Physical and cultural landscape in 2 Peter: implications for audience, author and context

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Introduction

I have a sense of belonging in two places, but never completely in one. I imagine this geographical 'schizophrenia' has been commonly felt by generations of immigrants and still is experienced by recent asylum seekers to Australia. I arrived from the lush green hills, temperate rainforests, and snow-capped mountains of Aotearoa (the land of the long white cloud), to find that this wide brown land of Australia—the smell of it, the dryness of the air, its vast open spaces—presented challenges to my sense of identity. I felt no immediate connection and interaction with either the natural features or the symbolic and spiritual forces of the landscape.

‘Landscape’ is an ambiguous word that encompasses both the physical and perceptual. The physical landscape includes natural or geophysical features as well as built environments: tangible objects such as buildings, roads, wind turbines, and mobile phone towers. The perceptual landscape involves the immaterial, spatial relationships of the built environment and the mental constructions and perceptions imposed and attached by people (not necessarily individuals).

Eric Hirsch, in his introduction to The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspective on Place and Space, has suggested that within any defined landscape there are two framing devices. The first is the objective framework, the context for the landscape or material culture. The second framework is one of ‘imputed meaning’ (Hirsch: 1). People have an active role in perceiving, understanding, and interacting with the landscape in which they live. Generally speaking, most readers today recognise the form and function of objective frameworks; these include the scientific descriptions of geography, anthropology, biology, and geology. However, the importance and nature of concepts such as ‘imputed meaning’ or ‘subjective framework’ are less familiar.

Yet, poets, authors, and artists have long understood that the key to successfully creating and presenting artistic and literary work is to explore and communicate views on the natural and imaginative landscape, including within the chosen text elements that get audiences thinking conceptually about the meaning of natural and cultural landscapes, the relationships individuals and groups have with their landscape, and factors that can
shape an individual's internal landscape.¹

This article is an exploratory, imaginative approach to selected landscape references in 2 Peter; cognitions and augmentation that suggest both objective and implied landscape. My research question is how does the author of 2 Peter intend references made to geophysical and cultural landscapes to impact the rhetorical situation of the letter? My reflections are informed by the multi-dimensional hermeneutic of socio-rhetorical interpretation (SRI)² that encourages the interrelation of ancient, modern and post-modern ways of thought, using anthropological, rhetorical, and social-psychological insights to identify differing perceptions of social, cultural, and religious locations.

It is vital for landscape or any material culture to be viewed in context if it is to be properly understood. The term context itself refers to an association with other objects, features, persons, groups, time and place, all of which provide information necessary for understanding, function and meaning. When an object or text is viewed in isolation, divorced from the larger picture, its meaning becomes ambiguous.

**Landscape narration in 2 Peter**

Efforts to reconstruct the rhetorical situation of 2 Peter have appealed to a wide spectrum of environments. These include: linguistic, social, ethnic, political, ethical, and religious contexts.³ However, to my knowledge, no previous commentator on 2 Peter has included an appeal to the physical environment. This is surprising in light of the clear interest in geography in 2 Peter: the sacred mountain (1:18), Tartarus (2:4a), chains [pits] of deepest darkness (2:4b), Sodom and Gomorrah (2:6), Bezer/Beor (2:15), meteorological and hydrological references, darkness and storm clouds, whirlwinds and mists (2:17). How does the author of 2 Peter intend recipients to hear its message in concert with lived experiences in the world around them? How much does the natural and cultural landscape play in 2 Peter's invention of argument, the choice of vocabulary, figures of speech, and appeal to common wisdom?

It is a truism that religious texts are written for religious communities; however, the socio-historical setting of 2 Peter’s intended audience is notoriously difficult to pin down. Unlike the author of 1 Peter, who at the start of his letter clearly identifies his audience as the four provinces of Asia Minor, 2 Peter provides few clues to remove the mystery surrounding the occasion and destination of this letter.

