Second Peter's Notion of Divine Participation

Stephen Finlan

For a Christian writer around 100 CE to say, "you may become participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4), was to evoke not only biblical images, but also concepts of divinization that were central to the leading Hellenistic philosophies—Middle-Platonism and Stoicism. Of course, Second Peter's[1] is a Christian teaching, but here he uses terminology that is recognizable from the Greek philosophical traditions, and this should not be overlooked in studies of Second Peter.

Second Peter has no hesitancy about using Middle Platonic and Stoic religious concepts and terms to express his biblical monotheism, but what he envisions by "participation in the divine" is far from obvious. It is not clear whether it means the "divinization" of the believer. One should suspend bias, investigate the relevant biblical and nonbiblical texts, and examine the message of Second Peter itself.

I leave aside almost entirely the "apotheosis" or deification of heroes and emperors, since both Jews and Christians recoiled from these notions.

---

[1] I use the term "Second Peter" to designate both the unknown author, and the epistle itself.

In reality, there is probably not a strict dividing line between the respectable philosophies (Platonism and Stoicism) and the popular religions, but I will maintain this barrier anyway, since it was a barrier that the philosophers and theologians themselves tried to maintain, and which we can observe when we study Hellenistic influences on biblical authors.

Middle-Platonic Background

An important connection between Plato and 2 Pet 1:4 is in the latter's reference to "escap[ing] the corruption that is in the world because of lust." That last term is ἐπιθυμία *epithymia*, the same word that Plato uses to describe "appetite" or "desire," the lowest level of a human being.[2] Second Peter seems to share the Platonic instinct that there is a high and noble level associated with correct knowledge, and a lowly level associated with *epithymia*.

The superiority of soul to body is a constant theme in Plato's thought; the body is like a tomb for the soul.[3] He writes, "we ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can; and to escape is to become like God, to become righteous and holy and wise."[4] But it is a mistake to think of Plato as fundamentally escapist.[5] His most celebrated work, *The Republic*, affirms that, rather than ascending to more spiritual levels, the spiritual person has the higher duty of staying in human community and helping others.[6] Social obligation and virtue are the central focus of several of his works.[7]

But the afterlife involves real community with gods. The souls that have not been corrupted in this life, but "who truly love wisdom,"[8] go on to find "gods for companions and guides."[9] Even clearer is the expression

---

[2] *Republic,* 437.

[3] *Gorgias* 493A; cf. *Phaedo* 67A-E.

[4] *Theaetatus* 176B, from *Plato*, vol. 2, tr. H. N. Fowler. LCL (London: Wm. Heinemann, 1921) 129.

[5] As N. T. Wright does. See *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 355.

[6] *Republic,* 519E.

[7] Certainly the *Meno, Republic, Statesman, Crito,* and *Laws.*

[8] *Phaedo* 82C.

[9] *Phaedo* 108B; cf. 111B.

found in Plato's *Laws*, despite his taking a generally down-to-earth approach in this work: his protagonist advises that "what god wants is that we should be as like him as possible."[10]

   Imitation of God is a major theme of Middle Platonism, which seeks to systematize Plato's metaphysics and theology, and which heightens the notion of deification. These are articulated most vividly by the prolific authors Plutarch of Chaeroneia and Philo of Alexandria. Plutarch uses the same adjective that Second Peter uses in our key passage—θεῖος *theios*, "divine." Plutarch uses θεῖος *theios* to describe the incorruption, power, virtue, and reason of God.[11] Plutarch teaches that humans can take on the first three of these characteristics, "incorruption, power, and virtue; and the most revered, the divinest of these, is virtue."[12] The goal of life is to come to resemble God. In order to do this, it is necessary to repudiate sensuality and selfishness.[13] Spiritual progress means imitating God, taking on God's righteous, rational, controlled nature. This results in an actual transformation, even taking on God's incorruption.[14] God is the perfect model. Deification involves progress, and is available only for a few:

> A few good men, specially honoured by the deity, may themselves become Daemons and act as guardian angels to others. . . . The better souls undergo a transformation from men to heroes, from heroes to daemons, and from daemons, some few souls, being purified through prolonged practice of virtue, are brought to a participation in the divine nature itself.[15]

---

[10] *Laws* 715E; from Christopher Rowe, *An Introduction to Greek Ethics* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1976) 97.

[11] James M. Starr, *Sharers in Divine Nature: 2 Peter 1:4 in Its Hellenistic Context*. Coniectanea Biblical 33 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003) 128.

[12] *Aristides* 6.2–3; from L. Ann Jervis, "Becoming Like God through Christ: Discipleship in Romans," in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 147.

[13] *Genio* 585A, 591D–E; *De virt* 442; *Profectus* 83F; Starr, *Sharers*, 139; cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 82C, 83B.

