

“Born Again from Incorruptible Seed”: The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation in 1 Peter  
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## Introduction

The value of 1 Peter for the doctrine of salvation has long been noted. For Martin Luther, 1 Peter was “one of the grandest books of the New Testament, and it is the true, pure Gospel”; indeed, Peter “inculcates the true doctrine of faith, how Christ has been given to us, who takes away our sins and saves us.”<sup>2</sup> Even a cursory look at the first chapter validates Luther’s claim; from the very beginning of the epistle themes such as new birth, resurrection, and eternal inheritance resonate strongly, clearly linked via faith to salvation. Even when σωτηρία itself is not explicitly mentioned (as it is in 1:5, 9 and 10), the theme persists, although, interestingly, “1 Peter develops his soteriology mainly by means of family imagery.”<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, the theme of salvation in 1 Peter is eschatological, forward-pointing.<sup>4</sup> Yet this is not to the exclusion of either the past or present aspects of salvation, since Christians “have been born again” (1:23, ἀναγεγεννημένοι), with the result that they are currently characterized by a “living hope” (εἰς ἐλπίδα ζῶσαν).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, “1 Peter sees salvation as something that happens across the span of time.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as Reinhard Feldmeier aptly notes, “eschatological renewal” has already taken place within the Christian’s life; there is a strong sense of the soteriological “present-ness” (*Gegenwärtigkeit*) within the believer addressed by 1 Peter.<sup>7</sup>

That particular word for “being born again,” ἀναγεννάω, is unique to 1 Peter in the New Testament (1:3, 23). Significantly, the “new birth” theme in 1:3 directly leads to an “incorruptible inheritance” (εἰς κληρονομίαν ἀφθαρτον), and the same two words (ἀναγεννάω + ἀφθαρτος) link to 1:23, where they reappear: the believer has been “born again from an incorruptible seed” (ἀναγεγεννημένοι ... ἀφθάρτου).<sup>8</sup> The latter reference leads directly into a quote from Isaiah 40, a rich textual background for understanding Peter’s theology.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude Preached and Explained,” trans. John Nicholas Lenker, in *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis, MN: Lutherans in All Lands, 1904), 34–35.

<sup>3</sup> Fika J. Janse van Rensburg, “Metaphors in the Soteriology in 1 Peter: Identifying and Interpreting the Salvific Imageries,” in *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt, SupNovT 121 (Leiden: Brill, 2005): 432; cf. Troy Martin, *Metaphor and Composition in 1 Peter*, SBLDS 131 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1992), 141.

<sup>4</sup> Peter H. Davids, “Immigrants in Our Own Land, Citizens of God,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 21 no. 3 (Fall 2017): 12.

<sup>5</sup> It is not so much that the perfect tense in Greek automatically necessitates a past action (this writer would prefer to see it that way, generally, but the verb tenses in Greek are too controversial to hang a theological point on). Rather, the perfect participle ἀναγεγεννημένοι in v. 23 seems to function as the *grounds* or perhaps the *means* for the command to “love one another intensely” (ἀλλήλους ἀγαπήσατε ἐκτενῶς; see the discussions in Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005], 125; John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, AB [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000], 388; Martin Evang, “Ἐκ καρδίας ἀλλήλους ἀγαπήσατε ἐκτενῶς: Zum Verständnis der Aufforderung und ihrer Begründungen in 1Petr 1,22 f.,” *ZNW* 80 (1989): 123). Consequently, the author’s logic demands that believers are already “born again.”

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Anne Reese, “Centering the Decentered Self: 1 Peter and Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Kingdom Rhetoric: New Testament Explorations in Honor of Ben Witherington III* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013): 206.

<sup>7</sup> Reinhard Feldmeier, “Wiedergeburt im 1. Petrusbrief,” in *Wiedergeburt*, ed. Reinhard Feldmeier, Biblisch-theologische Schwerpunkte (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2005), 94.

<sup>8</sup> All translations from the Greek New Testament, the OG (Septuagint), and the Hebrew Masoretic text are my own translation. For the Greek New Testament, I am following *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform 2005*, eds. Maurice A. Robinson and William G. Pierpont (Southborough, MA: 2005). I could not find any textual variants in the GNT that would impact my arguments here, though it is

New birth in 1 Peter, to the tune of Isaiah 40, will be the focus of this essay, specifically how the undercurrent of Isaiah's theology in 1 Peter indicates that new birth is the work of God's Word, and thus imperishable, compared to the work of man. In other words, since God's word accomplishes new birth in the Christian, consequently the seed implanted cannot fail. God's salvation itself is incorruptible and ultimately irrevocable.

The first section of this essay will briefly introduce 1 Peter's background and theology. The second section will concentrate on the theology of Isaiah 40 in the Old Greek (OG) translation (a.k.a., "the Septuagint")<sup>9</sup>, while the third section will focus on how that theology informs Peter's theology in 1:22–25. The final section will discuss the theological significance of our findings and how this focus on the "incorruptible seed" resonates with the theology of Peter's second epistle as well.

### **A. First Peter: Its Background and Key Theological Themes**

First Peter grapples with issues of social and spiritual identity and its practical significance. The letter addresses itself to "the elect strangers of the diaspora" (1:1), "strangers and resident aliens" (2:11). Such phrases most likely have both literal and spiritual connotations. Much of 1 Peter's audience may have been literal "resident aliens" in Asia Minor, perhaps even Christians transplanted from Rome.<sup>10</sup> Yet their reverence of Jesus Christ at the exclusion of all other gods in the Greco-Roman environment made them even "stranger" to those around them and increased the social pressure.<sup>11</sup>

To counter-act the social ostracization that would follow, Peter assists them in developing a new social-spiritual identity (see esp. 2:7–10, 4:16).<sup>12</sup> In the process, he frequently deals with the matter of persecution and the resultant suffering (1:6–7; 2:11–25; 3:9, 13–18; 4:1, 4, 12–19; 5:9).<sup>13</sup> However, 1 Peter does not wallow in negativity. To the contrary, the themes of hope and final deliverance resonate all throughout, in spite of any persecution (social or physical) that Christians might endure. Christians possess a "living hope" (1:3), and in light of that living hope their current trials are temporary and ultimately beneficial to them (1:6–7). Indeed, to suffer as a Christian is a