The style and language of 2 Peter have been closely studied and categorised as typical of an Asiatic style (D F Watson 1988: 24; J Neyrey 1993:119-120; T Callan 2003:

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yet its language could have been influenced by any cosmopolitan centre in the Mediterranean world – Antioch of Syria, Caesarea, Alexandria of Egypt, Ephesus, or Rome; to mention a few that have been suggested. Eusebius reports a tradition – clearly dependent on 1 Peter and the Acts of Peter – that Peter was involved in evangelistic work in Asia Minor. However, more reliable witnesses, including the Acts, suggest that Peter never travelled further west than Antioch. Paul’s comments about a division of labour with Peter have influenced some commentators to conclude a provenance for 2 Peter in southern Galatia. Yet, acceptance of the pseudonymity of 2 Peter by a majority of scholarship, and its agreed dual genre—as a ‘letter’ and ‘testament’ or ‘farewell speech’—ultimately leave introductory concerns about authorship, date, and audience, very much as open questions.

The author of 2 Peter employs references to the natural and cultural landscape in his letter. He exhibits clear knowledge and use of traditions from the first book of Enoch that describe with clarity and precision the geographical location of Enoch’s departure point for the heavenly journey, and his subsequent experiences of revelation. Enoch says it was ‘by the waters of Dan in the land of Dan, which is southwest of Hermon’ (1 En 13:7) where he sat down by the waters—traditionally a place of revelation—and was ushered into the presence of God. A further eye-catching detail is that Mount Hermon was also the place where tradition says the rebellious angels made their descent (1 En 6:6). Likewise, 2 Peter refers to a confirming revelation on the sacred mountain (1:18) and an imprisonment of ‘fallen’ angels (2:4a). So it seems reasonable to join Nickelsburg (2001: 245) in posing the question, ‘Is this coincidental that the story of the Watchers [condemned for sexual misconduct] is set in a geographical location that is also connected with a god [Pan] known for his sexual misadventures?’ How might the people living in the region of Mount Hermon have thought about these traditions in relation to each other? To what extent do the recipients of 2 Peter know the legends and geography of Mount Hermon and its environs?

The sacred significance of Mount Hermon and its environs is evident in the literary, epigraphic and archaeological evidence of resident cultures from the Bronze Age to the Greco-Roman period (Biran 1974: 26-51). While the ancient cult there, older than the nation of Israel, had virtually disappeared by the first century CE, the sacred traditions of the area—the springs, the forests, and the mountain—lived on (Berlin 1999: 27-45).

The massif that forms Hermon-Sēnir-Sirion is a breath-taking, imposing presence rising at the south end of the anti-Lebanon chain and towering above the landscape for many kilometres in every direction. Snow-capped six months of the year, Hermon’s enormous peak reaches up 2,814m above sea level, towering over the lush Beqaa valley to the north and the Huleh to the south. At its base, four major streams come together to form the headwaters of the Jordan. Three of them—the Hašbani, the Dan, and the Hermon—

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4 Eusebius, H.E. 3.1.2. ‘[Peter] seems to have proceeded to the Jews of the Dispersion in Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia, Cappadocia and Asia, and at the end he came to Rome, and was crucified head downwards, for so he demanded to suffer.’

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are fed by the snows of Hermon and produce on average 500 million cubic metres per annum of often white and thunderous water. This is the kind of geophysical landscape universally linked with divine epiphanies and worship.

Mount Hermon and Mount Tabor are both identified by Christian tradition as being the site of the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1-13; Mk 9:2-13; Lk 8:28-36; compare 2 Pet 1:18). However, Mount Hermon is the more likely location due to its greater height and closer proximity to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, the place of Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah, and the region Jesus travelled through prior to ascending the mount of transfiguration. New Testament scholarship considers the confession episode in Matthew 16:17-19 to be a discrete tradition that predates the gospel of Matthew itself. Nickelsburg (1981: 589) notes there are points of correspondence with the traditions of Enoch:

[T]he language and imagery in verses 18-19 can be read as a parabolising on the geographical environs of Caesarea Philippi, which are mentioned in verse 13. The polarity of heaven and earth corresponds to Mount Hermon. Both 1 Enoch and Testament of Levi see the mountain as a point of access to heaven, and for both authors, entrée to heaven is the prelude to a commissioning. The image of the rock calls to mind the rocky crags and environs of the Paneion, and the reference to the gates of Hades finds a counterpart in the subterranean waters of the grotto.

