



Aliens and Exiles: Social Location and Christian Vocation

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Effective pastors know their community. Peter clearly knows his community, and we can all learn from him, whether we are pastors, teachers, or parents.

It is one of my responsibilities at North Park University to teach undergraduate students the entire Bible in one semester. North Park is a unique Christian university, for it is simultaneously a Christian-based school *and* a school that does not discriminate in admission on the basis of Christian commitment. Because of the random nature of course assignments, some of my Introduction to Biblical Studies classes are populated predominantly by Christians, while others are just the opposite. You get the picture if you understand that in the period of one year I had a student (after two weeks) ask me, “Who is this Moses guy you are talking about all the time?” and another student ask me, “Does the eschatology of the Davidic Psalms impact the visions of Isaiah 40–54?” They were taking the same course! This sort of disparity among the students requires that I spend the first week or so getting to know them, what they know, and what I have to do to get the “big picture” clear. Pastors know the experience, for, in both sermon preparation and delivery, they are asking themselves: “How will my people respond to this idea?”

Knowing one’s community is foundational to effective parish ministry. Peter is a good example, for his theology and vision interacted with his community.

First Peter addresses “aliens and exiles”—terms that refer not to spiritual pilgrims, but to the social location of the Christians to whom Peter writes. Peter’s letter includes a strategy for how people in that location might best influence the Roman world, and infers how we might influence our own.

I make this suggestion: we need to know our community's past, present, and possibilities.

The first student had a past in which nothing about the Bible was taught, who in the present needed a focus on the "basics," and who at the end of the semester would have fulfilled expectations if he could think his way through the big picture. The second student simply needed some guidance, some bibliographic suggestions, and a fair bit of discussion-over-coffee, for which she had a taste.

Inattention to social "location" can lead either to exasperation or to boredom. When the same congregation has parishioners from both ends of the spectrum—as they inevitably do—the tasks of instruction and preaching can become nothing short of artwork. Seminaries may give you the tools and the bibliography, but only a heart in tune with the community can give the pastor sensitivity.

KNOWING THE COMMUNITY

1. *Knowing the community's past*

The dazzlingly rich (and long!) sentence from 1 Pet 1:3–8 might suggest Peter's audience is Jewish, as also might his regular appeal and allusion to the Old Testament. Perhaps the most concentrated set of allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures is found in 1 Pet 2:9–10, where Peter plainly "defines" Christian existence:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (NRSV)

My copy of Nestle-Aland suggests that no fewer than nine Old Testament references are tucked into Peter's words. How, we might ask today, could anyone but a Jewish convert comprehend such texts—even if a Jewish convert could get it all? "Catechism" and "instruction" are the obvious answers, because Peter's audience seems to be predominantly Gentile.

Notice these texts (emphasis added):

Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires *that you formerly had in ignorance*. (1:14)

You know that you were ransomed from *the futile ways inherited from your ancestors*. (1:18)

Once you were *not a people*, but now you are God's people. (2:10)

You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. (4:3–4)

This is not the language used to describe Jewish converts. Peter's audience is evi-

dently Gentile, but perhaps we should assume that there were some Jewish converts as well. At any rate, because Peter knows they can handle the density of his prose and the depth of allusion to Hebrew Scriptures, he paints a picture of Christian theology redolent with Old Testament allusion.

What Peter knew about his communities, in part because he “fathered” them and in part because they were all relatively young, may take some effort on our part to gain about our own. Surveys of the Christian journey for each parishioner is one method used by some pastors to get in touch with their parish. Increasingly, however, churches are “profiling” their entire community to get a bigger grasp of the Christian vocation, to gain insight on the needs of their community, and to form a “mission statement” to reach that community.

2. *Knowing the community’s present*

Peter’s churches are predominantly Gentile and, more importantly, they are in a precarious situation: they are suffering and have suffered, especially verbally (2:11–12, 15; 3:16; 4:4, 12–15), but scholars today no longer think what they are enduring is official Roman persecution. Peter knows they are converts, they are suffering, and they are in need of guidance.

