

2 PETER, PART 2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In 1:16 Peter begins his defense against the accusation by the false teachers that his teaching (particularly that Jesus will return in judgment) is based on “cleverly devised myths.” This was an old charge: Plato claimed tales of divine judgment were used by those in power to maintain order (*Rep.* 2.364-366). Lucretius “argued that tales of punishment in hell and rewards in paradise merely reflect the anxieties and desires of the mind in this life (*On the Nature of Things* 3.966-1023).”¹ In response, Peter defends the veracity of scriptural prophecy with a rare and important passage for the light it sheds on the nature of prophecy:

...no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (1:20-21)

The backdrop of Hellenistic prophecy is important for understanding this passage:

Ordinarily oracles were delivered at a sacred shrine by a person recognized as a *mantis* [one of the Greek words for “prophet”]. While the oracle on occasion was delivered directly to those petitioning it, customarily intermediaries were used, whose title was “prophet” (*prophetes* or *theopropos*). This intermediary might interpret in some way the vague utterance of the *mantis*, put it into poetry, or simply record it. It was assumed and never questioned that the *mantis* was “possessed” by the revealing Deity, so that all utterances were authentic words from the Deity. Yet there is a body of evidence that the *mantis* did not always speak clearly... The *mantis*, moreover, was often said to “understand nothing” when possessed (Philo, *Mos.* 1.283). Therefore, the source may be the Deity, and thus true, but the *mantis* may not be the best of channels (Plutarch, *Pyth.* 397A). Hence, the *prophetes* or intermediary or interpreter was often a necessary figure (Plato, *Tim.* 71E-72B). Thus two figures regularly occur in the transmission of oracles: a source (*mantis*) and an interpreter (*prophetes*).^{2,3}

The OT supports Peter’s assertion (Jer 23:16; Ezek 13:3)—false prophets abounded by spoke “visions from their own minds” whereas true prophets “did not blab their inventions of their own accord” (Calvin). In OT prophecy,

...the prophet is given a sign (e.g., Amos 7:1; Jer 1:11; 13), a dream (e.g. Zech 1:8; Dan 7:2) or a vision (e.g. Dan 8:1), and then its interpretation. In the true prophecy this

¹ Pheme Perkins, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*, pp. 173-4.

² Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude*, pp. 180-1. He continues, “The author of 2 Peter has already positioned himself as the source or *mantis* when he claimed to be an eyewitness to the oracle about Jesus’ parousia (1:16-18). Now he claims to function as well as a valid intermediary and interpreter of that oracle.”

³ The “dictation” view of prophecy can also be found in the Hellenistic Jewish writer Philo (*Life of Moses* 1.281-3; *Special Laws* 1.65) and in some early Christian writers (Justin Martyr, 2nd c., *1 Apology* 1.36) but not all (Bede on 2 Peter). Among the heretical fringe, the Montanists saw themselves as “a lyre struck by the plectrum of the Holy Spirit” (Green, p. 103, fn. 1).

interpretation is not the prophet's own explanation of his vision, but an inspired, God-given interpretation.⁴

Despite the OT's high view of prophecy (Jer 23:29: "'Is not my word like fire,' declares the Lord, 'and a hammer shattering a rock?'"),

[God] cooperated with [the prophets] while revealing himself through them. 'He says they were moved [1:21], not because they were out of their minds (as the heathen imagine *enthousiasmos* in their prophets), but because they dared nothing by themselves but only in obedience to the guidance of the Spirit, who held sway over their lips as in his own temple' (Calvin).⁵

In the NT, similarly, the prophet is not filled with a compulsive urge, but is in control of his or her mind (1 Cor 14:2, 32), speaking coherently (e.g. Acts 2:11).

- a. How would you describe for a new Christian or non-Christian this strange cooperation with the Divine, that prophecy is neither dictation nor from the will of the prophet? Can you give illuminating examples from the Bible or your experience to support your answer?
- b. What prophecies is Peter defending? How are they confirmed by the voice of God at the transfiguration? (If the false teachers are denying the *parousia*, what is the transfiguration relevant?)
- c. The cooperation between Holy Spirit and believer is characteristic of how God works in his people. D. A. Carson, while not equating prophecy with preaching, illuminates the interplay, writing

...what preacher has not had the experience, after detailed preparation for public ministry, of being interrupted in the full flow of his delivered with a new thought, fresh and powerful, interrupting him and insinuating it into his message—only to find after the service that the insertion was the very bit that seemed to touch the most people, and meet their needs?⁶

How do you see this cooperative interplay at work in your relationship with God?

