Delighting in the Sufferings of Others: Early Christian Schadenfreude and the Function of the Apocalypse of Peter

MICHAEL J. GILMOUR
PROVIDENCE COLLEGE
OTTERTURNE, MANITOBA

Fantasies of eschatological retribution in early Christian literature seem incongruous with Jesus’ teachings about forgiveness and the love of enemies. This paper proposes that the Christian victims of violence addressed by the Apocalypse of Peter were conflicted. On the one hand they were aware that Jesus expected them to respond lovingly to their persecutors, but on the other they experienced a very normal emotional response known as Schadenfreude—finding joy in the sufferings of others. It is argued here that ‘Peter’ attempts to justify his/vtheir violent fantasies by demonstrating the propriety of finding pleasure in the expectation that the wicked would be punished.

Key Words: Apocalypse of Peter, violence, Schadenfreude, Peter, judgment

Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble, or else the LORD will see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from them. (Prov 24:17–18)

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27)

Some early Jewish and Christian writers were clearly uncomfortable with literary depictions of brutal judgment and found ways to sidestep or distance themselves from sources that included them. We find Josephus, for example, discreetly omitting a particularly nasty story. Others cast violently inclined characters in a negative light. Such strategies for avoiding


2. For example, Philip is rebuked for bringing a Moses-like judgment on his opponents in the fourth century Acts of Philip (Acts Phil. 21, 29–32 [135–38]; cf. Num 16): “John said to Philip: Let us not render evil for evil. Philip said: I shall endure it no longer. The . . . others dissuaded him, but he said . . . let the deep open and swallow these men. . . . It opened and the
or critiquing violent biblical stories are understandable because many other texts describe God as loving, merciful, and slow to anger (e.g., Exod 34:6–7; Ps 145:8–9; Wis 11:22–24, 26). He does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:23, 32; 33:11) and indeed waits patiently for them to amend their sinful ways (e.g., Wis 12:1–2; 2 Pet 3:8–9). Not surprisingly, those whose view of God placed an emphasis on these qualities were faced with an awkward tension. The result was a variety of innovative strategies for avoiding, resolving, or accounting for inconsistencies.

Observing and explaining ancient disapproval of violent texts is a valuable and interesting exercise, but the same is true for the opposite line of questioning. Why did some Christian writers and readers embrace tales of gruesome retribution? Some may have been dutifully following the lead of their sources. Others may have intended their words to frighten readers into moral conformity, in effect, scaring the hell out of them. For others still, literature of this sort might serve a pastoral role, providing a much-needed catharsis for powerless readers. A variety of other purposes could no doubt be put forward. This article will suggest only one.

whole place was swallowed, about 7,000 men, save where the apostles were. And their voices came up, crying for mercy and saying: Lo, the cross enlighteneth us. And a voice was heard: I will have mercy on you in my cross of light. . . . Jesus appeared and rebuked Philip. But he defended himself. And the Lord said: Since you have been unforgiving and wrathful, you shall indeed die in glory and be taken by angels to paradise, but shall remain outside it forty days, in fear of the flaming sword, and then I will send Michael and he shall let you in” (131–36; taken from Montague Rhodes James, The Apocryphal New Testament [Oxford: Clarendon, 1975], 449). Another example is drawn from the NT where we find Luke's Jesus standing opposed to the Elijah-like call for destruction desired by James and John (Luke 9:52–56; cf. 2 Kgs 1:9–12). Allison comments on this passage: “Jesus does not say that the disciples are asking for the right thing at the wrong time; that is, he does not seem to be disallowing behavior that he might approve under other circumstances. Nor does he suggest that what is now wrong for his disciples was nonetheless once right for Elijah. . . . There is at this point no harmony between old and new. Jesus’ unelaborated rebuke seemingly implies that violent vengeance is wrong at all times and places” (“Rejecting Violent Judgment,” 476).

3. I will narrow this discussion to Christian literature.

4. These need not be biblical or even religious. For an example of a nonbiblical tradition that may have influenced Mark’s account of the murder of John the Baptist (6:14–29), see Dennis R. MacDonald’s Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark (New Haven: Yale University Press [2000], 77–82). MacDonald observes similarities between the Gospel narrative and Homer’s story of Agamemnon’s murder.