Josephus claims that Philip the Tetrarch, son of Herod the Great, built [ktizei, founded] the city of Caesarea near the sources of the Jordan in the district of Paneas (J.W. 2.167-169; Antiq. 18.28), in honour of Emperor Augustus. It was differentiated from Caesarea Maritime by being referred to as the Caesarea of Philip (Mt 16:13; Mk 8:27; and many other sources). It was renamed Neronias by Agrippa II (Antiq. 20.211; and coins6), but from the second and third centuries the name Caesarea Panias was eventually used exclusively (CIG 4750, 4951). In ancient Jewish sources the city is called Keisarion or Kisrin and the cave Pamias or Panias (Ma’oz 1993: 136). The ancient name of the site was Banias – spelled Panias, Paneias in Greek and Latin. Panias is the feminine form of the Greek adjective paneion, referring to the grotto of Pan (paneion antron or apēlaion). This name was used not only for the town, but also for the region and the Jordan sources flowing from the site.7 For the remainder of this article the ancient name of Banias will be used.

The development of Banias – its evolving from a small rural sanctuary into an administrative capital – most probably was the result of royal decree, the gathering

5 G E Nickelsburg 1981: 590; with documentation n.63.
6 Meshorer 1982: 244-245. Meshorer suggests that Philip issued three coins in 29-30ce to commemorate the founding of the city at Caesarea Philippi, but earlier coins attributed to the mint of Banias-Panias date the city prior to 14ce, and its founding in 3bce. Coins struck in Panias from the time of Marcus Aurelius bore the official name: Caes(areia) Seb(aste) hier(a) kai asu(los) hupo Paneiou.
7 Pliny, Nat. 5.17.
together of inhabitants in surrounding villages and merging them with other groups such as colonists and retiring army veterans (Harper 1928:13). However, throughout its history, it was local topography that exercised the greatest influence in shaping the city's development, as archaeological work at Banias has uncovered in recent decades (Berlin 1999: 27-45; Ma’oz 1993: 136-143; Tzaferis 1992: 190-201; Wilson 2004: 18-55).

Banias is located at the foot of the southwest extremity of Mount Hermon, at the northern edge of a triangular plateau, approximately 1.5km wide and 2km long, at 300m above sea level. To the north stand the imposing slopes of Hermon, while to the east and south lie the ascending slopes of the Golan Heights. To the west, the plateau terminates at a topographic step that drops to form a 60m cliff-face with the floor of the northern Jordan valley below. The plateau is cut by deep ravines on two sides, formed by fast flowing mountain streams, running roughly southwest and northwest. Sheer cliffs to the north and the step to the west left only the eastern approaches providing more or less even ground. Yet, limited space worked against urban expansion.

The central city area was divided into two precincts: a sacred precinct and an administrative precinct. The sacred precinct included temples, chapels, and altars whose boundaries were the cliffs to the north and the sacred pool to the south, which gathered and restrained momentarily the natural waters that gushed from the spring at the entrance to the cave of Pan. These waters were then directed 180m southwest, through Roman built channels, before pouring into a gorge at the south of the city centre. Excavations have uncovered elaborate underground water channels with connecting pipe systems that fan out from the spring and sacred pool area, delivering water in all directions to service the buildings and community needs of the city. The impression left on travellers and visitors must have been dramatic. Wilson (2004:53) writes, ‘The roar of the river, and the splashing sounds of the fountains and water channels, would have created an overwhelming impression of grandeur, one which undoubtedly equalled the wonder of the gleaming temples, innumerable statues and ornately decorated and columned public buildings on all sides.’

South of the sacred pool lay the public buildings of the city, organised along a typical Roman street grid. The Cardo Maximus has been partially uncovered to reveal paved and colonnaded streets. Black paving stones contrast with white columns. The royal palace has been identified, along with monumental horrea (storage buildings) and civil structures. Still to be discovered are the amphitheatre that housed the ‘Panian Games’, the Augusteum, and the formal marketplace (probably located near the intersection of the Cardo Maximus and the Decumanus). The city’s strategic location along the Tyre-Damascus highway ensured the traffic of goods through the city centre.

