



Teaching 1 Peter as Scripture

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Scholars often lament that certain biblical books, however rich with theological perspicuity and timely import, are routinely neglected in the church's teaching. First Peter is one such book, and the reasons for its neglect are easy to number. For example, today's "seeker-friendly" congregations may well be turned off by 1 Peter's emphasis on suffering believers who are found on the margins of pagan society as its resident aliens, the disciples of a suffering servant. This letter is correspondence cast with images of hardship and in a tone of spiritual testing that demands costly and rigorous obedience; this is not an easy definition of Christianity for even the most persuasive teacher to pitch—at least to first-world congregations of post-Christian societies!

Improving pedagogical technique or technology will not finally improve a congregation's reception of a biblical writing whose symbols are judged irrelevant by today's standards. Blame may also be placed on the tendency of modern criticism of pressing 1 Peter through a Pauline filter, producing a rather thin exegetical payoff and even a sense of redundancy that only subverts the distinctive contribution this particular book makes to our understanding of God's whole gospel. In this case, I doubt constructing new social worlds with which to encase 1 Peter, no matter how brilliant, or ciphering its complicated rhetorical design, no matter how

While acknowledging the important insights of critical scholarship, faithful Christian teachers will interpret 1 Peter within the early church's rule of faith, a unified tradition that found coherence, not dissonance, in the various elements of Scripture. Within this rule of faith, 1 Peter calls Christians to radical obedience to the God who has purged them from sin by the obedient suffering of Jesus on their behalf.

persuasive, can rehabilitate the importance of this letter for prospective readers if its message about God is not brought forward into today's world.

The more crucial issue, it seems to me, turns on whether the teacher approaches 1 Peter as Scripture: Does the teacher pick it up, however difficult and obscure, as somehow formative of what a congregation believes and how it lives with God? If so, the teacher must ask how the various strategies of biblical criticism are best employed to illumine the text's real referent, who is God, by whom its current readers' identity as a Christian people is forged. For this reason, the present article commends an approach to 1 Peter as Scripture—a *sacred* text—and to a practice of teaching 1 Peter as “theological pedagogy” for and of the church.¹ However counter to the prevailing intellectual and social constructions within the scholarly guild, which now have spilled over to the pulpit, this perspective presumes that Scripture's “legal address” is the church, where 1 Peter presumes to exercise a fiduciary claim upon its faithful readers—a claim that falls especially upon the teacher in a manner that compels interpretation that clarifies the theological instruction and practical relevance of this particular book.

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In this light, then, the most crucial property of theological pedagogy is the recovery of neglected texts such as 1 Peter for use in Christian worship and formation, where its normative role is to “teach, reprove, correct, and train” believers to know God's wisdom more completely and to serve God's purposes more earnestly (2 Tim 3:15–17). If Scripture aims congregations at God as the divinely inspired medium by which the Holy Spirit illumines believers to know God's truth and supplies the grace to perform it in holy living, then the practice of teaching 1 Peter in a way that targets a knowing and faithful relationship with God is no less “critical” than the academy's intentions: faithful readers must still ask whether what they find in the biblical text actually supplies meaning and direction to a faith that is truly Christian in content and practice.

Teaching 1 Peter as Scripture, then, reminds some congregations of the centrality of the very things they assiduously seek to avoid, or others of the very things they need to hear. Scripture, rightly read, has this remarkable capacity to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. Especially my congregation and my students, made comfortable by their undemanding variety of Christianity and the niceties of their middle-class lives, need more teaching about a holy God who demands a holy life; a suffering Christ who establishes the necessity of expending considerable personal cost in service of God; a community whose communicants

¹For a fuller list of pedagogical cues, consider the “nine theses on the interpretation of Scripture” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. E. F. Davis and R. B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 1–5.

are considered “aliens and strangers” by outsiders because of their radical commitment to a virtuous life and the unconditional obligations of real friendship; and a view of history that ends with the triumph of God rather than the triumph of some humanistic or nationalistic agenda. This article is written to model a strategy of theological pedagogy for teaching 1 Peter for believers such as these.

TEACHING 1 PETER BY THE “RULE OF FAITH”

As a convention of the early catholic church, the canonical process gathered together diverse Christian writings into various collections whose roles and subject matter are consistent with the theological agreements and purposes of the church’s *regula fidei*, a “rule of faith.”² Moreover, since the hermeneutics of the canonical process were of coherence, not dissonance, these various collections (e.g., Pauline and catholic letters) were constructed and included as complementary, not adversarial, entities of a unified tradition.³ In this sense, then, this sacred book formed by the church delimits its common ground rather than its irreconcilable differences; and the theological perspicuity of every part, Old and New, is recognized as such by connection to the theological agreements of the church’s ecumenical (and sometimes tacit) rule of faith.

