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Dogs, Adulterers and the Way of Balaam: the Forms and Socio-Rhetorical Function of the Polemical Rhetoric in 1 Peter. (Part ii)

Troy A.Miller

THE SOCIO-RHETORICAL FUNCTION OF THE POLEMICAL RHETORIC IN 2 PETER

The interactionist understanding of deviance germinated in the 1950s and flourished in the 60s and 70s as, essentially, a reaction to the "traditional"[1] approach to the study of the sociological category. The traditional understanding held deviance to be a quality or characteristic inherent within given individuals or acts, and sociologists studied it as such.[2] Yet, the deviant and the sociological category of deviance remained a bit of an anomaly for sociologists in that they were never able to substantiate this claim scientifically. Kai Erickson noted that

> investigators have studied the character of the deviant's background, the content of his dreams, the shape of his skull, the substance of his thoughts—yet none of this information has enabled us to draw a clear line between the kind of person who commits deviant acts and the kind of person who does not. Nor can we gain a better perspective on the matter by shifting our attention away from the

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[1] I use the term "traditional" to describe the primary understanding of deviance prior to and during some part of the 1950s.

[2] See Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1963) 3.

individual deviant and looking instead at the behaviour he enacts.[3]

Erickson then concludes that "it soon becomes apparent that there are no objective properties which all deviant acts can be said to share in common—even within the confines of a given group."[4] Thus, the relative inadequacy of the traditional sociological approach to deviance was exposed; "deviance is not a simple quality, present in some kinds of behaviour and absent in others."[5] Neither is it a characteristic or trait embedded within certain individuals that somehow make them deviant.

At the same time, however, sociologists were becoming increasingly aware of the relative and particularist aspects of deviance.[6] They began to observe and acknowledge the fact that definitions and understandings of deviance varied greatly within any given society, both between and within groups. What some persons considered deviant, others, in the same group or society, might not, and vice versa. It soon became apparent that deviance was a phenomenon relative to the particular norms, of a particular group, in the particular circumstances, of a particular time. In short, deviance appeared largely to be a social product. Therefore, sociologists began to approach deviance from the perspective of social interactionism, the concept that meanings of phenomena (in this case deviance) are created through the interaction of social norms and audiences.[7] Becker's classic description of this understanding of deviance sums up this perspective quite well.

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[3] *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966) 5. Cf. Becker, *Outsiders*, 163.

[4] *Wayward Puritans*, 5.

[5] Becker, *Outsiders*, 14.

[6] For the relative approach to deviance see Becker, *Outsiders*, 7-8.

[7] See Edwin M. Schur, *The Politics of Deviance: Stigma Contests and the Uses of Power* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980) 4. At its onset, the

> Social groups create deviance by making the rule whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender.' The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label.[8]

Ultimately, then, deviance came to be viewed and studied as a product created via the interaction of social forces and factors.[9]

Yet, as seen in an interactionist perspective, an accusation of deviance is not a one-time event that suddenly clarifies right and wrong, deviant and non-deviant. Rather, it is (observed as) an ongoing process of social conflict over norms of the group, sometimes referred to as the "deviantizing process."[10] The

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sociology of deviance, in appealing to the concept of social interactionism, was participating in a larger movement within the field of sociology.

[8] *Outsiders*, 9. Becker (14) further notes that "whether a given act is deviant or not depends in part on the nature of the act (that is, whether or not it violates some rule) and in part on what other people do about it."

[9] See Barclay, "*Deviance and Apostasy*," 115.

[10] For the use of this title see Schur, *The Politics of Deviance*, 4-5. On deviance and process see Edwin M. Schur, *Labeling Deviant Behavior: Its Sociological Implications* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 8; John I. Kitsuse, "Societal Reaction to Deviant Behavior: Problems of Theory and Method," in *The Other Side: Perspectives on Deviance*, ed. Howard S. Becker (New York: The Free Press, 1964) 87-102; and Barclay, "Deviance and Apostasy," 116. For the connection between deviance and social conflict see John Lofland, *Deviance and Identity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969) 14. Finally, in light of this identification and emphasis on process, sociologists make a distinction between what a group initially calls and responds to as deviance and the process utilized by the group in an attempt to deviantize the individual/act. This distinction is what Eugene Lemert first identified as primary and secondary deviation,

