

READING FIRST PETER IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY CHRISTIAN MISSION

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Summary

This paper argues that 1 Peter should be read against the background of early Christian mission. The readers of 1 Peter have a predominantly Gentile background. The letter assures these Gentile Christians that they now share the status and spiritual privileges of Israel. However, this cherished status also includes an existence as exiles and strangers in the world they live in. This experience was hitherto unknown to them. As God's people they have a new task: to share their faith in Christ by conduct and by word. Their experience of slander and persecutions cannot and need not bring their calling into question but is part and parcel of being God's people in the world.

1. Introduction

While 1 Peter does 'not address the issue of missionary work explicitly',¹ some scholars see much of its content as relevant for mission. Some of the recent studies of mission in the New Testament have sections on 1 Peter on its own, so for example E. J. Schnabel in his magisterial volumes *Early Christian Mission*;² or as part of a section on the General Epistles, so for example A. Köstenberger.³ Köstenberger writes: 'Peter's teaching on the continuity of the old and new covenant people, the necessity of holiness, and the suffering of

¹ E. J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II: Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove: IVP; Leicester: Apollos, 2004): 1521.

² Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1521-25.

³ E.g. A. Köstenberger, 'Mission in the General Epistles' in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach*, ed. W. J. Larkin, J. F. Williams (American Society of Missiology Series 27; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998): 189-206, esp. 200-6.

Jesus serves to clarify the nature of the mission task.⁴ I want to argue that 1 Peter not only contains sections that ‘clarify the nature of the mission task’, but that the letter as a whole can and should be read against the background of the early Christian mission. 1 Peter addresses issues directly related to the spread of the Gospel and the consequences of conversion for the new Gentile converts: the new identity of the predominantly Gentile Christian readers (section 2), the nature of their missionary task in difficult circumstances (section 3) and challenges which the first generation of Gentile Christians faced (section 4).

Obviously, other New Testament books can and should also be read against the backdrop of early Christian mission as this background is not unique to 1 Peter. Yet in this perspective, the theological themes of the letter come together to form a coherent whole.

1.1 The Addressees of 1 Peter

The question of the identity of the addressees needs to be raised, as it affects our argument. It seems ambiguous at first sight: Peter applies to them names and designations otherwise used in the Bible for Israel, while other statements indicate that the readers must have come from a predominantly Gentile background:⁵

1. The readers are no longer to be conformed to the desires that they formerly had in *ignorance* (1:14). It is unlikely that Peter would in general address fellow Jews in this way. Later Peter speaks of the ignorance of those who cause trouble for the church: ‘by doing right you should silence the *ignorance* of the foolish’ (2:15).⁶

2. According to 1 Peter 1:18, the readers have been ‘ransomed from the futile ways inherited from their ancestors’. While it is not impossible to apply this to Jewish Christians and their ancestral traditions, it is far more readily applicable to first generation Gentile Christians. The futile ways are those of ignorance of God, of pagan religion and morality. Now the readers had purified their souls by their obedience to the truth (1:22).

⁴ Köstenberger, ‘Mission in the General Epistles’, 201.

⁵ Cf. also Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1521-22.

⁶ Cf. Eph. 4:17-19 and Acts 17:30; W. Schmithals, *EWNT I*, 49-50: ‘... im Anschluss an das hellenistische Judentum, für das die schuldhafte ἄγνοια Gottes das Kennzeichen des Heidentums ist...’.

3. Would Peter need to write to Jewish Christians that they became in Christ part of ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ as he does in 2:9? They would hardly have needed such reassurance of their status. While those designations readily apply to Jewish Christians, they are all the more striking when applied to *Gentile* Christians. As Gentiles, ‘they once were not a people, but now they are God’s people; once they had not received mercy, but now they received mercy’ (2:10).⁷

4. According to Schnabel, 1 Peter 2:9 also suggests that the readers were former Gentiles: ‘They used to live in “darkness”, whereas now they live in the “marvellous light” of the presence of God.’⁸

5. According to 1 Peter 3:6 the Christian women have become the ‘daughters of Sarah’. This title suits Gentile Christian women better than Jewish Christian women, who already enjoyed that status as Jewesses.⁹

6. The strongest indication for a Gentile Christian audience comes in chapter 4: ‘You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and *lawless idolatry*’ (4:3). While it is not impossible to address Jews in this way (the OT prophets repeatedly charged Israel with ‘doing what the Gentiles like to do’), the charge of *lawless idolatry* is particularly difficult to apply to Diaspora Jews. Had they been involved in such ‘lawless idolatry’, they would have given up their Jewish religious identity.¹⁰

⁷ Quoting from Hos. 2:23; cf. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1521–22.

⁸ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1521. In a number of NT passages darkness is associated with Gentiles: Acts 26:17–18; 13:47; 2 Cor. 6:14; cf. also Rom. 13:13. For a possible OT background see Isa. 8:22–23. U. Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (4. Aufl., UTB für Wissenschaft, 1830; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002): 449 lists 2:25 as further evidence for a predominantly Gentile readership. I do not find this compelling.

