



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

1 Peter's Readers and Their Circumstances

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Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ:

To those chosen, living as exiles dispersed abroad in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient and to be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ.

May grace and peace be multiplied to you (1 Peter 1.1–2).

As we continue to survey the authorship, circumstances of the readers, message, and relevance of 1 Peter, we turn attention to the likely audience for the letter. The matter is complicated by the different terms and depictions of the readers.

The Nature of 1 Peter's *Diaspora*

At first blush, 1 Peter appears to be directed to Jewish believers scattered in the six provinces named in the greeting: Peter refers to his readers as “chosen exiles of the dispersion” (ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις διασποράς; *eklektois parepidēmois diasporas*; my translation). Historically, *diaspora* referred to the scattering of the Jews after the Babylonian exile. Migration and colonization, like that which saw Antiochus III (223–187 BC) remove 2,000 Jewish families from Mesopotamia and Babylon for resettlement in western Asia (O'Brien 1993, 147; cf. Josephus *Ant.* 12.147–153), resulted in the presence of Jewish communities throughout the Greco-Roman world. The influence of their beliefs, and presence of a synagogue in nearly every major city, provided a ready audience for evangelism in “the fullness of the time” (Gal 4.4 NASB).

Does it follow, then, that Peter's use of *diaspora* means the recipients of his letter were Jewish Christians? This would not be unexpected, given his designation as apostle "for the circumcised" (Gal 2.7–8). Indeed, there are good reasons to think that Peter uses the term in a spiritual sense to address Jewish Christians who were experiencing a new-covenant *diaspora*, similar to the physical dispersion of their forebears. In language reminiscent of physical Israel after the captivity, he says the Christians were "strangers and exiles" (1 Pet 2.11), a description that comes immediately after his reference to them as the "people of God" (λαὸς θεοῦ; *laos theou*; v. 10). He prefaces that description with quotations from OT texts that in their original setting refer to the Israelites (vv. 6 [Isa 28.16]; 7 [Ps 118.2]; 8 [Isa 8.14]; 10 [Hos 1.9; 2.23]); he also uses terms that had been used to describe the OT community: "chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, and people for his possession" (v. 6; cf. Deut 7.6; Exod 19.6; Isa 42.12; et. al.).

Other statements in the letter, however, indicate that Peter's readers were Gentiles. He refers to their pre-conversion lives of conformity to the desires of their previous ignorance (1.14), and to the empty way of life they had inherited (1.18). He says they had been called from darkness into God's marvelous light (2.9). And in 4.3, he warns them to refrain from behaviors typically associated with Gentiles, including "drunkenness, orgies, carousing and lawless idolatry." The introduction of these ideas indicates that *diaspora* should be understood more broadly than as a reference to Jewish Christians.

The Readers' Circumstances

In light of the complexity described above, some students of the letter have proposed that the terms "strangers and exiles" in 1 Peter 2.11 "refer as much (if not more) to [the readers'] *social* situation as it does to their *spiritual* situation" (McKnight 1996, 24). The words mean "alien resident" (παροικος, *paroikos*; Danker 2009, 273) and "foreigner" (παρεπίδημος, *pareidēmos*; Danker 2009, 271). They were commonly used in Greek to refer to people who were residents in a country that was not their own, to people who were temporarily residing there but planned to return home (the words are found elsewhere in the NT: *paroikos* in Acts 7.6, 29; Eph 2.19; and its cognate verb in Luke 24.18; Heb 11.9; *pareidēmos* in Heb 11.13; 1 Pet 1.1). Summarizing their extra-biblical use, McKnight writes that "in the Roman empire these terms were used for the group of resident aliens who occupied a special wrung [sic] on the social ladder—below citizens and above the slaves and foreigners" (McKnight 1996, 25).

Two options are possible for Peter's use of the terms. If used in their literal sense, "the audience of 1 Peter was a group of socially marginalized people who were 'resident aliens' and 'temporary residents' prior to, and independent of, their conversion to Christianity" (McKnight 1996, 24–25). They were people who had been "homeless," but had found a new home in God's family.

But other texts present evidence for a better option. The terms were at times used metaphorically or, perhaps better, spiritually, to refer to God's people in a world with values they no longer shared (cf. Eph 2.19; Heb 11.13). This fits the emphasis in 1 Peter better than the political, ethnic, or economic senses of the terms suggested above. As Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson explain:

These are people whose commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed attitudes and behaviors that place them on the margins of respectable society. They have become victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproach, scorn, vilification, and contempt. In the larger world, status was achieved by conformity to dispositions that had become so conventional that they were largely unspoken, taken for granted; noncompliance and other forms of social distinctiveness were regarded negatively. Rich or poor in economic terms, born into a good family or bad—these and other factors paled into insignificance for the readers of 1 Peter, whose reformed allegiances and transfigured practices distinguished them from Roman society. Previously, they had participated in the mainstream of Greco-Roman society, but now their lack of acculturation to prevailing social values marked them as social misfits to be held in contempt. 1 Peter was written to address Christians in such general circumstances as these—not so much to resolve the enigma of the suffering of God’s people as to articulate how best to relate to a society set against those allegiances, attitudes, and actions that are consistent with God’s agenda (Achte-meier et. al. 2001, 518–519).

In keeping with the faith-caused ostracism Peter depicts, we conclude that *diaspora* in this letter is used less in the sense of being scattered than in being a misunderstood and even persecuted people—just as the Jews in many places in the original dispersion had been.

Biblically Literate Pagans

Further complicating the picture is the fact that 1 Peter includes so many references to the OT, a use some see as evidence that the letter must have been written to readers with a background in the OT, i.e., to Jews. But it must be noted “that the OT was *the* Bible of the earliest Christians so that we would be amiss to suppose that even Gentile converts would not know its content well” (Achte-meier et. al. 2001, 518). Furthermore, we should recall that Peter himself is known to have had a ministry in the Gentile world (Acts 10.1–11.18; 1 Cor 1.12). There is no reason not to expect that he would have taught Gentile believers after the manner of the Twelve in Jerusalem following Pentecost (cf. Acts 2.42).

The letter itself indicates that Peter had matured to the point that the terms “Jewish” or “Gentile” had assumed a more theological meaning. As noted previously, when he describes the church in the book, he refers to it not as the ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*)—that word never appears in the letter—but as *laos theou*, “people of God.” And in fact, “the new people of God envisioned in this letter is not other than the people of Israel—so this document’s ‘Jewishness’ insinuates less a description of the ethnic origins of its implied audience than a clarification of its readers’ status before God” (Achte-meier et. al. 2001, 518).

Summation

As indicated by the terms and circumstances by which they are depicted, we conclude that Peter’s readers were Christians, most of Gentile origin, who were being ostracized because of their commitment to Jesus’ lordship. Helping them deal with the “suffering” (sixteen times in the letter) that accompanied this separation is the major emphasis of Peter’s message to them.

Works Cited

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An Additional Thought

"Observe [in 1 Pet 1.13] that the mind of the Christian is to be concentrated, stiffened, freed from impediment. Attempts to dissociate heart and mind in the experience and testimony of the Christian are as futile as they are foolish. We are given minds to use and apply, and the current exaltation, in some quarters, of 'experience' and emotion is only occult sloth, an avoidance of hard thinking."

~ E. M. Blaiklock. 1977. *1 Peter: A Translation and Devotional Commentary*. Word Books, Publisher, 34

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