CONCLUSION

The author of Hebrews selected, shaped, and narrated the events and characters of Heb 11. In the particular section of Heb 11 that deals with Abraham and his descendants (vv. 8–22), there are appeals to significant identity shaping collective memories such as Joseph and the exodus. The surprising comment that Joseph remembered the exodus is one example of the way in which some collective memories can be appealed to as evidence for a true hope, and an eschatological future that is embedded in the memory of the past. The book of Hebrews describes the eschatological future as something that has already begun (demonstrated in Heb 12 as well as in Heb 1:2) and makes use of collective memory as one more means to solidify that anticipation.

"You Shall Be Holy, For I Am Holy": Theosis in 1 Peter

CLIFFORD A. BARBARICK
ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Abstract — In recent years, NT scholars have recognized the idea of "theosis" or "deification" within the pages of various NT writings. To date, however, little to nothing has been written about theosis in 1 Peter. This article seeks to fill the lacuna. For the author of 1 Peter, conformity to the holiness of God is the telos of the Christian community. The community is called to fulfill the purposes of Israel by embodying God's holiness and, thereby, leading the nations to worship God. For the author of 1 Peter, however, the content of God's holiness is defined by the pattern of Christ. In other words, the community will be conformed to the image of God by imitating Christ's example. As in Pauline theology, Christosis is theosis. The author also affirms that conformity to God's holiness is accomplished corporately by means of divine enablement. It is as Israel, not as individuals, that they fulfill their telos. And it is only because they have been regenerated and continually nourished by the "living and enduring word of God" (1:23) that the community can be conformed into the image of God revealed through Christ.

Key Words — 1 Peter, cruciformity, deification, holiness, imitation, Israel, suffering, theosis

The author of 1 Peter never uses the term theosis or any related words to describe deification; nevertheless, theosis, or "becoming like God," occupies a central place in the letter's theology and ethics. Indeed, for the author of 1 Peter theosis—understood Christocentrically—is the telos of the Christian community.

Theosis in the New Testament

In Western churches, the idea of theosis, or deification, has been largely ignored. Ben Blackwell notes, however, that a recent increase in ecumenical dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox Church has given renewed
life to the doctrine in Western circles. Even more recently, biblical scholars have started recognizing and exploring the theme of theosis in the writings of the NT.

Adolf von Harnack, who believed that the doctrine of theosis results from the Hellenization of Christianity, expressed the Western discomfort with the doctrine. The religion changed, he famously argues, from "the glowing hope of the Kingdom of heaven into a doctrine of immortality and deification." Statements such as this one, however, overlook the rich traditions of deification within Jewish thought. The heart of the holiness code, to which we will return later in the essay, hinges on the call to become like God: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2). God's character defines Israel's intended identity. To realize God's purposes for his people, in other words, Israel must become like God. The authors of the NT, including the author of 1 Peter, anchor their theology of deification in the depths of this Jewish understanding of holiness. By discussing "theosis" in the NT, therefore, we are not implying that the NT authors inserted a Hellenistic concept, unprecedented in earlier Jewish thought, into their theology. Rather, we are using a technical term that focuses attention on the place of deification in the much broader concept of holiness.

Admittedly, the technical term theosis does not appear in the NT. Gregory of Nazianzus coined the term in the fourth century. This does not mean, however, that the idea of deification is absent in the NT. Interpreters, both patristic and present-day, often appeal to 2 Pet 1:4 (which describes Christians as becoming sharers in the divine nature) and 2 Cor 3:18 (which envisions Christians being transformed into the image of God) as evidence of theotic thinking in the NT. But theosis in the NT is not limited to these two verses.

Recently, scholars have given special attention to the place of theosis in Paul's theology. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, for example, affirm that "theosis is central to the theology of Paul." Michael Gorman goes so far as to say that theosis, rather than, say, justification, is the center of Paul's theology. He even contends that Romans should be considered the first Christian treatise on theosis. Within the last three years, 1

Ben Blackwell and David Litwa have both contributed monographs on theosis in Paul's writings, and the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2013 included an entire session dedicated to the topic of theosis in the NT.

