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Deificational Hermeneutics as Theological Interpretation: A Theological Exegesis on 2 Peter 1:1–11

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Abstract: This paper explores the parallel emergence of two theological movements that share ecumenical insights: Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS) and deification. It identifies their intrinsic connections to creeds and draws upon their recent scholarly convergence. By highlighting the absence of a robust *deificational* hermeneutics within the realm of theological interpretation, this paper aims to address that gap by advocating for a *deificational* hermeneutics that serves the interests of theological interpretation. This argument is founded on three vital theological insights: (1) similar to creeds, the theology of deification is essential to Christian theology with significant ecumenical value, (2) the *imago Dei* acts as a unifying framework, and (3) readerly formation is central to theological interpretation. Furthermore, through exegetical analysis of 2 Peter 1:1–11, this essay reveals aspects that would remain obscured without the "prism" of deification.

Keywords: *deificational* hermeneutics; Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS); 2 Peter 1:1–11; *theosis*; readerly formation; *imago Dei*

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1. Introduction

The emergence of Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS)[1] can be understood in relationship to the ferment in biblical studies during the final quarter of the previous century.[2] In particular, there was a growing dissatisfaction regarding the disconnect between biblical scholarship and the churches that hold these sacred texts as authoritative for their faith lives. The advocates of TIS are united by a commitment to the creedal tradition stemming from the ecumenical consensus of the early Christian centuries (Yong 2017, pp. 2–3). For instance, the esteemed Wesleyan biblical scholar Joel Green encourages New Testament scholars to "read Scripture through the prism of the creeds" so that they can see things they wouldn't otherwise see (Joel B. Green 2013, p. 133).

A parallel ecumenical theological discussion focuses on the concept of *theosis*, or deification, a term that originated in the fourth century through Gregory of Nazianzus (Finlan and Kharlamov 2006; 2012, p. 1:1). This idea is arguably as rooted in Western theology as in Eastern thought.[3] In recent years, *theosis* has increasingly become a theological topic valuable for ecumenical dialog.[4] Although the term "*theosis*" is not found in the ecumenical creeds, Daniel Keating compellingly argues that it encapsulates the essence and ultimate goal of Christian faith and living. He suggests that *theosis* draws its substance and framework from the Christian doctrines outlined in Scripture and creeds while concurrently evolving alongside them.

This paper discerns the two movements' common, intrinsic connections to creeds and receives its cue from their scholarly convergence, which has begun lately.[5] In addition, I identify a lack of robust *deificational* hermeneutics as an exercise of theological interpretation. This essay seeks to fill that lacuna by proposing *deificational* hermeneutics as a unitive narrative approach to the theological interpretation of the Christian Scriptures. The paper argues that *deificational* hermeneutics allows us to see things in a way that otherwise

would not be seen, such as the countercultural nature of 2 Pet 1:1–11 in highlighting believers' new identity as partakers of the divine nature, and that such a hermeneutics is conducive to readerly formation, both personally and ecclesially.

The essay is structured as follows. First, I will explore recent approaches to *theosis*, followed by several assertions regarding *deificational* hermeneutics aimed at engaging in theological interpretation. Next, I will provide a theological exegesis of 2 Peter 1:1–11. Subsequently, the essay will highlight several insights that emerge specifically from the *deificational* hermeneutics. Finally, drawing from my analysis of 2 Peter 1:1–11, the paper concludes with a working definition of this hermeneutics, presenting it as a valuable "prism" for theological interpretation.

2. *Deificational* Hermeneutics for Theological Interpretation

Two distinct approaches can be identified among contemporary theologians regarding *theosis* and its relationship to Scripture. The first is a "thematic" approach, exemplified by Michael Gorman, who, in his commentary on Romans, treats *theosis* as a prominent theme within "the tapestry of themes" (Gorman 2022, loc. 902–9). Gorman's thematic approach to *theosis* represents a recent trend where "biblical scholars have started recognizing and exploring the theme of theosis in the writings of the NT" (Barbarick 2015, p. 288). Other NT scholars have approached the Gospel of John and the Pauline epistles in a similar manner (Blackwell 2016; Thate et al. 2018; Litwa 2012; Gorman 2009).