Because the biblical canon as a whole was considered a textual analog of this rule, the church rendered the “sense” of its every part (e.g., Pauline or catholic letters) as generally cohering to a “unifying theology of Scripture.” While modern critical exegesis has done well to articulate and explain the theological diversity retrieved from the multiple parts of the biblical canon—a diversity that reflects and endorses the theological pluriformity of the church catholic—the canonicity of every part within the whole commends its theological coherence with every other part. Moreover, the church’s *magisterium* itself includes a rich diversity of teachers past and present, shaped by their different methodological interests and social locations, who are given the task of teaching the church’s pluriform and polyvalent Scripture to an ever changing community of readers and auditors. The result of this profound diversity—diverse texts rendered by diverse readers for diverse audiences—can be an incoherent mess of meanings in dire need of untangling!

In fact, the presumption of a “unifying theology of Scripture” implies the co-

²For the idea that the biblical canon as a whole and each part within is judged as roughly analogous to an ecclesial (and ecumenical) *regula fidei*, see R. W. Wall, “Rule of Faith in Theological Hermeneutics,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 88–107.

³Christopher Mount contends that Irenaeus is largely responsible for this construction of Christian origins, using the book of Acts in his polemics against Marcion to underwrite the continuity between the diverse apostolic traditions of the church; see *Pauline Christianity: Luke-Acts and the Legacy of Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). David E. Smith is even more expansive on this same point, arguing that the patristic use of Acts is largely responsible for the final literary form of the whole Christian biblical canon, Old Testament and New Testament, and for how the variety of intracanonical textual relations therein are to be rendered; see *The Canonical Function of Acts: A Comparative Analysis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002).

herence of *every* biblical book to the theological convictions of the *regula fidei* as one subset of the whole. Moreover, if this *a priori* is accepted, then one is better able to compare and assess the peculiar contribution each bit makes to the whole, and what this whole would lack if constructed in the absence of each peculiar part. Specifically, the theologian is better able to compare the contributions made by 1 Peter to the Bible's entire witness to God with all other biblical writings, since all parts of the canonical whole are mutually delimited by the same theological agreements of the church's *regula fidei*, while at the same time recognizing and assessing the exclusive, distinctive theological adumbrations of each in turn.⁴

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Simply put, the rule of faith is a grammar of theological agreements that Christians confess to be true and by which all of Scripture is rendered in forming a truly Christian faith and life. Beginning in the mid-second century, Christian teachers recognized the polyvalence of biblical texts; the texts do not interpret themselves, nor are their meanings always clear and unequivocal. Different faith traditions, some on the margins of the apostolic mainstream, retrieved wildly different wisdom and practices from the same stories of Jesus or letters of Paul. To bring clarity and coherence to the church's teaching ministry, Clement, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and other leading Christian apologists argued that Scripture's interpretation be measured by a unified tradition rooted in the still vivid memories of the Lord's apostles. They called this tradition a “rule of faith” or “rule of truth,” according to which the soundness of biblical interpretations and theological formulations might be determined.

A precursor to the later, more formal creeds of the ecumenical church, this theological grammar summarized the heart of Christian faith and served as a theological boundary marker for Christian identity. Though formally distinct from Scripture, the rule of faith formulates the church's attempts to demarcate the significance of what the Jesus of history said and did (Acts 1:1) and also to make sense

⁴In my construction of the canonical process, I suggest that three other biblical books are strategically related to 1 Peter and should be read with 1 Peter in order to teach its theological contribution most clearly and fully: (1) 2 Peter was written to “complete” extant 1 Peter and so the theological interpretation of the Petrine tradition (see 2 Pet 3:1)—probably quite late and perhaps even motivated by a prospective role in an emergent New Testament canon; see my “The Canonical Function of Second Peter,” *Biblical Illustrator* 9/1 (2001) 64–81; (2) as one member in the collection of seven catholic epistles (CE), 1 Peter is related theologically to the other six letters of this collection when considered as a whole, and especially to James as the “frontispiece” for the entire CE collection; (3) finally, the CE collection was first put into circulation during the canonical process with the book of Acts, which supplies a narrative context for a right reading of these letters. In particular, the biography of the Peter of Acts orients the reader of 1–2 Peter to its continuing importance for Christian formation. For these final two intracanonial relationships, see my “A Unifying Theology of the Catholic Epistle Collection: A Canonical Approach,” in *The Catholic Epistles and the Tradition*, ed. J. Schlosser (Leuven: Peeters, 2004) 43–71.

of the church's ongoing experience with the living Jesus. The resulting statements of core theological affirmations might continue to serve the church as criteria for assessing the coherence of one's interpretation of Scripture and, more importantly, provide a manner by which the community comes to think about itself in relation to all of life. A theological grammar, clarified in conversation with the biblical word, is then embodied by believers and becomes a way of ordering the choices one makes in response to the vicissitudes and vagaries of the mundane. This is the purpose of a theological pedagogy for and of the church, and I hope to illustrate this point in the following set of theological briefs.

