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Purification by Fire : 2 Peter 3 and the Stoic Cosmos

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PURIFICATION BY FIRE:
2 PETER 3 AND THE STOIC COSMOS

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BDAG	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature</i> , Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich.
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>SVF</i>	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i>

INTRODUCTION

Stoic cosmology is an essential background for understanding the discussion of the “coming day of God” in 2 Peter 3. I will argue that the use of Stoic language and themes in 2 Peter establishes a unique paradigm for the interrelation of ethics and eschatology. My argument will pick up on Jerome Neyrey’s thesis that 2 Peter perceives an Epicurean polemic. By outlining elements of Stoic physics and cosmology, we shall consider the relation of 2 Peter 3 to the Stoic doctrine of the conflagration. This will feed a broader discussion of the central concerns of 2 Peter. Specifically, I will suggest that 2 Peter appropriates Stoic conflagration language in order to resolve the problem of pollution in the Christian community.

CHAPTER ONE
A DESCRIPTION OF 2 PETER

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A. Date and Authorship

Scholarship has generally regarded 2 Peter as one of the latest writings of the New Testament, written sometime between 80 and 160 C.E. Several factors contribute to this assessment. First, given the frequency of pseudonymous letter writing in antiquity, especially in the New Testament, it is unlikely the apostle Peter wrote 2 Peter.¹ In particular, the volume of Greek ideas in the letter suggests the unlikelihood of Petrine authorship. Second, 2 Peter is familiar with the apostle Paul (3.15) and several Gospel traditions, most poignantly the transfiguration account (1.17). Therefore, we should place the text no earlier than the Synoptic tradition. Third, Davids notes that the *Apocalypse of Peter*, dating between 110 and 140 C.E., appears to have knowledge of 2 Peter, placing

¹ For a summary of 2 Peter and pseudopigraphy, see R. Riesner, “Der zweite Petrus-Brief und die Eschatologie,” in *Zukunftserwartung in biblischer Sicht*, ed. G. Maier (Wuppertal: 1984), 127-133.

the letter sometime earlier.² Our interest in Stoicism and 2 Peter does not require a date any more specific than the approximate range of 80-140 C.E.

B. Relationship to Jude

Historically, interpretation has often been occupied with the literary relationship between 2 Peter and Jude. For the purposes of this paper, we will work with the assumption that 2 Peter had the text of Jude and appropriated certain portions of it (specifically Jude 6-18). Though priority of Jude cannot be proven with absolute certainty, other theories such as a common source scenario are conjecture at best. I share the operative framework typical of most recent commentators: 2 Peter is dependent on Jude in specific instances of language and structure but differs greatly in argument and content.³ For our study, consideration of Jude will be restricted to occasions in which a comparison illustrates or magnifies the Graeco-Roman thought-world of 2 Peter.

C. Genre, Rhetoric, and Language

2 Peter opens in the form of a letter⁴ with a salutation from Simeon Peter addressed “to those who have received a faith as precious as ours...May grace and peace

² Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 131. See also, Richard J. Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish & Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 290-303.

³ See Richard J. Bauckham *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco, TX: World Books, 1983), 140-143. Davids, *2 Peter, Jude*, 136-142. Daniel J. Harrington, *Jude and 2 Peter* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 233. Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 120-122. Bauckham correctly notes that, “the literary relationship between 2 Peter and Jude does not justify the common habit of classifying these two works together as similar works, deriving from the same background and context, displaying the same theological outlook,” 143.

⁴ For a complete outline of 2 Peter’s use of epistolary conventions, see Neyrey, *2 Peter*, 111.

be yours...” (1.1-2).⁵ The occasion of the letter is the imminent death of its writer (1.13-15) with a stated intention: “...to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already...” (1.12). The notion of “reminding” (ὑπομνήσκω) the audience is restated in 3:1 as the writer reveals that this is “the second letter I am writing to you.” The repetition of the vocative ἀγαπητοί in the closing of the 2 Peter (3.1, 8, 14, 17) heightens the audience’s awareness that they are being addressed by a clear authorial voice; the overall tenor of the letter is rhetorical.

Unlike most New Testament letters, the text names no specific persons or localities with regard to its addressees. Given this absence, Bauckham suggests that, “2 Peter is fictionally represented as written shortly before Peter’s death (1.14)” and thus working in the mode of the testamentary genre.⁶ In response, Charles has shown that 2 Peter differs from the testamentary writings in terms of structure and content, arguing that we cannot restrict the letter to this genre.⁷ The situation of an author writing in anticipation of death naturally implies that the genre of the farewell speech is one of several backdrops for reading 2 Peter. Important for us is the ambiguity of the document itself: it is unclear whether 2 Peter addresses a specific Christian community. Moreover, the lack of distinctive genre markers forces us to question whether readers would have understood the document as working in a specific literary genre.⁸

⁵ Biblical quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 159.

⁷ J. Daryl Charles, *Virtue Amidst Vice: The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter 1* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 49-76. See also, Davids, *2 Peter*, 145-149.

⁸ Davids, *2 Peter*, 143.

Nevertheless, 2 Peter exhibits features typical of Graeco-Roman rhetoric and does so with skill and inventiveness.⁹ Watson summarizes the arrangement of the document:

2 Peter contains the essential elements, and their subcategories, that should specifically characterize deliberative rhetoric, and presents these elements in correct order: *exordium*, *probatio*, and *peroratio*...there is a lengthy *digressio* serving to destroy the ethos of the opponents in order to dissuade the audience from adopting their stance. As is proper, these elements of arrangement are all topically interwoven.¹⁰

The topical structure of 2 Peter vacillates between the theological and ethical, concluding with an explication of eschatological concerns grounded in the previous two. The clear rhetorical structure suggests that the writer had some degree of classical education, though it is difficult to say more with any certainty.¹¹

The style of 2 Peter is often described as grandiose and written in the Asiatic mode of rhetoric. This categorization is somewhat misleading. Watson notes that 2 Peter generally holds up to the “grand” style of Greek rhetoric, but does display the flaws of “inflated language,” by using “new and archaic words,” and “compound and strange words.”¹² So, too, Watson suggests that 2 Peter does not conform exactly to Cicero’s description of the Asian style as “redundant and lacking conciseness.”¹³ Thus, 2 Peter does not fit neatly into a specific style; the writer displays skill, but, at times, his language borders on being overwrought. This is not so surprising: the perceived eccentricity of eschatological thinkers is often a consequence of brazen use of language.

⁹ Duane Frederick Watson, *Invention, Arrangement, and Style: Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 146.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹¹ Neyrey, *2 Peter*, 120, observes that 2 Peter is a “Greek writer of solid, but by now means aristocratic or Attic eloquence. If, as Cicero remarks, the stereotype of this rhetoric truly belongs with the Asian people, then the author is more easily located among the Hellenistic cities of Asia Minor.”

¹² Watson, *Invention*, 144-145.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

2. Themes

A. Theology

The nature and role of God in 2 Peter's worldview has a varying texture. On one hand, God is the patron *par excellence* in relation to his clients—the whole of humanity.¹⁴ A description of God as patron opens the body of the letter: Ὡς πάντα ἡμῶν τῆς θείας δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ τὰ πρὸς ζωὴν καὶ εὐσέβειαν δεδωρημένης (1.3a). In this framework, the patron's benefaction is communicated or transmitted to the client by a mediator, σωτήρ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (1.1). Through the knowledge of Christ, the clients receive God's promises that allow them to escape (ἀποφεύγω) a cosmos corrupted by desire and “become sharers in divine nature” (γένησθε θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως).¹⁵ Claiming that the client can somehow share in the φύσις of the patron complicates a strictly hierarchical divine-human relationship. To be sure, the text does not suggest that humans themselves become divine *per se*. Further discussion of this passage will be important in our consideration of Stoic physics and theology in the letter.

2 Peter vigorously argues for God's sovereignty and justice. In 2 Peter 2.4-9 the writer alludes to a series of narratives in order to illustrate (a) God's ability to judge and punish, and (b) God's ultimate fairness in doing so. Particularly interesting for our study is the double allusion in 2 Peter 2 to Genesis 6 and the punishment of the Titans in Greek myth. In Hesiod's *Theogony* Zeus and his Counsel defeat the Titans in battle, bind them in chains, and cast them into Tartarus.¹⁶ 2 Peter 2.4 describes the angels with the same

¹⁴ See Neyrey, *2 Peter*, 145-146.

¹⁵ See James M. Starr, *Sharers in Divine Nature: 2 Peter 1:4 in Its Hellenistic Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000), for a full discussion of the philosophical background of this passage.

¹⁶ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 687-744.

details and uses the verb *ταρταρώσας* (“cast into Tartarus”). By alluding to a narrative that establishes Zeus’ power and authority in the Greek pantheon, 2 Peter aims to reveal the capability and justice of the Christian God in a Hellenistic mode.¹⁷ The issue of theodicy and providence is paramount for 2 Peter, particularly with regard to the *ψευδοδιδάσκολοι* identified as the writer’s polemic (2.1).¹⁸

B. Christology

Jesus Christ (only in 1:2 does he appear without *Χριστός*) has two main titles in 2 Peter: *κύριος* (1.8, 10, 14, 16; 2.20; 3.2, 18) and *σωτήρ* (1.10; 2.20; 3.2, 18). In 2:1 Jesus is also referred to as the *δεσπότης*. Jesus as *κύριος* suggests that he possesses a ruler’s authority and sovereignty, but this does not seem to place him in the same realm as God. He possesses direct authority over humanity and denial of that authority results in destruction (*ἀπώλεια*) of the individual (2.1b). Davids argues that the use of *δεσπότης* in reference to Jesus implies that he supplants the authority of Caesar or other rulers in the lives of the Christian community.¹⁹ This reading fits nicely with the patron-client theological framework established earlier in the letter.

Though the use of *σωτήρ* in 2 Peter seems to be merely a formal title, it does carry some theological weight. Jesus labeled *σωτήρ* can be understood politically: perhaps this functions as way of supplanting the authority of the Emperor who was often given the same title. However, given the eschatological charge of 2 Peter, we should question whether *σωτήρ* has any relation to the end of the world. *σωτήρ* appears twice in 2 Peter 3

¹⁷ See Neyrey, *2 Peter*, 202.

¹⁸ See Chapter 1.3 for a discussion of the polemic in 2 Peter.

¹⁹ Davids, *2 Peter*, 152.

