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Honorable Conduct among the Gentiles—A Study of the Social Thought of 1 Peter

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First Peter is an interesting document on several counts. Careful reading of the letter reveals, on the one hand, the complex world of the post-apostolic period and, on the other, a writer who is strikingly original. The letter, among other things, presents a challenging discussion of sociopolitical thought ("religion and society," in modern terms), for it addresses squarely the issue of Christians in a non-Christian society. Such a discussion occurs, of course, in the context of the author's review of the audience's baptismal commitment—its responsibilities vis-à-vis other members of the community and as a response to the trials its members are presently suffering (1:6; 4:12; 5:10).

This study begins by considering several introductory issues that have a bearing on the reading of 1 Peter: author and audience on the one hand, and occasion and purpose on the other. There follows a relatively brief discussion of the document's literary character, particularly its structure and its bearing on the author's strategic focus on the themes of suffering and glory. The third and principal part of the study concerns 1 Peter's treatment of Christian conduct vis-à-vis outsiders. Not only is the audience reminded of its commitment to Christ and of its duties toward fellow believers, but it is also introduced to a challenging perspective on the

According to 1 Peter, all humans are owed honor as creatures of God. Christians have duties, therefore, not only toward members of the community of believers but also toward outsiders.

social world of its daily activity and exhorted to "honorable conduct" toward its Gentile neighbors.

Introductory Considerations

1. Author and audience

Though the author claims to be "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ" (1:1), modern scholarship, employing linguistic, social, and theological factors, is virtually unanimous in arguing for pseudonymity. The author, most probably a Hellenistic Jewish Christian from Rome, employs the name and tradition about Peter to write to the Asian provinces of Pontus-Bithynia, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Asia to address a pressing problem that they are confronting and, of course, to insure a positive response on the audience's part. Interestingly, the author employs the self-designation "elder," that is, fellow-elder to the leaders addressed in 5:1. Further, the author is a fairly good writer, whose command of Greek, its vocabulary, and rhetoric is noteworthy. Finally, from a study of the letter's extensive use of Jewish (especially Septuagint) tradition and the early community's soteriological and paraenetic materials, we conclude that a member of the Roman community (see 5:13) is writing a letter of consolation to sister churches in Asia Minor.

The addressees in their turn are described both as belonging to "the dispersion" (1:1) or as "aliens and exiles" (2:11; see also 1:1, 17), both expressions that need some clarification (here and later). In the first case, one might view them as Jewish converts from the Diaspora, but numerous details in the letter underscore the audience's Gentile background (see especially 1:14, 18; also 4:2–4 and Jas 1:1). Instead, use of the term "dispersion" (as is true of sociological terms, such as household, priesthood, race or people, and nation—2:5, 9) points to a sociopolitical agenda on the author's part (see discussion later). The second description of the audience as "aliens and exiles" has led to some discussion concerning either the addressees' social status as resident-alien communities of recent arrivals in the Asian provinces or concerning the author's adoption of a "pilgrim theology," similar to that of the Letter to the Hebrews (see 11:13). The terminology chosen then represents the author's attempt to describe the community's religious and political relation to official Roman culture. Thus, the author's use of these two terms to describe the entire audience addressed (see especially 2:11) and by implication other Christian sufferers as well (5:8–9) forms part of the author's strategy and message to the intended audience and, by extension, to other readers.

2. Occasion and purpose

In general terms the occasion that led to the composition of 1 Peter is what the author describes as the suffering endured by the communities of these outlying provinces (1:6; 5:10). They are experiencing a "fiery ordeal," an experience that is a test of the genuineness of their commitment (1:7; 4:12). The author's purpose

therefore is to offer encouragement or consolation during the audience's time of trial (5:12).

