

11 1 Peter. Persecuted Immigrants in a Xenophobic Empire?

Outline

Greeting, 1:1-2

How Jesus' resurrection creates living hope for persecuted immigrants, 1:3-12

The dignity and holy identity of (unclean) Gentile Christians, 1:13-25

Homeless immigrants find welcome in God's Household: co-heirs with Israel, 2:1-10

Community responsibilities (Haustafel) in a patriarchal empire, 2:11--3:7

Thwarting slander by good works to the poor, 2:11-12

The subversive submission of community to authorities, 2:13-17

The way of the cross for slaves under unbelieving masters, 2:18-25

Subversive submission of wives, 3:1-6 (believing husbands' role, 7)

The way of the cross in the face of persecution and violence, 3:8--4:11

Non-retaliation in the face of oppression and violence, 3:8-12

Share the reason for your hope with those who oppress, 3:13-17

Christ's exemplary suffering of oppression and triumph over violence, 3:18-22

Spiritual warfare and Jesus' Good News of peace, 4:1-6

Inclusive community and spiritual gifts, 4:7-11

Oppressed like Christ, confident of God's liberating justice, 4:12-19

Presbyter Peter to his fellow-elders, 5:1-4; to the young, and to all, 5:5-11

Farewell: the kiss of love, 5:12-14

Perhaps no modern scholar would agree with the traditional Roman Catholic view that 1 Peter represents the first encyclical of the first pope. Scholars now commonly conclude that 1 Peter does come from the Petrine circle in Rome, but not before 80 AD, at least fifteen years after Peter's martyrdom there (65 AD) and thus not from the hand of Peter himself (perhaps from Silvanus/Silas; 5:12). Thus, just as "Babylon" really is Rome (5:13), "Peter" is the symbolic name for the apostle's disciple who wrote the letter. Probably he included actual Petrine traditions but adapted them for persecuted Gentile Christian communities in five Roman Empire provinces (1:1) in what is today Turkey (Asia Minor).

1. Oppressed Immigrants (literal?) and Slaves and God's Liberating Justice. 1 Peter refers to converted Gentiles who formerly had sufficient means for an affluent and excessive self-indulgent lifestyle (4:3) and where some wives still had to resist temptations to flaunt wealth (3:3-4). Obviously a certain diversity of economic level is thus indicated, despite the impoverishment resulting from discrimination, oppression and persecution. However, 1 Peter is addressed to "visiting strangers of the Dispersion" (1:1, 17), whom the author later amplifies to "resident aliens and visiting strangers" (2:11). Here the question of selectivity in literal interpretation notably affects our understanding of the epistle. Everyone recognizes that "Babylon" (5:13) is not literal but after 70 AD became a symbol or metaphor for Rome. Traditionally, however, "Peter" as author was taken literally, while "resident aliens and visiting strangers" were taken as metaphors for Christians everywhere, envisioned as "pilgrims" traveling in this world en route to their true heavenly home (cf. Hebrews 11:13; 13:14). Today, in contrast, "Peter" commonly is interpreted as a symbol for a later author, while "resident aliens and exiles" commonly are taken literally as immigrants who suffered the oppression common to their class, due to the xenophobia (fear of strangers) dominant throughout history and in every culture.¹

Paul Achtemeier agrees in rejecting the traditional Neoplatonic interpretation of the readers as “souls” exiled from their true heavenly home, but argues that in the context of the letter’s controlling metaphor (Israel), persecuted Gentile converts are viewed as becoming like Israel, “exiled” from their surrounding pagan culture and thus suffering the same discrimination, oppression and violence that literal immigrants and strangers suffer (4:4).² Whether 1 Peter addresses literally exiled immigrants or Gentile converts figuratively (but brutally) “exiled” and persecuted by their society, the letter places great emphasis on the injustices, oppression and violence the recipients suffered. In addition to the many general references to the persecution suffered by the recipients (1:6; 4:1, 12-19; 5:8-10), note especially:

2:19 (adíkos, oppression of household slaves suffering unjustly),

3:9-12 (citing Psalm 34:12-16, where the poor experience oppression and liberation),

3:13-14 (referring to --> Matthew 5:6, 10-12, solidarity with the oppressed),

3:16-18 (Christ's suffering on behalf of the unjust/oppressors, 'adíkon),

5:3 (religious leaders who "lord it over" their flock),

5:13 (Babylon = Rome, the oppressive empire).

