

THE CONCEPT OF EXILE IN 1 PETER

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Abstract

The concept of exile is a central theological and pastoral motif in the First Epistle of Peter, shaping the author's understanding of Christian identity, suffering, and hope. Addressed to believers described as "elect exiles of the Dispersion" (1 Pet. 1:1), the letter situates its audience within the socio-political realities of marginalisation in the Greco-Roman world while simultaneously drawing on Israel's Old Testament experience of exile. This study introduces exile not merely as a geographical displacement but as a theological metaphor that frames the Christian life as one of temporary residence, spiritual otherness, and eschatological expectation. The purpose of this study is to examine how 1 Peter employs the concept of exile to construct a distinct Christian identity and to encourage faithful living amid suffering and social alienation. It seeks to demonstrate that exile in 1 Peter functions both descriptively, reflecting the believers' marginal status and theologically, calling them to holiness, perseverance, and hope grounded in God's redemptive plan. The study also aims to show how Petrine exile theology reinterprets suffering as participation in Christ's own suffering and as a means of witness within a hostile environment. Methodologically, the study adopts a literary-theological and socio-historical approach. Attention is also given to the Greco-Roman social context of the recipients to clarify how metaphorical exile informed their ethical conduct and communal life. Through this approach, the study highlights exile as a unifying theme that shapes the message and pastoral intent of 1 Peter.

Keywords: Exile, Hostile Environment, Suffering, Holiness, and Perseverance.

Introduction

The concept of exile occupies a central place in Old Testament theology and provides a critical backdrop for understanding the message of 1 Peter. In the Old Testament, exile refers primarily to Israel's forced displacement from the land, most notably the Assyrian exile of the Northern Kingdom (722 BCE) and the Babylonian exile of Judah (586 BC). These events were not merely political catastrophes but theological crises interpreted as divine judgment for covenant unfaithfulness (2 Kings 17; Jer. 25). Yet exile also became a context for repentance, hope, and renewed identity as God's people. The First Epistle of Peter presents a profound exploration of the concept of exile, which serves as a central theme in understanding the identity

and mission of early Christians. The word exile is defined by Strong's Lexicon 3927 from the Greek word *parepidēmosas* "Sojourner, stranger, exile, temporary resident." The synonyms of the word "exiles" (NIV) and as used by different Bible versions include strangers (KJV), pilgrims (NKJV), sojourners (ASV), exiles (RSV), foreigners (CEV). This paper investigates how Peter employs the imagery of "exiles" or "strangers" to articulate the experiences of believers in a predominantly pagan culture, highlighting the theological implications for early Christian communities. In discussing the concept of Exile in 1 Peter, this paper looks at the theological background, Peter's use of exile imagery, the theological implications, alternative perspectives and the researcher's view.

According to David Sain, “Writer: Simon Peter, Galilean Fisherman whom Jesus called to be an apostle, was the author of the letter. It is thought that this letter was written soon after the Apostle Paul’s martyrdom about A.D. 66” (45). Peter wrote this epistle about 66AD from Babylon which is identified by scholars as Rome at this time as Babylon is seen to mean Rome in Revelation 17:1-5, 9, 18. “Historical tradition places Peter in Rome at the end of his life”. (Steward 3). “That Peter, as well as Paul, was put to death in Rome under Nero is the unanimous testimony of Christian tradition” (Bruce 80).

Exile in the Old Testament

Old Testament exile theology is shaped by three interrelated themes: judgment, identity, and hope. First, exile is portrayed as the consequence of Israel’s persistent disobedience to the covenant (Deut 28:36–37). The loss of land, temple, and monarchy signified a rupture in Israel’s relationship with God. Second, exile forced Israel to redefine its identity apart from national institutions. Prophets such as Ezekiel and Jeremiah emphasized that God’s presence was not confined to the land (Ezek 1; Jer. 29:4–7). Third, exile carried a strong note of hope. Promises of restoration, a new covenant, and spiritual renewal (Jer. 31:31–34; Isa 40–55) reframed exile as a purifying process leading to renewed faithfulness (Smith-Christopher 11). Thus, exile became both a historical reality and a theological metaphor for living under foreign rule while remaining faithful to God.

Exile Language in 1 Peter

The majority of the Old Testament and the entirety of the New Testament were written and/or edited under conditions of military conquest, exile, and forced migration, which began with the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests and exiles (see references to "Babylon" in Revelation, "exile" in 1 Peter 1:1, and "Babylon" in 1 Pet. 5:13 and 1 Pet. 6). As a result, the Bible takes on its current form among

groups living under foreign domination in the coastal Mediterranean Hebrew homelands and among diaspora communities outside of the country of Israel (Smith-Christopher 11).

