

THE PROWLING LION OF 1 PETER 5:8-9: EXEGESIS AND LITURGICAL ART

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1 Peter 5:8-9 (NRSV)

⁸ Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

Thesis

By employing a simile that connects the concepts “lion” and “devil,” the author of 1 Peter communicates to his 1st-century C.E. audience that as Christians they face both physical and spiritual dangers, and he offers advice to help them stand firm against both types of threat. I will analyze several elements of the two verses above in order to support this thesis.

“Keep alert”

The first verse begins with instructions to stay alert. The Greek word *grēgoreō* means to watch, to be awake, or to be vigilant.¹ Throughout the New Testament, forms of this word appear in eschatological contexts that accentuate the need for Christians to remain steadfast in their faith as God’s final judgment approaches.² The Petrine author is surely making this point;

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for example, eschatological references appear in 1 Peter 5:1 when he mentions “the glory to be revealed” and in 5:10 when he tells readers God has “called you to his eternal glory in Christ.” Similarly, in Mark’s “Little Apocalypse” Jesus advises his disciples to “keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come” (Mark 13:35), and in 1 Thessalonians Paul says “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (5:2), so “let us keep awake” (5:6).

Interestingly, in the latter verse Paul uses another word that also appears in 1 Peter 5:8 – *nēphō*, which can be translated as “be of sober mind” (NIV), “be clear headed,” or “discipline yourselves” (NRSV). González prefers “discipline” because it suggests cultivating and consistently following certain practices to gain strength and be prepared when a time of testing comes.³ She speculates that prayer is a specific discipline that might have helped early Christians to stay alert and not “slip into conformity with the surrounding [non-Christian] culture.” Through the use of *grēgoreō* and *nēphō*, the Petrine author stresses the need for his audience to be vigilant. In addition, he signals that the message in his next sentence is crucially important.

Conceptualization of the devil

The devil is described as an “adversary,” in the sense of an opponent in a

¹ All translations in this paper came from Mounce’s dictionary in the Accordance software.

² Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 340.

³ Catherine Gunsalus González, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, 1st ed., *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 147-149.

court of law.⁴ The Greek *diabolos* is rendered as “devil” in most English biblical translations, and it can also mean a slanderer or accuser. The devil figure gradually developed over time in ancient Jewish writings, and by the Petrine author’s time he was known as “the enemy of God’s purposes” whose tactics included lies and deception.⁵ In the only New Testament story in which the *diabolos* actually appears with a speaking role, he tempts Jesus in the wilderness with the aim of disrupting Jesus’ relationship with God (e.g., Matt 4:1-11).⁶ Elsewhere in the New Testament he is referenced in warnings to Christians to hold fast to their faith (e.g., Eph 6:11 “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil”; Jas 4:7 “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you”).

Feldmeier observes that the devil “does not have a personality in the true sense, but is only a ‘functionary,’ a personification of a mode of operation of evil.”⁷ He is not distinguished as an individual, as he lacks a personal name and is known only by a description of what he does – opposing and slandering in order to drive a wedge between God and humans.⁸ However, as in 1 Peter, invoking him within an eschatological context can powerfully emphasize for Christians that they are participants in the ultimate battle between God and evil, and thus they should be diligent about keeping the faith.⁹ The devil also emerges as the

“destructive energy” that causes their hardships,¹⁰ although the author does not identify him with the Roman Empire.¹¹

Adding lion imagery

Comparing the devil to a lion is not “simply part of the backdrop” of the text but rather is a rhetorical technique called *ékphrasis*, according to Horrell and colleagues.¹² Ancient Greco-Roman writers and orators used this method of description to create vivid imagery that would help an audience envision a scene clearly and fully experience the emotions related to it. The idea was that *ékphrasis* activates in the audience’s mind certain images which are “connected to a web of associations.”¹³ The technique works most effectively if the images are linked to culturally familiar items because then readers or listeners can mentally fill in details as needed for a truly powerful and engaging experience.

Authors using *ékphrasis* frequently included details about sound and movement, as in the description of the lion in 1 Peter.¹⁴ Such details not only assist the audience in vividly imagining the scene but also serve to heighten the sense of danger; “roaring” connotes aggression, and “prowling around, looking for someone to devour” suggests the lion is hunting for prey. Once the lion is fully visualized, the audience will then

⁴ Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, 340.

⁵ Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, 340.

⁶ Reinhard Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 249.

⁷ Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 248.

⁸ Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 247-248.

⁹ Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, 337.

¹⁰ Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 249.

¹¹ Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, 341.