5. Something of this sort seems to occur in the Ethiopic translation of the the Apocalypse of Peter (Apoc. Petr. 11): “they who have not honoured their father and mother . . . shall be punished eternally. Furthermore the angel Ezrael brings children and maidens to show to them those who are punished. They will be punished with pain.” What is not clear is the desired outcome for this audience. Are they allowed to watch the tortures of other disobedient children so they will amend their ways and avoid this terrible fate? Or is watching part of their own punishment—they are allowed to see in advance the tortures they will eventually experience firsthand?

6. Compare: “Fear, the sense of powerlessness, and aggressive feelings are not minimized, but heightened [through the Apocalypse of John]. They are placed in a cosmic framework, projected onto the screen of the heavenly world. This intensification leads to catharsis,
Philosopher John Portmann recently published what is apparently the first book-length study of *Schadenfreude*, simply defined as taking pleasure in the sufferings of others, specifically pleasure in suffering one has not caused. This interesting book may point us toward another explanation for the presence of morbid language in certain early Christian texts, in which writers fantasized about the brutality that would be returned on their enemies. For religious people, this desire for vengeance or justice can become a longing for an eschatological correction of this-worldly injustice, a time when God will remember and vindicate his oppressed people (e.g., Rev 6:9–11). Not all Christians would have considered it morally appropriate to derive pleasure from the knowledge that their opponents would suffer. After all, their literature frequently exhorted them to live peacefully, forgiving those who wronged them, exhibiting such qualities as gentleness and generosity to those who took advantage of them. It is reasonable to assume that a tension existed for some Christians who, on the one hand, felt compelled to love their enemies and forgive them as Jesus commanded, but also took some dark delight in reflecting on their enemies’ terrible fate. The question presents itself because *Schadenfreude* is, Portmann tells us, a very natural emotional response.

The early-second-century *Apocalypse of Peter* provides a glimpse of this tension firsthand. I propose that its author attempts to relieve a dissonance he and some of his readers experienced, created by the combination of three things: (a) certain teachings of Jesus (for example, “forgive your enemies, pray for those who persecute you” [Matt 5:44]); (b) their own painful experience as victims of violence (“there shall be many martyrs,” Jesus announces in the Ethiopic translation of this apocalypse [*Apoc. Pet. 2*]); and (c) the (guilty?) pleasure they (or at least the author of this text) derived from imagining the eschatological carnage to come. If this is correct, the text functions as an apologetic, one giving readers permission to fantasize about the fate of the damned. But before I proceed, a few notes on this second-century pseudepigraphon and Portmann’s definition of *Schadenfreude* are in order.

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7. John Portmann, *When Bad Things Happen to Other People* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 16. For his treatment of this topic in relation to religious thought, see esp. ch. 7, “Cheering with the Angels.”

8. Ibid., 19, 24, etc.

9. The writer responsible for the *Apocalypse of Peter* was familiar with Matthew, “evidently the only written Gospel the author . . . used” (Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* [NovTSup 93; Leiden: Brill, 1998], 173).
There is virtual consensus that a figure referred to as the “deceiver” in Apoc. Pet. 2 is Bar Kokhba, leader of the second Jewish war against Rome. If Richard Bauckham is correct, the absence of any reference to his defeat “necessitates a date during the revolt, 132–36 [C.E.].” As for the objectives of this apocalypse—it appears to be addressing a situation approximately as follows. Jewish militants rose up against Rome for the second time under the leadership of Bar Kokhba, identified by some as the messiah. Some Jewish Christians were caught up in the Revolt when they were pressured to join non-Christian Jews in this messianic movement, which obviously conflicted with their beliefs in Messiah Jesus (see, for example, Justin Martyr, 1 Apol. 31.5–6). Violence ensued:

deceiving Christs [shall] come, and awaken hope (with the words): “I am the Christ, who am (now) come into the world.” And when they shall see the wickedness of his (the false messiah’s) deeds, they shall turn away after them and deny him to whom our fathers gave praise (?), who crucified the first Christ and thereby sinned exceedingly. But this deceiver is not the Christ. And when they reject him, he will kill with the sword (dagger) and there shall be many martyrs. (Apoc. Pet. 2)

It seems likely that the Apocalypse is, in part, a response to the persecution of Christians at Bar Kokhba’s hands.


