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Apocalyptic rhetoric and social context: A socio-rhetorical analysis of 2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter

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Abstract

Apocalyptic rhetoric and social context: A socio-rhetorical analysis of 2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter

This article examines how apocalyptic rhetoric in the Second Epistle of Peter (2 Peter) and the Apocalypse of Peter is mobilized to address crises in early Christian communities. Reading both texts through socio-rhetorical criticism, it traces how ethos, logos, and pathos serve legitimation, boundary-drawing, identity formation, and norm enforcement. In 2 Peter, the delayed Parousia is interpreted as divine patience: this move defends apostolic tradition, delegitimizes rival teachers, and disciplines communal time by framing “waiting” as an ethical practice. In the Apocalypse of Peter, visionary depictions of punishment and reward console the suffering and deter accommodation, while the motif of intercession for the damned complicates retributive imagination with mercy. The comparison argues that Petrine apocalyptic discourse functions as practical theology. It stabilizes communities in crisis by shaping authority, collective memory, communal affect, and moral imagination.

Keywords: 2 Peter, Apocalypse of Peter, socio-rhetorical criticism, apocalyptic rhetoric

Abstrakt

Retoryka apokaliptyczna i kontekst społeczny: analiza socjoretoryczna 2. Listu Piotra i Apokalipsy Piotra

Artykuł bada społeczną funkcję retoryki apokaliptycznej w 2 Liście Piotra oraz w Apokalipsie Piotra w kontekście kryzysów wspólnotowych. W perspektywie socjoretorycznej analizuje, jak ethos, logos i pathos wspierają legitymizację, wyznaczanie granic, formowanie tożsamości oraz egzekwowanie norm. W 2 P motyw opóźnionej paruzji zostaje przedstawiony jako cierpliwość Boga, zabieg ten broni tradycji apostoelskiej, delegitymizuje konkurencyjne nauczanie i dyscyplinuje „czas wspólnoty”, przekształcając oczekiwanie w praktykę etyczną. Apokalipsa Piotra wykorzystuje wizję sądu jako retorykę pocieszenia i formacji, obietnica zadośćuczynienia umacnia cierpiących, katalog kar odstrasza od kompromisu, a motyw wstawiennictwa za potępionymi wiąże sprawiedliwość z miłosierdziem. Porównanie pokazuje, że apokalipsa „Piotrowa” działa jako teologia praktyczna, stabilizując wspólnotę przez kształtowanie autorytetu, pamięci zbiorowej, emocji i wyobraźni moralnej.

Słowa kluczowe: 2 List Piotra, Apokalipsa Piotra, krytyka socjoretoryczna, retoryka apokaliptyczna

1. Research problem and thesis

The relationship between 2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter has been debated for decades. Much of the discussion has centered on provenance, dating, and possible literary dependence. Recent scholarship has sharpened those debates and has proposed broader constellations of related Petrine apocalyptic traditions (sometimes discussed alongside Sibylline Oracles 2), including proposals that locate both writings in an Alexandrian milieu¹. Yet a functional question is often left implicit: why do these texts mobilize apocalyptic rhetoric, and what social work does it perform in the communities they address?

The point of comparison in this article is not a claim of direct dependence but a shared symbolic repertoire. Both writings speak “in Peter’s name,” recall a mountain revelation of Christ’s glory, and frame final judgment in the idiom of fire. These motifs are not neutral doctrinal data. They operate rhetorically: they authorize certain memories and interpretations, delegitimize others, intensify emotion, and shape practical reasoning about conduct. Apocalyptic discourse here is therefore treated as persuasion through eschatology, oriented toward present problems rather than toward curiosity about the future².

