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“Got Milk?” A Petrine Metaphor in 1 Peter 2.1–3 Revisited

KAREN H. JOBES

The apostle Peter writes, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Pet 2.2–3 NIV). The exegetical crux of this verse is in the interaction between the sensory metaphors of *logikon adolon gala* (pure spiritual milk) and “tasting that the Lord is good,” which is a direct allusion to the Old Greek (OG) of Psalm 33.9 in the Septuagint (LXX) (Hebrew and English 34.8: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.”).

The King James version of this verse reflects, and perhaps began, a long-standing interpretive tradition that identifies the referent of the milk metaphor as the word of God: “As newborn babes, desire the *sincere milk of the word*, that ye may grow thereby” (italics added). I am among the minority of interpreters who understand the referent of the metaphor *logikon adolon gala* to be something broader than the word of God and something related to moral transformation that allows the Christian believer to grow toward the end goal of salvation.¹ The interpretation that the *logikon gala* refers to the word of God, whether in the form of apostolic preaching or inscripturated in the Bible, is, I believe, based largely on two exegetical missteps. Firstly, on the etymological fallacy of closely associating the meaning of *logikon* with *logos*,² and secondly, in taking the immediately preceding verses, 1.22–25, as the primary context in which to determine the referent of the metaphor.³ Although in a minority, I am, nevertheless, in good company, going all the way back to at least to the Venerable Bede in the eighth century, Calvin in the seventeenth century, F. Hort in the nineteenth and J. Ramsey Michaels and Douglas Harink in our times.⁴

The exhortation to crave *logikon* milk is the fourth imperative in the letter following: 1) set your hope fully on God’s grace (1.13); 2) be holy (1.15); 3) love one another earnestly (1.22). This fourth imperative, to crave the pure spiritual milk is presented with four modifiers: 1) the simile, “as newborn babies” (*hos artigennēta*

1. Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 130–141; See also Jobes, “Got Milk? Septuagint Psalm 33 and the Interpretation of 1 Peter 2:1–3” *WTJ* 64 (2002): 1–14.

2. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 28; Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. and exp. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 44–51.

3. For instance Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Stephen Ayodeji A. Fagbemi, *Who are the Elect in 1 Peter? A Study in Biblical Exegesis and Its Application to the Anglican Church of Nigeria*, ed. Hemchand Gossai (Studies in Biblical Literature 104; New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Joel B. Green, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Paul A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective*, (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2009); John Phillips, *Exploring the Epistles of Peter: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005).

4. Bede, *On First Peter*, PG 93:47 quoted in Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, *New Testament XI. James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 84; John Calvin, *Hebrews and 1 & 2 Peter*, trans. W. B. Johnston (Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); F. J. A. Hort, *The First Epistle of St. Peter. I.1–II.17: The Greek Text with Introductory Lecture, Commentary, and Additional Notes* (London: Macmillan, 1898); J. R. Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1988); Douglas Harink, *1 & 2 Peter* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009).

brephē); 2) a purpose clause, “so that by it you might grow up into salvation” (*hina en autō auxēthēte eis sōtērian*); 3) a first-class condition of fact, “since you have tasted that the Lord is good” (*ei egeusasthe hoti chrēstos ho kyrios*), which is a direct allusion to the Old Greek (OG) Psalm 33.9; and 4) an adverbial participle with a string of five accusative direct objects, “putting off all malice, and all deceit, and hypocrisies, and jealousies, and all slanders” (*apothemenoi oun pasan kakian kai panta dolon kai hypokriseis kai phthonous kai pasas katalalias*). The structure of the passage can be represented as:

Crave *logikon adolon* milk
 as newborn babies
 so that by it you might grow up into your salvation
 putting off
 all malice,
 and all deceit,
 and hypocrisies,
 and jealousies,
 and all slanders
 since you have tasted that the Lord is good.

The metaphor of craving milk comprises the imperative exhortation of this passage, and so understanding its referent takes on heightened importance as we seek to apply this imperative to our lives and teach and preach this apostolic admonition to the church today. There are four exegetical points that I believe tilt the referent of the metaphor away from the majority interpretation: 1) the author’s syntax and lexical choice; 2) the cultural significance of nursing a baby in the Greco-Roman world; 3) the relationship of the participial phrase to the imperative verb “crave” (*epipothēsate*); and 4) the role of the allusion to Old Greek Psalm 33.9 in understanding the metaphor.

