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Craving the Milk in 1 Peter: The Pattern of Christ as Salvific Nourishment

CLIFF BARBARICK

To set the stage for my interpretation of the milk metaphor in 1 Peter 2.1–3, I begin with a brief anecdote: On early summer mornings when my grandma was visiting our home, I remember groggily descending the stairs only to find her already awake, sitting in the living room with her Bible on her lap and a pen in her hand. She had performed the same morning routine countless times in her life, and yet she persisted each day to search and to study, to learn anew and to learn again. I was blessed on many occasions to witness her in this posture, and the image remains with me as the archetype of a disciple, a lifelong student who never tires of sitting at the feet of her Lord. Her pattern, and the examples of other devoted disciples, have shaped my imagination and thereby deeply shaped who I have become. Doubtlessly, we all could identify similar, profoundly shaping exemplars.

Learning from the Ancients

The ancients certainly understood and appreciated the transformational value of moral exemplars. The Stoic philosopher Seneca, for example, wrote to his friend and student, Lucilius, advising him the path to virtue “is long if one follows precepts, but short and helpful if one follows patterns” (*Ep.* 6.5).¹ In the struggle to attain virtue, therefore, he advises Lucilius to “call to our assistance some helpers” (52.7). A living helper, in the form of a great teacher, is obviously advantageous; but even exemplars from the past can also greatly assist the student of philosophy. “Choose therefore a Cato,” he exhorts his student; “or, if Cato seems too severe a model, choose some Laelius, a gentler spirit. Choose a master whose life, conversation, and soul-expressing face have satisfied you; picture him always to yourself as your protector and pattern. For we must indeed have someone according to whom we may regulate our characters; you can never straighten that which is crooked unless you use a ruler” (11.10). In the labor to live rightly, Seneca advises, the student needs an exemplar, someone he can call to mind through intentional remembrance, someone who will act as pattern and protector when the student pictures him always before his eyes. In this way, the crooked soul might be straightened.

Plutarch, the first-century Neo-Platonic biographer and philosopher, demonstrates a similar appreciation for the value of moral exemplars. Indeed, he writes his biographies in part to provide exemplars for those interested in acquiring virtue. In the introduction to his life of Pericles, he describes his rationale for recording the lives of virtuous men. “Our intellectual vision,” he argues, “must be applied to such objects as, by their very charm, invite it onward to its own proper good. Such objects are to be found in virtuous deeds; these implant in those who search them out a great and zealous eagerness which leads to imitation” (Per. 1.4). Not all good works leads to imitation, Plutarch admits. Admiring the beautiful workmanship of a skilled artisan, for example, does not always lead to imitating the hard labor necessary to achieve artistic excellence. Virtuous action, he asserts, however,

1. The brief comments on Seneca in this paragraph receive a slightly fuller treatment in an earlier article published last year in *Leaven*: Cliff Barbarick, “Both Pattern and Protector: The Cloud of Witnesses in Hebrews 11.1—12.3” *Leaven* 19 (2011): 190–195. This article also explores the function of *exempla* in moral transformation, though it focuses on a different NT writing (1 Peter rather than Hebrews) and explores the creative application of these insights in contemporary communities.

“straightaway so disposes a man that he no sooner admires the works of virtue then he strives to emulate those who wrought them” (*Per.* 2.2). For this reason, Plutarch says, he has persevered in writing his *Lives*.

To describe the effectiveness of moral exemplars, Plutarch employs an agricultural metaphor. The language of “implanting” connotes a narrative in which a farmer plants in the ground a seed that she hopes will bear fruit in a future harvest. She can nurture the seed by watering the earth and protecting the young plant from harsh weather, but she cannot make the seed grow. Naturally, organically, the seed will sprout and grow and produce fruit. In a similar way, perceiving a virtuous exemplar implants in the soul a zealous desire for the good. The one who sees the example can cultivate this desire by carefully studying the virtuous example, repeatedly reflecting on it, and practicing the virtues, but the desire implanted by the exemplar has a power of its own that steadily works toward moral transformation.²

Philo, the Jewish theologian, provides one final example of the widespread assumption about the value of moral exemplars. He also appreciated the transformative power of moral exemplars, though he describes their effectiveness with a different metaphor. Rather than imagining the exemplar implanting something in the student, he describes the exemplar imprinting its own image on the soul of the attendee. According to Philo, those things which the outward senses perceive imprint their own character on the soul like a ring or seal in wax. “And the mind,” he writes, “being like wax, having received the impression, keeps it carefully in itself until forgetfulness, the enemy of memory, has smoothed off the edges of the impression, or else has rendered it dim, or perhaps has completely effaced it” (*Deus.* 43–44).³ Philo then notes that the impression, as long as memory retains it, can affect the soul “in a way consistent with itself.” That is, the impression leads to desires and actions that reflect the seal.

