WORD BIBLICAL THEMES

2 Peter–Jude

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PREFACE

This volume is based on the detailed exegetical work to be found in my volume in the Word Biblical Commentary, *Jude, 2 Peter*. Where the exegesis and interpretations I offer in this volume are controversial, detailed justification for them, with evidence and interaction with other views, will always be found in that commentary. In this volume I have largely avoided discussion of other interpretations and have concentrated instead on positive exposition of the message of these letters as I learned to understand it in the course of writing my commentary. I hope this will not be taken to be an arrogant disregard for views which differ from my own. The point is simply that I have already considered those views, I hope fairly and usually in detail, in the commentary, and I wished to do something different here. I have also read most of what has been published on these letters since I wrote the commentary, but have found no reason to change the views I expressed before. However, it is only fair to warn the reader that on many points of detailed exegesis and broad interpretation of these letters, on which I state my

views in this volume, there is no scholarly consensus. But we must all take the risk of interpreting Scripture to the best of our abilities in the light that has so far fallen on it for us.

There is no biblical translation, however literal, which does not embody many disputed decisions about the interpretation of the text (as well as, of course, the most original form of the text). In this volume I have usually quoted from the translations of Jude and 2 Peter which I published in my commentary. I have taken care to do so especially when my translation differs from the most commonly used translations in a way that is really significant for interpretation. Justifications for my translations appear in the commentary. Other biblical quotations in this volume are usually from the Revised Standard Version.

Jude and 2 Peter have often been treated as letters with a very similar outlook directed to very similar church situations, if not precisely the same situation. But in my commentary I argued that, in spite of the fact that 2 Peter borrows some material from Jude, they are in fact very different works, facing different problems in different ways in different contexts. I have therefore not attempted in this volume to deal with the two letters jointly, but have tried to hear and to convey the distinct message of each separately. Jude is treated before 2 Peter (rather than in the canonical order), because I consider that Jude was written first and was used by the author of 2 Peter.

Neither Jude nor 2 Peter has enjoyed a high reputation in modern biblical scholarship. Many biblical scholars have compared them unfavorably with other New Testament writings, especially the Pauline letters, and some have been openly contemptuous of them. I am convinced that much of this denigration and criticism of Jude and 2 Peter is based on ignorance. Because they have simply accepted a scholarly tradition which regards these works as of little interest or value, many biblical scholars scarcely bother to read them,

let alone to study them carefully, to reexamine the forms of interpretation which have become conventional or to attempt a fresh, unprejudiced evaluation.

The attempt, by a strong tradition of modern New Testament scholarship, to set up Paul as a standard of excellence, by which most other New Testament authors fall short to a greater or lesser degree, is to be questioned. The point of the New Testament canon is, in part, its diversity. United in the broad contours of early Christian belief, the various New Testament writings are different in style of thought and expression, reflecting their authors' differing gifts, varied insights and interests, different backgrounds and contexts. They are complementary. If we lacked any of them, our understanding of the apostolic faith and teaching would be to some degree poorer.

No doubt, if we *had* to choose, we should all prefer to be without some than to be without others. But the canon means precisely that we do not have to choose. Our concern should be, not with whether one is more valuable than another, but with the particular contribution each has to make. If we read and study Jude and 2 Peter with this positive concern, we shall discover, as generations of Christians have before us, two of the many scriptural voices through which the Word of God speaks to us today.

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1 *JUSTIFICATION AND RIGHTEOUSNESS*

Posing the issue

The central theological issue in 2 Peter is the relation between ethics and eschatology. As we have seen, this was also an important concern of Jude's, but the issue is focused more strongly and dealt with in more detail in 2 Peter. This is because of the particular character of the false teaching which this letter opposes. The two main planks of the opponents' teaching were eschatological skepticism and ethical permissiveness. These two features were closely linked since the opponents' denial of future judgment implied, for them, the removal of moral sanctions and freedom from moral restraint. Freedom from fear of divine judgment was at the same time a liberation from moral constraint. As a result, 2 Peter's central concern is to insist on the necessary connection between the practice of righteousness in Christian life now and the attainment of eschatological salvation in the future. Christianity is "the way of righteousness" (2:21) which leads "into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and

Saviour Jesus Christ" (1:11). Progress in the way of righteousness is, in some sense, a condition for entry into the eternal kingdom of Christ.

