

THE RHETORIC OF 2 PETER:  
AN APOLOGIA FOR EARLY CHRISTIAN ETHICS  
(AND NOT “PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY”)

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Ernst Käsemann’s 1952 lecture described 2 Peter as “an apologia for primitive Christian eschatology” and characterized it as “a document expressing an early Catholic viewpoint...”<sup>1</sup> Käsemann’s characterization of 2 Peter as marked by early Catholicism has contributed to the continued neglect of this Christian letter, for it leads to the viewpoint that it is, again in Käsemann’s words, “perhaps the most dubious writing in the canon.”<sup>2</sup> One of the pillars of Käsemann’s argument is to identify the occasion for the letter by that well-worn phrase, “the delay of the *parousia*.” He states: “the whole community is embarrassed and disturbed by the fact of the delay of the Parousia, a fact naturally used by the adversaries to bolster up their argument (3.9).” Summarizing 3:4, this argument is “based reasonably enough on the evidence of the eyes: those fathers of the first Christian generation who still fervently expected the Parousia are dead, and the world goes on in the same old way.”<sup>3</sup> Käsemann proceeds to evaluate the eschatology of 2 Peter: “The real theological problem of the epistle... lies in the fact that its eschatology lacks any vestige of Christological orientation.”<sup>4</sup>

I am privileged to have had Philip Davies as one of my doctoral supervisors. I cherish the memories of meeting to discuss the rough drafts of my chapters. Having completed my studies, Philip has become a good friend and colleague, and I am pleased to be able to contribute to this volume in honour of him. One of the many things I learned from Philip was to think outside the box—to look at questions and issues from new and different perspectives. I would like to apply what I learned from him to the question of the character of 2 Peter.

1. Ernst Käsemann, “An Apologia for Primitive Christian Eschatology,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (trans. W. J. Montague; SBT 41; London: SCM, 1964), 169–95.

2. *Ibid.*, 169.

3. *Ibid.*, 170.

4. *Ibid.*, 178.

It is the purpose of this essay to call into question Käsemann's characterization of 2 Peter as "an apologia for primitive Christian eschatology" by re-examining his view that the occasion for the letter is the delay of the *parousia* and his characterization of the letter's eschatology as lacking a Christological orientation. Others have also questioned Käsemann's view and provided alternatives,<sup>5</sup> but unfortunately this view remains influential, as is evidenced by its being repeated without question in recent textbooks for both undergraduate and graduate students, as well as recent academic monographs.<sup>6</sup> Returning for a moment to Käsemann's statements, we note that his claims are three-fold: (1) the entire Christian community addressed by the letter is "embarrassed and disturbed" by the delay of the *parousia*; (2) the focus of the opponents' argument is the delay of the *parousia*; and (3) the letter's eschatology lacks a Christological orientation. I propose to call these claims into question through an analysis of the letter's rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> Space forbids a complete analysis, and therefore my attention will focus only on the rhetorical exigence and the rhetorical argument.<sup>8</sup>

5. A few examples of recent challenges to Käsemann include Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC 50; Waco: Word, 1983); Duane F. Watson, *Invention, Arrangement, and Style: Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter* (SBLDS 104; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); J. Daryl Charles, *Virtue Amidst Vice: The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter 1* (JSNTSup 150; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). For recent surveys of 2 Peter research, see Richard J. Bauckham, "2 Peter: An Account of Research," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, vol. 2.25.5 (ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1988), 3713–52; Peter Müller, "Der 2. Petrusbrief," *ThR* 66 (2001): 310–37; Robert L. Webb, "The Petrine Epistles: Recent Developments and Trends," in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 373–90.

6. As an example of a recent undergraduate textbook, see Christian E. Hauer and William A. Young, *An Introduction to the Bible: A Journey Into Three Worlds* (6th ed.; Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 323, which states that 2 Peter is "a defense of the return of Christ despite the delay." As an example of a recent graduate-level textbook, see Lee Martin McDonald and Stanley E. Porter, *Early Christianity and Its Sacred Literature* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000), 545, which states concerning the readers of 2 Peter that they "are perhaps susceptible to their [i.e. the false teachers'] teaching because of disappointment about the return of Christ." See also Ralph P. Martin, "The Theology of Jude, 1 Peter, and 2 Peter," in *The Theology of the Letters of James, Peter, and Jude* (ed. Andrew Chester and Ralph P. Martin; New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 140–42.