The crises presupposed by the two texts are different. 2 Peter is best read as an intervention into intra-community conflict. The letter depicts influential teachers who challenge apostolic teaching and moral discipline, exploiting skepticism about eschatological fulfillment to weaken communal norms (2 Pet 2:1–3; 3:3–4). The Apocalypse of Peter, by contrast, addresses pressure produced by suffering and hostility (often associated with persecution), while also confronting internal ethical

¹ J. Frey, *Second Peter in new perspective*, in: *2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter: Towards a new perspective*, eds. J. Frey, M. den Dulk, J. G. van der Watt, Leiden–Boston 2019, pp. 7–74; P. Foster, *Does the Apocalypse of Peter help to determine the date of 2 Peter?*, in: *2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter: Towards a new perspective*, eds. J. Frey, M. den Dulk, J. G. van der Watt, Leiden–Boston 2019 pp. 217–260; J. N. Bremmer, *The Apocalypse of Peter, 2 Peter and Sibylline Oracles II: Alexandrian debates?*, in: *The Apocalypse of Peter in context*, eds. D. C. Maier, J. Frey, T. J. Kraus, Leuven–Paris–Bristol, CT 2024, pp. 153–177.

² A. Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, Philadelphia 1984, pp. 15–16, 21–22, 25–27, 125, 138, 145.

compromise in a morally permissive environment. In each case, apocalyptic language does not function as speculative forecast but as a persuasive means of community formation.

The thesis is twofold. First, 2 Peter uses apocalyptic expectation as an authority-legitimizing and norm-enforcing strategy. By constructing a Petrine ethos (as eyewitness, interpreter of prophecy, and dying testator) and by reinterpreting the perceived “delay” of the Parousia as divine patience (3:8–9), the letter defends inherited teaching, delegitimizes rival discourse, and disciplines communal time: believers are taught how to inhabit the interval between promise and fulfillment. Second, the Apocalypse of Peter uses apocalyptic vision as a rhetoric of consolation and moral formation. Its tour of the afterlife consoles the suffering through promised vindication, warns against accommodation through fear of punishment, and complicates the binary of reward and retribution by introducing intercession for the damned, a motif that situates mercy inside judgment.

The contribution of this article is therefore comparative and functional. It clarifies how Petrine apocalyptic discourse operates as applied theology: it manages authority, memory, and emotion in order to sustain communal identity, discipline, and hope. After a brief review of scholarship and method, the analysis examines 2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter in turn, then compares their shared repertoire and divergent crisis-responses.

2. Status quaestionis: Previous research and open questions

Research on 2 Peter has moved beyond the older dominance of authorship debates—already visible in early reception—toward analyses of the letter’s rhetoric of authority and boundary maintenance³. In these readings, “Peter” is a constructed voice that regulates communal memory and limits interpretive pluralism: Peter appears as eyewitness to

3 On early disputes over 2 Peter, see: Euzebiusz z Cezarei, *Historia kościelna. Tekst grecki i polski*, transl. A. Caba based on transl. A. Lisiecki, ed. H. Pietras, Kraków 2013, VI, 25, 8, p. 283; M. Rosik, M. S. Wróbel, H. Langkammer, *Komentarz do Listu św. Jakuba Apostoła, 1–2 Listu św. Piotra Apostoła, 1–3 Listu św. Jana Apostoła, Listu św. Judy i Apokalipsy*, Poznań 2015, pp. 65–78.

Christ's glory (1:16–18), interpreter of prophecy (1:19–21), and final testator (1:14–15). Dvorak's analysis of "plastic words" (2 Pet 2:3) has been influential for describing the letter as a struggle for discursive control, in which rival teachers are delegitimized and apostolic tradition is re-centered as the community's normative story⁴.

The Apocalypse of Peter, widely read in the second and third centuries yet excluded from the canon, has been interpreted as an early Christian "tour of the afterlife" that combines consolation with moral deterrence⁵. Scholarship has emphasized its graphic pedagogy of punishment and reward, its targeting of concrete vices, and the tension between justice and mercy preserved across its textual history⁶. A further debate concerns the relationship between Apoc. Pet. and 2 Peter: proposals range from direct dependence to shared traditions within a Petrine apocalyptic milieu⁷. While these questions remain important, the present study approaches both writings through their rhetorical function in community formation and crisis management.

Against this background, the present article asks what apocalyptic motifs do: how they authorize, exclude, console, warn, and form communal affect in concrete social situations.

4 J. D. Dvorak, *Counterhegemonic strategies in 2 Peter: The more reliable prophetic word versus 'plastic' words*, „Dialogismos” 6 (2022), pp. 58–59.

