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THE PROPHETS' UNDERSTANDING OR UNDERSTANDING
THE PROPHETS?:
2 PETER 1:20 RECONSIDERED

B. Paul Wolfe

Introduction

2 Peter 1:16-21 is certainly a *crux interpretum* concerning the early church's views on Scripture and the apostolic ministry. A careful evaluation of this passage prompts one to ask several crucial questions (answers to which are widely debated) about what the author was actually saying. The present study will focus primarily on the meaning of ἰδίας ἐπιλύσεως (one's own interpretation). Is the author speaking here of origin, i.e., the prophet's understanding of things, or subsequent interpretation, i.e., later understanding of what the prophets said? This is the question which I will attempt to answer. Following on from this, I will look at an alleged implication from the answer proposed.

It should be noted at the outset that the following study will concentrate primarily on the immediate context of the passage within 2 Peter. As Anthony Thiselton has summarily stated, the study of semantics has shown that "the meaning of a word depends not on what it is in itself, but on its relation to other words and to other sentences which form its context."¹ It is the immediate context of 2 Peter which still has neglected and untapped contributions for understanding the author's statement in 1:20.

Furthermore, though the consensus understanding of the phrase is "interpretation" rather than "origin," a recent authority was compelled to go against the grain. In what is surely one of the finest and most helpful commentaries on Jude and 2 Peter,² Richard Bauckham has argued for

¹ A.C. Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed., I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 78-79.

² R.J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983).

“origin” as the intended sense of the phrase. Clearly the issue is ripe for re-examination.

In keeping with the overall epistle, 1:16-21 is polemical in nature. The basic thrust of the passage is reassurance about the surety of apostolic teaching, especially as it involves eschatological expectations, and the *parousia* in particular. The need for such reassurance has arisen in response to the skepticism of the author's opponents³ concerning the *parousia*; a skepticism which evidently involved the specific charge that the apostolic teaching concerning the *parousia* was pure fabrication.⁴ One means employed by the author to counter this charge was to show that the transfiguration experience itself was a sure prophecy of the *parousia*.⁵ It is sure because there were eyewitnesses (v.16), and because God's voice was heard (v.18). It is prophetic because of what is implied by both Christ's majesty (v.16) and God's own statement (v.17), indicative of Christ as the chosen eschatological judge. Furthermore, as prophecy, the author asserts that it is in line with the nature of all genuine prophecy (vv.20-21).

The Extent of προφητεία γραφής

What is the extent of the phrase προφητεία γραφής (prophecy of scripture)? On this there is no consensus of opinion among scholars. B. B. Warfield elucidated a line of thinking which still exercises considerable influence today. He categorically defended the view that the phrase is synonymous with 'Scripture'.⁶ This view is supported in two ways. First, it

³ As to the identification of the opponents, cf. Bauckham, *ibid.*, pp. 154-157; T. Fornberg, *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society: A Study of 2 Peter* (CWK Gleerup, 1977); J.H. Neyrey, "The Apologetic Use of the Transfiguration in 2 Peter 1:16-21," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980), pp. 506-507.

⁴ Bauckham, pp. 154-155.

⁵ As to why the transfiguration was used instead of the resurrection or some other appropriate aspect of the tradition, see C. Bigg, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1901), p. 266; and T. S. Caulley, "The Idea of Inspiration in 2 Peter 1:16-21" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tübingen, 1982), p. 152.

⁶ B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), pp. 136-139.

is said that elsewhere in the NT, Scripture is referred to in terms of prophecy (e.g., Rom 16:26). Second, it is noted that Scripture as a whole is conceived of as prophetic. This view has been advocated more recently by, among others, Michael Green,⁷ J. N. D. Kelly,⁸ Dennis Farkasfalvy,⁹ and W. Schrage.¹⁰ In an effort to more effectively support this view, Bauckham¹¹ and Raymond Collins¹² have noted that the phrase τὸν προφητικὸν λόγον (the prophetic word) in v.19 was commonly used to designate the Scriptures. Thus, from their conclusion that this is its reference in v.19, they extrapolate that this is certainly also the meaning of προφητεία γραφῆς in v.20.