In order to focus our consideration of this issue, it may be useful to point out at once two theological dangers which arise in making future salvation conditional on the practice of righteousness. One of these we might call the problem of the Reformation, because it was the central issue in the debate over justification between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century. If final salvation is made dependent on the Christian's progress in ethical righteousness (in sixteenth-century terms, "inherent" as opposed to "imputed" righteousness), the danger, which Luther so clearly saw, is of a self-centered ethic and an anthropocentric eschatology. The pursuit of righteousness becomes self-interested—it is the means of achieving one's own salvation—and heaven exists purely in order to reward one's efforts to be righteous. At its worst, this approach makes ethics and eschatology into the instruments of the human pursuit of self-justification and self-deification.

The second danger we may call the problem of contemporary Christianity in its concern for social and political righteousness in the world. Here the danger is of an individualistic pursuit of one's own ethical righteousness in order to inherit salvation in the next world. Eschatology becomes the means of assuring pious Christians that they will be rewarded for their piety while their godless neighbors will get their deserved punishment in the end. Again the connection between ethics and eschatology degenerates into a self-interested distortion of both. The two dangers are not unconnected, of course, and they come together in the devastating critique of 2 Peter which was launched in a famous, influential essay by the Lutheran scholar Ernst Käsemann.[1] For Käsemann, 2 Peter succumbs to both these dangers, and he therefore sees it as a prime example of Christianity's

lapse from the Pauline gospel into "early Catholicism." This criticism does not do justice to 2 Peter, but it is worth bearing in mind because it raises important questions about the theology of 2 Peter.

Ethics and eschatology in 1:3–11

This passage plays a key role in 2 Peter. As we can see from the reference to it in 1:12, 15, it is a summary of the apostolic message which Peter bequeaths to the church as his testament. As such it is the fundamental *positive* statement about the relationship of ethics and eschatology which the rest of 2 Peter then aims to defend against the opponents' objections. It is also relevant to remember that this passage is the best example of our author's translation of Christianity into Hellenistic religious language.

These verses follow a standard homiletic pattern, which consists of three sections:

(a) a historical/theological section, which recalls the acts of God in salvation history (vv 3–4);

(b) ethical exhortations, based on (a) and with (c) in view (vv 5–10);

(c) an eschatological section, in which salvation is promised and judgment threatened (v 11).

This formal structure embodies a theological structure of thought. The ethical exhortations of the central section (vv 5–10) are framed by the saving act of God in the past (vv 3–4) and the prospect of salvation or judgment in the future (v 11). The saving act of God in the past is the *basis* for the ethical behavior expected of the readers, while the eschatological prospect provides a *motive* for ethics. To move from the salvation experienced in the past to the salvation which can be finally attained in the future one must pass

through the central section—ethical progress in the present. In some sense, final salvation is conditional on appropriate ethical behavior—though this does not, as we shall see, mean that the latter is what actually achieves or "earns" final salvation. Thus the structure of the passage already indicates a balance between a stress on the *prevenient* saving action of God, which precedes all Christian endeavor, and, on the other hand, the need for human ethical endeavor along the way which leads to final salvation. To understand this theological structure in more detail, we need to look carefully at each of its three sections.

Prevenient grace (1:3–4)

These verses read:

> His [Christ's] divine power has bestowed on us [Christians] everything necessary for a godly life, through the knowledge of him [Christ] who called us by his own glory and might, by means of which he has bestowed on us the very great and precious promises, so that through them you may escape the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire and become sharers of the divine nature.