The second approach, which may be referred to as a "theotic" approach, involves treating specific scriptural verses or passages as "theotic" texts. For instance, 2 Corinthians 3:18 is often regarded as the "most frankly theotic passage in Paul" (Finlan 2009, p. 75). While not all authors use the term "theotic", several have adopted this perspective, identifying other theotic passages such as Ps 82 (Mosser 2005), Col 2–3 (Blackwell 2014), 2 Pet 1:3–11 (Reuschling 2014), and Matt 18:15–35 (Kim 2022).

In light of these two approaches, I propose a more comprehensive *deificational* hermeneutic as a means of theological interpretation for several reasons. First, the theology of deification is not only a significant topic of ecumenical interest but is also foundational to Christian theology. Second, *imago Dei*, which is intrinsically linked to deification, serves as a unifying framework. Finally, this hermeneutic places readerly formation at the core of TIS.

2.1. Deification Constitutive of Christian Theology

In Orthodox theology, the doctrine of deification "is not some isolated theologoumenon, but has what one might call structural significance". It is intrinsically related to the other doctrines of incarnation, cosmology, eschatology, anthropology, and soteriology (Louth 2008, pp. 32–44).

In the works of Irenaeus, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Cyril, and even Augustine and Leo, the concept of deification "is precisely the capstone and summation of all that has been revealed in Christ and that is in store for the Christian faithful" (Keating 2015, pp. 277–81). This paper aligns with Keating in asserting that the theology of deification is fundamental to Christian theology. However, in his attempt to maintain a theological balance between preserving a clear distinction between Creator and creature on the one hand, and understanding the genuine relationship between them along with the authentic conveyance of divine life and qualities to the creature on the other (Keating 2015, p. 282), Keating does not specify the contents of the divine qualities that can be conveyed from Creator to creature, which will be covered later.

2.2. Deification and imago Dei

Since its inception, *theosis* has been intrinsically associated with the concept of *imago Dei*. Summarizing the post-Nicene consensus concerning the *imago Dei* in humanity, Frances M. Young states: "Athanasius and the Cappadocians, those who fashioned the notion of theopoiesis/theosis and recognized that it implied Nicene orthodoxy, were those who had

a sense of the interrelationship of differing aspects of God's image as presented in different parts of Scripture" (Young 2013, pp. 173–74).

The intrinsic connection between deification and *imago Dei* lies in the understanding of human nature and identity embedded in the creation account (Gen 1–3), whose narratives provide the locus classicus for biblical thinking about human nature (Stone 2004, p. 48). Speaking of personal identity sustained from this world to the world-to-come, it is suggested that Paul hints at a relational ontology, namely, "the preservation of our personhood, 'you' and 'me', in relational terms: with Christ, in Christ" (Joel B. Green 2004, p. 100). For Gorman, the *imago Dei* is embodied in Christ as the image of God. Paul's spirituality and soteriology should be characterized as believers' transformative participation in Christ (Gorman 2018, p. 182).

Based on his exegesis of Gen 1:26–28, Middleton confirms the royal-functional reading of the *imago Dei*: on the one hand, humans are like God in exercising royal power on earth, which denotes that image is "representational", indicating similarity or analogy between God and humans; on the other hand, the divine ruler delegated to humans a share in his rule of the earth. In this sense, the image is "representative", which designates the responsible office and task entrusted to humanity in administering the earthly realm on God's behalf (Middleton 2005, p. 88).

The connection between *imago Dei* and deification comes in when Middleton sees the similarity between Gen 1 and Ps 8. Namely, both reflect a conceptual milieu or symbolic world. *Imago Dei*, in its representational aspect, is reflected in the fact that humanity is crowned/adorned with an analogous "glory" (*kābôd*) and "honor" (*hādār*) for the terrestrial rule (Ps 8:5 [MT 8:6]). Such terms, with royal connotations to describe both God and the human creature, are "made explicit when the psalmist asserts that humans are godlike or almost divine, which is the import of having been made 'little lower than ʾělōhīm'" (Middleton 2005, p. 58). Therefore, Middleton's insight manifests the intrinsic connection between *imago Dei* and *theosis*, or "godlike or almost divine" humanity.