In one telling passage, Philo describes the positive effect the example of Israel will have on the nations. If Israel fulfills the Torah and offers a superior demonstration of virtue, then they will benefit those who see them. “For to gaze continuously upon noble models,” Philo explains, “imprints their likenesses in souls which are not entirely hardened and stony. And therefore those who would imitate these examples of good living... are bidden not to despair of changing for the better or of a restoration of wisdom and virtue from the spiritual dispersion which badness has wrought” (*Praem.* 114–116). The nations will be attracted to Israel’s virtuous living; and, by continuously gazing on Israel’s example, they will have the pattern imprinted on their souls (if they are receptive). Then, change for the better and a restoration of virtue will result.⁴

For Philo, memory serves a vital role in the process of imprinting. The student can encourage the impression of virtuous patterns on his soul by regular recollection. Philo compares the student to a cud-chewing animal that repeatedly chews its food: even after hearing the instruction, the student cannot hold it firmly in his mind “until he has resolved over in his mind everything which he has heard by the continued exercise of his memory (and this exercise of memory is the cement which connects ideas), and then impresses the image of it all firmly on his soul” (*Spec.* 4.107). By continual recollection of the pattern, in other words, the student cements that pattern in the soul. The continual recollection of a moral

2. Plutarch concludes his lengthy introduction to the life of Pericles with a summary of the effect he hopes it will have on the reader: “The Good creates a stir of activity towards itself, and implants at once in the spectator an active impulse; it does not form his character by ideal representation alone, but through the investigation of his work it furnishes him with a dominant purpose” (*Per.* 2.3).

3. Philo is likely adopting the image from Plato, who uses very similar imagery in *Theaet.* 191C–192A.

4. Elsewhere, Philo describes how gazing on an individual exemplar can imprint the soul and result in moral transformation. In his life of Moses, he describes how Moses, as a result of his encounter with God on Mt. Sinai, became a model of virtue for the Israelites. When Moses entered “into the darkness of where God was” on Sinai, he beheld the “the invisible, and shapeless, and incorporeal world, the essence, which is the model of all existing things.” As a result, he was transformed into “a piece of work beautiful and godlike, a model for those who are willing to imitate it.” Philo announces a blessing on those “who imprint or strive to imprint, that image in their souls.” If their minds can bear the image of virtue, it results in unvarying desire for virtue. “Indeed,” Philo concludes, “there is no one who does not know that men in a lowly condition are imitators of men in high reputation, and that what they see, these last chiefly desire, toward that do they also direct their own inclinations and endeavors” (*Mos.* 1.158–160). In other words, the shape of the soul determines actions, and “seeing” virtuous exemplars imprints the patterns of their lives on the soul of the attendee.

exemplar, therefore, would serve to firmly imprint his image or pattern in the soul of the student, preserving the impression from being effaced by forgetfulness and ensuring that the student continues to be transformed into the image of the exemplar. With this in mind, we are prepared to understand the meaning of the milk metaphor in 1 Peter and its relationship with the pattern of Christ to which the author repeatedly calls his audience's attention.

Interpreting 1 Peter

In 1 Peter 2.2, the author exhorts his audience to long for “pure, spiritual milk” like newly born infants so that they might “grow into salvation.” The phrase which the NRSV renders “pure, spiritual milk” (*to logikon adolon gala*) has been variously rendered as “pure milk of the word” (NASB, NKJV), “guileless milk of the word,”⁵ and “unadulterated milk of God's word.”⁶ The function of the metaphor seems clear enough: as newborns crave for nourishing milk, so the Petrine community should crave that which will grow them into salvation. They need divine sustenance to enable their present life just as they needed divine regeneration for the new birth that marked their initiation into the community.⁷ But what is the referent of the metaphorical milk? What will be the means of the needed sustenance in the present life of the community? Here, commentators depart.

