

1 Peter 1:18–20 (The concept of redemption from a first-century context)

by

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ABSTRACT

The theology of 1 Peter may reflect the words “the end of all things is at hand” (4:7). Perhaps, these words illustrate the tension that marks Peter’s considerations, indicating the decisive work of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise. Though it has yet to be completed, the end is near. Along with Acts 11:26 and 26:28, the epistle aims to strengthen Christians. 1 Peter 4:16 is the only place in the New Testament where the term “Christian” appears— in a time of distress by offering them a theology to understand their suffering. They are taught to identify with the suffering of Christ, who also suffered unjustly, and to understand that suffering for being a Christian is a sign that the end of history is at hand (4:12-16). The epistle assures its readers that when Christ returns, those who have suffered for their faith will receive the reward of eternal glory (1:7; 2:11; 4:13; 5:4, 10-11). For the first epistle of Peter, faith means more hope. Obedience and love are also essential, for they show the outside world that Christians are not a threat, but rather, model citizens. The objective of this analysis of 1 Peter 1:18-19 is to suggest how two major themes— namely: (1) Peter desires that those who read his epistle have the correct beliefs concerning Jesus Christ, precisely his accomplishments in his death, resurrection, and ascension, and (2) Peter wants his readers to live as examples of Jesus’ redemptive acts by understanding who they are because of the Savior’s triumph for them— focus on the doctrinal and moral concerns of Christian sorrow, dedication, redemption, and perseverance in relation to the body of Christ— his people. These solemn and hope-filled premises are well expanded as part of Peter’s argument in accordance with periodical references to the kerygma of Christ, the Old Testament references concerning him and the apostolic teachings in the New Testament. Peter’s argument and its influence on his words are often neglected and typical of many expositions of 1 Peter where the apostle’s instructions are often presented as a catechism void of the consideration and basis on which the passage builds upon its themes.

The epistle's argument, particularly the believer's attitude while facing persecution is critical to understanding the redemption wrought by Christ being as believer's hope.¹

HISTORICAL VIEW OF THE TEXT

Structure and Critical Signs

The apostle Peter is the implied author of this letter (1:1; 5:1, 12-13), writing just before his death in Rome (known here as Babylon). The recipients are communities in the northern area of Asia Minor [Turkey] (1:1-2). References to "exiles" and "Dispersion" (1:1-2) may imply that this letter was directed to Jews, but many verses (1:14, 18; 2:10) point to Gentile origin of at least many in these churches. Because Peter is a literary work, the purpose and themes of the epistle influence the text's meaning and impacts its various parts.

While second-and third-century Christian leaders such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria believed that the letter was by Peter, the apostle, many modern scholars believe that it was written, in the apostle's name, at the end of the first or beginning of the second century. Peter was a Galilean fisherman, and the Greek of this letter is too good to have come from Peter's hand, though the style could be attributed to Sylvanus (Silas), the letter's scribe (5:12). More indicative of the pseudepigraphic authorship finds the scriptural quotations are from the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew text, and the Greek form of Peter's name (rather than the Aramaic Cephas) is used in this epistle. Moreover, there is no associated link between the historical Peter and the churches in Asia. Finally, this letter shows many similarities to Romans and Ephesians. Perhaps, this letter was written from Rome in Pauline style, but in the name of Peter.²

¹ James R. Slaughter. "The Importance of Literary Argument for Understanding 1 Peter," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, Dallas Theological Seminary, January-March 1995: 72-73.

² D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 636-647.

First Peter adopts terms and scriptural citations that Jews used to express their exclusive covenant with God and applies them to the Christian community. For example, 1 Peter transfers to the church the theological concept of Israel as “chosen” (1:2; 5:13). Readers are described as *parepidemoi* (“sojourners, resident aliens, visitors”) in 1:2 and 2:9, and *paroikoi* (“sojourners, aliens”) in 2:11 and 1:17, words that the LXX employs to point the status of Israelites and Jews in a foreign place. Hebrews 11:9, 13, uses these words to describe the patriarchs. First Peter identifies its Gentile readers as living in the “Dispersion,” a term rare in secular Greek but used in the LXX (Deut. 28:25; James 1:1) to describe the scattering Jewish communities outside the Land of Israel.³ The readers have been sanctified by the sprinkling of blood (1:2), alluding to Jewish rites of purification and covenant ceremonies (Ex. 24). Readers have an inheritance (1:4), which in the Tanakh and LXX usually refers to the land of Israel (Num. 34:2; Deut. 20:6), though later Jewish literature uses the word in reference to possession of the entire earth in end times or life beyond the earth (Ezra 4). In 1 Peter 1:4, this inheritance is preserved for the Christ-believers in heaven— Israel’s promises now belong to the church, its heir, not its replacement. The Scriptures belong to both Israel and the church and have meaning for each.⁴