The author of 1 Peter therefore draws heavily on this Old Testament exile tradition but reinterprets it for a Christian audience. The letter opens by addressing believers as “elect exiles of the Dispersion” (1 Pet 1:1), immediately evoking Jewish exile imagery. However, Peter applies this language to predominantly Jewish Christians (Köstenberger 200-206) living in Asia Minor, transforming exile from a national experience into a spiritual and social condition. The people had been uprooted from their native countries, they became sojourners in the region. The Christian movement, of which they were a part, was planned by God before the world existed, and the result is the “sanctification of those people in the service of God by mean of spiritual instruction (Jackson 532). The Jewish people living in the Diaspora (1:1) always had to be concerned about Gentiles’ anti-Semitic slanders, for their safety and for their witness to the one true God (Keener 713).

Like Israel in exile, Peter’s readers are marginalized, suffering social alienation and hostility because of their faith (1 Pet. 2:12; 4:4). Their exile is not geographical displacement but existential estrangement within the dominant culture. This echoes Old Testament exhortations to maintain distinctiveness while living among foreign peoples (Jer. 29:5-7). Here, Peter calls his readers to their responsibilities while in sojourning on earth.

Continuity and Transformation of Exile Theology

The book of 1 Peter continues and transforms Old Testament exile theology. Continuity is seen in the emphasis on holiness, obedience, and identity as God’s chosen people. Peter explicitly borrows covenant language originally applied to Israel, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9; cf. Exod 19:5–6), to describe the church. This reflects the Old Testament

pattern where exile refined Israel's understanding of election and holiness.

Transformation occurs in the Christological reframing of exile. For Peter, exile is no longer primarily punishment for sin but a consequence of belonging to Christ in a hostile world. Jesus himself is presented as the ultimate suffering righteous one, rejected yet vindicated by God (1 Pet 2:21–24). Believers share in this pattern, making exile a participation in Christ's suffering rather than a sign of divine abandonment.

Theological Background

The notion of exile is deeply entrenched in biblical tradition, particularly within the context of Israel's history. The Babylonian exile significantly shaped Jewish identity and theology, emphasizing God's sovereignty and the necessity of maintaining faith amid adversity. Peter's reference to exile resonates with this historical backdrop, suggesting that early Christians were not merely facing societal rejection but were participating in a broader narrative of spiritual exile that traces back to humanity's expulsion from Eden (Gen. 3.23-24). This idea resonates with the broader biblical narrative, where exile often signifies both judgment and hope, as seen in Israel's experiences in the Old Testament (Jobes 22).

Peter's Use of Exile Imagery

Peter addresses his audience, Christian communities in Asia Minor specifically Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, as "exiles" (*parepidēmoi*) and "strangers" (*paroikoi*), underscoring their status as outsiders in a foreign land. This imagery serves several critical functions:

Identity Formation: By identifying them as exiles, Peter emphasizes that their true identity is found in Christ rather than their cultural or social surroundings. This transformation reflects a shift in citizenship; believers are now part of a transnational community redeemed from an empty way of life (1 Pet. 1.18).

Theological Orientation: The concept of exile offers believers a framework for understanding

their relationship with God and their place in the world. As strangers, they are called to rely on God's sovereignty while navigating their circumstances, paralleling Jeremiah's exhortation to the exiled Israelites to seek the welfare of Babylon (Jer. 29.7).

The exile, whether Babylonian or Roman, is not just a historical event, but a theological metaphor. It is a way of saying that the people of God are not 'at home' in the present world, that they are strangers and pilgrims, awaiting the redemption of the world and the final revelation of God's glory (Wright 159).

Instead of advocating for defense in cases when Christians are denigrated as evildoers (2:12), Peter urges the silent but powerful demonstration of moral behavior: "Live honorably among the Gentiles, so that they may witness your honorable deeds" (2:12). "Keep your conscience clear so that those who mistreat you because of your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed" (3:16).

Ethical Guidance: Exile imagery provides ethical directives for living as Christians amidst hostility. Peter encourages his audience to uphold their faith, live virtuously, and bear witness to their hope in Christ, thereby distinguishing themselves from their pagan neighbors. This call to holiness is essential as they navigate their lives as "foreigners and exiles" who must "abstain from sinful desires" (1 Pet 2:11).

The readers' current issues stem from their new status as God's people, which has caused them to become distant from their own upbringing. They have become aliens and exiles within their own community, although not having shifted their geographic position (1 Pet. 2:11). 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] (Stenchke 114). In reflecting on his own

mortality David says, "For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears" (Psalm 38:13 LXX). Geographically, David was not displaced, but he speaks of the temporality of his existence on earth. This however makes him look at a home out of his residence.