(vv.2, 18), but without direct thematic connections to the conflagration. The destruction of the world in 2 Peter is concerned with judgment and purification, not saving or deliverance. Interestingly, 2 Peter urges his audience to “regard the patience of our Lord as salvation” (καὶ τὴν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν μακροθυμίαν σωτηρίαν ἠγεῖσθε) (3.15). As they wait for the “coming day of God,” the writer urges the community to understand God’s patience and tolerance in salvific terms. However, there seems to be little relationship between this claim and the notion of Jesus as σωτήρ.

C. Ethics

Proper ethical conduct dominates much of 2 Peter. This concern appears in the opening of the body of the letter. In 1.5-7 the audience is given a model for living in a world corrupted by desire.

(5) καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦτο δὲ σπουδῆν πάσαν παρεισενέγκαντες ἐπιχορηγήσατε ἐν τῇ πίστει ὑμῶν τὴν ἀρετὴν, ἐν δὲ τῇ ἀρετῇ τὴν γνῶσιν, (6) ἐν δὲ τῇ γνῶσει τὴν ἐγκράτειαν, ἐν δὲ τῇ ἐγκρατείᾳ τὴν ὑπομονήν, ἐν δὲ τῇ ὑπομονῇ τὴν εὐσέβειαν, (7) ἐν δὲ τῇ εὐσεβείᾳ τὴν φιλαδελφίαν, ἐν δὲ τῇ φιλαδελφίᾳ τὴν ἀγάπην.

(5) For this reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, (6) and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, (7) and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.

Charles notes that this passage shares a number of common features with Stoic virtue lists, and these elements are “adapted to the Christian paraenetic tradition” in 2 Peter.²⁰ This evaluation is appropriate, particularly when we read that 2 Peter writes in order that “you may be able at any time to recall these things” (1.15). Several of these virtues are

²⁰ Charles, *Virtue Amidst Vice*, 85. Charles’ concluding chapter (pp. 128-58) offers a thorough discussion of the virtue list (1.5-7) with regard to Hellenistic philosophy and ethics. See also, Arius Didymus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 5b1-5b5.

noteworthy for our study. Self-control (ἐγκράτεια) will be contrasted with the dangers of ἐπιθυμία (1.4; 2.10, 18; 3.3) later in the letter, specifically with regard to sexual self-restraint. ἐγκράτεια leads to ὑπομονή (perseverance or endurance), another of the Stoic virtues. The inevitability of the earth's destruction requires perseverance: "...while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation" (3.14-15).²¹

The focus of each narrative allusion in 2.4-9 is also ethical. Angels are condemned for acting sinfully; the righteous Noah is saved as the ungodly world is flooded; the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of what will happen to the ungodly; and the righteous man Lot is saved. After offering these examples, 2 Peter is specific about the most flagrant participants of immorality: μάλιστα δὲ τοὺς ὀπίσω σαρκὸς ἐν ἐπιθυμίᾳ μiasμοῦ πορευομένους καὶ κυριότητος καταφρονοῦντας (2.10a). The remainder of 2 Peter 2 deals with the immoral behavior of the opponents before the writer sketches his eschatological vision. We shall return to a discussion of ethics and eschatology in Chapter 4.1.

3. Epicurean Polemic

In 2.1, the writer predicts "there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions." As the chapter continues, 2 Peter outlines the activities of those unrighteous ones who will be judged by God (2.9-22). These people

²¹ For a linguistic analysis of the virtues in 1.5-7, see Charles, *Virtue Amidst Vice*, 138-148, and Tord Fornberg, *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society: A Study of 2 Peter* (Lund: Gleerup, 1977), 97-101.

are “like irrational animals” (2.12), have “eyes full of adultery” (2.14), and “speak bombastic nonsense” (2.18). Moreover, “scoffers” (ἐμπαίκται) who indulge their own desires will doubt the coming of the Lord saying, “all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (3.3-4). Nevertheless, the letter contains no specific details about its recipients or possible opponents, making it difficult to elucidate whether specific individuals have targeted the community of 2 Peter’s audience.²² It is quite possible that 2 Peter only paints a general picture of his potential detractors.

In his seminal study, “The Form and Background of the Polemic in 2 Peter,” Neyrey illustrates affinities between the argument of 2 Peter and Plutarch’s *De Sera Numinis Vindicta* (On the Delays of Divine Vengeance).²³ In *De Sera*, an Epicurean argument against divine providence serves as a polemic. The heart of the matter is theodicy: the Epicurean position contends that God does not judge, reward, or punish because God must be free from trouble (ἀταρξία). If God were provident, he would be bound continually with the concerns of the world; because he is God (in the Epicurean system of freedom) he cannot be subject to such concerns.²⁴

Neyrey further outlines the four arguments against providence used by the Epicureans.²⁵ (1) *Cosmology*: Because the world consists of atoms passing one another in a chaotic manner not guided by reason or divinity, a provident God is impossible. (2)

²² For a consideration of the methodological difficulties in identifying polemics in New Testament epistles, see John M.G. Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: *Galatians* as a Test Case,” *JSNT* 31 (Oct. 1987): 73-93.

²³ Neyrey, Jerome H, “The Form and Background of the Polemic in 2 Peter,” *JBL* 99.3 (1980), 407-431.

²⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 10.139. All citations of Greek and Latin authors are from the Loeb Classical Library (LCL) unless otherwise noted.

²⁵ Neyrey, “Form and Background,” 409.

Freedom: Providence is deterministic, thereby limiting human agency and freedom. (3)

Unfulfilled Prophecy: Because the cosmos comes about by chance, there can be no prophesying or divination. (4) *Injustice*: Justice is delayed; one can observe that the good are not rewarded and the bad are not punished. The delay of divine judgment is a particularly strong argument for the Epicureans: “but there is another absurdity...involved in all this procrastination and delay of the Deity: that his slowness destroys belief in providence.”²⁶ Consequently, the Epicureans reject any notion of the afterlife or post-mortem retribution.²⁷ As Neyrey suggests, the Epicurean polemic against providence

...rests on the argument of injustice...expressed primarily in the complaint that justice is delayed...God must be free from trouble (i.e. providence); and, the wise man who strives for freedom from trouble (*ἀταρξία*), must reject all that destroys his troubleless state...The formal argument of injustice therefore functions in a coherent philosophy which rejects the triad of judgment, afterlife, and post-mortem retribution.²⁸

Elements of this argument appear in 2 Peter’s perception of his polemic. In 3.9, the delay of the Parousia and the slowness of God’s judgment are interpreted in a positive light. 2 Peter argues that God “is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (3.9). Earlier in the letter, he insists upon the inevitable destruction of the false teachers (2.1, 3b). Moreover, 2 Peter rejects the “promise of freedom” offered by the opponents (2:19), possibly an Epicurean motive.²⁹ Given these statements, Neyrey contends that author of 2 Peter is responding to the argument against providence similar to that promulgated by Epicurean philosophy.³⁰

²⁶ Plutarch, *De Sera*, 549B.

²⁷ Plutarch, *De Sera*, 560F.

²⁸ Neyrey, “Form and Background,” 411-412.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 418-419.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 418.

Several other elements of the text suggest that the writer perceived an Epicurean-like polemic. 2 Peter makes extensive efforts to point out the immorality of his opponents in order to defame their authority. In addition, he reveals that they deny that the world is passing away (3.3-4) and believe that they will not be judged (3.9). Neyrey describes this picture of the opponents:

Like the Epicureans and Sadducees, their happiness rests with their own radical self-determination here and now. This is perceived by the author not as freedom but as slavery to immorality which must lead to destruction.³¹

We shall bear this in mind in our consideration of 2 Peter's eschatological vision. How does 2 Peter imagine the fiery destruction of the cosmos in relation to the portrayal of his antagonists? Moreover, in what ways does the appearance of Stoic thought address the problems raised by such an opposition?

³¹ Ibid., 420.

CHAPTER 2

STOIC THOUGHT AS A BACKGROUND FOR 2 PETER

1. The Stoic Ideology

Before outlining the philosophical elements of Stoicism pertinent to our discussion of 2 Peter, it will be helpful to consider its cultural influence in the Hellenistic world. Attention to this issue—primarily one of ideology—will provide us with an appropriate frame in which to place the letter of 2 Peter. Of significant interest for us is the dissemination and adoption of Stoic language in the Graeco-Roman world at large. What about Stoic philosophy was so attractive for the people of the ancient Mediterranean? How did the academic language of Stoicism impact culture and knowledge? Finally, in what ways did Stoicism interact with imperial and political power structures, especially after the period of the early Stoa? I will use the term ideology in two senses: (1) as the manner of thinking characteristic of mass culture—especially urban culture, and (2) as the system of ideas on which the individual bases decisions (political, economic, religious and ethical).

Stoicism's capacity to function as ideology rests initially in its claim to be comprehensive. The Stoics held that the world and all its events were understandable through reason and divided philosophy into three inextricable categories: logic, physics,

and ethics.³² Stoicism's contention that the world was a knowable and unified whole allowed it to be intellectually accommodating. B.D. Shaw writes:

Like any other successful ideology Stoicism is typified by the extent to which it could absorb other philosophies and exercise an imperialism of ideas. Hence, if anything, Stoicism was by its very structure ill-defined and flexible, especially about its ideological periphery where it shared amorphous points of contact and overlap with existing idea systems...it was precisely the shapeless and multifaceted nature of Stoicism that allowed the core of the doctrine to exercise a determinant influence over peripheral ideas.³³

The human being has the ability to interact with the world through reason in a way that constantly aims to understand the part in light of the whole. Epictetus places the capabilities of the individual in relation to the world:

...you are a citizen of the world, and a part of it...you possess the faculty of understanding the divine administration of the world, and of reasoning upon the consequences thereof.³⁴

With the presupposition that the unified cosmos was logically knowable, the goal of human beings in the Stoic system is living in accordance with nature (*φύσις*), which was identified with God.³⁵ Because the human has his own *φύσις* identical to the nature of the universe at large, his purpose is teleological: live in conformity with nature, accomplished primarily by proper moral behavior.³⁶

³² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.40.

³³ B.D. Shaw, "The Divine Economy: Stoicism as Ideology," *Latomus* 44 (1985), 19.

³⁴ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2.10.3-4.

³⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.88. A.A. Long summarizes the Stoic outlook, "The coherence of Stoicism is based upon the belief that natural events are so causally related to one another that on them a set of propositions can be supported which enable man to plan a life wholly at one with Nature or God." *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 108.

³⁶ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.4.15, 1.12.