⁹ I owe this observation to Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 449. For details see P. J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996): 216: ‘The aorist ... (“you became”) indicates a past action, thus rendering it highly unlikely that the two participles ... are to be understood as conditional, that is, “if you do good and do not fear”.’ For Schnelle, the husbands of the Christian women that are directly addressed in 3:1 are explicitly called Gentiles (‘ausdrücklich als Heiden bezeichnet’, *Einleitung*, 449). They are described as people who do not obey the *word*. It is more likely that ‘word’ refers to the Christian proclamation (“‘word” clearly means the Christian faith’, Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 210) than to the word of the OT. Therefore it is applicable to Jewish and Gentile husbands.

¹⁰ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1521 notes on 1 Pet. 2:1: ‘The malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander that they must get rid of (1 Pet. 2:1) are every bit as much

1 Peter 4:4 indicates that the readers were involved in such a Gentile lifestyle prior to their conversion: 'you *no longer* join the *unbelievers* in the same excesses and dissipations'.¹¹ It is unlikely that Jews (prior to their conversion to Christ) would have joined 'unbelievers' in activities that were in one way or other related to Gentile religious practice.

Peter writes in 4:12: 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.' Achtemeier rightly notes 'that such surprise would be more likely for Christians of *pagan* than Jewish background, since the latter already belonged to a group that had suffered'.¹²

7. At the same time, the letter clearly indicates that the readers must have been familiar with the Old Testament. Apparently they knew some of its characters (Sarah and Abraham in 3:6 or Noah in 3:20) and what to make of a number quotations (e.g. 1:24-25; 2:6-8; 3:10-12). They should recognise allusions to the Old Testament (e.g. 1:16; 2:3, 7, 8, 9-10, 22, 24; 3:14; 4:18; 5:5) and some of the concepts and titles of the Old Testament that are now applied to them.¹³

In the past scholars have argued from this evidence that the readers must have been Diaspora Jews.¹⁴ However, this is not necessarily so. Some of the readers could have been God-fearers or proselytes prior to

pagan behaviours as licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing and detestable idolatry (1 Pet. 4:3).'

¹¹ The occurrence of 'excesses and dissipations' may refer to practices in the context of pagan religious practice; cf. Rom. 13:13.

¹² Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 305.

¹³ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 50 speaks of 'references that evoke Jewish history (e.g. dispersion, 1:1, exiles and aliens, 2:11, Babylon, 5:13)'. On the use of the OT in the letter see W. L. Schutter, *Hermeneutic and Composition in 1 Peter*, WUNT II.30 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989): 35-43. After a discussion of quotations from the OT, Achtemeier (*1 Peter*, 12) observes: '1 Peter abounds in OT language in the form of phrases, allusions, and imagery, to the extent that it is difficult to be precise in every instance about what OT passage may be in mind. All three types of OT literature are represented (Torah, Prophets, Writings), with a preference for Isaiah, Psalms, and Proverbs, and they are as often combined or placed in a kind of florilegium as they are quoted in extenso. Such is the abundance of references to and motifs from the OT that virtually all of the imagery of 1 Peter is drawn from its writings. Yet the material so drawn is used far more often as illustration than as proof, attesting to the fact that while the traditions contained in the sacred writings of Israel informed the thought of the author of this epistle, they did not furnish the fundamental basis for his convictions.'

¹⁴ For scholars who argued this case from Origen onward see Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 50-51 and K. Jobes, *1 Peter* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005): 23. Achtemeier lists the various references to the OT. Jobes questions the modern consensus for Gentile Christian readers on pp. 23-27.

their faith in Christ and would therefore have been familiar with the Old Testament and Diaspora Judaism. Others would have known the Scriptures of Israel through Jewish Christians.

From this evidence we conclude that the readers of 1 Peter have a *predominantly* Gentile background.¹⁵ We will come back to the significance of this identification. This does not exclude the presence of some Jewish Christians in the churches. However, there is no evidence that demands their presence in the churches. The fact that Jewish Christians are not specifically addressed in this letter may be due to the fact that—through their history and past experience—they were in a better position to deal with the problems that the letter addresses.¹⁶

1.2 The Situation of the Readers

Also important for understanding the letter is the situation of the addressees. Obviously, this reconstruction is dependent on the date assigned to the letter, which in turn is closely linked to the question of authorship.¹⁷ The readers must expect to endure persecution as well as

¹⁵ Cf. also the similar conclusions by D. A. Carson, D. J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd edn; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005): 647: ‘the explicit references which we have mentioned suggest that, whatever the population of the churches may have been, Peter’s intended audience is mainly, if not exclusively, Gentile.’ For Gentile predominance see also Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 50-51; P. H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990): 7-9; L. Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief* (KEK 12.1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978): 30 and Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 449. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 50 discusses the arguments for readers of Jewish origin and proponents of this position. For Jobes the identity of the recipients is less important (*1 Peter*, 23-24). Some authors note that for the areas mentioned in 1 Pet. 1:1 there is to a different extent evidence for Jewish Diaspora communities; cf. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 51; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ 175 B.C.–A.D. 135* (rev. ed. by G. Vermes; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986): III.1, 17-36 and P. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (MSSNTS 69; Cambridge: CUP, 1991). Other NT letters addressed to Christian communities in the same areas (Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians) presuppose Christian of Jewish and Gentile background, perhaps with a Gentile predominance.