7. Any such analysis must acknowledge indebtedness to the excellent rhetorical analysis of 2 Peter by Watson, *Invention*.

8. In his ground-breaking work on rhetorical criticism, George A. Kennedy (*New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984], 33–38) proposes that rhetorical analysis proceed through five stages: (1) determine the rhetorical unit; (2) define the rhetorical situation; (3) determine

In 2 Peter, the exigence from the author's perspective is the presence of false teachers in the church (2:1) who at one time had been faithful Christians but have now gone astray (2:15, 20–22). These false teachers have gathered a following—other Christians in the church(es) have succumbed to their teaching and lifestyle (2:2, 14, 18).

Our knowledge of these opponents is limited to the author's references to them, filtered, of course, through the rhetoric of his response. We must distinguish between stereotypical polemic name-calling and genuine debate.<sup>9</sup> There are several places in 2 Peter where the opponents' views are probably alluded to in the course of such genuine debate. The clearest of these is 3:4, in which a statement is attributed to the opponents and is introduced with λέγοντες (“saying”): “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!”<sup>10</sup> The precise phrasing is probably that of the author himself, but the specificity of the statement indicates that it is the opponents' viewpoint being expressed.

Two elements in 3:4 merit closer attention for our purposes. First of all, what is implied by the question, “Where is the promise of his coming?” It is quite evident in the context of the letter that “his coming” refers to the *parousia* of Christ (cf. 1:16). The “promise of his coming” might refer to promises in the Hebrew Bible (hereafter HB), but more likely it refers to the promises made by Jesus himself.<sup>11</sup> But what is suggested by asking the question, “Where is...”? In the preceding verse the question is placed on the lips of “scoffers” (3:3), so the question is obviously more than, “In what text is the promise found?” It is illuminat-

the species of rhetoric; (4) investigate the invention, arrangement, and style of the rhetorical argument; and (5) evaluate the rhetorical effectiveness. The rhetorical situation (#2 above) is defined by Lloyd F. Bitzer (“The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 [1968]: 6–7) as consisting of three elements: the exigence, the audience, and the constraints. He defines exigence as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (p. 6).

9. So carefully demonstrated by Jerome H. Neyrey, “The Form and Background of the Polemic in 2 Peter” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1977), 13. The argument by Michel Desjardins (“The Portrayal of the Dissidents in 2 Peter and Jude: Does It Tell Us More About the ‘Godly’ than the ‘Ungodly?’,” *JSNT* 30 [1987]: 89–112) is unfortunately marred by not taking this distinction into account, for he begins his study with more polemical statements (e.g. 2:10). He also blends the evidence from Jude and 2 Peter, a move which has been recognized more recently as a methodological error: whatever the literary relationship between these two letters, their respective occasions need to be examined separately.

10. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

11. For defense of this, see Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 290.

ing to compare this with scoffing questions in the LXX that begin with this same clause, “Where is...?” (ποῦ ἔστιν). For example, Israel was frequently asked the question, “Where is your God?” when faced with defeat (e.g. Joel 2:17).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Jeremiah’s opponents scoff at his prophecies: “Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come!” (Jer 17:15). These questions mockingly deny the existence of God or some element of divine truth. If a similar understanding is brought to 2 Pet 3:4, it suggests that the scoffers are mockingly denying the truth of the *parousia*. To deny the truth of the *parousia* is different from, or more than, simply a problem with the delay of the *parousia*.<sup>13</sup>