Despite the growing interest in theosis, however, little to nothing has been written about the role of deification in the theology of 1 Peter. This oversight may offer evidence that 1 Peter continues to be treated as an exegetical stepchild, and this essay seeks to fill the lacuna. Deification holds an important place in Petrine theology, and the particular formulation of theosis in 1 Peter can contribute to the Christian doctrine more generally. Before analyzing 1 Peter, however, we need to sketch a broad definition of the term theosis.

A Working Definition of Theosis

Finlan warns in his study of theosis in Pauline theology: "The question of whether or not Paul taught a doctrine of theosis is entirely dependent on what we mean by the term." We could say the same for our study of 1 Peter. The malleability of the term theosis makes a study such as this susceptible to circular reasoning. We should not be surprised to find theosis in 1 Peter, in other words, if we define the term based on what we find in 1 Peter. Therefore, although we need to remain open to the particular formulation of theosis in 1 Peter, we must outline a basic definition at the outset. To begin, we will articulate three things that theosis is not.

First, when we use the term theosis, we are not invoking the comprehensive doctrine of deification in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Gösta Hallonsten complains that the concept of theosis is becoming increasingly

---

7. Brenda Colijn, for example, gives ample attention to Paul, 2 Peter, and even John in her chapter on theosis in the NT, but she makes no mention of 1 Peter (Images of Salvation in the New Testament (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 249–67).
8. Likewise, when Finlan and Kharlamov list biblical passages that express the idea of theosis, they include 2 Pet 1:4, several passages from Paul and the Johannine literature, and even Matt 5:48: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect" ("Introduction.", 4–5). They fail, however, to include any passages from 1 Peter, even though Matt 5:48 is an allusion to a verse from Lev 19 that 1 Peter cites directly.
unclear because interpreters often confuse the “theme of deification” with the “doctrine of deification.”

The doctrine of deification is a complex of thought that includes a certain understanding of creation, anthropology, the incarnation, sanctification, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

In a short, occasional letter such as 1 Peter, we will not find this full complex of thought. Instead, at best, we may find the theme of deification. Second, Christian deification does not mean an ontological fusion with the divine essence. Third, deification does not eliminate personal identity. Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware explains, “Christification does not signify annihilation.” Quoting Macarius of Egypt, he continues, “In the Age to come, God is ‘all in all’ (1 Cor. 15:28); yet Peter is Peter, Paul is Paul, Philip is Philip. Each one retains his own nature and personal identity.”

The variety of possible expressions of theosis further complicates outlining a broad definition of the term. David Litwa, for example, recognizes multiple expressions of theosis in the ancient world that differ from one another in terms of chronology, mode, motivating power, and result. For example, does a person become like God before or after death? Does theosis come about through ritual or moral practice? Is God the motivating power for deification, or does it result from human action? Litwa contends, however, that these distinctions are secondary outgrowths of a more fundamental conception. The basis of deification, he states, “is sharing in those distinctive qualities that make (a) God (a) God.” Gorman offers a similar basic definition: “Theosis means taking on certain divine attributes.” These broad definitions highlight two fundamental features of theosis in Christian thought: participation with the divine and reflection of divine attributes or qualities. Although interpreters debate which divine attributes humans can properly assume, Gorman concludes that “it is generally agreed that these include holiness and immortality.”

Also, within Christian thought, theosis is intimately related to Christology. If Christ is the Son who reveals the Father, then imitating Christ would mean also imitating God. And, if Christ reveals God most clearly in the kenosis of the cross, then, as Gorman puts it, “cruciformity is really theoformity.” As the following analysis will demonstrate, this understanding of theosis occupies an important place in the theology of 1 Peter.

The author understands that his audience, as the new Israel, is called to embody the holiness of God, and they will do so by imitating the koinon pattern of Christ.