5 *Fragmentum Muratorianum* (Canon Muratori), in: H. Lietzmann, *Das Muratorische Fragment und die monarchianischen Prologe zu den Evangelien*, Berlin 1933, p. 8; Sozomen, *Historia Kościoła*, VII.19, transl. S. Kazikowski, Warszawa 1989, p. 498.

6 R. J. Bauckham, *The Apocalypse of Peter: An account of research*, „Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt” II.25.6 (1988), pp. 4712–4750; E. J. Beck, *Justice and mercy in the Apocalypse of Peter: A new translation and analysis of the purpose of the text*, Tübingen 2019, pp. 32–52.

7 J. Frey, *Second Peter in new perspective*, in: *2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter: Towards a new perspective*, eds. J. Frey, M. den Dulk, J. G. van der Watt, Leiden–Boston 2019, pp. 7–74.

3. Methodology: Socio-rhetorical reading of Apocalyptic discourse

The article employs socio-rhetorical criticism to connect rhetorical description with social function⁸. Analytically, it traces ethos, logos, and pathos as they serve legitimation, boundary-drawing, norm enforcement, and identity formation in early Christian groups. Apocalyptic motifs are treated as present-oriented persuasive resources: they authorize claims, frame insiders and outsiders, and form communal affect (fear, indignation, hope, compassion) so as to stabilize belief and practice.

The procedure is comparative and text-driven. Each writing is first analyzed as a rhetorical intervention addressed to a specific crisis; comparison then isolates a shared Petrine repertoire and shows how it is adapted to different pressures and genres. Because the argument concerns function, the analysis does not require a prior decision on direct literary dependence; it asks instead how each text uses apocalyptic discourse to shape communal life.

4. 2. Peter: Apocalyptic rhetoric as legitimation and discipline

2 Peter presupposes an internal struggle over teaching and moral direction⁹. Its opponents are described as “false teachers” (2:1) whose message loosens moral constraint, exploits the community for gain, and seduces believers into practices that contradict apostolic instruction (2:3, 13–15). The crisis crystallizes around eschatology: “scoffers” mock the Parousia and normalize the present (“all things continue as they were,” 3:4). Such skepticism is not treated as an abstract philosophical doubt; it is narrated as a social threat. If the promise of judgment can be dismissed, the motivational force of ethical exhortation can be weakened. The letter therefore intervenes rhetorically to defend the credibility of eschatological promise and to reinforce communal norms.

8 V. K. Robbins, *Exploring the texture of texts: A guide to sociorhetorical interpretations*, Valley Forge, PA 1996, pp. 1–7; Robbins V. K., *Sociorhetorical interpretation*, in: *The Blackwell companion to the New Testament*, ed. D. E. Aune, Chichester 2010, pp. 192–195.

9 F. Mickiewicz, *List św. Judy. Drugi list św. Piotra*, (Nowy Komentarz Biblijny, 18), Częstochowa 2018, pp. 269–275; A. C. Thornhill, *2 Peter*, Cambridge 2025, pp. 108–133.

4.1. Ethos: Petrine memory and interpretive authority

The letter's persuasive force begins with ethos. It identifies its speaker as "Simeon Peter" (1:1), invoking the apostolic founder as guarantor of truth. This ethos is strengthened through eyewitness testimony: "we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (1:16–18). The Transfiguration functions as a privileged memory-scene that does more than validate a doctrine; it authorizes a communal narrative about Christ's future coming by anchoring it in a past epiphany of glory. The claim "we did not follow cleverly devised myths" (1:16) is therefore a claim about epistemic legitimacy: the author presents the community's eschatological expectation as grounded in apostolic witness rather than in imaginative speculation.

A second element of ethos is interpretive authority. The "prophetic word" is said to be "more fully confirmed" (1:19), and prophecy is protected from being a matter of "one's own interpretation" (1:20–21). Socio-rhetorically, this is boundary work: the community's access to Scripture is mediated through apostolic tradition rather than through competing teachers who tailor interpretation to desire. Dvorak's reading of the contrast between apostolic truth and opponents' "plastic words" (2:3) captures the letter's hermeneutical politics: it presents deviant interpretation as morally driven manipulation, while presenting apostolic interpretation as faithful transmission¹⁰.