The second element to examine is the statement in 3:4b which provides the reason for the opponents’ denial of the *parousia*: “For ever since the ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.” The key point at issue here is the referent for the expression οἱ πατέρες (“the fathers” or “the ancestors”). Most commentators understand this to refer to the first generation of Christians.<sup>14</sup> They have died without the *parousia* of Christ taking place as expected. The argument of the opponents could be paraphrased as follows: “We deny the truth of the *parousia* because the first generation of Christians has died and the *parousia* did not take place—look, nothing has changed since creation!” However, another referent is more likely. The expression οἱ πατέρες could instead refer to the HB patriarchs or saints. For several reasons this interpretation is preferable.<sup>15</sup> First of all, HB patriarchs is the only referent of οἱ πατέρες in evidence gathered from both Jewish and early Christian literature.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, the expression “all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” suggests a referent in the ancient past rather than the recent past. If the referent of οἱ πατέρες was

12. For further discussion and references, see Neyrey, “Polemic in 2 Peter,” 15.

13. *Ibid.*, 15.

14. E.g. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 290.

15. For the minority of scholars who support this position, see Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (ICC 41; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), 291; J. Rawson Lumby, *The Epistles of St. Peter* (2d ed.; ExpB; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908); Michael Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude* (2d ed.; TNTC 18; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 139–40; Norman Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude* (NIBC 16; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992), 214; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (NAC 37; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 372–74.

16. For references, see Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 290. This holds true in later Christian literature as well. Bauckham notes a possible exception in 2 Clem 19:4, but admits (p. 290) that the phrase here also “most probably refers to the OT saints.” The same holds true for use of the phrase in 1 Clem 23:3 and 2 Clem 11:2 where it is contained in a prophetic proverbial saying.

the previous generation of Christians, it would make more sense for the clause to say something like “for ever since the first generation of Christians died, all things continue as they were from when Christ lived among us.” Thirdly, the response by the author in vv. 5–10 indicates that this is the way he understood the referent, for he goes back to the time of the HB saints and shows that judgment had in fact taken place in the Flood (v. 6). This response by the author is quite irrelevant if the real issue is the death of the first generation of Christians before the *parousia* has taken place.

So, this first allusion to the viewpoint of the opponents indicates that the issue at hand is *not* a questioning of the *parousia* in the future because of its delay, but rather a rejection of the truth of the *parousia* itself because there is no evidence of divine intervention and judgment in the past.

The second allusion to the viewpoint of the opponents is in 3:9: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you...” The use of an οὐ...ἀλλὰ... (“not [this]...but [that]...”) construction assists us in identifying the opponents’ viewpoint.<sup>17</sup> The phrase “as some think of slowness” suggests that the denial in the first clause is, in fact, an allusion to the viewpoint of the opponents—they think that “the Lord *is* slow about his promise.” This suggests that the opponents are using the failure of the *parousia* to occur as an argument against divine judgment. The context points out, however, that this is not, in fact, the “delay of the *parousia*” as traditionally understood. First of all, the preceding verse, an intertextual allusion to Ps 90:4 (LXX 89:4), asserts that God’s perspective of time is quite different from a human perspective.<sup>18</sup> Again, we note that the time frame being asserted is “a thousand years” not “twenty/thirty/fifty years” or some other time referent associated with a single generation. Second, the author rejects the notion that there is any delay: “the Lord is not slow...[but rather] he is forbearing...” The author’s response to the claim of the opponents is not to explain a delay, but to deny that there is one. His response is simply to affirm in v. 10: “But the day of the Lord will come...” From the opponents’ perspective, then, it is the failure of the *parousia* to happen that serves as evidence for their denial that there will be any divine judgment at all. Again, the issue for the opponents is not the *delay* of the *parousia*, but the denial of its possibility.<sup>19</sup>

17. See the argument by Neyrey, “Polemic in 2 Peter,” 18–19.

18. See Bauckham (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 306–10) for a discussion of the interpretive issues here, and support for the one cited here.

19. Cf. Tord Fornberg, *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society: A Study of 2 Peter* (trans. J. Gray; ConBNT 9; Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1977), 70.

The third text that alludes to the viewpoint of the opponents is 1:16: “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” In the same way that 3:9 contained an οὐ...ἀλλὰ... (“not [this]...but [that]...”) construction to identify the author’s rejection of the opponents’ viewpoint, so does this verse. The opponents claim that the *parousia* is nothing but “cleverly devised myths.” In other words, the *parousia* is a human concoction and is, therefore, fictitious. The author’s response is to provide eyewitness testimony of the veracity of the *parousia* in vv. 16b–18 (in other words, it is not a myth), and to affirm the prophetic source for the truth of the *parousia* in vv. 19–21 (in other words, it is not a human concoction).