THEOSIS IN 1 PETER

1 Peter begins with a theologically compact salutation. The author addresses the letter to a variety of communities throughout Asia Minor that he labels the “elect (ἐκλεκτοὶ) exiles of the Diaspora,” using terminology the OT employs to refer to Israel’s special status as God’s chosen people.

He then provides three parallel prepositional phrases that outline the grounds, means, and telos of the communities’ status with God. First, their election is grounded in the foreknowledge of God (κατὰ πρόγνωσιν). The phrase emphasizes the divine initiative for the audiences’ election; their status originates in God’s will. Second, their election occurred by means of the Holy Spirit (ἐν ἀγαθῷ πνεύματος). And third, the purpose or telos of their election is obedience and the sprinkling of Christ’s blood (εἰς ἱππαχόν καὶ ῥαντισμὸν ἁμαρτιῶν θησαυρὸς Χριστοῦ). This final prepositional phrase poses interpretive challenges, however. What obedience does the author have in mind? And how is the sprinkling of Christ’s blood the telos of their election? Would it not make more sense for the sprinkling of Christ’s blood to be the cause of their elect status?

In a later section, this article will offer a possible interpretation of “the sprinkling of Christ’s blood”; first, however, what “obedience” does the author envision as the telos of his audiences’ election?

The author next refers to obedience in 1:14–15. “Like obedient children,” he exhorts his audience, “do not be conformed to the desires of

18 Gorman, Inhabiting the Cruciform God, 1.
19 For a list of OT passages, see Paul J. Achtemeier, 1 Peter, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 8-10.
20 John H. Elliott (s Peter, AB 37B [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000], 319) and Joel B. Green (s Peter, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 20) both take εἰς as causal rather than telic. Green’s resistance to the telic reading is grounded in the difficulty of understanding the “sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ” as the result, rather than the cause, of sanctification. Hopefully, the interpretation of the “sprinkling of the blood” outlined in this article will address Green’s well-founded concern.
21 Lewis Donelson also notes the thematic and linguistic connection between 1:12 and 1:14: “In 1:12, obedience is portrayed as the proper destiny of the readers. Thus the phrase ‘obedient children’ is revealing of the core outlook of 1 Peter” (1 and 2 Peter and Jude, NTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010], 42).
of God regenerates its own kind, and it does so continually. As the author promises in 2:1–2, the word that regenerates them like a father’s seed will continue to nourish them like a mother’s milk (referred to as λογικόν γάλα), growing them into their salvation.

After reiterating that being conformed to the holiness of God is a divinely enabled transformation, the author turns to outline the content of this holiness. What will it look like when the obedient children reflect God’s holiness? What will it look like, in other words, when they realize the purpose of their election? In short, the author writes, they will look like Israel, though he redefines Israel according to the archetypal pattern of Christ.

In 2:4–12, the author invokes titles reminiscent of Israel to describe his audience. First, he writes, they are a spiritual house being built up in order to be a holy priesthood that offers spiritual sacrifices through Jesus Christ. In Isa 61, the prophet describes Israel in similar terms, announcing that Israel will be called priests of the Lord and that they will minister to God (61:6). In 1 Peter’s image, the stones used to construct this spiritual house are “living stones” like the living stone that is their foundation, a stone for which election by God meant rejection by humans. Thus, the cruciform pattern of Christ is the foundation and structure of the spiritual house. Also, the “holy priesthood” in 1 Peter will offer sacrifices through Jesus Christ. Interpreters have variously identified these spiritual sacrifices, but the recurring image in 2:9 implies that the proclamation of God’s mighty acts might be the primary focus. And, as Karen Jobes observes, “that declaration is not to be by mere verbal expressions but also by living good lives among the pagans.” Offering these sacrifices “through Christ” may not refer to Christ as a mediator so much as to Christ as the model for the good life to be lived among the pagans. Thus, the “holy” priesthood will proclaim God by embodying his holiness in the cruciform pattern of Christ. Although such an interpretation can only be suggested at this point, the author makes the same connection more explicitly in the next paragraphs.