Observation of First Century Christianity

Given that 1 Peter 4:16 is the only place in the New Testament where the term “Christian” appears, the Christians of Asia Minor who received this letter discovered that living a life in submission to God’s divine will was a difficult one. While some of the trouble facing Christians involved their neighbors, many of their troubles were government related as well, though not in the official sense. Paul Achtemeier proposes three possibilities of

³ Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Historical, and Social Contexts* (Grand Rapids, IL: Baker Academic, 2017), 272-80.

⁴ Ben Witherington, *Torah Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 324-26.

persecution under different heads: (1) general official persecution, (2) local official persecution, and (3) local unofficial persecution. Referencing 1 Peter 5:9, “fellow believers throughout the world,” is the suggestion by many scholars of a general official persecution throughout the world, but the periodic and local persecution before Nero’s reign (before A.D. 68) is perhaps the occurrence that the apostle reports in 1 Peter. While strict and official torture of Christians did not occur until Domitian’s reign (A.D. 95) or Trajan (A.D. 112), local oppression and persecution was the pattern from the inception of early Christianity’s establishment (Acts 14:19). This is Peter’s “implied” premise of the known hostilities Christians eventually met from the general Roman public for resolutely distancing themselves from cultural social vices and immorality, and often meeting to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. The Christian’s behavior was often met with suspicion and antagonism. Peter’s death in Rome is associated with the persecution under Nero’s reign (A.D. 54-68), so the dating of his letter around A.D. 67 for the latest possible date for authorship, or around A.D. 62-64 as the earliest possibility, lacks evidence for Peter’s support of a general official persecution sponsored by Rome.⁵

Although the origins of the Roman Jewish community are unknown, Rome had a significant Jewish presence by the second century B.C. The Roman government frowned upon the Jewish way of life, though in many ways it was tolerated. However, the military actions in Judea (63 BC) and other early campaigns in Palestine led to large numbers of Jews deported to Rome as slaves only to be expelled by Tiberius in A.D. 19. These actions appear to be the beginning of a larger crackdown brewing to rid the capital from foreign cults and superstitions. The banishment of Jews in Rome would be short-lived resulting in larger numbers under Caligula and Claudius— but again targets for judicial actions. Historical

⁵ Earl Radmacher, Ron Allen, and H. Wayne House, *Nelson’s Compact Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 910.

sources speak of actions against Jews commencing in AD 41 and 49, perhaps a banning of Jews in retaliation for some unrecorded incitement against civil authorities. Specifically, the events in AD 49 have something to do with Judeo-Christian missionaries. They may be a catalyst for trouble, and they will cause disagreements within the Jewish community. Though the expulsion could have been permanent (but unlikely) under Claudius, biblical text provides that Priscilla and Aquila were present in Rome by AD 58 (Romans 16:3). The lingering intolerance of “the eastern superstition” and foreign cult appears later with Domitian’s execution and banishment of Christians.⁶

THEMES AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Sources and Composition

Conceivably there is no other book in the New Testament that depends on as much traditional material as 1 Peter. Many of its sources are clear and unopposed. “1 Peter quotes the Old Testament eight times (1:24-25=Isa. 40:6-8; 2:6=Isa. 28:16; 2:7=Ps. 118:22; 2:8=Isa. 8:14; 2:22=Isa. 53:9; 3:10-12=Ps. 34:12-16; 4:18=Prov. 11:31; 5:5=Prov. 3:34), alludes to it much more often, and is suffused with Old Testament concepts and vocabulary.”⁷ Many scholars estimate that only the Hebrews and Revelations of the New Testament rely more on the Old Testament than the first Peter. Peter also relies on Christian traditions as well, though the specifics are not always agreed upon. In the past four decades, many scholars have suggested that the first book of Peter knew and used certain Pauline letters—especially Romans and Ephesians. However, most modern scholars assert, rightly, that the epistle’s

⁶ Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Historical, and Social Contexts* (Grand Rapids, IL: Baker Academic, 2017), 275.