This particular understanding of τὸν προφητικὸν λόγον in v.19, however, is not incontroverted. Collins' view comes into question because he separates vv.12-18 from vv.19-21, and describes these as two distinct movements of the author's thoughts.¹³ Though there is something of a shift within the passage, it is simply one of application concerning the author's points within the context. But this shift does not take place at v.19, introduced by a simple καὶ (and). Instead, it is surely at v.20, introduced by the more emphatic τοῦτο πρῶτον γινώσκοντες (know this first). Furthermore, while τὸν προφητικὸν λόγον was used as a designation for the Scriptures per se, it was also used as a reference to specific passages.¹⁴

⁷ M. Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude* (London: Tyndale Press, 1968), pp. 86ff.

⁸ J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (London: A.&C. Black, 1969), pp. 323ff.

⁹ W. R. Farmer and D. M. Farkasfalvy, *The Formation of the New Testament Canon* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 120.

¹⁰ W. Schrage, *Die Katholischen Briefe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), p. 132.

¹¹ Bauckham, p. 229.

¹² R. F. Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 323.

¹³ *Ibid.* Green, p. 86, is another who mistakenly sees a distinct shift in the author's argument taking place at verse 19.

¹⁴ J. T. Curran, "The Teaching of II Peter 1:20 on the Interpretation of Prophecy," *Theological Studies* 3/4 (1943), p. 348.

Thus the precedent is certainly evident for taking the phrase to indicate a specific passage(s) or prophetic event.

James Mayor¹⁵ and Charles Bigg¹⁶ both maintained that the phrase προφητεία γραφῆς was to be related only to the prophecies of Scripture. Howard Marshall has concluded likewise; remaining unconvinced with the reasoning and unsatisfied with the conclusions of the above view, he has noted that application of the phrase to the whole of the OT does not necessarily follow.¹⁷ Initially it seems that these latter scholars have simply taken the phrase at face value. But closer examination makes it evident that there is much support from within the context of the passage for the view that it is only the prophecies of Scripture to which the author is referring.

Before developing this point, one other interpretation should be noted. In a very helpful investigation of this passage, J. H. Neyrey has concluded that the phrase is a reference to "NT prophecies of the parousia, and the transfiguration in particular."¹⁸ To support his conclusion, he primarily draws upon what he sees as a parallelism between vv.16 and 21. Neyrey has greatly aided interpretation of this potentially perplexing passage through his clear presentation of the structure and flow of the argument, and to be sure there is an inherent connection between v.16 and v.21. Neyrey's view gains support from the fact that the author of 2 Peter is not averse to extending the concept of γραφή to include NT writings (3:15-16).

In spite of these facts though, it does seem that Neyrey has narrowed the phrase unnecessarily. The term γραφή (occurring 51 times in the NT) is used in the NT as something of a *terminus technicus* to refer to Scripture, with the OT always clearly in the picture. Neyrey's understanding would render the present occurrence the *only* one in the NT referring *exclusively* to the NT itself. Moreover, by taking the phrase as a reference to the prophecies of the OT, the close relationship between v.16 and vv.20-21 which Neyrey has sought to preserve is not lessened at all. The relationship is retained, and the principle argued for, i.e., the surety of a genuinely

¹⁵ J.B. Mayor, *The Epistles of Jude and II Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 111.

¹⁶ Bigg, p. 269.

¹⁷ I. H. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1982), p. 25.

¹⁸ Neyrey, p. 518.

prophetic event, has been extended to new proportions. When understood in this manner, the phrase *τοῦτο πρῶτον γινώσκοντες* is allowed to have its full force and call special attention to what follows, which clearly applies to at least all Scriptural prophecy, if not all Scripture.¹⁹

This then brings us back to the question, does *προφητεία γραφῆς* indicate only scriptural prophecy or all Scripture? Apart from the above weakness of Neyrey's interpretation, there is much in his study that leads toward a solution to this question. Of primary interest here is his proposal that the transfiguration event itself is prophetic in nature. Drawing on the study of G. H. Boobyer,²⁰ he concludes that here in 2 Peter the event is used specifically as a prophecy of the *parousia*. "Although some may shy away from calling the transfiguration a prophecy as such," writes Neyrey, "there are many variations of this basic suggestion which include conceiving of the event as a *Vorspiel* of the *parousia*, an earnest of it, a *specimen* of it, a foreshadowing of it, or a proleptic *parousia* experience."²¹ Neyrey is followed to this extent in a Tübingen thesis by T. S. Caulley.²² Both men carefully demonstrate the need for sensitive contextual interpretation, which leads them to understand *τὸν προφητικὸν λόγον* of v.19 as speaking of the transfiguration itself, which the author just recounted in vv.16-18. As Caulley aptly says, "Everything about the passage points back to the transfiguration account," and thus the identity of the prophetic word should be sought there as well.²³ It does seem that this interpretation best maintains the flow of the author's thought. The resultant understanding is that we, i.e.,

¹⁹ Bauckham, p. 229; he rightly points out that this phrase is not necessarily an introductory formula. It does, however, call special attention to what follows.