This sentence, which is typical of 2 Peter's rhetorical style, takes some unraveling. Christ's "divine power" and "his own glory and might" are synonymous phrases which describe the event of Jesus Christ—his incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection—conceived in Hellenistic religious terms as a manifestation of divine power. By means of this divine saving act, Christians are said to have received four things:

First, *knowledge* of Christ ("knowledge of him who called us"). The author of 2 Peter uses two words for "knowledge" (*epignōsis*, used here and in 1:2, 8; 2:20, and *gnōsis*, used in 1:5,

6; 3:18) in different senses. *Epignōsis* is the fundamental knowledge of God in Christ which is gained in conversion and makes a person a Christian; *gnōsis* is the knowledge which can be acquired and developed in the course of Christian life. In 1:3 the reference is to the knowledge gained in conversion.

Secondly, through this knowledge Christ "has bestowed on us everything necessary for a godly life." The word translated "bestow" (*dōreisthai*), found here and in verse 4, was used especially of royal and divine bounty. It stresses the favor and generosity of God in granting us grace. So the emphasis is on salvation as gift. Though the special concern of 2 Peter is the living of a godfearing life, the author here roots the Christian's ability to live such a life in the generous, freely given grace of God in Christ. He has given us "*everything* necessary for a godly life." We do not have to add to God's grace from our own human resources. What we have to do is to live a godly life out of the resources of divine grace which have been given us.

Thirdly, there is Christ's *calling* of Christians. Though only mentioned in verse 3, the mention is important because it is taken up in verse 10 ("confirm your call and election"). Christians have been called by Christ to be his people, but this calling has still to reach its goal in his heavenly kingdom. So between the call and its goal lies Christian discipleship in response to the call and on the way to the goal.

Finally, Christ has bestowed on us his *promises*. These are promises which Christ gave but have yet to be fulfilled. Their content, still to be attained by Christians in the future, is that believers should "escape the corruption that is in the world . . . and become sharers of divine nature." We postpone a consideration of the meaning of this description of the eschatological hope until the next chapter, but we should note here that once again what Christ has already given us (promises) points forward to a goal yet to be attained. The

author now goes on to describe the way from one to the other as the ascent of a ladder of virtues.

The ladder of virtues (1:5–7)

If we compare this list with other New Testament lists of virtues, it appears distinctive in two ways: in terminology and in form. As far as terminology is concerned, although some distinctively Christian terms are included in this list ("brotherly affection," "love"), in general its ethical terms correspond much more closely to the terminology of Hellenistic moral philosophy than do other New Testament lists (with the exception of Philippians 4:8, which is also notably Hellenistic). Three terms in 2 Peter's list are markedly Hellenistic in flavor and occur only once each in other New Testament lists: virtue (*aretē*), godliness (*eusebeia*), and self-control (*enkrateia*). "Virtue" especially encapsulates the Hellenistic ethical ideal of virtue as the achievement of human excellence. Plainly, the author, in accordance with his general concern to translate the gospel into terms which make contact with its Hellenistic environment, has sought to bring the Christian ideal of the virtuous life as close as possible to the moral ideals familiar to his pagan contemporaries. But we cannot properly assess this procedure until we have considered the second difference between this and other New Testament lists of virtues: its form.

Second Peter 1:5–7 uses the literary device known as *sorites*, or chain argument. This is the structure: A . . . B, B . . . C, C . . . D (and so on), a favorite Hellenistic rhetorical device which occurs quite often in Jewish and early Christian literature. A particular type of sorites was the ethical sorites, the chain or ladder of virtues used by Stoics and other writers on ethics as a memorable summary of their view of the good life. A rabbinic example (*Mishnah*, tractate *Soṭa* 9:5) will illustrate the form:

Zeal leads to cleanliness,
and cleanliness leads to purity,
and purity leads to self-restraint,
and self-restraint leads to sanctity,
and sanctity leads to humility,
and humility leads to the fear of sin,
and the fear of sin leads to piety,
and piety leads to the Holy Spirit,
and the Holy Spirit leads to the resurrection of
the dead.