“Peter’s audience understood the essence of Christian theology”

He also knows they can handle a variety of topics in Christian theology that are anchored in the catechetical tradition. Several themes are appealed to by Peter in such a manner that we have to admit Peter’s audience understood the essence of Christian theology. *Salvation* is understood through the lens of temple imagery (1:2, 22; 3:18), through the lens of Passover (1:18–19), through the lens of new birth (1:3, 23; 2:2, 24; 3:7, 18), and through the family (1:4–5; 3:9). *Church* becomes the new/true people of God that displaces Israel in the plan of God (2:8, 9–10), and it does so primarily in terms of a family of God (1:22; 2:5, 17; 3:8; 4:17; 5:9), especially as found in Peter’s *Haustafel* (domestic code) (2:11–3:12). *How* the Church is organized (5:1–4) is less important than *what* it is. And, for Peter, everything is fleshed out in the *Christian life*: grounded in salvation (1:3–12), the Christian life *therefore* (note 1:13a) is noted by hope (1:13), holiness (1:14–16), fear of God (1:17–21), love (1:22–24), and continued growth (2:1–8). Finally, Peter (like most of the early Christians) paints a picture of the Christian life *in light of future eschatology*: God will judge (1:7, 9, 17; 2:12, 23; 3:12; 4:5, 17–19) and will reward those who are faithful to their Christian calling (1:7, 13; 4:13, 14). This future is the Christian hope (1:3, 13, 21; 3:5, 15) and it is protected by God (1:5).

Clearly, Peter knows the community—even though this community is scattered over the map of Asia Minor (1:1–2). There is enough similarity in make-up and catechesis for Peter to write a letter to be shuffled from one Christian community to another.

When pastors come to terms with their community's past they are more prepared to place the challenge of the gospel in its proper context and to give it the emphases that the community needs. Pastors know the joy of building one stone upon another, as they also know the futility of placing stones on a wall that do not fit. Learning what fits and what doesn't is one of those (billion) secrets to local parish ministry.

3. Knowing the community's possibilities

So perceptive is Peter of his set of churches that he gives them a "label." He calls them "aliens and exiles" (1:1, 17; 2:11). These two terms provide a key to unlock a pastoral strategy of Peter's churches: through them we see both the limits and the *strategies* of their *potential impact* on Asia Minor.

This article will focus on this label for Peter's churches. Because of its complexity, and because the view taken is not traditional (even though widely respected among scholars), we need to wend our way through the discussion.¹

ALIENS AND EXILES: METAPHOR OR SOCIAL REALITY?

First, the term "alien" (Greek, *ἀλλογενής*) refers at the literal level to "non-citizen residents in some location," while "exile" (*παρεπίδημος*) refers to "temporary residents in some location." Any first-century reader upon hearing these terms would have recognized their social reference and would have associated with their status a certain legal and political precariousness. Those who occupied these social locations stood firmly on a special rung on Rome's social ladder: below citizens and above slaves and foreigners.

Excluded from voting and landholding privileges as well as from the chief civic offices and honors, they enjoyed only limited legal protection, were restricted in regard to intermarriage, commerce, transmission of property, land tenure, could be pressed into military service, and were susceptible to severer forms of civil and criminal punishment....but still shared full responsibility with the citizenry for all financial burdens.²

Second, there is a problem: the traditional interpretation of these terms in 1 Peter is metaphorical, and this interpretation "fits" like an old slipper.³ That is, we generally read these terms as spiritual rather than as referring to a social location: we are "pilgrims," not the "socially-marginalized." We've read John Bunyan's masterpiece, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the notion of a spiritual pilgrimage makes sense to us. However, if the social location is the right interpretation, there are pro-

¹For this discussion, I rely upon my own commentary: *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 23–26, 47–52. My work is based on the careful studies of John Hall Elliott. See his *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 21–100; and now his massive *1 Peter*, Anchor Bible 37B (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

²Elliott, *1 Peter*, 94.