¹² David G. Horrell, Bradley Arnold, and Travis B. Williams, “Visuality, Vivid Description, and the Message of 1 Peter: The Significance of the Roaring Lion (1 Peter 5:8),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132.3 (2013): 698.

¹³ Horrell, Arnold, and Williams, “Visuality, Vivid Description, and the Message of 1 Peter: The Significance of the Roaring Lion (1 Peter 5:8),” 701.

¹⁴ Horrell, Arnold, and Williams, “Visuality, Vivid Description, and the Message of 1 Peter: The Significance of the Roaring Lion (1 Peter 5:8),” 703-704.

spontaneously call to mind related concepts. Although lions appear in the Hebrew Bible, Horrell and colleagues contend that the 1 Peter verse would not have led audiences to think about those texts. For one reason, the Hebrew Bible never compares lions to the devil.¹⁵ In addition, a much stronger cultural association for anyone living in the Greco-Roman world would be the *ad bestias* executions of criminals in the arena.¹⁶ The executions were popular spectacles throughout the Empire, including in regions of Asia Minor where the churches addressed in 1 Peter were located, and some Christian prisoners had been dispatched in this manner. Moreover, images of lions (some attacking humans) were commonly depicted in mosaics, statues, coins, and common objects like vases and lamps, and lions were best known for their involvement in the games and executions in the arena. They were considered the most dangerous animals, and prisoners condemned to face them rarely survived. They were also unpredictable, sometimes killing arena attendants.

Combining “devil” and “lion” gives the Petrine author a way to remind his audience of two distinct but related dangers. First, the lion imagery calls to mind threats to their physical safety. Although Christians were not officially persecuted when the Petrine author wrote, they could still find themselves in trouble with civil authorities when they declined to participate in pagan rites and festivals or veneration of the Emperor, which they considered idolatrous activities. As Achtemeier explains, “religious observances, regarded as of great importance, were inextricably woven into

the social fabric,” but Christians’ “new way of life no longer allowed them the kind of full participation in the religio-cultural activities that was expected of all people living within the Roman Empire.”¹⁷ In fact, some Christians were apparently executed for their “treasonous” behavior.¹⁸ Even if they escaped the attention of Roman authorities, Christians could expect ostracism, which could have dire consequences, for example if they needed help in an emergency situation and their neighbors refused to share resources or come to their aid. To help ensure their safety and well-being, the Petrine author advises his audience to keep a low profile, for example by submitting to civil authorities and honoring everyone (1 Pet 2:13, 17) while nevertheless adhering to Christian standards of morality (1 Pet 1:14).

Even within their own homes some Christians might have faced physical threats. The verses in 1 Peter dealing with the household code suggest that Christian slaves might have non-Christian masters and Christian wives might have non-Christian husbands. In the Greco-Roman world, both slaves and wives were at the mercy of the *paterfamilias*, with few legal options if he physically abused them,¹⁹ and the risk of violence could increase if their Christian activities raised concerns about their ability to fulfill their household duties. The need for safety is probably one reason that the Petrine author counsels Christian slaves and wives to be obedient and submissive. As marginalized individuals, they were especially vulnerable, although even free male Christians had to be careful. In sum, all Christians should try to avoid harm and not

¹⁵ Horrell, Arnold, and Williams, “Visuality, Vivid Description, and the Message of 1 Peter: The Significance of the Roaring Lion (1 Peter 5:8),” 709.

¹⁶ Horrell, Arnold, and Williams, “Visuality, Vivid Description, and the Message of 1 Peter: The Significance of the Roaring Lion (1 Peter 5:8),” 705-711.

¹⁷ Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, 284.

¹⁸ Horrell, Arnold, and Williams, “Visuality, Vivid Description, and the Message of 1 Peter: The Significance of the Roaring Lion (1 Peter 5:8),” 710.

¹⁹ Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, 191, 206-207.

seek martyrdom, but they should accept that they might experience physical suffering.

Whereas the lion imagery suggests physical danger, the reference to the devil evokes a spiritual risk: losing one's salvation by abandoning the Christian faith. The two dangers are obviously related because the purpose of threatening Christians with harm or death was to coerce them into giving up their religion,²⁰ yet the latter brings more disastrous consequences. Renouncing their faith would mean forfeiting eternal life – the “crown of glory that never fades away” (1 Pet 5:4). The eschatological language makes defense against this peril all the more urgent. As God's final judgment approaches, Christians must make sure they are aligned with God. Moreover, the soul's survival is more important than the survival of the body, which eventually dies anyway. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus makes this point: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28).