In this example, as in some others, the chain of virtues leads to an eschatological climax (resurrection). Second Peter does not have an eschatological climax within the sorites, but the eschatological goal of the sorites follows in verse 11.

The peculiarly Christian character of 2 Peter's sorites results from the combination of two distinctive features: (a) the list begins with faith and ends with love, and (b) each virtue *derives from* the preceding one. This second feature is frequently obscured in translation.

The Greek (literally: "by means of your faith supply virtue" and so on) implies that each virtue in the list is the means of producing the next. But the difficulty of putting this nuance into an English translation which preserves the form of the sorites no doubt accounts for the inaccurate English rendering: "add to your faith virtue" (KJV), "supplement your faith with virtue" (RSV), "add to your faith goodness" (NIV). These translations are very unfortunate in relation to the issue of justification, since by introducing the idea of *adding*, which is not in the Greek, they suggest that faith needs supplementing by moral effort. They imply salvation by faith *and* works. What the sorites actually suggests, however, is that faith is the root out of which all virtues grow. It is not supplemented with virtue, but develops into virtue. The sixteenth-century mediating formula,

"faith working through love" (from Gal 5:6), might be an appropriate description of the concept.

It would be a mistake to attach any significance to the order of items in the list, with the exception of the first and last (faith and love). In an ethical sorites of this sort, it is not possible to give some kind of psychological explanation of how each virtue develops out of another. The idea is simply that the virtues are interconnected, but the precise order in which they are listed is random. However, what is certainly deliberate and significant is that faith is placed first, as the root of all the virtues, and love is placed last, as their culmination.

The last virtue in a list of this kind is not simply the final or even the most important, but the virtue which *encompasses* all the others. Thus the Hellenistic elements in the list are given a decisively Christian interpretation by their place in a list of virtues rooted in Christian faith and culminating in Christian love. They witness to the fact that Christian ethics cannot be totally discontinuous with the moral ideals of non-Christian society. But the new context in which they are set ensures that they are subordinated to and are to be interpreted by reference to the comprehensive Christian ethical principle of love. Thus "self-control," for example, is not for Christians a virtue simply in itself or for the reasons it was valued in Stoicism, but because self-discipline is a necessary element in the practice of Christian love. Thus 2 Peter remains faithful, in a new context, to the central insight of Jesus' moral teaching: that love is the all-inclusive ethical principle, the requirement which sums up the whole of the Law and the prophets (Matt 22:40).

The salvific necessity of good works

The following verses (8–10) insist that the ladder of virtues must be climbed if final salvation is to be attained. The knowledge of Christ and the forgiveness of sins received in

conversion and baptism lose their value unless moral progress follows. The exhortation to "make all the more effort to confirm your call and election" (v 10) does not mean, as seventeenth-century Calvinists thought, that Christians' moral progress provides them with a *subjective* assurance of their election. It means that the ethical fruits of faith are *objectively* necessary for the attainment of final salvation. The divine initiative in our calling to be Christians will not reach its goal—our entry into Christ's kingdom—unless it is ratified by our response in moral effort.

Finally, the way the eschatological goal is attained, according to verse 11, is highly significant: "in this way entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour will be richly provided for you." The phrase, "will be richly provided," indicates the lavish provision made by the divine generosity. Thus, while the whole passage emphatically regards the ethical fruits of faith as *necessary* to the attainment of final salvation, this phrase rules out the notion that the latter is, in any strict sense, a *reward* deserved in justice for the Christian's good works. Final salvation is the gift of God's generosity which far exceeds any human merit. In spite of the passage's stress on human participation in the attainment of salvation, it ends as it began (v 3) with an attribution of salvation to God's grace.