While some scholars in the past have focused on the theme of suffering as indicating persecution, thus providing clues for the dating of the letter, and others have concentrated on the author's theology of suffering, it seems more appropriate here to examine the theme itself as shedding further light both on the occasion for the composition and on the author's strategy and message. On the one hand, the "fire" terminology associated with the audience's suffering describes not the suffering as such but its role as a purifying agent (1:7—see the smelting imagery) or as a demonic test that is to be resisted by the believer (4:12 and 5:8–9). On the other hand, the frequent association of the audience's situation with the sufferings of Christ (see 4:13: "sharing Christ's suffering") points to the author's strategy rather than to the nature of the problem addressed. The difficulty seemingly is the result of hostility, harassment, and social, unofficial ostracism on the part of the general populace.

The letter's context is that of Christians undergoing hard times as they adjust to the give and take of life among non-Christians. There is in the letter much evidence of ostracism and verbal abuse. Thus, when 1 Peter discusses the audience's suffering at the hands of nonbelievers, the reality is invariably described in verbal terms as "speaking against or maligning...as evildoers" (2:11–12; 3:14; also 2:1) or as being "reviled or insulted on account of the name of Christ" (4:14)—even those responsible for such abuse are characterized as "those who insult, abuse or treat with spite" (3:16). Further, there is much insistence on innocent suffering (2:19–20; 3:13, 16–17; 4:14–16), and the hearers are exhorted to refrain from returning insult for insult or from responding in kind (2:1, 23; 3:9–10). There are also hints that some of this abuse might be the result either of "mischief-making" on the part of some community members (4:15) or perhaps of brazen response on the part of others (see 2:23; 3:14–16 and even 5:5–6). The problem is how to deal with such treatment or, more generally, how to live among abusive neighbors, that is, how to deal with the challenge of being a Christian minority in a pagan environment. They are assured nonetheless that, in the meantime, they are "protected by the power of God through faith" (1:5).

Literary Character of 1 Peter

1. Epistolary structure

The writer composes a letter of consolation (5:12) both to help those who are suffering abuse and to address more generally the Christian's responsibilities vis-à-vis political, social, and community realities. The document is a real letter, for it retains the basic characteristics of the genre, especially a standard opening and closing. The body of the document, however, adopts more readily the thematic concerns of later paraenetic epistles. Thus, scholars are agreed that, between a standard opening (1:1–2) and closing (5:12–14), one finds a lengthy composition con-

sisting of several blocks of material. Though earlier scholars routinely proposed the use by 1 Peter of two sources—one a baptismal homily or tract, the second a paraenetic text on persecution—more recent analyses of the document's various features and style opt for a unitary composition, whose structure continues nonetheless to be debated. Careful analysis of the letter's rhetorical and thematic features leads us nonetheless to posit three major structural blocks.

The letter begins in its first major part (1:3–2:10) by addressing the basics of Christian belief. What had once been seen as a baptismal homily is now viewed, in light of the author's strategy, as a foundational statement, wherein 1 Peter speaks repeatedly of "new birth" in Christ (1:3, 14, 17, 23; 2:2), of God's choice or call (1:1, 3, 15), and of the creation of a new people (2:4–5, 9–10). Here also the author underscores Jesus' soteriological role as the lamb who, by shedding his precious blood, has ransomed the addressees from their former lives (1:18–19).

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In light of this foundational discussion, the author proceeds in the second major section (2:11–4:11—"beloved, I urge you...") to address the audience's political and social activity and responsibility. From the outset the author focuses on the major issue of the letter, namely, Christian relations with outsiders and proper motivation for honorable behavior in the face of innocent suffering (2:12). The author makes adroit use of an extended household or social code (2:13–3:12), both to address difficult or exemplary cases and to provide a christological pattern for proper confrontation of unjust treatment and slander. Thus motivated, believers can confront such malice with a clear conscience (3:16) and aspire to life in an ideal community focused on mutual love and responsibility (4:7–11; see also 3:8).

The author returns in a third, final block (4:12–5:11—"beloved, do not be surprised...") to the pressing issue that the community is confronting, namely, innocent suffering. No longer is the issue treated in relation either to abusive or public contexts (see 2:18ff.; 3:2, 13–17) but more particularly in relation to the christological themes of suffering and glory, as the ultimate motivation for honorable behavior among Gentiles (4:13–19) and, by means of a parallel community code (5:1–5), for humble service vis-à-vis other believers.