⁷ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 640.

similarities are due to common use of early Christian tradition rather than literary dependence.⁸

The structure of 1 Peter is a conventional Hellenistic letter of that time with an opening statement identifying the author and the original recipients, greetings, the letter's body, and closing greetings. In Peter's mentioning of "scattered," he may have been thinking of a Diaspora letter, a Jewish literary form that an accepted religious power taught his readers concerning holy living for God's people dispersed to areas that rejected their faith practices and belief in Jesus Christ. The two themes offered form Peter's theological premise is centered on Christ's fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Peter's, readers however live in a different era than the OT prophets (1:10-12)— the prophets yearned to see fulfillment of their prophecies and to undergo the salvation and grace they declared. Though not belonging to them, this fulfillment experience is for those who live on the other side of Jesus' death and resurrection.⁹ In this indication, Peter reminds both Jews and Gentiles of the living hope grounded in Jesus' resurrection from the dead, a hope fulfilled in "the coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1:5), "when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1:7).

The primary theme of divine accomplishment, the death and resurrection of Jesus is key as it is interwoven through the first chapter. Peter's desire of wanting his readers to know Christ's accomplishments in fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies forms the second theme of Peter wanting his readers to live in light of Jesus' suffering and vindication resulting in their rebirth into an eternal hope fully realized at his return (1:13). What Jesus has done is the foundation of what those who follow him will become— "living stones" being built into a spiritual temple with Jesus as the chief corner stone (2:4-5). The eschatological concept is the already and not-yet kingdom— the kingdom is inaugurated, but yet not fulfilled. Believers

⁸ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 640.

⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 602.

live in the days of the fulfilled promise in the OT (1:10-12), yet believers in Jesus Christ are exiles and sojourners on earth (1:1; 1:17). The allusion is not that Peter's readers were literal exiles, but that they are alienated from life in the world. Their destination is the future home of heaven.

In apprehension of theology's meaning in 1 Peter, philosophical and historical interests have at times predominated a more comprehensive enterprise; however, it has encouraged exegesis. However, a broader understanding suggests that this letter can be viewed from a theological perspective. God's action and character is the epistle's theology consisting of God's providence before creation through Christ's salvific work to the consummation of which cannot be separated from the apostolic authority, and Christian suffering addressed in the epistle. It constitutes a moral exhortation for new believers in Jesus Christ and grants a clearly defined Peterlin application— their new faith, “and their identification with the *oikos tou theou* have added to their suffering.”¹⁰ This idea is not only a footnote to Paul, but Paul's expression we see in the first epistle of Peter. As the point of revelatory development around *paroikoi* in Asia Minor, the importance of the overarching theology is God.

The Integration of Divine Providence and Eschatology

Peter calls the reader's attention to an integrating and practical theological point that permeates the entire epistle- that of divine providence. It works as a “theology of history,” testifying the truth of the divine initiative and guarantying the evidence of the believer's hope. In theology's history, providence is a far-reaching theme of the doctrine of God. In 1 Peter, providence constitutes God's redemptive acts and purposes while serving as an extension of

¹⁰ William David Kirkpatrick. “The Theology of First Peter,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* Vol. 25, (Fall 1982).

the epistle's eschatological emphasis. "This two-fold emphasis of providence and eschatology allows the writer to move back and forth from theology (election-redemption) to praxis (good works), to hope and expectation."¹¹ When combined with eschatology, providence in 1 Peter is not a philosophical worldview but rather the believer's understanding and experience of faith. God's sustaining initiative raises 1 Peter's theological and moral declarations by serving to describe God's nature in Jesus Christ as the One who elects, and the One who sustains the elected. God's motives are his divine will. For the elect, life is made possible under the most trying conditions because its potentiality is the exhibition of hope in God's divine initiative. His elective purposes set up the eschatological hope, which is human destiny's end. "Thus, also Peter, in saying that the believers to whom he writes are elect "according to the foreknowledge of God," (1 Peter 1:2), properly expresses that secret predestination by which God has sealed those whom he has been pleased to adopt as sons."¹²

THE CONCEPT OF REDEMPTION

The Doctrine of God

From its Hebraic position, 1 Peter is cautious about certifying the most historical character of the divine revelation. While its theocentricity reveals God's supremacy, his relationship with man reveals his fullness. People need salvation and hope. This need is visible to those who suffer in faith while finding comfort and support in the merciful Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Though sovereign, the Creator-Redeemer is closely associated with his people while grounding them in faith as an acknowledgment of God's historical revelation. As the Spirit of God is "the generating power of biological life, so is he the source

¹¹ William David Kirkpatrick. "The Theology of First Peter," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* Vol. 25, (Fall 1982).

