

GENRE—WHAT ARE WE READING?

In some sense, *all* of the books in our Bible were written to people other than us. Each author had in mind a particular setting and audience, none of which included 21st-century America. But with 1 Peter, this is especially true, since we are literally reading other people's mail. That is to say, 1 Peter is an **epistle**, or letter, written to specific people to address specific concerns (1:1 names those addressees as believers in the provinces of "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia"). Much of our New Testament, of course, is presented in epistolary form, from the letters of Paul to individual congregations (at Corinth or Philippi, for example), to a book like James, which opens like a letter would but lacks almost any other feature of an epistle and is written without a geographically-specific audience.

1 Peter fits somewhere in between—on the one hand, it follows the form of a real letter, in some ways very much like Paul's do. It begins with a personal address, followed by a prayer of blessing (cf. Eph. 1:3 and 2 Cor. 1:3) that introduces several of the book's themes. The body develops them, then, and the closing again gives personal greetings and directions. On the other hand, it is written to people in a wide and diverse territory, a region that made up most of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). And what's more, unlike Paul's letters, which

were generally written to congregations with whom he had some previous connection, we have no idea how there came to be Christians in many of the northern regions of Asia Minor addressed in 1 Peter, nor do we know what relationship our author had to them. Traditionally, 1 Peter has been grouped in with the so-called "*catholic epistles*," writings that addressed the whole church and had a broader scope.

So what difference does it make to read 1 Peter as a real—but general—letter? For one, it suggests that our author has at least some idea of the circumstances in which the recipients lived, even if not very narrowly focused. For example, throughout the book, there is an underlying awareness of tension between the Christian community and the outside world—an atmosphere of being persecuted and marginalized by society. But we do not get any specifics: it is not clear, for example, what the specific source or reason is for this hostility. That also suggests that the advice and direction given in the letter, while often very broad, is intended to address a certain situation in a certain set of times and places. As we read through 1 Peter, then, we will have to continually ask how this book's teaching applies to a very different church and cultural setting, and how we might hear this voice from the early church speak to us today.

AUTHORSHIP: PETER WHO?

The first verse of the book we call 1 Peter connects the whole letter with "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ," presumably intended to refer to the very same Simon Peter who was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Early church tradition continued that association of disciple and letter, but (perhaps not so surprisingly), more recent scholarship has seriously questioned whether the book could have been written by the disciple of Jesus, Simon Peter. The reasons to think that someone else wrote this letter in the name of Peter are, in all honesty, significant ones; they include the following:

- a *highly polished style* to the Greek text, which seems unlikely for a Galilean fisherman who, even as a Christian leader, was understood to be an apostle to the Jews as opposed to the Gentiles
- *the use of the name Peter* itself, which is the Greek translation of the Aramaic name "Cephas" which Jesus would have given—it would be surprising for the real Simon Peter not to use his given name; later NT books like the gospels use "Peter" rather than "Cephas," but they were probably written after Peter's death in the 60s AD

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

WHEN AND WHERE— DATE AND PLACE OF 1 PETER	2
AUDIENCE— WHOSE MAIL ARE WE READING?	3
CONNECTIONS— SEEING OURSELVES	3
THEMES OF THE BOOK	4

BOOKS IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES MOST USED BY 1 PETER:

- *Isaiah* (especially the "servant songs" like *Isaiah 53*)
- *Psalms* (especially *Psalms 34*)
- *Proverbs*
- *References to stories in Genesis and imagery from Exodus and Leviticus* are also prevalent

AUTHORSHIP, CONTINUED

...continued from Page 1

- *special language in common with other New Testament books*, especially Romans, Ephesians, and James—this could suggest that the author of 1 Peter must have known those books, and thus must have written them after they had been widely circulated
- *a lack of reference* to events from Jesus' life, or even from Peter's life; in fact, apart from the opening verse, we would have no reason to connect this letter with the historical Peter (whereas Paul will occasionally use events from his own life in his letters).
- *a lack of reference* to Paul, too—the letter ends with a coded reference to an origin in Rome ("Babylon," in 5:13, is the way Christians and Jews often came to refer to Rome after the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD), where tradition has it, *both* Peter and Paul were martyred in the 60s; if this were coming from Peter, imprisoned alongside Paul in Rome, we might expect a greeting from Paul along with the others in 5:12-13.
- *lateness of writing*—several of the reasons above also suggest a late date for this letter to be written—and the later the date, the less likely Peter could have written it, assuming he was in fact martyred during Nero's rule in Rome.