[14] Starr, *Sharers*, 137–38.

[15] Plu., *De Defectu* 415 B–C; from John Oakesmith, *The Religion of Plutarch* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1902) 172.

Philo of Alexandria is, in my view, the most interesting Middle Platonic thinker, utilizing both Platonic and Stoic terms and allegorizing, while remaining connected to Jewish monotheism. Philo draws heavily upon Plato and the interpreters of Plato for ethics and metaphysics alike. Philo uses the adjective *theios* to speak of God's justice and mercy, as we might expect, but also to describe the special status of biblical figures, especially Moses, who was "a piece of work beautiful and godlike, a model for those who are willing to copy it."[16]

But imitation of God is possible for anyone: solitude is an opportunity for "those who . . . desire to find God . . . to become like his blessed and happy nature."[17] Those draw near to God "who regard it as their goal to be fully conformed to God who begat them."[18] People are "nearly related to God."[19] God "made man partaker of kinship with Himself in mind and reason"[20] ("kinship" here is συγγενεία *syngeneia*, not κοινωνός *koinōnos*). The human intellect is "an impression of, or a fragment or a ray of that blessed nature."[21]

More than the average person, however, the prophet is a "friend of God," and "would naturally partake [here it is κοινωνὸν *koinōnon*] of God himself."[22] Moses, again, was "full of the divine spirit and under the influence of that spirit."[23] This is not just spiritualizing language for a purely mental experience. Philo believes that the human mind is temporarily "removed . . . . at the arrival of the divine [θεῖον] Spirit, but is again restored to its previous habitation when that Spirit departs."[24] Thus, there are two kinds of theōsis in Philo: prophetic oraculation, which

---

[16] *Mos.* 1.158; from Jervis, "Becoming Like God," 148.

[17] *Abr.* 87.

[18] *Opif.* 144; from *Philo*, vol. 1, tr. F. Colson and G. Whitaker, LCL (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929) 115.

[19] *Mos.* 1.279.

[20] *Opif.* 77; LCL edition.

[21] *Opif.* 146; Hendrickson edition.

[22] *Mos.* 1.156.

[23] *Mos.* 1.175.

[24] *Her.* 265; cf. *QG* 3.9; *Spec.* 4.49. See Gregory E. Sterling, "'Wisdom Among the Perfect': Creation Traditions in Alexandrian Judaism and Corinthian Christianity," *NovT* 37 (1995) 381; Carl R. Holladay, *Theios Aner in Hellenistic-Judaism: A Critique of the Use of This Category in New Testament Christology*, SBL Dissertation Series 40 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1977) 158.

is an extraordinary but momentary divinization; and the gradual divinization or "conforming to God" that results from lifelong practice of reason and piety.

Stoic Growth in Virtue

Although having a weak theology (that is, concept of God), Stoicism was intensely religious, and had a strong concept of deification, or rather, of reunion with the Logos. Further, Stoicism had more followers, and at more levels of society, than did Middle Platonism, which was embraced mostly by the highly educated.

The Stoics believed that Reason (the Greek word is λόγος *Logos*) pervaded the world. Human reason is connected with this Logos;[25] it is "a part of the mind of God that has descended in to the body."[26] Epictetus said, "You are a principal work, a fragment of God Himself, you have in yourself a part of Him. . . . You bear God about with you, poor wretch, and know it not."[27]

There can be little doubt that Second Peter was living in "a pervasively Hellenistic environment."[28] Even his use of φύσις *fysis* in our key verse (1:4), like his use of φυσικός *fysikos* in 2:12, "employs the vocabulary of Hellenistic piety," specifically the Stoic variety.[29] To be "in agreement with Nature" (φύσις *fysis*) was the supreme virtue for a Stoic, because nature is ruled by reason, and reason is God, more or less.[30]

Some Stoics speak of God as a personal being, for instance Epictetus, who says, "Rational creatures . . . are by nature fitted to share in the society of God, being connected with Him by the bond of reason—why should he not call himself a citizen of the universe and a son of God?"[31]

---

[25] J. Daryl Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice*: *The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter 1*, JSNT Sup 150 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 102, citing Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.20.5; 2.20.21.

[26] Starr, *Sharers*, 159, summarizing Seneca, *Epistle* 120.14.

[27] Epict. *Disc.* 2.8; from *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, ed., tr. Whitney J. Oates (New York: The Modern Library, 1940) 295.

[28] Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice*, 47.

[29] Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice*, 101, with note 17.

[30] Edwyn Bevan, *Stoics and Skeptics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913) 55.

[31] Epict., *Disc.* 1.9; *Stoic and Epicurean*, 240.