deviantizing process has its formal genesis in a group's initial attempt to label an individual/act "deviant."[11]   Labeling involves "an intricate rite of transition, at once moving the individual out of his ordinary place in society and transferring him into a special deviant position."[12]   In short, the group attempts to alter or change the status by which the individual was known previously by replacing it with a new normative identity, that of a deviant.[13] However, the creation and affixation of a deviant identity, for an individual who was not known previously as such, is not achieved so easily.   Before this ultimate change in status can be accomplished, the group must discredit effectively the deviant individual in the eyes of the group membership. Here, the labelers from the group attempt to obliterate the "old" identity by stigmatizing the individual.[14]   Through the application of stigma,

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respectively. On this specific topic see his *Social Pathology: A Systematic Approach to the Theory of Sociopathic Behavior* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951) 75-8 and *Human Deviance, Social Problems, and Social Control*, Second edition, Prentice-Hall Sociology Series (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972) 17, 40.

[11] As a result, this approach to deviance is often entitled, rather loosely, "labeling theory."

[12] Erickson, *Wayward Puritans*, 15. Cf. Harold Garfinkel, "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies," *American Journal of Sociology* 61 (1956) 420. Garfinkel makes two important points concerning labeling or, what he calls, "status degradation ceremonies": (1) the new deviant position assigned to the individual is certainly an identity lower in social status and (2) these ceremonies can be observed in any given structured society since it is the very structure itself which provides the sufficient conditions for identity degradation to occur.

[13] See Charles S. Suchar, *Social Deviance: Perspectives and Prospects* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978) 195 and Becker, *Outsiders*, 33-4.

[14] Lemert, *Human Deviance*, 42 describes stigmatization as "a process of attaching visible signs of moral inferiority to persons such as invidious labels, marks, brands, or publicly disseminated information." Yet, it is important to note that stigmatization is not limited to the arena of morality.

the labelers hope to discredit, degrade, and defame the individual, in hopes of convincing the group membership that the person actually is, and possibly always has been, deviant. The most prominent sociological categories employed in the assigning of stigma are: simple degradation, stereotyping, and retrospective reinterpretation.[15]

Each of these three strategies can be seen as a subset of the process of stigmatization. The means by which they accomplish their given task of stigmatization is through the selective interpretation of the individual in question. In degradation, the simplest of the strategies, a series of defamatory images are invoked and appended to the deviant individual, in hopes of denigrating him.[16] The images invoked in simple degradation can vary widely and their ultimate effectiveness will depend largely on the surrounding society's perception of them. A somewhat more intricate strategy, stereotyping occurs when the labeler(s) extracts a single trait (or, possibly, a limited set of them) from the individual's overall identity and attempts to re-form the person's identity around that particular characteristic. Thus, "stereotyping involves a tendency to jump from a single cue or a small number of cues in actual, suspected, or

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Cf. Lemert, *Human Deviance*, 44 and the classic work by Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Penguin, 1963).

[15] See Schur, *Labeling Deviant Behavior*, 37-56 for a discussion of these categories. I have omitted the strategy of "negotiation" here because it is based on the active participation of the deviant in the deviantizing process and the voice of the deviant is not heard directly in 2 Peter or other similar epistles.

[16] Garfinkel, "Conditions of Successful," 421 dismisses simple degradation as an effective means of stigmatization. Yet, while the comparative effectiveness of this strategy may be lower than others, it still retains some potential for discreditation and/or defamation of an opponent. Furthermore, the increasing intricacy and complexity of the strategies that are presented in this section (likely) parallel their increasing effectiveness in accomplishing the task of stigmatization.

alleged behaviour to a more general picture of 'the kind of person' with whom one is dealing."[17]   Through stereotyping, the labeler hopes to persuade the membership of the group to relate to the deviant not as an individual but merely as an example of a negative social type, thus depersonalizing the deviant.[18]   Finally, retrospective reinterpretation, the most complex of the three strategies, also attempts to recast the deviant individual's identity but in a much more holistic fashion. Here, the trait that has been singled out is used by the labeler not only to transform the present identity of the individual, but also to reinterpret the individual's entire past. Through a re-reading of the character of the perceived deviant, the labeler constructs an entire history of deviance for the individual and, thus, contends that he/she is and always has been deviant. Garfinkel observes that this