11. Among the men reaching this conclusion was Rabbi Akiba. For a convenient overview of relevant texts, see Craig A. Evans, “Simon Ben Kosiba,” in Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds (ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 1112–16.

12. Citations of the Apocalypse of Peter are taken from Edgar Hennecke, Wilhelm Schneemelcher, and R. McL. Wilson, New Testament Apocrypha (rev. ed.; Louisville/John Knox, 1992), 2:625–35. Greek fragments and an Ethiopic translation of the Apocalypse of Peter are extant and the relationship of these is very complicated. For discussion, see C. Detlef G. Müller’s introduction to the Apocalypse of Peter in Hennecke, Schneemelcher, and Wilson, Apocrypha, 2:620–25; Terence V. Smith, Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity: Attitudes towards Peter in Christian Writings of the First Two Centuries (WUNT 15; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1985), 43–45; and Bauckham, “The Apocalypse of Peter,” 4713–18. Most of the comments in this paper are based on the Ethiopic translation, which is usually thought to reflect the original form of the text most closely (see, e.g., Martha Himmelfarb, Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 10–11). Some parallels from the Akhmim Greek fragment are included (AAP). For convenience, I use the word “author” to refer to the composition, redaction, and translation of this document without further qualification.

13. The suffering of “the persecutors and betrayers of [Jesus’] righteous ones” is described in Apoc. Pet. 9 and AAP 27.
**Schadenfreude**

Schadenfreude is not an easy term to define, but I find Portmann's exploration of the concept helpful for understanding the emotional response of harassed Christians during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. He organizes his explanation of this emotion around four principal sources or causal antecedents: (a) low self-esteem; (b) loyalty and commitments to justice; (c) the comical; and (d) malice. Though malice is difficult to dissociate from Schadenfreude, Portmann argues that they are not synonymous and that the first three categories are in some cases morally justifiable—“Only the last unequivocally calls for moral blame.”14 The second causal antecedent seems most relevant for the present discussion.15 If justice is the outcome of suffering, this is a morally appropriate emotion because the schadenfrohe person is not taking pleasure in the suffering itself: “the attendant pleasure is not properly in seeing someone suffer, but in the hope that someone


15. To speculate further, allowing the reconstruction of events behind the Apocalypse suggested above, it would be reasonable to ask whether the Christians described in this pseudepigraphon experienced low self-esteem and/or resentment (Karl Marx, along with other philosophers, recognized that groups and even nations can suffer from self-esteem problems [see Portmann, *When Bad Things Happen*, 32–33]). They were, after all, a powerless community facing violence from a stronger foe. Portmann’s definition of self-esteem seems to rule this out, however. Self-esteem can be understood “as the capacity to value oneself despite one’s imperfections and limitations. Self-esteem enhances our sense that we are leading good lives; indeed, it is difficult to separate the two” (p. 33). Individuals guided by religious conviction would naturally assume that they are living out their lives in the best way possible. At the same time, it is reasonable to suggest that these Christians felt resentment toward their abusers. As followers of Jesus they would have viewed their allegiance to the “real messiah” as evidence of intellectual and spiritual insight. Pressure to follow Bar Kokhba would not only be an affront to their religious sensitivities but would have appeared foolish—why risk life and limb in the cause of a fraudulent messianic claimant? This would indicate healthy self-esteem and attacks would therefore be taken as an affront to their dignity (that is, insulting leading to resentment). Portmann points out that an “important link connects self-esteem and resentment. Resentment consists of anger caused by an affront to one’s dignity. Those who believe themselves morally entitled to certain treatment are disposed to resent what they regard as indignities. Just as resentment reflects a healthy self-esteem, Schadenfreude indicates a reasonable and defensible pleasure that another has received his comeuppance” (p. 35). Finally with respect to self-esteem issues, we are left with the question whether Schadenfreude is morally neutral. Portmann notes that the social aspect of self-esteem takes two forms. Either it is egalitarian, presupposing that all people are inherently important and valuable, regardless of attributes and talents—meaning that all “can come to like themselves” (p. 33)—or it is defined by an individual’s talents and abilities and therefore measured by wealth, career, accomplishments, and so on. If the latter, an individual’s inability to achieve certain goals produces suffering and envy (p. 34). So is Schadenfreude, so defined, immoral? Portmann argues that it is not, pointing out that “condemning a schadenfroh person is a bit like castigating people for not liking themselves more. And to the extent that a feeling of disempowerment seems to invite resentment, condemning a schadenfroh person is a bit like blaming him or her for dissatisfaction with an unjust social framework” (p. 35).
will learn a valuable lesson from having suffered.”16 This is approximately analogous to biblical references to God’s chastening his people because he loves them (e.g., 2 Macc 6:12–16; Heb 12:5–11).