Every aspect of the world is causally linked in the Stoic system. All that happens is connected and in harmony with the whole. Much of this has to do with Stoic physical theory (see below), but the notion of unified causality lends itself quite naturally to ideology.³⁷ For the Stoics, nature is good, and meaning is inherent in the structure; humans need only recognize the harmonious cosmos and live properly.³⁸ Moreover, the rational being understands that hierarchy is built into the world (both in physics and in the social relations of living things).³⁹ Social definition and role-playing is fundamental in Stoic anthropology and sociology, and thus Stoicism could function as an acceptable ideology; the individual should be concerned with fulfilling the duties of his or her role.⁴⁰ The uniqueness of Stoicism derives from the political landscape of the Hellenistic world. No longer under the social rubric of the *πόλις*, the Stoics posited a system in which humans could identify themselves with the entire universe.⁴¹

A final note about Stoicism as ideology: the pliant nature of Stoic doctrine did not necessitate a stringent orthodoxy. This allowed Stoicism to adapt and embrace philosophies and ideas, and posit them in distinctly Stoic language. In this sense, Stoicism yielded a “common ideological field, a common language of political thought and behavior.”⁴² The perpetuation of a common language is especially critical for our consideration of 2 Peter 3; the use of Stoic language in a text that does not identify itself as Stoic changes how meaning happens in that text. In short, meaning is a consequence of language. The common language of Stoicism carries with it the possible referents of

³⁷ *SVF* 2.945.

³⁸ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.6.12-22.

⁴⁰ B.D. Shaw, “Divine Economy,” 32-33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 49.

the system's central tenets. As such, the appearance of such language in 2 Peter should prompt us to interrogate other elements of the text under the Stoic lens: our task will be an attempt to “round out the discourse” of 2 Peter. It will be difficult for us to determine whether the writer of 2 Peter is deliberately or intentionally using Stoic language. Perhaps our writer is employing the language prevalent in his own discourse in a way that shifts the “meaning” of the text. Moreover, an appropriate reading of 2 Peter will not force the text to be Stoic when it is not. Given the ideological pervasiveness of Stoicism in the Hellenistic world, it is our task to understand how the language of Stoicism affects the meaning of a text that identifies itself as specifically Christian.⁴³

2. The Physical World

A. Stoic Physics

Stoic physical theory is a rather large topic and a thorough outline of its intricacies cannot be discussed here.⁴⁴ Instead, I will attempt to summarize the basic principles of Stoic physics, including some details about Stoic cosmology and theology—both intimately bound up in the physical structure of the Stoic worldview. I will draw on both primary sources and scholarly commentary, especially David E. Hahn's seminal study, *The Origins of Stoic Cosmology*.⁴⁵

⁴³ For a discussion of the interaction of Stoic ideas in a New Testament epistle, see Troels Enberg-Pedersen, “Stoicism in Philippians.” *Paul in his Hellenistic Context*, ed. Troels Enberg-Pedersen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 256-290.

⁴⁴ See A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 147-178.

⁴⁵ David E. Hahn, *The Origins of Stoic Cosmology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977). For a discussion of Stoic physics in the New Testament see, David E. Fredrickson, “Ephesians and Stoic Physics,” *Word & World* 22.2 (2002), 144-154.

For something to exist—for it to be real—it must be corporeal; this is the basis of all Stoic thought.⁴⁶ Everything is body in their system: visible things, ψυχή, and even God.⁴⁷ No void exists in the world because it is a unified whole, and only outside the world does the incorporeal void exist.⁴⁸ With regard to the compositions of these bodies, the Stoics proposed two principles (ἀρχαί)—the active (Nature, God, or Reason) and the passive (matter or “a substance without quality”).⁴⁹ However, these ἀρχαί are only separable on a theoretical level. The Stoics held that the active and passive principles existed in an indivisible *mixture* that constitutes all bodies.⁵⁰ In short, the active principle provides shape and movement to the passive unqualified matter.⁵¹

This active principle was identified with fire and heat, which was also synonymous with πνεῦμα—a biological life-giving entity—something like “fiery air.”⁵² The πνεῦμα can have several functions. First, πνεῦμα is the ‘vehicle of the λόγος’, because it works intelligently and artistically, not merely a physical combination of fire and air that moves at random. Characteristic of the description of πνεῦμα is the fluidity in Stoic physical terminology:

⁴⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.135. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 4.14. *SVF* 2.363.

⁴⁷ *SVF* 1.518, 2.790.

⁴⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.140.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.134. Seneca, *Epistles*, 65.2, offers a brief outline: “...there are two things in the universe which are the source of everything—namely, cause and matter. Matter lies sluggish, a substance ready for any use, but sure to remain unemployed if no one sets it in motion. Cause, however, by which we mean reason, moulds matter and turns it in whatever direction it will, producing thereby various concrete results.”

⁵⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.151. *SVF* 2.310. A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 159-160, discusses the difficulties of the Stoic notion of mixture—of two bodies occupying the same space.

⁵¹ *SVF* 2.311. See also, Hahn, *Origins*, 29-56, describing the Stoic synthesis of Aristotelian and Platonic physical theory.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 158-169, discusses the nuances of πνεῦμα in Zeno, Chrysippus, and Cleanthes.

Δοκεῖ δ' αὐτοῖς τὴν μὲν φύσιν εἶναι πῦρ τεχνικόν, ὁδῶ βαδίζον εἰς γένεσιν, ὅπερ ἐστὶ πνεῦμα πυροειδὲς καὶ τεχνοειδές.

Nature in their view is an artistically working fire, going on its way to create; which is equivalent to a fiery, creative, and fashioning breath.⁵³

Therefore, πνεῦμα is a generative force in constant motion; its heat was thought to be vital and powerful for the growth and motion of bodies.⁵⁴

πνεῦμα suffuses both the entire cosmos and every individual body in it. In doing so, “fiery breath” maintains bodies by holding them together.⁵⁵ This will be crucial for the whole of Stoic cosmology. With regard to the traditional elements (στοιχεῖα), πνεῦμα, conceived as a combination of fire and air, is associated with the active principle because of its heat. In contrast, earth and water (both cold elements) are understood as passive.⁵⁶ In typical Stoic fashion, these four elements have a fundamental interrelatedness. The πνεῦμα expands and contracts because of its hot and cold parts (fire and air).⁵⁷ Hahm describes the result of the dual motion of πνεῦμα:

In specific, fire and air (the active elements) hold together earth and water (the passive elements)...⁵⁸ this motion has two phases, a movement into itself and a movement out of itself...The state of the πνεῦμα in this activity is sometimes called tension (τόνος)...Each phase of the pneumatic or tensional movement produces its own result. The inward movement or movement toward the center holds the body together and produces cohesion (συνέχεια), unity (ἕνωσις), and being (οὐσία); the outward movement toward the periphery causes dimensions and qualities.⁵⁹

Accordingly, Stoic physics prefers its bodies to be stable. This is achieved as forces interact with the tension of the expanding and contracting πνεῦμα, yielding balanced and

⁵³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.156. See also, *SVF* 2.1027.

⁵⁴ Cicero, *On the nature of the gods*, 2.23-24.

⁵⁵ Plutarch, *On common conceptions*, 1085C-D. *SVF* 2.442.

⁵⁶ *SVF* 2.418.

⁵⁷ *SVF* 2.446.

⁵⁸ Galen, *On bodily mass*, 7.525,9-14.

⁵⁹ Hahm, *Origins*, 165-166.

cohesive bodies. The dynamic substance *πνεῦμα* allowed the Stoics to conceive of bodies—their movement and their integrity—as guided by reason (i.e. Nature or God). On the micro-level Stoic physics is remarkably controlling: everything real is a body, and all bodies exist because their internal forces are in a state of rational equilibrium. There is no empty space in the world; every individual body is bound together.⁶⁰ Thus, Stoicism envisaged a physical world antithetical to the randomness of Epicurean atomism.⁶¹ Now that we have a sense of the physicality of things in the Stoic world, let us consider the implications of these tenets of Stoic physics on a macro-level.

B. Stoic Cosmology

The Stoics arranged the cosmos according to the four elements. The structure of world is a series of co-centric spheres: earth in the center surrounded by water, air, and fire (also called *αἰθερία*). A realm of planets and stars stands between the sphere of air and fire.⁶² In addition, all matter is derived from the four elements, each can transform into another, and all are paired with a particular quality: earth is dry, water wet, air cold, fire hot. The entire cosmos and its elements are stationed at the center of an incorporeal and infinite void.⁶³

The biological character of the Stoic cosmos is especially apparent in accounts of cosmogony:

In the beginning all by himself he turned the entire substance through air into water. Just as the sperm is enveloped in seminal fluid, so god, who is the seminal principle (*σπερματικός λόγος*) of the world, stays behind as such in the moisture,

⁶⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.140

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 10.41-43.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.137. *SVF* 2.527.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 7.140.

making matter serviceable to himself for the successive stages of creation. He then creates first of all the four elements...⁶⁴

In this case we see how God (the active cause) changes the elements into one another by acting on a substance (οὐσία). Therefore, God's role in creation is understood analogically to the seed in the process of reproduction.⁶⁵ Importantly, fire was identified with σπέρμα which possesses the “λόγοι of all things and causes of events.”⁶⁶ Hahn suggests that, “the primary fire, which is actually identical with god, has the cosmogonical function as did god in the account of Diogenes Laertius; fire is the seed and, as seed, is associated with what Zeno calls the λόγοι of all things.”⁶⁷ Fire is therefore understood as a generative on the macro-level.⁶⁸

Because the Stoics understood fire as a creative force, they had to deal with the critique that fire is, at least empirically, destructive. Zeno dealt with this problem by delineating two kinds of fire and placing them in relation to the celestial bodies:

...the sun and the moon and each of the other stars are intelligent and prudent and have the fieriness of designing fire. For there are two kinds of fire: one is undesigning (ἄτεχνος) and converts fuel into itself; the other is designing (τεχνικός), causing growth and preservation...⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.135-6

⁶⁵ Hahn, *Origins*, 60.

⁶⁶ *SVF* 1.98.

⁶⁷ Hahn, *Origins*, 60.

⁶⁸ *SVF* 2.1027. See also, Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, 36.56. An allegorical cosmogony that illustrates the interchange of God, fire, and seed: “But recalling Aphrodite and the process of generation, it tamed and relaxed itself, and quenching much of its light, it turned into fiery air of gentle warmth, and uniting with Hera...it emitted anew the full supply of seed for the universe.”