In summary, this passage (1:3–11) plainly presents both the priority of God's grace to all human participation and the excess of God's grace beyond all human achievement. It also makes clear that the Christians' response to God's grace in *faith* is the root from which the whole of their ethical obedience to God must grow. Within this context, however, it lays great stress on the necessity for faith to bear fruit in ethical behavior, because without it final salvation cannot be attained.

Because of this stress, the teaching of the passage is, in sixteenth-century terms, more "Tridentine" than "Lutheran." The Council of Trent's decree on justification is closer to the

teaching of this passage than are the Lutheran formularies. But the reason for this correspondence must be appreciated. It lies in the *polemical* context in each case. The Council of Trent perceived in Lutheran teaching (largely mistakenly) an antinomian threat similar to that posed by the opponents in 2 Peter. In both cases, this perceived threat of antinomianism leads to a stress on the importance of good works for the attainment of salvation in the future. *As a polemical correction* this emphasis is quite justified. Second Peter, it must be admitted, lacks any stress on the scandal of the gospel as the message of God's love for sinners which accepts and welcomes the most wicked. But it emphasizes another side of the matter which must not be forgotten: the fact that God's love in the gospel does not *succeed* until it makes sinners into saints.

However, this passage (1:3–11) does not stand alone in 2 Peter. As we have noticed in the introduction to 2 Peter, it is important to recognize the balance our author achieves between Hellenistic and apocalyptic material. In this case, we must put 1:3–11, with its strongly Hellenistic flavor, alongside the little apocalypse of chapter 3. If some readers feel that the specter of a self-interested ethic and an anthropocentric eschatology still seems to linger around the former passage, it will be thoroughly dispelled by the latter.

Eschatological righteousness

Second Peter 3:11–14 again makes the link, so characteristic of 2 Peter, between ethics and eschatology, between the Christian practice of righteousness now and the hope of the new world which is coming at the Parousia. The key to this link really comes in verse 13: "we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness is at home." It is very notable that the *only* feature of the new world which the author considers worthy of comment is that it will be a world in which God's will will be done. Of all the points he could

3 CHRISTIAN HOPE

Aspects of 2 Peter's eschatology have already been treated in the previous two chapters. In this chapter we shall focus on the author's refutation of the eschatological skepticism of his opponents. These false teachers rejected the future eschatological expectation of the early Christians. There would, in their view, be no divine intervention to bring the history of this world to a conclusion, to complete the divine purpose in history, and to establish God's kingdom forever. There would be no Parousia of Jesus Christ to judge the wicked and complete the salvation of the faithful. In some ways these teachers resembled some modern attempts to remove future eschatology from the Christian message. Part of their motivation, like that of such modern attempts, was the incredibility, as they saw it, of future eschatology in their cultural context.

But 2 Peter is written out of the conviction that future eschatology is not an inessential, culturally relative way of expressing Christian belief, which had to be abandoned when Christianity moved from a Palestinian-Jewish to a

pagan-Hellenistic environment. Difficult though it was for the Hellenistic mind to accept, it was integral to the Christian gospel.

The author therefore engages in a serious debate with his opponents. He deals with a series of specific objections they raised to the Christian hope as it had been preached by the apostles. We should note that his defense of future eschatology is therefore oriented to the particular objections raised and felt by those influenced by the Hellenistic cultural context of the late first century. It will not necessarily answer all objections raised and felt by people today, but we may find it still relevant to some of them. We may also learn from the author's perception of the need to maintain the future hope as a nonnegotiable element of the Christian message, closely related to the integrity of Christian living. In this, the mainstream tradition of the church in his time and afterward followed him.

The evidence of the transfiguration

The false teachers did not dispute that the apostles had taught that Jesus Christ would come at the imminent end of history to judge the world and to establish his kingdom. So they had to argue that the apostles were mistaken in this. In fact, they argued that the apostles had invented the idea of the Parousia; it was not part of the Christian revelation which Jesus Christ had commissioned them to preach. Rather, it was their own human addition to that revelation. Thus the false teachers charged the apostles with teaching "cleverly concocted myths" (1:16), using the word "myth" in the derogatory sense it quite often had in ancient religious controversy: a story which purports to be true but is not.