In such a context of persecution, oppression, poverty and violence, God's justice is understood preeminently as a liberating justice--to be decisively expressed above all in a final judgment that will put an end to all oppression, while rescuing, vindicating and rewarding the oppressed (1:17; 2:14, 23-24; 3:12-14, 18; 4:6, 17-19; --> James 5:1-6).

Some believe that the reference to “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1:4) supports the traditional metaphorical interpretation of pilgrims making their way toward heaven. But in the early Christian apocalyptic eschatology the new Jerusalem descends finally to earth.³ Traditionally the misinterpretation of 1 Peter as a Neoplatonic document, portraying the Christian soul’s “salvation” in its pilgrimage towards its

true heavenly home, has been supported by the common mistranslation of the Greek psuche as “soul,” which occurs six times in the book (see psychology, “the word concerning the soul or life”). Both NIV and NRSV commonly mistranslate psuche as “soul” (1:9, 22; 2:11, 25), but in 3:20 they correctly translate it as “people/persons,” and in 4:19 “themselves,” properly reflecting the anthropology we would expect from a Jewish writer influenced by the Hebrew Bible and Septuagint Greek.⁴ Latin American theologians have emphasized that the mission of the church is not to “save” souls but to bring an integral liberation (forgiveness, healing, liberation from oppression) to the whole person, introducing them by baptism into viable communities. Thus, 1 Peter 1:9, with its reference to the Hebrew prophets, is best translated: “obtaining the goal of your faith, the integral liberation of your lives” (“salvation” understood as the future apocalyptic “integral/cosmic liberation” in 1:5, 9-10; 2:2; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 17--19).

1 Peter thus probably addresses communities with a considerable nucleus of literal exiles and immigrants, but may well apply the terms metaphorically to these communities as embracing other elements marginalized and rejected by the dominant pagan culture. Abraham, father to both Israel and the church, was an immigrant (Genesis 12), the Israelites became immigrant slave laborers in Egypt (Exodus), and after Babylon destroyed Jerusalem (586 BC) most Jews became exiles. Not surprisingly, then, Israel’s “Apostolic Creed” (Deuteronomy 26:4-9) emphasized their immigrant roots, and the law repeatedly commanded that justice and mercy be shown to immigrants, widows and orphans (Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34; Duet. 24:17-18, 27:19). In Jerusalem at Pentecost we find representatives from three of the five provinces that 1 Peter names (1:1; see Pontus, Cappadocia and Asia in Acts 2:9), and soon persecution arose that forced many believing Jews to immigrate (Acts 8:1-4). In Romans 16 Paul greets 28 immigrants in the churches whom he had known elsewhere (see especially Priscilla and Aquila). As

marginalized and oppressed, in many places immigrants are among the first to respond to the Good News (see also Rahab in Joshua 2; cf. Matthew 21:31). Early Christian communities often developed from a nucleus with a large proportion of Jews and immigrants. 1 Peter's extension of the terms metaphorically to entire communities was thus quite natural and appropriate.

2. Xenophobia, Homophobia and Sexual Minorities. Throughout human history we find immigrants strangers accused of importing strange sexual practices. The Hebrew Bible itself warns against certain sexual abominations as typical of the Egyptians and Canaanites (Leviticus 13:3, 24-30; 20:23). In European and Latin American history we find descriptions of “sodomy” as a vice imported by the Italians, the French, the English and various indigenous peoples. In Africa homosexuality commonly has been attributed by one tribe to another, to the Arabs, or to Europeans and Americans.⁵ John Boswell has demonstrated how homophobia and anti-Semitism developed in the twelfth century, eventually culminating in the Nazi Holocaust that killed thousands of homosexuals and other minorities together with some six million Jews.⁶