Admittedly, there is room to question whether Schadenfreude as Portmann defines it is the best term in relation to our document. For one thing, there is no redemption in the Ethiopic translation of Apocalypse of Peter for those who suffer (though the Rainer fragment suggests that the original form of the text included an opportunity for those condemned to be released from torment).17 Further, though it is not always the case, Portmann has pointed out that Schadenfreude is a passive emotion that does not usually involve expectation of suffering.18 Malice, by comparison, is active and not only looks for evil to befall its object, it could involve agency.19 The text we are considering provides permission to celebrate the anticipated, eschatological demise of opponents, and though this emotional response to the horrendous violence (“there shall be many martyrs”) is understandable, modern readers may be inclined to disagree with the author’s belief that such expectation of punishment is morally neutral. I propose that the term Schadenfreude may provide a heuristic for discussing such texts.

JUSTIFYING VIOLENT FANTASIES

Violence, of course, has many forms. . . . It is important to bear in mind, however, that the line between actual killing and verbal, sym-

16. Portmann, When Bad Things Happen, 37. Alongside biblical imperatives requiring acts of kindness and demonstrations of mercy are constant announcements of inevitable judgment. The Gospel writers (e.g., Matt 25:41), Paul (e.g., Rom 1:18; 2:8), and other NT texts (e.g., 2 Pet 3:7; Rev 14:11; 20:15) are in full agreement with the prophets (e.g., Isa 13:11; 26:21) on the necessary divine response to evil. The writer of the Apocalypse of Peter is heir to these traditions, and Peter shares with those earlier teachers the conviction that God is the one who judges. For the religious person who accepts the divine prerogative to hold creation to account and further trusts in the goodness and justice of God (e.g., Zeph 3:5; Rom 2:2; Apoc. Pet. 7; AAP 25), the experience of Schadenfreude is, following Portmann’s argument, a “morally acceptable kind of pleasure in the setbacks of others . . . an emotional corollary of justice” (p. 197; for his discussion of suffering in the hereafter, see pp. 151–58). In the human sphere most accept that society’s punishment of wrongdoers is intended, ideally, as a deterrent to future wrongdoing (though there are detractors like Friedrich Nietzsche, who finds in the penal system sanitized revenge; p. 143; also pp. 134–36). Portmann responds: “at the heart of Schadenfreude lies the same question that lies at the heart of our endorsement of penal codes in the West: do we enjoy the suffering of another (as in revenge) or do we enjoy the confidence that this suffering will serve as a deterrent to future wrongdoing?” (p. 143). Motive is at issue here. Of course religious people may be guilty of sanitized revenge, hiding their malice behind a theological argument for the necessity of punishment. Jonah’s hatred for the Assyrians at Nineveh became evident when he voiced his disgust over God’s decision to withhold judgment (Jonah 4:1–3). Arguably, whatever pleasure Jonah may have had over the prospects of that city’s destruction beforehand went beyond the pleasure of knowing that justice would be done and involved a longing for revenge.