I have provided extended descriptions of the city of Banias and its environs—its topographical features and excavated remains—for three reasons. First, it is to impress

8 In addition to the cave sanctuary of Pan, a Temple of Zeus and chapels to the Lady Nemesis and the Nymph Maia have been identified to date.
upon the reader the size and nature of this ancient settlement, whose importance as a centre of cultural, political, and religious activity has largely been left unexplored. Certainly, to date, Banias has not been considered important for the study of the New Testament and early Christian history. Secondly, it is to emphasise the importance of natural and cultural landscape for early Christian discourse that produced enthymematic argumentation out of cognitions and reasonings emerging from lived experiences in specific places in the first century world. As Robbins notes (2010: 200), ‘Sensory-aesthetic experiences of the body in various places create the contexts in which people interpret the places they experience as cultural, ideological, and religious spaces’. Thirdly, it is to raise the question: given the established geographical and textual correspondence between 2 Peter, the traditions of Enoch, and the region of Mount Hermon, what significance do archaeological discoveries at Banias have for the letter of 2 Peter?

Landscape perception and recognition in 2 Peter

It is clear that 2 Peter was written after the apostle Peter’s death to an audience among whom Peter remained an authority (2 Pet 1:14,15), and where a collection of Pauline letters and the Letter of Jude were known as well (2 Pet 3:15). What are the odds of this audience being located in the Syrian-Palestine region?

Any attempt to identify the earliest Christians in Banias is entirely elusive. Yet, what is accepted and known is that Banias was situated on the main road between Tyre and Damascus, which were two centres of early Christian life and mission (Acts 21:3-11; 22:10-13), perhaps as early as the first ten years following the public ministry of Jesus. Then, as witnessed by all three Synoptic evangelists, Jesus travelled and taught in the region of Caesarea Philippi (Banias), Peter made there his confession of Jesus as Messiah, and Jesus – possibly standing beneath the cliffs of Banias – declared, ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it’ (Matt 16:18). Is it beyond the realms of probability to conceive that disciples were made from among the ‘villages’ (or dormitory suburbs) of Banias, even during the visit of Jesus and the Twelve?

Available evidence suggests a continuing Christian presence in the Banias region from the earliest days of Christianity, a community which interacted with communities responsible for the Synoptic gospels, and possibly left their imprint on them. Is it possible, also, that the author of 2 Peter used traditions that actually arose from the missionary activities of the apostle Peter in the geographical area of Banias?

I refer to three archaeological discoveries at Banias which present interesting trajectories and connections with the text of 2 Peter. First, despite the seemingly inexhaustible stream of water from the spring at Banias, the residents of houses that stood on land higher in elevation than the spring had problems with water-supply. Excavations have uncovered numerous villas to the east, west, and south of the city, many with decorated
and painted plaster-walls, and mosaic floors. These homes were probably owned by upper-class people, aristocrats and business owners. Neighbourhoods to the west of the spring were forced to obtain water at some expense, by means of a long aqueduct that was constructed to channel water from distant springs on Mount Hermon. Hartal (1997:7) comments, ‘The aqueduct was probably built when the town expanded in the late first century and early second centuries CE.’ Imagine, if among these residents were counted leaders from the Christian community; perhaps some were known as teachers, who refused to deny themselves privileges and pastimes of social rank – although, in this instance they lacked something basic for all life, enjoyed even by the poor. Imagine the irony this crisis in supply would have presented a commentator or correspondent, an opportunity to pass some ‘waterless’ pun (2 Pet 2:17a).

One of the series of accusations that 2 Peter levels against the false teachers is that ‘their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight...revelling in their pleasures while they feast with you. With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning...’ (2 Pet 2:13b-14a). Judaism assumed a close association existed between idolatry and sexual immorality (Exod 32:15-16; Wis 14:12-31; T.Reu. 4:6; T. Benj. 10:10; b.Sanh. 82a; b.Meg. 25a; b.Ketub. 13b). In the Old Testament the idolatry of Israel is frequently condemned through the use of the metaphor of prostitution and sexual immorality (Jer 3:2; 13:27; Ezek 16:15-58; 23:1-49; 43:7; Hos 5:4; 6:10). The connection between idolatry and sexual misdeeds in Judaism was taken over into Christianity (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; Rom 1:23-25; Gal 5:19-21; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 Thess 1:9; 4:3; Rev 22:15).

