

REFINED BY FIRE:  
PARAENETIC LITERARY STRATEGIES IN 1 PETER

J. de Waal Dryden

This thesis seeks to address the long-standing question of the overarching agenda of the author of 1 Peter.<sup>1</sup> The search for a unifying purpose behind the epistle has proved a surprisingly difficult problem in the history of Petrine research. Traditionally many biblical interpreters have argued that the author's agenda is consolation, training the eyes of these suffering Christians heavenward to embrace a hope of glory that outweighs the pain of their present circumstances. More recently others have argued the author's aim is to shore up the corporate identity of these churches to combat temptations to cultural isolation and/or assimilation. While both these proposals recognize real authorial concerns, neither is sufficient to explain the agenda of the epistle as a *whole*. Consolation is, in reality, only a minor theme in the epistle; and the concern for corporate identity, while real, is only one component in the author's overall agenda.

The present study aims to show that the author's overarching concern, in response to the persecutions faced by these young churches, is with the formation of Christian character, which is chiefly evidenced in growing active dependence upon God and growing moral integrity. The author's seemingly paradoxical response to the sufferings of his addressees is the repeated command to 'do good'. In this, the author reveals that his deepest concern is with the *moral* challenges that arise out of the pain of social ostracism. Temptations to retaliation, assimilation or isolation threaten Christian convictions and praxis, and the author's aim in confronting these temptations is to encourage these Christians to maintain their distinctive lifestyle, from which their persecutions arise, and in so doing to facilitate Christian character formation. This accounts for the author's primarily practical

---

<sup>1</sup> J. de Waal Dryden, 'Refined by Fire: Paraenetic Literary Strategies in 1 Peter', (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 2003). Supervisor: Prof. G. N. Stanton.

bent in calling these churches to maintain their righteous conduct in the midst of persecutions. The author, of course, seeks to strengthen their faith in and allegiance to God through reminders of his grace to them, but he recognizes that it is only faith in *practice* that will produce a character that has been refined by the fire of adversity. In this he seeks to turn persecution into an opportunity for growth in Christian character instead of an occasion for despondency. Only a recognition of this character forming agenda has the ability to provide an overriding and unifying agenda to the diverse materials contained in 1 Peter.

This line of interpretation also has the advantage of placing 1 Peter within the historical epistolary traditions of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean world. 1 Peter's agenda for character formation finds deep resonances in the epistolary traditions of the Greco-Roman philosophical schools. In particular, paraenetic epistles, written to neophytes within a school, seek to encourage growth in the philosophic life through moral exhortation, encouraging adherents to translate their new beliefs into new practices. Through praxis, students internalize their beliefs, transform their lives, and attain virtue. Character formation (ἠθροποιία) is, therefore, at the center of the paraenetic enterprise, because it is only through a well-formed virtuous character that one can attain the goal philosophy: εὐδαιμονία. Both 1 Peter and Greco-Roman paraenetic epistles emphasize the moral sphere of life as the central arena for growth in maturity, and see considered moral action as the chief agent of that growth. Both also see the formation of character as the key to realizing spiritual benefits.

This thesis seeks to advance the line of interpretation outlined above by demonstrating that 1 Peter functions as a paraenetic epistle. The author of 1 Peter adopts the literary form of a paraenetic epistle as an appropriate vehicle to achieve his pastoral ends. This epistolary genre was well suited to his task because it had developed a host of literary/rhetorical strategies that aided in the task of facilitating growth in moral character. The most obvious of these stock literary strategies is the moral instruction or precept, which transmits practical wisdom in distilled pithy phrases. In addition to other well-known devices like virtue-and-vice lists, and 'housecodes', paraenetic authors possessed an array of useful literary/rhetorical tools well suited to exhortation. One of the most prevalent is the use of moral exemplars, where virtuous men of the past are extolled for their virtuous characters and held up as models to be imitated. As another tool, paraenetic authors sometimes

emphasized the radical change in life brought about by one's conversion to philosophy. By deprecating pre-conversion life, and extolling the blessing of life since conversion, the author not only underscores conversion as a life-defining choice, but also elicits a recommitment to those principles first embraced in conversion. Paraenesis oftentimes also includes summaries of fundamental doctrines that provide grounding and motivation for actions, as well as an interpretive framework for moral deliberation. Thus, the paraenetic author possessed a vast array of literary strategies to realize his aim of facilitating growth in moral maturity. As recent research has shown, paraenesis does not limit itself of simply giving moral precepts, but rather is a complex form of literary address that seeks to reshape the intellectual, moral, and affective commitments of its hearers through a comprehensive program that includes diverse literary forms.

The bulk of this thesis is taken up with the rehearsal of these diverse literary strategies and the demonstration of how the author of 1 Peter appropriates, adapts, and augments these strategies to accomplish his particular agenda of fostering growth in Christian character. The aim in this approach is first to gather evidence that 1 Peter is a paraenetic epistle, and secondly to use that knowledge of the nature and purpose of the epistle to make exegetical judgments at key and oftentimes difficult points in the text. In addition, this method brings to light how different literary elements function *together* within the overall agenda of character formation.

It is hoped that taking into account the paraenetic nature of 1 Peter will facilitate a deeper understanding of the relationship of theology and ethics in the epistle. By seeing the epistle as a *whole* directed toward the paraenetic aim of growth through moral exhortation, new possibilities emerge for seeing the theology of the epistle as something more than simply the didactic indicative on which the imperative is based. Rather theology becomes an active agent for change directed toward shaping the convictions and praxis of the readers. This is theology in a pragmatic mode, working to undergird the paraenetic project of character formation by providing ideational context and affective motivations for deliberate moral actions.

Thus, one of the subsidiary agendas of this thesis is to undercut the deeply rooted separation of theology and ethics that pervades biblical interpretation. By demonstrating how 1 Peter integrates theological and ethical modes of discourse for the purpose of sustaining character

growth, this thesis unlocks new pathways in interpretation that are not hampered by an *a priori* separation of these two 'forms'. At several points, this opens up new avenues of interpretation and new solutions to old problems. One example is the solution of several particularly difficult exegetical problems in the *imitatio Christi* materials in 2:18-25; 3:17-18; 4:1-2. Understanding these texts within the overall paraenetic enterprise of the epistle provides more satisfying solutions than have been mustered to date.

In addition to exegetical payoffs like this, this paraenetic line of interpretation provides the key to understanding the relationship of profound theological passages to their neighboring ethical instructions. This has always proved one of the most difficult and fascinating aspects of the study of 1 Peter. By seeing theology and ethics both functioning in paraenetic modes, a way is made to see how they come together and strengthen each other in the paraenetic enterprise. An example of this is the treatment of the benediction of 1:3-12, which shows how this passage constructs a theological narrative worldview that contextualizes the persecutions of the readers and provides both intellectual grounding and affective motivations that promote the paraenetic project of character formation.

Thus, seeing 1 Peter as a paraenetic epistle opens up new avenues in the interpretation of the epistle that are historically grounded and fruitful in finding an integrating agenda for the purpose of the epistle as a whole. In addition, it opens up new possibilities for models of interpretation for 1 Peter (and other early Christian literature) that are unencumbered by a bifurcation of theological and ethical materials. This is an aid not only to fruitful theological interpretation, but also to interpretation apposite to the ancient context out of which early Christian literature arose.