A third element of ethos is the letter's appropriation of other authoritative voices. The reference to Paul's letters (3:15–16) functions not only as a gesture of unity but as an extension of interpretive policing: the author aligns the Petrine voice with Pauline authority while depicting misreaders as "ignorant and unstable." The implied logic is that doctrinal deviation is sustained by hermeneutical distortion, and that apostolic authority includes the right to name which readings are faithful and which readings are destructive. In this way, ethos is constructed as a network of authoritative memories—Peter, prophecy, and Paul—mobilized to stabilize a contested community.

Finally, the letter adopts a testamentary posture. Peter speaks as one whose death is imminent (1:14–15) and explicitly aims to secure

¹⁰ J. D. Dvorak, *Counterhegemonic strategies in 2 Peter: The more reliable prophetic word versus 'plastic' words*, „Dialogismos” 6 (2022), pp. 64–65.

communal remembrance after his departure. This form intensifies authority: rejecting the letter becomes symbolically equivalent to rejecting the apostolic founder and the community's origin story. The repeated address to the readers as "beloved" (3:1, 8, 14, 17) complements the strategy by binding hearers affectively to the Petrine voice, even as that voice warns them against seduction.

4.2. Logos: Judgment, delay, and the ethics of time

2 Peter's logos proceeds largely by precedent and typology. A chain of scriptural exempla—the punishment of angels (2:4), the Flood (2:5), and Sodom and Gomorrah (2:6–8)—establishes a moralized pattern: God judges the impious yet rescues the righteous. The conclusion is explicit: "the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment" (2:9). The argument confronts the opponents' normalization of the present by insisting that divine patience is not divine indifference and that present impunity does not entail future safety.

The letter's decisive rhetorical achievement is the reframing of "delay." Rather than offering a chronological calculation, the author offers a theology of time: "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years" (3:8). The interval is interpreted as mercy "not wishing that any should perish" (3:9). This move performs two functions simultaneously. Theologically, it preserves the credibility of judgment while affirming God's patience. Socially, it disciplines communal temporality. The community is trained to inhabit the interval not as emptiness (which invites cynicism) but as moral opportunity (which invites repentance and perseverance). Time is rhetorically moralized.

A further argumentative move reinforces this moralization of time, the scoffers are accused of willful amnesia. They "deliberately overlook" that creation itself depends on God's word and that the world once perished by water (3:5–6). The charge is rhetorically sharp. It frames skepticism not as intellectual sophistication but as culpable forgetting, and it recasts the Flood as a paradigm of divine intervention that contradicts the myth of a self-sustaining, unchanging cosmos. By narrating the opponents' reasoning as deliberate oblivion, the author claims

interpretive superiority and binds communal identity to a shared memory of judgment that demands moral vigilance in the present.

Eschatological imagery intensifies this argument. The world is “stored up for fire” (3:7), the “elements” will be dissolved (3:10–12), and yet the letter concludes with hope for “new heavens and a new earth” where righteousness dwells (3:13). Whatever one concludes about the letter’s cosmological background, its rhetorical aim is clear: it destabilizes complacency by portraying the created order itself as accountable, while also providing a positive horizon that motivates holiness. The ethical logic is explicit: “what sort of persons ought you to be... in holiness and godliness” (3:11). Apocalyptic discourse is thus paraenetic: it redirects doctrinal dispute into ethical urgency.

4.3. Pathos: Disgust, fear, and communal cohesion

The letter’s pathos is strategic. Chapter 2 mobilizes disgust and indignation through vilification: opponents are “irrational animals” (2:12) and are compared to a dog returning to its vomit and a sow wallowing in mire (2:22). Such imagery is not merely decorative. It functions as social stigmatization, making deviation emotionally repellent so that imitation becomes less likely.