¹⁶ If still present in the churches at the time of writing the letter, Jewish Christians would not have needed reassurance that they indeed belong to the people of God and share in their spiritual blessings. They would know from their pre-Christian Jewish experience what it means to honour God through their lifestyle and verbal apologetic; cf. J. P. Dickson, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities: The Shape, Extent and Background of Early Christian Mission* (WUNT II, 159; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003): 51-60, 67-74. In addition, Jewish Christians would not have been surprised and intimidated by slander and persecution by Gentiles, as would have been the case with *Gentile* Christians.

¹⁷ Despite a number of challenges, a good case can be made for the apostle Peter as the author. Therefore I refer to the author as Peter. For defences of Petrine authorship

milder forms of social ostracism as a consequence of their new faith in Christ.¹⁸ It is a situation that makes active verbal Christian witness difficult, but not impossible. In such circumstances Peter's letter offers 'an appropriate as well as a realistic perspective on the mission task in the context of persecution'.¹⁹

2. A New Status as the People of God and as Exiles and Strangers

2.1 A New Status

Now we return to our observation that 1 Peter contains many terms and titles used in the Old Testament of Israel and reapplies them—with distinctive Christian additions—to the predominantly Gentile-Christian readers. While the significant presence and variety of such expressions has been readily acknowledged by scholars (often in passing or in their discussions of the addressees of the letter²⁰), few students of 1 Peter have treated this phenomenon on its own and asked for its function in the letter. The extent of this transfer of terms and titles is impressive.

Peter addresses the readers as 'the *exiles of the dispersion* ... , who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be *sprinkled with his blood*' (1:1-2). The Christians have received a *new inheritance* that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for them (1:4). They are called to a holy life in all their conduct with a quotation from Leviticus 11:45, by which Israel was called to reflect the holiness of its

see Carson/Moo, *Introduction*, 641-46; Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 3-7; Jobes, *1 Peter*, 5-19; I. H. Marshall, *1 Peter* (IVP NT Commentary Series; Downers Grove, Leicester: IVP, 1991): 21-24; E. Mauerhofer, *Einleitung in die Schriften des Neuen Testaments: bearbeitet von D. Gysel* (3. Aufl.; Nürnberg: VTR; Hamburg: RVB, 2004): 230-36; for a summary of the discussion and arguments against the apostle Peter see Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 1-43; Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 30-37 and Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 445-47. Possibly Peter had personal contacts with some of these churches on his journeys between Jerusalem, Antioch and Rome (cf. Acts 12:17; 15:6-11; Gal. 2:11-14); cf. M. Hengel, *Der unterschätzte Petrus: Zwei Studien* (2nd edn; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

¹⁸ For detailed descriptions of the readers' situation see Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 23-36; Carson/Moo, *Introduction*, 638-39; Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 56-64; Jobes, *1 Peter*, *passim*; Marshall, *1 Peter*, 24-24 and Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 450-51.

¹⁹ Köstenberger, 'Mission in the General Epistles', 205.

²⁰ So for example Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 50 ('Such identification of the readers with events and figures from Jewish history').

God (1:16). The Christians are seen to live their remaining earthly life as in *exile* (1:17), a situation which Israel faced and which was deeply entrenched in her history and identity. The Christians have been ransomed by the blood of Christ, who is described with the technical language of an Old Testament sacrifice: a lamb without defect or blemish (1:19). Like living stones they should let themselves be built into the spiritual house of God, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (2:5). The Gentile believers are now a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. Just as Israel was called, they are called to proclaim the mighty acts of God (2:9). As Abraham and his descendants were for part of their history aliens and exiles in foreign lands, so the Gentile Christians now live as aliens and exiles among their Gentile compatriots. As such they are to 'conduct themselves honourably among the Gentiles', to whom they no longer belong (2:11). Christians are to live as *a free people* who do not use its freedom as a pretext for evil (2:16). The image of shepherd and flock, used repeatedly in the Old Testament of God and Israel or individual Jewish believers, is applied to Gentiles as well: 'For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls' (2:25).²¹ Christian wives have become the daughters of Sarah (3:6), who was the wife of the first and foremost patriarch of Israel and the mother of Isaac, the long awaited son of promise. If these wives have become Sarah's daughters, they share in the history and privileges of Israel from the very beginning.

In addition to their privileged status here and now, these Gentile Christians will also share in the future glory of the people of God which is to be revealed (5:1: 'in the glory to be revealed'). Peter draws on the early Christian hope for the revelation of glory associated with the return of Jesus. In addition, he might also be drawing on Old Testament imagery and concepts about the 'day of the Lord' and its implications for Israel, on which the words of Jesus and the early Christian proclamation of glorious revelation are based.²²

²¹ For a survey of the OT background see Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 204; Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 211 and Goppelt's introductory section p. 55.

²² Cf. H. E. Dosker, 'Day of the Lord', *ISBE I*, 879 on the use in both Testaments. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 324 does not note any OT background to these expressions.