In 1 Peter the Apostle is portrayed as accompanied only by Silvanus/ Silas (5:12) and his spiritual “son” Mark (5:13), both unmarried. In the entire New Testament, James, Jude (Jesus’ brothers) and Peter are the only married authors (1 Corinthians 9:5), but Peter’s wife (unnamed in the New Testament) is not mentioned in 1-2 Peter. If these two letters were not written by Peter personally, then James and Jude would be the only books in the New Testament written by married authors. But even if 1-2 Peter, James and Jude really wrote the books that bear their names, only 5% of the New Testament would come from married authors, while 95% would come from sexual minorities. The emphasis in 1 Peter on the churches as a “household of God,” then, has a special significance not only for persons who were literally pilgrims and immigrants (John Elliot) but also for persons who did not have literal spouses and children. A new

household [“family”], the community of the disciples of the unmarried Jesus, replaces patriarchal households in God’s cosmic liberation project (Mark 3:31-35; Romans 8:18-39).

For the “unclean” Gentile immigrants this letter addresses, many of them sexual minorities (unmarried), 1 Peter focuses on the people of God as a “spiritual house” (2:5) and “household of God” (4:17). As in the entire Bible, and contrary to dominant modern ideobgies reflected in some translations (such as the NIV), 1 Peter never talks about “family” but about “house(hold)s.” In accord with this focus on the “house,” 1 Peter uses other words of the same root: “construction of a building” (2:5), with a foundation (5:10) and “house servants” (2:18). Even when 1 Peter addresses married couples (3:7), his use of the phrase “live in the same house/under the same roof” reminds us that it was common to include slaves, widows, orphans and other unmarried relatives under such a roof. Such couples did not live alone or only with their own children. In God’s new community, the unmarried Jesus’ new household, persecuted immigrants without shelter could find a home and feel accepted. God’s people throughout the world constitute a “brotherhood” (2:17; 5:9 [only in 1 Peter]) whose principal characteristic is fraternal love (1:22; 2:17; 3:8; cf. 4:8-9; 5:14). This brotherly/sisterly love, 1 Peter reminds us, implies respect for privacy rights (4:15, “meddler”). Even if the Greek word is not interpreted as “one who pries into other people’s affairs,” but as fraudulent acts, other texts insist on respect for privacy (2 Thessalonians 3:11; 1 Timothy 5:13; Luke 12:13-14; see Jesus’ “messianic secret” in Mark; cf. modern privacy invasions by state, technology and media).⁷

Despite the sexual minority status of many in 1 Peter and the bias reflected in many translations, the letter says remarkably little about sexual sins. When allusion is made to the Ten Commandments, the condemnation refers to murder and theft, but not adultery (4:15). When the recipients’ former pagan lifestyle is recalled, three terms refer to the use or abuse of alcohol, and only one possibly to accompanying sexual misbehavior (4:3-4; epithumíais may simply

mean desire or covet, not necessarily sexual “lust”). For 1 Peter, angels and infants may experience strong desire without sin, but the author emphasizes the danger of undisciplined desire that gives rise to unjust acts that harm others (1:12-14, 22; 2:1-3, 11; 4:1-5; 5:2-3; see James).

3. Submissive wives, the “weaker vessel”? Much controversy in 1 Peter’s theology stems from its domestic code (German: Haustafel, household table, domestic code), which exhorts slaves to submit to their masters (2:18-25) and women to their husbands (heads of extended households, 3:1-6; cf. Colossians 3:18--4:1; Ephesians 5:22--6:9; Titus 2:1-10). The absence of any mention of believing masters and the fact that only one verse addresses believing husbands (3:7) may indicate that 1 Peter was written to communities where immigrants, poor slaves and women constituted the basic nucleus. Such New Testament household codes commonly have been interpreted as promoting a conformity with the oppressive patriarchal world and as undermining the equality and radical justice of early Christian communities (Galatians 3:22). However, Paul Achtemeier points out that the intention of the letter and its domestic code was not accommodation but rather to warn against accommodation, even though it meant suffering.⁸