²⁰ G. H. Boobyer, *St. Mark and the Transfiguration Story* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1942). Boobyer examines the traditions of the transfiguration account and concludes that the event was understood by the early Christians to be a prophetic event, pointing toward the *parousia*.

²¹ Neyrey, pp. 510-511.

²² Caulley, "Inspiration."

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 128; Caulley seeks to identify specific citations, understood as prophetic by the author, underlying the statement, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." He concludes that it is likely Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42 are behind the statement. Yet surely Fornberg is correct when he concludes that "it is not possible to establish which prophecy the author had in mind" (p. 82).

the apostles, have the prophecy of the *parousia* more sure than those who seek to discount or deny it, because we were there.

It might be objected that it is rather strange to understand λόγος as referring to a vision or to an event such as the transfiguration. It should be remembered, however, that the term had a broad range of accepted uses. It occurs in the Fourth Gospel to refer to the person of Christ (John 1:1, 14), thus indicating the non-verbal content designated by the term. In the OT רָבִד is used of visions of the prophets (e.g., Isa. 2:1; Jer. 38:21). The LXX translates this with λόγος. It is thus clear that to understand λόγος in the present passage as referring to the transfiguration experience is certainly not out of order.

Neyrey and Caulley have quite lucidly set forth the proper meaning here and have shown that the thrust of the passage has the issue of prophecy at its centre throughout. Verses 20-21 are to be understood in this light, but with an expanded application. This, however, is the point at which Neyrey and Caulley cease to tread the same path concerning this passage. As has been shown above, Neyrey sees the intended application to NT prophecies, whereas Caulley rightly sees the extension as a principle involving all prophecy of Scripture. Consequently, προφητεία γραφῆς does not refer only to specific prophecies, nor all Scripture,²⁴ but instead is a reference to all scriptural prophecy.

The Meaning of ἰδίᾳς ἐπιλύσεως

Establishing the subject of the author's comments in vv.20-21 is obviously a step in the right direction, but the comments themselves bristle with problematic questions, not the least of which concerns the meaning of ἰδίᾳς ἐπιλύσεως. As stated earlier, the primary issue involves the question of whether the phrase is intended to indicate origin, or subsequent interpretation. If the author is saying that prophecy did not arise as a result of the prophets' interpretation of events, then he is denying human origin for

²⁴ This is not to say that at times, and especially with certain writers, Scripture as a whole was not, in fact, conceived of as prophetic, but simply to say that it is wrong to foist this view on the present passage, which clearly has the specific issue of prophecy at hand.

prophecy.²⁵ Alternatively, if the author is saying that prophecy is not subject to idiosyncratic interpretation, then he is affirming the need for interpretation and application to stem from some authoritative benchmark or interpreter.

Naturally involved here is the force of the verb γίνεται, which, as Bauckham²⁶ correctly points out, depends to some extent upon the sense of the genitive ἐπιλύσεως. When the passage is understood in the former manner, i.e., the prophets interpretation of events, the sense of the verb becomes “arises from” or “comes from”. However, it has been correctly pointed out that for this to be the intended sense, the preposition ἐκ would normally be required.²⁷ But when the phrase is interpreted in the latter sense, i.e., interpretation of the prophecy itself subsequent to its being given, the verb is adequately expressed by “is a matter of” or “comes under the scope of.”²⁸