⁶⁹ *SVF* 1.120.

The designing fire is differentiated from the fire typically visible to humans, but the Stoics were unwilling to make these separate elements.⁷⁰ The sun is considered a source of the craftsman-like fire—analogous to the fire that maintains bodies. However, this designing fire was also inevitably (and slowly) destructive because, in the absence of void, the elements are converted into or consumed by fire. As such, the fire continues to be fueled, resulting in a fully destroyed (consumed) cosmos.⁷¹ This is the so-called Stoic doctrine of conflagration, which we will consider in more detail in Chapter 3.

We have seen how πνεῦμα provides life in living things and cohesion in all bodies. In keeping with the Stoic fondness for a unified whole, this conception of πνεῦμα contributes to the notion that the cosmos is itself a living being. Like the human body whose parts work together and are inextricable from one another, the cosmos is understood as a biological entity. Moreover, just as the human ψυχή has its supervisory or ruling principle, the ἡγεμονικόν, so the cosmos is permeated by νοῦς and is guided by αἰθερία.⁷² This holds the cosmos together and moves intelligence throughout the whole. πνεῦμα, therefore, performs both a physical and psychological role in the cosmos.⁷³

⁷⁰ Hahn, *Origins*, 93.

⁷¹ Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1052C.

⁷² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.138-39.

⁷³ Hahn, *Origins*, 163-67. For a discussion of the analogous relationship between the human being and the cosmos, see Margaret E. Reesor, *The Nature of Man in Stoic Philosophy*, 1-21. In addition to the biological analogy, the Stoics understood the cosmos to be held together by centripetal force: “For all its parts in every direction gravitate with a uniform pressure towards the center...this function is fulfilled by that rational and intelligent substance which pervades the whole world as the efficient cause of all things and collects the outermost particles towards the center...the same must be the case with the earth, so that all its parts must converge towards the center (which in a sphere is the lowest point) without anything to break the continuity and so threaten its vast complex of gravitational forces and masses with dissolution.” Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 2.45.115-16.

C. Stoic Theology

The Stoics associated nature (φύσις), fate (εἰμαρμένης), and fire with God; he is intelligent, immanent and provident.⁷⁴ According to Plutarch, the Stoic God is “an animate being, blessed and indestructible, and beneficent towards men.”⁷⁵ As we have seen in Stoic physics, God is identified with the active principle. This move is crucial in the Stoic divergence from Platonic and Aristotelian theology. Sedley writes that God as active principle “sets up Stoic pantheism from the very outset with a breathtaking decisiveness, enabling god to enter the physical world on the ground floor.”⁷⁶ In practice God can be called Zeus or Jupiter, and the Stoics often used allegorical descriptions and narratives of the Greek pantheon to describe God and the universe.⁷⁷ Expressions of Stoic theology and religiosity are many, and a survey of some significant passages will be helpful for contextualizing 2 Peter.

Providence (πρόνοια) is immensely significant in Stoic theology, often in polemical relationship with Epicureanism.⁷⁸ God admits “nothing evil [into him]” and takes “providential care of the world and all that therein is”⁷⁹; his substance (οὐσία) is the whole of cosmos.⁸⁰ Because of his physical inextricability from body, the intelligent and rational God participates in and controls the happenings of the world. Epictetus notes humanity’s relationship to the divine by asking,

⁷⁴ *SVF* 2.1027. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.135, 147.

⁷⁵ Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1051F.

⁷⁶ David Sedley, “The Origins of the Stoic God,” in *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, Its Background and Aftermath*, ed. Dorothea Frede and Andre Laks (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 41.

⁷⁷ See note 37. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.147.

⁷⁸ Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions*, 1075E.

⁷⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.147.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.148.

But if our souls are so bound up with God and joined together with him, as being parts and portions of his being, does not God perceive their every motion as being a motion of that which is his own and of one body with himself?⁸¹

The motion of God is inseparable from the motion of the human soul in such a way that actions and events are under God's control. In a sense, God percolates through all bodies, controlling everything as the result of his physicality.

Epictetus has several empirical arguments for God's providence. First he points out the wonders of nature and animal life which are inherently linked for the benefit of man: "milk is produced from grass, and cheese from milk, and that wool grows from skin—who is it that has created or devised these things?"⁸² He then notes the seemingly useless characteristics of human beings (hairs on a chin, for example) and deduces that these are signs given by God to distinguish between people and things.⁸³ Finally, he urges the reader to praise God for his generosity in providing functioning bodies (the power to swallow, the ability to breathe while sleeping) and, most importantly, the capacity to follow the path of reason.⁸⁴

Claims about providence also led the Stoics to identify God with fate.⁸⁵ As such, the Stoics had an extraordinarily deterministic worldview, often construed under the rubric of physics. Temporally, this means that all future events have been decided in accordance with nature: "nothing is going to be which nature does not contain causes

⁸¹ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.14.6-10.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1.16.1-8. See Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 2.37, who argues that though man is not perfect, the cosmos is perfect and has "nothing missing." Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1044D, which recounts a similar argument by Chrysippus. *SVF* 2.1172 notes flaws in the Stoic argument.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1.16.9-14.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.16.15-21.

⁸⁵ *SVF* 2.933.

working to bring that very thing about.”⁸⁶ Moreover, the Stoics recognize a sequence of causality that occurs because of the divine ordering of the world.⁸⁷ The insistence upon divine determinism creates a conflict with the Stoic supposition that the cosmos and God are essentially good. This is the problem of evil and the issue theodicy in Stoicism. In other words, (a) Does evil exist in a system where God, who determines everything, is providentially good? And (b) why do human beings, for whom the world is oriented, undergo hardship and suffering?

The Stoic πνεῦμα is crucial in dealing with the problem of theodicy because it aims to give causal responsibility to a rational substance that pervades the entire cosmos.⁸⁸ Stoicism contends that the chain of causation is entirely under God’s control. In thinking about evil, therefore, we must bear in mind the Stoic interest in maintaining the unified whole. When bad things happen, the Stoics do not deny that a cosmic “badness” exists. However, to keep the goodness of the unified cosmos intact, they stress how injustice and disaster actually serve in God’s plan.⁸⁹ As Long notes, “If moral badness is the only *κάκον*, and something foreign to God’s nature, cosmic *κακία* turns out to be only a human description of events necessary for the realization of the good on a universal scale.”⁹⁰ Here we have the Stoic belief that the wise man always attempts to see things in totality; one is always to comprehend the part in light of the whole, which is

⁸⁶ Cicero, *On divination*, 1.125-6.

⁸⁷ *SVF* 2.945.

⁸⁸ A.A. Long, “The Stoic Concept of Evil,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1968), 332.

⁸⁹ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 2.35-7.

⁹⁰ Long, “Stoic Concept of Evil,” 333.

inherently good because it is determined by God. The virtuous human being will live in accordance with nature by observing God in order to develop “right reason.”⁹¹

We see a structural similarity in 2 Peter. Starr suggests that “knowledge of Christ” in 2 Peter functions analogously to Stoicism’s notion of right reason.

The Stoics and 2 Peter agree that right reason/knowledge of Christ is what enables a person to share in divine nature (1.4); they would also agree that a person must align himself correctly to “the divine,” which requires a specific “knowledge” of the divine, and then must focus his attention on his own moral actions. There is thus a marked similarity of structure, especially in the position given to *knowledge* of Christ in 2 Peter and the position of *reason* in the Stoics.⁹²

Just as the Stoics connect ethics with rational living, so 2 Peter understands proper moral behavior as the foundational requirement for the individual who has “knowledge of Christ.” Moreover, 2 Peter shares with Stoicism an insistence on the ethical responsibility of the individual above all else.

⁹¹ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 4.99-100: “...if he attach himself to God, he will pass through the world in safety...so that whatever God wills, he also wills, and whatever God does not will, this he also does not will.”

⁹² Starr, *Sharers in Divine Nature*, 166.

CHAPTER 3

2 PETER 3 AND THE STOIC CONFLAGRATION

1. Textual Problem

Before we can begin a discussion of 2 Peter 3 and its relation to Stoic cosmology, we must deal with a textual problem that bears on our interpretation. 2 Peter 3.10 reads,

Ἦξει δὲ ἡμέρα κυρίου ὡς κλέπτῃς, ἐν ἣ ὁὶ οὐρανοὶ ῥοιζηδὸν παρελεύσονται
στοιχεῖα δὲ καυσούμενα λυθήσεται καὶ γῆ καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ ἔργα εὐρεθήσεται.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

The word in question is εὐρεθήσεται (“will be found”), a future passive of εὐρίσκω. Metzger notes that this reading is best supported in manuscript evidence; the “oldest reading, and the one which best explains the origin of the others that have been preserved” but is nevertheless “devoid of meaning in the context.”⁹³ A number of variant readings have been suggested to deal with this issue. Significant manuscript evidence is present that replaces εὐρεθήσεται with κατακαήσεται, meaning “will be burned up.” This use of κατακαίω fits nicely with the subject matter, perhaps as stylistic maneuver, complementing the verb καυσόμαι earlier in the sentence. Beyond this major variant, Van den Heever summarizes the other verb replacements proposed by scholars:

⁹³ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 706.

δύησεται/ρέύσεται (will flow or melt), συρροήσεται (will flow together), ἐκπυρωθήσεται (will be burnt to ashes), ἀρθήσεται (will be taken away), κριθήσεται (will be judged), ἰαθήσεται/ἔξιαθήσεται (will be healed thoroughly), and πυρωθήσεται (will be burned).⁹⁴

Scholars who maintain that 2 Peter 3 follows Old Testament models of judgment suggest that εὐρεθήσεται should be preserved, quoting an array of LXX instances in which εὐρίσκω appears to be synonymous with ἄβρ (‘‘to find’’) in situations of judgment.⁹⁵ Neyrey points to New Testament passages in which ‘‘finding’’ has to do with judgment: εὐρεθήσεται ‘‘implies that something will be revealed, uncovered, and brought to light, which might be goodness to be rewarded or evil to be requited.’’⁹⁶ However, the biblical parallels proposed do not help us understand the presence of the στοιχεῖα in the context of 2 Peter’s argument about the physical destruction of the earth. Moreover, though an adaptation of Psalm 90.4 appears in 2 Peter 3.8, ‘‘with the Lord one day is like a thousand years,’’ Old Testament passages do little to explain the presence of εὐρεθήσεται in 3.10.⁹⁷ Admittedly, this is probably an instance in which the textual problem is unsolvable.⁹⁸

Interestingly, Olivier’s replacement for εὐρεθήσεται is ἐκπυρωθήσεται,⁹⁹ a verbal form of the technical term for the conflagration in Stoic physical theory, ἐκπύρωσις. This rendering would be ideal for my argument about the Stoic background of 2 Peter, but the manuscript support is minimal and we can only regard ἐκπυρωθήσεται as conjectural. We

⁹⁴ G. Van den Heever, ‘‘In Purifying Fire: World View and 2 Peter 3:10,’’ *Neotestamentica* 27.1 (1993), 108. See also, Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 316-321.