But the general thrust of Stoicism is pantheistic, identifying the divine with the active principle (Logos) and with Nature (which is run by the Logos). Most Stoics cannot be said to have a *personal* God; everything that happens in Nature is a manifestation of the Logos, so everything in Nature is equally divine. The Divine is the *active* principle behind Nature or Kosmos (world): the "seminal principle of the world," or a "designing fire" (πῦρ τεχνικόν *pyr technikon*).[32] Greek polytheism is made to fit into this system; the gods are seen (or explained away) as reflections of the Logos. Imitation of the gods is a paramount value for the Stoics. In fact, "the only sufficient worship of the gods is to imitate them."[33] However, one can argue that, "the theistic language is mere metaphor," and that, with these explanations, "the gods are abolished. . . . The Deity in which he [Cleanthes] truly believes is the cosmos."[34] But this is not sufficient to account for a Seneca or an Epictetus.

Some early Stoics had difficulty with the idea of progress. Their monism indicated that one was either in harmony or out of harmony with Logos, and if one was truly in harmony with reason, one was the equal of Jupiter.[35] The deification of the sage really grows out of Stoic "deification of human virtue"[36]; to be truly virtuous was the highest possible condition for god or human. And later Stoics allowed that there could be progress toward this goal. Still, it remains close to pantheism. Deification is really just reunion with the Divine. The soul will return to the Divine when it dies, although there is not much notion of individual identity; this is more like reabsorption into the All. Thus, "death is not a great change from what now is . . . . *You* will not be, but something else will be, of which the world has need"[37]—a very unselfish sentiment.

Although ostensibly materialist (that is, believing everything, even Logos, was physical), Stoic philosophy was rich with religious thought and feeling, including in its exhortation toward moral and mental

---

[32] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.134–37; Starr, *Sharers*, 152.

[33] Starr, *Sharers*, 158; citing Seneca, *Ep*. 95.50.

[34] Ludwig Edelstein, *The Meaning of Stoicism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966) 34.

[35] Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, tr. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner's, 1964) 55.

[36] Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, 54.

[37] Epict., *Disc*. 3.24; taken from Cyril Bailey, *Phases in the Religion of Ancient Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1932) 242.

betterment. Everyone received "seeds of virtue" or "seeds of reason" at birth,[38] but virtue needs to be developed, perfected, or it only gets practiced intermittently. Reason may be inherent, but virtue is acquired. What is needed is a complete change in one's behavior, even a conversion of one's life purpose, accompanied by the joining of a new community,[39] ideas that resonate with Second Peter. But where a Stoic would say that one's inclinations must become more rational, Second Peter would say one needs to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord"; in fact, that is his final exhortation (3:18). Knowledge is central, but it is a particular kind of knowledge.

As Stoics stress the necessity of choosing the mental over the sensual life, Second Peter articulates a choosing of "goodness . . . and self-control" (1:5–6) over "dissipation . . . adultery . . . . greed . . . licentious desires" (2:13–14, 18). The virtues list in 2 Pet 1:5–7 is easily the "most Hellenistic of the NT ethical lists."[40] Some of its words are rare in the LXX, but common in Greek moralizing literature. After "faith" and "goodness," Second Peter lists γνῶσει *gnōsei* or "knowledge," a common term in Hellenistic philosophy (as in *C.H.* 13[41]), and then ἐγκράτεια *egkrateia* or "self-control"—one of the principal Stoic virtues. Next come "endurance," "godliness," "mutual affection," and the list culminates on "love," the supreme Christian virtue, so it is safe to say that Christian distinctiveness is clearly evident in the first and last terms. Inside the list, however, are words that are as much or more at home in a Stoic list of virtues.

In 2 Pet 2:22 there is an evident reference to Prov 26:11 (a dog returning to its vomit), but Second Peter attaches a nonbiblical, "oriental proverb"[42] about a sow returning to the mud. Immediately after paraphrasing Ps 90:4 with "one day is like a thousand years" (3:8), Second Peter speaks of the heavens passing away, the elements being dissolved with fire (3:10, 12). This is a really fascinating conflation of influences, seeming to combine Jewish apocalyptic with Stoic apocalyptic, possibly

---

[38] Musonius Rufus, *Fr.* 2 and Seneca, *Ep.* 94.29, respectively; Starr, *Sharers*, 163.

[39] Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 102–9, 125.

[40] Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC 50 (Waco: Word, 1983) 187.

[41] Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 186.