In order to justify his interpretation that the author is speaking of the origin of prophecy, Bauckham places significant exegetical weight on the use of ἴδιος as “virtually a technical term” in Hellenistic Jewish and early Christian discussions of the origin of prophecy.²⁹ While he amasses a fairly impressive list of examples to support his claim, there is an important aspect to these examples which seems to have gone unnoticed by Bauckham. In virtually all of the statements Bauckham sets forth, it is made very clear in the context that ἴδιος is specifically referring to prophets or a particular individual. In other words, within each context the term is accompanied by the noun prophet (Philo, *Quis Her.* 259; *Spec. Leg.* 4.49; *Quaest. Gen.* 3.10; Methodius, *Convivium* 8.10), a pronoun referring to the prophets (Hippolytus, *Antichr.* 2; Pseudo-Justin, *Cohortatio* 8; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.65; Jer. 23:16; Ezek. 13:3 LXX), or an individual’s name or pronoun referring to an individual (Philo, *Mos.* 1.281, 286; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.121). Within each passage the antecedent could be none other than the prophets

²⁵ Understood in this way, Green, p. 91, acknowledges that *epilysis* almost comes to mean ‘inspiration’, which Kelly, p. 324, says is impossible.

²⁶ Bauckham, p. 231.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231; Mayor, p. 113.

²⁸ Mayor, p. 112.

²⁹ Bauckham, pp. 229-230.

or individuals mentioned. This is also the case when one turns to 2 Peter 3:15-16. The author states that the opponents twist the Scriptures πρὸς τὴν ἰδίαν αὐτῶν ἀπώλειαν (to their own destruction). Within 2 Pet. 1:16-21 there is no such indicator.

The interpretive quandary can be resolved only by appeal to the overall flow and argument of the pericope in question. Bauckham looks beyond the terminology and syntax of v.20, but he stops short of looking at the overall passage. It is "the relationship of v 20 to v 21, and the possible polemical thrust of the two verses," writes Bauckham, which "must help us to decide between the alternative interpretations of v 20."³⁰ This, however, is an inadequate expansion of context. In other words, vv.16-19 are just as indispensable, if not more so, in determining the meaning of v.20 as is v.21. Verse 20 constitutes a logical and natural continuation of and conclusion to vv.16-19; thus the thrust of these verses cannot be slighted if v.20 is to be correctly understood.³¹

As has been noted above, scholars commonly agree that the author is defending against the opponents' denial, in some sense, of parousia prophecies. In order to conclusively deal with the problems, the author is showing why the parousia prophecies can be trusted. In so doing he sets forth the apostolic understanding of the "prophetic word" as the "antithesis to ἰδίᾳς ἐπιλύσεως."³² This is then logically followed by the assertion that the opponents are out of order in treating the prophecies as they do, because prophecy is not subject to individual preference, but instead is to be understood and applied in accordance with (in the present case) the apostolic proclamation of it. Furthermore, this is so because (γὰρ of v.21 is causal) these prophecies, like all genuine prophecy, are not the result of the fertile imagination of men, but are the direct result of the activity of God. Prophecy should not be interpreted according to personal whim, according to the fancies of those who are out of touch with the purpose, intent and giver of those prophecies.³³ In the present passage the author indicates that it is the apostolic ("we" in vv. 16-19) proclamation which is determinative

³⁰ Bauckham, pp. 229-230.

³¹ Cauley, p. 142.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 143

³³ Kelly, p. 324; Collins, p. 323.

for the correct understanding.³⁴ Both the use of the imperative ποιείτε in v. 19, and the fact that the voice of God (which was “borne” to them personally) is set over against ιδίας ἐπιλύσεως, indicate the normative status of the apostolic understanding and proclamation of the prophetic word.

Curran correctly points out that if the author intended the reference to be to the prophets’ own interpretation of events which led them to prophesy as they did, then ιδίας would have to bear the meaning “their own”. He goes on to say that such a construction is “very awkward, for no express mention is made of ‘prophets’ either in the text or in the preceding context.”³⁵ This is an important observation. When viewed in this light, it becomes clear that with these terms the author is speaking of subsequent interpretation or understanding of the prophecies, not their origin. This is not to say that the issue of origin is not present within the passage, for it surely is. In vv. 17-18 the voice from heaven indicates the divine origin of the event, and in v. 21 it is stated that all scriptural prophecy has a divine origin. Understanding ἐπιλύσις as “interpretation” is not excluded by these facts. Rather, the two ideas of divine origin and the exclusion of private interpretation go hand in hand and are complementary.