As in the preceding instances, it is also illuminating here to observe the argument used by the author to reject the viewpoint of the opponents. To deny that the *parousia* is nothing but “cleverly devised myths,” the author claims to provide eyewitness testimony: “we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty” (v. 16b), and then proceeds to describe Jesus’ transfiguration (vv. 17–18; cf. Mk 9:2–10 par).<sup>20</sup> The basic question arises: How can claiming to be an eyewitness of a past event like the transfiguration be an effective rebuttal to the denial of a yet-future event like the return of Christ? The most common explanations of this conundrum are either to link the transfiguration in some way with the second coming of Christ, or else to link the evident truth of the apostolic witness of the transfiguration to the questioned truth of their proclamation of Christ’s second coming.<sup>21</sup> But a simpler explanation may be found by questioning the referent of *parousia* assumed in these explanations. The most common view is that *parousia* referred to in the clause “we made known to you the power and coming (παρουσία) of our Lord Jesus Christ...” is to the future expectation of Christ’s return. However, as is well known, the term *parousia* does not mean “second coming” or “return,” but rather means “presence” (i.e. in the sense of “the state of being present at a place”) or “coming” (i.e. in the sense of “arrival as the

20. On the dependence or independence of 2 Pet 1:17–18 on the Gospel narratives of the transfiguration, see Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 205–12; Robert J. Miller, “Is There Independent Attestation for the Transfiguration in 2 Peter?,” *NTS* 42 (1996): 620–25.

21. An example of the former explanation is that offered by Schreiner (*J, 2 Peter, Jude*, 316), who states: “the transfiguration represents and anticipates Christ’s powerful coming.” An example of the latter explanation is that offered by Bauckham (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 216–17), who states: “Since the readers accept this eyewitness testimony to the Transfiguration as reliable, they can also rely on the teaching which the apostles based on it: the prophecy of the Parousia.”

first stage in presence”).<sup>22</sup> While used in everyday ways for presence and coming of things and people,<sup>23</sup> it was also used for a divine manifestation<sup>24</sup> as well as a visit of a king.<sup>25</sup> When used of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, its referent is to the expectation of his yet-future appearing in glory,<sup>26</sup> but the basic sense of the term *does not require* this referent. It could instead refer to the earthly life of Jesus Christ understood as a divine manifestation. In other words, the Christian claim was that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God manifested himself through his appointed Messiah. It is this divine intervention in human history through Jesus that the opponents view as “cleverly devised myths.”

Three pieces of evidence are usually used in support of the traditional view (i.e. the referent is Christ’s return). First, everywhere else in the New Testament, including two other places in 2 Peter (3:4, 12), when used of Christ, the referent is Christ’s return, and not his earthly life. But, in response, there is nothing in the sense of the word that *requires* this referent; all that can be claimed here is the weight of statistical probability, all other things being equal. But, as we shall see, other things are not equal. The second piece of evidence is the entire expression used by the author in 1:16: “the power and coming (δύναμιν καὶ παρουσίαν) of our Lord Jesus Christ...” The phrase “power and coming” is probably a hendiadys having the sense of “powerful coming,” and thus it is claimed that the link of “power” to “coming” supports the referent being to Christ’s eschatological return in glory. But, again, while possible, the sense does not require it. For example, in 2 Pet 1:3 the author has used the term δύναμις (“power”) with respect to Jesus Christ and the benefits that believers experience as a result of his first coming. Thus in this letter

22. BDAG, 780–81. Cf. LSJ, 1343. The same basic set of meanings is also observed in the verb πάρεμι (“to be present, come”).