⁹⁵ See Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 316-321.

⁹⁶ Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude*, 243-244.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁹⁸ See Larry Overstreet, ‘‘A Study of 2 Peter 3:10’’ *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137.548 (1980), 357-378, and Daniel J. Harrington, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 289, who suggests that εὐρεθήσεται can only be retained if one takes 3.10 as a question or adds the negative οὐκ.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Van den Heever, ‘‘In Purifying Fire,’’ 108.

cannot say whether εὐρεθήσεται is the “correct” reading; however the problem is not necessarily a *crux interpretum* for our study.

First, we should bear in mind that κατακαήσεται appears in a number of manuscripts and fits well with the context of 2 Peter 3; therefore, it cannot be ruled out entirely. Second, we should not disregard Neyrey’s suggestion that εὐρεθήσεται carries the connotation of judgment, especially in light of 2 Peter 3.9. However, this does not require us to harmonize 2 Peter 3 with an Old Testament paradigm of judgment by fire; by considering Stoic cosmology I aim to show how 2 Peter operates in different mode. Third, the deviation in manuscripts may reveal nervousness about the controversial nature of 2 Peter’s eschatology—specifically its pagan connotations.¹⁰⁰ Finally, I want to stress that 2 Peter is capable of using language figuratively. Perhaps εὐρεθήσεται would not have been understood literally in a discussion of the dissolution of the cosmos and its elements.

2. Stoic ἐκπύρωσις

We will now consider the Stoic notion of the cosmic conflagration which I briefly mentioned earlier. There seems to be no clear reason why the early Stoics proposed the notion of a circular cosmos—an infinite series of creations and destructions. Lapidge outlines the three main explanations for the ἐκπύρωσις used by the Stoics.¹⁰¹ 1) The first position is from Chrysippus as outlined by Plutarch: “Zeus continues to grow until he has

¹⁰⁰ See Carsten Peter Thiede, “A Pagan Reader of 2 Peter: Cosmic Conflagration in 2 Peter 3 and the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix” *JSNT* 26 (1986), 79-96.

¹⁰¹ Michael Lapidge, “Stoic Cosmology,” in *The Stoics*, ed. John M. Rist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 181.

used up everything on himself.”¹⁰² In this case God increases in such a way that the entire universe is absorbed. 2) The second explanation suggests that the celestial bodies, being made of fire, consume the moisture of the world until the entirety dries up and catches fire.¹⁰³ However, Lapidge notes that the Stoics believed the sun and stars consisted of “creative fire,” not the ordinary destructive fire that required fuel or nourishment.¹⁰⁴ 3) The final position suggests that the conflagration occurs when the planets return to the same position that they occupied at the beginning of creation.¹⁰⁵ None of these arguments seems logically defensible or necessary in the unified Stoic cosmos. Interestingly, the Stoics did use the doctrine of conflagration to prove the existence of the void outside the cosmos.¹⁰⁶

Perhaps the biological nature of the cosmos best explains the Stoic doctrine of the conflagration. Plutarch summarizes Chrysippus:

For, since death is the separation of soul from body and the soul of the universe is not separated but goes on growing continually until it has completely absorbed its matter, the universe must not be said to die.¹⁰⁷

In this sense, the Stoics maintain the eternity of the cosmos by casting their argument in a biological frame. Eusebius, reporting Stoic teaching, shows the biological connection of conflagration and cosmogony:

At certain fated times the entire world is subject to conflagration, and then is reconstituted afresh. But the primary fire is as it were a sperm which possesses the principles [λόγου] of all things and the causes of past, present and future events. The nexus and succession of these is fate, knowledge, truth and an inevitable and

¹⁰² Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1052C.

¹⁰³ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 2.118.

¹⁰⁴ Lapidge, “Stoic Cosmology,” 181. We will return to this issue below.

¹⁰⁵ *SVF* 2.625.

¹⁰⁶ *SVF* 2.537.

¹⁰⁷ Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1052C.

inescapable law of what exists. In this way everything in the world is excellently organized as in a perfectly ordered society.¹⁰⁸

The cosmos is destroyed but the creative fire remains—understood as σπέρμα—and is therefore the agent of reproduction, growth, and regeneration. As Hahn notes, this view is analogous to the continuous cycle that all species of animals go through, and allowed the Stoics to uphold the eternity of the cosmos.¹⁰⁹ The doctrine of the conflagration, despite its logical problems, was an outlet for the Stoics to affirm the biological organization and harmony of the world.¹¹⁰

The belief in an infinite number of cosmic cycles led some Stoics to argue for the phenomenon of eternal recurrence.¹¹¹ For many, this was the most embarrassing and ludicrous element of the Stoic conflagration. The most famous summary of this position comes from Origen:

Trying to soften the incongruities somewhat, the Stoics, I know not how, say that everyone in one period will be indiscernible from those in the previous periods: they don't want Socrates to recur but someone indiscernible from Socrates who is to marry someone indiscernible from Xanthippe and be accused by men indiscernible from Anytus and Meletus...Those of them who were embarrassed by the doctrine [of indiscernibility] said that there is a very slight discernibility between one period and the events of its predecessor.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Eusebius, *Evangelical Preparation*, 15.14.2. See also, Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1053B.

¹⁰⁹ Hahn, *Origins*, 193-195.

¹¹⁰ Philo, *The Eternity of the World*, 89.

¹¹¹ Michael J. White, "Stoic Natural Philosophy (Physics and Cosmology)" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. B. Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 141-144, traces the differing Stoic positions with regard to eternal recurrence.

¹¹² Origen, *Against Celsus*, 4.68, 5.20. See also, Marcus Aurelius, 2.14, who adheres to the belief in eternal recurrence: "...everything everlastingly is of the same kind and cyclically recurrent, and it makes no difference whether one should see the same things for a hundred years or for two hundred or for an infinite time."

Not only will every person live again in the next cosmic cycle, every event will occur in exactly the same way. This is perhaps the epitome of Stoic determinism; the dissolution of the cosmos into fire, its generative part, can only yield a new cosmos that is exactly the same. That is to say, fire (God) has a limited economy of possibilities in the Stoic worldview. The finitude of the physical world can only take a certain shape in accordance with the inherent “capacity” of the first principles. Nevertheless, we have no extant proofs for the Stoic doctrine of eternal recurrence, merely assertions about its possibility.¹¹³

But how did the Stoics actually feel about the fiery destruction of the universe? Was it considered a welcome rejuvenation of the world or a terrifying bloody event? How did they understand it theologically, given their benevolent and provident deity? Two passages from Seneca are useful in discussing this issue. Seneca explains the life of a wise man abandoned by his friends by comparing him to God during the period between cosmic cycles:

It will be like the life of Zeus, at the time when the world is dissolved and the gods have been blended together into one, when nature comes to a stop for a while; he reposes in himself given over to his thoughts. The wise man’s behavior is just like this: he retires into himself, and is with himself.¹¹⁴

If we take this comparison seriously, we can make two theologically inferences: 1) Just as the wise man is better off when he is with friends, so God is in his “more natural” state when he suffuses all the substance of the cosmos. 2) Nevertheless, God requires an “alone time” or “time out” to get his thoughts together so to speak—a kind of retirement period for the deity to be in his pure and fiery state. In all of this, it seems that God

¹¹³ *SVF* 2.623-625.

¹¹⁴ Seneca, *Epistles*, 9.16.

maintains his overall goodness, wisdom, and providence. Moreover, there is a trust that God will recreate the entire universe in a predictable manner with desirable results.

Another passage from Seneca offers a description of the conflagration from the perspective of humanity.¹¹⁵ In this account we read an almost contemporary projection of a final apocalyptic scenario: rivers and mountains are destroyed, nations and people become disassociated, a final flood “will kill every living creature, and in huge conflagration it will scorch and burn all mortal things.” However, Seneca quickly follows this portent with the assertion that the world is “blotted out in order that it may begin its life anew.” After the celestial bodies have been burned completely, Seneca concludes that, “the souls of the blest, who have partaken of immortality, when it shall seem best to God to create the universe, shall be added as a tiny fraction to this mighty destruction, and shall be changed again into our former elements.” Therefore, at least in Seneca, we see a picture of the calamitous destruction of the universe, but one that is construed positively—as rejuvenation.

Much is at stake for Stoic religiosity and theology in the doctrine of the conflagration: “the attitude of the early Stoics toward the supreme creator and ruler of the universe is not purely rational, but also emotional. This makes the part played by God in the destruction of the universe a rather sensitive issue.”¹¹⁶ This is a problem of theodicy (a problem at the core of 2 Peter). However, in Stoic fashion, we must approach the problem from the angle of physics.

¹¹⁵ Seneca, *To Marcia on Consolation*, 26.6-7.

¹¹⁶ J. Mansfeld, “Providence and the Destruction of the Universe in Early Stoic Thought,” in *Studies in Hellenistic Religions*, ed. M.J. Vermaseren (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 136.

The matter in question has to do with the distinction between creative and destructive fire: how strict was this dichotomy? Mansfeld argues, against Lapidge, that the Stoics understood the fire of the sun to be destructive in the sense that it consumed all other celestial bodies before Zeus consumed the whole.¹¹⁷ This blurs the distinction between creative and destructive fire used by the Stoics to uphold the traditional Greek four-element schema. Mansfeld concludes that the Stoic fire slowly changes from wholly “craftsmanlike” at the beginning of the cosmic cycle to dominantly destructive at the end.¹¹⁸ In this sense, the Stoic universe is slowly burning itself into destruction; the fire that suffuses all matter, providing growth and movement, uses that same matter as fuel. Fire is associated with the rational and benevolent God, and it is this same fire that brings about the entire dissolution of the cosmos. As the material of the cosmos burns up, God is returning to his “pure” and fiery form.