In many interpretations, the meaning of the odd adjective *logikos* helps define the milk's referent. As the translations cited above indicate, a number of interpreters translate *logikon gala* as “milk of the word,” determining the meaning of *logikos* from its cognate *logos* which appears in the immediately preceding section of the letter. Achtemeier states a common interpretation: “Since, therefore, in this context the word of God (λογὸς θεοῦ) was the agency by which the readers were rebegotten as Christians (1:23), and since the word of the Lord (ῥῆμα κυρίου) was the good news that has been communicated to them (1:25b), some relationship between the divine word and the adjective λογικός seems most likely.”⁸

He thus concludes, “λογικός would express the relationship of γάλα (‘milk’) to the word of God as the proper nourishment for Christians.”⁹ Even if we accept this interpretation, important questions still remain. Most notably, what exactly is the divine word?

At this point, we must beware of truncated definitions of the word of God. Few would follow the interpretation of Grudem, for example, who identifies the word-milk with the scriptures themselves.¹⁰ Karen Jobes correctly notes that “when Peter exhorts them to crave spiritual milk, he is not telling them to crave the word of God, as if commanding them to listen to more sermons or read more Scripture, as good and even necessary as those activities may be.”¹¹ While she rightly rejects limiting the milk to sermons and scripture, she—unnecessarily in my view—also denies the connection of the milk to the word. What we need is a more robust understanding of what the author may mean by the word of God.

Based on 1.23–25, I identify the word-milk with the proclaimed gospel; that is, the narrative of Christ's path through suffering and death into vindication and glorification, the parabolic pattern of his life. This is the good news that, when proclaimed to the audience, precipitated their conversion. This is the Lord whom they have tasted and now should crave. The word-milk is, therefore, in a sense, Christ himself, the narrative of his life, and the pattern of that life as it is proclaimed in the good news. For the rest of the letter, the author

5. John H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (AB 37B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 394.

6. Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 143.

7. Eugene Boring, *1 Peter* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 92, writes, “just as their entrance into the household of faith was a matter of divine begetting and rebirth, so their continued growth is not something they can regenerate themselves, but depends on life-giving nourishment.” Karen Jobes, *1 Peter* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 140, concurs that Peter “is saying that God in Christ alone both conceives and sustains the life of the new birth.”

8. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 147.

9. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 147.

10. Wayne A. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 95.

11. Jobes, *1 Peter*, 140.

will repeatedly feed this milk to his audience in order to grow them to salvation; that is, he will repeatedly present before the eyes of their memory the example of Christ. And this example not only outlines the contours of the life that the community should live; the example also has (based on the understanding of moral exemplars outlined above) the ability to transform into its own image those who attend to it. The author of 1 Peter does not use the metaphor of imprinting, as we found in Philo; he uses a neonatal metaphor. But we are in the same conceptual ballpark. Both authors assume the transformational value of moral exemplars. The milk grows the community into salvation; or, to translate the metaphor, Christ, through the parabolic pattern of his own life, shapes the community who remembers him into those who will likewise persevere through suffering and share in his glory.

The Pattern of Christ

The author explicitly calls to mind the pattern of Christ in several places. Immediately following his exhortation to crave the nourishing milk, for example, he pictures Christ as a living stone, rejected by mortals yet chosen by and precious to God, and then applies that pattern to the audience. They are like living stones, he says. Though they may be maligned and shamed by their mortal contemporaries, they have been chosen by God and established as a spiritual house built on the rejected cornerstone. In 2.21–25, when addressing slaves who suffer unjustly, the author again presents the example of Christ. Christ also suffered unjustly, but the abuse did not alter his faithfulness. He endured by entrusting himself to God, the only judge that matters. His example establishes the pattern for the slaves, but I contend, it can also nourish them, shaping them, growing them, into people who will instantiate the pattern in their own lives. In 3.18 and 4.1 and 4.13 the author again presents the pattern of Christ's suffering and glorification as part of his exhortation to the whole community to continue doing good in the midst of unjust suffering. In all these cases, the pattern serves two important functions: it nourishes the community by (1) defining the virtue needed to live faithfully in their present crisis and (2) shaping them—through the exercise of attention to and remembrance of Christ's example—into those who will be able to imitate that pattern.

Other Examples

Along with these explicit references to the pattern of Christ, the author also presents other examples that refract the pattern of Christ in various contexts. In this way, the other examples can address specific concerns while reinforcing the letter's overarching paraenesis. In 3.5–6, for example, the author presents the "holy women of long ago," including specifically Sarah, as models for the wives in his audience. In their immediate context, these examples illustrate the submission a wife should show to her husband. More broadly, they provide another instantiation of the virtue of doing good by "accepting authority" (*hypotasso*), an attitude defined paradigmatically by Christ, who endured suffering with gentle humility because he subordinated himself to God's will (2.21–24). The example of the holy wives, therefore, reinforces the primary example of Christ. Their example deepens the imprint of Christ's pattern while at the same time inspiring the addressees to creatively imagine how that pattern might be instantiated in their own unique context.