[42] According to Richard Bauckham's footnote in the *HarperCollins Study Bible* (1993) 2289.

using ἐκπύρωσις *ekpyrōsis*,[43] the Stoic technical term for the final conflagration. At any rate, Second Peter accepts the notion of a final, violent day of judgment, similar to what is described in Jewish apocalyptic works such as *First Enoch*. And the approach of the end "like a thief" has a Pauline sound (1 Thess 5:2). Second Peter's theology is consistent with biblical monotheism, not with Stoic pantheism. Still, a fiery destruction followed by a cosmic re-formation does have a Stoic overtone. Pagan Hellenism is a suggestion that refuses to go away, despite the presence of specifically Jewish influences.

Of course, in theology *per se*, Second Peter departs sharply from Stoicism: he affirms the sovereignty and free will of God (not an impersonal "reason" in the cosmos), and the certainty of a judgment day under a personal God, not a mechanistic collapse of all things. Second Peter is confident about the personal God having spoken through the prophets (1:19) and manifested Godself in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is entirely possible that Second Peter is arguing against the allegorizing stories and re-interpreted myths told by the Stoics, when he argues against "cleverly devised myths" (1:16). He could be attacking those to whom he was formerly close, ideologically. Additionally, some scholars see an attack on Epicurean skepticism in 3:3–4, 9.[44] Second Peter may be distancing himself from his former philosophical comrades. Some of these comrades may have joined him in converting to Christianity, but then slid back to pagan philosophy, like a dog returning to its vomit (2 Pet 2:22). Second Peter 2 sounds somewhat Stoic (even if directed against Stoics), but sounds even more like the way that Jewish apocalyptic inveighs against sin.

The sharp contrast between godliness and the sensuality of the world found in Second Peter recalls similar rhetoric in Middle Platonic, Stoic,[45] and Hellenistic Jewish writings.[46] Anti-sensualism itself does not signal to

---

[43] There is significant variation among the ancient manuscripts for 2 Pet 3:10–12. They clearly speak of the heavens and the earth being dissolved or burned up, but only a minority of scholars argue for the Stoic term ἐκπύρωσις *ekpyrōsis* being present; Bauckham (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 317–18) mentions Olivier and Windisch.

[44] Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice*, 45–46; "Epicureans were known in terms of their denial of divine judgment" (Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude*, 122).

[45] "You bear Him about within you and are unaware that you are defiling Him with unclean thoughts and foul actions" (Epict., *Disc.* 2.8; *Stoic and Epicurean*, 295); cf. *Disc.* 2.18; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.110, 113.

[46] *Testament of Reuben* 5–6; Philo, *Ebr.* 5–6; idem, *Spec.* 1.206; 4.89–91.

us whether the influence upon Second Peter's mind is "pagan" or Jewish. Second Peter repeatedly chooses terminology that is common in "pagan" Hellenistic literature, but his eschatology closely resembles that of apocalyptic Judaism.

Apocalyptic Judaism

Some scholars want to treat lightly all of the "Hellenistic garb" found in Second Peter, arguing that his apocalyptic shows biblical, not Hellenistic, roots.[47] While I think the Hellenism is more than merely "garb," I can accept the notion that the main Hellenistic influence upon the author is Hellenistic *Judaism*, especially the apocalyptic genre. The original meaning of the Greek word "apocalyptic" is "revelatory," but since much of the literature that spoke of revelation also spoke of God and God's angels separating the good people from the evil people, carrying out an end-time judgment, and re-making the world, the term "apocalyptic" has naturally taken on this implication of end-time catastrophe and judgment, and I am intending to include that implication when I use the term here.

Echoing the popular apocalyptic literature of the time, Second Peter promises that incineration is "coming to the ungodly" (2:6), who will be destroyed like animals (2:12), sent "to the deepest darkness" (2:17). Yet there is no hint of any knowledge of covenant thinking or of the importance of holy days, things one would expect from a Galilean Jew. Despite the reference to prophecy fulfilled (1:19), no specific prophecy is given; and despite a knowledge of biblical stories (in 2 Pet 2:4–8, 15–16), some details are peculiar (Balaam's father's name is misspelled in 2:15). These peculiarities in Jewish knowledge tend to suggest a pre-Christian identity as either a non-Palestinian Jew or a devout Gentile who was being instructed in Judaism.

Second Peter's apoclypticism bears resemblances to some passages in Isaiah, but with only one certain quotation.[48] But the allusions to the

---

[47] Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice*, 47 n.14, agreeing with R. Bauckham, E. Loevestam, and M. Green.