CREATOR

The grammar of the *regula fidei* is theocentric, agreeing that God exists and is one God, creator of all things visible and invisible. In congruence with this formula, 1 Peter is also theocentric, exploring the message of God's existence as it relates to a suffering people who live in those places where the presence of a loving, powerful God may not be self-evident: What sort of God allows the innocent to suffer, especially those who consider themselves God's children? This book's theological conception is centered by this hard question. Innocent suffering occasions a theological test: Can God's presence be affirmed by a faithful people, even those living "between a rock and a hard place" where purpose and meaning sometimes get squeezed out of life?

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According to 1 Peter, God can be found and worshiped even there, because God's presence is mediated through the resurrected Jesus (1:3, 21; 3:21). By this experience of the living Jesus, the suffering community realizes that God has not abandoned them—against all public appearance—and in fact has a relationship with them as "father" in an intimate manner that is not shared by outsiders (1:2–3).

As a community of "resident aliens" (1:1; 2:11) believers anticipate and perhaps even now experience the hardships of living as a people belonging to God and not to the Caesar of a pervasively pagan culture (1:6; 2:20; 3:14; 4:12). They are God's own people, citizens of a "holy nation" (2:9), and this world is not their real home. God's plan to deliver this people from their present suffering and sense of alienation is already presaged by Israel's Scripture (1:10–12), especially its narrative of God's suffering Servant-Messiah (1:11; cf. 2:22–24), in whose messianic career the Creator has disclosed the design of deliverance (see 4:19): God's resurrection and glorification of God's messianic Servant (3:18–22) testifies to the vindication that awaits those who suffer as a result of their own faithfulness to their faithful Creator (4:12–19; cf. 3:22–24).

Both nonbeliever (4:1–6) and believer (1:17; 5:5–6) must stand for judgment before an impartial yet powerful God whose rational response is predicated on the hard evidence of whether a people obey God’s will (1:17). On the one hand, those who do God’s will and are righteous (3:13–17) will follow the risen Christ into heaven (3:18–22). The evidence of their obedience to God is their public rejection and suffering at the hands of pagan outsiders (2:11–12). They are promised vindication and blessing from God for the coming age (3:9). On the other hand, God’s judgment of “evildoers” is certain (4:5), and for this reason the faith community need not seek vengeance against those who provoke their suffering (3:8–12).

The Creator’s good intention for all of life extends to every human relationship so that for the Lord’s sake, believers “submit to every human institution” (2:13–3:7) and love each other (1:22). God is the Holy One who has called a people out of a pagan world (1:1; 2:10), and purified them from sin (1:18–19) in order to live as holy people (1:15; 2:9–10) in that pagan world. It is this same God who now protects them for eternal life with God (5:10). In response to these actions of provident care, the faith community reveres God (1:17) and worships God (4:11). This interplay between the reader’s social and spiritual worlds, fraught with so much ambiguity, forges a spirituality that is empowered to submit to the social requirements of daily life in a public manner that embodies the purifying changes a holy God is fashioning within the human soul (1:22–25; 2:11–12).

CHRIST

Scripture’s witness to Christ, as oriented by the rule of faith, is naturally divided into two relationships, the first his relationship with God and the second his communion with those who profess him as Lord and are baptized into “new life” because of him. The two are, of course, integral, since Christ’s relations with God disclose the Creator’s redemptive intentions for human creation.

According to 1 Peter, God is first of all known as the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3), and God calls the church out of the world for salvation in Christ (5:10), by him (2:21–25) and for him (1:2), for a salvation that will be fully revealed at his Parousia as Lord. That is, God is known and confessed in terms of God’s relationship with the Messiah’s work—principally as Suffering Servant (2:21–24), by whose costly obedience God has liberated a suffering community for a future heavenly home (1:3–9; 2:25; 5:13–14), but also as resurrected Jesus Christ, through whom God’s triumph over evil is ultimately disclosed (1:3–5; 3:18–4:6). While present suffering is a real problem, the resurrection is the central symbol of a “living hope” by which that present suffering is glossed by a future “inheritance” that will be “undefiled and imperishable” (1:4).