Turning to the first point about syntax and lexical choice, it must first be noted that the expression to *logikon adolon gala* is not a very apt way of referring to the word of God, even though the very influential KJV sent English interpreters in that direction by translating it as “the sincere milk of the word.” (And indeed how best to translate *logikon* is a challenge; the NIV’s “spiritual” is probably not the best choice.) The straightforward phrase “word of God” (*logos tou theou*) occurs in almost every book in the New Testament and more than eighty times throughout the whole. If Peter meant to restrict the referent of the metaphor to the preaching of the gospel or the reading of scripture, he had a straightforward way to say that. But the unusual adjective *logikos* occurs otherwise in the New Testament only in Romans 12.1, where it refers to Christians offering themselves to God as their “*logikos*” worship (*logiken latreian*).⁵ There are a few relevant parallels in the extra-biblical corpus that clearly show the sense of the adjective to mean “rational.”⁶ For instance, Epictetus, a pagan Greek philosopher, can say that because he is *logikos* (in comparison to a nightingale or a swan), he must sing praises to God.⁷ But to be rational in the Greek world influenced by Stoic thought meant to conform oneself to the *Logos* as the divine rationality that ordered the universe. So for Peter the sense of the adjective as “rational” or “reasonable” may have suggested conformity to Christ as the one who inaugurated a new reality.⁸ And therefore we see that the syntax and lexical choice in this phrase to *logikon adolon gala* likely points to a broader referent than preaching and the Bible; it points to craving what is consistent with life in the new reality that Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension have created. (This sense also fits in Romans 12.1, where the NIV rightly captures the sense

5. See Karen H. Jobes, “Distinguishing the Meaning of Greek Verbs in the Semantic Domain for Worship” in *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: an Introduction to Lexical Semantics* by Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 204.

6. E.g., Epictetus *Diatr.* 1.16.20; Philo *Spec.* 1.277; T. Levi 3.16.

7. *Diatr.* 1.16.20.

8. s.v. “*logos*” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, revised edition, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

that offering of our bodies as a living sacrifice is true and proper worship, that is, worship that conforms to the reality established and ordered by the Christian *Logos*, Jesus Christ.) This understanding of *logikon* seems to be that of Oecumenius when he writes on 1 Peter 2.1, "These few words say a great deal, for it is unworthy of those who have been born again to an incorruptible life to be ensnared by evil and to prefer things which have no existence to *that which truly exists*" (emphasis added).⁹ *Logikon* milk corresponds to what nourishes new life in the reality that the believer enters through new birth.

But there is another adjective modifying "milk," *adolon*, which is often translated as "pure." The cultural significance of nursing a baby in the Greco-Roman world sheds light on this element of the phrase. Given the nature of metaphor in general as a culturally specific analogy that extends the reader's knowledge from a familiar concept to a new one, special attention should be paid to the cultural connotations of the metaphor in the Greco-Roman world. We must remember that prior to the modern invention of infant formula in the nineteenth century *all* babies—and certainly at the time 1 Peter was written—either received their life-sustaining nourishment through breast-feeding for the first couple years of their lives or they died. And so to crave milk *as newborn babies* is a direct reference to breastfeeding. On this point, much modern thought about the metaphor is anachronistic, reading modern cultural values back into the ancient text. Wayne Grudem, for instance, and others shaped by the modernist controversies about the inerrancy of the Bible, understand *adolon* to mean "unadulterated" or "uncontaminated," that is, truth unmixed with false doctrine.¹⁰ But Philip Tite, who has recently done work on the cultural background of this metaphor, writes,

Given the broader Greco-Roman link between breastfeeding and moral development, articulated both through practical decisions regarding the wet nurse (should one be used or not? What is the moral character of the nurse? How does the quality of the milk affect the nursling?) and an ideal view of the mother who nurses her own infant (with literary instances serving as moral *exempla*), the Petrine author's carefully constructed metaphor of a nursling longing for milk as a metaphor for Christian development should evoke attention to this broader cultural reference for explicating the Petrine metaphor.¹¹

When Peter employs the metaphor of milk, he does not contrast it to solid food, creating a negative evaluation of spiritual maturity (cf. 1 Cor 3.2 and Heb 5.12, 13). Rather, Peter's point is that every person born anew as a child of God must be nourished by *logikon adolon gala* or their new life will die. In Peter's eschatological schema, it seems that a Christian does not "grow up" into salvation (*auxethete eis soterian*) until "the coming of salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet 1.5). And so the Christian believer never outgrows the need for the life-sustaining milk Peter refers to during their earthly life. In contrast to Paul's and Hebrews' use of the metaphor, there is no point at which a Christian maturity is reached in this life when the milk is no longer needed.

