the original hearers of this diatribe were from Gentile backgrounds. The language, it must be admitted, is not only strong but strange.<sup>17</sup> The end of 1.6, however, turns to the positive condition of our receiving sight by putting away the cloud of darkness upon conversion. The grace involved in this conversion is conveyed by the expression that all of these conditions were removed “by his will” (*τῇ*

13. Donfried, *Setting*, 103–7.

14. He elaborates in an earlier article in an even more detailed way how the rest of the message interprets and seeks to correct this hymnic confession (Donfried, “Theology of 2 Clement”).

15. GE, s.v. *πηρός*, 1661.

16. BDAG, s.v. *πηρός*, 812. Codex H (also called Codex C) has *πονηροί* probably because of the rarity of the adj. *πηρός*.

17. Tuckett observes that “ἀμαύρωσις (‘dimness of sight’) and ἀχλὺς (‘mistiness’) occur only here in early Christian literature” (2 *Clement*, 136n34). He overlooks, however, the use of ἀχλὺς to describe the literal condition that fell upon the sorcerer Elymas in Acts 13:11 (*ἀχλὺς καὶ σκότος*).

αὐτοῦ θελήσει). This is the only appearance of this noun in the Apostolic Fathers, and it only occurs once in the NT (Heb 2:4). This emphasis on the “will” of Christ/God again stresses his sovereign salvific act of deliverance. Benecke argued that some key words in 2 Clem. 1.6 indicate that the writer was “influenced” by the language of Hebrews.<sup>18</sup> I would add that the use of the rare word θελήσει in Heb 2:4 strengthens his assertion.

Further examples of these vivid word images occur in 1.7 in a description of the salvific events that delivered us from the vivid images of destruction and calamity. The condition from which we were delivered was marked by “much deception” (πολλὴν πλάνην) and “destruction” (ἀπώλειαν) and absolutely “no hope of salvation” (μηδεμίαν ἐλπίδα ἔχοντας σωτηρίας). One translation renders this last expression as having “not an ounce of hope.”<sup>19</sup> Three familiar NT words express how God showed us “mercy” (ἡλέησεν); and “compassion” (σπλαγχνισθεῖς); and “saved” us (ἔσωσεν). The emphasis in this passage is not on eschatological salvation, but on the present experience of being saved.<sup>20</sup>

This section closes in 1.8 with a positive statement about the cause of deliverance from “our” pitiful state just described in 1.6–7. God called (ἐκάλεσεν) us out of nonexistence to a new existence. This verb has already been used to describe conversion (1.2: ἐκλήθημεν). Its use here functions to prepare the hearer/reader for the “scripture” quotation in 2.4: “I came not to call (καλέσαι) righteous ones but sinners.” It will often be used later to describe that experience (2.7; 5.1; 9.4, 5; 10.1; 16.1). The metaphor of our nonexistence leading to existence also prepares the way for the metaphor in 2.1–3 of the church as “barren” in the past but now becoming “fruitful.” While not all see a clear reference to Paul at this point, it is possible that “God’s (Christ’s) calling the nonexistent is based on Romans 4:17.”<sup>21</sup>

18. Benecke, “II Clement,” 125–26. More recently, others argue that the differences in application make this unlikely (Gregory and Tuckett, “2 Clement and the Writings,” 290–91). These authors do not mention the use of θελήσει, which, in my opinion, strengthens the Hebrews connection.

19. Brannan, *Apostolic Fathers*, 57.

20. Tuckett remarks that it is noteworthy that “the descriptions of the ‘lost’ state of human beings do not include any reference to ‘sin’ or sinfulness” (Tuckett, 2 *Clement*, 136n360). This appears a bit harsh, given the metaphorical language that obviously describes the effect of sin. It also overlooks the fact that in just a few verses (2.4), a “scripture” is cited that says “I came not to call righteous ones but sinners.”

21. Grant and Graham, *First and Second Clement*, 113. The expression “things that were not” (τὰ μὴ ὄντα) in Romans 4:17 bears a striking resemblance to the ἐκ μὴ ὄντος in this verse.