³So recently in Paul Achtemeier's massive commentary, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

found implications for reading 1 Peter, as well as for pastoral strategy today. We need to be open about this, even though I have students who look at my suggestion that this text could be social the way my dog, Webster, looks at a turtle in his daily jaunt around the lake—curious, but for only a brief moment. So, we are asking that we move from what appears to be “self-evident” to what is genuinely evident.

Whether right or not, the difference between the two interpretations can still be overcooked. If the social location view is taken, the spiritual location may be implied or even true nonetheless. What matters, ultimately, is whether or not Peter is thinking of his community in terms of its social location.

Third, since there is no doubt about the social location of these terms when used literally, what matters is *how to detect if these terms are used metaphorically in 1 Peter*. A standard operative principle for all of us is to assume a term is “literal” unless something tips us off that the term is “metaphorical.” If I say to my son, “Step up to the plate,” you may think it is an athletic metaphor or you may think it is literal. Since my son plays baseball, my use of this expression would clearly be literal (in most instances). *Context* determines whether or not a term is metaphorical.

“there are four tests to discern when a word is metaphorical”

According to G. B. Caird’s brilliant study on the language and imagery of the Bible, there are four tests to discern when a word is metaphorical.⁴ If we apply these tests to our expression (1:1, 17; 2:11), we should be able to determine if Peter intended his readers to think in terms of spiritual or social location:

1. When the author explicitly states that a given expression is metaphorical. This would be indicated by “like” or “as,” or the term “allegory” (Gal 4:24), or by adding a qualifier that shows that something more than literal is in mind. Thus, “poor *in spirit*” indicates that “poor” is not just social (Matt 5:3) and “loins of *your mind*” (1 Pet 1:13) shows that the clothing is mental.
Application: See below.
2. When an expression is impossible to understand literally. Peter tells the leaders to “shepherd (or tend) the flock of God” in 5:2. This is clearly not literal.
Application: There is nothing impossible about the terms “aliens” and “strangers.” They could just as easily be social as metaphorical.
3. When an expression shows a high correspondence between the term and the reality, the term is more likely to be literal; when the correspondence is low, the term is more likely to be metaphorical. Peter is not in “Babylon” (5:13) and it is not likely that Jesus will be wearing a shepherd’s garb when he returns (5:4).
Application: Christians of Asia Minor may well be socially marginalized; indeed, many, if not most, were.

⁴G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 183–197.

4. When the imagery is highly developed or intensively explored, it is almost always the case that the language is metaphorical. Thus, 1 Pet 2:4–8—with its exploration of the theme of temple imagery—suggests immediately to the reader that we are listening in on a metaphorical description.

Application: Again, the imagery of “aliens” and “exiles” is not developed by Peter.

We return to the first indicator. Here is the language of 1 Peter when these terms are used:

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia.... (1:1)

...live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. (1:17)

I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires.... (2:11)

It is clear that 1:1, taken at face value, is literal: we are talking about “exiles” in the (literal) Dispersion in (literal) Pontus and Galatia, etc. (The NIV’s addition of “in the world” is an intrusion.) But, both 1:17 and 2:11 are ambiguous. There is nothing in either verse that demands a metaphor. If one assumes either interpretation, one can make sense of the text. Thus, one can read 2:11 as, “I urge you, *because you are literally* aliens and exiles, and *because disruption on your part would have devastating effects on the churches*, to abstain from....” Or, it can be read as, “I urge you, *as if you are* aliens and exiles....”

This is where Caird’s tests come into play: Do we not need explicit evidence, or at least strong logical argument, to suggest that either of these terms is a metaphor for “life on earth as a pilgrimage”? Indeed, we do, and it, like evidence supporting the Da Vinci code, is not present. There is no unambiguous evidence for a metaphorical use, and there is clear evidence of (1) the terms having normal social reference and (2) of 1:1 suggesting precisely that notion: the “exile” is literal.