When investigating the meaning of 2 Peter 2:13-14 what needs to be remembered is that charges of sexual misconduct were commonplace in writings and speeches of the time, designed to challenge the status and authority of opponents. Bible commentaries advance all manner of suggestions to identify the hedonism and licentiousness practiced by 2 Peter’s false teachers. These range from cavorting in pagan festivals, and participating in pagan rites, to exceeding the boundaries of sexual taboo. Yet, it always needs to be remembered that, when it comes to accusations of sexual misconduct, error is often in the eye of the beholder.

Some critics of social values in ancient Rome condemned as licentious those citizens who flocked to gladiatorial games, or those who attended the theatre. Further, to lie with your wife during the daytime was considered licentious, as was leaving the light on at night.

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9 M. Hartal 1985: 7-8; Birley 1997: 230-234. While many of these villas date from Late Roman and Byzantine periods, it seems plausible that these areas would have been settled by wealthy citizens in the second century also; from the time of Hadrian’s visit to Banias in 129ce, and especially during the prosperous period of the Antonines, from the time of Antoninus Pius (138-161ce) to his successor Marcus Aurelius (161–180ce).

10 During his excavations, Hartal traced much of the system as it carried water in a covered channel through various ‘industrial’ areas and even a cemetery, before it reached the residential areas of the city proper. Hartal found five settling pools and seventeen distribution pools. Ceramic and lead piping distributed water to the villas. Hartal comments that the distribution pools and piping functioned as ‘meters' not unlike modern water utilities. He even discovered evidence of ‘water-cheating’, in a pipeline that accessed the aqueduct bypassing the metering system!
while a man made love with his wife. Yet, while not discounting any of the aforementioned suggestions as possible explanations of the conduct by 2 Peter’s teachers—or denying the sexual dimensions of worship in some Graeco-Roman religions—I wonder if the discovery of decorated villas at Banias might point our investigations in a new direction?

Clement of Alexandria once wrote about the dangers of art and culture: *tousotón ischusen apatēsai technē proagōgos anthrōipois erōtikōs eis barathron genomenē*, ‘Such strength had art to [delude] that it became for amorous men a guide to the pit of destruction’ (Clement, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 4.51). Is it possible that some members of the Christian community, to whom 2 Peter is addressed, were adopting a popular cultural practice of decorating homes with pictures of drunken satyrs, nude women, and what was considered by some critics as unnatural lust? Did the author of 2 Peter, like Clement, consider this form of art and decoration as licentiousness? How might he have responded, for example, to the knowledge that, while lying on their beds, married couples in the midst of their embraces might fix their eyes on naked Aphrodite bound in her adultery? Do these suggested scenarios focus the meaning of 2 Peter’s ‘eyes full of adultery’ (2:14a)? Would 2 Peter have considered it shameful to have this ‘art of licentiousness’ openly viewed in public? Can we imagine 2 Peter saying that not only the use, but also the sight and very hearing of these things should be forgotten? Finally, do we conclude with Desjardins (1987: 89-102) that the portrayal of false teachers in 2 Peter says more about the author than his opponents? Is 2 Peter a moral conservative, or an advocate of some form of asceticism?

A third and final discovery, among the excavations at Banias, deserves some commentary: the monumental *horrea*, or storage buildings. The economy of the district of Banias would have been agriculture based. The northern Jordan valley, with a permanent water source, produced wheat and rice. Sheep and goats would have thrived on the grasses of the Golan. Walnut trees grew in the area, and the Jerusalem Talmud\(^\text{11}\) mentions ‘early-ripening Damascene plums’. Besides the storage of locally produced food, however, is it possible that these buildings were also used occasionally for nefarious purposes? Did these public buildings at the foot of Mount Hermon, these *siroi*, communicate mixed messages?\(^\text{12}\) Were they ever used as a *barathron*, a pit into which prisoners were thrown for punishment?