17. See Bauckham, Fate of the Dead, 232.
18. Portmann, When Bad Things Happen, 27–28. For a qualification on this point, that there are times when Schadenfreude involves anticipation, see p. 89.
19. Ibid., 22.
bolic, or *imaginary* violence is thin and permeable. The threat of violence is a method of forceful coercion, even if no blood is actually shed.\(^{20}\)

As suggested already, taking delight in the expectation that others will suffer may have been acceptable to the author, but he anticipates that some will find this morally questionable. As a result, the *Apocalypse of Peter* functions as an apology, one that attempts to demonstrate that enjoying the prospect of impending torment is acceptable. And so it is that we find the author going to great lengths to demonstrate that witnesses of post-mortem torment voiced their approval. The author's agenda and line of argument can be illustrated by observing four themes in the text.

First, in building his case for the morality of *Schadenfreude*, the author presents scenes in which righteous/innocent witnesses observe the hellish plight of the wicked. Along with Peter himself (*Apoc. Pet.* 3; cited below), victims look on as the perpetrators of violence are punished:

> murderers and those who have made common cause with them are cast into the fire. . . . And the angel Ezrael will bring forth the souls of them that have been killed and they shall see the torment (of those who) killed (them). (*Apoc. Pet.* 7)

> the souls of those who had been murdered stood and watched the punishment of those murderers. (AAP 25)

> the women (are) swallowed up (by this) up to their necks. . . . These are they who have procured abortions and have ruined the work of God which he has created. Opposite them is another place where the children sit, but both alive, and they cry to God. And lightnings go forth from those children which pierce the eyes of those who, by fornication, have brought about their destruction. Other men and women stand above them naked. And their children stand opposite to them in a place of delight. And they sigh and cry to God because of their parents, “These are they who neglected and cursed and transgressed thy commandment. They killed us. . . .” (*Apoc. Pet.* 8)

> opposite [the women] sat many children, who were born prematurely, weeping. And from them went forth rays of fire and smote the women on the eyes. And these were those who conceived children outside marriage and who procured abortions. (AAP 26)\(^{21}\)

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\(^{21}\) Compare with Clement of Alexandria: “The Scripture says that the children exposed by parents are delivered to a protecting (= temelouchos) angel, by whom they are brought up and nourished. And they shall be, it says, as the faithful of a hundred years old here (cf. Isa 65:20; Wisd. Sol. 4:16). Wherefore Peter also says in his Apocalypse, ‘and a flash of fire, coming from their children and smiting the eyes of the women’” (taken from Hennecke, Schneemelcher, and Wilson, *Apocrypha*, 2:637 n. 36). See too Ecl. 48–49. Comments in the *Apocalypse* regarding children are analyzed in Patrick Gray, “Abortion, Infanticide, and the Social Rhetoric of the *Apocalypse of Peter*,” *JECS* 9 (2001): 313–37.
These gruesome scenes have at least one clear function in the author’s apology; they imply that it is perfectly natural to look on as the damned are tormented. Readers reluctant to engage in dark speculations about the eventual demise of their foes see that this is the normal course of events in a time and place when justice is delivered. As we shall see, the children’s approval of their parents’ punishment stands in contrast with Peter’s compassion in *Apoc. Pet.* 3.

Second, not only are there righteous/innocent witnesses of postmortem torture, these victims like what they see, as the author points out. Thus, they represent the author’s position by modeling an ideal response to impending judgment. When the souls of the murdered are permitted to see the sufferings of the people who killed them, they say to one another,

*Righteousness and justice is the judgment of God* [Ps 19:9; = 18:10 LXX; Rev 16:7; 19:2]. For we have indeed heard, but did not believe that we would come to this place of eternal judgment. (*Apoc. Pet.* 7)

the souls of those who had been murdered stood and watched the punishment of those murderers and said, “O God, righteous is thy judgment.” (*AAP* 25)

If these victims can watch with approval, so too living, *schadenfreude* Christians should feel no guilt if they imagine what God’s righteous judgment will look like.