Alongside disgust stands fear. The “gloom of utter darkness” reserved for the opponents (2:17) and the announcement of a world reserved for fire (3:7) are designed to reorient anxiety: fear should be directed toward divine judgment rather than toward the social influence of rival teachers. Yet the letter does not rely only on negative affect. It also cultivates confidence and vigilance. Believers are urged to “remember” (3:1–2), to interpret delay as mercy (3:9), and to “grow in grace and knowledge” (3:18). The rhetoric thus combines exclusion and exhortation: it polarizes “true” and “false,” but it also aims to keep the faithful from despair by teaching them to live the interval as purposeful and ethically charged.

4.4. Social function: Apocalyptic discourse as internal governance

Taken together, ethos, logos, and pathos reveal apocalyptic discourse functioning as internal governance. The Petrine ethos legitimates

authority; the theology of delay disciplines time; vilification and judgment imagery enforce norms and protect boundaries. The letter uses the end to regulate the present: eschatological expectation becomes a mechanism for sustaining cohesion, limiting interpretive competition, and intensifying ethical seriousness under internal contestation. Recent commentary reinforces that 2 Peter's rhetoric is best read as a community-stabilizing intervention rather than as speculative timetable-building¹¹. In this perspective, apocalyptic discourse performs "temporal governance": it teaches the community how to live between promise and fulfillment without surrendering either to cynicism or to moral relaxation.

This governance is not only doctrinal but performative: by naming some interpretations as "destructive" (3:16) and by attaching eschatological consequences to present behavior, the letter creates a moral economy in which teaching, interpretation, and conduct are mutually accountable. Apocalyptic rhetoric thus operates as a technology of community maintenance: it produces a disciplined imagination of time in which everyday choices are read in light of an approaching evaluation, and in which patience becomes a communal virtue rather than a sign of disappointment.

5. The Apocalypse of Peter: Visionary consolation and moral formation

The Apocalypse of Peter addresses a different rhetorical situation and employs a different genre. Its internal signals suggest a community shaped by tribulation and pressure to accommodate. The text responds by granting Peter a visionary "tour" of post-mortem destinies, in which punishment and reward disclose a moral order that the present world seems to deny¹². The rhetoric is intentionally affective: it aims to console

11 A. C. Thornhill, *2 Peter*, Cambridge 2025, pp. 38–54; see. J. D. Dvorak, *Counterhegemonic strategies in 2 Peter...*, pp. 58–59.

12 J. N. Bremmer, *Orphic, Roman, Jewish and Christian tours of hell: Observations on the Apocalypse of Peter*, in: *Other worlds and their relation to this world: Early Jewish and ancient Christian traditions*, eds. E. M. M. Eynikel, F. García Martínez, T. Nicklas, J. Verheyden (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, 143), Leiden: Martinus

sufferers through promised vindication and to deter accommodation through fear of judgment.

5.1. Crisis horizon: Persecution, injustice, accommodation

Many readers locate Apoc. Pet. within an environment of persecution, or at least of sustained hostility and marginalization. The text implies that some have suffered “for my name,” and it interprets such suffering within an eschatological framework of reversal. At the same time, the catalogue of sins indicates a second pressure: ethical drift in a morally permissive environment. The work targets concrete vices—sexual exploitation, unjust wealth, violence, and the killing of children—suggesting that the community faced both the scandal of injustice (in which the wicked seem to prosper) and the temptation of accommodation (in which believers could avoid cost by compromise). Apocalyptic vision becomes a way to interpret both: it assures the oppressed that suffering is neither meaningless nor final, and it warns the tempted that compromise is not harmless.

5.2. Ethos and identification: Peter as the audience’s guide

The Apocalypse of Peter constructs ethos through revelatory proximity. Peter is positioned as the recipient of Christ’s disclosure and as a representative observer whose questions and reactions guide the audience’s own responses. The narrative invites identification: the community “sees” the afterlife through the apostle’s eyes. This structure does not merely assert authority; it draws the audience into a shared experience of vision, fear, and compassion. Peter’s shock models the appropriate response to sin’s consequences, while his compassion models the appropriate response to the condemned. The reader is thus formed not only in belief but also in stance.