23. E.g. Jdt 10:18; 2 Macc 8:12; 15:21; 1 Cor 16:17; 2 Cor 7:6–7; 10:1; Josephus, *War* 4:345; Josephus, *Life* 90.

24. For example, in the inscriptions from Epidauros, after healing a woman, “Asklepios revealed his presence to her (παρουσίαν τὸν αὐτοῦ) and ordered her to send offerings to Epidauros” (stele B, line 34), as quoted in Lynn R. LiDonnici, *The Epidaurian Miracle Inscriptions: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (SBLTT 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 104–105. For other references, see C. Spicq, “παρουσία,” *TLNT* 3:53–54.

25. E.g. 3 Macc 3:17. For other references see Spicq, “παρουσία,” 3:54; A. Oepke, “παρουσία, κτλ.,” *TDNT* 5:859–60; G. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (4th ed.; trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan; Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint, 1978 [1922]), 368–73.

26. E.g. Mt 24:3; 1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thes 4:15; Jas 5:7–8; 1 Jn 2:28.

“power” does not require that “coming” refer to Christ’s eschatological coming in glory. The third piece of evidence is that the eschatological orientation of this letter supports an eschatological referent for “coming.” But in response we should note that this assumes that everything in the letter must be eschatological. As we shall see, that is not necessarily the case.

Three points may be noted to support the referent of *parousia* in 1:16 being the earthly life of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> First, the church fathers, while they do use *parousia* with reference to Christ’s return, clearly demonstrate that the term is not a technical term that *requires* this referent, for they also clearly use it with reference to the earthly life of Jesus. For example, in his *Letter to the Philadelphians*, Ignatius refers to the gospel as “the coming (παρουσίαν) of the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, his passion, and the resurrection” (9:2; Lake LCL). In an interesting parallel to 2 Peter, the *Letter to Diognetus* argues that the Christians’ endurance of suffering (7:7–8) is evidence that God has chosen to reveal himself in the life and death of Jesus Christ (7:1–5; 8:1). Their endurance “are the proofs of his coming (παρουσίας) (7:9; Lake LCL). Here it is evident that *parousia* is not merely used to refer to Jesus Christ’s first coming, but it is his first coming *as a manifestation or revelation of God*.<sup>28</sup> The use of *parousia* with reference to Christ’s first coming is common in the writings of Justin, Origen, and Eusebius.<sup>29</sup>

Second, we have already seen that the term “power” in 1:16 does not require a reference to Christ’s second coming (cf. 1:3), but this phrase “power and coming” can be used specifically with reference to a *present* divine manifestation. Josephus tells the story of Elisha praying that the eyes of his servant be opened so that he could see the heavenly armies that were protecting him from army of the king of Aram (2 Kgs 6:15–

27. This is not a widely held view; see, e.g., C. Spicq, *Les Épîtres de Saint Pierre* (SB 4; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1966), 219–20. Eric Fuchs and Pierre Reymond (*La deuxième épître de saint Pierre. L’épître de saint Jude* [2d ed.; CNT 13b; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1988], 68) view it as an allusion to both Christ’s earthly life and his eschatological coming in glory (cf. Oepke, “παρουσία,” 5:869). I am indebted to Edith M. Humphrey for suggesting I explore this alternative interpretation.

28. In *Ep. Diog.* 7:6 παρουσία is used with reference to Christ’s second coming. The use of these this term twice in close proximity to each other, one with reference to Christ’s first coming and the other with reference to his second, demonstrates that *parousia* is not a technical term for Christ’s eschatological coming in glory, but rather should be understood as a reference to what God is doing in and through Jesus Christ, and the context should determine what the referent is: past or future.

29. Fornberg (*Early Church*, 80 n. 15) states that of Justin’s 36 uses of παρουσία, 17 are with reference to Christ’s first coming. Similarly 21 out of Origen’s 28 uses, and 24 out of Eusebius’ 28 uses.

17). Josephus states that Elisha prayed that God might “reveal, so far as was possible, his power and presence (δύναμιν καὶ παρουσίαν) to his servant...” (*Ant.* 9:55; Marcus LCL).

