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1 Peter 1:1–2



PETER, AN APOSTLE of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, ²who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

Original Meaning

PETER'S SALUTATION¹ is one of the richest greetings to open a letter in the New Testament. It contains pastoral warmth and theological sweep. Whereas some salutations orient themselves around Christology (Rom. 1:1–7), salvation (Gal. 1:1–5), or the church (1 Cor. 1:1–3), and others are "bare bones" greetings (e.g., Eph. 1:1–2; Col. 1:1–2; 1 Thess. 1:1–2; 1 Tim. 1:1–2), Peter's salutation contains both a penetrating description of the audience and a theological explanation of how they became Christians. While Paul's greetings are frequently tinged with a necessity to defend himself, Peter's apostolic status is not under question, leaving his title a simple, humble claim to authority (cf. 1 Peter 1:1; 5:1). As with other New Testament letters,² the themes of the salutation become central to the letter itself: the status of the people of God and the salvation God provides for them. Peter's letter has been categorized with other ancient hortatory (paraenetic) letters.³

1. One of the main words for greeting in Latin is *salutatio* ("salute").

2. On letters, see S. K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (LEC 5; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); W. G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); S. McKnight, "More Than Mere Mail," *Moody Monthly* 88/89 (May 1988): 36–38. See also the summary of D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (LEC 8; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 158–225; S. K. Stowers, "Letters (Hebrew; Aramaic; Greek and Latin)," *ABD*, 4:282–93.

3. See Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 91–152. Stowers finds several kinds of "Letters of Exhortation and Advice": paraenetic (exhortation and dissuasion), advice, protreptic (exhortation to a way of life), admonition, rebuke, reproach, and consolation. We run amok, however,

Letters of the ancient world began with the author's name and any descriptions needed (here: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ"), the addressee and any necessary descriptions (here: "To God's elect . . ."), and the greeting proper (here: "Grace and peace be yours in abundance"). Thus, there are three parts. Peter expands the *addressee* to include a threefold breakdown: the believers in Asia Minor are who they are (1) "*according to the foreknowledge of God the Father,*" (2) "*through the sanctifying work of the Spirit,*" (3) "*for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.*" The italicized prepositions highlight the triadic description of these believers, and each is connected to a different member of the Trinity.

The Sender. Peter has been categorized in popular writings and sermons as impetuous and impulsive, but we know far too little about him to know whether such psychological descriptions are fair. We do know that he was a fisherman on the northern shore of Galilee, he was called by Jesus to follow him (cf. Luke 5:1–11; John 1:35–42), he became the leader of the apostolic band (Matt. 10:2), he was the first to perceive Jesus as the Messiah (Matt. 16:17–19; Mark 8:27–33), he tried to walk on water (Matt. 14:28–31), he denied Jesus (Luke 22:21–23, 31–34, 54–71), he was restored (John 21:15–19), he was a primary leader of the new church formed at Pentecost (Acts 2–5), he received a magnificent vision about the unity of God's people (Acts 10–11), he was miraculously released from prison (Acts 12:1–17), and he continued to have a ministry as far as Rome (cf. Acts 12:18–19; 15; Gal. 2:7–8; 1 Cor. 1:12; 9:5; 1 Peter; 2 Peter). We know that Peter's ministry in Rome was so extensive that Roman Catholics see the foundation of their church in his ministry there; we also know that Peter's ministry has become far too divisive of an issue between Roman Catholics and Protestants.⁴

if we think reductionistically, contending that 1 Peter has to have only one trait. Rather, while Peter's first letter is clearly paraenetic, it contains other methods of exhortation and advice.

4. See O. Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple-Apostle-Martyr. A Historical and Theological Study*, trans. F. V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953); O. Karrer, *Peter and the Church: An Examination of Cullmann's Thesis* (QD 8; New York: Herder and Herder, 1963); R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, and J. Reumann, *Peter in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Minneapolis: Augsburg / New York: Paulist, 1973); C. P. Thiede, *Simon Peter: From Galilee to Rome* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986).

Perhaps more important for the interpretation of our letter, we can discern in Peter an “about-face” over the question of Jesus’ death: from outright rejection (Matt. 16:22) and denial (Luke 22:54–71), to restoration (John 21), to preaching the death and vindication of Jesus (Acts 2), to finding in the death of Jesus the ultimate paradigm of Christian existence (1 Peter 2:18–25). This trail of Peter’s conversion is what lies beneath our letter: a Peter who found in Jesus’ death and resurrection the secret of life. Another feature of his life that is fundamental for understanding his letter is that his original name was “Simon” and only through a special calling by Jesus was it changed to “Cephas” (or “Peter”).⁵ His name change included Jesus’ prediction of his role in the development of the early church: Simon would be a “foundation,” a “rock” (*petros*), upon whom the church would be built. In light of this, Peter developed the metaphor of Christians as “living stones” (2:4–8).