Tite's work shows that it was believed that the moral character of the baby was imparted by the quality of the milk it ingested while nursing, and great moral significance was attached to the decision of who would be best to nurse an infant.¹² Some ancient writers raised moral suspicions about hired wet nurses in order to develop the trope of the ideal mother who nursed her own baby. Against that background, Tite offers this thought about the adjective *adolon* as it describes the quality of the milk Christians are to crave:

9. Bede, *On First Peter*, PG 93:47.

10. See for instance, Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter: The Way of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 79, and Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 95.

11. Philip L. Tite, "Nurslings, Milk and Moral Development in the Greco-Roman Context: A Reappraisal of the Paraenetic Utilization of Metaphor in 1 Peter 2.1–3" *JSNT* 31 (2009): 371–400, esp. pg. 386.

12. Soranus, *Gyn.* 2.19[88], 2.24[93]–27[96]; Galen, *On the Powers of Food* Book 3.

...bad milk [that is, the opposite of *adolon gala* in Peter's rhetoric], therefore, is milk that leads the nursling (=Petrine Christian) to vice rather than virtue; and it is this possibility of falling into vice that threatens the proper growth of the Christian into salvation. With this adjective, therefore, the nursling-milk metaphor becomes an exhortation for moral development, to follow the path of virtue rather than vice.¹³

Tite concludes, "the Roman practices and ideological beliefs regarding milk, wet nurses and the ideal mother for the moral development of the infant...suggests that this cultural referent places added stress on the *moral exhortation* of this metaphor in 1 Peter" (emphasis added).¹⁴ Nevertheless, Tite does go on to identify the milk with the word of God, presumably as the basis of Christian morality and ethics, but I think it is more likely that the original readers would have understood the metaphor to refer, not narrowly to the word of God, but more broadly to nourishing the moral character that a child of God must have (cf. 1 Pet 1.14–17).

And so the first two of four significant exegetical points—the apostle's syntax and lexical choice, and the metaphor and the cultural significance of nursing a baby in the Greco-Roman world—tilt toward understanding the metaphor more broadly than a reference to the word of God preached or inscripturated.

The third exegetical issue—relationship of the participial phrase (*apothemenoi*...) to the imperative verb "crave" (*epipothēsate*)—also suggests that to crave milk is to pursue moral virtue. The same verb (*apotithēmi*) occurs six times elsewhere in the New Testament to describe turning from the vices and sins of the life lived before faith in Christ (Rom 13.12; Eph 4.22, 25; Col 3.8; Heb 12.1; James 1.21). In each case the admonition to "put off" the negative vices is followed by a positive expression of what to do instead. These six statements written by three other apostolic authors bear striking similarity to the statement of 1 Peter 2.1, where crave *logikon adolon gala* parallels Paul's concept of "put on the armor of light/new self," the author of Hebrews' "run the race with eyes fixed on Jesus," and James' "humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." It seems evident that the use of this verb with these parallel concepts should inform our understanding that craving *logikon adolon gala* refers to the passionate desire to reorient one's whole self and life to the reality of one's new birth. As Tite also observes, the Petrine rhetoric presents "the antithesis through the nursling-milk metaphor rather than a virtue list."¹⁵

Fourthly, the role of the direct allusion to the Old Greek (OG) of Psalm 33.9 (Hebrew and English Ps 34.9) in 1 Peter 2.3 also suggests that the referent of the milk metaphor is broader than the word of God. The pervasive influence of Psalm 33 on the fabric of ethical teaching in 1 Peter has been long recognized.¹⁶ Of foundational relevance is how the Greek translation of the psalm has been contextualized for a new historical situation in the Hellenistic age far past its original historical setting in the lifetime of David. The superscription of the Hebrew Psalm 34 identifies it as a psalm of deliverance when David was in danger while sojourning among the Philistines. Centuries later the Greek translators of this psalm recognized in David's situation an analogy for the life of God's people in *diaspora* sojourning under pagan rulers (OG Ps 33.5).

The apostle Peter recognizes that the Christians to whom he writes are also among God's people living in a socially precarious situation of the *diaspora* of northern Asia Minor and weaves the psalm's major themes of praise, hope and deliverance into his ethical instruction for hope, holiness and righteousness. The psalm's major theme of the righteous sufferer bridges Peter's Christology of suffering, based on Isaiah 53, with his ethical teachings based on following the example of Christ (1 Pet 2.18–25), truly the ultimate righteous sufferer.