In sum, depicting the devil as a prowling lion allows the Petrine author to simultaneously warn his early Christian audience about both physical and spiritual threats. They can minimize their vulnerability to physical danger by treating everyone around them with respect and by assimilating to the prevailing culture as much as possible without compromising their commitment to Christ. The spiritual danger is more serious, and it calls for firm resistance, which the author addresses in 1 Peter 5:9.

Resist him in solidarity with your brothers and sisters

The Petrine author urges his audience to resist the devil that prowls like a lion.

²⁰ Horrell, Arnold, and Williams, “Visuality, Vivid Description, and the Message of 1 Peter: The Significance of the Roaring Lion (1 Peter 5:8),” 716.

According to Achtemeier, the opening phrase in this verse could mean “resist him, you who are firm in the faith” or “resist him by being firm in the faith.”²¹ Either way, the idea is that only by trusting God rather than in their own strength can they successfully oppose evil. Next, the author assures his audience that they are not alone. Affliction and social rejection are universal for Christians throughout the Empire, and they can take consolation and strength in the knowledge that their brothers and sisters in other churches stand with them and share in Christ's suffering.²² As a whole, this verse emphasizes that resisting evil is supremely important. As Achtemeier put it, “In the choice between suffering and apostasy, it is God's will that Christians eschew apostasy, even when that means inevitably that suffering will be inflicted upon them.”²³

Overall purpose of 1 Peter 5:8-9

According to Horrell et al., 1 Peter 5:8-9 forms part of the discourse's *peroratio*, a rhetorical unit that functions as a summary.²⁴ Quoting Witherington, they explain more specifically that a *peroratio* utilizes emotion to “to grab the audience's attention one last time and galvanize them into action.” Also, it revisits the main goals of the text, “so here we find out what it is that Peter most wanted his audience to remember, what he wanted to leave ringing in their ears.” Overall, he exhorts them to hold steadfastly to their hope of salvation and to watch out for potential threats that might undermine this effort. They should

²¹ Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, 342.

²² Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, 343-344.

²³ Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, 344.

²⁴ Horrell, Arnold, and Williams, “Visuality, Vivid Description, and the Message of 1 Peter: The Significance of the Roaring Lion (1 Peter 5:8),” 712-713.

avoid exposing themselves to bodily harm, but above all they should resist the pressure to abandon their commitment to Christ even if physical suffering results. By utilizing a simile in which the devil stalks about like a hungry lion, the author emphatically and vividly alerts his early Christian audience to both physical and spiritual dangers so that they can be better prepared to deal with them.

Liturgical art

Christians living in the U.S. today are unlikely to worry about becoming the victims of violence simply because they are Christians. Given that no one will throw them to the lions if they refuse to worship other gods, the devil surely has to find other ways of undermining their faith. What sort of physical dangers lurk like prowling lions in our world today and how are they connected to the forces of evil? A work of liturgical art could provide a way for modern Christians to contemplate these issues.

In the piece at right, the background is an urban scene filled with trash, rubble, and abandoned cars. The litter and debris, along with the bare trees, remind us that we have caused massive environmental damage to the earth even though we are supposed to be good stewards of all creation. The abandoned cars allude to our culture of consumerism, our reluctance to reuse and recycle, and our dependence on fossil fuels. The buildings look like run-down tenements, bringing to mind poverty, crowding, and urban blight. The fact that the setting seems to be an inner city might make viewers think of racism, police brutality, food insecurity, addiction, and homelessness. The rubble, broken pieces of machinery, and damage to the cars suggests that a war might have swept through this area. In sum, the scene evokes the many ways in which we destroy ourselves, our environment, and each other.

Leaping out of this ruined landscape and directly toward viewers is the devil in the form of a lion. It is as though he has ripped the image apart and is breaking through the gap. One can imagine that a few moments earlier he was lurking behind the image, invisible, hoping we would not notice his purring influence on us. But now, after so much devastation has been wrought by our sins, he is bold enough to emerge into the open, springing forward to devour someone (us!).

Yet it is not too late. High atop the leftmost building in the distance is a cross, reminding us of our brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world who face the same suffering we do. What if we were to work together in solidarity, as God calls us to do, and start taking better care of our environment and each other? What if we join together to overthrow the structures of oppression and injustice? What if we refuse to worship the gods of materialism, greed, and selfishness and instead place our trust in God?

What if we resist?

I can imagine the devil lion evaporating in a puff of smoke.



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