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\(^{12}\) 2 Peter writes that the fallen angels were committed to ‘chains’ [pits] of darkness—evidence for both variants is evenly balanced; see NA27 at 2 Pet 2:4—waiting for the day of judgement. The phrase *seirais* [or, *sirois*] *zophou* has points of comparison with the place of darkness: *zophōdē topos* in 1 En. 17:2 and the Greek concept of the realm of the dead. In Jewish and early Christian literature *skotos* (a synonym for *zophos*) is used when referring to primordial chaos (Gen 1:2), non-existence (1 Clem. 38:3), and a place of punishment (Wis 17:20; *Pss. Sol.* 14:9). In the NT, both Jude and 2 Peter use *zophos* when referring to a tradition of fallen angels from 1 Enoch. Does the appearance of the noun *sirois* in 2:4, then, indicate an awareness that *siros* can occasionally mean ‘pit/granary/silo’ as well as expressing connotations of the underworld and punishment? Pearson (1989: 78-79) outlines how the word *sirois* can occasionally be used as a substitute for *barathron*, a pit into which criminals were thrown for punishment.
During the time of Herod Agrippa the governance of Banias was held in the hands of a viceroy named Varus, a member of the old Iturean royal family. During the revolt of the Jews (66-70CE), when Agrippa was away travelling with the Roman army, Varus and his supporters seized the opportunity to restore the throne of Banias to its ancient roots. Varus sealed off the city, arrested members of the Jewish community, and ordered many executions (Josephus, Life 52-53). Ultimately the revolt failed and the Jewish community survived.

In the summer of 67CE Vespasian arrived in Banias from Rome with his entire army, on the invitation of Agrippa, on his way to put down the Jewish revolt (Josephus, War 3.343-344). Then following the fall and destruction of Jerusalem, Titus moved his victorious army and thousands of Jewish captives to Banias. Here many of the prisoners were killed in gruesome displays of blood revenge.

During his stay at Caesarea [Philippi], Titus celebrated his brother’s birthday with great splendour, reserving in his honour for this festival much of the punishment of his Jewish captives. For the number of those destroyed in contests with wild beasts or with one another or in the flames exceeded two thousand five hundred. Yet to the Romans, notwithstanding the myriad forms in which their victims perished, all this seemed too light a penalty (Josephus, War 7.37-38).

There are no other records to support the claim, yet it seems entirely possible that such a spectacle could have been repeated over the years. The holding of athletic displays, as well as gladiatorial events and public punishment of prisoners, seems likely considering evidence for a continuing military presence at Banias. Large storage buildings might have afforded temporary accommodation of prisoners, whose chains would have seemed to them like deepest darkness. The city known widely as a Holy City of Refuge would have provided anything but peace and rest for those awaiting death.

**Landscape and rhetoric in 2 Peter**

How does the author of 2 Peter intend references made about the geophysical and

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13 Josephus, War 7.37-38. Excavations have yet to uncover any arena large enough to have accommodated such a blood lust.

14 Ph. Le Bas and W.H. Waddington, 1972: I.42. An inscription from the early second century (c. 140ce) provides evidence of games being held at Banias; listing victories of an athlete named M. Ailion Aurelion Menandros.

15 Epigraphic evidence at the Temple of Zeus in Banias, in the form of an inscription, suggests a military presence still during the reign of (Trajan 98-117ce). The inscription reads: ‘To Heliopolitan Zeus and to the god Pan who brings victory, for the salvation of our lord Trajan Caesar, with his entire house Maronas son of Publius Aristo has dedicated this holy altar’ (Wilson: 40).