Peter was an “apostle of Jesus Christ.” An apostle⁶ is one who was personally called by Jesus to a special ministry of founding the church; the corollary of that calling is that an apostle represents, as an ambassador does a president, the one who sent him. Peter, like the other apostles, was a personal representative of Jesus, and how people responded to Peter reflected how they responded to Jesus (cf. Matt. 10:40–42). Yet we should note that Peter does not brandish his authority like a saber; rather, he states his title here and then uses the more humble power of rhetoric and persuasion. Not until 5:12 do we again see his authority, unless it be noted (as it probably can be) in his use of commands and prohibitions. In fact, Peter identifies himself with the leaders of the various churches (5:1).⁷ Nonetheless, the “letter is to be seen, not as the pious opinions of a well-wishing friend, but as the authoritative word of one who speaks for the Lord of the church himself.”⁸

The Addressees. The geographical location of Peter’s churches is not as important as the terms he uses to describe their social and spiritual

5. “Cephas” is an Aramaic word that is translated into Greek by “Peter.”

6. See K. H. Rengstorf, “ἀπόστολος,” *TDNT*, 1:407–47; J.-A. Bühner, “ἀπόστολος,” *EDNT*, 1:142–46; H. D. Betz, “Apostle,” *ABD*, 1:309–11; P. W. Barnett, “Apostle,” *DPL*, 45–51.

7. C. E. B. Cranfield, *First Peter*, 12: “So here in our letter the word ‘apostle’ is essentially an exceedingly humble word; for it directs attention away from the Apostle’s person to Him, whose Apostle he is, from the one sent to the One that has sent him.”

8. P. Davids, *1 Peter*, 46.

status: "To God's⁹ elect, strangers¹⁰ in the world, scattered¹¹ throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood." Another translation, one that I will refer to occasionally in the discussion that follows, is "To the sojourning elect¹² who are scattered throughout . . ." (pers. trans.).

To be "elect" means to receive God's grace; this benefit is the result of God's initiative, not ours.¹³ In other words, God has called us to his love and grace, he has prompted our faith through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and he claims our allegiance (cf. John 15:16; Rom. 8:28; 1 Cor. 1:9; Eph. 4:1; 2 Thess. 2:14; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Peter 1:15; 2:4, 6, 9, 21; 3:9; 5:10). To be one of God's elect is a source of joy and comfort (for we know God's will cannot be thwarted) and of exhortation and demand (for we know God is working in us to enable us to do his will).

9. Actually, "God's" is not in the original Greek text; the word is, however, implied. Adding words like this tends to focus the expression in ways that are not always accurate. In this instance, a social-ecclesiological focus is lost when "God's" is added.

10. In the Greek the words for "elect" and "strangers" are in the same case (dative) and their relationship is such that one is not sure which is the noun and which is the adjective. Thus, is it "sojourning elect ones" or "elect sojourners"? The NIV has decided that "strangers" is an adjective and "elect" is the noun. Furthermore, it has added "in the world" to "strangers" as an interpretation of the term "strangers" in such a manner that the *only possible* meaning one can infer from this expression is a spiritual status. As mentioned in the introduction, this term probably refers to a social status. Thus, while I would agree that the NIV's rendering is a tolerable interpretation, I believe the translators have gone beyond their limits here by forcing the expression into only one possible meaning. When terms are ambiguous, it is usually best to leave them ambiguous rather than trying to be more specific than the author.

11. The Greek word *diaspora* is translated by "scattered" (from which we get Diaspora).

12. I prefer the term "sojourners" over "strangers" because, in American English, the latter speaks of weirdness and oddity; the former, at least, conveys the notion of "temporary residency away from home." Another good term would be "exiles." The term "elect" is the noun and the adjective "sojourning" is placed after it for a smoother transition to "scattered throughout. . . ." See Michaels, *1 Peter*, 7; "chosen sojourners" is preferred in Grudem, *1 Peter*, 47–48.

13. This issue has, of course, been a divisive issue among theologians; Calvinistic views may be found in A. A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 68–92; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 109–25, 415–22, 454–79; an Arminian view can be seen in J. R. Williams, *Renewal Theology: Salvation, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 13–33. Williams helps at the pastoral level in correcting potential errors and misunderstandings of this important doctrine.