The dialogue structure strengthens this effect. Peter repeatedly asks what the scenes mean, and Christ provides authoritative explanations. The vision is therefore not uncontrolled spectacle but guided

Nijhoff/Brill 2010, pp. 305–321; S. K. Brown, C. W. Griggs, *The Apocalypse of Peter: Introduction and translation*, „Brigham Young University Studies” 15 (1975) no. 2, pp. 131–145.

interpretation. It models for the audience how to see and how to judge: fear is legitimized, but so is compassion; disgust at evil is cultivated, but it is not allowed to become relish in punishment. In socio-rhetorical terms, the apocalypse trains an interpretive habitus: the community learns to read its world—suffering, temptation, injustice—through a Christ-mediated Petrine lens.

5.3. Pathos as pedagogy: Fear, horror, and moral imagination

Apoc. Pet. is famous for graphic depictions of punishment, often organized by a logic of fitting recompense. These scenes are deliberately shocking. Their function is pedagogical: the text forms moral imagination through affect. Gray's analysis of punishments associated with abortion and infanticide illustrates how the vision targets concrete social practices and reasserts moral boundaries against surrounding norms¹³. Fear thus becomes catechesis. Instead of merely listing prohibitions, the apocalypse gives the audience an emotionally charged picture of why certain actions are incompatible with fidelity.

The punishments also encode social critique. They expose patterns of exploitation (economic, sexual, and violent) and portray them as ultimately unsustainable. Recent readings of Apoc. Pet. have shown how the damned bodies can be “read” as carceral and socially marked: they register gendered, economic, and status-related anxieties in a community negotiating marginalization and power¹⁴. Such analyses underscore that the apocalypse does not simply threaten individuals; it maps a moral order onto a social order, unmasking what the surrounding culture may normalize as deadly.

Yet pathos is not only deterrent. The vision also functions therapeutically. By portraying oppressors as finally accountable and by promising reward for sufferers, the text provides symbolic compensation for victims of injustice. Collins's account of apocalypse as “crisis and catharsis”

¹³ P. T. Gray, *Abortion, infanticide, and the social rhetoric of the Apocalypse of Peter*, „Journal of Early Christian Studies” 9 (2001) no. 3, p. 323.

¹⁴ M. R. Henning, *Socioeconomic status among the damned? Reading the carceral bodies of the Apocalypse of Peter in their ancient context*, in: *The Apocalypse of Peter in context*, eds. D. C. Maier, J. Frey, T. J. Kraus, Leuven–Paris–Bristol, CT 2024, pp. 72–92.

is instructive here: apocalyptic narrative can transform anxiety and outrage into a coherent horizon of meaning without requiring the community to seize vengeance in the present¹⁵. The Apocalypse of Peter thus uses fear and hope to heal as well as to warn, enabling endurance without retaliation.

5.4. Logos and the tension of justice and mercy

Although the Apocalypse of Peter persuades primarily through vision and affect, it also contains a substantive theological logic. Its central claim is that the cosmos is morally ordered and that divine judgment will reverse present injustices. Beyond this, the text introduces a remarkable motif: intercession for the damned. In the Ethiopic tradition, the condemned receive respite; in earlier Greek witness, the horizon appears even more expansive, suggesting release¹⁶. Bauckham's survey of research and Beck's analysis of justice and mercy have shown how this motif sits at the heart of the work's theological distinctiveness and how it contributed to later controversy around the text¹⁷.

Socio-rhetorically, the intercession motif has decisive implications. Communities under persecution can form identity through resentment and demonization. Apoc. Pet. acknowledges the desire for justice yet re-directs communal affect: anger is transmuted into prayer. Mercy does not cancel judgment, but it prevents eschatological imagination from becoming a warrant for cruelty. The apocalypse thus constrains boundary-drawing by demanding a Christlike posture even toward enemies. In addition, the motif resonates with liturgical imagination (e.g., the

¹⁵ A. Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The power of the Apocalypse*, Philadelphia 1984, pp. 141–160.

¹⁶ E. J. Beck, *Justice and mercy in the Apocalypse of Peter...*, pp. 155–167; J. Doehhorn, *Der Acherusische See als Reinigungsort in christlicher und jüdischer Nachdemythologie*, in: *The Apocalypse of Peter in context*, eds. D. C. Maier, J. Frey, T. J. Kraus, Leuven–Paris–Bristol, CT 2024, pp. 253–298; M. Starowieyski, *Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu*, vol. 3: *Listy i apokalipsy chrześcijańskie*, Kraków 2017, pp. 225–241; M. Starowieyski, *Apokalipsa Piotra*, „Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne” 2 (1984), pp. 48–78.