[48] The heavens rolling up (Isa 34:4), or vanishing like smoke (Isa 51:6), may be echoed in 2 Pet 3:10, 12, where the earth passes away, dissolves. The weakness of these parallels is strengthened, however, by the one actual quotation: the Lord executing judgment

influential apocalyptic book we call *First Enoch* are more obvious: 2 Pet 2:4 speaks of the rebel angels being "committed . . . to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment," which seems to derive from "Azazel" being "b[ou]nd . . . and throw[n] into the darkness," then covered with rocks until "he may be sent into the fire on the great day of judgment" (*1 En.* 10:4–6).[49] Second Peter goes on to speak of the judgment of the ungodly, lawless, and lustful (2:6–11), recalling the several Enochian chapters that speak of the punishment of the lustful and violent rebel angels, the "Watchers" (*1 Enoch* 9–14, 18, 21). The righteous believers are promised that they will "be partners with the good-hearted people of heaven" (104:6); God "and my son are united with them forever in the upright paths" (105:2). There will be a "new heaven" (94:16), a "new creation" (72:1).

Not all Hellenistic Jewish literature shares the same apocalyptic viewpoint, or uses the same philosophic strategies. There is a work very different from *First Enoch* which sheds light on 2 Pet 1:4. *Pseudo-Phocylides* is a moralizing teaching text, presenting both Jewish and Hellenistic ideas in a thoroughly Hellenistic guise, ascribing the authorship to a Greek writer (Phocylides[50]). Far from being an effort to persuade Gentiles to consider the "philosophy of Moses" (as with Philo), this is an effort to instill principles of right and wrong, without distinguishing Greek from Jewish philosophy. It has a divinization passage that seems to blend Jewish bodily resurrection with Platonic godlikeness. *Pseudo-Phocylides* 103–4 says, "We hope that the remains of the departed will soon come to the light . . . and afterward they will become gods [θεοὶ τελέθονται *theoi telethontai*]."[51] The sentences that immediately follow this one sound very Hellenistic, where the spirit is "on loan," and people are destined to "become gods."

---

with fire and making a new heavens and new earth (Isa 66:16, 22) is repeated in 2 Pet 3:7, 13. Most of the individual elements in 2 Pet 3:7–13 are independent of Isaiah.

[49] Translated by E. Isaac, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983) 17.

[50] An authority on ethics cited by Plato and Aristotle (*Rep.* 407a7; *Pol.* IV.II.1295b); John J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 159.

[51] P. W. van der Horst, *The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides: With Introduction and Commentary*, SVTP 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1978) 185.

Yet elsewhere *Pseudo-Phocylides* restates certain moral principles that can be found in the Pentateuch and Proverbs, without ever giving a hint that these are Jewish in origin. Since the whole piece is presented as a work of Greek wisdom, and Jewish ideas are never identified as such,[52] and since its divinization concept looks so Greek, its author seems to be interested in assimilating to Greek culture. In fact, there may be a significant parallel between conceptualization and socialization. The author's assimilation to Greek culture seems to be paralleled by his concept of assimilation to the Divine; one is drawn into God, much like one is drawn into the universal culture!

Second Peter is not assimilationist, nor does he speak of becoming gods or God, but of partaking of the divine *nature*, which seems to mean divine character, knowledge of the Savior, and proper self-controlled and ethical behavior. Second Peter has a different social strategy from *Pseudo-Phocylides*, but there is a point of similarity, in that both assert their truths as *universal* principles, not tied to the Jewish nation or the Mosaic covenant. In *that* sense, both are Hellenistic; Hellenism is characterized by the search for universal principles and universal community. Second Peter, however, has a particular ideology and social group—Christianity—distinct from popular Hellenistic culture, and in that sense is very different from *Pseudo-Phocylides*, though both use Hellenistic ideas.

Both of these works, as well as *1 Enoch*, envision the salvation of righteous Gentiles. *First Enoch* says that the Son of Man, the Chosen One, will be "the light of the gentiles and he will become the hope of those who are sick in their hearts. All those who dwell upon the earth shall fall and worship before him" (48:4-5). "He shall proclaim peace to you in the name of the world that is to become" (71:15).

For *1 Enoch* and 2 Peter, there is a severe dividing line between the good and the evil people, but this is an ideological and moral divide, not an ethnic one. *First Enoch* is still closely attached to Jewish identity, but the criterion of judgment that is spelled out is always ethical, not national. Those who are going to be punished are "governors, kings, high officials, and landlords" (*1 En.* 63:12), "those who amass gold and silver" (94:7), and the "powerful people who coerce the righteous" (96:8).

---

[52] Collins, *Jewish Wisdom*, 176.

Pseudo-Phocylides alerts us to a linkage between theology and sociology, but, of course, notions of deification can be had by people of greatly divergent social strategies and theologies. *First Enoch*, with its intense moral resentment of oppressive outsiders, strongly suggests a sectarian social profile, while *Pseudo-Phocylides'* instinct for moral education and ostensible Greek identity implies an assimilationist strategy. In the social dimension, Second Peter is closer to Enoch's sectarianism.