Third, the author of 2 Peter uses the transfiguration (1:17–18) as evidence for Christ’s “power and coming.” It is interesting to note the event the author chose as evidence—it was one that clearly demonstrated that God was revealing himself in the earthly life of Jesus. If *parousia* is understood not simply as “coming” but rather as “coming in divine manifestation,” then the transfiguration is clear evidence that Christ’s life was a “powerful coming” of divine manifestation and not “cleverly devised myths.”

If this interpretation of the referent to *parousia* in 1:16 is correct,<sup>30</sup> then it alters our understanding somewhat of the opponents’ view that the author of 2 Peter is rejecting. The opponents are claiming that Jesus’ life and death understood as a “powerful coming,” that is, a divine manifestation, is merely cleverly devised myths. In other words, they are objecting to understanding Jesus’ life as evidence of divine intervention and involvement in human history.

The fourth text that alludes to the opponents’ viewpoint is 1:21. It also contains the οὐ...ἀλλὰ... (“not [this]...but [that]...”) construction: “no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” Again, the οὐ...ἀλλὰ... construction suggests that the opponents’ viewpoint is alluded to here.<sup>31</sup> The opponents’ claim is quite clear: prophetic announcements are only the result of human impulse. This would include the prophetic announcement that the author has just claimed in v. 19 is a “prophetic message.”<sup>32</sup> Verse 20 clarifies the opponents’ claim: “prophecy is only the prophet’s own

30. A parallel might be observed with respect to the expression “day of Yahweh/the Lord.” While the predominant use of this expression is with reference to the expectation of eschatological judgment (cf. 2 Pet 3:10), it was also used with reference to current events that were interpreted as Yahweh’s judgment; see, e.g., Ezek 7:7–12; 34:12; Lam 1:12; 2:1, 22. Thus, as the term “day of the Lord” could be used with reference to divine intervention both in the past or present as well as the eschatological future, so the term “*parousia* of Christ” could equally be used with reference to divine intervention in the past as well as the eschatological future. Cf. Robert L. Webb, “Day of the Lord,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids; Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1997), 264–67 (264); Richard H. Hiers, “*parousia* of the Lord,” *ABD* 2:82–83.

31. Neyrey, “Polemic in 2 Peter,” 24–25.

32. Scholars are divided as to the referent “the prophetic message” in 1:19. It is not relevant for our concerns here. For a discussion of the alternatives, see Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 224–25.

human interpretation of his visions.”<sup>33</sup> So vv. 20–21 are not a separate response to a separate accusation by the opponents, but rather they are a sub-issue of the argument that began at v. 16.

In light of this summary from the four clearest allusions to the opponents viewpoint, we are able to extrapolate to at least one other reference to their teaching. In 2:3b, in the author’s claim that “their condemnation...has not been idle, and their destruction is not asleep,” there is probably an allusion to his opponents claim that “condemnation is idle and destruction is asleep.” This is, in effect, a rejection of divine judgment in general—a view that the author has also attributed to his opponents in 3:4–10. Thus, this is not a teaching of the opponents that is distinct from those we have already uncovered from other texts.

Let me summarize the opponents’ viewpoint to this point: they deny the *parousia* of Jesus Christ in the future, or any form of divine judgment for that matter, because there has been no divine judgment in the past (2:3; 3:4), and because it has not yet happened in the present (3:9). As well, they deny that the life of Jesus Christ as a *parousia* of divine manifestation, because it is a fabricated myth (1:16), and because it is, like all claims to speak for or represent God, merely a human impulse (1:21).

All the evidence considered thus far has focused on the opponents’ teaching that rejected divine manifestation in Jesus Christ’s first *parousia* and rejected divine judgment in his second, eschatological *parousia*. A corollary of this teaching is one that has ethical implications. This is most clearly seen in 2:18–19: “For they speak bombastic nonsense, and with licentious desires of the flesh they entice people who have just escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them.” If we filter out the polemic rhetoric, the clause “they promise freedom” is an allusion to the opponents’ viewpoint. By itself it is ambiguous, but it can be clarified by the immediate context where the author refers to “licentious desires of the flesh” (2:18) and to being entangled in “the defilements of the world” (2:19). The statement that “they promise freedom” is, therefore, a statement about what the author perceives as freedom from ethical constraints. It also alludes to being free from the fear of judgment, for this is the link to our earlier discussion—denial of divine judgment at the *parousia* obviously results in a freedom from the fear of judgment. And if there is no ultimate moral accountability, then it allows for freedom from ethical constraints.