2.2 *Becoming 'Exiles and Strangers'*

This new status as the people of God is also the cause of the problems which the readers now face: what they gained in Christ estranged them from their own background. Though they have not changed their geographic location, they have become *aliens and exiles* (παρεπιδήμιοι καὶ πάροικοι, 2:11) within their own society.²³ These expressions point to the nature of the church and of its mission. Their Old Testament background is Abraham and the patriarchs who lived as foreigners in the promised land, because 'Abraham was, on account of his faith, the citizen of the future heavenly city' (Heb. 11:9-10).²⁴

The combination of παρεπιδήμιοι καὶ πάροικοι occurs in Genesis 23:4 LXX where Abraham refers to himself as 'a stranger and resident'.²⁵ In reflecting on his own mortality David says: 'For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears' (Ps. 38:13 LXX).²⁶ On the implications Schnabel notes:

The missionary task is difficult ... because of their identity as Christians. ... 1 Peter is a 'missionary document' precisely because it raises the most fundamental question about the church: How should Christians live in a non-Christian society as a new community of people who have a discernibly different life-style? The cause of this 'strangeness' and 'alienness' of Christians ... in their relationship to society at large is their identity as people of God ... The internal distance from society (as deliberately different behaviour and as experienced rejection) is characteristic.²⁷

²³ H. Balz, *EWNT III*, 89-90, esp. 89 notes '[Im] 1Petr 1.1 werden die Glaubenden als ἐκλεκτοὶ παρεπίδημοι διασπορᾶς angesprochen, d. h. als die durch die Erwählung Gottes in der Welt ausgesonderten und zugleich in die derzeitige 'Zerstreuung' gewiesenen Fremdlinge. An beiden Stellen ist παρεπίδημος übertragen gebraucht; es geht um die Isolierung der Gemeinden und ihre kritische Distanz zur Welt.'

²⁴ Further discussion of the OT background in Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1523-24. Schnabel surveys and criticises various social/sociological readings of both terms. Such readings underestimate 'the (new) alienation that is created by the conversion ... and by a Christian way of life', 1523; cf. also R. Feldmeier, *Die Christen als Fremde: Die Metapher der Fremde in der antiken Welt, im Urchristentum und im 1. Petrusbrief* (WUNT 64; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

²⁵ Cf. also Philo, *Conf.* 79 (cf. 76-77) quoting Gen. 23:3.

²⁶ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 174 observes: 'this combination continues our author's practice of applying to the Christians terms originally applied to Israel, in this case to Abraham, and it is not drawn from the secular vocabulary used to indicate classes of residents in lands other than their own. ... The status the phrase describes, however, painful though it may be, is nevertheless the necessary status of those who are *estranged from the values and customs of the culture within which they were formerly at home*. The phrase ... is thus not only a description of their present reality, it is also a description of a status they are to maintain.'

²⁷ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1522.

2.3 Function

In view of this density of designations derived from the Old Testament which are applied to Gentile Christians, we should ask what their function is. Peter used them in order to build and strengthen the self-understanding and new identity of these new Gentile converts as the people of God and in continuity with the people of God.

With their conversion they had lost some of their socio-cultural identity (those aspects linked with Gentile religiosity) and broke with the social fabric of their communities. Few aspects of culture and life in the first century were *not* linked to pagan religion. Through their conversion they had become ‘aliens and exiles’ (2:1-11). However, now they belong to a new community which is nothing less than God’s own household (1:2-5). They have a new identity as part of the people of God. As Gentile believers they stand in the line and tradition of Israel of old.

It is noteworthy that Peter uses Old Testament concepts and expressions for providing these Christians with a new identity and for building a new character:

1. A Gentile Messianic movement outside the Jewish synagogues was a new phenomenon. However, it was in continuity with the people of God and in line with salvation history.

2. Peter wrote at a time, when the age of something, be it a religion, a philosophy, an institution or a custom, was a sign of dignity and of value. While the Gentile Christians have received a *new* status with their conversion, *they were grafted into an entity with a proven past, dignity and with the legitimacy of history*. Their new status was nothing to be ashamed of.

3. This new status was precarious. On the one hand, much of the Graeco-Roman world had at least a latent anti-Jewish tendency. Its forms and consequences varied from a sense of otherness, to ridicule and scorn and to open persecution and expulsion. On the other hand and at the same time, Judaism proved to be attractive to many non-Jews. The Gentile Christians who had become part of this people should be prepared for both reactions.

4. People who were put to *shame*, slandered and maligned for their faith are reminded of their new identity through the use of these *honorific* titles of God’s people in order to assure them that they already are and certainly will be ‘winners’. In a culture that was shaped

by notions of honour and shame, the taxonomy of turning shame to honour is significant.

5. When Peter transfers the designations and privileges of Israel to his Gentile readers, is this merely a transfer of categories for the purpose of identity-building or is the fact that this transfer is possible an indication of the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God? If the latter is the case, the 'incorporation' of the Gentile Christians into the people of God has parallels to Paul's understanding in Romans 11:17-24. In comparison with Paul, Peter does not address the issues which Paul discusses in this context: what is the position of the Jewish Christians? What is to become of the Israel without faith in Jesus? Are they still the people of God when their privileges and titles have been transferred to Gentile Christians? How are the Gentile Christians to regard their fellow Jewish Christians or unbelieving Jews?