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noteworthy that in 1 Pet 2:2 some Greek NTs have "grow into [εἰς] salvation" while others have just "grow" (see the helpful comparison in the *Solid Rock Greek New Testament: Scholar's Edition*, eds. Joey McCollum and Stephen L. Brown [North Conway, NH: Solid Rock]). For the Septuagint, I am following Alfred Rahlfs's *Septuaginta*, ed. Robert Hanhart (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006). For the Hebrew, I am following the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. Karl Elliger, William Rudolph, et al, 4<sup>th</sup> corrected ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983). The latter two are accessed via *Accordance* 11.2 (OakTree Software, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> I acknowledge here the imprecise nature of those terms. In the first century, the apostles would not have been using a single, published, book-form "Septuagint," but rather a variety of scrolls for each book or set of books, often with notable textual differences, and sometimes they may have relied on memory from oral recitation. With that caveat, I will refer to the Greek translation of Isaiah as the "Old Greek" (OG) version, noting that OG Isaiah 40 seems to be stable enough that we can draw general conclusions on its use in 1 Peter. Currently the best introduction to the nature of the "Septuagint" is, in this writer's opinion, Karen H. Jobes and Moisés S. Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> The classic defense of the position that 1 Peter's audience consisted of literal resident aliens is John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005). I have (for the most part) defended Elliott's position in chapter 2 of Paul A. Himes, *Foreknowledge and Social Identity in 1 Peter* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014); see especially pages 63–71. For the idea that Peter is addressing Christians who were displaced from Rome into Asia Minor, see Jobes, *1 Peter*, 28–41 (I especially appreciate Jobes' statement that "The nature and extent of the 'foreigner' metaphor in 1 Peter are better explained if it was triggered by a real event or experience instead of just being pulled out of thin air" [39]). Finally, for a helpful discussion of what it meant to be a "stranger" in the ancient world, see Christian Wolff, "Christ und Welt im 1. Petrusbrief," *TLZ* 100 (1975): 333.

<sup>11</sup> See the excellent treatment by Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), esp. 37–66.

<sup>12</sup> Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, deals with this topic, as does David G. Horrell, "'Race,' 'Nation,' 'People': Ethnic Identity-Construction in 1 Peter 2:9," *NTS* 58 (2012): 123–43. See also Paul A. Himes, "First Peter's Identity Theology and the Community of Faith: A Test-case in How Social Scientific Criticism Can Assist with Theological Ethics via Biblical Theology," *EvQ* 89 no. 2 (2018): 122–4.

<sup>13</sup> For the important role that a theology of suffering plays in 1 Peter, see Floyd V. Filson, "Partakers with Christ: Suffering in First Peter," *Interpretation* 9 no. 4 (1955): 410.

cause for joy (4:13) and evidence that God’s Spirit and glory rests on such a person (4:14).<sup>14</sup> At the close of this book (5:10), Peter further notes that such temporary suffering (ὀλίγον παθόντας) cannot but help lead to God’s mending (καταρτίζω), among other things.

Consequently, Peter’s doctrine of salvation in this epistle is developed not to evangelize (though it certainly contains value in that regard) but rather to encourage. The epistle assumes that the audience consists of Christians (e.g., 1:3–4), and as noted above frequently uses familial language to denote the relationship that the readers have to each other and to God.<sup>15</sup> First Peter, then, does not so much describe *how* one becomes born again (though clearly faith in the resurrected Messiah plays the decisive role: 1:3–5), but rather the theological significance of being born again. Indeed, the fact that Peter’s audience is experiencing the effects of believing on Jesus Christ means that their status can simultaneously be contrasted both with unbelievers (2:7) and with their own previous life (4:3–4).

This, then, is the framework in which we will discuss Isaiah 40. Specifically, we will be asking the question, “How does Isaiah 40 contribute to 1 Peter’s theology of the new birth, its significance and durability? In light of the OG of Isaiah 40, is it likely that the new birth, which leads to final salvation, could be revoked, or is it of necessity permanent?” As we shall see, Peter’s argumentation, including his use of Isaiah 40, favors the permanent, irrevocable nature of the new birth.

## B. The Theology of the Old Greek of Isaiah 40

Peter primarily (though not exclusively) utilizes the Old Greek version in his first epistle instead of a direct translation from the Hebrew.<sup>16</sup> Space excludes the possibility of a thorough discussion of the canonical and/or theological significance of the OG in the New Testament, but the fact that Peter relies primarily on it for 1:24–25 can be demonstrated by the following chart<sup>17</sup>:

1 Peter 1:24–25a	Isaiah 40:6–8 (OG)	Isaiah 40:6–8 (MT)
Διότι πᾶσα σὰρξ ὡς χόρτος καὶ πᾶσα <b>δόξα</b> ἀνθρώπου [or: <b>δόξα</b> αὐτῆς] <sup>18</sup> ὡς ἄνθος χόρτου. Ἐξηράνθη ὁ χόρτος, καὶ τὸ ἄνθος αὐτοῦ ἐξέπεσεν· τὸ δὲ ῥῆμα Κυρίου μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.	Φωνὴ λέγοντος Βόησον· καὶ εἶπα Τί βοήσω; Πᾶσα σὰρξ χόρτος, καὶ πᾶσα <b>δόξα</b> <b>ἀνθρώπου</b> ὡς ἄνθος χόρτου· ἐξηράνθη ὁ χόρτος, καὶ τὸ ἄνθος ἐξέπεσεν, τὸ δὲ ῥῆμα τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.	אקרא מה ואמר קרא אמר קול כצִיץ וכל־חסדו חציר כל־הבשר רוח כי צִיץ נבל חציר יבש השדה העם חציר אכן בו נשבה יהוה ודבר־אלהינו צִיץ נבל חציר יבש לעולם יקום

<sup>14</sup> Elliott well states, “To suffer as a Christian, a Christ-lackey, is no cause for shame (4:16ab) but, to the contrary, an opportunity for glorifying and honoring God (4:16c)” (*1 Peter*, 117).

<sup>15</sup> See Feldmeier, “Weidergeburt,” 97–98 for a helpful discussion of the significance of “rebirth” language for the “family” terminology of 1 Peter.

<sup>16</sup> A number of sources establish this, though pride of place goes to Karen Jobes, “The Septuagint Textual Tradition in 1 Peter,” in *Septuagint Research: Issues and Challenges in the Study of the Greek Jewish Scriptures*, eds. Wolfgang Kraus and R. Glen Wooden, SBLSCS 53 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2006), 311–331. Also helpful is D. A. Carson, “1 Peter,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 1015–45. Exceptions do exist. In 1 Pet 4:8, Peter relies on the Hebrew over the OG (see the discussion in the section “Peter’s Use of Proverbs 10:12 in 1 Peter 4:8,” in Paul A. Himes, *1 Peter: A Research Commentary*, Lexham Bible Guide [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017; Logos Bible Software]).