Furthermore, reflecting on *imago Dei* in the Ancient Near Eastern background with the Mesopotamian notion of the king as an image of a god (as a particular crystallization of royal ideology) (Middleton 2005, p. 145), Middleton develops an ethics of power rooted in a theological model of the self as an empowered agent of compassion that would be serviceable for the Christian community in envisioning its calling in an increasingly violent and brutal world (Middleton 2005, pp. 33–34).

2.3. Readerly Formation Indispensable for TIS

As described above, Middleton's ethics of power is conducive to the third element of the proposed deificational hermeneutics: readerly formation, which is at the heart of TIS (McKinzie 2021, p. 6). Karl Barth proposes a "biblical attitude", an attitude, disposition, or demeanor adopted through training and inculcation in "the school of the Holy Spirit", a process in which we learn to think after the thoughts of the prophets and apostles, and on that basis, after the thoughts of others (Burnett 2001, p. 63). Barth's proposal opens the door to reflections on readerly formation. Based on Umberto Eco's "model reader",[6] Green is similarly concerned with "what sorts of communities are open and able to hear the words of Scripture as God's word addressed to them" (Joel B. Green 2011a, p. 9).

In alignment with the readerly formation is Norman Russell's ethical approach to deification,[7] which "takes deification to be the attainment of likeness to God through ascetic and philosophical endeavor, believers reproducing some of the divine attributes in their own lives by imitation. Behind this use of the metaphor lies the model of homoiosis, or attaining likeness to God" (Russell 2004, p. 2).

In sum, I have argued for deificational hermeneutics that it is more comprehensive than the "thematic" and "theotic" approaches identified in this paper. This hermeneutics takes seriously the theology of *theosis* as constitutive of Christian doctrine, holding *imago Dei* as its unitive and narrative framework, and aiming at readerly formation indispensable for TIS. Next, I will turn to the theological exegesis of 2 Pet 1:1–11.

3. Exegesis of 2 Pet 1:1–11

Theologians who advocate *theosis* almost unanimously agree that 2 Pet 1:4 is one of the most essential scriptural verses supporting the idea, if not the unique representative.[8] However, they rarely do much in-depth exegesis but rather mention the verse in passing and quickly delegate the work to their counterparts in biblical studies.

To begin with, the word κοινωνός, translated as "participants" (NRSV) or "partakers" (KJV, ESV), or its verb form "participate" (NIV), appears ten times in the NT corpus.[9] Its plural form indicates the corporate nature of those "companions", "partners", or "sharers".[10] By today, the word "participation" or "to participate" has become a "theotic" catchword for theological conversations on *theosis* (Christensen and Wittung 2008, p. 11).

What do these participants share in common? Before answering this question, it is important to look at the structure of 2 Peter. In his influential Jude, 2 Peter, Richard J. Bauckham identifies three types of passage apart from the opening (1:1–2) and concluding passages (3:17–18), namely, those which belong to the genre of testament, those which are apologetic in character, and the passages of an exhortatory nature. In particular, Bauckham views 1:3–11 as a summary of Peter's message in the category of the genre of testament (Bauckham 1990, pp. 41–42). However, despite the seeming neatness of his structural reconstruction, Bauckham fails to take into consideration Peter's cohesive theological motif beginning as early as in v. 1b. Similarly, even though most English translations start a new sentence at v. 3,[11] Reese argues that "[i]n Greek, v. 3 is grammatically linked to vv. 1–2 by the word ὡς (hōs, 'since, like, as'), and vv. 3–4 lack a main verb of their own … At the same time, we should keep in mind that the encouragement and teaching in vv. 3–11 flow right out of his desire that his readers may grow in their knowledge of Jesus" (Reese 2007, p. 134). Therefore, this essay takes 1:1–11, and more accurately, 1:1b–11, as a cohesive unit, which, following Bauckham, captures the central theme of Peter's message.