The lack of lofty intellectualizing in Second Peter blocks the application of the label "Platonic." The absence of even a hint of any notion that nature is to be identified with God, shows an ability to dispense with fundamental Stoic principles. The strong perpetuation of Jewish literary themes, along with the absence of any interest in the temple cult or holy days, suggests diaspora Judaism as the most likely social background for the author. But we cannot understand Second Peter if we do not explore his specifically Christian beliefs.

Pauline Parallels; Petrine Disputes

There is a peculiar kind of Pauline influence. Second Peter clearly borrows from certain portions of the letters of Paul, but shows no hint of any notion of justification, substitution, typology, fulfillment of promises made to Abraham, or Jesus as a Second Adam—the distinctive soteriology and salvation history of Paul, yet Second Peter does share some of Paul's ideas about the Second Coming, moral purification, and divinization of the believer. In any case, Second Peter's connections to the letters of Paul are much more numerous than his links to First Peter. Just a few of them are: salvation being "bought" (forms of the verb ἀγοράζω *agorazō*, 2 Pet 2:1; 1 Cor 6:20; and of course, this *is* a soteriological image); something "stored up" for destruction (forms of the verb θησαυρίζω *thēsaurizō*, 2 Pet 3:7; Rom 2:5[53]); being a slave to corruption (φθορά *fthora*, 2 Pet 2:19; Rom 8:21). One of the last theological points in Second Peter, being "found by him . . . without spot or blemish (ἀμώμητος *amōmētos*)" (3:14), may owe something to Paul's "be blameless (ἀμέμπτος *amemptos*)

---

[53] Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* AB 37C (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 133, where a number of other parallels are listed.

. . . at the coming of our Lord Jesus" (1 Thess 3:13; cf. 5:23; Phil 2:15). The words are formed from different roots, but they sound similar and have similar meanings.

Not all apparent connections to Paul, however, are certain. The image of "body" as "tent" (2 Pet 1:13-14: τὸ σκήνωμα; cf. 2 Cor 5:1, 4: τὸ σκῆνος) occurs as a metaphor in Greek (Hippocrates[54] and Hermeticism[55]) and Hellenistic Jewish literature (Philo[56] and Wisdom 9:15[57]).

But Second Peter does have connections to Pauline terminology. The term "participants" (κοινωνοὶ *koinōnoi*; 2 Pet 1:4) is common in Paul: "ye are partakers (κοινωνοί *koinōnoi*) of the sufferings" (2 Cor 1:7 KJV); "you share (συγκοινωνούς *sygkoinōnous*) in God's grace" (Phil 1:7). There is a conceptual, but not terminological, connection between taking on God's *nature* (2 Pet 1:4) and believers being "conformed (συμμόρφους *symmorfous*) to the image of his Son" and "conformed to the body of his glory" (Rom 8:29 and Phil 3:21, respectively), and to "this mortal body put[ting] on immortality" (1 Cor 15:53). Although Paul is largely referring to the afterlife, he does see the process beginning in this lifetime: believers reflect "the glory of the Lord," and are "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). Christians "have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16), or *need* to have it (Phil 2:5). They can discern the will of God when they are "transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom 12:2).

Second Peter says that the ignorant do not correctly understand Paul, "to their own destruction" (3:16). Those who "exploit you" (2:3) were formerly on "the straight road" (2:15), and knew "the way of righteousness" (2:21), but now, "many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned" (2:1). In Second Peter's opinion, these apostate Christians are sexually immoral, and are bringing the Christian message into disrepute. Though not assimilationist, Second Peter is sensitive to what outsiders think of Christians.

---

[54] *Aph.* 8.18; from Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*. ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915) 142.

[55] *C.H.* 13.12, 15; David E. Aune, "Anthropological Duality in the Eschatology of 2 Cor 4:16–5:10," in *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 225 and 312 n.55.

[56] Using, instead, the term *oikos* (*Somn.* 1.20); from Plummer, *Second Epistle*, 142.

[57] Aune, "Anthropological Duality," 225; Plummer, *Second Epistle*, 142.

There is clearly an intra-Christian fight over who is the true inheritor of the apostolic tradition, who presents "the way of truth." To claim to be Peter is certainly to make an authority claim.[58] Second Peter attacks the notion that "scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation" (1:20). He is attempting to foreclose interpretation by some people, equating "false prophets" of the past with "destructive opinions" in the present (2:1). Everything is at stake in interpretation; wrong interpretation leads to destruction (3:16).

Knowledge of Christ

The prime religious value in Second Peter, the key to spiritual transformation, is "knowledge of Christ." The principal summarizing passages all say something about knowledge. In 2 Pet 1:2, the author wishes "the knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις *epignōsis*)[59] of God and our Lord Jesus" on his readers. Ἐπίγνωσις was the word used in Hos 6:6 LXX for what God most desires—knowledge of God, the loss of which is deadly (Hos 4:1, 6).