The charge is that the eschatological teaching of the apostles was not what it claimed to be—prophecy inspired by God—but the fabrication of mere human cleverness,

presumably for some unworthy motive. The Epicureans held that Greek stories of punishment in the afterlife had been invented as instruments of moral control, to keep people in fear. Since there are other indications that the false teachers were familiar with arguments deployed in Hellenistic religious debate about prophecy and revelation, they may have said something similar about the Christian expectation of judgment at the Parousia. This would reinforce the link they evidently made between their eschatological skepticism and their moral libertinism.

In 1:16–18 our author (writing in Peter's name) denies this charge and claims that the teaching of the apostles about the Parousia was not invented, but based on their eyewitness testimony to the transfiguration of Jesus. In other words, it was an integral part of the special teaching role of the apostles which was to testify to that of which they had been eyewitnesses (cf., Acts 1:21–22).

Modern readers may not immediately recognize how the event of the transfiguration of Jesus, as described in 2 Peter 1:17–18 (cf., the Gospel accounts in Matt 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36), can be a basis for the expectation of his Parousia. The point is that the transfiguration is here understood as God's appointment of Jesus as his Messiah, his eschatological vicegerent. This office of Messiah involved the task of subduing the rebellious world to the divine rule, a task which Jesus had not yet fulfilled (cf., Heb 2:8). But if God had already appointed Jesus as the eschatological judge and king, the time must be coming when Jesus would be manifested to the world in triumphant glory. His manifestation in glory to the apostles on the mountain had been a foretaste of the glory in which he will appear on the last day.

This meaning of the transfiguration is conveyed through the author's allusions to the messianic Psalm 2, which is echoed in the words of the heavenly voice (cf., Ps 2:7) and suggested by the phrase "the holy mountain" (cf., Ps 2:6: "I

have set my king on Zion my holy hill"). According to Psalm 2, God has enthroned his anointed king, the Son of God, on Mount Zion precisely in order to subdue the rebellious world to divine rule (Ps 2:8–9). If the transfiguration was God's installation of Jesus as the Messiah of Psalm 2, it must have had his Parousia directly in view.

The emphasis of the account is on the apostolic witness to the fact that *God himself* had chosen Jesus as his vicegerent, appointed him to the office, and invested him with glory for the task. The apostles had seen the glory given him by God and heard the voice from heaven declaring him the Messiah. Therefore, the apostles' expectation of the Parousia was soundly based on this divine action and declaration.

The evidence of Old Testament prophecy

The author has a second reply to the charge that the apostles simply invented the Christian hope: "Moreover, we [Peter and his fellow-apostles] place very firm reliance on the prophetic word, to which you would do well to attend, as you would to a lamp shining in a murky place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (1:19). As well as the divine declaration at the transfiguration, the apostles had also, as a reliable basis for their expectation of the Parousia, the Old Testament prophecies inspired by God. Such prophecies, of course, are frequently interpreted in the New Testament as prophecies of the coming of Jesus as judge and king. We noticed some of these prophecies earlier (cf., chapter 3 on Jude) and the fact that a Parousia-related interpretation of them goes back to the earliest Christian teaching.

Rather than considering the transfiguration and the Old Testament prophecies two *distinct* bases for the apostolic expectation of the Parousia, it might be better to see them as *together* forming the basis for that expectation. The apostles

knew that the prophecies referred to the Parousia of Jesus Christ because at the transfiguration God had identified Jesus as the one who was to establish his eschatological rule as predicted in prophecy. The prophecies predicted the final triumph of God's kingdom in history; the transfiguration identified Jesus as the messianic king who would accomplish that triumph.