Theological Implications

The implications of exile in 1 Peter are manifold. They are as follows:

Pilgrimage Motif: The idea that Christians are on a pilgrimage emphasizes their temporary residence on earth, with heaven as their true home (1 Pet. 2.11-12). This notion aligns with the belief that all believers are "aliens" whose ultimate citizenship lies in heaven (Phil. 3.20). "This pilgrimage motif reinforces the idea that earthly existence is transient and should be viewed through an eschatological lens" (Smith 45). As Jobes states, "Peter redefines exile as a state of being that comes with belonging to Christ, rather than merely a geographical displacement" (Jobes 45). This theological perspective encourages believers to view suffering as a temporary reality in light of their eternal inheritance (Schreiner 89).

Eschatological Orientation: Exile reminds believers that their current situation is transient and that they anticipate future redemption (1 Pet. 1.3-5). This eschatological perspective encourages endurance through suffering with hope. Accordingly, the apostle in his First Epistle places before his readers the 'living hope' and admonishes them to conduct themselves in harmony with the hope" (Hendriksen 361 - 362). Furthermore, Peter exhorts Christians to maintain holiness in their exile, urging them to "be holy, because I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16). This command reflects the Old Testament call to holiness and reinforces the idea that Christian exile entails a moral distinction from the surrounding culture (Green 76). Peter further advises, "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God" (1 Pet. 2:12). This highlights the evangelistic dimension of exile,

demonstrating that Christian conduct can lead others to faith (Witherington 102).

Community and Solidarity. The shared experience of exile fosters unity among believers. Peter urges them to support one another and maintain harmony within the church (1 Pet. 3.8-9), creating a new home for exiled Christians.

Mission and Witness: As exiles, Christians are tasked with being lights in darkness, sharing their hope in Christ and proclaiming the gospel (1 Pet. 3.15-16). This mission reflects both individual and collective responsibilities within the community.

Perseverance and Hope in Exile: One of the key messages of 1 Peter is perseverance through suffering. The epistle reassures believers that their trials are a means of refining their faith, "so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that perishes though refined by fire, may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet. 1:7). This verse draws a parallel between exile and spiritual refinement, illustrating that suffering serves a divine purpose (Achtemeier 65; Goppelt 134).

Additionally, Peter points to Christ as the ultimate model of endurance. He writes, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23). This depiction of Christ as the suffering servant serves as both a comfort and an example for believers facing hardship (Michaels 211).

Alternative Perspectives

While many scholars recognize the significance of exile imagery in 1 Peter, alternative interpretations exist. Eusebius of Caesarea, and Christopher P. Jones argue that Peter's audience may have included literal exiles from Rome facing persecution under Nero, emphasizing the socio-political context of early Christianity. In his Ecclesiastical History, Eusebius notes that Nero was the first emperor to persecute Christians, leading to the martyrdom of Peter

and Paul in Rome. He writes: "It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified under Nero." (Eusebius, pp. 64, 65 and p. 80). Christopher P. Jones: In his response to Brent Shaw's article, Jones discusses the persecution of Christians under Nero and the martyrdom of Peter and Paul: "It is usually thought that the fire of the year 64 led to a persecution of the Christians by Nero; the chief evidence is a famous passage of Tacitus' *Annals* [15.44.2–5]" (Jones 146–52).

Others contend that "exile" primarily denotes Christians' spiritual condition rather than just social standing (Stenschke 113). In this view, all believers are seen as exiles separated from heaven due to their faith. Critical scholars often debate the authorship and authenticity of 1 Peter based on stylistic differences compared to other New Testament writings, highlighting complexities surrounding early Christian texts.

Hope and Restoration

As in the Old Testament, exile in 1 Peter is temporary and hope-filled. Peter points believers toward an eschatological inheritance "kept in heaven" (1 Pet 1:4), paralleling prophetic promises of restoration after exile. The future salvation and revelation of Christ assure believers that their present suffering is not final. This hope sustains ethical living, perseverance, and faithful witness amid adversity.

Conclusion

The concept of exile in 1 Peter profoundly shapes Christians' understanding of Christian identity, community, and mission. By embracing their status as exiles and strangers, early Christians maintained their faith, lived virtuously, and witnessed to their hope despite adversity. This theme remains relevant today, encouraging contemporary believers to view themselves as pilgrims oriented toward their true home while actively engaging with unfavourable humans that continue to challenge their faith. With a home beyond here mindset, Christians

will be able to bear whatever condition life throws at them, knowing that one on a journey may have to experience some of those challenges. Such a mindset will also enable Christians to continue to obey civil authority irrespective of their performance.

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