First Peter’s interpretation of Jesus’ suffering, while developed against the biblical background of Isa 53, is richly textured (cf. 1:10–12), drafting prophetic typologies from both the Exodus story (1:18–19) and temple symbolism (2:4–8). The Suffering Servant is also the Paschal Lamb, unblemished and spotless, whose blood

purifies the souls of believers (1:22) and effects in them an imperishable life (1:23). At the same time, his acceptable sacrifice to God establishes the very “cornerstone” for a “spiritual house,” marginal from a social perspective (2:11–12), but the very dwelling place of the people of God (2:9–10).

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In a book layered with christological affirmations, none is more distinctive and decisive than 1 Pet 3:18–22.⁵ Without denying the substantial critical problems posed by this passage, it does supply a working glossary of the Christ event and a range of beliefs about him that effectively defines Christ’s relationship with humanity as God’s Suffering Servant:

(1) The first affirmation is the traditional belief in the reconciling death and resurrection of Christ (3:18). According to 1 Peter, Christ “suffered for sins,” a phrase unique in the New Testament’s theology of the cross, almost certainly recalling 2:21–24 with its emphasis on the messianic Servant’s obedience to God; that is, the redemptive result of Jesus’ death comes not because he is a substitute sacrifice for sin but rather because of his *obedience* to God’s redemptive purposes—a point 1 Peter then emphasizes by the appositional phrase, “a righteous/just man for the unrighteous.” This emphasis on Christ’s costly obedience is central to 1 Peter’s pattern of humanity’s salvation, since it is precisely in the community’s active and demanding response to God’s call that its salvation at the end of the age is made secure (1:6–9). Yet, Christ’s unjust, abusive suffering does not conclude his work; resurrection does. Suffering is a necessary element of his work, of course, even as it is a necessary element of the Christian’s salvation (1:6–7) and vocation (3:8–17); however, the christological argument of 1 Peter assures its readers that innocent suffering is a means to a future with God. While Christ’s suffering does not end humanity’s suffering, it does establish a *typos* of success that opposes any choice that allows momentary relief from the costs of discipleship at the expense of a holy lifestyle demanded by a holy God.

(2) The second belief confessed is that Christ journeyed first to the netherworld to proclaim God’s triumph to the “spirits” imprisoned there (3:19), and then to heaven (3:21). The history of interpreting this phrase reflects its theological difficulty and possibility.⁶ In context, Christ’s journey almost certainly picks up 1 Peter’s conflict thematic (2:11–12; 3:8–16; 4:1–6) to interpret it under the light of the triumph of the risen and glorified Christ (3:18, 21), who is now cosmic Lord

⁵For the history of interpreting this passage as a distinctively Petrine contribution to New Testament christology, see J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988) 194–222.

⁶See W. J. Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18–4:6* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989).

even over these same “spirits” (3:22). Whatever else 1 Peter might mean by this curious mythology, it illustrates the confidence a suffering people might have in a Messiah whose redemptive work has already defeated those invisible agents who are at work to wreak havoc today as they once did in Noah’s time (3:20). Surely the keen Petrine interest in Christ’s resurrection as the disclosure of a Creator who is the powerful maker of all things, invisible and visible, underscores the ultimate triumph of the gospel as the very foundation of Christian hope in a milieu of social disruption and suffering (so 4:6).

(3) Finally, the assertion that “baptism now saves you” (3:21), however grammatically convoluted, clearly relates Christ’s triumphant experience with that of his current followers and their experience of the living Christ (1:18–2:3). The properties of that experience are of inward purification from sin through Christ (1:18–21), providing the basis to love each other publicly as friends (1:22–25) and to resist moral vice (2:1–3)—the moral effects of the community’s “clear conscience” (3:21) by which it also obeys the truth of the gospel (1:22). These properties are the marks of God’s good intentions for humanity.

COMMUNITY

Luke Johnson speaks of a “scandal of appearances” that attends the church’s professed commitment to the life and work of “the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.” This profoundly human community, made of frail, disagreeable, and unholy people, is called into existence by God to do God’s work in transforming a pagan world.⁷ Such a conception seems to be in play in 1 Peter, whose idea of church is a community of marginal ones—weak and powerless by societal standards—who are called forth out of a world utterly opposed to God’s agenda, not only to live at odds with its norms and values but to save it by walking in Christ’s steps as God’s suffering servant (2:21–25).