16 P. Perdizet and G. Lefebvre, 1919: 7 no. 528. An example of second century graffiti was discovered on the external wall at the Mennonian of Abydos in Egypt, left by a visitor from Banias named Harpocras. In part he wrote: ‘...I am Harpocras, citizen of Holy Paniados and priest...’. The word he uses for his city is zatheos, meaning very divine, sacred. The epitaph is similar in sound to the word 2 Peter uses for the punishment cells: ho zaphos (2:17).
cultural landscape to impact the rhetorical situation of the letter? Scholarly discussion on
the occasion and purpose of 2 Peter has focussed on material in 1:16-2:10a and 3:1-13.
These sections of the letter, especially 3:4-13, suggest there was a degree of scepticism
held by some in the community addressed by this letter regarding the expected return
of Jesus as the exalted end-time judge. This scepticism is first addressed in the initial
argument of the letter (probatio) when the author presents eyewitness testimony to the
transfiguration of Jesus as substantiation for the promise of Christ's *parousia* (1:16-18).
However, the language and detail found at 3:9 and 12 are deemed by some analysts as
being a more principled philosophical rejection of any possibility for divine intervention
in the world. For a number of these commentators, such rejection was a notable
characteristic of first-century Epicurean philosophy (Neyrey 1980: 407–31; Green 2001:
107–22; Bauckham, 1983).

This assessment of the occasion of 2 Peter has recently been challenged by Edward
prophecies about the end times, and argues that the objections discernible in 3:4 do
not concern principled rejection of God's intervention in the world. Rather, Adams
suggests (2005: 114), the scepticism identified has arisen from lived experiences and
observations concerning various unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies about a new
creation (for example, Isa 65:17; compare 2 Pet 3:13). Such an apparent failure of
prophetic vision has posed a challenge to the promise and expectation of the *parousia*
of Christ as end-time judge. Adams further observes that if there are any philosophical
elements blended within this eschatological cynicism they emerge from the widely held
worldview that the *cosmos* was stable and unchanging, rather than from the matrix of
Epicureanism.

The setting and purpose of 2 Peter, together with the question of its authorship, has
been debated since ancient times. It was the slowest of all New Testament documents
to gain acceptance as canonical. Eusebius classified it among ‘those that are disputed,
yet familiar to most’, and also wrote that among works ascribed to Peter, ‘I have
recognised only one epistle as authentic and accepted by the early fathers’ (*HE* 3.3.4;
3.25.3). Contemporary biblical scholarship has debated over differences in language
and style between 1 and 2 Peter; an apparent second-century date of composition
due to a reference to Paul's letters as 'scripture'; and, the delay in Christ's coming. Yet,
those who argue that authorship by Peter should not be dismissed, as readily as it has
been, present the counter-argument that stylistic differences can be attributed to Peter's
*amanuensis*; lexical differences may be accounted for by considering distinct situations
and audiences for each letter; Paul's letters were collected and circulated early; and,
teaching about the delay of the *parousia* has been woven into the earliest documents of
Christianity (Matt 25:1-13; Lk 12:35-48; Jas 5:7-8).

Clearly, a distinctive feature of 2 Peter is the merging of Hellenistic thought with early
Christian apocalyptic eschatology. Confronted by those who, in the author's view, had
abandoned the apostolic gospel in their compromise with the prevailing Greco-Roman
culture, 2 Peter attempts to convey a pastoral message that evokes aspects of the
natural and cultural landscape. Whether ultimately one argues for an earlier (mid-60s CE) or later date (100-150 CE), I am inclined to agree with Charles’ reconstruction of the occasion and purpose of 2 Peter (Charles 2002: 342); namely, a culturally hassled community struggling to live lives of separateness in a Greco-Roman environment. The strongly pastoral concern of the letter calls members of the community to strive daily to lead a godly life (3:11-12a) alongside a striking depiction of the judgement that awaits the ungodly within this present world (2 Pet 3:7,10,12b).

In 2 Peter the theme of judgement is not only a future event, but past and present are woven together in the future. Further, the core concern of the author is not in the validity of his assessment of false teachers and their followers, or the certainty of divine verdict, but the judgement of those who receive the letter. The rhetorical function of 2 Peter’s argument concerning eschatological judgement is to convince his audience to apply the label of ungodliness to those who scoff and indulge their lusts, saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming?’ (3:3-4).