Now, let us return to what the sharers have in common. For Peter,[12] the first thing they share in common is the Christian faith (1:1), whose quality is "of the same kind as ours [Peter and his companions]". Such faith is obtained "in the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ".[13] The next thing they share is grace and peace (1:2), "multiplied" and obtained "in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord" (1:3). This "knowledge" through which they have gained grace and peace is also shared among the participants. Next, they have been given "the things toward life and godliness" by the divine power, received "through the knowledge of the one who has called you with his own glory and excellence". It is worth noting here that first, Jesus Christ is described as both God and Savior.[14] Second, "glory" and "excellence" (ἀρετῆ) belong to God in Christ. Moreover, the exhortation to "escape from the corruption" (1:4) also implies incorruptibility as another "thing" for sharing. Therefore, a preliminary reading of 1:1–4 shows that these seven "things" (τά),[15] namely, faith, grace, peace, knowledge, life, godliness, and incorruptibility, have their origin in Jesus as savior (1:1) and Lord (1:2). It is based on these seven "things" that Peter began to speak of the "precious and very great promises" (1:4). The goal of these promises is that "they may become participants of the divine nature" as the result of, or conditioned by, "having escaped from the corruption that is in the world in lust" (1:4). For Peter, his audiences are already participants,[16] though not yet in its fullest sense, anticipating full realization in the eschaton because God in Christ "has given us everything needed for life and godliness" (1:3) and "has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises" (1:4).

The following promise is delivered in v. 11: "the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly granted to you". Only this time, the promise is framed as a future blessing of admittance into the eternal kingdom. For this promise to be fulfilled, Peter uses a Hellenistic rhetorical device called *sorites*, or chain argument (Bauckham 1990, p. 56), and exhorts his audience to devote "all eagerness" (1:5), faith, excellence (ἀρετή), knowledge, self-control (1:6), endurance, godliness, mutual affection (1:7), and love. Then, in 1:8–9, Peter summarizes them as "these things" (ταῦτα) twice. Positively, Peter expects these nine things to "be possessed as properties" and also as "increasing",

which resemble seeds growing in fertile soil. Negatively, if these things are "not present", then Peter's addresses are near-sighted, blind, and forgetful of the cleansing of old sins.

In a nutshell, Peter structures the first eleven introductory verses around two promises—in 1:4 and 1:11. He employs a literary strategy of progressive repetition to drive home his exhortation with promises. There is a certain degree of parallelism in the pattern of recurrence in that faith, knowledge, and godliness appear in both sets of "things" or properties that are shared by his audience. It is important to note that the excellence (ἀρετῆ) of God in Christ (1:3) has now become the property of Peter's audience (1:5), the implication of which can hardly be underestimated, namely, some properties of God in Christ can be, have been, and will fully be, communicated into believers. Again, using the imagery of seed, specific attributes of God can be, have been, and will fully be, planted or reproduced into believers. The parallel structure in 1:1–11 can be illustrated as follows:[17]

A faith, righteousness (1:1)
grace, peace (1:2)
life, godliness, *his divine power*, knowledge, *his glory*, *his excellence* (1:3)
B *his divine nature*, *escape from* corruption (incorruptibility) (1:4)
A eagerness, faith, excellence, knowledge (1:5)
self-control, endurance, godliness (1:6)
mutual affection, love (1:7)
B *entry into* the eternal kingdom will be richly provided (1:11)

A few remarks can be initially made from the present exegetical work. First, even though the phrase "divine nature", (θείας φύσεως) is a typical example of *hapax legomenon*,[18] arguably, it is not an abstract, philosophical, or metaphysical concept whose meaning allegedly is only to be retrieved by resorting to resources outside the text. Richard Bauckham argues that the divine nature does not refer to the nature of the one God but to the nature of the gods, the immaterial beings of the divine world. In my opinion, Bauckham's reading is far-stretched.[19] Instead, the divine nature is concretely defined by the divine properties or attributes before and after v. 4, some of which (such as excellence) can be communicated or reproduced from God in Christ to the faithful. Other attributes, such as divine power (1:3), belong uniquely to God.[20] Therefore, the divine nature is Peter's description of who God is in Christ in anthropomorphic terms. By employing this hapax legomenon, his goal is not primarily to affirm the Creator–creature distinction—no matter how true that is—but to demonstrate that God in Christ is, and has been, more than willing to share the divine attributes with the faithful.

Second, the structural parallelism in 1:1–11 indicates that for Peter, "participation in the divine nature" is closely related to the corresponding promise in v. 11. The entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ ushers the faithful into an everlasting realm of God's royal rule.