<sup>17</sup> While this chart is my own work, any reader interested in a more detailed analysis of the OG vs. MT here should consult Steve Moyise, “Isaiah in 1 Peter,” in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, eds. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 176.

<sup>18</sup> There is a textual variant here. The Byzantine text more closely mimics the OG (“glory of man”) while most critical texts have a pronoun instead of “man,” specifically “her glory,” where the feminine αὐτῆς refers back to σὰρξ (see for example, *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition*, ed.

Peter's adherence to the OG is indicated especially by the phrase "glory of man" (or "its glory") which occurs in the OG but not the Hebrew (the Hebrew has "his lovingkindness"), and the complete lack of all of v7 of the Hebrew text in the OG (v7–8 in the OG constitute v8 in the Hebrew; thus v7 is completely skipped). It must be noted, however, that a couple key differences between the OG and 1 Peter do exist (especially "Word of the Lord" vs. "Word of God"), though this does not change the fact that Peter is relying on the OG here.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, two streams of thought must factor into our study of Peter's use of Isaiah 40:6–8—first, the original context of the inspired Hebrew author; secondly, the theological reflection of the OG translator whom Peter is following.

Furthermore, as D. A. Carson notes, "Peter recognizes the stark similarities between those who were initially comforted by Isaiah 40 and those who are going to read his epistle. Almost certainly he expects them to pick up on all of Isa. 40, not just the two verses that he actually cites, and to detect the parallels in their own situation."<sup>20</sup> I believe, then, that a general study of the first part of Isaiah 40 will shed light on the nature of salvation in 1 Peter 1.

Isaiah 40 functions as a prologue to a new section of Isaiah. The context is either the Babylonian or Assyrian threat of annihilation.<sup>21</sup> Against that ominous backdrop, "[The] theme of comfort is a leitmotif throughout these chapters [40–48], ... and it makes for good news indeed after all the dire threats and comminations of chs. 1–39."<sup>22</sup> Such comfort, however, is placed within the context of God's ruling power: "The prophet calls people to believe in a God who rules on earth as in heaven and acts on earth on afflicted Israel's behalf."<sup>23</sup>

On the one hand, Isaiah 40 contains its share of difficulties. One can speak of it as "a famous yet problematic passage incorporating a number of ambiguities and nuances."<sup>24</sup> Scholars especially struggle with the identification of the various "voices" and "listeners" in the first portion of the chapter.<sup>25</sup> For example, the subject of "comfort" cannot be God himself, since the verb is plural in Hebrew, while who exactly is to "prepare the way" in v. 3 is nowhere explicitly stated in the context.<sup>26</sup> Having said that, the expression *יִאמַר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם* makes it clear that the Lord himself "is the source of the message," and it is directed "to a forgiven people."<sup>27</sup>

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Michael W. Holmes [Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2010]). Regardless, 1 Peter is still generally following the OG. As Jobes notes, "This difference is of little or no significance in meaning, for *ἀνθρώπων* can be understood as referring to humankind, and so the substitution of the pronoun could be the result of slight paraphrases by the author of 1 Peter" ("The Septuagint Textual Tradition in 1 Peter," 317–8).

<sup>19</sup> Elliott (*1 Peter*, 391) helpfully discusses the significance of this deliberate modification by Peter: "The Petrine context, however, makes it likely that the change was deliberate. Verse 25b contains the author's own clarification of the word spoken of in the Isaian text and its import for the readers. This verse ('this "word" is the good news that was proclaimed to you') relates the 'word' of v 25a to the previous statement of vv 10–12 concerning the good news regarding Christ (v 11b) that was proclaimed to the addressees (v 12b)." Cf. also the discussion in Martin Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*, SNTSMS 149 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 146. Finally, the reader interested in the various views on the role of the Septuagint in the Christian church should begin by consulting W. Edward Glenny, "The Septuagint and Biblical Theology," *Themelios* 41 no. 2 (August 2016): 263–78, as well as Timothy E. Miller, "An Evangelical Apology for the Septuagint," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 22 (2017): 33–55.

<sup>20</sup> Carson "1 Peter," 1021. This idea is also ably defended by Peter R. Rodgers, "The Question of 1 Peter 3:13," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 31 (2018): 113–114, drawing from Richard Hay's development of the idea of "metalepsis." Note also Jobes, *1 Peter*, 125–30 (who examines the broader context of Isaiah 40, since "Peter echoes Isaiah's thought elsewhere" [125]).

<sup>21</sup> The general scholarly consensus is that the Babylonian threat is in view in Isaiah 40. An Assyrian background for the text is defended by Matthew Seufert, "Reading Isaiah 40:1–11 in Light of Isaiah 36–37," *JETS* 58.2 (Jun 2015): 269–81 and a series of articles by J. Barton Payne, "Eighth Century Israelitic Background of Isaiah 40–66: Parts I–III," *WTJ* vols. 29.2–30.2 (May 1967–May 1968): 179–190, 50–58, and 185–203.

<sup>22</sup> Joe Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 179; cf. Ben Witherington III, *Isaiah Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2017), 178.

<sup>23</sup> John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40–55*, 2 vols., ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 1:89.

<sup>24</sup> Terry W. Eddinger, "An Analysis of Isaiah 40:1–11 (17)," *BBR* 9 no. 1 (1999): 119.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40–55*, 1:63, 1:77; Eddinger, "An Analysis of Isaiah 40:1–11 (17)," 119, 124–25.

<sup>26</sup> Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40–55*, 1:63, 1:76. For a perspective on this passage that sees God addressing "his divine court," see Christopher R. Seitz, "The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah," *JBL* 109 no. 2 (1999): 235.

<sup>27</sup> Eddinger, "An Analysis of Isaiah 40:1–11 (17)," 125.

In the initial exhortation of verse 1 (“Comfort, comfort”), the Lord addresses either a group of prophets (the verb is plural)<sup>28</sup> or priests (so the OG in v2), though possibly with Isaiah at the center. The language of v1 in the Hebrew (עַמִּי [“my people”] in close proximity to אֱלֹהֵיכֶם [“your God”]) anticipates such passages as Jeremiah 24:7 and 31:33.<sup>29</sup> This in turn resonates well with Peter’s own theology of spiritual identity (notice 2:9–10, where Peter draws from a variety of OT passages). While the OG slightly mutes the emphasis here (having simply ὁ θεός instead of σου ὁ θεός), nonetheless the expression τὸν λαόν μου makes it clear that the Lord is taking possession of his people and will protect them. In this way the focus is constantly centered on YHWH and *his* capability to protect, in contrast with the frail work of humanity.