¹² John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 3, Ch. 22*, ed. Thomas Norton (Middletown, DE: Pantianos Classics, 2021), 332.

and generating power of the spiritual life. His work in redemption mirrors his work in creation.”¹³ The apostle’s theology has determined his theological formulation from living in the world oppressed by sin.

1 Peter 1:18 reveals the type of redemption that the readers of his epistle have experienced in the gospel: “For you know that it was not with imperishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers”— an OT reference now develops: “but with the precious blood of the Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” The redemptive language referenced here is rooted in Greco-Roman culture for the freedom of slaves. The price of a slave could be deposited in a temple of a local god or goddess, with money, minus commission, paid out of the temple’s treasury to the owner of the slave. The result of the ownership being now dissolved by the god of the temple, the former slave is now free from his master’s obligation and ownership, but now belonging to the god or goddess instead— meaning that the slave is now free. The purchase price was referred to as *timi* (“price”). This could also take place in Jewish culture as well (Ps.43:22; 33:23 LXX). 1 Peter 2:3 quotes this idea alluding to the redemption of slaves at great length: “The Lord will redeem the lives of his slaves; none who hope in him will go astray” (LXX). Redemption also alludes to God delivering his people from the plight of their enemies or foreign domination— whether from exile or enslavement from Egypt (Deut. 7:8; Isa. 52:3). The language that Peter applies in reference to Christians is how God redeems them from their own captivity— free, but now slaves to God (*doulos*).¹⁴

The second observance of redemption is the rescue of God’s people from captivity or their former way of living. Peter gathers this same idea and applies the language to Christian converts to whom he is addressing: “You have been redeemed out of the useless (*mataios*)

¹³ R. C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier, 2018), 75.

¹⁴ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 1018-19.

way of life (*patroparadotos*) you inherited from your ancestors” (1:18). Peter’s negative reference employed in this verse is a reference to the pre-Christian life existence. Perhaps, Peter’s negative reference is used only by him in comparison to others who would propose that the ancestral way of life usually has positive associations. A deeper suggestion would be that Peter may be referring to Gentiles since the adjective *mataios* is often used in the LXX to describe pagan idols (1 Kings:2; Jon. 2:9; Isa. 44:9). In addition, some scholars suggest that Peter would not have applied such language to describe the Jewish life before one’s conversion to Christianity. In observation, it would be ill-advised to conclude too much about Peter’s readers.

So how are Christians redeemed? Certainly, not with *timi* (“price”) such as silver and gold, but instead with the *timios* (“precious”) blood of Jesus Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. A myriad of OT texts can be referenced in this juncture, but redemption by the blood of a lamb is rooted in the Torah’s books of Exodus and Leviticus, the New Testament’s book of Isaiah, and the Kethuvim’s book of Psalms— all books quoted by Peter. Speaking of Jewish ancestry and their old way of life or even the Gentiles’ doomed location would suggest, based on Peter’s theology, nothing from their past can redeem them. Not the sacrificial killing of animals— neither the purchase with silver or gold— but only God’s powerful act in redemptive history— the precious blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ (1:20-21; 1 Cor. 7:23; Heb. 9:12).¹⁵

Conclusion

The language of 1 Peter is theologic. It is both practical and relational. However, it is liturgical in some moments, but not abstract. The epistle is grounded historically with the understanding of God's revelation. It does not appeal to any system of abstract ideas.

¹⁵ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 1018-19.

Theologically, the language is practical in its concern for Christian living. Relationally, it reveals the redemptive intentions of God's plan for man. The eschatological-redemptive language describes God's nature. Although possessing the supreme sovereignty, he participated in creation compassionately by providing salvation to those who believed. 1 Peter 1:18-20 is the Old Testament's fulfillment of the God who is sovereign and holy, but also the God who rescues and redeems his people. In view of his redemptive work, the clarion of the writer's theology is God's business in the redemption of those whom he has called in faith (1:20). This "faith and hope" is that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead (1:20-21). "I will raise up a faithful priest, and he shall walk before mine anointed forever." (1 Sam. 2:10, 35). Kingship in this context is a future expectation (Deut.17:14-20).¹⁶ "And there can be no doubt that our heavenly Father intended that a living image of Christ should be seen in David and his posterity."¹⁷

¹⁶ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 284.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 2, Ch. 6*, ed. Thomas Norton (Middletown, DE: Pantianos Classics, 2021), 127.

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