2. Focus on a christological pattern

The author's strategy in addressing the various "suffering" communities of the Asian provinces involves the use of a christological pattern to establish the Christian community's status as children of God ransomed by means of Jesus' death and resurrection, and the astute use of a variation of this pattern to address the community's suffering in light of their Christian status. It is particularly in the

first section of the letter that 1 Peter employs the traditional Jesus material to underscore the soteriological function of the Christ event. Through Jesus' salvific death and resurrection, whether focusing on ransom, baptismal, or conversion imagery (1:3, 18, 21, 23; 2:2–3, 9–10), the author repeatedly stresses God's call to and gift of new life and thereby underscores the believing community's unity, strength, and source of life.

At this point we turn to the second use of the christological pattern. In place of death and resurrection, the author employs the themes of suffering and subsequent glory (see 1:11), that is, innocent suffering like that of Christ (1:22–23), and promise of glory, also like that of Christ. This promise is even described as "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for" the believer (1:4). Jesus is offered to the reader then as the model of suffering and glory. Indeed, Jesus the innocent sufferer, not the dying Messiah, is the example (ὑπογραμμός) approved by God and given to the Christian who is "to follow in his steps" (2:20–21). Thus the author stresses both the soteriological function of the Christ event and its paradigmatic value to console those who are suffering "for a little while" (1:6; 5:10). It is particularly the latter that sets the pattern for Christian behavior, for the believer, like Christ, is neither to return abuse nor threaten when provoked (2:23), but instead is exhorted to display honorable behavior when faced with the maltreatment and "ignorance of the foolish" (2:12, 15; 3:16).

Christian Conduct vis-à-vis Outsiders

1. Debate about social relations

A cursory look at the major contextual indicators of 1 Peter, particularly the issues of suffering and maltreatment, would lead readers to expect a rather negative or adversarial perspective on the part of the author toward outsiders. Further, one might even discern in this regard a concern for social separation from outsiders with a corresponding emphasis on internal, structural cohesion (see especially 3:8–9 and 5:1–5). Positive attention toward outsiders would then relate to the community's missionary concerns (see 2:12; 3:1). However, one notes that the author, though acknowledging the readers' intense suffering, their being tested as though by a conflagration, and their being at the mercy of ignorance and slander, enjoins them to follow Christ's example and thus to have recourse to nonviolent resistance or gentle defense (3:15b–16) and to accept innocent suffering only when necessary (3:17). The author's goal then would be that of seeking peace, harmony, or at least a reasonable modus vivendi with outsiders (see especially 2:13–3:12). The debated issue might best be described in terms of "social separation versus acculturation."[1]

Beyond the above contrast in the perceived treatment of outsiders, one must add that the author insists that Christian life in a social context demands holy conduct, reverent fear, duty to society, to others, and especially to fellow believers

[1]See the Elliott-Balch debate in C. H. Talbert, ed., *Perspectives on First Peter* (Macon: Mercer, 1986) 61–101.

(1:15–16; 2:11–17), demands that invariably involve insiders and outsiders. This is especially true as the readers face a test to the genuineness of their faith. Thus, beyond the immediate attention given to the temporary crisis in the process of assimilation, one finds in 1 Peter serious reflection concerning the believer's political, social, and religious responsibilities.

2. Important clues to the author's social thought

Crucial for our understanding of the issue is the author's choice of social-political terminology, "exiles" and "aliens," to describe the audience. From the outset they are called "elect exiles of the diaspora" (1:1), that is, they are Christians living among Gentiles or non-Christians. The section of the letter that follows (1:3–2:10) focuses on the community's basic beliefs, that is, its religious character. The second term appears at the beginning of the second section (2:11–4:11), where the audience is addressed both as "aliens and exiles" (2:11). There follows a lengthy social code on behavior toward outsiders and insiders, involving political and social concerns. In this case they are addressed first as political actors but also as social agents whose loyalty includes the religious sphere. Thus, 1 Peter calls the audience "political aliens" (πάροικοι) and "religious exiles" (παρεπίδημοι). In the first case, they have responsibilities that relate to their political status as residents and citizens of the Roman Empire and its regional civic communities and, in the second case, they have duties vis-à-vis God, their religious communities, and in their relationships toward their pagan neighbors. The terminology is indicative of and consistent with the author's insistence on the dual responsibilities—religious and political—of the Christian readers. We should note the further confirmation of this in 1:17 where believers are admonished: "live in reverent fear during the time of your [political] sojourn" (not "exile" as in NRSV; use of παροικία). Even one's political activity should be religiously motivated. It should be noted finally that the entire "duty" or "household code" (2:11–3:12), which follows immediately, is a complex and creative interweaving of sociopolitical and religious responsibilities and motivation.