Although “wives” occupy the second place in the household code (Haustafel, 3:1-6), no woman is specifically named in 1 Peter. Because of the general exhortation to submit to imperial authorities (2:13-17; --> Romans 13:1-7), in the case of 1 Peter some prefer to speak of 2:13--3:7 as a “community code” (not limited to patriarchal “households”). However, when it refers to Rome as “Babylon” (5:13), 1 Peter at the same time anticipates the prophetic denunciation against imperial injustice, oppression and violence in Revelation (13; 17--19). Paul Achtemeier helpfully delineates 1 Peter’s critique of the Roman imperial state as midway between Romans 13 (imperial rulers bear divine authority) and Revelation 13 (the Roman Empire as anti-Christ, to

be resisted).⁹ 1 Peter's call for tactical submission to purely human authorities bears witness to the diversity in Biblical teaching stemming from changing historical contexts (increasing persecution: Romans, 58 AD; 1 Peter, 80 AD; Revelation, 95 AD).

The strategy of 1 Peter concerning immigrants, slaves and women who suffer oppression is dialectic: first the letter seeks to encourage, strengthen and empower them in their dignity (1:1--2:10), but later it calls them to voluntary and subversive submission relative to the dominant imperial and patriarchal structures (2:11--4:18). This submission is not presented as a universal "ethic" but as a subversive strategy or tactic in the face of a concrete oppressive situation and as a wise expression of Christian liberty in this historical context (2:16).

Women and people of color properly have protested against the traditional use of this letter to bolster oppressive structures. But we should not confuse later abuse of the letter with its original intent. The exhortations to submission occur as a tactic to dignify and empower the new community (1:1--2:10), in an empire at that moment invincible (Revelation 13:4), and as a part of a canon of books that address other historical contexts and give us very different advice (cf. Exodus, and prophetic denunciations of oppression).

4. (Anti?)Judaism Although Peter's ministry was directed mainly toward his Jewish compatriots (Galatians 2:7), 1 Peter addresses predominantly Gentile communities (2:12; 4:3), perhaps reflecting Peter's decisive role with Cornelius (Acts 10--11; 15). Surprisingly, however, the letter speaks of these Gentiles who professed faith in Jesus as Messiah as if they had become Jews. The letter's controlling metaphor speaks of its Gentile recipients now identified with Israel: they had participated in the Exodus; they now live in the "Dispersion", 1:1; and they are now called to live as God's holy people (1:16; Leviticus 19:2), heirs to Israel's titles and privileges (2:9-10).¹⁰ This perspective may stem from the fact that Christians of this era were still viewed simply as one more sect within Judaism (like the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the

Qumran community). The letter comes from the community of believers in Rome (“Babylon,” 5:13), which now appears to be one community, not several as earlier (58 AD) when Paul wrote Romans 16 (cf. Hebrews 13). In 1 Peter the common oppressor and persecutor of both Jews and new Gentile converts is “Babylon” (Rome). The letter gives no evidence of the type of conflict between traditional Jews and those others who, together with certain Gentiles, had followed the “way” of Rabbi Jesus (cf. Galatians, Philippians, Romans, Matthew, John). 1 Peter speaks serenely to the Gentiles as heirs of all the privileges of Israel without any suggestion of having taken such privileges from the Jews.¹¹ The letter warns against unbelief and the lack of commitment but without specifying “Jews” as being especially guilty (2:4-8; cf. Peter’s sermon in Acts 4:11-12) -->Ephesians; Romans 9--11.

5. The Weak, Physically Challenged, and Sick. 1 Peter’s recipients share with all humanity the weakness of the flesh (1:24), and prior to their conversion they had lived in “darkness” (2:9; that is, as “the blind”). In addition, however, as immigrants and not Roman citizens in the Empire they were socially and economically weak, and as a minority sect within Judaism their weakness was even greater. Furthermore, since so many were slaves and women, they commonly suffered violence, persecution and oppression. Violent persecution and slave beatings obviously would have left many wounded and physically challenged. Specific references to such people are lacking, but the “healing” of wounds (2:24, “with his stripes we are healed”) is a metaphor that undoubtedly reflected the literal reality of many of the letter’s recipients.

