

Introduction

A Letter Encouraging Christian Hope

Encountering First Peter

The significance of 1 Peter is out of proportion to its size. It consists of 105 verses (NRSV), easily placed in two columns of modern newsprint. Its importance for biblical studies, its impact on the Reformers and the early Anabaptists, and its potential significance for contemporary church life and ethics—all these are larger than the brevity of the letter suggests.

The history of the letter's acceptance and influence, however, is uneven. Apparently it was widely and readily accepted as apostolic from the time of Eusebius (A.D. 260-340). In 1905 biblical scholar Charles Bigg could write, "There is no book in the NT which has earlier, better, or stronger attestation" (Bigg: 7). Luther praised 1 Peter as "one of the grandest books of the NT, and it is true gospel" (Luther, 1982:2). Calvin, likewise, considered it apostolic and gave it full-length treatment in his commentaries.

In more recent times, rigorous biblical criticism diverted attention from 1 Peter's central message, probing its authorship, setting, purpose, and literary form. By 1964, Bishop Stephen Neill called it "the storm center of NT studies" (Neill: 343). In 1992, John H. Elliott

spoke of it as an “exegetical stepchild” of biblical studies (in *ABD*, 5:270).

Currently, something of a restoration and rehabilitation may be underway and well-deserved. Already in 1978, Leonhard Goppelt listed 326 scholarly items in his bibliography on 1 Peter, 148 of them commentaries. Since then a host of new commentaries have appeared on these same 105 verses of holy Scripture. However, new challenges have also surfaced, especially from liberation scholars who consider this epistle deficient in making a clear case for the liberation of slaves and of women (Balch, 1981; Corley: 349-360). A significantly different and positive perspective is represented by Mary H. Schertz in her scholarly analysis of “Nonretaliation and the *Haustafeln* in 1 Peter” (258-286).

Why 1 Peter Was Written

Read at face value, 1 Peter was written to scattered Christians residing in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey)—to the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Described as “strangers and pilgrims” (KJV) or as “resident aliens” (Elliott, 1981), these Christian believers lived in a hostile environment. They were experiencing trials and were sometimes falsely accused. Some of them were mistreated by their employers or slave masters; some of their women were married to non-Christian husbands; and all of them were subject to some forms of abuse and suffering.

The letter reminds them that they have experienced the hope-giving grace of God in the coming, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are called to shape their lives accordingly, especially in how they respond to their experiences of suffering. The basic exhortation is for them to stand fast in the grace of God (5:12), which they experience even in their painful encounters, and follow in the pattern of Jesus (2:21), doing what is good and right.

First Peter as a Letter

During most of the centuries since 1 Peter appeared, readers have considered it to be a letter because of its opening and closing sections. Letter writing of the time commonly began with a simple formula of giving first the name and some descriptive title of the writer, next the designation of the intended reader(s), and then a formal greeting. Likewise, generally a letter would include closing greetings, as well illustrated in Pauline and other NT letters.

In the case of 1 Peter, however, some views emerged out of criti-

cal studies about earlier sources, including the proposal by Richard Perdelwitz in 1911 that 1:3—4:11 was a baptismal exhortation or sermon, while 4:12—5:14 was epistolary. He suggested that these two parts were later put together.

This view was elaborated by later scholars, Windisch and Preisker, who read the document as a baptismal liturgy. In 1954 Frank L. Cross suggested that 1 Peter is a baptismal eucharistic liturgy for a Paschal vigil on Easter evening. John H. Elliott appropriately observes that such theories “must be judged more imaginative than cogent” (in *ABD*, 5:270).

In this commentary, 1 Peter is viewed as a unified letter. This does not exclude the possibility of the writer including a variety of source materials.

First Peter differs from some Pauline letters, however, in that it is written to an audience much wider than a single congregation. It thus may have been a circular letter, intended to be carried and read to scattered congregations in various provinces of Asia Minor. It is possible that the order of the provinces named was to be the order in which the letter-bearer was to bring the epistle to these scattered congregations of the people of God.

This Letter as Truly Apostolic

While there has been much more scholarly controversy over the authenticity of 2 Peter, the authorship of 1 Peter has also been vigorously debated. This commentary affirms this letter as Petrine, but acknowledges a need for understanding different perspectives held by competent biblical scholars. Three different views are possible: (1) Peter the apostle wrote it, as the letter itself claims. (2) It is pseudonymous, written in the name of Peter but by a later hand. (3) It is essentially Petrine but an amanuensis (secretary), possibly Silvanus (5:12), collaborated with Peter in drafting it [*Authorship*].

The Date and Place of Writing

Going with apostolic authorship, we may assume a date of circa A.D. 62-64 as the time of writing, and the place as Rome, assuming that *Babylon* (5:13) is a pseudonym for Rome (cf. Rev. 17-18). Calvin argued for a literal Babylon, assuming that Peter had traveled widely, but Luther read Babylon as figurative for Rome. Luther's interpretation continues to prevail.

