

2 PETER, PART 1

BACKGROUND

The word “knowledge” in English translation represents two words and ideas in the Greek: In 1:2, 3, 8; 2:20 it translates *epignosis*, the basic and foundational knowledge of God in Christ gained in conversion. Elsewhere in 1:5, 6; 3:18, it translates *gnosis*, which is knowledge acquired in the course or Christian life.¹

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. 2 Peter had a harder time getting into the canon than any other NT book. The text itself makes an unambiguous authorship claim (2:16-18; 1:1; 3:1). However, many contemporary scholars believe it is a forgery, possibly (though not necessarily) with the intent to deceive.
 - a. Who wrote 2 Peter?
 - b. Given the three criteria which generally accompanied entry into the canon (apostolic authorship, use in the churches, harmony with NT teaching), should 2 Peter be in our Bibles?
 - c. What would we have lost if 2 Peter hadn't entered the canon?
2. In 1:3-11 Peter motivates holy living. In this, he uses a literary device called *sorites* (from the Latin, from the Greek *soros*, or “heap”), a sort of chain argument in which a series of things are related to one another. For Peter, faith→goodness→knowledge [*gnosis*]→self-control→endurance→godliness→mutual affection→love.

This was a favorite device in both Greek and Jewish writing. A rabbinic example is:

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

(*Mishnah*, tractate *Sota* 9:5). Other examples are found in Rom 5:1-5 (suffering→perseverance→character→hope) and James 1:2-4 (testing of faith→patience→completion).

“It would be a mistake to attach any significance to the order of items in the list, with the exception of the first and the 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

¹ Bauckham; but also be aware in the Asiatic style sometimes vocabulary was varied for the sake of variety (Witherington, 310).

another. The idea is simply that the virtues are interconnected, but the precise order in which they are listed is random.”² The last virtue in the ethical chain is meant to encompass all the rest. As N. T. Wright puts it,

The point is not to spend some years acquiring the first, and then move on to the second, and so on; they work together. And the point is their *forward* look: the aim of it all is to be fruitful in working for Jesus (2 Peter); to be ‘complete,’ *teleioi*, ready for whatever contingency may arise, since your character has been formed to be prepared for anything and everything (James).³

The Stoics and other writers used this sort of “ladder of virtues” as “a memorable summary of their view of the good life” (Bauckham 56).⁴ “Craddock rightly adds that it would have been striking to the ancients to have a list with *both* mutual affection between brothers and sisters and some other kind of love listed. ‘But that is just the point: mutual affection, reciprocal love, pertains to life in the church, to the fellowship. Beyond that, however, is love *agape*. Love does not require reciprocity; it includes the stranger, and even the enemy.’”⁵

- a. Are there any virtues where seem missing from this collection?
- b. Which do you find hardest? Which generally don’t show up on your radar?
- c. Verse 5 begins “for this very reason” in motivating the *sorites*. What reason?
- d. What important things will be yours if you live the life this *sorites* encapsulates?
- e. Have you ever felt “ineffective” or “unproductive” as a Christian? Practically speaking, how would you apply Peter’s advice to avoid ineffectiveness?
- f. How does v. 3 keep this from becoming a works-based soteriology?⁶ Isn’t growth in holiness something the Spirit accomplishes in us, not something we do? (Contrast Rom 8:4; Phil 2:13; Heb 2:11 with 1 Peter 1:14-16; Rom 8:12-13; Eph 4:22-24.)
- g. Why did the author use this rhetorical form?

² Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Word, Dallas) 1990, p. 58.

³ *After You Believe*, p. 179. This isn’t to say that in other *sorites* there wasn’t a progression; there’s just not one here.

⁴ E.g. Seneca, one of the Stoics, in his *Epistle* 85: “He who is brave is fearless; he who is fearless is free from sadness; he who is free from sadness is happy.” Or “He that possesses prudence is also self-restrained; he that possesses self-restraint is also unwavering; he that is unwavering is unperturbed; he that is unperturbed is free from sadness; he that is free from sadness is happy.” These easily led to syllogisms and Seneca himself alludes to debates about these with the Peripatetics. If a plain virtue list is desired, see Aristotle’s “virtues of character”, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book II-IV (<http://pages.interlog.com/~girbe/virtuesvices.html>); add then Justice (discussed in book V), and the “virtues of thought” (aka “intellectual virtues”) discussed in Book VI (see summary at: http://faculty.cua.edu/hoffmann/courses/769_1081/769_EN6_Intellectual_Virtues.pdf).

⁵ Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, Vol. 2, p. 307-8.

⁶ “Confirm your call and election” (v. 10) employs the Greek middle-voice, *poieisthai*, “make sure for yourself.” “The NT characteristically makes room for both [election and free will] without attempting to resolve the apparent antinomy” [Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, p. 83].

h. Can you infer anything in this passage (3-11) about the false teachers Peter's opposing?

3. God's promises allow us to escape the corruption of the world and "participate in the divine nature" (4). According to Green (65),

Rival pagan schoolmen asserted that you escaped from the toils of *corruption* (*phthora*) by becoming *partakers of the divine nature* either by *nomos* ("lawkeeping") or by *physis* ("nature"). Peter takes up their language and replies that it is by sheer grace [v. 3].

- a. What attributes do you generally associate with divinity?
- b. Jesus deliberately emptied himself of many divine qualities such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, etc. (Phil 2:5-11). How *did* Jesus participate in the divine nature?
- c. What does Peter mean by the believer's participating "in the divine nature"? Do you see this at work in mature Christians?⁷



FUN QUOTES FROM A SELECTION OF 2ND-CENT. WRITINGS ASCRIBED TO PETER

"And Peter turned and saw a herring (sardine) hung in a window, and took it and said to the people: If ye now see this swimming in the water like a fish, will ye be able to believe in him whom I preach? And they said with one voice: Verily we will believe thee. Then he said -now there was a bath for swimming at hand: In thy name, O Jesu Christ, forasmuch as hitherto it is not believed in, in the sight of all these live and swim like a fish. And he cast the herring into the bath, and it lived and began to swim" — *Acts of Peter*, 13 (yes, Peter resurrects a smoked fish)

"But who is there to whom it is not manifest that it is better not to have intercourse with a woman in her separation, but purified and washed. And also after copulation it is proper to wash. But if you grudge to do this, recall to mind how you followed after the parts of purity when you served senseless idols; and be ashamed that now, when it is necessary to attain, I say not more, but to attain the one and whole of purity, you are more slothful." — *Kerygmata Petrou* 30 [Supporting baptism. Elsewhere we learn Eve was both the first prophetess and a deceitful one.]

"Then the apostles worshiped again saying, 'Lord, tell us: In what way shall we fight against the archons, since the archons are above us?'" [Archons are "A power subordinate to the Deity, held by some of the Gnostics to have made the world" (OED).] — *The Epistle of Peter to Philip*

"And they were hearing a voice from the heavens saying, 'Have you made proclamation to the fallen-asleep?' And an obeisance was heard from the cross, 'Yes.'" — *Gospel of Peter*, 41-42, at the crucifixion

⁷ **Spoiler:** "Plutarch by contrast [with Peter] complains that humans feel the passion for immortality (a quality of God they cannot really share) far more than the passion for God's moral excellence, which is within their reach (Plutarch *Artist*. 6)... in Greco-Roman thought participating in the divine nature meant things ranging from immortality even to apotheosis and entering the Elysian fields, here it has an ethical dimension: participating in the holiness of God and thereby being able to act ethically" [Witherington 304-5, drawing upon Craddock, *First and Second Peter*, 98].