Similarly, in 3.20, Noah and his family serve as examples that refract the pattern of Christ. In the Noachian traditions preserved in the *Sibylline Oracles*,¹² Noah faithfully endures the ridicule of his contemporaries just as Jesus endured verbal abuse (and just as the Petrine addressees endure slander and

12. Jobes (*1 Peter*, 245–246) calls attention to the Noachian traditions in the *Sibylline Oracles*. She also notes that traditions about Noah were widespread, even among Gentiles, in Asia Minor. On this point, see also Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (SNTSMS 69; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 86–99. Noah and his wife (along with the ark) appear on coins of five emperors dating from 193–253 CE.

In *Sib. Or.* 1.125–280, the author retells the story of Noah, emphasizing his preaching role. God not only instructs Noah to construct the ark, he also commands him, "Embolden yourself, and proclaim repentance to all the peoples, so that all may be saved" (1.128–129). Noah calls the people to repentance, but they respond with jeers: "When they heard him, they sneered at him, each one, calling him demented, a man gone mad" (1.171–172).

maligning from their neighbors), but the parallels run even deeper. Noah passed through threatening waters of the flood (cf. Ps 69.1–3; Jonah 2.2–10)¹³ and was saved by God on the other side.¹⁴ In this way, his story exemplifies the pattern of Christ who passed through shameful suffering and death before God vindicated him through his resurrection.

Even more implicitly, the slaves, wives, elders and youths addressed in 1 Peter act as living examples that refract the pattern of Christ in diverse contexts. The author explicitly addresses these groups, but his specific instructions to them apply to the whole community. This is most clear with his instructions to youths. Immediately after instructing them to “accept the authority” of their elders, the author exhorts the entire community: “And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealing with one another” (5.5). If the youths follow the exhortation, they will stand as examples for the whole community, reinforcing the general pattern of humble subordination by refracting it through their own unique circumstances. The slaves (and wives) could likewise provide examples for the entire community. Slaves with harsh masters are already (unintentionally) imitating Christ’s unjust and innocent suffering, if they also endure with gentle humility, then they will exemplify the pattern of Christ for the whole community.

The author addresses the elders in 5.1–3, calling them to be examples to the flock; and as Achtemeier notes, “The immediately following verse, where Christ is identified as the ‘chief shepherd,’ makes clear that once again he is the example to be followed, this time by the shepherd/elders.”¹⁵ If the elders exercise their authority through a willingness to sacrifice themselves for the good of their sheep, as the Chief Shepherd is described doing in 2.21–25, they will present to their flock the pattern of Christ. The ultimate pattern will be reflected and refracted in yet another unique context. This time, interestingly, the audience will have an example of what the pattern of Christ looks like when instantiated by someone who has been given authority, lest they think only slaves and youths can exemplify Christ.¹⁶

Lastly, and maybe most intriguingly, the author himself, whether actual or attributed,¹⁷ reflects the pattern of Christ in his own narrative of suffering and glorification.¹⁸ The book of Acts records traditions of Peter’s suffering in Jerusalem at the hands of the religious leadership (Acts 4.1–21; 5.17–42; 12.1–5), and other early

13. See Dominic Rudman, “1 Peter 3–4 and the Baptism of Chaos,” in *The Catholic Epistles and the Tradition*, ed. Jacques Schlosser (BETL 176; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), 397–405. He connects the waters of baptism to the chaos waters mentioned in various biblical texts, including Jonah 2 and Psalm 69.

14. Joel Green nicely summarizes the coherence of the flood narrative, the death of Christ and the suffering of the Christian community: “The water that endangered Noah and his kin actually served to rescue them, the death of Jesus that was to have silenced him and countermanded his message was actually the means by which he triumphed, and so the suffering of Peter’s Christian audience, far from destroying them, marks them as those who have pledged themselves to Christ and who will share in his resurrection” (*1 Peter* [The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 138).

15. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 328.

16. In a similar way, the husbands (3.7) can also exemplify for their households the pattern of Christ.

17. Most likely, the letter is pseudonymous; but why did the authors choose to attribute the writing to Peter? It may be that the actual authors are disciples of a Petrine school, and so they write in the name of the one who instructed them concerning what they now pass on to the Anatolian churches. “The letter would be authentically Petrine,” Elliott explains, “in the sense that it conveys the traditions known to, and the ideas, theology and social outlook once held by, the apostle Peter and then shared, preserved and developed by the group who reckoned him as their spiritual leader” (*A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981], 272). It is also likely, however, that the apostle Peter was invoked as the author because his own life follows the pattern of Christ outlined in the letter.