3. Conflagration in 2 Peter

We are now in a position to consider the conflagration prediction in 2 Peter 3 under the lens of Stoicism. A close reading of this passage will allow us to recognize where and when 2 Peter echoes Stoic thought or diverges from it. The conflagration is

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 148-155. Mansfeld cites a fragment attributed to Zeno from the 3rd Century C.E. by Alexander of Lycopolis: “The universe will be totally destroyed. Everything which burns [something], having [what] it burns, shall burn up the whole of it.” See also, Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions*, 1075B: Chrysippus and Cleanthes have “filled full of gods heaven, earth, air, and sea, have held that none of all these many is indestructible or everlasting except Zeus alone, in whom they consume all the rest. The result is that he too has the attribute of destruction, which is not more fitting than that of being destroyed, for some weakness is the reason both why what changes into a different thing is destroyed and why that is preserved which is nourished on the destruction of others that it absorbs.”

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 156.

introduced by referring to cosmogony: “...that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water by means of water” (ὅτι οὐρανοὶ ἦσαν ἔκπαλαι καὶ γῆ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ δι’ ὕδατος συνεστῶσα τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγῳ) (3.5). The Stoic cosmogony had a similar understanding: the element earth comes about from the condensation of water.¹¹⁹ Interestingly, the verb συνίστημι (to hold together) evokes the insistence upon coherence in Stoic physics. Earth, the center of the cosmos, is held together because of its relation to water; God is behind this process by means of his divine reason (τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγῳ). Unlike fire and air that sustain themselves, the elements of earth and water need to be “held together” in Stoic cosmology.¹²⁰ If 2 Peter perceives an Epicurean opposition, as Neyrey has suggested, then it seems quite fitting that he would argue for the physical coherence of the earth. Epicurean atomism displaced God’s providence by imagining a chaotic physical world. 2 Peter, working in the Stoic cosmological framework, argues for providence by appropriating a system in which everything is coherent body, guided and held together by a pervasive divine λόγος.¹²¹

To be sure, 2 Peter offers only a brief glimpse of Stoic physics. In 3.5 he does not appropriate the exact terminology used in the philosophical descriptions of Stoic cosmology. Rather than 2 Peter’s συνίστημι, the verb συνέχω is typically employed to describe the Stoic notion of sustaining or “holding together.”¹²² Moreover, 2 Peter suggests that the agent of this “holding together” is τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγῳ. The normative

¹¹⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.142.

¹²⁰ *SVF* 2.439.

¹²¹ Contra Starr, *Sharers in Divine Nature*, 149, who argues, “The Stoic belief that λόγος characterizes the nature of the cosmos and permeates the world is nowhere reflected in 2 Peter’s thought. This Stoic identification of God with reason that permeates the world is similarly lacking; 2 Peter’s God transcends the world.”

¹²² Hahn, *Origins*, 165-167. *SVF* 2.413 uses συνίστημι in the same sense as 2 Peter when describing the four elements.

agent of συνέχω is πνεῦμα (i.e. fiery breath), often related to the notion of tension (τόνος).¹²³ However, this discrepancy in terminology does not detract from the logic and argument being presented in 2 Peter 3.5: divine reason, a sort of all-purpose idea in Stoicism, holds the elements together in a purposeful and providential manner. The general framework of Stoic physics enables this argument.

2 Peter continues, “through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished” (δι’ ὧν ὁ τότε κόσμος ὕδατι κατακλυσθεὶς ἀπώλετο) (3.6.). The agent is here again τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγῳ. The context has consistently been understood as one of judgment: the scoffers who deny the “promise of his coming” (2.3-4) will be judged and destroyed just as Noah’s generation perished in the flood. This is a possible interpretation, especially given the previous reference to Noah and the flood in 2.5. Nevertheless, given the similarity of 3.5 to Stoic physics and cosmogony, we might pursue a different reading of 3.6.

In one sense, 3.6 is the inverse of 3.5: the earth came into being through water and the world was destroyed by water. The terminology, however, is not congruent. 3.5 expresses the change and nature of the elements γῆ and ὕδατος; 3.6 argues for the dissolution of the κόσμος by flooding. In Seneca’s version of the conflagration we saw that floods could be part of the destruction of the world.¹²⁴ However, 2 Peter 3.6 does not seem to suggest that the deluge was part of a previous cosmic cycle. In this sense, 2 Peter does not express the Stoic idea of eternal recurrence. It is possible to take 3.6 as an allusion to the great flood of Genesis 7.11, but the text is by no means explicit. Significantly, τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγῳ remains the agent in vv. 5 and 6. Though 2 Peter is not

¹²³ Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions*, 1085C-D.

¹²⁴ See note 22.

acting outwardly Stoic in 3.6, it is interesting that he understands τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγῳ as that which a) holds the earth and water together and b) causes the destruction of the cosmos.

It is both “craftsmanlike” and destructive.

2 Peter 3.7 begins by making this very connection, and we see a continued broadening of terms:

οἱ δὲ νῦν οὐρανοὶ καὶ ἡ γῆ τῷ αὐτῷ λόγῳ τεθησαυρισμένοι εἰσὶν πυρὶ τηρούμενοι εἰς ἡμέραν κρίσεως καὶ ἀπωλείας τῶν ἀσεβῶν ἀνθρώπων.

But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless.

3.7b further establishes the notion that God will judge the wicked. 2 Peter will bolster this claim in 3.9 by arguing that, against the Epicurean challenge to providence, God is not slow to judge.

Fundamentally, this claim is made possible by the physical reality presented in 3.7a: the heavens and earth “have been reserved for fire” by the same λόγος of the previous two verses. The phrase οἱ δὲ νῦν οὐρανοὶ καὶ ἡ γῆ seems to be an elaborate way of saying “everything” or “κοσμος”, but is nevertheless ambiguous.¹²⁵ This certainly fits with the fragment from Alexander of Lycopolis which suggests that everything is subject to the conflagration.¹²⁶ The phrase τεθησαυρισμένοι εἰσὶν πυρὶ τηρούμενοι is interesting when contrasted with Stoic descriptions of the conflagration. Generally, the Stoics do not use τηρέω when illustrating the relationship between fire and the cosmos in the conflagration. Fire is considered a constituent part of the world and is often associated with the generative and creative πνεῦμα. That is to say, fire is always an active force in

¹²⁵ Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude*, 242-243.

¹²⁶ See note 25. The fragment from Alexander of Lycopolis does not appear in the *SVF*; it is included in Long & Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 276.

Stoic physics. 2 Peter's use of *τηρέω* is ambiguous because it implies that fire will begin its destructive action only at a given time—the heavens and earth are kept intact until the appointed moment.

Perhaps this fits into the framework proposed by Mansfeld (fire changes from creative to destructive over the course of the cosmological cycle). The Stoics do not formulate their discussion this way, but the logic of 2 Peter's use of *τηρέω* is plausible, if not congruent with the Stoic worldview. Because 2 Peter frames the conflagration as an occasion for judgment, he stresses the singularity of the event. That is to say, the suggestion that cosmos is “reserved for fire” creates an atmosphere of suspense; this destruction and judgment is inevitable—only a matter of time. God's perceived delay in judgment is actually built into the physical reality of the world. Against the Epicurean denial of providence, 2 Peter believes that God controls the events of the physical world; this physical world will eventually serve to destroy those who are not living in accordance with the *λόγος* of God.

I want to suggest that 2 Peter is operating in two paradigms (neither of which is necessarily free from the other). In the Noachian typology of judgment proposed in 2 Peter 2:5, the destruction of the earth by flood is understood as momentous—a specific occasion.¹²⁷ In 3.7a this is only part of the assertion. We see an appropriation of Stoic cosmological thought in the proposition that the heavens and earth will inevitably become fire; fire will consume all things and that same fire has the ability to sustain itself in the period between cosmic cycles. Due to the physical makeup of things, fire (another way

¹²⁷ It is interesting here that 2 Peter does not follow the chronology of allusions used in Jude 7-14. The reference to Noah and the flood is not derived from Jude. Given the brevity of the allusion 2.5, the degree to which 2 Peter is familiar with Genesis 7 is unclear.

of saying God in Stoicism) is slowly destroying the cosmos. At the same time, 2 Peter suggests that this will result in a final cataclysmic judgment. The cosmos is being maintained for the final judgment and destruction of the godless. Thus, we cannot be sure whether 2 Peter intended one paradigm or the other; the text is not confined to either. My treatment suggests that, given the pervasiveness of Stoic cosmology, readers could have understood 2 Peter's assertions in 3.5-7 in one, the other, or both. If we contend that 2 Peter 3.5-7 operates in the framework of the Stoic physical world, the theological assertions of the letter take on a different shade. The God of the Stoics is identified as the active principle and the determiner of things. What is provocative in 2 Peter is the suggestion that the destruction of the cosmos, a physical inevitability, will nevertheless be a means for the judgment and punishment of those who have gone astray.

Earlier we considered 2 Peter 3.10 with regard to a central textual problem. Let us now examine its content under the lens of Stoic cosmology. The verse opens by assuring that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief" in spite of the Epicurean argument that God is slow to judgment (2.9). This continues the kind of eschatological suspense introduced implicitly in 3.5-7: the coming of the Lord will be sudden, extraordinary, and surprising for those not properly prepared. But, in keeping with the Stoic notion that the conflagration of the cosmos is a gradual physical process, 2 Peter suggests the manner in which everything will be destroyed. First, the future passive of *παρέρχομαι* ("pass away" or "disappear") is combined with an adverb unique in the New Testament, *ροιζηδόν* ("with a rushing noise"),¹²⁸ to describe the destruction of the heavens. Interestingly, nothing about this aspect of destruction has to do with fire, despite

¹²⁸ BDAG, 907.

the suggestion in 3.7a that the heavens are reserved for fire. The implication is possibly that the heavens (celestial bodies included) have dissolved into their constituent parts or elements.

This necessitates a further description of the destruction of the στοιχεῖα, an issue of contention in Stoic cosmology. We saw in Seneca's conflagration narrative the suggestion that heavenly bodies would be burned up before converting back into their elemental makeup. As we have seen, the elements are the constituent parts that make up the cosmos and everything in it. The Stoics held that these could convert into one another. According to Chrysippus, the "whole world and its contents" dissolve (διαλύω) into the elements at the time the world is destroyed; the process occurs as earth is converted into water, water into air, and finally air into fire.¹²⁹ Fire consumes all the others, presumably because it can use them as fuel. Moreover, Chrysippus suggests that the στοιχεῖα can simply refer to fire, "because out of it the remaining elements are composed by alteration and into it they get their resolution."¹³⁰ 2 Peter is clearly following the same pattern in 3.10: the heavens pass away, before the elements can be destroyed by burning.