Isa 40:3–4 in both the Hebrew and the OG proclaim that any impediments that stand in the way of God’s merciful restoration of Israel will be eliminated (a role fulfilled to a certain degree by John the Baptist, Mark 1:3).<sup>30</sup> Thus the emphasis is that the Lord himself will accomplish the task he has set out to do. Nothing will stand in his way.

Isa 40:5 introduces us to a key variation between the OG and Hebrew, and one that holds special significance for 1 Peter. The Hebrew states, “The glory of YHWH will be revealed, and all flesh will see [it] together [יחד],” whereas the OG states, “The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see *the salvation of God* [τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ θεοῦ].” Although the theme of salvation clearly reverberates throughout the chapter in the Hebrew as well, the OG makes it more explicit with the word σωτήριον (1 Peter uses a cognate, σωτηρία, three times in the epistle’s first chapter). Thus the OG amplifies the fact that the Lord himself accomplishes salvation.

The question remains, however: how exactly can one trust the Lord to accomplish that salvation, especially in light of Israel’s destitute condition? Indeed, v7 in both the Hebrew and the Greek constitute a potential objection to the reality of deliverance. Claus Westermann states,

The exiles’ greatest temptation—and the prophet speaks as one of their number—was precisely to be resigned to thinking of themselves as caught up in the general transience of all things, to believing that nothing could be done to halt the extinction of their national existence, and to saying “just like the countless other nations destroyed before our time, in our time and after our time, we are a nation that perishes: all flesh is as grass!”<sup>31</sup>

In other words, from the perspective of the Israelites, how can one truly know that their fate will not be the same as those other nations caught up in the transience of life? Indeed, *where does their hope and assurance of salvation come from?*

YHWH’s powerful answer offers true comfort for the Israelites of Isaiah’s era, the believers of Peter’s era, and Christians even today: salvation and assurance do not come from “the mundane and human frailness,” as represented by “the withering blossom and grass ...both exclamations of despondency . . .”<sup>32</sup> If such were the case, neither salvation nor one’s hope of salvation would have any solid mooring. To the contrary, Isa 40:8 (τὸ δὲ ῥῆμα τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα: “But the word of our God remains unto eternity”) means that “The ‘word of our God’ spoken to Israel in her past history is not part and parcel of the inevitable decay: it stands, it persists, it abides ... [This Word] does not belong to the realm of transitory things, but to that which abides. *Nothing in existence has the power to make it void, not even the desperate plight which was Israel’s.*”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, 1:63.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>30</sup> Peter A. Steveson, *A Commentary on Isaiah* (Greenville, SC: BJU, 2003), 337; Carson, “1 Peter,” 1020.

<sup>31</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, trans. David J. G. Stalker, OTL (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1969) 41.

<sup>32</sup> Eddinger, “An Analysis of Isaiah 40:1–11 (17),” 130.

<sup>33</sup> Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 42, emphasis added; cf. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 180.

Here, then, is the heart of the matter. Isaiah 40 acknowledges that mere humanity is like the grass of the field: it will be destroyed. Whatever humanity hopes to accomplish will also fade away. Thus, any hope of rescue or salvation that depends upon humanity is doomed to disappointment (cf. Psalm 20:7). The Word of the Lord, however, is infinitely more powerful, to the point where whatever it has set out to accomplish *must* come to pass (cf. Isa 55:11).<sup>34</sup>

In light of the powerful declaration in v8 that YHWH is fully capable of working out his salvation, Isa 40:9 then shifts focus into a jubilant declaration of that salvation. The Hebrew is somewhat ambiguous as to whether it is Zion giving or receiving the tidings, whereas the OG seems to focus on Zion as the recipient of the tidings.<sup>35</sup> What is significant for 1 Peter, however, is that in the OG εὐαγγελίζω is repeated twice in Isa 40:9, since in 1 Peter 1:25b, after having just quoted OG Isa 40:6–8, Peter declares to his audience that “this is the word which was ‘gospelled’ [εὐαγγελίζω] to you.” In this way, Peter further links his own context to the broader context of the first part of Isaiah 40.<sup>36</sup>

A few more points may be made. The speaker in Isa 40:9–11 “commission[s] a herald to issue a proclamation openly, loudly, and fearlessly” for “people to believe in a God who rules on earth as in heaven.”<sup>37</sup> In addition, v9–11, with the use of εὐαγγελίζω in this context, demonstrates “the ancient connection between kingship and salvation, the figure of the savior king.”<sup>38</sup> This in turn shifts to the shepherd motif in v11 (ὡς ποιμὴν ποιμανεῖ τὸ ποίμνιον αὐτοῦ): YHWH himself is the great shepherd who will care for his people.<sup>39</sup>

The rest of the chapter fittingly declares the glory and power of YHWH, the true God who does not himself grow weary and is, in turn, capable of succoring those who rely on Him (v31—οἱ δὲ ὑπομένοντες τὸν θεὸν ἀλλάξουσιν ἰσχύϊν). The point, once again, is the infinite power and capability of God to accomplish what he has determined to accomplish. Indeed, “[This] chapter is one of the most remarkable in all Scripture for placing God and man in sharp antithesis.”<sup>40</sup> With this Isaianic theme in mind, we can now turn to Peter’s allocation of it for his own theology.

### C. The Incorruptible Seed in 1 Peter 1

As discussed, the broader context of the first part of Isaiah 40 helps inform Peter’s own theology in 1 Peter 1. In addition, the key Isaianic terms σωτήριον (Isa 40:5) and εὐαγγελίζω (twice in Isa 40:9) reverberate strongly with Peter. Peter does not use that first term, but he does use the cognate σωτηρία three times in the first 10 verses (and in 1:9–10 it is clear that Peter is thinking in terms of salvation history).<sup>41</sup> The second term, εὐαγγελίζω, in 1 Pet 1:25 clarifies the role of the

<sup>34</sup> Martin Williams is correct to note how the “Word of God” can refer to “the efficacious activity of God” (*Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*, 145).

<sup>35</sup> Witherington, *Isaiah Old and New*, 182. Even in the OG, however, there may still be ambiguity because neither Σιών nor Ἱερουσαλήμ alter their morphology in the OG when functioning as different cases (i.e., a genitive Σιών looks no different than a nominative Σιών). However, word order is helpful here, since both words are in the most logical place to function as the direct objects of the participle εὐαγγελιζόμενος.