In 2:9, the author continues defining his audience according to the titles of Israel. “You are an elect race,” he writes, “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people in order that you might proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9). Elliott notes that these corporate epithets of ancient Israel “identify believers as

---

22. Elliott, 1 Peter, 383.

23. See Philip L. Tite, “Nursemings, Milk and Moral Development in the Greco-Roman Context: A Reappraisal of the Paedogenetic Utilization of Metaphor in 1 Peter 2:1–5,” JSNT 31 (2009): 371–400. Tite’s research shows ancients understood that a mother’s milk had the ability to shape the nursing child in such a way that the child assumed the attributes of his mother.


members of the covenant community of the end time and sharers in the honor, dignity, and status of God's special people.”

They also place the audience under the imperative call to holiness; it is to Israel that God says, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 19:2). As the new Israel, the Christian community enjoys the honors and responsibilities of God's elect. Joel Green explains: “to embrace the mantle of Israel's identity as God's people is inescapably to embrace Israel's vocation to mediate the purpose and blessings of God to the world.”

In Isa 2, the prophet envisions Israel as a house built on the highest of the mountains, raised above the hills and made visible to all. The word of the Lord will go out from Zion, and the nations will stream to the mountain in order that Israel might teach them to walk in the paths of the Lord (2:2–3). Similarly, in Isa 49:6, the prophet compares Israel to a light given to the nations so that God's salvation might reach them. David Garland concludes, “Israel was called to be a light to the nations, a beacon that would draw those in darkness to God and to God's city set on Mount Zion.” In Matt 5, Jesus invokes this imagery to establish the mission for his disciples. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus says. “Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:14, 16). The mission once assigned to Israel has now been given to the disciples.

Similarly, in 1 Pet 2:12, the author exhorts his audience to fulfill the calling of Israel. In language reminiscent of Matt 5:16, he writes, “Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they might, when they see your good deeds, glorify God on the day of his visitation.” Israel was called to be a light to the Gentiles, drawing them to glorify God by embodying his holiness. In 1 Pet, the author calls his audience to the same responsibility. Once, they were conformed to the desires of the flesh. Now, they appear to resemble the holiness of God; and when they embody that holiness in “good deeds,” they will fulfill the mission of Israel and draw the nations to worship God. But what are those good deeds?

In the next lengthy section, the author offers specific instructions to his community, and the behaviors and attitudes he encourages are all expressions of the normative pattern of Christ. 1 Peter 2:13–3:9 can be loosely organized into a chiastic pattern. At the bookends (2:13–17 and 3:8–9), the author offers instructions to the whole community. In the next layer, the

26. Elliott, 1 Peter, 444.
27. Green, 1 Peter, 220–21 (emphasis added).
29. Garland, Reading Matthew, 60.

author provides instructions for various household relationships (slaves in 2:18–22; wives and husbands in 3:1–7). Then, in the central piece of the chiasm, the author describes the pattern of Christ that provides the controlling norm for all of his other instructions. Christ selflessly endured abuse without retaliation because he trusted God rather than grasping for power. In a similar way, slaves and wives are called to submit to their social superiors; and, when they do so, they become exemplars of Christ’s pattern. The whole community follows their pattern, which is itself a reflection of the pattern of Christ, by submitting to the ruling authorities and refusing to repay abuse for abuse. Throughout this larger section, therefore, the author defines “good deeds” according to the pattern of Christ. Thus, for his community, being conformed to the holiness of God and thereby fulfilling the mission of Israel means reflecting the pattern of Christ. Conformity to the pattern of Christ is conformity to the holiness of God. Christosis is theosis.