6. Redemptive Suffering: Jesus’ and Ours. 1 Peter continually reminds readers how the kind of oppression, persecution and violence they suffered was first suffered by Jesus, in whose steps they are to follow (1:2, 11, 18-21; 2:4, 7, 21-25; 3:18; 4:1, 13; 5:1). Like other New Testament books, 1 Peter offers a diversity of perspectives and metaphors to remind readers how

the oppression and violence Jesus suffered on the cross has redemptive power of cosmic significance. 1 Peter portrays Jesus' death as:

a payment of great price for the redemption and liberation of slaves (1:18-19),

a weakness which, with Divine help, triumphs over all forces of evil (3:19),

an efficacious sacrifice to clean sin's interior filth (1:2),

a demonstration of solidarity of love which we should follow and imitate in our relationships with the weak and oppressed (2:21-23),

the suffering of punishment by an innocent person (2:24a),

and as wounds that heal us (2:24b).

The interpretation of Jesus' death as a cultic "sacrifice" to expiate sin and propitiate God's wrath has provoked strong criticism, especially from many feminist and African-American theologians. They object that powerful oppressors always promote "sacrifices" on the part of the oppressed, while refusing to sacrifice any of their own privileges. We may recognize that certain biblical images of suffering (Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac, or the propitiation of Divine wrath) carry such high risks of misinterpretation and abuse that often they are best avoided. However, if our fear of possible abuse of such texts prompts us to oppose all language that speaks of sacrifice, then the sacrificial commitment and solidarity of figures like Martin Luther King, Che Guevarra, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Theresa also are disqualified. Like Jesus in the Gospels, 1 Peter does not call its readers simply to self-fulfillment in seeking comfortable and prosperous lives, in the style of much popular modern religion. Despite the diversity of interpretations and emphases, we cannot eliminate the centrality of Jesus' cross without undermining the Christian faith. 1 Peter is one of several New Testament books that makes this especially clear (see Job, Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 in the Hebrew Bible).

Two texts in 1 Peter used to provoke much discussion (3:18-20 and 4:6), and commonly were used to support the phrase in the Apostle's Creed: "He descended into hell" (cf. Matthew 27:52; Ephesians 4:8; Philippians 2:10; Colossians 2:15). Now, however, the "proclamation to the spirits" (3:19) is taken as referring to Jesus after his resurrection, pronouncing condemnation to angels/evil spirits (Genesis 6:1-4). Interpreted thus, 3:18-20 has nothing to do with 4:6, where the evangelized "dead" are believers (Israelites or Christians) who died before the Second Coming (see HCSB notes; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).¹²

In opposition to "Babylon" (the cruel and oppressive Roman Empire), 1 Peter's subversive strategy is to consolidate and strengthen the new base communities. Notably, therefore, the epistle that represents the Petrine tradition from Rome does not speak of Peter as "first pope" with resplendent cardinals, privileged Vatican City, hierarchy of archbishops, bishops and priests, and with countless properties throughout the world. The "Apostle Peter" of this letter speaks through his later disciple with subversive humility, someone who is but one "elder/presbyter" among many (5:1-2), fervently opposed to all ecclesiastical tyranny (5:3), and addressing Gentile ecclesiastical communities where all members are "priests and kings" (2:9) with their gifts and abilities for ministry (4:10-11).

1 Peter shares the common New Testament apocalyptic perspective that "the end of all things is near" (4:7) when Jesus will return to consummate his universal order of justice and peace (1:5-9). After 2,000 years we cannot interpret literally such words about the imminence of Jesus' coming. However, in contexts of oppression, torture and pain we can maintain the hope that "after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to share the eternal glory in Christ, will personally restore, support, strengthen, and establish you" (5:10), so "To God be the power forever and ever. Amen" (5:11). With its final command to express

mutual greetings with a “kiss of love” (5:14; mouth to mouth, including males to males in ancient culture), 1 Peter concludes with a kind of integration of spirituality and sexuality.

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