Third, the two sets of properties are illustrative of the divine nature in a non-exhaustive way, including faith, grace, peace, knowledge, life, godliness, incorruptibility, eagerness, excellence, self-control, endurance, mutual affection, and love. Among these attributes, at least grace, peace, life, godliness, and excellence are directly communicated from God in Christ. Attributes such as the divine power (1:3) belong exclusively to God. Others, such as the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ (1:1) and glory (1:3), will be accounted for later.

Fourth, the two cycles in the parallel structure form a complete theological unit in that the first cycle (1:1–4) enables the faithful to *escape from* corruption (1:4), and the second (1:5–11) facilitates their *entrance into* the eternal kingdom of God in Christ. At the center of the parallel structure lies Peter's *deificational* message, which serves as the end of their *escape* and the means of their *entrance*.

Finally, I have shown that the first exhortation with promise (1:4), participating or partaking in the divine nature, is simultaneously an accomplished fact and an already-and-not-yet reality. The second promise (1:11) is yet to be fully realized, which indicates that the second set of eleven attributes can be likened to seeds planted into the soil that need to be constantly nurtured and cultivated, awaiting future consummation in Christ's eternal kingdom as a realm

for believers to execute God's royal power.[21] Therefore, the divine attributes that constitute the divine nature are closely linked to the idea of *imago Dei* as human rule (Middleton 2005, p. 89).

4. What Can We See Through the "Prism" of Deification That Cannot Otherwise Be Seen?

4.1. Peter's Creative Countercultural Message by the Transformative Usage of Hellenistic Language

Situated "within the framework of the Hellenistic world … teeming with diverse gods and philosophies" (Reese 2007, pp. 124–25), Peter's message to his audience is countercultural if we read his epistle in light of the *imago Dei*. Similarly to the author of Gen 1–11, who critiques the royal ideology of the ancient near-Eastern world by "crystaliz[ing] the central Israelite insight about being human in a term typically applied only to idols, kings, and priests" (Middleton 2005, p. 231). Peter borrows Hellenistic language such as ἀρετῆ, ἐγκράτεια, and εὐσέβεια, "the very language used by the philosophers, poets, and dramatists of the day to talk about the virtuous life" (Reese 2007, p. 125), transforms them in a way that negates their original meaning, and (re)-traces their origin to God's divine nature.[22] In this way, Peter assures his audience that they are like God in exercising royal power.

Middleton suggests that Gen 1–11 serves as an ideological critique. He argues that through the pervasive critique of idolatry and absolute kingship in Israel, the author of Gen 1 "daringly seized on the bold symbol of the *imago Dei* to restate for a new context Israel's unique insight about being human". Moreover, the author "chose to crystalize the central Israelite insight about being human in a term typically applied only to idols, kings, and priests—*ṣelem ʾĕlōhīm*". For Middleton, such a theological imagination "must be acknowledged as one of the most daring acts of theological imagination within Scripture" (Middleton 2005, p. 231). In essential continuity with the religious and ethical ideals of Israel's Scripture demonstrated by the author of Gen 1–11, Peter delivers an equally daring, theological message affirming the believers' Godlike identity and royal honor to counter the multiplicity of gods in the multicultural Roman Empire.

There have been some counterarguments. Bauckham, for example, suggests that Peter's usage of Hellenistic virtue language "offers a degree of Hellenization of the gospel message" balanced by his apocalyptic eschatology (Bauckham 1990, p. 49). Therefore, he identifies 2 Pet 1:3–11 as "perhaps the most Hellenistic in the New Testament, though the Hellenistic language is carefully controlled by the Christian content" (Bauckham 1990, p. 48). Reese critiques Bauckham in that his analysis of the sources of 2 Peter and Jude "distracts from the uniqueness of 2 Peter's own contributions to the canon" (Reese 2007, p. 115). She is also insightful in noticing that "[w]hile Peter draws on many aspects of Hellenistic culture—values, language, and philosophy—all of these are only servants of the message about the Father, his son Jesus, and the kingdom that is both present and yet to be completed" (Reese 2007, p. 125). It can be further argued that Peter's *deificational* message, wrapped up in the most Hellenistic language, overturns the Hellenistic worldview of gods and their virtue vocabularies when considered in light of the *imago Dei*. Perhaps the same passage can be said to be the most counter-Hellenistic in the NT.