Third, there are explicit statements about the moral appropriateness of punishing the wicked throughout the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Not surprisingly, because Jesus himself speaks of eternal torment in the Gospels (e.g., Matt 18:9; 25:46), he is found arguing the point here: “I will show thee their works in which they have sinned against the Most High” (*Apoc. Pet.* 3; that is, sinners are only getting what they deserve). What is more remarkable is that the victims themselves acknowledge the justice of their predicaments:

those who are in torment will . . . “Righteous is the judgment of God: for we have heard and perceived that his judgment is good, since we are punished according to our deeds.” (*Apoc. Pet.* 13)

Again, it is as though the author were arguing with reluctant readers: Surely, if the victims of violent punishment can accept their fate, the righteous Christian reader should be able to do the same.

Fourth and finally, on two occasions Jesus rebukes St. Peter in the *Apocalypse*. Peter’s offer to make tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah builds on the Gospel stories about the Mount of Transfiguration (actually citing Matt 17:4; cf. Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33). In the Gospel narratives, Peter is not rebuked (though Mark and Luke were compelled to explain his bizarre offer: “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified” [Mark 9:6]). The rebuke in *Apoc. Pet.* 16 (not in *AAP*) draws on the language of Matt 16:23 and Mark 8:33 (the confession at Caesarea Philippi). Following Peter’s offer to make the tents, Jesus responds “in wrath”:
This condemnation seems a little harsh, but it may serve to undermine Peter's authority in the present context.22 I suggest this because Peter is also rebuked in the *Apocalypse of Peter* for showing compassion to sinners who are in hell.

Finally, *Apoc. Pet.* 3 is an important passage for the present discussion. If the author is in fact engaged in an apologetic, one justifying the exercise of Christian imagination about the coming judgment, and if he is seeking to relieve Christians of guilt feelings resulting from their *Schadenfreude*, use of “Peter” as a pseudonym is rather effective. Peter, of course, had an exalted status in the early church as the number of Petrine pseudepigrapha attests. In *Apoc. Pet.* 3, Peter is rebuked for showing compassion to the suffering wicked—the very response to suffering that the author wishes to refute.

> [Jesus] showed me in his right hand the souls of all (men) and on the palm of his right hand the image of that which shall be fulfilled at the last day. . . . We saw how the sinners wept in great distress and sorrow, until all who saw it with their eyes wept, whether righteous, or angels or himself also. And I asked him and said “Lord, allow me to speak thy word concerning these sinners: ’It were better for them that they had not been created.’” And the Saviour answered and said, “O Peter, why speakest thou thus, ’that not to have been created were better for them’? Thou resistest God. Thou wouldest not have more compassion than he for his image, for he has created them and has brought them forth when they were not. . . . And since thou hast seen the lamentation which sinners shall encounter in the last days, therefore thy heart is saddened; but I will show thee their works in which they have sinned against the Most High.” (*Apoc. Pet.* 3)

Peter's response to the vision seems natural. People are in distress and agony, and Peter, functioning in his familiar role as spokesperson for Jesus' disciples, says the very things that *Christians readers would have assumed they should be feeling* but perhaps were not. What this passage offers, then, is a license to enjoy a morbid depiction of their enemies' pain. The author relieves his readers of any guilt they might feel by showing that their compassion is misguided. Jesus himself argues the case, in effect telling them to ignore things that he said before (i.e., Matt 26:24; Mark 14:21) and attempting to convince them that severe punishment is appropriate.

Attempting to recover an author's motives is admittedly a risky enterprise.23 Still, if we pull together these few clues we may gain some

22. Peter may also be undermined in *Apoc. Pet.* 2 when he needs to ask for an interpretation of the fig tree parable. Two times Jesus seems to be surprised at his lack of discernment: “Dost thou not understand . . . ?”; “Hast thou not grasped . . . ?”