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Secondly, the opening of the code (2:13) as well as its recurring, dominant theme of "duty" provide further clues. The interpretation of this verse, however, is problematic on two counts. The NRSV reads: "for the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution." In the first case, the term ὑποτάσσω, the linking motif of the entire code, while including the sense of "subjection or subordination," has a more inclusive meaning of "recognizing one's relation to or duty toward" (see also 2:18; 3:1).[2] This lexical conclusion is important particularly for the

[2]H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 1897.

reading (below) of 2:17. In the second case, the expression "of every human institution" is not a very good rendering of the difficult Greek expression πάσῃ ἀνθρωπίνῃ κτίσει. By far the more literal and preferable rendering is "of every human creature or creation." Thus, what follows in 2:13–14 is not a list of institutions but of individuals, namely, the emperor and his governors. Indeed, a more correct rendering of v. 13, "for the Lord's sake recognize your duty toward every human creature," prepares for the profound statement of v. 17: "honor everyone; love the family of believers [brotherhood]; fear God; honor the emperor." The list of verbs (honor, love, fear, honor) does not denote subordination in each case but presents interesting statements of "relation to or duty toward" specific groups. Also, the duty one owes to "all [fellow] humans" is that of "honor," a statement that is further underscored by its religious motivation: "for the Lord's [Creator's] sake." Basic then to 1 Peter's social thought is the claim, and the consequences thereof, that all human creatures are owed honor.

3. First Peter's perspective on and treatment of outsiders

There are then two basic factors in considering the social thought of 1 Peter, namely, the author's perception of insiders and outsiders on the one hand and the relationship that exists between these on the other. There is of course a third crucial factor, which will not be treated here, and that is the social interplay among insiders—they are now "a people" who must live in "genuine mutual love" (1:22; 2:10) and who also have social relation with and responsibilities toward one another (4:7–11; 5:1–5).

Important in discerning the author's perspective is the terminology used to describe outsiders and their social world. As noted earlier the author describes insiders as "religious exiles" who have been called out of the world of darkness into God's marvelous light (2:9). It is no surprise then that the world of the believer is seen in positive terms as one of new life (1:3, 14, 17, 27; 2:2), even one of "indescribable and glorious joy" (1:8). This description is in sharp contrast to the negative world of the outsider (the ancestor of the believer—1:18), since believers are said to have been "ransomed from [their] futile ways" (1:18 again). Indeed, outsiders are "conformed to...desires...held in ignorance" (1:14); they are enslaved "by the desires of the flesh" (2:11) or act "according to human desires" (4:2). In short, the world of the nonbeliever is one of dissipation or of "living in licentiousness and unbridled passion, in drunkenness, orgies, and carousing, ultimately in forbidden idolatry" (4:3–4, my translation).

But though called out or chosen from this unenlightened mass of humanity, believers are nonetheless "exiles of the dispersion" (1:1) or Christians among Gentiles. Choice of this Jewish terminology describes both believers' separateness from outsiders (who are called Gentiles—2:12; 4:3) and the social context of their lives (they live in diaspora in a Gentile world).