Knowledge (γνῶσις *gnōsis*) is in the middle of Second Peter's virtue list, which begins with faith (1:5) and ends with love (1:7). Lack of these virtues means one is "near-sighted and blind" (1:9); such people "are like irrational animals [who] do not understand" (2:12). Christians "have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις *epignōsis*) of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2:20). Escaping the corruption that is in the world is the primary religious need. For Second Peter, divinization means escaping such corruption, and taking on a Godly character.

This does not take place in a protected environment, but in treacherous waters. "Knowing Christ" requires successful navigation past "cleverly devised myths" (1:16) and "deceptive words"[60] (2:3), linked with a strange sensualist religiosity (2:10-19; 3:4) and with a distortion of Pauline teaching

---

[58] Charles tries to downplay the fact (*Virtue amidst Vice*, 35, 86).

[59] This word is used by Paul for "acknowledging" God (Rom 1:28) and for determining what is good, which probably means God's will (Phil 1:9). But ἐπίγνωσις *epignōsis* dominates Second Peter's discourse; this is not the case with Paul.

[60] Or "untrue tales" (NJB), or "stories they have made up" (NIV).

(3:16). Those who successfully avoid error achieve γνῶσις *gnōsis* of the Lord and Savior (3:18). Correct *knowing* and correct *behavior* go together.

The believer needs to reject corruption, learn about Christ, and take on his virtues. This is a *virtue soteriology*: one is saved by, and for, virtue. But it is virtue mediated through Christ; salvation and divinization are thoroughly Christological. God gives "life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (1:3). These things are given "so that through them you may . . . become participants of the divine nature" (1:4). Divinization is progress into greater moral excellence; the means for achieving it are also a matter of choosing moral excellence.

Virtue is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the process: by "goodness," God "called" the believer (1:3); "effort" must be made to develop virtue (1:5); believers "ought to be . . . leading lives of holiness and godliness" (3:11); and God will create a world "where righteousness is at home" (3:13).

Doctrinal correctness is itself a virtue: not interpreting Scripture according to "human will" (1:21), not listening to "enticing" and "adulterous" religious teaching (2:14), being able to recognize "bombastic nonsense" and "error" (2:18). There seems to be a clearly sociological corollary to all this cognitive advice, namely: stay in the group, stay on "the straight road" (2:15). "Faith" can mean staying on the path, so correct membership, correct belief, and saving virtue go together: "support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control" (we mentioned that ἐγκράτεια *egkrateia* was a principal value among Hellenist philosophers of all stripes, but it also was for Paul [Gal 5:23; 1 Cor 9:25; Acts 24:25]). Everything Hellenistic, however, is here Christianized. The values and the terms resonate with Hellenistic philosophy, but attaining these values requires loyalty to and "knowledge" of, Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior, the revelation of God.

How does divinization begin, for Second Peter? The necessary pre-conditions are ethical character and proper belief. When these are present, divinization commences, which then results in enhancement of one's ethical character, and establishment of one in proper belief! The means and the destination are quite alike.

Deification is linked with sobriety, humility, piety, and morality. There is no hint, in Second Peter, of spiritual ecstasy or vision, but only of these more cautious and communal virtues, similar to those advocated in the Pastoral Epistles: staying with "the sound teaching that you have followed" (1 Tim 4:6; 2 Tim 1:13); being "temperate, serious, prudent" (Titus 2:2); avoiding "idle talkers" and those with "itching ears" (Titus 1:10; 2 Tim 4:3); rejecting "profane myths and old wives' tales" (1 Tim 4:7). Second Peter and the Pastorals recommend an attitude of humility and teachability in community. Virtue includes conformity to the group—as long as it is the *right* group.

Second Peter has more to say about eschatology and epistemology than the Pastorals do, but the social message seems the same: stay in the orthodox community; cultivate cooperative and conformist virtues. Second Peter, however, places more emphasis on right perception or recognition (*epignōsis*). This focus on knowledge of God places Second Peter in continuity with the prophetic (Num 24:16; Hos 4:6; 6:6) and wisdom (Prov 2:5; Eccl 2:26) traditions, and with the Pauline understanding of Jesus as the doorway to knowledge of God (2 Cor 4:6), and of such knowledge as the gateway to deification:

> To know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph 3:19)

It is in such matters that Second Peter looks very close to the Pauline tradition: "knowledge of the Son of God" leads to "maturity," growing up "into Christ," and being able to resist wrong doctrine (Eph 4:13-15). One becomes like a new person; in fact, "the new self . . . is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (Col 3:10). I think that deification in Second Peter finds its closest intellectual relatives in Ephesians and Colossians. In these three letters, deification means growing up into the likeness of Christ, although this is spelled out more clearly in Ephesians and Colossians than in Second Peter.