The noun used by the author, ἐπιλύσις, occurs nowhere else in the NT, but the verb occurs in Mk. 4:34 and Acts 19:39. The view advocated above is supported by the use of the verb in these two passages. Mk. 4:34 is especially instructive. The term is used there to portray Jesus *explaining* to his disciples what he had *previously* spoken to the crowds in parables. In the passage in Acts, the verb is used to indicate that problems between plaintiffs, beyond those with which the proconsul deals, should be *settled* or *worked out* in the regular meeting of the town assembly.

This leads to another objection by Bauckham to the interpretation espoused here. He states that “there seems to be no instance of ἐπιλύσεως

³⁴ Caulley, p. 134.

³⁵ Curran, p. 134. Bauckham, p. 230, admits the “grammatical awkwardness of taking ιδίας to mean ‘the prophet’s own.’” But he considers it alleviated if one recognizes the “semi-technical nature of ἴδιος in this context.” As seen above, however, we regard this assertion concerning ἴδιος as doubtful.

or ἐπιλύειν used of the interpretation of Scripture.”³⁶ Instead, he sees uses such as those in Aquila’s version of Gen. 40:8; 41:8, 12, where the term is used of God-given interpretations, to be indicative of its use to specify origin. However, in each passage it is Joseph’s interpretation of someone else’s previously experienced dream which is at issue. Furthermore, especially in Gen. 40:8, it is not the use of ἐπιλύσεως which indicates a divine origin to the interpretation, but it is the fact that Joseph replied to the cupbearer and baker: “Do not interpretations belong to God?”

This is very similar to the point being made by the author of 2 Peter. The author is concerned with things previously experienced or prophesied, i.e., the transfiguration experience and the implications rightly drawn from it by the apostles, which clearly have their origin in divine activity. Thus all subsequent interpretation must not be divorced from this original God-giveness with disregard for the apostolic teaching concerning the prophecy/event, otherwise it will be surely misunderstood.

The essence of the Petrine passage is as follows: The opponents are wrong in what they have said about the parousia. Of this you can be sure because we were there when his majesty was declared; we heard the proclamation directly from God. Thus our proclamation to you concerning what is yet to come is sure, because of what has already taken place. The prophetic nature of these events, just as all prophecy, is not to be subjected to preferential understanding, but instead is to be understood in light of the purpose and activity of God, because all prophecy is the result of the purpose of God and the activity of his Spirit.³⁷

This understanding is further supported when it is remembered how important the idea of interpretation is to the author, and that the principle stated here is applied to the letters of Paul in 3:15-17.³⁸ Apart from questions about the supposed anachronistic nature of these statements, questions obviously connected with the issue of the authenticity of the letter, the author clearly betrays here a concern for correct interpretation. Those

³⁶ Bauckham, p. 231.

³⁷ Collins, p. 323. In light of the structure and flow of the argument stated above Green is not at all correct when he states that verse 21 is totally irrelevant to the argument if interpretation is the correct meaning of the term (*Second Peter and Jude*, p. 91).

³⁸ Caulley, pp. 155-156.

who “twist” the letters of Paul as they do the other Scriptures are much the same as those who follow the “cleverly devised myths” of 1:16; and twisting the Scriptures is tantamount to “one’s own interpretation.”³⁹ In chapter 3 the opponents views and activities are contrasted with the wisdom of Paul. Thus once again the apostolic understanding is antithetical to the position adopted by the opponents, which consists of the “twisting” of the Scriptures.⁴⁰ In a similar vein, and in support of this, the “lamp shining in a dark place” of 1:19, which refers to the significance of the transfiguration and the apostolic proclamation of it, is distinctly contrasted to “the error of lawless men” in 3:17. The idea of interpretation is clearly an integral part of the author’s response to, and polemic directed against, his opponents.⁴¹

A final possible objection is that vv. 20-21 constitute an answer on the part of the author to a charge by his opponents that all prophecy was of human origin.⁴² The author is seeking to counter this charge with a dual assertion and emphasis on the divine origin of prophecy.

If this were the case, then it would certainly give substantial support to Bauckham’s understanding of the passage. It must be admitted, however, that this is at best conjecture. Though the opponents’ false teaching involved

³⁹ Bauckham states that the emphatic *ἰδίαν* of verse 16 “recalls 1:20, and perhaps suggests an irony concealed in the phrase. Perhaps the author was going to say that they twist the Scriptures ‘to their own interpretation’ (πρὸς τὴν ἰδίαν ἐπιλύσιν, cf. 1:20), turning back on them their own accusations against the prophets. Instead he states what this amounts to: ‘their own destruction’” (p. 334). It is surprising that Bauckham does not recognize and deal with the fact that his suggestion here presents an appropriate and significant parallel to 1:20, which tells against his interpretation of 1:20.