Green identifies the same connection between anthropology, theology, and Christology in his analysis of the theology of 1 Peter. According to the creation narratives in Genesis, God creates humans in his own image. “Accordingly,” Green writes, “the embodied existence of human beings has its singular vocation to reflect the image of God.” When God exalts Israel, “You shall be holy, because I am holy,” he calls them to fulfill their full humanity. The author of 1 Peter quotes God’s exhortation to Israel and, Green notes, “paints the Christian life as tracing the pattern of Christ.” For this author, therefore, “the human vocation to reflect the divine image is exeged in relation to God’s holiness and the imitation of Christ.”

This close relationship between theology, Christology, and anthropology can also be found in Pauline theology. Gorman recognizes that in Pauline theology Christ’s kenosis both reveals what God is truly like and what humanity truly should have been. “To be like Christ crucified is to be both most godly and most human,” Gorman writes. “Christification is divinization, and divinization is humanization.” When humans become like God, therefore, they fulfill their ultimate purpose as beings created in the image of God; and, according to both Paul and the author of 1 Peter, humans become like God by embodying the cruciform pattern of Christ.

Finlan argues that in Pauline theology conformity with Christ is “first ‘cruciform,’ and then ‘anastiform,’ to coin a term derived from ἀνάστασις, resurrection.” Theosis, Finlan argues, has to do primarily with the

30. Green, 1 Peter, 274–79.
31. Ibid., 175.
32. Ibid.
33. Gorman, Inhabiting, 37.
34. Finlan, “Can We Speak of Theosis in Paul?” 75.
"anastiform" experience. Finlan correctly recognizes the full parabolic arc of the pattern of Christ, but he unnecessarily separates crucifomy and anastiformity, and this may result from conflating suffering and self-emptying. Imitating the open-handed, self-giving cruciform pattern of Christ may result in suffering, the author of 1 Peter readily acknowledges, but suffering is not essential to the pattern. Rather, suffering is the likely (one might even say unavoidable) result of kenosis in the present age. In the present, God guards his elect as they suffer temporary trials while imitating Christ's kenotic pattern. At the second revelation of Christ, these trials will cease, but kenosis will continue.

Thus, the author of 1 Peter avoids the chronological movement from crucifomy to anastiformity that Finlan assumes. Also, he does not limit theosis to the anastiform experience. In 1 Peter, the pattern of Christ includes both self-emptying and resurrection and glory. The author of 1 Peter does not say that his audience must pass through the self-emptying so that they can enjoy exaltation. Self-emptying is not a means to exaltation, in other words. It is exaltation. It is not something the community must do in order to purify themselves so that they can imitate God; it is itself the imitation of God. Paradoxically, in the present age, this exaltation will often appear as suffering. Thus, the author (without using chronological markers) says of Christ in 3:18: θεανομετοθείς μὲν σαρκὶς, εἰς θεοποιηθές δὲ πνεύματι (woodenly: "On the one hand he was put to death in the flesh, but on the other he was made alive in the spirit").

Similarly, the author closely links suffering and exaltation in the experience of his audience. "Do not be surprised," he tells them, "at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (4:12). If they are being conformed to the holiness of God by reflecting the pattern of Christ, he tells them, they should not be surprised that they share in Christ's sufferings. Rather, they should rejoice. In 4:14, he encourages them: if they suffer without retalliation—that is, if they reflect the pattern of Christ—the Spirit of glory, the very Spirit of God rests on them. Self-emptying is exaltation. Enabled by the Spirit, they are fulfilling the call to embody God's holiness.

Could this, then, be the referent of the sprinkling of Christ's blood in 1:22? The telos of their election is being conformed to God's holiness, and because the author of 1 Peter defines God's holiness with the pattern of Christ, fulfilling their purpose as God's elect will mean living a life marked by his suffering. As Donelson notes, the sprinkling of the blood of Christ "may occur in the abuse that Christians endure when they follow in his footsteps." When interpreted thus, the "sprinkling of Christ's blood" can be understood as the telos, rather than the cause, of the audiences' election.

35. Donelson, I and II Peter and Jude, 27.