Peter assures his audience that even though they are situated in a culture with numerous gods, they possess real Godlike attributes and royal honor. They are not to confuse the divine attributes with the virtue list in the Hellenistic world. The real virtues belong to God in Christ. Growing in them guarantees a richly provided entry into Christ's eternal kingdom where they can continue to rule as *imago Dei*. In sum, Peter delivers a strong countercultural message by creatively furbishing new theological meanings to Hellenistic vocabularies.

4.2. Readerly Formation as Fruit of Deification

After enumerating the second set of attributes, Peter urges his audience: "For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 1:8). For his audience, Peter's exhortation of fruitfulness is nothing abstract but a sincere expectation that they are to respond to God's calling and election (1:10) by being active recipients of the divine attributes, not merely as a future hope but as a present exercise. It is not until this graced response has been generated that morality and

ethics can be rightfully spoken of.[23] Therefore, readerly formation is the fruit of the deificational process in which God's divine attributes are constantly reproduced into believers and constitute their new identity in the new creation according to the *imago Dei*.

Middleton is aware of the historical readings of Gen 1:1–2:3 through the lens of the Western aspiration of the scientific conquest of nature, which results in violence against women and the environment. However, Middleton refutes the ethical concerns of God's power and argues that the text reveals that God is depicted neither as a warrior creating by primordial violence nor as an extrinsic transcendence unilaterally imposing order on the world. Instead, Gen 1 depicts God as a generous Creator, sharing power with a variety of creatures (especially humanity), inviting them (and trusting them—at some risk) to participate in the creative (and historical) process. For Middleton, the liberating character of the *imago Dei* is grounded in the nature of God, who calls the world into being as an act of generosity. The vision of God's love cannot be artificially separated from an understanding of God's creative power (Middleton 2005, pp. 296–97). In continuity with Israel's Scriptures, Peter creatively mingles God's power (2 Pet 1:3) with love (1:7). God in Christ exhibits tremendous generosity by sharing the divine nature through the communication of attributes. Peter encourages his readers that a rightful critique of the royal ideology and Hellenistic worship of gods ushers in the fruit of mutual affection and love. Against immorality that comes from false teachings, believers are entrusted with the capacity to rule over lust (1:4) and exhibit true godliness (1:6–7).

One example suffices to illustrate the point. Under the dominant political ideology, the Christians in mainland China in general, and the "underground" Christians in particular, have suffered constant oppression, if not persecution, even half a century after China implemented the open-door policy. Resurgent in recent years are the "personality cults" that exalt the political leader and beautify the abuse of power (Momoi 2021). To make things worse, the lack of Christian communication and communion due to tight political control has resulted in a number of heresies with false teachings and concomitant immorality.[24] Pressured by the political image of absolute kingship from without and religious image of idolatry from within, Chinese Christians have by and large exhibited the divine attributes of love toward the enemy, peace in society, mutual affection within Christian communities, endurance toward suppression and persecution, and self-control toward immorality. The churches and Christians in the Global North, though situated in vastly different socio-economic-religious situations, may do well if we heed Middleton's clarion call "to stand tall again with dignity and to take seriously their royal-priestly vocation as God's authorized agents and representatives in the world" (Middleton 2005, p. 231) in our deifying humanity as the *imago Dei*.

5. Conclusions

In this essay, I first summarized two approaches to the theological study of deification in relation to the Scriptures: the thematic and the theotic. Building upon these two frameworks with the aim of developing a more comprehensive and robust approach, I advocate for a more extensive deificational hermeneutics that enhances the Theological Interpretation of Scriptures (TIS). This argument is grounded in three perspectives: (1) that the theology of deification is foundational to Christian theology and holds ecumenical significance, (2) that the *imago Dei* provides a unifying framework, and (3) that reader formation lies at the core of theological interpretation. Through exegetical analysis of 2 Peter 1:1–11, I have demonstrated several insights that would remain obscured without the "prism" of deification.