⁴⁰ Compare above where it is the antithesis to “*ἰδία ἐπιλύσις*”; *ἀμαθεῖς* indicates “not simply ‘ignorant’ but ‘uninstructed,’” *ἀστήρικτοι* has a similar connotation,” thus again indicating the normative status of the apostolic teaching. In fact, “correct interpretation requires a broad and sound knowledge of apostolic teaching” (Bauckham, pp. 331, 35).

⁴¹ If, in fact, the author borrowed from Jude, as is conceivable and concluded by many, and made changes in the application of the borrowed material from ethical to doctrinal concerns, then this would be further indication of the emphasis on right understanding and doctrine which the author had (Fornberg, pp. 38-39).

⁴² Bauckham, pp. 232-233.

error concerning aspects of prophecy, it is best to take it as primarily concerned with eschatological prophecy, and the *parousia* in particular.⁴³ In fact, the only specific mentions of prophecy other than 1:20-21 revolve around this particular theme (1:16-19; 3:4-5.). It would certainly seem more plausible to understand vv. 20-21 as undergirding the assertions regarding the surety of the *parousia*, rather than standing on their own as a counter to a more fundamental and independent charge about all prophecy.⁴⁴

Thus we conclude that through the use of the phrase *ιδίας ἐπιλύσεως* the author was concerned with the handling of prophecy subsequent to its occasion. Any such treatment that failed to coincide with the apostolic tradition was to be rejected as out of touch with the Spirit of that prophecy.⁴⁵

2 Tim. 2:15 is an exhortation to diligence and care in handling the word of truth. The statement of 2 Pet. 1:20 is similar in that the author is not speaking of the prophets and what they experienced, but of later treatments of what the Spirit spoke through these prophets, and the need to be sure that one's interpretation of these prophecies is not in isolation. I do regard the evidence over this issue quite compelling, but I do not find myself compelled in the same direction as Bauckham.

ιδίας ἐπιλύσεως as an Indication of Early Catholicism

It is the contention of Caulley, largely based on his agreement with the widely held judgement that 2 Peter is pseudepigraphical, that the author is seeking to assert himself as the exclusive interpreter of Scripture within the community. "This document," writes Caulley, "represents the emergence of an ecclesiastical hermeneutic directly tied to the inspiration of the pneumatic leader(s)."⁴⁶ As such, "in 2 Pt we find the leader challenging his opponents

⁴³ Fornberg, pp. 35, 60-65; Caulley, pp. 112-113. Fornberg, pp. 38-39, notes that the change, which the author of 2 Peter makes in 3:3-4 in relation to Jude 18, is a significant indication that the false teaching is specifically concerned with the Second Coming.

⁴⁴ J.M.G. Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case," *Journal of the Study of the New Testament*, 31 (1987), pp. 79-80, 84.

⁴⁵ As Schrage has noted: "Geist, Prophetie, Schrift und Auslegung gehören zusammen, und der Schlüssel zu allem ist die apostolische Lehrtradition" (p. 133).

⁴⁶ Caulley, p. 157.

and followers alike by asserting his right to the exclusive interpretation of Scripture in the light of apostolic tradition.”⁴⁷ In other words, an element of “early catholicism” is evident at this point because the author has approved and institutionalized a distinct difference between the ability of the leaders and the laity to interpret Scripture; it is the leaders only, by virtue of apostolic succession and charismatic ability, who are able and reserve the right of scriptural interpretation.⁴⁸

In seeking to identify the author’s motivations for writing, it seems that Caulley has asserted an implication that the evidence will not bear. Aside from the precariousness of trying to determine motivations which are not explicitly stated, there are two good reasons why this particular motivation should be rejected.