<sup>36</sup> As Michaels (*1 Peter*, 79) notes, “Although Peter does not extend the quotation to v 9, ...The occurrence of εὐαγγελιζεσθαι in Isaiah’s context affords him an excellent opportunity to identify the eternal word of God with the gospel proclaimed in Asia Minor.” Cf. also Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 142.

<sup>37</sup> Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40–55*, 1:85, 1:89.

<sup>38</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 186.

<sup>39</sup> For a helpful discussion of the shepherd motif in the OT in general, as well as its significance for Jesus’ use of the imagery in the Gospels, see Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 186–7. Note also how in 1 Pet 5:2, Peter will utilize the shepherd/sheep motif for his own exhortation. Interestingly, 1 Pet 5:2 is the only place in the NT where ποιμνιον and ποιμαίνω occur within 5 words of each other (though there are 7 such passages in the OG, including Isaiah 40, though Isaiah 40:11 is unique in that it has *three* shepherding cognates within five words of each other). Accordance command line: = ποιμνιον <WITHIN 5 Words> ποιμαίνω

<sup>40</sup> Everett F. Harrison, “Exegetical Studies in 1 Peter: Part 5,” *BibSac* 98 no. 390 (April 1941): 193.

<sup>41</sup> That a significant amount of semantic overlap exists between σωτήριον and σωτηρία in the New Testament can be seen via a comparison of e.g., Acts 28:28 with Acts 13:47, or Eph 6:17 with 1 Thess 5:8.

“Word” from 1:24–25b, precisely the point at which Peter quotes Isaiah 40.<sup>42</sup> Clearly, Peter sees “salvation” and “good news” not merely in terms of physical salvation from an enemy, or even solely in terms of God’s deliverance within time; rather, for Peter those terms point to the eternal deliverance that awaits believers (since such salvation is linked to an “inheritance” currently being “guarded in the heavens”; 1 Pet 1:3–4).

In 1 Pet 1:17, Peter has given his readers the 3<sup>rd</sup> in a series of 4 imperatives, the command to “live out your time of sojourning (παροικίας) in fear.” Verses 18–19 then give the basis for that command, the fact that their redemption was accomplished not through corruptible (φθαρτος) material (“mere” silver or gold) but rather through the infinitely more precious blood of Jesus Christ. Here Peter has both introduced the theme of “corruptibility” (which will reappear shortly) while also initiating a contrast between what man’s work accomplishes versus what God’s work accomplishes.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, as Katherine Anne Girsch well notes, “Inherent in 1 Peter 1:3–2:10 is the contrast between human beings who have been begotten by normal means and those who have been begotten of imperishable seed.”<sup>44</sup>

The contrast between man’s work and God’s work soon shifts into familial and agricultural terms. In v22, Peter directs his fourth imperative (“love one another intensely”) at his readers, yet immediately in v23 he also provides the grounds for that command, “showing how the kind of love commanded in v22 is now possible.”<sup>45</sup> They can love precisely because they have been “begotten again,” and that from an incorruptible rather than a corruptible seed.<sup>46</sup> The imagery of a “new birth” and a “seed” simultaneously invokes thoughts of human procreation and basic agriculture, the former because of the predominance of Peter’s familial language and the latter because of the underlying agricultural metaphor in Peter’s use of Isaiah 40:6–8.<sup>47</sup>

Interestingly, this particular word for new birth (ἀναγεννάω) only occurs one time in all of published Greek literature before 1 Peter.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, good reason exists for seeing it as semantically equivalent to γεννᾶν ἄνωθεν in John 3.<sup>49</sup> The broader concept of new birth does occur within both Jewish Second Temple literature and older pagan texts.<sup>50</sup> As Williams notes, however, “Rather than assuming some specific background to the term ἀναγεννάω, it is better to see a more general background in the concept of rebirth in early Christianity originating in the teachings of Jesus (though not necessarily directly dependent on it), which has in turn been influenced by the eschatological language of renewal in the Old Testament.”<sup>51</sup> In addition, this new birth is clearly linked to the resurrection of Jesus Christ in 1:3.<sup>52</sup> Both Christ’s resurrection and this new birth are

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<sup>42</sup> Significantly, εὐαγγελίζω in Isaiah accounts for 26% (6/23) of the total uses of that verb in the entire OG.

<sup>43</sup> Katherine Anne Girsch, “Begotten Anew: Divine Regeneration and Identity Construction in 1 Peter” (PhD diss., University of Durham, 2015), 132.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>45</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 139.

<sup>46</sup> The emphasis seems to be more on God’s act of “begetting” rather than the act of being born *per se* (see Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 139).

<sup>47</sup> For an emphasis on the idea of human procreation as the controlling metaphor, see J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1998), 76; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 388; Davids, “Immigrants in Our Own Land,” 12 fn4. For a discussion of agriculture within the metaphor, see Girsch, “Begotten Anew,” 137; and Michaels, *1 Peter*, 76 (while Michaels prefers to see the term “seed” as primarily referring to human reproduction, he does note that “an essential point in the Scripture quotation that follows is the metaphorical equating of the two [agricultural seed and human reproduction], precisely with regard to perishability”).

<sup>48</sup> Searches of this kind have been performed utilizing the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* database (Irvine, CA: University of California, 2014), <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>.

<sup>49</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> For helpful discussions of the idea of “new birth” outside of the New Testament, see the following: Feldmeier, “Wiedergeburt,” 82–83; Leonhard Goppelt, *Der Erste Petrusbrief*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 93–94; Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 78; Williams, *Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*, 132. In addition, Girsch (“Begotten Anew,” 99–125) provides a helpful overview of the “holy seed” theme in both the Old Testament and Second Temple Jewish literature.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, *Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*, 134.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–5

inseparable in this context from the faith of believers (1:21—τοὺς δεῖ αὐτοῦ πιστεύοντας εἰς θεόν, τὸν ἐγγείραντα αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν). In light of both context and biblical background, then, this “new birth” can be defined as that which causes “believers [to be] endowed with the living and abiding power of God,” with the result that “they are a new kind of being defined qualitatively by life rather than death.”<sup>53</sup>

Such rebirth is accomplished by means of a “seed” (σπορά), a common enough term that is well-suited to conjure up images of agriculture (cf. OG 2Kgs 19:29 and 1 Macc 10:30).<sup>54</sup> The term for “corruptible” (φθαρτός) is a common enough term in *Koine* Greek, though its proximity to σπορά is unheard of.<sup>55</sup>