What Second Peter emphasizes is Jesus as *Savior*, a title that occurs five times, from the first to the last verse of the epistle, including that climactic advice to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:18; cf. 1:1, 11, 2:20; 3:2). Deification is spiritual growth directed by the Savior toward the inculcation of "the divine nature,"

which seems to mean character values. So what is divinized is one's character, but also one's "knowledge of God and of Jesus," who "give[s] us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (1:2-3). Jesus and God are so blended as to be almost indistinguishable. So also are knowledge and character reciprocally related. To know God is to start becoming like God.

Abbreviations:

C.H. – *Corpus Hermeticum*, scripture of a Gnostic, Platonizing religious philosophy
LCL – Loeb Classical Library
LXX – The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures
NT – New Testament
OT – Old Testament

Bibliography

Primary Sources:
ATHANASIUS (English; two sources) *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*. Edited and translated by Robert W. Thomson. London: SCM, 1971. And *The Letters of St. Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*. Translated by C. R. B. Shapland. London: Epworth, 1951.
DIOGENES LAERTIUS (English and Greek): *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. II. Translated by R. D. Hicks. Loeb Classical Library 185. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931.
EPICTETUS (English): *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*. Edited and translated by Whitney J. Oates. New York: The Modern Library, 1940.
FIRST ENOCH (English): *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1. Translated by E. Isaac. Edited by James H. Charlesworth. New York: Doubleday, 1983.
PHILO (English; two sources): *The Works of Philo*. Translated by C. D. Yonge. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993. And (only for *Opif.*:) *Philo*, vol. 1. Translated by G. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929.
PLATO (English and Greek): (for *Phaedo* and *Theaetatus*) *Plato* vols. 1–2. Translated by Harold North Fowler. Loeb Classical Library. New York: Putnam, 1921, 1923.

Psuedo-Phocylides (English and Greek): *The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides: With Introduction and Commentary.* P. W. van der Horst. SVTP 4. Leiden: Brill, 1978.

Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (English): *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1. Translated by H. C. Kee. Edited by James H. Charlesworth. New York: Doubleday, 1983.

Secondary Sources:

Aune, David E. "Anthropological Duality in the Eschatology of 2 Cor 4:16–5:10." In *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide,* 215–39. Edited by Troels Engberg-Pedersen. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001.

Bailey, Cyril. *Phases in the Religion of Ancient Rome*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1932.

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

———. "2 Peter." *HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Bevan, Edwyn. *Stoics and Skeptics*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1913.

Charles, J. Daryl. *Virtue amidst Vice: The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter 1*. JSNT Sup 150. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997.

Collins, John J. *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*. OTL. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997.

Edelstein, Ludwig. *The Meaning of Stoicism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.

Engberg-Pedersen, Troels. *Paul and the Stoics*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000.

Holladay, Carl R. *Theios Aner in Hellenistic-Judaism: A Critique of the Use of This Category in New Testament Christology*. SBL Dissertation Series 40. Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1977.

Horst, P. W. van der. *The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides: With Introduction and Commentary*. SVTP 4. Leiden: Brill, 1978.

Jervis, L. Ann. "Becoming Like God through Christ: Discipleship in Romans." In *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament,* 143–62. Edited by Richard N. Longenecker. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Maritain, Jacques. *Moral Philosophy*. Translated by Joseph W. Evans. New York: Scribner's, 1964 (from the French edition, 1960).

Neyrey, Jerome H. *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary.* AB 37C. New York: Doubleday, 1993.

Oakesmith, John. *The Religion of Plutarch*. London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1902.

Plummer, Alfred. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*. ICC. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915.

Rowe, Christopher. *An Introduction to Greek Ethics*. London: Hutchinson & Co., 1976.

Starr, James M. *Sharers in Divine Nature: 2 Peter 1:4 in Its Hellenistic Context*. Coniectanea Biblical NT Series 33. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003.

Sterling, Gregory E. "'Wisdom Among the Perfect': Creation traditions in Alexandrian Judaism and Corinthian Christianity." *NovT* 37 (1995) 355–84.

Wesche, Kenneth Paul. "ΘΕΩΣΙΣ in Freedom and Love: the Patristic Vision." In *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture*, 123. Edited by Rodney Clapp. Downers Grove: IVP, 1998.

Wolters, Al. "'Partners of the Deity': A Covenantal Reading of 2 Peter 1:4." *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 (1990) 28–44.

————. "Postscript to 'Partners of the Deity.'" *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 (1991) 418–20.

Wright, N. T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.