It is not that the traditional interpretation is wrong. After all, the pilgrimage theme is clearly present in Heb 11, and it makes good sense for anyone who embraces a Christian eschatology. However, there is very little evidence (one could say “no evidence”) to suggest this highly conventional reading of 1 Pet 1:1, 17, and 2:11. We conclude that it is safest, and most in concord (a good Lutheran term) with grammar and logic, to read these passages as referring to the *social location of the churches of Asia Minor*. (We could debate whether they “lost” status by becoming Christians or were always in this lower social location, but what evidence we do have in our letter would only lead us to suggest tentatively that they were always socially marginalized. At the least, their faith exacerbated their social location.)

We are to see in this set of expressions a picture of hardworking poor Christians who, through the grace of God’s salvation, had been empowered by coming into the eternal family of God.

ALIENS AND EXILES: THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The implications of perceiving this social location are enormous and enlighten what Peter has to say to each group in his *Haustafel* (2:11–3:12). I am sug-

gesting that *knowing his audience and its possibilities leads Peter to a set of strategies for living the Christian life effectively in the Roman Empire*. It is important to understand the general moral stance of Peter: he is encouraging his churches to do what they can for the greater glory of God.

“Peter urges these socially marginalized Christians to holiness and to goodness so the oppressing majority of Gentiles will someday glorify God on the basis of their deeds”

Peter’s overall strategy is set forth in 2:11–12, and until this is understood we will miss what he is up to in 2:13–3:12. Thus, 2:11–12 may be broken into:

- Pastoral connection:* Beloved
- Social location:* I urge you as aliens and exiles
- Moral strategy #1:* to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.
- Moral strategy #2:* Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles,
- Potential impact:* so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

Thus, Peter urges these socially marginalized Christians to holiness (strategy #1) and to goodness (strategy #2) so the oppressing majority of Gentiles will someday glorify God on the basis of their deeds. This happens, Peter contends, if the Christians permit their moral character to survive pressure, like a flower pressed between the pages in an old book. Put differently, Peter is asking his churches not to run from evil but to transform evil into good, the way God did to the death of Jesus on a cross by raising him from among the dead.

These two strategies of Peter and their potential impact are what emerge from a careful reading of 2:13–3:12. We can only wonder what Peter would have told Christians who were in the political majority. But, we can be assured both that it would be adjusted in concrete details (holiness and goodness would be expected but would have different manifestations) and that it would nevertheless have the same potential impact: God’s glory on the lips of the nonbelieving community.

First, in their relationship to the *government*, the socially marginalized Christians of Asia Minor are to “accept the authority of every human institution” (2:13) *as acts of holiness and goodness* “for the Lord’s sake” (2:14). The potential impact surfaces as well: “For it is God’s will that by doing right [strategy #2] you should silence the ignorance of the foolish” (2:15). Once again, the moral strategies appear in 2:16: “As *servants of God*, live as free people [i.e., not as “aliens and exiles”], *yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil*” [strategy #1]. Throughout this section, Peter keeps these two issues at the front: moral strategy and potential impact. Even though they are “aliens and exiles,” they are free (because of their freedom in

Christ). As free, however, they are not to offend the community unnecessarily. Instead, they are to do good. Bruce Winter's study of 1 Peter argues that Peter is actually exhorting his churches to make public benefactions—like supplying grain, selling items at low prices, erecting public buildings or adorning old buildings, widening roads, being emissaries, and working for social peace.⁵

Second, *slaves* (clearly socially marginalized) are to relate to their “masters” with holiness and goodness. *Even though set free in Christ* (2:16), they are to be good workers and act deferentially (strategy #1 and #2), even to rascally-type masters (2:18). Again, what Peter would have told them had they been in a position to fight for their own rights we will never know. Peter knew his audience and, in light of their social location, urged them to live for the glory and approval of God (2:20). Amazingly, Peter connects the social location and behavior of the slaves to that of Jesus Christ—who endured the humiliation of crucifixion because he knew the potential impact as well as the ultimate foundation of God's approval (2:23). Peter can't speak of Christ's death without turning the conversation back to his audience's Gentile past and conversion, as well as the moral strategy of righteous living (2:24–25). Peter omits any discussion of potential impact, in part (so it seems to me) because he has shifted from Christ's moral example to Christ's saving death and vindication.