What is significant for our study, however, is the use of ἄφθαρτος (“incorruptible”), since this has ramifications for our understanding of the nature of a Christian’s salvation. The sense of ἄφθαρτος frequently seems to be that of “incapable of being destroyed.” Strabo, for example, speaks of Druids who (along with other people) believe that both human souls and the universe itself are indestructible (ἄφθάρτους δὲ λέγουσι καὶ οὗτοι καὶ ἄλλοι τὰς ψυχὰς καὶ τὸν κόσμον).<sup>56</sup> In Plutarch’s “On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander,” the sculptor Sasicrates boasts to Alexander the Great that he can make an image of him out of indestructible material (εἰς ἄφθαρτον, ὃ βασιλεῦ, καὶ ζῶσαν ὕλην).<sup>57</sup>

Elsewhere in Plutarch the word ἄφθαρτος is quite often clearly linked with the divine. The expression περὶ τῆς μακαρίας καὶ ἀφθάρτου φύσεως is used to describe the gods in *De Iside et Osiride* 358.E.5, and ἄφθαρτος is a divine attribute in many texts.<sup>58</sup> The point is not that Peter is informed by Plutarch’s usage. The point rather is that ἄφθαρτος, when linked to deity, quite frequently means “incapable of being destroyed,” and this fits well with Peter’s contrast between man’s work and God’s work. That which originated with man will fade away, but that which originates with God cannot be destroyed.

Thus this new birth is “out of/from” (ἐκ) an indestructible seed, but also “through” (διὰ) God’s Word, described as that which lives and remains forever.<sup>59</sup> Scholars debate the difference (or lack thereof) between ἐκ and διὰ, but this does not affect the overall point that God’s power transcends human frailty and creates a new existence, solely by means of his Word.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, “seed” and “word” here become linked in such a way as to “indicate an equivalency between the ‘living and enduring’ quality of the word (cf. also v25), on the one hand, and ‘imperishable’ seed on the other. Emphasized here is the enduring quality that brought the believers into being.”<sup>61</sup> In summary, the comparison and contrast Peter develops in 1:23 is that “Just as seed sown on a natural level,

<sup>53</sup> Girsch, diss., 135. Naturally it is worth asking at what point this happens. While space precludes a thorough discussion, I would simply point out to the reader the prominent role that “faith” and “believing” play in 1 Peter (1:5, 7–9, 21 [τοὺς δι’ αὐτοῦ πιστεύοντας ... τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν]; 2:6–7). With Achtemeier, I reject the idea that this moment of rebirth is physical baptism (“Because the discussion concerns such a divine rebegetting rather than rebirth, and because the rebegetting is accomplished through the hearing of God’s word, allusion to baptism is rendered unlikely here”; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 139).

<sup>54</sup> Also, σπορά here seems to be a deliberate word-play on διάσπορά in 1Pet 1:1 (as pointed out by Girsch, “Begotten Anew,” 130).

<sup>55</sup> I performed a search on the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* for σπορά and φθαρτός within 10 words proximity, arranged by earliest date, and no such usage occurs before 1 Peter 1:23. I had the same results with σπορά and ἄφθαρτος within 10 words proximity, as well.

<sup>56</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 4.4.4. For Strabo and Plutarch I am following the *TLG* numbering.

<sup>57</sup> Plutarch, *De Alexandri magni fortuna aut virtute*, 335.C.8.

<sup>58</sup> See also Plutarch, *De Superstitione* 165.B.6; *De E apud Delphos* 388.F.1; *De defectu oraculorum* 419.A.2, 420.A.11, 420.E.5; etc.

<sup>59</sup> The participle μένοντος most likely refers to “word,” because, as Achtemeier notes, “The quotation from Isaiah that follows emphasizes the abiding nature not of God but of his Word . . .” (*1 Peter*, 140).

<sup>60</sup> Feldmeier, “Weidergeburt,” 96–97. For various perspectives on the difference or lack of difference between ἐκ and διὰ here, see the following: Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 139; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 389; Girsch, “Begotten Anew,” 134; Eugene A. LaVerdiere, “A Grammatical Ambiguity in 1 Pet 1:23,” *CBQ* 36.1 (Jan 1974): 91; Williams, *Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*, 140;

<sup>61</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter*, 388.

though perishable, has life-giving power within it, so the word of God, which is much superior because it is imperishable, has life-giving power.”<sup>62</sup>

The quotation from Isaiah in vv. 24–25a, then, “is not so much a proof of what has been maintained in v. 23 as a comment on it, verifying as it were that what the author has said has the backing of the authoritative Scriptures of the early Christian community.”<sup>63</sup> Peter’s scripturally reinforced point is that

If the seed from which they were begotten was perishable, then their fate would surely be that of the grass and its flowers, which withers and falls off. But if the word of God, the good news, is living and everlasting, and if believers have been given new birth through his word, then the life into which they have been reborn is unending and their love for one another can endure as well. In short, the word of God, the good news, is efficacious in generating, cultivating, and sustaining new life.<sup>64</sup>

To be sure, a political and social dimension to this rebirth exists as well. Peter cannot help but think of the mighty Roman Empire (like the mighty Assyrian and Babylonian empires of centuries past), and how ultimately that great power becomes like frail grass before the mighty hand of God, a point which naturally offers encouragement to struggling Anatolian Christians.<sup>65</sup> In addition, Girsch has well emphasized how the new birth theme in 1 Peter is meant to “explain the source and means of believers’ new ethnic identity,” and “also functions as the basis for believers’ sense of solidarity, ethical conduct, and cultural formation.”<sup>66</sup>

Nonetheless, Peter’s first epistle clearly concerns the individual believers that make up such a community (otherwise such statements as “according to each person’s work” [1:17] and “just as each of you received a gift” [4:10] become nonsensical). If the community is a “born-again” community, it is only because it consists of individual members who have been “born-again.”<sup>67</sup> Consequently, when Peter declares in 1:25b that the same Word spoken of in Isa 40:6–8 is, in Peter’s own time, “the Word that was ‘gospel’ to” his audience, he means this on both the communal and individual level.<sup>68</sup>

In this way, when Peter declares that believers have been “born again from an indestructible divine seed,” he is now making an ontological statement about each individual believer herself. As Girsch aptly states, “The kind of seed something is determines the kind of thing it will be.”<sup>69</sup> Thus the new birth does not consist merely of a new orientation from the side of the Christian, as if one were simply transferring their loyalty from one sports team to another. Nor does the efficacy or permanence of the new birth depend on anything that exists on the human/fleshly side. If such were the case, no assurance of the effectiveness of the new birth could ever be given, for “all flesh is like grass.”