6. In view of the many occurrences of such honorific terms for Israel and related expressions it is noteworthy that Peter does *not* speak of the readers as the house of *Israel* (cf. Acts 7:42), the people of *Israel* (cf. Acts 4:10), the sons/children of *Israel* (Acts 5:21; etc.) or the tribes of *Israel* (Matt. 19:28), the new *Israel* or the like (cf. the expression 'the Israel of God' in Gal. 6:16) or as Israelites. Neither does he refer to them as Jewish, Jews or Jewesses or speak of their belonging to Judaism (cf. Gal. 1:13-14) or of living in a Jewish way (cf. Gal. 2:14).²⁸ Is the reason for this lack the fact that such terms are reserved for those born to Jewish parents? Are they so closely associated with a Jewish lifestyle according to the law and Jewish tradition that Peter had good reasons not to apply them to Gentile Christians? Is the lack perhaps linked to the above observation of anti-Judaism?

We now turn to two important themes in 1 Peter which are directly related to this new status of the Gentile Christian readers.

3. A New Task: Witness to the Gospel by Conduct and Words

Peter draws some conclusions from this new identity of the converts to the tasks now before them because they have become the people of

²⁸ Cf. Balz, *EWNT II*, 470-82.

God. Donald Senior comments on the missiological importance of 1 Peter as follows:

One of the major contributions of 1 Peter is the robust sense of Christian mission he conveys. Even though these fragile communities are embedded in a hostile environment and suffering abuse, he does not prescribe reaction or caution. The Christians are not to flee the world but to participate in it (2:13). They are not to condemn or berate the world, but to treat it with respect, even gentleness, all with the hope that in its own time, the world will join the Christians in glorifying God.²⁹

There is material more directly addressing mission in the letter than Senior's important observations, including the fact that Peter does not prescribe reaction or caution.

The Old Testament categories not only apply to the identity of the believers but also have implications for their missionary task:

It appears that Peter's entire vision for the church's mission takes its cue from the OT concept of Israel as a meditorial body, a light to the nations, thus revealing God's glory (Exod. 19:6 and Isa. 43:20, quoted in 1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Isa. 49:6). ... The transferral of covenant categories ... is linked with the climactic purpose statement in 2:9, 'that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light', a quote from Isaiah 43:21 ... recipients are exhorted to keep their behaviour excellent among the nations 'so that ... they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation' (2:12).³⁰

Based on this foundation—their calling as the people of God to proclamation and to observable good deeds—the addressees are to share their faith by conduct and words.

3.1 Witness by Conduct

Peter emphasises that Christians must show by their lives that they reject the religious and moral ethos of a pagan society to which they no longer belong: 'Rid yourselves of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy and all slander' (2:1).³¹ In their new role as aliens and exiles they were urged to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war

²⁹ Quoted according to Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1522.

³⁰ Köstenberger, 'Mission in the General Epistles', 202-203.

³¹ The reference in 1 Pet. 2:11 to the Gentiles suggests that Peter has a *pagan* context in mind in 2:1, rather than referring to the shortcomings of all of humanity. For the early Jewish background of such ethical apologetic and Paul's references to it see Dickson, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities*, 51-60, 262-92.

against the soul and ‘conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles’ (2:12)³² so that, though the Gentiles may malign them as evildoers, they may see their honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge (2:12). In a situation where direct verbal witness is difficult and for at least some believers not advisable, Christian conduct is of supreme importance.

Such honourable conduct is described in 2:13 in relation to civil authorities (2:13-17). Through doing right the Christians are to silence the ignorance of the foolish (2:15). Christian slaves are exhorted to an exemplary conduct (2:18-25). Christian wives are called to accept the authority of their husbands so that unbelieving husbands would be won over *without words*, by their wives’ *conduct* when they see the purity and reverence of their lives (3:1-6). Their new Christian character is to be their adornment. Says Schnabel: ‘Peter exhorts the women in the church who are married to pagan husbands to be a witness through their everyday behaviour, as there is always hope that their husbands might be “won”, even if they refuse to let their wives speak about their faith, making their witness with “words” impossible for the time being (1 Pet. 3:1).’³³

The required conduct of Christian husbands (3:7a) is not directly related to their witness. However, in view of the context it is likely that Peter had the behaviour of Christian husbands towards their non-Christian wives in mind.³⁴ This reading is supported by the reason given for the required conduct, namely that the women are also *heirs of the gracious gift of life*. The behaviour of Christian husbands should make the gospel attractive (3:7). All Christians are exhorted to proper

³² This recalls OT passages where Israel is seen as on a stage in the midst of the nations. The nations observe Israel and Israel is to reflect before the nations the glory of its God. The (Gentile) Christians are now in the same position; cf. C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006): 454-500 and Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission I*, 55-91.

³³ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1525. From the husbands’ disobedience to the word of the Gospel (which is in the text) Schnabel seems to conclude that they would *refuse* to let their wives speak about their faith. Could the silence of the women under such circumstances also be due to their wisdom?