33. Ibid., 232, cf. 229–33 for a full discussion.

Freedom from ethical constraints as a part of the teaching and lifestyle of the opponents (from the author's perspective) is evidenced elsewhere in the letter, particularly in the language used to describe immoral practices. These descriptions are found particularly in two sections of the letter: 2:1–3a and 2:10b–22. In these two sections several terms are used: licentious ways (2:2, 18), greed (2:3, 14), slander (2:10b, 12), reveling in their dissipation (2:13), eyes full of adultery (2:14), and insatiable for sin (2:14). To what extent we can separate the rhetorical polemic from the specifics of actual immoral behaviour is difficult to determine. It is sufficient at this point to observe the author's concern with what he perceives to be their unethical lifestyle.

We can summarize now the understanding of the exigence gleaned from the study thus far: there are false teachers in the church(es) who are leading others astray with their teaching and lifestyle. These false teachers reject the idea of divine manifestation in the life of Jesus Christ's first *parousia* and in claims of prophetic messages. They reject the idea of divine judgment in general and the divine judgment at the second *parousia* of Christ in particular. And freedom from divine manifestation and divine judgment leads to freedom from ethical constraints in their lifestyle.

This analysis of the exigence of the rhetorical situation has drawn out certain features that impact our understanding of the rhetorical structure of the letter. In particular, the *probatio* section has three sections in which the author makes a defense against the opponents' teaching, each of which is introduced by a brief reference to the opponents: the opponents' claim in 1:16 (along with v. 21) is refuted by the rhetorical unit of 1:16–21; the allusion to the opponents' view in 2:3b is refuted by the rhetorical unit of 2:3b–10a; and the opponents' views expressed in 3:4 (along with v. 9) is refuted by the rhetorical unit of 3:1–10. Interspersed between these three sections of apologetic defense, the author goes on the offensive and makes polemical charges against his opponents. What is interesting to note is that these polemic charges focus upon the opponents' unethical lifestyle, not their teachings.

The following is a macro-level rhetorical outline. It consists of the three essential components of a rhetorical outline: an *exordium*, a *probatio*, and a *peroratio*.<sup>34</sup>

34. This outline follows closely the overall structure proposed by Watson, *Invention*, 141–42. However, the outline proposed here differs in its understanding of the structure of the *probatio*.

*The Rhetorical Structure of 2 Peter*

1. *Exordium*, 1:3–15
  - 1.1. A miniature homily on the theological foundation, the ethical qualities, and ultimate goal of a Christian lifestyle, 1:3–11
  - 1.2. The testamentary nature of “Peter’s” desire for them to “remember these things,” 1:12–15
2. *Probatio*, 1:16–3:10
  - 2.1. Apologetic Defense against the Opponents’ Teaching #1: The *parousia* is not a cleverly devised myth, for it is based on eyewitness testimony and prophetic proclamation, 1:16–21
  - 2.2. Polemic Charge against the Opponents’ Lifestyle #2: The opponents are false teachers who are leading others astray with their teaching and immoral lifestyle, and they will be judged, 2:1–3a
  - 2.3. Apologetic Defense against the Opponents’ Teaching #2: Divine judgment is not asleep, for God has judged in the past and he will do so again in the future, 2:3b–10a
  - 2.4. Polemic Charge against the Opponents’ Lifestyle #2: The opponents are not free, but in fact have become enslaved and entangled by their immoral lifestyle, 2:10b–22
  - 2.5. Apologetic Defense against the Opponents’ Teaching #3: Judgment at the *parousia* is not to be denied, for God has judged in the past and he will do so again in the future, 3:1–10
3. *Peroratio*, 3:11–18
  - 3.1. A call to a holy lifestyle while waiting for the *parousia*, 3:11–13
  - 3.2. Final exhortations to follow a Christian lifestyle and to avoid the errors of the opponents, 3:14–18