To the contrary, the efficacy, power, permanence, and irrevocable nature of this new birth all depend upon the divine seed, the Word of God. This is due to the link between new birth and the divine seed, for “The ‘living and abiding’ quality of the word is thus transferred to believers. The

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<sup>62</sup> Williams, *Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*, 146–7.

<sup>63</sup> Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 140.

<sup>64</sup> Joel B. Green, *1 Peter*, The New Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 54.

<sup>65</sup> This point is aptly articulated in Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 142, and Jobes, *1 Peter*, 130.

<sup>66</sup> Girsch, “Begotten Anew,” 128; cf. Feldmeier’s warning about overly individualistic perspective on salvation in 1 Peter (“Wiedergeburt,” 99).

<sup>67</sup> As an analogy: If a sports announcer were to declare, “The crowd tonight is loyal to the Red Sox,” he can only make this statement because a vast number of individuals who make up “the crowd” are loyal to the Red Sox. The statement on the corporate level makes no sense unless it were true on the individual level many times over. My concern here is to grant on the one hand that 1 Peter is concerned about communal identity without swinging the pendulum too far to the other side and neglecting the fact that Peter is also speaking to and of individuals.

<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, as Norbert Brox points out, the community only came into existence because “preachers of the Gospel” approached and “confronted” them with God’s word (Brox, *Der Erste Petrusbrief*, EKK [Zürich: Benziger, 1979], 87). In other words, the community only developed as individuals responded in their heart to God’s Word.

<sup>69</sup> Girsch, “Begotten Anew,” 144.

reference to life is strongly associated in 1 Peter with the resurrection. The seed is therefore the means by which divine properties are transferred to believers.”<sup>70</sup>

To conclude: (1) the new birth in 1 Peter is inextricably linked to the divine seed; (2) the divine seed, by its very essence, is indestructible (in contrast to human work); (3) logically, then, the new birth in the believer is also indestructible, since to claim otherwise would contradict the point Peter is making about the link between new birth, divine omnipotence, and the permanence of God’s Word and what it accomplishes.

#### **D. The Theological Significance of 1 Peter 1:23–25**

Two further points need to be discussed in regards to how our discussion of 1 Peter 1:23–25 supports the theological viewpoint that one cannot lose their salvation, initiated in the new birth.

First, looking at Petrine theology as a whole, some scholars note how the idea of the divine seed being implanted within believers resonates with 2 Peter 1:3–4.<sup>71</sup> There, God’s “divine power” (τῆς θείας δυνάμεως) is that which has produced life in believers. Even more significantly, it is through God’s “valuable promises” that believers transform into “partners of the divine nature” (διὰ τούτων γένησθε θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως).<sup>72</sup> In this way Peter reiterates that the source of change within them is the divine nature itself, an indestructible force that cannot fail.

To be sure, this does not abrogate the fact that believers have a responsibility to grow in virtue (2 Pet 1:5–11), and that in v10 one’s certainty about election may be linked to such growth.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, as the entirety of ch. 2 indicates, one can be an outward member of the community of faith and yet eventually reveal one’s true, corrupt nature (2:22—“the [outwardly!] washed pig returns to wallowing in the mud”). Fascinatingly, in 2 Pet 2:15 Peter uses a Hebrew pun to illustrate the true nature of such people—they are like “Balaam the son of Bosor,” where “Bosor” refers not to Balaam’s father (who was Beor, Num 22:5) but rather to the Hebrew word בֶּשָׂר, “flesh.” Thus the false teachers of 2 Peter 2, just like Balaam, are not children of the divine nature but rather children of the flesh. In other words, what determines one’s spiritual status is not outward conformity, but inward reality. One is either a child of the divine nature or a child of the flesh: there is no in-between status.

Consequently, both Petrine epistles collectively point to a strong contrast between the “corrupt” and the “incorruptible.” In 2 Peter, that which is characterized by “corruption” (2 Pet 1:4, 2:12, 2:19, φθορά, a cognate of φθαρτός) is linked to that life which is in opposition to Jesus Christ, that sort of lifestyle which Peter’s audience *used* to belong to. The person who is corruptible is truly a

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Reinhard Feldmeier, “Salvation and Anthropology in First Peter,” in *The Catholic Epistles and Apostolic Tradition: A New Perspective on James to Jude*, eds. Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr and Robert W. Wall (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 210; Harrison, “Exegetical Studies in 1 Peter,” 192.

<sup>72</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, for one, views “the sharing of the ‘divine nature’” as future oriented, that “which God will grant to the just at the end of the world” (2 Peter, Jude, AB [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press], 156). This is certainly possible, but it seems more probable to see the partaking of the divine nature as the current reality that has come from their rescue from the world’s corruption. In other words, “divine nature” stands in stark contrast to “the corruption of the world” in 2 Pet 1:4, which would cohere more with the flow of thought of 1 Peter 1. The discussion of entrance into God’s kingdom in v. 11, however, should be viewed as eschatological since the tense of the main verb (ἐπιχορηγηθήσεται) is future. Also, the reader should note that I am assuming here that the author of 1 Peter is the same as 2 Peter (for a critique of those who would too-quickly dismiss the petrine authorship of 2 Peter, see Michael J. Kruger, “The Authenticity of 2 Peter,” *JETS* 42.4 [Dec 1999]: 645–71).

<sup>73</sup> I would argue, however, that v. 11 does not seem to deal with whether or not one enters the kingdom (as if somehow one’s success in adding virtue, etc. determines whether one is eternally saved) but rather the *manner* in which one enters. “Richly” (πλουσίως) is the first word in the sentence after οὕτως γὰρ, and thus possesses a more significant discourse function than normal (contrast with the other uses of πλουσίως in the NT—Col 3:16, 1Tim 6:17, Titus 3:6—where it always *follows* the word it modifies). Thus I would suggest that obedience to 2 Pet 1:5–7, 10, determines the manner in which one enters the kingdom. Indeed, “Abundant sowing will be followed by abundant reaping (Luke 6:38)” (D. Edmond Hiebert, *Second Peter and Jude: An Expositional Commentary* [Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1989], 61; cf. also the helpful discussion in Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, rev. ed., TNTC [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987], 86). I am not, however, ruling out spiritual growth à la 2 Peter 2:1–10 as a form of evidence of salvation, though I do not believe that this is the point of the passage.