2 Peter 3.12b repeats the proposal of 3.10, but does so in strikingly different language:

...τὴν παρουσίαν τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμέρας δι' ἣν οὐρανοὶ πυρούμενοι λυθήσονται καὶ στοιχεῖα καυσούμενα τήκεται.

...the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire?

¹²⁹ *SVF* 2.413.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

2 Peter repeats that God's presence results in destruction by fire. Unlike 2 Peter 3.10, 3.12 uses the preposition *διὰ* to connect the day of God's presence to the fiery destruction of the world. Earlier the heavens were said to "pass away with a loud noise," but in this case fire is the agent (*πυρούμενοι λυθήσονται*). With regard to the elements, 2 Peter uses the same form of *καυσούμενα* in 3.12 but pairs it with the passive form *τήκομαι* (dissolve, be melted) instead of *λύω*. Interestingly, Philo uses *τήκομαι* in a discussion of the conflagration to describe the conversion of earth into water, but does not relate the idea directly to burning (*καυσόομαι*).¹³¹ Plato uses *τήκομαι* to describe the processes involved in the rotting flesh of a corpse and the conversion of flesh into blood.¹³² This shade of meaning may be significant in the biological nature of the Stoic cosmos. Given the parallelism between 3.10 and 3.12 it seems that *τήκομαι* is a way of specifying the sense of the verb *λύω* (in 2 Peter's grandiose style).

In both cases, 2 Peter does not include the terminology typically used to discuss the Stoic conflagration—*ἐκπύρωσις* or its verbal form. I am inclined to read the textual variant *κατακαήσεται* and bear in mind that this is a synonym of *ἐκπύρωσις*. Perhaps the writer is aware of its pagan connotations or its illogicality. The dubious nature of the Stoic doctrine of the conflagration led many in the early church to shy away from the term.

However, it is interesting that 2 Peter does not target any specific recipients of God's destructive powers. In fact God is never the subject of the verbs of burning, destroying, or melting; they are all passive forms. We might interpret this in two ways. 1) 2 Peter may be nervous about attributing the entire destruction of the cosmos to God.

¹³¹ Philo, *On the Eternity of the World*, 110.

¹³² Plato, *Timaeus*, 83A, 85D.

This was the very reason some later Stoics such as Boethus abandoned the Stoic doctrine of the conflagration.¹³³ 2) Accordingly, 2 Peter may be casting the destruction in primarily physical terms as a way of alleviating this theological concern. He upholds the notion of Parousia, in accordance with the Christian tradition before him (especially Paul), but perceives an Epicurean polemic that would scoff at a deity that destroys his own creation. 2 Peter aims to maintain his providential and just God while showing how the world comes to an end. His answer lay in Stoicism and its physical world that slowly consumes itself by fire.

Though 2 Peter conflicts with some of the traits of Stoic physics, he is operating within its ideology: bodies convert into their elements and are destroyed by fire. In appropriating this system, the letter of 2 Peter struggles to be completely coherent. Several thematic elements of 2 Peter 3 diverge from the Stoic doctrine of the conflagration. Most poignantly, there seems to be no suggestion of the Stoic idea of eternal recurrence. 2 Peter claims that after the fiery destruction, the new heavens and new earth will be a place “where righteousness is at home” (ἐν οἷς δικαιοσύνη κατοικεῖ) (3.13b). Commentators suggest that 2 Peter’s “new heavens and new earth” is derived from Isaiah 65.17 and 66.22 and note that the renewal of creation is a significant theme in 2nd Temple Jewish apocalyptic literature.¹³⁴ This is a likely context for interpreting 2 Peter’s remarks in 3.13, but we should bear in mind that the Stoics believed in the re-creation and renewal of the cosmos after its dissolution. The earlier comment from Plutarch implies that the conflagration purged the cosmos of any evil, allowing the new

¹³³ Philo, *On the Eternity of the World*, 76-77.

¹³⁴ Davids, *2 Peter*, 291-93. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 326. Harrington, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 294-295.

creation to be good (τὸ δὲ ὅλον φρόνιμὸν ἔστι τηνικαῦτα καὶ σοφόν).¹³⁵ Though 3.13 does not exclude Stoic cosmogony and the notion of everlasting recurrence, it is unclear whether 2 Peter is here working within the framework of Stoicism. I see this as an instance in which the text of 2 Peter departs slightly from Stoic cosmology, perhaps because everlasting recurrence was a controversial (and embarrassing) topic in later Stoicism.¹³⁶ The Stoics were not explicit about the re-creation because it was not a rational necessity of their cosmological system.

I have suggested that 2 Peter utilizes Stoic cosmological thought in order to uphold God's providence and refute his Epicurean opposition. Let us now consider the relationship between 2 Peter's eschatological worldview and the central theme of the letter: proper ethical behavior.

¹³⁵ See note 13. Rieser, "Der zweite Petrus-Brief und die Eschatologie," 140, argues, "Wie immer man den hellenistischen Einfluß bei der Aufnahme der Ekpyrosis-Vorstellung im Zweiten Petrus-Brief einschätzen mag, es gibt auf alle Fälle einen entscheidenden Unterschied zu den Lehren der Stoa: Die Stoiker erwarteten eine restituierte Welt, also einen νεὸς κόσμος, der zweite Petrus-Brief aber eine völlige Neuschöpfung, einen καινὸς οὐρανὸς καὶ γῆ καινὴ (3.13)." Thiede, "Pagan Reader of 2 Peter", 79, echoes this argument. This interpretation implies that there existed an orthodox position in Stoic cosmology and cosmogony. Second, Thiede does not cite any Stoic material to illustrate the "vital contrast" between Stoic cosmogony and 2 Peter. The Stoic cosmological cycle had several connotations, not least of which was a biological characterization of creation. See Hahm, *Origins*, 193-195.

¹³⁶ Thiede, "Pagan Reader of 2 Peter," outlines the positive and negative interpretations of the conflagration by the early church fathers.

CHAPTER 4

PURITY AND ETHICS IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

1. Ethics and the Conflagration

Charles has shown the affinities between 2 Peter 1.5-7 and pagan ethical catalogs, particularly those of the Stoics: “Both assume the individual to be rational and morally self-responsible. Both teach a doctrine of moral progress, even when the pagan understanding of this progress is void of grace. The language and logic of virtue in Stoic thinking come to expression in the ethical catalog as a teaching device.”¹³⁷ The ethical list in 1.5-7 functions paraenetically and governs the literary strategy of letter: to remind the community about the necessity of proper moral behavior. Therefore, the overarching moral concern of the letter calls into question the common “early catholic” interpretation that 2 Peter is dealing with a fading hope in the Parousia. Instead, argues Charles, the issue at hand in 2 Peter 3 is the “ultimate moral accountability” of the community, and the inevitable fact of the Parousia is being stressed, not the timing of such an event.¹³⁸

Our consideration of Stoic physics and the conflagration bolsters this argument. 2 Peter 3 employs language that alludes to a system in which the material world will inevitably be destroyed by fire because of its physical makeup. To be sure, 2 Peter departs from the Stoic cosmological and theological framework in significant ways by a)

¹³⁷ Charles, *Virtue Amidst Vice*, 156.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

stressing God’s judgment of immoral behavior (3.7), and b) suggesting that the community “hasten” (σπεύδω) the coming destruction (3.12). In this sense, the problem of 2 Peter is the relationship between ethics and theodicy; moral disruption occasions a discussion of the Parousia and God’s ability to judge. As Charles suggests, the issue 2 Peter 3 aims to resolve is “the relationship of *moral* man to matter.”¹³⁹ In doing so, 2 Peter reveals a shade of ambivalence. The destruction of the cosmos and divine judgment are inevitable, but what will happen to those who live a moral life? 2 Peter urges, “...since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (3.17-18a). The individual possesses the moral agency required for living the Christian life. Through the knowledge of Christ, the fate of the human being and the benefit of living the moral life are presupposed: 2 Peter concludes with an exhortation for ethical living given the physical reality of the Parousia. In light of this tension between ethics and eschatology, I propose that we also consider 2 Peter 3 in relation to another concern of the letter: pollution and purity.

2. Miasma in the Community

2 Peter depicts his perceived opposition under the cultural category of pollution (it is the only document in the New Testament to use the technical word for pollution in the Hellenistic world, μίασμα). In 2.10 the opponents are described as “those who follow the polluting desires of the flesh” (τοὺς ὀπίσω σαρκὸς ἐν ἐπιθυμίᾳ μiasμοῦ πορευομένους).¹⁴⁰ This assessment follows the series of narrative allusions that illustrate God’s ability to

¹³⁹ Ibid., 93.

¹⁴⁰ Translation from Neyrey, *2 Peter*, 195.

judge, and 2 Peter believes that these unrighteous ones will be kept “under punishment until the day of judgment” (ἀδίκους δὲ εἰς ἡμέραν κρίσεως κολαζομένους τηρεῖν) (2.9b). 2 Peter 2 offers a harsh portrayal of the unethical behavior of these opponents, and the pollution implied in 2.10 has to do with improper sexual conduct. This helps to qualify the sense of ἐπιθυμία as it relates to the knowledge of Christ: 2 Peter envisages a community that escapes the cosmos corrupted by desire in order to become sharers in divine nature (1.4). The foremost corruption in 2 Peter’s worldview is improper sexual ethics, construed as a polluting entity.¹⁴¹ Sexually immoral individuals are understood as pollutants, and are therefore dangerous to the community: “They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation while they feast with you” (σπίλοι καὶ μῶμοι ἐντροφῶντες ἐν ταῖς ἀπάταις αὐτῶν συνευχόμενοι ὑμῖν) (2.13b). Though pollution can be understood metaphorically, it should also be considered an imminent physical reality in the ancient imagination.¹⁴² The notion of pollution in early Greek religion is often related to ritual purity. An individual in contact with a corpse was understood as dangerous and contagious, and was not allowed to enter a temple.¹⁴³ 2 Peter operates in a worldview in which pollution could be a physical reality for the individual. For 2 Peter the unethical behavior is a pollutant that is hazardous, contagious, and requires separation from the community.

¹⁴¹ For a Stoic description of ἐπιθυμία, see Arius Didymus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 10b.

¹⁴² Ruth Padel, *In and Out of Mind*, 9-11, discusses the physicality of the Greek world which moderns often understand as metaphorical.

¹⁴³ Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 5. See 5-13 for a general discussion of the word μίασμα and the vocabulary of purity and pollution.