This verse's comparison of Old Testament prophecy with a lamp shining in a dark place we shall leave for consideration in the next chapter, in the context of 2 Peter's view of Scripture.

The scoffers

In 1:19 the objection raised by the opponents is not explicitly stated, but is implicit in the author's denial of it. In 3:3–4 the opponents (prophesied by Peter before his death, now active after Peter's death) are explicitly quoted: "Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, everything remains just as it has been since the beginning of the world." This is the author's own formulation of their principal objection to the expectation of the Parousia, set out explicitly no doubt because of its importance as an argument which was carrying weight among his readers. He replies to it at length in 3:5–10.

The attitude of the false teachers is suggested by the word "scoffers" (3:3, borrowed from Jude 18). In the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, the scoffer is the person who despises and ignores religion and morality (Prov 1:22; 9:7–8; 13:1, etc). Second Peter uses the term to describe his opponents as people who mock divine revelation. Their objection to the Christian hope is not raised in an open spirit of intellectual inquiry, but with an attitude of scorn. These people are out to discredit a teaching they consider absurd. Their attitude of cynical mockery is also conveyed by the way the

author phrases the beginning of their objection, "Where is the promise of his coming?" In the Old Testament, this kind of rhetorical question is used to express skeptical scoffing at the convictions of believers (e.g., Ps 42:3, 10; 79:10; Jer 17:15; Mal 2:17).

The core of their objection is that the apostolic prophecy of the Parousia has been disproved by the lapse of time. They point out what has become generally known to modern scholars as "the delay of the Parousia." The Parousia had been expected during the lifetime of the first Christian generation. Indeed, the reported sayings of Jesus seemed to predict this (Mark 9:1; 13:30; John 21:22–23). But that generation ("the fathers") had now passed away, and still nothing had happened. Thus the expectation of the Parousia had not been fulfilled within the allotted time span, and so could be considered disproved. This objection probably reflects what for a period in the late first century, when people would be likely to have considered the first generation of Christian believers now passed, was an acute problem for the Christian hope until it was successfully surmounted and forgotten. The false teachers were no doubt able to exploit a genuine source of perplexity for 2 Peter's readers, as is shown by the serious attempt the author makes to meet the problem.

However, the last phrase of verse 4 reveals a further dimension to the skepticism of the false teachers. Since the death of the first generation, they maintained, everything remains unchanged—just as it has done since the beginning of the world. It seems that the failure of the Parousia hope only confirmed the opponents' assumption that divine interventions in history do not happen. The course of the history of the world has always continued, they thought, without catastrophic acts of divine judgment to disrupt its natural course. There was no reason to expect that the future would be any different. This rationalistic assumption about the uniformity of history and nature probably contributed as much

to their eschatological skepticism as did the delay of the Parousia. It brings their objection close to some difficulties modern Christians may have with traditional eschatology in view of our scientific understanding of the universe.

Indeed, the whole objection, as formulated in 2 Peter 3:4, sounds remarkably similar to a famous statement of the modern theologian Rudolf Bultmann, explaining one reason why he was convinced that the message of the New Testament needed to be "demythologized" in order to be made intelligible to modern people:

> The mythical eschatology is rendered fundamentally obsolete by the simple fact that the *Parousia* of Christ did not immediately take place, as the New Testament expected, but that World-history went on, and, as every responsible person is convinced, will continue to go on.[1]

What Bultmann calls "the modern scientific world view" allows for no end to history—or at least for no theologically significant end to history.

The sovereignty of God's Word

The part of the scoffers' objection which the author tackles first is their rationalistic assumption of the necessary stable continuance of the world without divine interruption. Their confidence that the world will continue unchanged indefinitely is based on no more solid basis than the claim that it always has continued unchanged. The author shatters this facile rationalism with his belief that the world, and its continuance as a stable habitation for humanity, are radically contingent on the will of God.

His evidence is that the world was brought into existence by divine decree (3:5), and by divine decree ("the word of