³⁴ Some translations leave it open whether the prayer of the Christian husbands will be hindered if they do otherwise (e.g. NRSV ‘your prayers’) or whether this refers to the joint prayers of a Christian couple (so Luther 1984: ‘und euer *gemeinsames* Gebet soll nicht behindert werden’); cf. the discussion in Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 218 who notes: ‘While the pronoun in the phrase “your prayers” ... could be understood to mean the prayers of both men and women, there is nothing in the context to lead one to assume the pronoun refers to anyone but the men addressed in this verse.’

conduct among themselves in unity, sympathy, mutual love, a tender heart, and a humble mind (3:8). The context suggests that this type of conduct in the Christian community (which can be observed by others) will serve a missionary purpose as it not only expresses Christian core values but also some ideals of the ancient world (mainly, the stress on unity).³⁵

What was said previously about the relationship between Christian slaves and their masters (2:23), applies to all Christians who suffer unjustly: 'Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing' (3:9). The exemplary conduct of Christians in difficult circumstances and their response in blessing to evil and abuse has the potential to convert their persecutors. Even if it does not, Christian conduct follows the pattern of Christ's own sinless suffering and will also be greatly rewarded. This behaviour is motivated by referring to Psalm 34:12-16.

Christians are challenged to keep their conscience clear so that when they are maligned, those who actually abuse them for *their good conduct in Christ* will be put to shame (3:16; cf. also the good conscience in 3:21). The maligning compatriots have noted that the Christians' good conduct is linked to their faith in Christ. This link presupposes a certain amount of verbal witness which accompanies conduct: 'Peter believes that Christian lifestyle, if it is a consistently holy lifestyle, has certain unique qualities that will render the gospel proclamation attractive.'³⁶

Some observations on this 'missionary conduct' in closing:

a) Köstenberger notes that the new conduct is based on the new status as the people of God. The requirement of a new conduct also draws on the Old Testament:

³⁵ Cf. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 222, n. 31 for references to Graeco-Roman authors. Achtemeier notes: 'What is asked of Christians in relation to their hostile, non-Christian culture grows out of the ethic that prescribes how they are to live with one another' (223).

³⁶ Köstenberger, 'Mission in the General Epistles', 206. F. Hahn writes: 'Doch es ist sehr bezeichnend, dass in der Verfolgungssituation der Auftrag gegenüber der Welt nicht aus dem Auge verloren wird: der gute Wandel der Christen wird gerade deswegen gefordert, *weil auf diese Weise vielleicht der eine oder andere noch zu gewinnen ist*, vor allem aber, weil durch Zucht und Standhaftigkeit ein rechtes Zeugnis abgelegt werden kann für das Evangelium', *Verständnis*, 124 (italics CS).

The exhortation for holiness... is directed toward believers' responsibility to reflect God's character in the midst of the unbelieving world around them. The injunction is grounded in God's command... to be holy and set apart for him (1:15-16; quoting Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7). ...the need for God's people to live a distinct Christian lifestyle and to abstain from both physical and spiritual adultery remains (1 Pet. 1:14, 18; 2:1, 11-12; 4:3-4, 15).³⁷

b) The challenge of a new conduct is directed at the whole church and not restricted in any way. God himself gives Christians the strength to act accordingly. Christ 'is more than able to strengthen those in minority positions, whether Christian citizens existing in an ungodly society, Christian slaves suffering from the abuse of people in authority over them, or Christian wives living with unbelieving husbands. ...the church is the place where exemplary relationships in proper submission are to be lived out before a watching world.'³⁸

c) Peter's reminder to the Gentile Christians of their pre-conversion past (4:3) emphasises *how they should live now*: in addition, the reference to their own past at the same time reminds the readers of their own conversion and fosters the hope and desire that others will share in their experience.³⁹

d) This conduct serves not only as a witness for the gospel or to evoke occasions when Christians are called to speak of the hope that is within them (3:15), but also procures the future glorification of God ('they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge', 2:12; though at present their behaviour is considered weird or offensive). This conduct serves for silencing the ignorance of the foolish by doing right (2:15) and indirectly for the judgement of their opponents (4:5).

3.2 *Witness by Proclamation*⁴⁰

a) The Christians received a new identity (2:9) and sphere of life in the marvellous light of God with a clear purpose: '*in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his*

³⁷ Köstenberger, 'Mission in the General Epistles', 203.

³⁸ Köstenberger, 'Mission in the General Epistles', 204-5.

³⁹ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1522.

⁴⁰ For the early Jewish background of such ethical apologetic and Paul's references to it see Dickson, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities*, 67-74, 302-307.

marvellous light' (2:9; cf. 1:15-16).⁴¹ This is a clear call for a verbal communication of the gospel. It is not limited to occasions when Christians are demanded to give an account of their faith nor limited by actual or anticipated abuse or persecution: 'The telling forth of God's acts in 1 Peter is to be done both by act and by word, and the latter is surely the intention here.'⁴²

b) In addition to this unsolicited proclamation, Christians who suffer fearlessly for doing what is right should be ready to make their defence to anyone who demands from them an account for the hope that is in them and that motivates their conduct (3:15-16). Their lifestyle will inevitably raise questions which Christians should be prepared to answer. This is an opportune occasion for verbal witness in tense times: 'The term *apologia* signifies that they should be prepared to give an account of the objective foundation of their Christian faith and identity.'⁴³ They are to give this account with gentleness and reverence (3:16: 'yet do it in gentleness and reverence'), not in a spirit of abuse or threatening but as imitators of the exemplary suffering of Jesus (2:23).⁴⁴

c) The advice that the *husbands* may be won by the exemplary conduct of their *Christian wives without a word* in 1 Peter 3:1 does not imply that these wives should be silent *in other circumstances*, nor does it mean that other women or men should abstain from verbal proclamation in general (cf. also 3:15 above). The silence of the

⁴¹ For the OT background see Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 163-67. 'That Isaiah 43:21 identifies the purpose of the acquiring as the announcement of his deeds ... the same point made in this verse, suggests that the author had that passage in mind' (166).