For the purpose of discerning the referent of the milk metaphor, it is notable that neither the Old Greek (OG) of Psalm 33 nor its corresponding Hebrew text (Psalm 34) mentions the word of God. Had Peter been

13. Tite, "Nurslings," 389.

14. Ibid., 373.

15. Ibid., 394–95.

16. E.g., W. Bornemann, "Der erste Petrusbrief—eine Taufrede des Silvanus?" *ZNW* 19 (1920): 143–165; K. R. Snodgrass, "1 Peter ii 1–10: Its Formation and Literary Affinities," *NTS* 24 (1978): 97–106; Sue Woan, "The Psalms in 1 Peter" in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 213–229.

quoting the psalmist in order to clarify and reinforce the identification of the word of God as the referent of the milk metaphor, he could have quoted, for instance, Psalm 119.103, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

And so, to reiterate, there are four exegetical points that tilt away from understanding the referent of the metaphor as the word of God: 1) the author's syntax and lexical choice; 2) the cultural significance of nursing a baby in the Greco-Roman world; 3) the relationship of the participial phrase to the imperative verb "crave" (*epipothēsate*); and 4) the role of the allusion to OG Psalm 33.9.

Therefore, to crave "pure spiritual milk" means to crave what nurtures growth of spiritual life after rebirth into the new reality that Christ's death, resurrection and ascension has created. This certainly includes the word of God in both its printed and preached forms as foundational, but is not limited to it. As Harink points out,

We receive this nourishment through the church's preaching and sacraments. We receive it in the *sanctorum communio*, the concrete, gathered life together of the messianic community. We receive it through the practices of corporate and personal scripture reading and study under the rule of faith. We receive it through the testimony of the saints and the writings of the Christian tradition. In each of these ways, and more, *Christ gives himself to us as our food* (italics original).¹⁷

He continues,

...the food that is Christ himself is not merely "good for us" because of its "nutritional value." It is also delectable: *it tastes good!* Our desire for this food is moved not only by hunger, but also by delight; not only by need, but also by attraction; not only from our lack, but also from the savory allure of that which will abundantly fill it—God's goodness... Having once experienced this gourmet offering, which is truly good beyond imagining, how could we wish to return to the flavorless fast foods offered in the markets, malls, and carnivals of our society? In the kingdom of God the glorious, life-giving banquet is the big attraction (cf. Isa. 25:6; Luke 14:12–24). The aroma and flavor of Christ's sheer goodness invite us: Come and dine!¹⁸

Given the longevity and nature of the debate about this metaphor, we may never be able to resolve its referent with complete certainty. And it is probably not essential that we do. J. Ramsey Michaels observes it is doubtful "that the full significance of 'pure spiritual milk' for Peter can be summed up in just one word or concept."¹⁹ I tend to agree with him. And so where does that leave us in the church today as we apply the apostle's admonition? How can we crave the milk and encourage others to do so as well?

Four points from this passage can be made with certainty:

1. The gospel of Jesus Christ as understood and taught by the apostle Peter requires the new birth. The church must continue, or resume, to call people to a life-changing faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for sin. Christian identity is not a matter of having membership in a church, or of serving in even the most charitable of good works. Spiritual regeneration by the imperishable and incorruptible seed of God into the reality created by Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension is essential.
2. All believers as children of God who have been reborn need spiritual nourishment through all of their earthly lives. Just as an infant will die from lack of nourishment, Peter warns that new life in Christ will come to nothing if it is not nourished. As John Phillips observes, "We must guard against jaded appetites. It is a serious thing to 'taste and see that the LORD is good' (Ps. 34:8) and then to turn away from Him, craving the carnal things of this world. The children of Israel did this when they were

17. Harink, *1 & 2 Peter*, 65.

18. *Ibid.*, 65–66.

19. J. R. Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 89.

- on their way to Canaan”²⁰ (cf. Num 11.4–6 and Ps 106.15). And Jesus himself spoke of “desires for other things” having a choking effect on spiritual growth (Mark 4.19).
3. Those who claim to be reborn followers of Jesus Christ must willfully put aside the habits, vices and sins of the old nature. The transformation of character demanded by the new birth does not happen magically or apart from the active, willful participation of the believer. Phillips compares a sinful Christian to the vivid image of the resurrected Lazarus clinging to his smelly grave clothes after being given new life by Jesus.²¹
 4. We are what we eat. Christians are to crave and consume wholesome spiritual food rather than the spiritual junk food that surrounds us in American society. While the written and preached word of God is the primary and essential source of that nourishment, cognitive knowledge of the Bible is useless if its message does not transform the believer’s life and worldview.

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20. John Phillips, *Exploring the Epistles of Peter: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 86.

21. *Ibid.*, 82.