> transformation of identities is the destruction of one social object and the constitution of another....It is not that the old object has been overhauled; rather it is replaced by another....The other person becomes in the eyes of his condemners [and, hopefully, the audience] literally a different and new person....He is reconstituted."[19]

Once again, the labeler hopes that the audience will relate to the individual based on this entirely reconstituted deviant identity, seeing him merely as a representative of a devious figure type.

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[17] Schur, *Labeling Deviant Behavior*, 52. Note that an individual may be stereotyped successfully regardless of whether the individual actually has committed the act that he/she has been charged with.

[18] It is important to note that the simple degradation and stereotyping strategies of stigmatization can overlap a great deal. The thin line of differentiation between them is that stereotyping involves a much greater reliance upon single character traits, while simple degradation is often more blunt, relying upon generalized negative imageries.

[19] "Conditions of Successful," 421.

The deviantizing process, then, is largely an act of persuasion. The labelers in the group attempt to stigmatize the individual in hopes of persuading the membership that the individual truly is deviant and, thus, that they are "in the right."[20] If the group membership largely is persuaded by the stigmatization and deviantizing process of the labeler(s), then most likely, (1) the individual will come to be known as deviant within that given group and continue on (to some degree) in the process of secondary deviation, (2) the prominence and authority of the labeler(s) will be enhanced (at least temporarily), and (3) the norm being enforced will be sharpened and become more established, often having a unifying or solidifying effect on the group.[21] Thus, the outcome of the deviantizing process will have a substantial impact on all parties involved in the situation of social conflict. Here, though, I am interested in utilizing the sociology of deviance, in general, and the deviantizing process, in specific, as a sensitizing tool[22] to aid in the understanding of the

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[20] The deviant, however, is not left without recourse. The deviant individual can appeal to certain strategies of de-stigmatization in an attempt to convince the same audience that the label should not be or has been applied wrongly to him/her. On the process and strategies of de-stigmatization see Carrol A. B. Warren, "Destigmatization of Identity: From Deviant to Charismatic," *Qualitative Sociology* 3.1 (1980) 59-72 and J. W. Rogers and M. D. Buffalo, "Fighting Back: Nine Modes of Adaptation to a Deviant Label," *Social Problems* 22 (1974) 101-18. Again, since the voice of the deviant is not audible in the texts which are the object of this study, I have not explored further this aspect of the deviantizing process.

[21] Numerous sociologists have observed that deviance, if successfully rebutted, actually can solidify the boundaries of the group and unify the people of the given community. The origin of this aspect of deviance stems initially from George Herbert Mead and was developed further by Émile Durkheim. In the 1960s, Kai Erickson and Lewis A. Coser were two of the sociologists that enhanced and applied this outgrowth of deviance studies to various circumstances. More recently, Nachman Ben-Yehuda has re-worked and made further application of this concept.

[22] See the use of deviance theory in Schur, *Labeling Deviant Behavior*, 26, 31 and Barclay, "Deviance and Apostasy," 118.

situation of social conflict and, especially, the polemical rhetoric in 2 Peter.

Turning back to 2 Peter, the interactionist perspective on deviance provides a helpful guide by which to assess the evident situation of social conflict. Here, we see (at least) two internal "groups," one represented by the author of the epistle (likely including a number of followers within the congregations being addressed) and the other "group" being the members of the congregations whom the author opposes (i.e., the teachers and adherents to their way). The author's primary point of opposition lies in the later group's eschatological skepticism, as well as the improper teachings and way of life that result from it, as it was leading persons away from the "proper" teachings and way of life. The evident success that this later group was enjoying posed a threat not only to these teachings and ethics, but also to the prominence and authority of the group represented by the author. Therefore, in an effort to secure or win back the allegiance of the communal membership, the author attempts to bolster his position and authority in the eyes of the communal membership. He does so in two ways. First, he appeals to a number of different bases of authority, within early Christianity and Judaism, in an attempt to legitimize his contentions and authority over against those of the opposing group. Coupled with this effort at legitimation, is a strenuous and deliberate effort to deviantize the opponents primarily through the use of polemical rhetoric. A closer look at the function of this polemical rhetoric is in order.