⁴² Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 166. 1 Pet. 2:9 is one of the few passages in the NT where all Christians are called to an active verbal witness. For community evangelism in Paul see Dickson, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities*, 302-07; M. J. Keown, *Congregational Evangelism in Philippians: The Centrality of an Appeal for Gospel Proclamation to the Fabric of Philippians* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2008); I. H. Marshall, 'Who Were the Evangelists?' in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, ed. J. Adna, H. Kvalbein (WUNT 127; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000): 251-63; R. L. Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006) and J. P. Ware, *The Mission of the Church in Paul's Letter to the Philippians in the Context of Ancient Judaism* (NTS 120; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005).

⁴³ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1524-25.

⁴⁴ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II*, 1524-25 describes the content of this account 'of the objective foundation of their Christian faith and identity' based on 1 Pet. For Hahn, *Verständnis*, 124, the Christian account for their hope is not intended to present the gospel. Rather it has an eschatological function.

Christian wives towards their non-Christian husbands is an exception to the rule. The advice of 3:1 does not imply that verbal proclamation is impossible.⁴⁵ Despite adverse circumstances, evangelism by word is the norm.

d) Though it appears in the context of behaviour *within* the Christian community (4:7-11, there are three occurrences of 'one another'), the command in 4:11 may also apply to communication with unbelievers: 'Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God.'

e) Through such proclamation the readers themselves must have come to faith and were familiar with it. They are encouraged to follow the example of these missionaries and to continue in this task.

The fact that it was not their verbal proclamation that got the Christians into trouble but apparently their changed lifestyle (as suggested by 4:4), does not mean that there was no such communication. There is no indication in the letter that active evangelism by all members of the church is a thing of the past, that it was ever limited or that it was delegated to a small number of Christians.

In situations in which Christians are maligned as evildoers (2:12) Peter does not recommend defence but calls for the quiet but effective witness of honourable behaviour: 'Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that... they may see your honourable deeds' (2:12). 'Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame' (3:16).

4. New Challenges as the People of God

Peter's readers share not only in the spiritual privileges of Israel, they also experience the trials and testing of God's people in the world, namely 'the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you' (4:12). One of the purposes of the letter is to prepare the readers for what they now suffer or are likely to suffer because of their new faith. The slander and disadvantages they now face could develop into open persecution.

Such preparation, explanation and exhortation were necessary as these Gentile Christians faced a situation previously unknown to them. Previously they were fully integrated into the surrounding Gentile

⁴⁵ Against Hahn, *Verständnis*, 125.

society and got into trouble only for wrongdoing and deviant behaviour. With their conversion this had changed. Now that they belong to a religious minority with a distinct conduct which at times was surprising and offensive to the majority who 'are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses and dissipations' and in order to express their surprise and contempt: 'they malign you' (4:4). The readers must have been surprised when their *own* people, with whom they formerly associated, now turned on them.

Against this background Peter tells them, that they should not be surprised when they experience persecution: 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you' (4:12). Although it is a new experience for them, what is happening to these Gentile Christians is *not* strange! They now share what the people of God of old had to face in the midst of Gentile nations.

This position of a distinct religious minority with all its implications, which was common and therefore not surprising to the Jewish communities of the Diaspora (and the homeland),⁴⁶ has now become the calling of these Gentile Christians. Achtemeier rightly notes 'that such surprise would be more likely for Christians of pagan than Jewish background, since the latter already belonged to a group that had suffered'.⁴⁷

These Gentile Christians faced something they apparently had not expected and which was unknown to them previously. This must have been unsettling. Not only did they experience hardships—what was happening also had theological repercussions: did their suffering mean that they lost God's favour? Was God no longer in control? Was there any benefit at all in such suffering? What are Christians to make of the suffering that probably caught them by surprise? Such suffering and the questions it raised are arguably the main occasion of this letter to the exiles in the dispersion (1:1). In response Peter describes the

⁴⁶ The Jewish experience of a religious minority in the Graeco-Roman world is reflected in a number of early Jewish writings and in the way the OT tradition was received. This body of literature addresses such suffering and provides examples of faithful suffering and divine vindication of the faithful.

⁴⁷ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 305; cf. above our discussion of the addressees of the letter. Such suffering did not apply to all Jews under and before Roman rule. There was no constant open persecution. In addition not all Jews responded to the challenges of Hellenism with faithful commitment to the Law and the ancestral traditions. Assimilation and apostasy also occurred.

reason, the nature and the promises of Christian suffering, and gives theological, christological, practical and doxological advice for demanding times.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Peter wrote to recent Gentile converts and addressed a concrete situation. Due to a nascent or impending persecution *active mission* was difficult. Therefore it is not surprising that Peter says little about a direct active mission by the church. However, in comparison with what we find on this topic in other books of the New Testament, Peter's comments on evangelism by conduct and word are substantial. Yet not only for this reason can the letter be understood as a missionary document. 1 Peter also deserves that designation because it addresses burning issues directly related to the conversion of Gentile Christians. The building of the identity of new Gentile Christian converts in continuity with the people of God of old, their testimony by conduct and by word and their suffering, arising from their status and their new life, show that it is worthwhile to read this New Testament letter (as well as other books) in the context of the early Christian mission.⁴⁸ This context provides the coherence of the letter.