“child of the flesh” (2 Pet 2:15), in stark contrast to the one who has been born-again and now participates in the incorruptible divine nature.

Secondly, one must ask: if one is currently a child of the divine nature, can such status be lost? In other words, can one’s “born-again” status be revoked?<sup>74</sup> Only if the divine seed could be corrupted or destroyed, and the Word of God’s creation of the new birth within somebody be voided. Yet to this possibility both Isaiah and Peter respond with a definitive “No!” The divine seed cannot fail in what it has initiated (cf. Isa 55:11). To participate in the new birth means that the divine seed has already been implanted, and if the divine seed has been implanted, it cannot possibly waste away or fail to create eternal life (as if it were mere agricultural seed that could be cut down by the wind). This is the whole point of Peter’s argument. While man either chooses to accept or reject the Word of God and the resurrected Christ (1 Pet 2:4–8), both the giving and the sustaining of that new life is the work of God, not man.<sup>75</sup> Thus 1 Pet 1:23 stresses that the Word of God which initiates rebirth *remains forever*, i.e., “can never be made ineffective”!<sup>76</sup>

Believers do have an obligation to take steps to grow (1 Pet 2:1–3), and certainly different babies (to borrow Peter’s metaphor) grow at different rates and with different degrees of health. Yet this growth is ultimately the direct result of the Word of God which remains in them, indeed which *cannot perish* (1 Pet 1:23–25). If the Word of God implanted in them cannot be destroyed, how could a believer’s salvation ever be revoked? For the new birth in a Christian to fail means that something more powerful than the divine seed, the Word of God, has impacted the Christian and reversed the process. Neither Peter’s nor Isaiah’s theology allow for that. To suggest that a Christian, of their own accord, could reverse the impact of the new birth/divine seed within them would be to once again miss the point of Isaiah’s contrast between the work of humans versus the work of God. If the new birth were the work of a human, and dependent upon one’s continued ability to persevere (with God’s power being relegated to secondary status), then obviously the possibility (perhaps the likelihood!) of the process being reversed would loom ominously over the Christian. Yet because the new birth is God’s work, it will continue forever to accomplish what God has decreed it to accomplish, even while all the mightiest testaments to human power fall and crumble like grass in the wind.

## E. Conclusion

Often those who teach that a Christian can lose their salvation do so from legitimate concerns about the testimony of the church when so-called Christians live in unrepentant sin or even blaspheme Jesus Christ. Such concerns are understandable, and one must acknowledge that Scripture does contain warnings to members of the community of faith to examine themselves to see if their faith is genuine (e.g., 2 Cor 13:5; the warning passages in Hebrews). However, for those who are truly born again, the divine seed implanted within them cannot be nullified. If, hypothetically, the divine seed could be removed through the actions of a human (resulting in one losing their salvation), then this would destroy the very contrast Peter and Isaiah have created:

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<sup>74</sup> Charles Wesley, for example, speaks of how a believer can “lose his faith” (“The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God,” ed. Kevin Farrow, *The Sermons of John Wesley—Sermon 19*, Wesley Center Online, accessed June 24, 2019, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-19-the-great-privilege-of-those-that-are-born-of-god/>, III.1), and he seems to imply that a Christian can move away from the state of being “born again.” Wesley frequently speaks of the need to “keep oneself” (e.g., II.1, 7, 10; Wesley here is drawing from 1Jn 5:18). Regarding Wesley’s theology, Kenneth J. Collins states, “Sanctifying, regenerating faith and willful sin are mutually exclusive in Wesley’s thought. *When the one appears the other recedes*. In fact, Wesley details the slow and subtle process of the loss of faith and a descent into sin—what some might call a reversal of the *via salutis*—in his sermon *The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God*” (Collins, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of the New Birth,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32 no. 1 [Spring 1997]: 66–7; emphasis added).

<sup>75</sup> Feldmeier, “Wiedergeburt,” 91.

<sup>76</sup> Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 79.

God's work is different from man's work, and the work of man cannot possibly nullify the work of God (the new birth).

All Christians, including Arminians, believe that at some point salvation is irrevocable, at least after the resurrection (i.e., I know of no theologian who believes that a Christian with a glorified, resurrected body in the New Jerusalem could lose their salvation). Yet what I have argued here is that the logic of 1 Peter 1:22–25 indicates that the certainty of that future permanence is predicated upon the certainty of the current status of having been born-again (1:3–5). God Himself is the one who guards (φρουρέω, 1 Pet 1:5) our future inheritance, which is linked to our born-again status, and this born-again status is, in turn, based on God's implanted seed. This seed which cannot help but accomplish its purpose because it is God, not man, who implanted it.

Thus we see that Peter utilizes the theology of OG Isaiah 40 to stress a key point—this new birth which characterizes those who have placed their faith in Christ is based on the implanted seed of God's Word, a seed which by definition cannot fail in what it has initiated.<sup>77</sup> This fits well with the familial emphasis of 1 Peter, for those born-again of the divine seed now have a different relationship with God, that of a child, not a stranger or an enemy. This new-found status of “child” makes all the difference in regards to a Christian's salvation, because once a Christian is born-again it is God's status as parent which determines the outcome, not the believer's abilities. As my great grand-father wrote almost 80 years ago,

A Christian is literally a child of God and has become a partaker of the divine nature... My children stay in my family, not by virtue of their goodness but by virtue of their birth. We are God's children on the same basis, born into His family... The Bible could not honestly use this picture of a birth and a relation of father and child concerning God and His people if it were not so that when one is saved he enters into a permanent relationship with God which does not change.<sup>78</sup>

Consequently, we see that “the new birth = a new relationship,” and this new relationship is founded on the indestructible work of God, not the flawed and fleeting work of man or woman. God's parenthood of all believers stems from his own Word implanted within each Christian; because his Word can never perish, neither can a Christian.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> One might object that the parable of the sower in Matt 13:3–23 would argue against this point. The focus on that passage, however, is more on the act of sowing the Word rather than the implanting of the Word. Thus in 13:19 the word is σπείρω, not φυτεύω, and in 13:21 we are clearly told that the Word did not actually take root (οὐκ ἔχει δὲ ῥιζαν ἐν ἑαυτῷ). Whether or not Matt 13:22 refers to a true believer or not, however, is a debatable point that cannot be covered here.

<sup>78</sup> John R. Rice, *Twelve Tremendous Themes* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1943), 145–6.

<sup>79</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Justin Langford for his comments that helped improve an earlier draft of this paper.