The suggested date assumes that Peter was alive and that Nero was emperor (54-68). The traditional date for Peter's death is around

64, and his arrival in Rome not earlier than 62. However, certain scholars, including William Ramsay and J. Ramsey Michaels, have argued that Peter lived much longer. Earlier some associated this letter with the persecution under Domitian in 96 or under Trajan in 117. Their arguments are partly based on the view that the persecutions described in 1 Peter, especially in 4:16, are official and state-ordered, a position that biblical scholars no longer consider necessary.

The Circumstances of the Readers

The text of 1 Peter gives many clues about the circumstances of those addressed. They live as scattered faith communities spread across what came to be called northern Asia Minor. Peter is a Jewish Christian, and some of his addressees may have shared his ethnic background. Yet it is probable that most of them were Gentile Christians, relatively recent converts to Christianity. Ethnically, then, they were mainly Greeks, but legally they were under Roman law.

The letter itself indicates that the social status of these believers was difficult. Living in scattered communities, they represented a minority status. Peter calls them “resident aliens” who were not truly at home in the social communities in which they resided. In various ways they lived on the borderline between Christian faith and non-Christian peoples. Their neighbors not only misunderstood them but also made false interpretations and leveled unfounded accusations against the followers of Jesus Christ.

Interpreters who have studied 1 Peter through sociological lenses have helped us understand that the Christians’ status and condition in society was even more difficult than earlier thought. Elliott speaks of them as “homeless strangers,” sharpening the contrast between the meanings of *oikos* (house, household) and *paroikos* (sojourner, resident alien, refugee). Thus the title of his book on 1 Peter, *A Home for the Homeless*. While Peter uses the concept of “resident aliens” in a metaphorical sense, their legal and cultural status was complicated and socially marginal. They lived in a truly oppressive and hostile environment.

Beyond that, however, their status boundaries were much more limited, much more sharply defined, and more hierarchical than those of so-called democratic societies. Likely many of them were slaves. The understanding of citizenship was complex, and lack of clarity in one’s status could be oppressive. As John Crook observes, “The origins of the complexities of citizenship and non-citizenship lie in the

history of ancient Greece, where the Greeks (for reasons, indeed, only dimly understood today) organized themselves politically not into a nation but into a large number of tiny nations, city-states, whose members had rights and duties within their own state but were without duties or rights—were foreigners—in the state on the other side of the mountain” (37).

Their life was burdened also by the household codes (German: *Haustafeln*), prevalent in the Greco-Roman culture, that sought to define rights and duties, not in terms of equality but on the basis of a hierarchical system of authority and submission [*Household Codes*].

The believers’ relationship to government was further complicated by the spread of the emperor cult, which deified the emperor and insisted that this should be ritually acknowledged by all in the empire. Early Christianity insisted that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar (cf. 1 Cor. 12:3). Any deviation from the pagan household codes could be interpreted as an attempt to undermine the prevailing culture and loyalty to the emperor. Hence, the status of Christians became precarious and led to persecutions at both local and empire levels. Not only did these readers need a true home. They also needed the courage we call hope.

Under the household codes, the status of slaves and women became particularly difficult and sometimes oppressive. In the prevailing hierarchical system, they felt powerless. They needed not only hope but also real encouragement and empowerment.

The Central Message of 1 Peter

The writer of 1 Peter seeks to apply the teaching of Jesus on loving the enemy to the life situation of the scattered Christians of Asia Minor, coping with a hostile environment. The letter encourages and empowers them to live and bear witness as Christians. They are under suspicion, falsely accused, and sometimes abused both psychologically and physically. Discouragement and hopelessness tempts them. The believers themselves and others tend to regard them as powerless and helpless in the Greco-Roman society of which they are a part.

The word of Peter is that these Christian believers, though aliens and strangers, are indeed the people of God, chosen by God, graced by God, given dignity, strength, and destiny, and born anew to a living hope. They are, therefore, called to live in holy obedience toward God and in love toward one another. They are to be a worshiping and serving people who face their experiences of suffering (1) in the light

of how Christ has faced and triumphed in suffering, and (2) in the light of the coming judgment of God, which will be impartial, just, and vindicating.

Peter instructs them to accept and respect all persons and human social structures, even though sin has corrupted them. This, however, does not mean simply settling for the status quo. They are to live redemptively, following Christ and doing what is good and right in the situations and relationships that arise in a fallen and hostile world. With dignity and trust in God, they are to endure the variety of sufferings they are facing. They are to break the cycle of violence by not striking back or cursing their enemies, thus following the example of Jesus.

They are, in short, embracing the grace and enabling of God to pursue peace and keep on doing good and right. As they do so, they may possibly win some nonbelievers to Christian faith. But in any and every case they are to remain faithful to the teaching and example of their Lord Jesus Christ, through whose life, death, and resurrection they are finally saved.

As living stones, they are to be active participants in God's household, which is a stewardship of God's gifts. They are all, as pastors and people, women and men, slaves and free, to remain strong and firm in the grace of God and in their pilgrimage of faith, hope, and love. This includes resisting Satan and all forms of evil that threaten their lives and witness.