18. Benjamin Fiore notes in his discussion of *exempla* in Seneca that the letter form is particularly conducive to the author presenting himself as an example (*The Function of Personal Example in the Socratic and Pastoral Epistles* [AnBib 105; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1986], 87). Of the many different exempla that Seneca employs in his philosophical letters, “the writer-preceptor himself ranks in the forefront among these.” Fiore explains:

This is due to the letter form itself which from the outset carried philosophical paraenesis tied to autobiographical traces. Thus, along with the tone and context of friendship in the instructional letter as already noted above, there

Christian traditions record his execution in Rome.¹⁹ The author of *1 Clement* presents Peter as a noble example from “our own generation”: “because of unjust jealousy,” the author states, Peter “bore up under hardships not just once or twice, but many times; and having thus borne his witness he went to the place of glory that he deserved” (5.3–4). These writings are likely later than 1 Peter, but they testify to early characterizations of Peter as one whose path to glory passed through suffering. For an audience familiar with traditions about Peter’s persecution in Jerusalem or his martyrdom in Rome, therefore, the life of the author supplies another instantiation of the pattern of Christ.

Hermeneutical Suggestions

If the author of 1 Peter exhorts his audience to “crave the word-milk that will grow them into salvation,” the question presents itself: how might present-day communities “crave the word-milk”? That is, how might they continually and discerningly contemplate the pattern of Christ so that they might be shaped into those who instantiate that pattern in their own unique contexts? Such a question invites reflection on a local, ecclesial level. Each community must articulate an answer that fits its own context. In this last section, however, I will suggest some ways that 1 Peter imagines the pattern of Christ can be encountered and contemplated.

First, one can attend to the pattern of Christ in the *heroes of Jewish and Christian history*. These heroes, found both in the holy writings and ecclesial tradition, present behavioral models that refract the pattern of Christ. As a result, attending to the examples of Abraham and David, the Suffering Servant and the Psalmist, or, in the case of 1 Peter, Sarah and Noah, can be an indirect way of attending to the pattern of Christ. Such an interpretation relies on a typological imagination that understands these heroes as pre- and post-figurations of Christ, and, for Christian communities who affirm that the God revealed most clearly in Christ is the same God active throughout history, such linkages are expected. The pattern of Christ has revealed the very pattern of God, enabling the Christian community to understand anew God’s activity in other historical events. Thus, contemporary communities can attend to the pattern of Christ in the stories of the heroes of Jewish and Christian history.

Second, in a similar way, the pattern of Christ can be discerned in the *lives of contemporaries*. As the author of 1 Peter finds refractions of the pattern of Christ in the slaves, wives and elders in the communities he addresses, so also contemporary Christian communities can find instantiations of Christ in their own midst. By consciously interpreting community members’ lives as modern contextualizations of Christ’s example and calling attention to those lives, Christian communities can attend to a rich variety of Christlike patterns. The presentation of these various examples will contribute to shaping the community’s imagination so that they can creatively instantiate the pattern in their own unique contexts.

Third, 1 Peter suggests that the pattern of Christ can be discerned and contemplated in the *sacraments or rituals* of the Christian community.²⁰ In 3.18–22, the author pictures baptism as a refraction of the pattern of Christ. He briefly alludes to the ritual as a post-figuration of the Noachic flood that saves the audience through the resurrection of Christ (3.21). Noah’s journey to salvation

noted above, there is also the self-presentation of the author. These belong to the letter’s essence. (87)

The epistolary framework at the beginning and ending of the letter establishes the situation of the letter and includes explicit self-description from the author. Throughout the body of the letter, however, the author can continue to present his own example more implicitly. In Seneca’s letters, for example, he occasionally calls attention to his example, but more often he implicitly presents himself as a model for Lucilius. He creates the persona of one who ceaselessly strives for learning, never arriving at perfect wisdom; and this persona impresses itself upon Lucilius as the pattern to be emulated (89).

19. Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.1) quotes Origin: “Peter was crucified at Rome with his head downwards, as he himself had desired to suffer.” See also Tertullian (*Praescr.* 36.3), who notes that in Rome Peter endured “a passion like his Lord’s.”

