

The Promise of His Appearing

Peter J. Leithart, *The Promise of His Appearing: An Exposition of Second Peter*
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Published by Canon Press, P.O. Box 8741, Moscow, ID 83843
800-488-2034 / www.canonpress.org

05 06 07 08 09 10 11 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Paige Atwood.
Printed in the United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leithart, Peter J.
The promise of His appearing : an exposition of Second Peter / by Peter J.
Leithart.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 1-59128-026-5
1. Bible. N.T. Peter, 2nd—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Bible. N.T. Peter,
2nd—Prophecies. 3. Realized eschatology. I. Title.

BS2795.6.P7L45 2004
227¹.9306—dc22

2004022136

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An Exposition of Second Peter

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CANON PRESS

Moscow, Idaho

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To Smith

*May you be among
Those who have insight
Who shine brightly
Like the bright firmament of heaven*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the course of preparing this brief commentary, I realized that I have spent more time with 2 Peter than with any other New Testament book. Though I have not devoted exclusive attention to it for over fifteen years, I have returned to it again and again. Sometime in the murky *Urzeit* of the late 1980s, I first taught through the book in a Sunday School class at Cherokee Presbyterian Church in Woodstock, Georgia. It was the first book I preached through when I took a pastoral call in 1989 at the Reformed Heritage Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama, and I taught it again in a Sunday School class at the Cambridge Presbyterian Church, Cambridge, U.K. More recently, I delivered several lectures on the epistle at the 1999 Biblical Horizons Summer Conference, and finally taught the book to a group of friends in Moscow who have gathered for dinner and Bible study for the past several years. Peter's second epistle, in short, is an old friend, and I hope that these various opportunities to teach through the book have given me some measure of familiarity with and insight into its contents. But *judicet lector*.

In addition to the churches that have shown interest in my work on 2 Peter over the years, I wish to thank Doug Jones of Canon

Press, who continues to be far more generous and gentle with me and my books than either of us deserves. Jared Miller too has been an invaluable assistance, noticing incoherencies in my writing and forcing me to clarify, and Lucy Jones has also assisted in moving messy manuscripts to finished books.

Most of my books during the past several years have been dedicated to one of my children. The present volume is due to be dedicated to my sixth and, if present trends continue, my last son, Smith. It is deeply appropriate that this commentary on an “apocalyptic” epistle should be dedicated to Smith, who is no stranger to signs and wonders in the heavens. He was born in Huntington, England, while I was doing my doctoral work at Cambridge, and I’ll never forget tearing through the night in our uncertain Freight Rover, with the Hale-Bopp comet guiding us to the hospital. We considered working some reference to Hale-Bopp into his name but finally decided against it. Yet I have amused myself with the thought that the auspicious birth is a portent of greatness, but more importantly I trust that Smith will not be among the stars that fall from the heavens or the elements that melt with intense heat. I trust that he will instead be among those who shine brightly in the expanse of heaven, like a star forever and ever.

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THE FIRST-CENTURY CONTEXT

This book is not a technical commentary on the Greek text of 2 Peter (though the Greek will be appealed to as necessary or when I want to show off), and it does not give a detailed exposition of every verse of the letter. Instead, it lays out a broad interpretation of the letter, and, more importantly, it lays out a broad interpretive *framework* for it. To do this I will focus on a set of specific issues within the letter, all of which are related in some way to the eschatological teaching of the book, which I argue is central to Peter's intentions. No doubt I have made some errors of interpretation on small and perhaps even larger issues, but I hope that this reading is plausible enough to make some contribution to the scholarship on the epistle and to shift the context for discussion of its contents.

A significant shift in orientation and context is, I believe, necessary to make sense both of 2 Peter and of New Testament eschatology generally. The sort of shift I hope for can be easily stated: I offer a preterist reading of 2 Peter and hope that this book will contribute to making the preterist framework of interpretation a more reputable player in New Testament studies. *Preterism* is the view that prophecies about an imminent "day of judgment" scattered throughout the New Testament were ful-

filled in the apostolic age by the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the event that brought a final end to the structures and orders of the Old Creation or Old Covenant. Within this framework, Peter is dealing with issues facing the churches of the first century as the day approaches when the old world will be destroyed. Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Mt. 16:28), and I argue that Peter wrote his second letter to remind readers of that specific prophecy of Jesus and to encourage them to cling to that promise of His appearing.

For the purposes of this book, preterism is not merely a way of interpreting New Testament prophecy but also provides a framework for understanding New Testament theology as a whole. In part, this is nothing more than an effort to understand the New Testament in its historical context. The issues and debates that dominated the New Testament era were largely about the relation of Jews and Gentiles, and derived directly from the gospel’s announcement of a new people of God, within which circumcision and uncircumcision are equally meaningless. Preterist interpretation means trying to understand the New Testament in the light of this struggle without retrojecting post-Reformation debates into the text.¹ Further, an important goal of preterist interpretation is to reckon with the influence that the threat and promise of Jesus’ imminent coming, which affects nearly every book of the New Testament, had on the shape of New Testament theology. For example, a preterist framework generates such questions as “Is it possible that the typology of the church in the wilderness (in Hebrews, for instance) had specific reference to the first-century situation?” and “What is unique about the organization, worship, and life of the church in the period between A.D. 30–70?” and

¹This does not mean that the New Testament has nothing to say about post-Reformation debates, only that those debates were not the same as the debates of the New Testament era itself.