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The Meaning of "Aliens and Strangers": A Brief Study. Not only did Peter's churches enjoy a special status with God; Peter uses another term that goes a long way in helping us to understand the social location of his readers. In the introduction I observed that this term "strangers" (or "sojourners") can refer either metaphorically to their temporary residence on earth as they await final salvation (NIV)—the so-called pilgrimage theme—or literally to the social location in their communities. It is important to pause for a brief study of this term and another one like it, "aliens" (2:11), and of the idea of a pilgrimage theme in this letter. By looking at more than one term at a time, we will have a wider grasp of what Peter is saying and will avoid the hazard of being concerned with only one term apart from its larger contexts.

First, I must observe that the inertia of convention propels us in the direction of a metaphorical sense to these terms. Most popular and scholarly works interpret 1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11 as describing the Christian pilgrimage on earth. Many commentators assume this view without further reflection¹⁴ and give little space to arguing against the unconventional view.¹⁵ Progress in interpretation can never be gained if we simply repeat habitual interpretations; instead, we must look again at the evidence to see what it says. If we arrive at an unconventional conclusion, we may be breaking free from unnecessary restrictions, though we may also be simply wrong. But such are the implications of exploring interpretations.

Second, there is no doubt that the literal meaning of these terms refers to people in specifically low social conditions. The Greek word for "foreigners" or "aliens" (*paroikos*) refers to people who reside in a given place without the legal protection and rights provided for citizens (i.e., noncitizen residents); the Greek word for "strangers" (*parepidemos*) refers to people who reside in a place but who stay there

14. A clear example of this is P. Davids, *1 Peter*, 46–47. In spite of writing his commentary during the time when Elliott's ideas about "foreigners and strangers" were being hotly debated and the trend was moving toward Elliott, Davids never once raises the issue in his commentary. Instead, he assumes that the terms are metaphorical. So also the (otherwise) fine study of B. W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (FCGRW; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 12.

15. Thus, Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, xxviii–xxx (review of the recent discussion).

only for a brief time (temporary residents).¹⁶ This is the literal senses of these two terms; when used metaphorically (in the rare instances when they are found this way), they emphasize, in some nonliteral sense, sojourning in a place temporarily or being found as an alien in some location.

Third, the issue here, then, is *whether there is evidence that the terms in question are being used metaphorically*. Good metaphors are drawn from reality, from the hustle and bustle of normal life. Here we have two terms drawn from perceptions of the social rank and how society works. However, a standard principle of interpretation insists that words be taken literally unless there is something in the context that tips the reader off to a metaphorical use of a term. For example, it strains our reading to think that “slaves” in 1 Peter 2:18 does not refer to actual social status but instead to our “slave-minds” and that we are being exhorted to submit to reason, for nothing in the text makes us think that anything other than a social class is in view.¹⁷ The questions we must face, then, are simple: Is there evidence for a metaphorical use here either in the type of literature we are examining¹⁸ or in the immediate context? And how do we discern the difference between a literal meaning and a metaphorical one?

The late G. B. Caird, in his masterful book on language and interpretation,¹⁹ proposes four tests to discern when a given word or phrase is being used metaphorically. (1) At times the biblical author makes an explicit statement that a given expression is metaphorical, as when he uses the word “like,” states that such-and-such is an allegory (Gal. 4:24), or adds a qualifier that shows something other than the literal

16. Thus, the use of the expression “aliens and strangers” in the NIV (2:11) has little chance of informing the reader of the nuances involved in the original expressions. Although not perfect, I prefer the expression “aliens and sojourners.” A nearly exhaustive listing of translation possibilities can be found in J. H. Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 39–41.

17. Philo of Alexandria, a first-century Jewish philosopher in Alexandria, did just this sort of thing with Old Testament narratives. For an introduction, see especially E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, rev. ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Goodman (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 3.2:809–89.

18. That is, it is normal to find metaphors in apocalyptic literature (like Revelation) or in poetry (like Psalms and the Song of Solomon); narrative and letters, on the other hand, are not as full of metaphors. Reading a letter makes us think naturally of the literal sense to referential terms of a personal nature. However, this does not exclude the use of metaphors.

19. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 183–97.

sense is intended (Matt, 5:3—“poor in spirit”; Eph. 2:14—“wall of hostility”; 1 Peter 1:13—“the loins of your mind”²⁰). (2) Sometimes an expression is impossible to understand literally. For example, the believers in Asia Minor are not literally “a royal priesthood” (2:9), their leaders are not really “shepherding flocks of real sheep” but are leading the believers the way a shepherd leads his flocks (5:2), and it is not their literal “brothers” who are suffering throughout the world but their spiritual brothers (5:9). (3) There must be a certain amount of correspondence between an expression and the reality itself for something to be literal; when the correspondence is low, then we have a clue to the use of a metaphor. Thus, just as it is unlikely that Peter was in “Babylon” (5:13), so it is unlikely that Jesus will appear the second time in a Shepherd’s garb (5:4). (4) Sometimes the expression is developed so highly and intensively that it is easy to detect metaphorical imagery. Clearly, Peter is raiding architectural metaphors when he speaks of the church in 2:4–8, to the point that one gets lost in the mixing of metaphors (see also 2:9–10).

In light of this brief analysis, we can ask whether the terms “aliens and strangers” betray any of these clues. First, there is no explicit statement in 1 Peter that the references in 1:1, 17 and 2:11 are to be understood metaphorically. In 1:1, the addressees are “strangers . . . scattered throughout” the Diaspora; there is no qualifier here that suggests anything but a literal meaning. Inasmuch as “scattered throughout” leads into a literal description of geography, so we are led to think that “strangers” has the same literal sense.²¹ The other two references, however, contain some ambiguity. First Peter 1:17 says, “Live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.”²² If the readers truly are socially isolated (for whatever reasons), this expression can be literal and makes sense that way; if, however, they are upper-class elites, there is evidence for a pilgrimage theme. But we have no evidence to suggest that a metaphor is being used. Slight ambiguity, however, could be felt in a contrast between life “now” (not “here”) and life “in the future”

20. The NIV eliminates this ancient metaphor by translating “your minds”; the original Greek has literally, “gird up the loins of your mind.”

21. This is why the NIV’s addition of “in the world” is unfair, for it has no evidence in the context; the evidence that we do have points in the opposite direction.

22. Literally, “live the duration of your sojourn in fear.” “Here” has been added in the NIV according to the translators’ perception of a pilgrimage theme.

(1:20–21). This *could* be evidence for a modifier being present. Finally, the use of “as” with “aliens and strangers” in 2:11 is perhaps significant evidence for a conscious use of a metaphor. There is, however, a problem. Does “as” mean (1) “I urge you, as if you were foreigners and strangers,” or (2) “I urge you, because you are literally foreigners and strangers”?²³ The text does not give us a clue as to which of these we should choose. I conclude, therefore, that there is no unambiguous evidence in 1 Peter for a pilgrimage use of these two terms (though there is some evidence).

The second, third, and fourth tests turn up nothing for our concerns. There is nothing impossible at the literal level for any of the references cited above; each could be literal with no problem. The evidence in 1 Peter does not admit of a low correspondence between the condition of the readers and the actual terms used, nor does Peter run wild in developing this imagery (he simply states it each time). Thus, the tests for determining a metaphor do not yield any clear evidence that the expression “aliens and strangers” must be understood as a metaphor. I am not saying it is impossible or wrong to interpret these expressions metaphorically, but I maintain that such a view is highly conventional in modern reading and has little (if anything) to offer on its own behalf. Because of a lack of evidence for such a view,²⁴ we ought to see here a literal expression. The evidence, then, leads us to think that the expressions in 1 Peter are literal, describing the readers’ social location.

Finally, was the addressees’ literal status as “aliens and strangers” caused by their becoming Christians or by their already being “aliens and strangers” prior to believing? That is, did they suffer social exclusion because of their faith, or were they already targets of persecution, who simply became easier targets when they embraced the faith? Without engaging in a lengthy discussion, it seems best to say that

23. An analysis of “as” expressions in 1 Peter is not entirely clear. When the noun of the “as” expression is literal, the order “verb/noun” then “as” is found 13/14 times (cf. 2:12, 13, 15, 16 [2x]; 3:6, 7; 4:10, 11, 12, 15 [2x], 16; 5:3). However, a clear metaphorical usage of “as” can be found in either order (cf. 1:14, 19, 24 [2x]; 2:2, 5, 16, 25; 3:7; 5:8). The order would only slightly favor a literal sense in 2:11.

24. There is no evidence outside of these terms in 1 Peter that the author is working with a pilgrimage theme either; this counts against seeing a pilgrimage theme in the first line of the letter, where central themes are often present. That the readers were (literally) socially excluded, however, is found throughout 1 Peter.