20. Douglas Harink (*1 & 2 Peter [Brazos Theological Commentary]*; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 65) also states that “we receive this nourishment through the church’s preaching and sacraments,” though I don’t think we are saying exactly the same thing. He does not outline, for example, the ways in which the sacraments might present the pattern of Christ for the congregation.

through the threatening waters prefigures the pattern of Christ whose path to glory passed through the suffering and shame of the cross. As a post-figuration of the flood, baptism would also be a post-figuration of the pattern of Christ. The author presents a Flood/Christ/Baptism typology in which the pattern of Christ shapes the meaning of both the flood narrative and the ritual of baptism. In baptism, the catechumen is plunged into the threatening waters that mirror both the waters of the flood and the sufferings of Christ. Then, as Christ was resurrected into victory after his death, so the catechumen is raised from the waters of baptism.²¹ Those who witness the sacrament of baptism witness a concrete instantiation of the pattern of Christ. The baptismal rite, therefore, provides an opportunity to both share in and contemplate the pattern of Christ.

Other sacraments or rituals, when interpreted christologically, could also be understood as presentations of the pattern of Christ. Communion, confession and marriage, for example, could be articulated as presentations or instantiations of the self-emptying, self-giving christological pattern. If members of an ecclesial community interpret their various rituals through the prism of Christ and publicly proclaim this interpretation, then they provide their congregations repeated opportunities to contemplate the pattern of Christ in the life and activity of the church.

Lastly, I would like to suggest another opportunity for attending to the pattern of Christ that is not explicitly mentioned in 1 Peter: one can contemplate the pattern of Christ in *the created order*. Such a suggestion runs far afield of what we find in 1 Peter, but other writers have hinted in this direction. In the writings of John Muir, for example, the author describes the Yosemite wilderness as a divine manuscript that he struggles to comprehend. He affirms that the flowers and crystallized rocks of the Yosemite Valley are “a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator,”²² and he laments his lack of understanding.²³ Near the end of *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir’s journal of his first foray into what would become Yosemite National Park, he finally articulates an interpretation of the mountain manuscripts. Gazing at the mountains sculpted by “upheaving volcanoes” and “down-grinding glaciers,” he concludes: “we see that everything in Nature called destruction must be creation—a change from beauty to beauty.”²⁴

Muir’s fidelity to Christian orthodoxy is often questioned, but in this passage, without naming Christ, he beautifully describes the pattern of the suffering Son. In what appears to be destruction, the Father accomplishes beautiful creation. In what appeared as shame, suffering and death on the cross, the Father defeated death itself, creating through that seeming destruction the new life of the resurrection. Nature teems with similar examples;²⁵ and for the Christian who sees these examples through the prism of Christ’s death and resurrection, they offer opportunities to contemplate the pattern of Christ.

These suggestions, of course, make no attempt to be comprehensive. I have not even explored the rich capacity of the fine arts—music, literature, film and other visual arts—to powerfully present the pattern of Christ. Contemporary Christian communities, therefore, may find a myriad of ways to attend discerningly to the pattern of Christ. For those who crave it, the nourishing, transforming milk of the word

21. Admittedly, the author of 1 Peter does not emphasize these elements of the baptismal rite in his brief allusion. In Romans 6.1–11, however, Paul explicitly links baptism with the pattern of Christ. He describes baptism and sharing in Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. The one who enters the waters of baptism dies with Christ and relies on God for new life (cf. Gal 2.19–20). The baptizand shares in the complete pattern of Christ, the self-sacrificing death and the divinely invigorated new life.

22. John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Penguin Nature Classics; New York: Penguin, 1987), 153.

23. Muir gazes on the beauty of the wilderness around him, “without definite hope of ever learning much, yet with the longing, unresting effort that lies at the door of hope, humbly prostrate before the vast display of God’s power, and eager to offer self-denial and renunciation with eternal toil to learn any lesson in the divine manuscript” (*My First Summer*, 132).

24. Muir, *My First Summer*, 229.

25. For example: The fragile Columbine flower grows best in the wake of an avalanche that has leveled the trees on an alpine hillside, clearing the canopy so that enough sun can reach the ground and nourish the flower. The Sequoia seed remains trapped in its pinecone until a fire sweeps through the forest, consuming the underbrush and heating the pinecone until it bursts open and releases the seed.

is there. The example of Christ can still “imprint” the imaginations of those who carefully and continually contemplate it, shaping attendees into those who live according to the pattern. Through his example, therefore, Christ provides more than a pattern by which to live. He also provides an enduring power to nourish and transform.

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