Third, for *wives*, holiness and goodness—Peter's two moral strategies—will have their desired impact on their husbands in conversion (3:1–6). This little paragraph pokes into the moral center of modern egalitarian values, but (if we are sensitive to what Peter is doing) we need to see this text not so much as a comment about the social status of women today as about how to live the Christian life in the social location of “aliens and exiles.” (I wish not to be taken as dismissing this text's import for our society by appealing to social location; neither do I wish to be taken as assuming the normativity of this social location.) Holiness and goodness can be found in the women of Peter's churches if they live with “purity” and “reverence” and “modest attire” (3:2–3). They are to cultivate the “inner self,” which, as we are accustomed to seeing in Peter, is approved by God (3:4). Such women can be “daughters of Sarah” if they do “good” (strategy #2). As Peter wants his Christians to live in such a way that those around them glorify God (2:12) or are morally silenced (2:15), so Christian women can lead their husbands to conversion if they live good lives (3:1).

Husbands are exhorted rather quickly to “show consideration” and “honor” to their wives because of their physical vulnerability (3:7). In such a manner, they are living out the moral strategies of Peter with the potential impact of having an effective prayer life. (As a husband, I've always felt a tad cheated by Peter here; a few more verses may have done me some good.)

In general, this *community* of “aliens and exiles” is to live out holiness and

⁵Bruce Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

goodness in their relations with one another. They are to “love” one another (something Peter learned from the *Shema* and from Jesus; Mark 12:28–31) and to return oppression with “blessing” (3:9). Quoting Ps 34:13–17, Peter comes back to his moral strategies: holiness (3:10) and goodness (3:11) as conduct before God (3:12). God responds to such people (3:12).

THE EXAMPLE OF FRANK C. LAUBACH

Though little known today, Frank C. Laubach, in his day, was the most influential missionary in the world. Known more now for his powerful life of prayer, and his reactivation of the classic statement of Brother Lawrence that Christians can live every moment in the presence of God, Laubach encountered in the Philippines a fundamental *social location* that needed to be addressed.⁶

The people to whom he was called to minister could not read. So, one person at a time, he began to teach people to read. His strategy eventually became famous: “Each one teach one.” If each person who knows how to read teaches one other person, eventually all will be able to read. Laubach is credited with being responsible for teaching over sixty million people to read—for the social location he addressed in his first missionary experience led him to propound his strategy throughout the entire world. What he gave each of these communities to read was a first-person autobiography of Jesus.

Laubach’s strategy could have been taken from Peter: do what you can to spread the good news about Jesus Christ in your community. As C. S. Lewis once put it to a young Christian woman: “You’re not David and no one has told you to fight Goliath. You’ve only just enlisted. Don’t go off challenging enemy champions. Learn your drill.”⁷ Indeed, we need to face what is in front of us—nothing else.

To do this there are only three requirements: believe the gospel, know your community, and live a holy and good life. Peter had no idea of the difference he was to make in the Roman Empire, and we have no idea what difference we might make. ⊕

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⁶His story can be found in Karen A. Norton, *One Burning Heart: A Biography of Frank C. Laubach* (Syracuse, NY: Laubach Literacy International, 1990). An older biography can be found in David E. Mason, *Apostle to the Illiterates: Chapters in the Life of Frank C. Laubach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966).

⁷*The Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1988) 422.