A few things are noteworthy in this rhetorical outline. First of all, in the *probatio* the author alternates between apologetic and polemic. The apologetic sections defend his understanding of Christian truth concerning divine manifestation and divine judgment at each *parousia*, past and future, against the error of the opponents’ teaching, while the polemic sections charge the opponents with an immoral lifestyle derived from their theological error. Second, the emphasis in both the *exordium* and the *peroratio* is ethics, not eschatology. Frequently, 2 Peter is viewed as a letter whose focus is eschatology—witness Käsemann’s title to his essay: “An Apologia for Primitive Christian Eschatology.”<sup>35</sup> But in rhetorical structure we would expect the *exordium* and the *peroratio* to contain the central concerns of the author, and in both sections the clear emphasis is primarily ethics rather than

35. Käsemann, “Apologia,” 169–95.

eschatology. It is not that eschatology is unimportant to the author. Rather, the author is having to combat what he perceives as error that is being used to support what he perceives as an immoral lifestyle. It is also interesting in this ethical focus of 2 Peter that, while the opponents argue for freedom from moral constraints because there is no divine judgment coming, the author of 2 Peter does not emphasize the reverse. That is, his ethical focus is not: “live ethically because there is divine judgment coming.” This may be alluded to in 3:11, but the focus of his ethics is a living out the implications of the gospel: knowing Jesus Christ (1:2, 3, 8; 2:20; 3:18) and expecting his kingdom—a “new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (1:11; 3:13). The author’s ethics are oriented around the twin poles of christological blessings and eschatological hope—not judgment.

To conclude, I return to Käsemann’s comments concerning the occasion of 2 Peter and the character of its eschatology; there were three points: (1) the entire Christian community addressed by the letter is “embarrassed and disturbed” by the delay of the *parousia*; (2) an emphasis of the opponents’ argument is the delay of the *parousia*; and (3) the letter’s eschatology lacks a Christological orientation.

By way of response, first of all, the concern of the opponents is not the delay of the *parousia* but rather a denial of any form of divine manifestation or divine judgment, past or future. With respect to the eschatological *parousia*, their emphasis is primarily on rejecting divine judgment in general rather than the Christian hope of the *parousia* in particular.

Secondly, there has been no evidence that the author or the audience is “embarrassed and disturbed” by the delay of the *parousia*. The author assumes and affirms the *parousia*. While he does defend the “powerful *parousia*” of the life of Jesus Christ (1:16–21), the greater emphasis in his defense is divine judgment in general (2:3b–10a; 3:1–10). I would suggest that characterizing 2 Peter as “early catholic” based upon its eschatology is to misunderstand the rhetorical exigence and the argument of the letter.

Thirdly, it is hardly accurate to state that the letter’s eschatology lacks a Christological orientation. It is “the *parousia* of our Lord Jesus Christ” that is affirmed (1:16), and it is “the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” that is anticipated (1:11). If some of the eschatological discussion concerns the more general eschatological themes of divine judgment without an explicit mention of Christology, it is because the emphasis of the opponents’ teaching is a denial of divine judgment in general. This particular exigence requires a defense of divine judgment in general. Such discussion will, at times, lack an explicit Christological orientation, but the implication of Christ’s *parousia* is always there. Furthermore, if, as I have argued here, the author’s true focus is ethics, this is where the author places his particular christological emphasis. Christological ethics are founded on the knowledge

of Jesus Christ and the blessings that flow from him as a result of his first *parousia* (1:3–11), as well as the hope of the eschatological kingdom he establishes at his second *parousia* (3:11–18).

A careful examination of the rhetorical exigence and rhetorical structure of 2 Peter reveals that this letter is not “an apologia for primitive Christian eschatology” as Käsemann proposed,<sup>36</sup> but it is rather an apologia for early Christian ethics. Rather than being left to die by neglect as “the most dubious writing in the canon”<sup>37</sup> as Käsemann suggested, I would conclude that 2 Peter should be appreciated as a vibrant and quite different voice expressing a distinct stream in the development of early Christianity.

36. Ibid., 169.

37. Ibid., 169.