Believers then live in the same social world as nonbelievers, but they are called upon to avoid what outsiders "like to do," that is, "the same excesses of dissipa-

tion" (4:3–4). They are subject to the same "human desires" (4:2) and are to avoid these "desires of the flesh that [in so far as (ἅτινες) they] wage war against the soul" (2:11). Thus, they live in the same world but are to be motivated "no longer by human desires but by the will of God" (4:2). The life of the believer is to be one of holiness (1:15–16; see also 4:2) but also of interaction with other members of the Christian diaspora, namely, outsiders and insiders.

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Though believers are called upon to avoid certain types of Gentile behavior (see 2:1, 12, and especially 4:1–6), they are nonetheless expected to live their daily lives in a Gentile world among pagan neighbors toward whom they have social and political responsibilities. To address these various duties the author makes use of a complex and beautifully presented duty or household code (2:11–3:12). This passage especially is designed to provide advice to Christians for their daily lives in the world they live in, for it addresses the positive attitude they should have toward Roman culture, all the while living as Christians among non-Christians. They are to live responsibly in society (their time as resident aliens—1:17), for they are to "recognize their duty toward" other humans (2:13). Indeed, this duty is characterized in the same pericope as "honoring (τιμάω) everyone" (2:17). Thus there is a relationship between humans as "creatures or servants of God," who are to "live as free people" (2:16), recognizing their relationships to individuals and to the social-political structures that are in place to reward the good and punish the evil (2:13–14; see also Rom 13:1–7). The remainder of the duty code (2:18–3:7) is concerned with a range of relationships and the duties of believers toward individuals as well as groups. The letter, more generally, insists that Christian life in a social context, despite innocent suffering, demands holy conduct, reverent fear, duty to society, to others, and especially to fellow believers (1:15–16; 2:11–17), as they face what the author calls a test of the genuineness of their faith (1:7).

The author of 1 Peter insists that moral responsibility derives from the realization that humans are God's creatures or servants and that all are owed honor according to their relationships in the social order, namely (in the terms used by Epictetus, *Discourses* 2:10), duty as humans, as citizens, as children or sons, and as siblings. The author focuses both in the code and throughout the letter on these natural and acquired relational categories to discuss the believer's relation to insiders and outsiders. These duties are most eloquently and succinctly expressed in 2:17, first (by the use of an aorist command) as honor owed fellow humans and secondly (by use of the present imperative in three subordinate, complementary commands) as underscoring mutual love among fellow believers, absolute rever-

ence and awe vis-à-vis God (the Creator, Judge, and Father—1:17; 4:19), and honor or duty toward those who punish and reward.

Finally, it should be noted that 1 Peter repeatedly describes outsiders (and insiders) in light of the categories just discussed and insists that they be shown honor according to their status, an admonition that most generally is expressed as "doing good" (2:14–15, 20; 3:6, 11, 13, 17), despite opposition, especially conducting oneself honorably (and publicly) among Gentiles (2:12—use of καλός). But when advising honorable, holy, or good conduct toward outsiders, the author without fail also underscores theological or christological motivation (see 1:17; 2:12, 13; 3:16). The ultimate goal of good behavior among Gentiles, even the gentle and reverent defense of Christian conduct (3:15–16), is, in the short term, the cessation (on the insider's behalf) of malevolence, ignorance, and consequent suffering ("for a little while"—1:6; 5:10) and, in the long term, the public, eschatological acknowledgment (by the outsider) of the God of mercy (2:12; 3:16; 4:5; see also 2:10).

First Peter advises the Christians of Asia Minor that, if they must suffer—despite the good offices of Roman social and political structures—let them take Christ as their model. Let them follow in his footsteps (2:21), for just as he suffered innocently and then received glory, so will Christians, if they suffer for Christ's sake (innocently; see 2:19–20; 4:13–16), receive glory also when he returns as lord of the end time. In the meantime, however, they are citizens or wards of the Roman Empire (πάροικοι) and owe corresponding honor to officials and have their share of political and social duties. At the same time, though they are religious exiles (παρεπίδημοι) in a sea of Gentile faces, they owe their nonbelieving neighbors the honor owed God's creatures or servants. It is their duty, even in the face of "malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander" (2:1) to "conduct (them)selves honorably among (their) Gentile [neighbors]" (2:12). ⊕

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