In 2.18 we see a further exposition of those who participate in the “desires of the flesh.” These figures “entice people who have just escaped from those who live in error.” Here 2 Peter suggests that individuals are drawn away from the knowledge of Christ in the “desires of the flesh.” Improper sexual behavior endangers the community in a manner that is physically threatening. From 2.18 we might suggest that 2 Peter uses the notion of sexual pollution metaphorically: “the desires of flesh” do not actually make the individual “dirty,” but instead corrode the barrier between insider and outsider of those who have the “knowledge of Christ.” However, Padel’s contention upon the physical reality of the Greek world suggests otherwise. We understand 2 Peter as metaphorical, but “desires of the flesh” as pollution suggests that the community must be once again purified in some way. To read the text metaphorically does not place the same necessity upon the return to a purified state. Because the purity of the community has been compromised, 2 Peter must propose a method for its cleansing. We will see that this purification occurs on the cosmic level in 2 Peter’s thought.

Following his assessment of sexual pollution in the community, 2 Peter appropriates the language of pollution on the cosmological scale. In 2.20, he develops the theological and ethical reality proposed by 1.4 (escaping a corrupt cosmos), but this time describes the reversion of the opponents: “For if, having once escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered by them, their final state has become worse than the first.”¹⁴⁴ Knowledge of Christ allows the individual to escape a polluted cosmos; a return to the polluted state is always an imminent and dangerous possibility. 2.20 may refer to

¹⁴⁴ Translation from Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 271.

1.9b: “the cleansing of past sins” (τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ τῶν πάλαι αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτιῶν). καθαρισμός denotes the process or force that counteracts the perilous nature of μίασμα. 1.9b could refer to baptism (a lustral form of purification), and likely points to the conversion or initiation of the individual into the community. A number of scholars have noted 2 Peter’s use of the vocabulary of mystery cults. We noted earlier that 2 Peter 1.9 refers to the members of the community as those who have been purified (καθαρισμός) of their past sins. Ritual cleansing as a means of purification was common practice for initiates of mystery religions.¹⁴⁵ Soon after, 2 Peter 1.16-18 includes a brief account of the Transfiguration in the vein of the synoptic tradition. 2 Peter labels the audience of apostles who viewed this event as ἐπόπται (eyewitnesses). This is the technical term for the highest initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries who saw Persephone reveal herself.¹⁴⁶

2 Peter’s use of the pollution/purification vocabulary is significant for the entire argument of the letter. First, 2 Peter can use pollution language to designate behavior that jeopardizes the stability of the community. However, he does not specify a group of individuals (perhaps they are the same individuals who advance the Epicurean argument against providence), and thereby the letter maintains a strong degree of ambiguity. As a result, 2 Peter makes a connection between an immoral opposition (their ethics and opinions) and the pollution of the cosmos on the macro-level. He employs the language of pollution and purification to speak about the cosmological reality of those initiated into the Christian community. When one has the “knowledge of Christ”—a result of

¹⁴⁵ Luther Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 61-62, and Parker, *Miasma*, 283-286.

¹⁴⁶ Fornberg, *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society*, 123. Charles, *Virtue Amidst Vice*, 84. See also, Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 62-72.

purification (1.9)—the individual is thought to be safe from *μίασμα* in the cosmos, so long as proper ethical conduct is upheld.

3. Purification of the Cosmos

It is expected that some means of purification occur when pollution is present. As we have seen, 2 Peter has a heightened awareness of the organizing categories of pure and polluted.¹⁴⁷ In his worldview things have their proper places, and he construes immoral individuals as pollutants who are at once outside the community and simultaneously a danger to it. In earlier Greek culture there was a need for purification after the invasion of a community and this was typically done using fire. Parker writes that purification by fire

...was the most potent renewal a Greek community could undergo, since, lodged in the individual hearths of houses and the collective hearth of the city, fire was the symbolic middle point around which the life of the group revolved...the Messenians, it is said, once expelled all Epicurean philosophers, and then purified the shrines and the entire state.¹⁴⁸

Thus, fire could be used for large-scale purification as a way of revitalizing and uniting a community after some foreign presence had defiled its localities and persons.

Therefore, we should ask how 2 Peter understands the notion of purification. He speaks of conversion by purification in 1.9, but suggests in 2.20 that those who are polluted cannot undergo a new purification through the knowledge of Christ. 2 Peter does not speak about the redemption or repentance of the unrighteous opponents. Despite his insistence upon the knowledge of Christ and ethical conduct for “sharing in divine

¹⁴⁷ See Neyrey, *2 Peter*, 136-137, for an outline of 2 Peter’s classifications of pure and polluted.

¹⁴⁸ Parker, *Miasma*, 23.

nature”, 2 Peter offers no means for the re-purification of the polluted. He will quote an ancient proverb to illustrate this: “the sow is washed only to wallow in the mud”

(2.22).¹⁴⁹ Herein lies the core problem of 2 Peter’s framework of ethics and purity: if one strays and participates in impure behavior, one can never be restored to the original purified state. 2 Peter’s solution is eschatological: a final expansive purification by fire.

A fragment from Hippolytus attributed to Zeno and Chrysippus suggests that the Stoic conflagration was understood as the purification of the entire cosmos:

προσδέχονται δὲ ἐκπύρωσιν ἕσσεθαι καὶ κάθαρσιν τοῦ κόσμου τούτου οἱ μὲν παντός, οἱ δὲ μέρους. καὶ κατὰ μέρος δὲ αὐτὸν καθαίρεσθαι λέγουσιν. καὶ σχεδὸν τὴν φθορὰν καὶ τὴν ἐτέρου ἔξ αὐτῆς γένεσιν κάθαρσιν ὀνομάζουσιν.¹⁵⁰

The language here is striking. The conflagration is “welcomed” (προσδέχονται) because it will be a purification (κάθαρσις) of the cosmos and all its parts; corruption (τὴν φθορὰν) will also be eradicated by the conflagration. Though we have no intricate physical explanation for how this purification takes place, it is significant that the final destruction of the cosmos is not characterized pejoratively. Because the entire universe resolves into pure fire (associated with God), the entire process was understood as κάθαρσις; and it is from this pure fire that the world is created.¹⁵¹ Plutarch offers a Stoic explanation of the positive results conflagration, albeit without the language of purification: “Whenever they subject the world to conflagration, no evil at all remains, but the whole is then prudent and wise.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ See Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 279-280, for a discussion of the background of this saying.

¹⁵⁰ *SVF* 2.598. Jaap Mansfeld, “Resurrection Added: The *Interpretatio Christiana* of a Stoic Doctrine,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 37.3 (1983), 218-221, suggests that this passage shows influence of Christian eschatology which associated the conflagration with purification.

¹⁵¹ Lapidge, “Stoic Cosmology,” 179-180.

¹⁵² Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions*, 1075D.

The Stoic doctrine of the conflagration put positively provides the language of purification for 2 Peter. He continues the Christian eschatological trend of the coming day of God, but in employing Stoic cosmology, strikes a new chord. To be sure, judgment for unethical behavior is one strand of 2 Peter's thought regarding the destruction of the cosmos (3.7). However, such a judgment is couched in physical terms: "heavens and earth have been reserved for fire." The destruction of the universe as purification helps us to make sense of the whole of 2 Peter: a massive purification is the only means of dealing with pollution and corruption of the cosmos (1.4, 2.20). Parker suggested that the city or community could purify itself by fire. However, the reality of 2 Peter and his community is likely one of minority in which such an action could not be undertaken. In the decentralized milieu of the Hellenistic world, 2 Peter employs purification on a large scale with the help of Stoic cosmological thought. He moves from micro to macro—from the vein of the Eleusinian mysteries to the realm of physics and providence (i.e. from particular to universal)—all the while focused on ethical behavior as the normative factor for his version of the Gospel. Purification will occur when all bodies are dissolved into their elements and the entirety is consumed by fire. Starr contends that, "the final conflagration in 2 Peter is not God's reabsorption of himself, but a 'day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men' (3.7)."¹⁵³ This reading is appropriate: nothing in 2 Peter suggests that God will consume the entire cosmos as some Stoics believed. However, as I suggested earlier, the use of Stoic language and ideas, even in part, shifts how the texts makes meaning. The dissolution of elements into fire in the "coming of the day of God" fashions a unique brand of Parousia in the New

¹⁵³ Starr, *Sharers in Divine Nature*, 156.

Testament: God's full presence results in the fiery purification of everything. The pollution envisaged by 2 Peter is eradicated.

4. Conclusion

I have attempted to show how the Stoic concept of ἐκπύρωσις functions within the letter of 2 Peter itself. Thiede and Mansfeld have offered helpful discussions of the various interpretations of 2 Peter 3 and the Stoic conflagration among the church fathers.¹⁵⁴ However, neither of these readings shows concern for the logic and literary strategy of 2 Peter. As Charles has argued, I contend that 2 Peter's fundamental concern is the individual moral responsibility of those who have been initiated into the knowledge of Christ. In addition, 2 Peter argues for God's providence and ability to judge those who participate in immoral conduct. In an interesting move, 2 Peter construes this unethical behavior ("desires of the flesh") as pollution (μιάσμα).

The ἐκπύρωσις-concept offers 2 Peter the language and ideas to address these concerns. The Stoic conflagration is inevitable because of the physical makeup of the cosmos; 2 Peter describes the dissolution of the cosmos and the elements into fire. This cosmological reality refutes the opinions of those who scoff at the destruction of world and God's judgment (3.3-4). By using explicitly physical language 2 Peter assures his audience about the ineluctable obliteration of everything. 2 Peter uses Stoic materialism rhetorically: eschatology is no longer a matter of correct opinion or doctrine, but is actually built into the world. The perceived Epicurean polemic and its chaotic atomism

¹⁵⁴ Thiede, "Pagan Reader of 2 Peter," 83-91. Mansfeld, "Resurrection Added," 218-233.

are repudiated; God's providence is affirmed. 2 Peter concludes that such an eschatological reality requires proper ethical behavior (3.11-18).

I have also suggested that the Stoic ἐκπύρωσις resolves the issue of pollution in the community. The individual is purified of sins upon entrance into the Christian community (1.9). Some have gone astray by participating in the "desires of the flesh" and threaten the community as pollutants. The fiery destruction of the cosmos brings the community (and everything else) back into a state of purity. Immorality cast under the rubric of pollution requires some form of purification. With the help of Stoicism, 2 Peter envisions this cleansing on a massive scale.

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