- d. OT prophets were either careful to maintain their holiness and obedience, or they didn't last long (e.g. 1 Kings 13). We read in Rom 12:1-2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (cf. Mt 5:8). In your experience, what helps you best hear the Holy Spirit?

2. See the attached devotional from D. A. Carson's *For the Love of God*, vol. 2.

⁴ R. Bauckham, quoted in Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, Vol. 2, p. 336.

⁵ Michael Green, *2 Peter & Jude*, p. 103.

⁶ *Showing the Spirit*, pp. 168-9.

3. In 1:1-11, Peter gives his core teaching, a positive exhortation giving the elements of holy living in the form of a *sorites*, a list of virtues which lead the believer from faith to true Christian love. These confirm the believer's calling and make the believer effective and fruitful. In 1:16ff, Peter defends the foundations of the faith by upholding prophecy and by his eye-witness testimony to the transfiguration.

Douglas Moo points to pluralism and relativism as the hallmarks of the new false teachers, and cautions against a particular line of defense of the faith:

We live at a time when everything is tolerated—except intolerance. In such a climate of opinion, Christians often find it both uncomfortable and difficult to take a stand for absolute truth... Many Christians have conceded the debate over truth and increasingly rely on a defense of the faith more congenial to our age: that of utilitarianism...

The implications of this “paradigm shift” (as some are calling it) for the topic that Peter addresses in this paragraph are not hard to figure out. As Christians focus more and more on defending their faith on the basis of practicality—going to church has helped my family; my commitment to Christ has given me a better self-image—they will be less and less concerned to know the truth. Feeling replaces thinking. Such a situation provides a golden opportunity for false teachers to enter our ranks and prey on those who simply do not know much about what they believe or why.

- a. Is Moo right about the identity of the new false prophets?
 - b. Are Peter's arguments suited for the modern skeptic, or are they better aimed at the ancient mind and its prejudices and beliefs? If you were addressing an open-minded skeptic, how would you describe the foundations of your belief?
4. In 2:4-10a Peter lists three examples of judgment and one of deliverance. The three offenders are (a) angels (v. 4), whose primary sin was rebellion, though lust is also mentioned (Gen 6:1-4; Jude 6; Rev 12:7); (b) the rebelliousness and wickedness of Noah's contemporaries (v. 5); (c) the cities of the plain (vv. 6ff) and their licentiousness and lawlessness and, from “those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature” in v. 10a, a likely reference to homosexuality.⁷
 - a. What role does this passage play in Peter's overall argument?
 - b. V. 9 says the Lord knows how to “keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.” Does this follow from the previous examples? Is this a statement you can defend from your experience and observations of the world?
 - c. Lot is presented as an example of one “tormented in his righteous soul” by the sin around him. By contrast,

⁷ Green, *ibid.*, 114.

It is customary for Christians today, living in a secularized society, no longer to be shocked by sinful things which they see and hear. They will, for example, without protest sit through a television programme presenting material which a generation ago would never have contemplated watching at a theater or cinema. But when a man's conscience becomes dulled to sin, and apathetic about moral standards, he is no longer willing to look to the Lord for deliverance. (Green, 113)

Discuss.



FUN QUOTES ON PROPHECY:

“Some interpret Peter’s words to mean that the Spirit inspired the prophets in much the same way as the flutist blows into his flute, so that the latter were no more than mechanical instruments in God’s hands, saying what the Spirit told them to say without necessarily understanding or believing it themselves. This is ridiculous. For how could prophets have given such good counsel to people if they did not know what they were saying? Are prophets not also called seers?” (Bede, *On 2 Peter*)

“Not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet, but only if he follows behaviorally the path of the Lord. Accordingly, from their conduct the false prophet and the true prophet will be known.” (*Didache* 11:8).

“If the grace of God could work through an animal without affecting the animal—for the donkey was not saved—but only as a means of helping the Israelites, it is perfectly clear that he is prepared to work in us, which is why this story is so poignant.” (Chrysostom)