After this description of some aspects in 1 Peter, which emerge when the letter is read against the background of the early Christian mission, I now suggest some implications for the mission of the church in our day and age.

1. Christians, new converts in particular, need to know who they now are and where they belong. Once they lose some of their roots in their own culture and religion, they need to understand their new identity as God's people. Although they have lost some of their own roots, they have been grafted into the roots and the stem of the people of God.⁴⁹ Such understanding is particularly important when new Christians come under persecution. They need to be assured that such trials do not question their standing 'in the grace of God'.

⁴⁸ Cf. the discussion of methodological concerns in my essays, 'New Testament Studies and Missiology: Comfortable Bedfellows!', *Missionalia* 33 (2005): 214-33 and 'Das Neue Testament als Dokumentensammlung urchristlicher Mission: Alter Hut oder neue Perspektive?', *Jahrbuch für evangelikale Theologie* 19 (2005): 167-90.

⁴⁹ Cf. Rom. 11:17. In contrast to Peter, Paul spelled out the implications of this grafting in for the relationship between Gentile Christian and Jews/Jewish Christians.

In the ancient world many Gentiles were drawn to *Judaism* and showed their allegiance by becoming proselytes or God-fearers. However, there was also a widespread anti-Judaism which from time to time went beyond ridicule and slander and erupted into open persecution. Several passages in the New Testament bear witness to this anti-Judaism. Against this background Peter's approach is particularly interesting: The Gentiles are addressed with the titles and designations of the people of God of old. They now share all the privileges associated with being the people of God—but also the difficult position and calling of such people in the world.

Such a transfer of identity is not without risk and problems. How would a Palestinian Christian react to being described with the language cherished and used by orthodox Jews to describe their own chosen status? How would such a distinctly *Jewish* description of the Gentile Christian church have sounded in Nazi-Germany?

How do modern missiological notions of contextualisation and indigenisation of the gospel relate to the 'people of God' identity in both Testaments? How much of the biblical 'people of God identity' is necessary for a community to be 'biblical' and/or 'Christian'? What criteria are used for picking and choosing? What does this mean for cultures where Jews and Judaism are a virtually unknown entity? How much of the identity (and titles) of *Israel* is required for building the identity of *Christians* to emphasise continuity? Have the titles which Peter used been appropriated by the church to such an extent that their original referent is no longer discernible? Does this origin have to be discernible? How *Jewish* do Christians need to be in order to be *Christian*? How can the continuity between Israel and the church (and the continuing election of Israel) be communicated? Where and how do Christians draw on the Old Testament in order to define their self-understanding? How important for new believers is the inclusion of the grand narrative of God into the history of salvation? Are such designations the theological basis of a theory of 'substitution', which claims that all the privileges of Israel have been transferred to the Christian church? What is left for Israel, when Gentile Christians likewise claim this identity?⁵⁰

⁵⁰ For a brief survey of the issues see J. Goldingay, 'Israel' in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. S. B. Ferguson, D. F. Wright (Leicester, Downers Grove: IVP, 1988): 344-45 and V. Fusco, 'Israel' in *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, ed. J. Y. Lacoste (New York, London: Routledge, 2004): II, 798.

Finally, do people convert more easily who see in their conversion to Christianity less of a loss of status than an increase in status? Is it perceived to be a privilege acknowledged by the wider society to belong to the church or is it seen as a (social) disadvantage? While earlier approaches to mission often demanded of converts a complete break with pre-Christian religion and (often) culture (as both aspects are often intertwined), more recent approaches question whether new converts necessarily have to leave *all* their roots in their own religion and culture behind.

2. (New) Christians are called to new tasks: through their exemplary conduct and their words they are to point people to their new Lord.

a) From a historical point of view this emphasis in 1 Peter helps us to understand the rapid spread of Christianity and throws interesting light on a number of recent studies of early Christian mission. In addition to figures like Paul and his co-workers (for whom there is a fair amount of information), other apostles and figures like Apollos, and the testimony of ordinary Christian women and men of all strata of society, is not to be neglected. For Peter, women and slaves who believed in Christ were as much bearers of the Gospel as other early Christians. This also illuminates the egalitarian nature of early Christian missionary endeavour: without distinction, all Christians were called to this privilege and task.

b) What does Peter's call to witness by conduct and word mean for the Christian witness in post-Christian societies in which direct forms of evangelism increasingly fail to convince or have become politically incorrect? What does Christian conduct that will lead to situations like the one presupposed in 1 Peter 3:15 look like today?

3. For 1 Peter, suffering is an inevitable ingredient to Christian existence that is closely linked to the new status of Christians and to the calling they have as believers to proclaim their faith by conduct and word. Such suffering should be seen and addressed in this wider context.

Reading 1 Peter in the context of early Christian mission offers interesting perspectives beyond New Testament scholarship. Some have been presented, others could be added.