Within the various forms of polemical rhetoric employed by the author of 2 Peter are examples of each of the three different levels of stigmatization noted above. First, at the level of simple degradation, we see the author invoke the images of destruction, nature, animal life, and that of following myths. Each of these categories represents a blunt attempt by the author to caricature the opponents in hopes that the communal membership will come to see these persons in a negative and defamatory light. One step more intricate, the author also attempts to stereotype the opponents as being the type of persons who are morally depraved, blasphemous, blind, and going astray. Here, multiple stereotyped, and sometimes stock, traits are invoked in an effort to persuade the audience that

the opponents are merely examples of a negative social type. A third level of stigmatization can be seen when the author compares the opponents with both general false figure types and specific Old Testament figures and Jewish tradition. Here, the author attempts a thorough re-working of the opponents' over all identity by not only identifying them as currently being deviant but providing them an entire history of deviance, which is defined via their comparison with notable deviant figures of the past. The thoroughness with which the author enacts the deviantizing process against the opponents is quite striking.

Though we regretfully are not privy to any response or efforts at de-stigmatization made by the opponents, the author's attempt at deviantizing them remains quite instructive for understanding the social situation and aims of the epistle. In light of the above analysis of 2 Peter, it is evident that the function of the polemical rhetoric in the epistle is not limited to mere invective aimed at the opponents. Though it certainly represents heated language fraught with negative emotions, its primary function is not limited to this arena. Furthermore, while it also serves as a literary device by which the author can identify "the opponent," *a la* Johnson, the function of the polemical rhetoric here again is not contained within these bounds. In light of an interactionist perspective on the sociology of deviance, the polemical rhetoric in 2 Peter is seen to participate directly and deliberately within the overall socio-rhetorical aims of the author and the epistle.[23] The rhetoric functions socially as a means by which to caricature, denigrate, defame, and destroy the contentions and credibility of the opponents, and rhetorically, in that it is part of the author's larger attempt to persuade the communal membership to abide by his words and teachings, over against those of the opponents. Ultimately, then, the polemical rhetoric in 2 Peter is seen to be wide-ranging not only in form but also in function.

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[23] See Watson, *Invention, Arrangement, and Style*, 143-6.

READING AND STUDYING POLEMICAL RHETORIC IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Though the focus of the present study has been limited primarily to 2 Peter, I would contend that it yields implications for reading and studying polemical rhetoric that occurs elsewhere in the New Testament within situations of internal social conflict. First, the various forms of polemical rhetoric employed by a given author should not be overlooked with too much haste. Though all polemical rhetoric found within situations of internal social conflict functions in the same general manner (i.e., to discredit, caricature, and/or defame the opponent) the individual forms may reflect varying strategies (e.g., simple degradation, stereotyping, retrospective reinterpretation) and levels in this effort. Second, in order to gain a full appreciation for the forms and function of this sub-section of polemical rhetoric, the rhetoric must be examined from within the social and literary (as well as other) contexts in which it is found. The rhetoric should not be extracted from its given contexts in order to examine it, as this hinders, more than aids, attempts at identifying and understanding its forms and function(s). Third, I would contend that an interactionist perspective on the sociology of deviance is a tool which aids in this type of contextual reading of the polemical rhetoric. Far from doing injustice to the text by imposing pre-formed categories upon it, this approach to deviance helps elucidate the situation of conflict by bringing forth questions that often are overlooked. When polemical texts, which are found within a situation of internal social conflict, are read and studied in this light, a more intricate socio-rhetorical function of the rhetoric often (but not always) can be observed. Though some examinations of polemical rhetoric have marked it only as heated language or invective, a thorough examination of the phenomenon can lead to wider conclusions. Close analyses of the polemical rhetoric can provide larger social, literary, and historical, as well as other, insights that can aid the overall effort of biblical interpretation.

<div align="right">Troy A. Miller</div>