¹⁷ R. J. Bauckham, *The Apocalypse of Peter: An account of research*, „Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt” II.25.6 (1988), pp. 4712–4750; E. J. Beck, *Justice and Mercy in the Apocalypse of Peter...*, pp. 169–178.

Ethiopic “Sunday respite”), suggesting that the community’s experience of time and worship could be connected to the narrative’s hope that mercy has a place even within judgment.

Reception history suggests why this motif mattered. A vision in which the condemned are relieved—or even finally released—can be read as an early form of apokatastasis, and such a horizon would destabilize emerging canonical boundaries by softening the finality of exclusion. This may help explain why the Apocalypse of Peter remained disputed and ultimately did not enter the New Testament canon, even while it continued to be read in some churches. Rhetorically, however, the text does not primarily speculate about the ultimate number saved. Its practical aim is formative: it teaches the living to desire justice without surrendering to hatred, and to imagine divine judgment in a way that does not contradict the Church’s vocation to mercy.

5.5. Social function: Narrative therapy and norm reinforcement

Apoc. Pet. therefore performs social work on two levels. First, it reinforces norms through deterrence: vivid punishments make accommodation emotionally costly and strengthen communal boundaries against vice. Second, it offers narrative therapy: the vision interprets suffering, promises vindication, and shapes communal affect so that fear and hope produce endurance rather than despair. In contrast to 2 Peter’s inward polemic against internal rivals, the Apocalypse of Peter works primarily by forming imagination and emotion, and by pairing judgment with mercy so that the community’s longing for justice does not devolve into hatred.

6. Comparative perspective: Shared repertoire, divergent social work

Both writings draw on a Petrine symbolic repertoire: Peter as privileged witness (linked to a mountain revelation of Christ’s glory) and eschatological fire as the idiom of final judgment. In both texts, eschatology functions pastorally rather than speculatively. It stabilizes communal memory, frames identity, and motivates conduct through accountability.

The divergences follow genre and crisis. In 2 Peter, apocalyptic rhetoric is chiefly disciplinary and inward-facing: it legitimates apostolic tradition, stigmatizes internal deviants, and reinscribes boundaries within the community. In the Apocalypse of Peter, apocalyptic vision is chiefly consolatory and formative: it interprets suffering through future vindication, deters accommodation through fear, and—through intercession for the damned—redirects anger into compassion. Petrine apocalyptic thus appears as an adaptable repertoire: a tool of internal regulation in one context and a narrative therapy that forms resilience and moral imagination in another.

7. Conclusions

A socio-rhetorical comparison of 2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter shows apocalyptic discourse functioning as practical theology rather than detached speculation. In 2 Peter, the delayed Parousia is reframed as divine patience to legitimate apostolic authority and intensify moral seriousness; eschatology supports boundary maintenance and norm enforcement against internal contestation. In the Apocalypse of Peter, visionary eschatology addresses communal trauma and ethical drift by promising vindication, warning against accommodation, and placing mercy inside judgment as a constraint on communal resentment.

Read together, the texts highlight the formative role of communal affect in apocalyptic rhetoric. Fear and indignation are not merely aroused but redirected: toward vigilance and repentance in 2 Peter, and toward hope and intercessory compassion in the Apocalypse of Peter. Petrine apocalyptic discourse thus stabilizes communities by integrating authority, memory, emotion, and ethics—demonstrating how reflection on the “last things” can serve the present life of the Church without collapsing into either moral panic or moral indifference.

Methodologically, the comparison also illustrates the value of socio-rhetorical reading for theological interpretation. It allows apocalyptic language to be taken seriously as theology while also explaining why such language was persuasive in particular social conditions. Apocalyptic discourse is thus neither reduced to social control nor isolated as abstract doctrine; it is seen as a communicative practice in which

theological claims, communal emotions, and moral formation belong together.

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