As an exercise of theological interpretation, this article, together with its proposed *deificational* hermeneutics, affirms the validity and value of reading Scripture through the "prism" of the theology of deification. The word "prism" is significant to biblical interpretation in that, first, it is invitational in nature. Interpretation of Scripture is not to be bound by the process of historical criticism proper,[25] but to be liberated by integrating the rich tradition of Christian theology through the creative, theological imagination of interpreters in various social locations. Second, just like white light is separated into a spectrum of colors through glass or other transparent objects with surfaces at an acute angle with each other, the composite light of Scripture can be refracted from the angle of canonical reading, "oriented to the knowledge of God"

(Vanhoozer 2005, p. 24), rooted in "inner-biblical exegesis" (Fishbane 1989), resulting in a rainbow of colors that shine and penetrate "with immediacy into the lives of contemporary readers" (Joel B. Green 2007, p. 1).

Within this comprehensive framework of hermeneutics using *theosis* as a "prism", I now offer a clearer definition of the two existing approaches to deification. First, the "thematic" approach to deification works by identifying a beam of light from the composite light of Scripture. To put it another way, the thematic approach identifies *theosis* as one "beam" from the numerous "beams of light" shined from Scripture. Second, the "theotic" approach allows interpreters to assign *deificational* values to certain sporadic verses that lead to a potentially more profound understanding of *theosis*, which can be likened to identifying certain "photons" that carry with the "energy" of deification in the "light waves" of Scripture. When used properly, these two approaches fit into the comprehensive *deificational* hermeneutics as proposed by this article, providing the theological scaffolding for TIS.

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Notes

1 For an initial proposal, see (Fowl 2009). Overviews of TIS include (Treier 2008), and (Vanhoozer and Treier 2015).

2 There are different views regarding the date of the reaction to this "ferment". Joel Green, e.g., traces it to the eighteenth century, during which Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91) made a distinction between public and private uses of Scripture in the service of the rational investigation of the Bible distant from the polemics of dogmatic theology and advocacy of the study of the biblical canon by rational means, like any other book. See (Joel B. Green 2007, p. 1).

3 Jared Ortiz argues that "deification is biblical, traditional, and a constitutive part of all the major expressions of Christianity. … Moreover, each tradition has its own resources for thinking about deification" (Ortiz 2021, pp. 2–3).

4 Ortiz and his colleagues dedicated an edited volume as an exercise in what has been called "a receptive ecumenism", which is not about debates or a joint statement but about hospitality and "an exchange of gifts" among Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Anglican, Baptist, and Wesleyan voices. See (Ortiz 2021, p. 3). For an important Global South voice, see (Feng 2024). For similar ecumenical recognition, see (Mosser 2021; Gavrilyuk 2009).

5 For example, a few articles are related to the retrieval of deification as a theme in various NT passages, including Matt 18:15–35, 1 Peter, 2 Pet 1:3–11, Luke–Acts, Col 2–3, Romans, and 2 Cor 3:18. See (Kim 2022; Barbarick 2015; Reuschling 2014; Kuecker 2014; Blackwell 2014; Gorman 2011, pp. 13–34; Litwa 2008).

6 See e.g., (Eco 1979). For a discussion of Eco's development of the notion "model reader", see (Pisanty 2015).

7 Theoretically, the passage could also be approached ontologically. However, this paper adopts the view of Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), for whom 2 Pet 1:4 was the preferred means of expressing how human beings appropriate the divine life. For Cyril, baptism into Christ through the Spirit enables us to participate in the divine nature not in an ontological sense but morally. See (Russell 2004, p. 201).

8 Michael Christensen and Jeffery Wittung list only 2 Pet 1:4 in their introduction. See (Christensen and Wittung 2008, p. 11). Keating lists 2 Pet 1:4 as an example of a key text. See (Keating 2015, p. 281). Ortiz lists 2 Pet 1:4 with other verses, such as 2 Cor 8:9, 13; Rom 6:3; 1 John 3:1; Eph 3:19; see (Ortiz 2021, p. 1).

9 Matt 23:3; Luke 5:10; 1 Cor 10:18, 20; 2 Cor 1:7, 8:23; Phlm 17; Heb 10:33; 1 Pet 5:1; 2 Pet 1:4. Among these references, only 1 Pet 5:1 is theologically similar to 2 Pet 1:4 in that Peter describes himself as one "who is a participant of the glory that is about to be revealed" (ὁ καὶ τῆς μελλούσης ἀποκαλύπτεσθαι δόξης κοινωνός).