2 Peter highlights three past occasions when God judged the unrighteous, and on two of those occasions rescued the godly (2:4-10a), implying that God will do the same in the future (2:9). These same three occasions are often listed in apocalyptic discourse and are used to summarise periods of history divided by God, a sequence of events that leads inexorably toward the day of the Lord—the end of the world. Since 2 Peter uses stories found in the Old Testament there is an assumption that his audience knows these stories: the fall of ‘angels’ (Gen 6:1-4; 1 En 12:4-6), the consignment of the angels to Tartarus, the judgement of the world at the time of Noah (Gen 6:5-9:29), and the sending out of Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18 and 19).

Rhetorical analysis of 2 Peter has been helpful in describing the arrangement, the style, the argumentation of the letter, but not the function of the text. The topography of rhetorical analysis is the courtroom, political assembly, and civil ceremonies of the Greco-Roman world. Yet little consideration has been given to the characteristics of Jewish ‘rhetoric’ or the merging of both during the Hellenistic period. There are aspects of 2 Peter that appear to owe more to a Jewish than Greco-Roman tradition; for example, the use of triads in the argumentation of 2:4-10a.

The author uses three traditional apocalyptic illustrations (2:4–8) leading to a conclusion (2:9). The parallelism intended by the three pictures is marked by repetition and development. The conditional phrase ‘if…did not spare’ appears in verses 4 and 5; the adjective ‘ungodly’ is used in verses 5 and 6; and each story is presented as a progression of events. The weight of argument in this section, however, derives not only

18 Bauckham (1983:249). The integration of Tartarus into the picture of divine judgement—God's punishment of the angels and Zeus' punishment of the Titans—appears to have been familiar to author and audience.
from these literary features, or the identified chiastic\textsuperscript{19} relationship between the three pictures and their conclusion (Callan 2010: 80), or the identified style of 2 Peter as a form of ancient rhetoric, but, as I have suggested, the dynamic interaction of the text with its geophysical, social and cultural contexts.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have posed the question: how does the author of 2 Peter intend references made to geophysical and cultural landscapes to impact the rhetorical situation of the letter? I have argued the importance of natural, cultural and perceived landscape, stating that when an object or text is viewed in isolation, divorced from the larger picture, its meaning becomes ambiguous.

The results of rhetorical analysis have been helpful in describing the arrangement, the style, the argumentation of 2 Peter, but not the function of the text. I have provided evidence for the claim that 2 Peter attempts to convey a pastoral message exhorting hearers to ‘godly living’ in light of the certainty of prophecy regarding the return of Christ as judge, presenting argument and appeal that evokes aspects of the natural and cultural landscape. As an apostle of Jesus Christ who speaks a true prophetic word—in contrast to pseudo-prophets and teachers (2:1)—the author speaks in a context of significant resistance where religious and political leaders act on the basis of human greed, pride, and power, rather than God’s justice, freedom, and mercy; the ‘way of righteousness’ (2:21) and ‘commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (3:2). As a prophet, the author brings an eschatological message in the exhortation to ‘godliness’ (2:9; 3:11), while waiting for ‘new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home’ (3:13), a message that is blended with human experiences of emperor, imperial army, occupation, cultural imperialism, ungodly and unrighteous living (2:2-3, 10-11, 13-15, 18-19).

I have posed a further question: what are the odds of the audience of 2 Peter being located in the Syrian-Palestine region? It remains uncertain whether excavations of the ancient city of Banias will uncover evidence, as archaeological work in the city of Sepphoris has done, that will provide insight, challenge, and renewed stimulus for the study of the New Testament and earliest Christianity. What is certain is socio-rhetorical interpretation will continue to challenge the fixation of boundaries in traditional exegetical methods. The explicit goal of socio-rhetorical interpretation is to bring together various approaches to the interpretation of texts that are so often separated from one another; to bring different disciplines into dialogue with one another by creating space around and among areas of speciality normally functioning in a strictly disciplinary manner. There is something appealing about an approach that recognises the multi-dimensionality of texts, including the impact of geophysical and cultural landscapes on argument, language, and meaning.

\textsuperscript{19} The author draws a conclusion from the second and third clauses and then from the first clause, bringing the entire period back to its starting point.
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