On the other hand, those points weighing against Petrine authorship are often countered with arguments like these:

- ✦ People living in Galilee probably would have had to know several languages, including Greek, just to do business with a diverse population. And even if Peter did not know Greek earlier in his life, there is no reason he could not have developed his skills with Greek later in light of his role in the church. For that matter, 5:12 says that the letter is coming "through Silvanus," which could mean that Silvanus (a variation on the name "Silas") wrote what Peter told him to write, but with his own style and polish.
- ✦ The mention in 5:12-13 of both "*Silvanus*" (Silas) and "*Mark*" (believed to be the same John Mark who went along with Paul and Barnabas in Acts) presumes that these names still mean something to the readers, which could suggest that they were still alive when the book was

written, early enough for Peter to still be living.

- ✦ The similarity to other NT writings does not necessarily mean that 1 Peter is quoting or copying from them; it is just as likely that both 1 Peter's author and Paul draw from a common bank of early Christian language and tradition
- ✦ The very fact that there are no references to Peter's life or anecdotes from following Jesus could actually *support* the idea that Peter wrote the letter, since it ended up connected with his name somehow. It's hard to see what would lead someone to associate this book with Peter otherwise, especially since the early church knew that not everything attributed to Peter was written by him (it threw out the apocryphal "Gospel of Peter," for example).

In the end, we really cannot be certain about whether Peter did or did not write this letter. The arguments against Petrine authorship largely rely on probability or are arguments from silence. On the other hand, the counter-arguments are by no means bulletproof, either, and simply point out that we cannot be certain either way. There are certainly reasons that an anonymous author would want to use Peter's name, from the less-than-noble desire to give his/her own ideas the authority of Peter, to a genuine connection to the teachings of the apostle Peter, perhaps that of a student or community which had in fact been taught by Peter and wanted to continue his legacy and apostolic teaching in the wake of his martyrdom. Considering all this, it seems more *likely* that 1 Peter was written by an anonymous author in the name of the apostle.

That said, however, it is important to recognize that the authorship question *does not* undercut the value of 1 Peter as Christian Scripture. The Good News that Christians proclaim is *not* that we have scientific proof that Peter did or did not write this letter, nor does the gospel rest on being announced by "all-stars." The good news, as the book of 1 Peter itself gives it to us, is that we have been given a "new birth into a living hope" (1:3) through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

WHEN AND WHERE

1 Peter was probably written **from Rome**—the mention of "Babylon" in 5:13 is most likely a veiled reference to the capital of the empire. However, "Babylon" appears in reference to Rome only **after 70AD** when the Temple was destroyed; this conceivably gives us an early side to a date range. But the letter doesn't suggest any official persecution from the empire itself (see 2:13-17) yet, which would pick up again in the 90s, which gives us the late side to our date range. The map shows the **provinces of Asia Minor** addressed in the letter in 1:1.



AUDIENCE—WHOSE MAIL ARE WE READING?

Given how wide the circulation of 1 Peter was intended to be (those five provinces listed in 1:1 carve up a *lot* of Turkey, so to speak), it is hard to pin down much of a description of the letter's first readers. Asia Minor of the 1st century would have included large cosmopolitan cities and remote, rural, and mountainous regions as well. Some parts would have been a part of the Roman Empire for a long time already and would have been immersed in its ways, and other parts would have remained more isolated from the Greco-Roman culture, even as they were incorporated into the empire.

It is even hard to tell whether 1 Peter was intended for a particular group or groups within that wide swath of land, since several social subgroups are named and addressed. There is, however, an emphasis on women and slaves within the Christian community and the world-at-large in 1 Peter; this may not mean at all, though, that they were the *only* intended readers. Our author simply sees specific ways that these groups can witness to the suffering love of Christ.