First, it is evident from the two primary passages, 1:16-21 and 3:15-17, that the author is not concerned so much with the opponents attempting to interpret Scripture, as he is to put down erroneous interpretations. It is the distortion and rejection of the true message, with the apostolic proclamation and teaching as the standard,⁴⁹ that the author seeks to rectify, not the establishment of his or anyone else’s exclusive right to interpret Scripture. Curran sees evidence of early catholicism in the way that the author of 2 Peter introduces “false teachers” immediately after his discussion of the interpretation of prophecy (2:1).⁵⁰ However, even here it is the substance of their teachings that determines their false status, not their position within the community. This perspective is legitimate irrespective of questions concerning the genuineness of the epistle.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228; so also Kelly, pp. 324, 373.

⁴⁸ This view, in various forms, has been very prominent within NT studies for many years, most notably propounded by Ernst Käsemann, “An Apologia for Primitive Christian Eschatology,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1964), pp. 169-195. But Caulley represents one of the most recent full scale treatments to defend this view; see Bauchman, p. 151, for references to its other major proponents.

⁴⁹ Thus the imperative ποιείτε in 1:19 is indicating the normative status of the apostolic proclamation.

⁵⁰ Curran, p. 366.

Second, it is significant that in the statement which comes closest to explaining the motivation and purpose for his writing (3:1-2) the author explicitly calls for action in accordance with the “predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.” Here again there is no exaltation of successive church leaders, but a call to faithfulness in light of the original prophetic, dominical and apostolic proclamations.

The NT writers clearly expected certain charismatic realities to be present within one’s life in order for that person to be able to apprehend correctly and completely the truths of Scripture. First and foremost among such conditions was faith in Jesus as the Christ. This is encountered explicitly in the Pastoral epistles (2 Tim. 3:15) and the Corinthian correspondence (2 Cor. 3:14-16), and again is clearly in evidence here in the Petrine epistles (2 Pet 1:16-19). It is also clear that they taught that individual Christians possessed, to some extent, charisma for particular ministries within the community (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6; Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11; 1 Pet. 4:10). Now it obviously follows that those who were gifted as teachers would be recognized as having a higher degree of ability and authority in this capacity (thus also incurring a stricter judgement, James 3:1).⁵¹ However, it is an unwarranted leap from this to say that the author of 2 Peter is obviously seeking to assert and protect the *exclusive* right of the pneumatic leaders to interpret Scripture authoritatively. Though we disagree with the statement of Bauckham that 2 Pet 1:20-21 has nothing to do with the interpretation of Scripture, we do agree with him that these verses “do not insist on an authoritative interpretation of Scripture by officeholders who alone possess the Spirit.”⁵²

It was said above that if *ἰδίᾳ ἐπιλύσεως* meant interpretation subsequent to the giving of the prophecy, then it indicated the need for interpretation in accordance with an authoritative benchmark or stemming from an authoritative interpreter. It now becomes clear that, whether one refers to benchmark or interpreter(s), it is the apostolic tradition to which the author of 2 Peter was pointing. In this sense it is more appropriate to speak of the need for interpretation to be in accordance with a standard, i.e., the

⁵¹ It points just such as these above which Curran, pp. 362-367, uses to support a conclusion similar to Cauley.

⁵² Bauckham, p. 152; contra Käsemann, pp. 189-191.

apostolic tradition, rather than its being maintained by an authoritative officeholder or interpreter within the various and successive communities.

There is, therefore, no warrant for assigning to this epistle the view that Scripture functions adequately *only* in the hands of an inspired charismatic leader. Quite to the contrary, the author recognized its adequacy for anyone willing to interpret it in accordance with the traditions which stemmed from the prophets, the Lord and the apostles, traditions which the author regarded as homogeneous (3:2). On the other hand, those who refuse to interpret and proclaim the message of the Scriptures after this manner distort the Scriptures "to their own destruction" (3:16). The obvious corollary to this is that by rightly interpreting the Scriptures, they could be assured of gaining guidance in the right way, and instead of destruction, they could find salvation.

Conclusion

The author of 2 Peter was well aware that many persons within the communities to which he was writing were in danger of or currently were being seduced by false teachers who were falsely portraying the message of certain prophecies and distorting the message of the Scriptures in general. In addressing this situation the author reassures the churches concerning the prophecies, stating that it is wrong for any one to treat the prophecies in the manner that the opponents are doing, because it is completely out of touch with the Spirit who inspired them. The proper manner in which they are to be understood (i.e., in accordance with the apostolic tradition) is open for all to see and understand, for the gospel was not worked out in a corner.