

Historical Issues in 1 Peter: Audience, Situation, and Purposes

I. Audience of the Letter

A. Religious Location: Jew or Gentile?

1. Evidence for Jewish audience
 - a. OT quotations and allusions
 - b. Inclusion of OT characters
 - c. Jewish history assumed and evoked (e.g., exile)
2. Evidence for Gentile audience [1:14, 18; 2:10, 25; 3:6; 4:3-4]

Conclusion: Likely predominantly Gentile audience which is viewed as continuation of the people of God from OT story. "1 Peter was written primarily to Gentile Christians in Asia Minor, but...the author, for his own reasons, has chosen to address them as if they were Jews" (Michaels, 1 Peter, introduction).

B. Geographic Location

1. Five Roman provinces of Asia Minor named (1:1): Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia
2. Rural or Urban?
 - a. Elliott argues for mostly rural population of these areas (and so of Petrine audience)
 - b. Achtemeier argues for predominantly urban audience (e.g., Pliny's letter to Trajan)

C. Social Location

1. The population of Asia Minor fell into these broader, social categories:
 - a. Natives (local aristocrats, administrators, and ordinary citizens)
 - b. Freed persons
 - c. Slaves (great numbers)
 - d. Resident aliens/strangers passing through (sizable numbers)
 - e. Roman officials/military veterans (small number)
 - f. Numerous Jewish communities (afforded some special rights)
- [categories provided in Elliott, *1 Peter*, 88-89]

2. "Aliens and Exiles" (1:1, 17, 2:11): Literal or metaphorical?
 - a. Elliott: many of the recipients of 1 Peter were resident aliens prior to conversion. This put them in a precarious position socially, politically and legally.
 - b. For most commentators (and certainly traditionally), "aliens" and "exiles" are used metaphorically to refer to either or both (1) their relationship to this world as compared to their "heavenly home;" (2) the recipients' solidarity with God's people in the OT context.

Conclusion: Since even Elliott admits to an enlarging of the concept of 'resident aliens' to include all those who are spiritual children of Abraham and Sarah, the metaphorical use of these terms is most probable. They seem to be used primarily to connect the audience of the letter to the OT faith community.

3. Limited or broad audience?
 Achtemeier, quite reasonable, argues that the audience of 1 Peter includes "a broad spectrum of people living in northern Asia Minor" (57).

II. Situation of the Audience: Hostility and Suffering

A. Roman (official) Persecution?

1. There is no external evidence for widespread Roman persecution of Christianity (cf. 5:9) prior to 250 CE (reign of Decius).
2. Internal evidence does not support viewing the suffering at hand as coming from Roman, official policy. (Only reference to Roman rule encourages obedience to the emperor!—cf. 2:17.)

B. Local, Informal Hostility

1. External evidence: Christians were often accused of anti-social activity, given their withdrawal from many religious (and therefore cultural) activities. Such "anti-social behavior often had immediate political and economic ramifications. Cf. Acts 16:19-24; 19:24-27. As such, Christians were susceptible "to charges of wrongdoing and conduct injurious to the well-being of the commonwealth and the favor of the gods" (Elliott, *1 Peter*, 94).
2. Internal evidence: the verbal nature of much of the hostility (cf. 2:12; 3:16; 4:4, 14). Christians are being maligned for their Christian activity and values, which are often misunderstood and misrepresented by their pagan neighbors (and/or members of their households).

III. Purpose(s) of the Letter

A. To address their suffering (2:12, 20; 3:13-14, 16-17; 4:3-4, 14-16; 5:9-10)

B. To cast a vision of their hope in Christ (1:3, 13, 21; 3:5, 15)

C. To encourage them to live faithfully in a hostile environment
(1:15-16, 22; 2:11-12, 14, 20; 3:1-2, 13-14, 16-17; and 4:1-2)

1. Honorable and holy conduct exhorted

2. Issue: Assimilation or non-assimilation?

a. According to Balch, the household code (2:11-3:12) emphasizes acculturation to prevailing Greco-Roman values of house and state (Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter*).

b. According to Elliott, the purpose of 1 Peter more generally is precisely non-assimilation to Greco-Roman cultural values. Elliott emphasizes the theme of the Christian household (*oikos*—cf. 4:17) in this regard.

Conclusion: A middle course between the assimilation and non-assimilation views seems advisable. The author both encourages select values common to the social context and distinctive values based in Christian identity.

(1) Clearly, the author calls Christians to avoid unnecessary suffering by ensuring that their behavior is always honorable, that any persecution comes from truly Christian behavior rather than evil doing (2:20; 3: 13-14, 16-17). In this regard, certain values common to both the Christian faith and broader society are encouraged as a way to lessen the hostility coming their way (e.g., obedience to governing authorities; 2:13-17).

(2) It is also clear that believers are called to live in allegiance to Christ and in alignment with Christian mission in the world (cf. 2:9; 3:1, 15-16). This provides a distinctive call to the audience of the letter that would necessarily put them at odds with their non-believing neighbors.

Cf. Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditū*. Online:
<http://www.northpark.edu/sem/exauditū/papers/volf.html> [accessed 6 April 2004].