The current interpreters of 1 Peter do not require certainty about the historical circumstances of its first readers or about whether its canonical version is the composite of two (or more) discrete compositions in order to agree that its intended audience suffers (or expects to suffer) for its Christian faith and that 1 Peter’s theological conception is decisively shaped by this experience. Christians who are the book’s implied readers are called “resident aliens” (1:1; 2:11), living in a hostile environment (2:12; 3:16) where they suffer simply for trying to live as Christians ought (4:15–16). Although reasons for this conflict are not precisely given, one can surmise that it is the logical result of competing loyalties: the community suffers the result of a life concentrated on serving the interests of a holy God within a profane world.⁸ The paraenetic function of 1 Peter is not to domesti-

⁷See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) 254–281.

⁸This is the thesis of J. H. Elliott’s influential reading of 1 Peter; see now *1 Peter* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

cate an alien group to prevent future oppression but to prescribe the life of a holy people, whose vocation within an alien world is to bear witness to God by walking in the steps of God's suffering Christ and by so doing to herald the revelation of his return to earth, this time in glory.

The community's preoccupation, then, is not with this world *per se*, whether to accommodate it in response to malicious rumors or to resist it as a counter-cultural movement; rather, the vocation of a people belonging to God is to be the church, a holy nation, and so to suffer, if need be, simply for doing the will of God (3:13–17).

The special vocabulary of 1 Peter empowers this "alien" perspective by proposing to normalize human suffering as the expected character of purified human existence within a profane world: Christian discipleship is cruciform by nature since believers follow a crucified Lord. The real issue facing the community is the manner of its response to suffering; indeed, its final salvation depends upon it (4:17). Sharply put, the right(-eous) response is firm and steadfast obedience (1:13–14) to God's will (3:17) in a cultural milieu that rewards the opposite. God's will fully encompasses personal ethics (2:11; 3:8–9) and the various arrangements of human life; thus, the community's rule includes loving relations with each other (1:22; 2:1–2) and with outsiders (2:12; 3:15–16) as well as with the institutional (2:13–17) and social/familial (2:18–20; 3:1–6) structures of the cultural order. Critical to this moral order is the role of the community's leaders (5:1–5), who must be exemplars of the Christian life (5:2–3), especially for a suffering people (5:1) when the potential for disaffection (5:9–11) or exploitation (5:5–8) is very great.

This Petrine ideal of a holy obedience is complemented by a glossary of hope (1:3, 13, 21; 3:5, 15), the central feature of 1 Peter's practical theology. This seems to follow the calculus of the prophetic model, to which 1 Peter refers (1:10): if divine judgment is the prior experience of divine salvation, then a people's purification depends upon this purging of sin. Thus, 1 Peter can speak intelligently of the community's purification as the result of the Messiah's suffering (1:14–18; 3:21–25), but can also claim that the Creator's purging of a broken creation of its sin is indicated by the community's own suffering (4:17–19), even if that suffering results unjustly (2:19) for living as a Christian rather than the just desert of vice (4:15–16). The result is a sacred text that looks ahead to the future revelation of God's salvation, when the homeless will enter their eternal home (cf. 2 Pet 3:11–13).

CONSUMMATION

The biblical narrative of God concludes where the rule of faith does: with salvation's consummation in God's triumph over evil and death. In particular, Christian faith will be vindicated at the Lord's future Parousia. While the importance of this teaching is sharpened by the addition of 2 Peter's apocalyptic idiom to 1 Peter

during the canonical process, it is effectively introduced in 1 Peter, whose theme of “hope in God” (1:21; 3:15) points toward a future heavenly inheritance (1:3–5), predicated on a christological pattern already revealed (so 3:18–22) that moves from the experience of present suffering to one of future glory (1:6–9, 20; cf. 5:1). A community that posits hope at the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7, 13; cf. 4:13;

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5:4) has two foci that bracket and thus qualify the community’s present suffering: his resurrection and his return as exalted Lord. On the one hand, the past resurrection of the Suffering Servant discloses the triumph of his steadfast obedience to God (1:3; 3:18) and is the present exemplar for the cruciform community’s normative response to God; on the other hand, his future return discloses on earth God’s final triumph over the hostile forces that continue to provoke the suffering (and death?) of God’s holy children. The triumph of the risen Messiah, already revealed in the empty tomb, prefigures the inevitable vindication of those faithful to him—a future revelation when the faithful Creator will restore all things to their pristine order (4:19)—and so satisfies the “living hope” of a suffering community. In this sense, 1 Peter cultivates trust in a God whose best is yet to come. ⊕

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