Enough, then, about what we do not know about 1 Peter's first readers. Several things *can* be said. First, there is evidence in the text that there were Gentiles within in the audience, but there is also clearly an assumption that this audience is quite familiar with Old Testament imagery and narrative. As for the first half of that claim, there is a recurring contrast between the people's old way of life and their new identity in Christ (see especially 1:14, 1:18, and 2:9-10). This seems to assume that hearers (at least some of them) had converted to Christianity from pagan ways. But at the same time, the appropriation of Old Testament materials is even clearer; readers are assumed to know who Abraham, Sarah, and Noah were, to find the Hebrew Scriptures authoritative, and even to see themselves no longer as Gentiles. Beyond that, the author describes the recipient Christians in terms previously used to talk about Israel. From the language of "dispersion" in the first verse to the coded reference to "Babylon" in the last paragraph, our author not

only assumes that the significantly (but probably not completely) Gentile audience would *understand* these reference, but also directly *applies* those images and texts to these formerly Gentile members of the Christian community.

The communities to which 1 Peter was first sent were also suffering communities—at least to some extent. Shortly into the first chapter, and then again in each following chapter, there is reference to suffering that the recipients are understood to be enduring. This is most likely some form of persecution or marginalization of the Christian communities throughout Asia Minor. However, it is unlikely that the persecution Christians were facing at this time was empire-wide, nor was it officially sanctioned by the Roman government. That sort of government-sponsored persecution was limited to the city of Rome during Nero's rule in the early 60s, and then did not become empire-wide policy until the end of the 1st century during Domitian's reign. So whatever persecution Christians were facing in Asia Minor during the decades between those periods (probably when our letter was written) was sporadic and less formal. Rather than executing or imprisoning Christians, society simply excluded, harassed, or alienated them.

Why were Christians persecuted at this time? A major reason seems to have been the tension between the Christian way of life and the prevailing ways of the Greco-Roman culture. Christians were seen as aloof, even detached, because of their refusal to participate in certain aspects of life in the empire. They were also just beginning to be perceived as subversive, because Christians claimed an ultimate authority other than the empire or the empire's gods. It is this backdrop of hostility and tension with the prevailing culture that is the most defined aspect of 1 Peter's intended audience. The challenge the book presents, then, is one of how to live in that society without withdrawing from it while also being faithful to their new identity as the people of God.

CONNECTIONS—SEEING OURSELVES

❖ There was clearly a great deal of diversity among the first hearers and readers of 1 Peter, since they lived in different places, came from various social classes, and probably were of diverging ethnic backgrounds. And yet, there were some common traits assumed by our author—from the familiarity with Hebrew Scripture to the backdrop of persecution and suffering. Today, there is obviously a great deal of diversity within American Christianity also, for all of the same reasons as in the 1st century, if not more (denominations are almost a new form of ethnic division). But are there things common to most Chris-

tians' experience in America? Are there characteristics that we share across denominations and across geography because of living in the same general culture? How might you describe that experience?

❖ We live in an age where Christianity is not only legal, but has had a long reign as the "official" or at least established religion in Western culture. How might we hear 1 Peter's discussion of life in the midst of suffering differently in our context? How will the relative affluence of our society and prestige of being in the mainstream of American religion affect our reading and interpreting of biblical texts like this one?

THEMES FROM 1 PETER

Several key themes dominate the whole book of 1 Peter and shape the way everything else is viewed and said. Here is a brief look at some of the images and ideas that hold the letter together:

The Church and Israel—This is almost better put as “the church *as* Israel, since the author of 1 Peter has taken language usually only applied to the Old Testament people of God and employed them in talking about the New Testament community of Jesus’ followers. From the very beginning, Christians are identified as people of the “dispersion,” which literally referred to those Jews living throughout the empire centuries after the exile. And throughout the book, Christians are called things like, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (2:9—titles which come from Exodus 19:6 to refer to the nation of freed slaves). While the person of Christ is absolutely pivotal for 1 Peter, there is nonetheless a strong sense of continuity with the identity of the Old Testament people of God. However, this continuity is peculiar in 1 Peter, since there is no real mention of Israel itself. That is, we don’t get the sense, as we do with Paul in Rom. 9-11, that Christians have been grafted into the people of Israel which existed independently already. Instead, all of the language and identity of Old Testament Israel is imputed to the Christian community “without remainder,” as one writer puts it, almost as though there were no other, previously distinct entity called Israel. 1 Peter understands that the prophets all pointed to the coming of Christ and in fact that the story of the Old Testament people of God is one and the same with that of the New Testament people of God. Paul goes in this direction to some extent in Rom. 15:4ff and 1 Cor. 10:1ff, but he does not streamline the relationship between church and Israel to the extent that our author does; for 1 Peter, the church and Israel are one seamless garment, intended from the beginning to be woven by and for the Christ who suffered, died, and rose from the dead. But while there is that strong continuity for 1 Peter between the church (although that particular term is never used) and the identity of the Old Testament people of God, the book sees that as the grounds for a sharp discontinuity with the society around the church in the present (see below).

The Suffering of Christ—While there is a great deal of language and imagery drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures, 1 Peter also has a very strong focus on the person and work of Christ. It is Jesus Christ who gives believers “new birth” into the new people of God, and who stands literally at the crux of God’s intent for humanity. Christ’s resurrection is the source of hope for Christians’ future, and his suffering and death are seen as the grounding of Christian living *now*. There is a strong sense that because Christ suffered and submitted to the authorities placed upon him, so will the followers of Christ find themselves in suffering submission as they are faithful to him. This seems to fuel an emphasis on Christian non-violence and non-retaliation, the sources

of which could well be the sayings of Jesus himself. At the same time, 1 Peter sees the suffering and death of Jesus Christ as unique—when Christians suffer in the present, it is in solidarity with Christ, but his death *accomplished* something once and for all (3:18) that we do not have to do. The imagery 1 Peter uses is often that of ransom, as though Jesus’ suffering and death has paid some price to release a sinful humanity from its bondage. Here, 1 Peter seems strongly influenced by the suffering servant songs of Isaiah, especially Isaiah 53 (see 2:24-25, which virtually quotes this passage and inserts Christ into it). For 1 Peter, then, the Christ who has drawn believers into a new community is both, as we say in the liturgy, “a sacrifice for sin and a model of the godly life.”

Christians as Resident Aliens—Both of the previous themes, when applied to the church, point to a community that will live at odds with the outside world. As it carries on the identity of Israel, the Christian community will be *holy* and distinct in its living (which includes for 1 Peter, non-retaliation and the show of love in return for hate). And as it allows itself to be shaped by the cross of its Lord, the church will also be willing to suffer the hostility and hatred of the world. And so a recurring image for the people of God in 1 Peter is that of exiles, or resident aliens, who are always at least somewhat out of step with the prevailing powers and culture. This is a delicate balance for 1 Peter, since the book will not allow either withdrawal from the world nor dissolution or absorption into it. In other words, both the *resident* and the *alien* part of their status is important—Christians live in the world, suffering its hostility, and even witnessing to a better hope in the midst of it through selfless love. But at the same time, the church will not play by the culture’s rules—it will not acknowledge Caesar as lord, it will not vie for power over others, and it will not give itself over to sin, even when the society around it says it’s “okay.” Rather, in the midst of a world that has no hope and will not love as Christ loved, Christians are called to “be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (3:15).

Past, Present, and Future—1 Peter plays with the connection between Christ and the Christian community over time. What Christ suffered in the *past* (rejection and death), Christians may (will?) suffer now. But where Christ is *now* (raised from death and exalted at the “right hand of God”), Christians will be. The pattern of suffering love, hope, and new life found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is cast as a pattern for how Christians live now. 1 Peter also plays with the contrast between believers’ past lives, apart from the “living hope” of belonging to God’s people, and their present lives as the beloved people of God.