10 BDAG renders κοινωνός as companion, partner, and sharer. See (Danker et al. 2000, "κοινωνός", p. 553).

11 As an example, NRSV regards 2 Peter 1:1–2 as Peter's salutation. Many scholars follow these translations. For example, Wyndy Corbin Reuschling begins her treatment with v. 3. See (Reuschling 2014, p. 275).

12 Reese argues that despite the fact that the majority of commentators agrees that 2 Peter is written by someone who follows an ancient practice of pseudepigraphy and use Peter's name, 1 and 2 Peter may be examined in terms of their theological relationship as part of the same sub-canonical corpus. Reese adopts the canonical approach, which "bypasses traditional arguments about the historical author of Peter and instead focuses on the significance of reading the New Testament canon as *scripture*" (Reese 2007, pp. 119–20). This essay follows Reese in designating Peter as the author of 2 Peter.

13 The scriptural translations in this essay are adapted from NRSV.

[14] Based on the fact that only one article, τοῦ, governs the whole genitive clause in v. 2, Reese applies Sharp's rule, and argues that "the general consensus is that the phrase refers to one person, Jesus Christ, who is described as both God and Savior" (Reese 2007, p. 131).

[15] I intentionally do not define or name what these "things" are to avoid rushing into conclusions before the full picture is in view. Naming or defining them as "virtues", in my opinion, is an exegetically premature move. See e.g., (Harink 2009, p. 209).

[16] Harink argues that in 1 Pet 1:3–4, the author "reminds us of what we have already been given, of where we already stand, of what we are already promised, and for what we have already been called and chosen" (Harink 2009, p. 209).

[17] John Paul Heil also identifies a parallel in 1:1–15. But the pattern he recognizes is a chiastic parallel in the form of ABCBA. See (Heil 2013, pp. 206–7).

[18] Reese follows Al Wolters and translates the phrase as "divine being". See (Reese 2007, p. 135); cf. (Wolters 1990).

[19] See (Bauckham 1990, p. 75). Likewise, Reese speculates that Peter "could assume that his audience would know what they were" by resorting to God's covenant to suggest the content of the promise. Reese's speculation is rather forced. See (Reese 2007, p. 135).

[20] Harink argues without explanation that "[a] Christian lives to God as one who already shares in God's power". (Harink 2009, p. 209). However, the word δύναμις appears three times in 2 Peter (1:3, 16, 2:11), all of which imply that such power belongs exclusively to God (1:3), Christ (1:16), or angels (2:11). Even if we extend the scope to 1 Peter, none of the two references (1:5; 3:22) assigns the power to humanity.

[21] To execute God's power is different from possessing the divine power as an attribute. In human society, certain power can be conditionally endowed to individuals. However, once that individual becomes disqualified, she can no longer exercise that power.

[22] Excellence, or moral goodness, is now used to describe Jesus. See (Reese 2007, p. 125).

[23] As a theological ethicist, Reuschling, argues that *theosis* in 2 Pet 1:3–11 is not just an end but also a means by which we learn to embody the goodness of God as a key motivation and purpose to Christian ethics. Reuschling begins her study of 2 Pet 1:3–11 from a moral approach. This essay starts from the divine initiative to communicate divine attributes, and upon believers' graced response, leads to Christian morality and ethics. See (Reuschling 2014, pp. 278–82).

[24] One commonly identified heretical group is called the Church of God Almighty, or Eastern Lightening, originated from China in 2001. Its leader, Zhao Weishan, taught that a woman is now God's incarnate, a woman Christ. See (Bu 2013, pp. 8–9).

[25] Joel Green provides a nuanced delineation of distinct conceptions of "historical criticism": reconstruction of the past ("historical criticism 1"), reconstructions of the events of the Bible's textualization ("historical criticism 2"), and study of the historical context that informs the biblical materials ("historical criticism 3"). Green points out that the first two are methodologically beholden to the atheistic assumptions and attitudes that theological interpretation must reject. See (Joel B. Green 2011b, pp. 160–61).

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