23. For comments on the writer of the *Apocalypse of Peter*, see David Henry Schmidt, *The Peter Writings: Their Redactors and Their Relationships* (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University,
insight. (1) Some early Christian readers and writers were uncomfortable with earlier depictions of violent judgement. (2) Schadenfreude is a normal, universal response, especially among people concerned with justice. It is also reasonable to infer that victims of violence would derive pleasure in knowing that those who hurt them would receive their comeuppance. (3) Jesus exhorted his followers to love their enemies and pray for them. (4) The combination of the natural emotion Schadenfreude and Jesus’ injunctions about loving enemies may have created an awkward tension for some Christians. (5) The author presents Jesus as rebuking St. Peter because he showed compassion after witnessing the plight of the damned. (6) The author finds a variety of ways to convince readers that the sufferings of the wicked are morally justifiable (the victims and perpetrators of evil acts, along with Jesus himself, voice their approval of scenes of brutal torment). The Apocalypse of Peter is, then, an apologetic intended to relieve readers of their guilty consciences.

VIOLANCE IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY:
CLOSING THOUGHTS

There is no avoiding the fact that violent fantasies such as the fantasies included in the Apocalypse of Peter will strike many readers as repugnant. I’m inclined to agree that this sort of voyeurism (finding pleasure in the [imagined] torments of others) is in itself offensive. But there is no real dilemma with respect to this particular text; the rather obscure Apocalypse of Peter does not cross our path very often. But what do we do with other literature that contains similar violence? Should we stop reading and teaching the poetry of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), for instance, whose Commedia is a direct descendant of Peter’s apocalypse? No; hopefully most would agree that we would defraud ourselves and our students of one of the world’s literary treasures if we did.24 Censorship is not an option when great art, such as Dante’s work, is under consideration.

But the situation with Scripture is quite different. Because of its authoritative status, and given the long history of oppression by and within the church, scholars are increasingly careful in their treatment of texts involving authority structures or violence. Tina Pippin observes that the book of Revelation, which has certain affinities with the Apocalypse of Peter, “unmasks the desire for death, and for utopia. It also . . . remasks the ethics

1972), 129–35. Schmidt argues that there are only two areas in which the author is accessible for reconstruction. First, there are passages in which he appears to identify with his pseudonym by speaking in the first person (Apoc. Pet. 2, 3, 14) or appealing to Peter legends (14; possibly 3 and 16). Second, there are passages in which the writer has edited identifiable sources, “and these expansions may help reconstruct the concerns of the writer” (p. 129). The present article attempts to press the text a little further for clues about this anonymous author.

24. “One cannot discuss genius in all the world’s history without centering upon Dante, since only Shakespeare, of all geniuses of language, is richer” (Harold Bloom, Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds [New York: Warner, 2002], 91).
of violence and destruction.”25 She adds that it may be fortunate that the violence of the text is limited to the imagination (that is, God, not his people, are to execute judgment) but expresses concern that “imagination is endless, and the connection between the desire of the reader and the desire of the text has endless possibilities.”26 This is indeed frightening; we cannot control how ancient texts will be received, applied, and even abused by modern readers.

So is there anything of value buried underneath the brutality of this kind of literature? I believe there is if we recall the audience’s plight and recognize the immense distance between their situation and the situation of privileged readers. What Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza wrote concerning the book of Revelation is equally true of the Apocalypse of Peter: “The outcry . . . for justice and judgment can be fully understood only by those who hunger and thirst for justice.”27 This may mean that those of us fortunate enough to live in peaceful and prosperous parts of the world, with all the benefits offered by societies built on principles of law and assured rights for its citizens, will never fully understand the injustices experienced by Peter’s (or John’s) readers. That which was meaningful to them may do nothing (spiritually or emotionally) for us, and if we are offended by such a text—and I confess that I am—it is a consequence of the great advantages we enjoy.

The Apocalypse of Peter, in its time and in its context, offered relief from injustice by holding out the promise that justice was inevitable. The author’s attempt to depict what it would look like, even holding out an invitation to readers to enjoy the scene, may be distasteful to modern sensitivities and incomprehensible for those reading from a privileged perspective, but this does not in itself prove it to be immoral. After all, “the joy of Schadenfreude is not diabolical, because a belief about justice lies beneath and morally justifies that joy.”28

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28. Portmann, When Bad Things Happen, 89.