Part 1

A Letter to "Aliens and Exiles"

The First Letter of Peter was probably not written by the fisherman from Capernaum who put down his nets to follow Jesus and later became the central figure in the first years of the Christian movement. Simon Peter was probably martyred in Rome in the mid-60s of the first century, possibly as a victim of Emperor Nero's tactic to scapegoat Christians for the great fire of Rome that occurred in 64. The person writing this letter in Peter's name is neutral toward Rome. The author is not as unconcerned as Paul seems to be in Romans 13, written in the late 50s, but by no means demonizes Rome as John does in Revelation, which was written sometime around the mid-90s. The letter is thought to have been written sometime within the twenty-year span of 73 to 92. It is a general epistle to a variety of congregations proliferating around Asia Minor (modern Turkey; see 1 Peter 1:1) that drew individuals from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

New Testament interpreter John Elliott analyzes the message of 1 Peter using a social-scientific assessment of its historical context. The letter addresses the conflict early Christians experienced with a conformist society that found them objectionable and worthy of contempt. Ancient and traditional societies were based on codes of honor versus shame, in contrast to the codes of virtue versus guilt familiar to us in modern, industrialized societies. Today, moral assessment tends to be individual and introspective. In the ancient world, it was more group-oriented and confrontational. Honor was closely identified with family, ethnicity, morality, civic duty, and religious piety. Non-conforming individuals and groups were stigmatized, shamed, and

marginalized, both socially and economically. In Greco-Roman thought, the ability to feel shame separated humans from the animals. Shamelessness was therefore seen as subhuman, amoral, the realm of deviants and strangers.[2]

Early Christians were shamed, slandered, and marginalized in their neighborhoods for their religious otherness and lack of civic spirit. If Wayne Meeks is correct in his social study of Paul's urban congregations, the gospel may have attracted men and women who had already experienced some kind of social dissonance. Meeks finds among the references to individuals and circumstances in Paul's letters a marked incidence of Jews attracted to Greek culture, Gentiles drawn to Judaism, freed slaves, formerly free individuals fallen into slavery, and women of unusual wealth and independence. The story of a crucified Messiah served as a powerful paradigm for their social experience. Jesus of Nazareth experienced rejection, humiliation, and even death in response to his gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. Paul's congregations may have been more urban than those addressed by 1 Peter, but it would appear that they faced similar hardships.[3]

According to Elliott, 1 Peter responds to the ostracism faced by early Christians with four key points. First, the true criterion of honor is doing the will of God, not conforming to public opinion. Second, Christ is the paramount example of honor, yet he too was shamed and suffered ultimate rejection. Third, Christians should let their honorable conduct win over hostile neighbors. And fourth, suffering for doing right is itself an honor. Thus, 1 Peter offers an *inversion* of the dominant culture's codes of honor.[4]

These dynamics forged a community with internal cohesion strong enough to face down the malignant attitudes of its neighbors. Its members were slandered as *Christianos*, or "Christian" (4:16), yet for them Christ was the source of grace, not disgrace. They lived like

aliens and exiles in their surrounding culture, yet they were at home in the household of God. The household (*oikos*) was the basic building block of Greco-Roman society. It grounded family and ethnic identity, religious devotion, and often economic activity. But households also anchored early Christian communities, which spread in impromptu networks that expanded in unpredictable patterns like the underground rhizomes of an invasive plant. These households drew together motley assortments of people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, social status, and economic class. As such, they were anathema to the society around them.

These are the general social coordinates of 1 Peter. We may now read the pivotal passage of this unique New Testament letter, 2:4–17 (NRSV)[5]:

> *Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:*
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> *"See, I am laying in Zion a stone,*
>
> *a cornerstone chosen and precious;*
>
> *and whoever believes in him*
>
> *will not be put to shame."* [Isaiah 28:16]
>
> *To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,*
>
> *"The stone that the builders rejected*
>
> *has become the very head of the corner,"* [Psalm 118:22]
>
> *and*
>
> *"A stone that makes them stumble,*

> *and a rock that makes them fall."* [Isaiah 8:14]
>
> *They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.*
>
> *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*
>
> *Once you were not a people,*
>
> *but now you are God's people;*
>
> *once you had not received mercy,*
>
> *but now you have received mercy.* [Hosea 1:9, 10]
>
> *Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*
>
> *For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants [or slaves] of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

As if to play with Peter's name, the first verses in this passage abound with mentions of stones. And like the stones of a foundation, this passage establishes the movement's orientation toward Christ and (later)

toward the Roman Empire. This rich passage deserves a closer, step-by-step examination.

> *Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.* (1 Peter 2:4–5)

The "him" referenced here is "the Lord" mentioned at the end of the preceding verse, Jesus the Messiah/Christ. The paradox of a "living stone" sets up the paradoxical identity of Christ and of those who come to him. He was rejected by mortals but chosen and precious in God's sight. And those who come to him become living stones as well, built by the Spirit of Christ into a spiritual house. This is no monolithic institution but one in which the solidity and consistency of the stones is matched by their living, evolving, elastic relationship with one another in Christ. They are not enacting any human plan but rather find themselves being built into a structure whose purpose is beyond their human understanding.

The letter elaborates this "house" (*oikos*) with images and practices from the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish religion that birthed the movement. This house is "a holy priesthood" offering "spiritual sacrifices." In Hebrew tradition, holiness is the unearthly beauty of the otherworldly God who called Israel to be a people apart. Holiness is a quality apart from the categories and beauties of the rest of creation. It does not imply a negative assessment of the ordinary and earthly, but it does suggest the special calling and set-apart identity of those who are called. Thus, the social otherness they experience as Christians is an outworking of that quality of holiness.

But as this "holy priesthood," the living stones built around Christ are set apart not to enjoy a special status for their own sake; they exist as a sign in service to the wider human society. Their "spiritual sacrifices" mediate *shalom*: that is, they facilitate peaceful relationships with God and in society. That was the role of the Levitical priesthood in ancient Israel, which is the implied model here. These living stones, however, are drawn from many peoples, so this heterogeneous "holy priesthood" offers spiritual sacrifices on behalf of a wider world. So, what are "spiritual sacrifices"? They are "spiritual" in that they arise from the Spirit's leading in particular social contexts, not according to the prescribed rituals of a given religious tradition. They evolve just as the living stones themselves and the house they constitute evolve. The work of peacemaking, of mediating God's *shalom*, is endlessly varied, depending on the conflicts needing to be mediated. They may be psychological, interpersonal, social, cross-cultural, international, material. This work is "sacrificial" in that it offers God's peace to people who may not understand or accept it.

In all this, there is one constant: this house and its peacemaking will be as routinely misunderstood and even hostilely rejected as Jesus was.

> *For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame*" [Isaiah 28:16]. *To you then who believe, he is precious*. (1 Peter 2:6–7a)

Peter draws here from the prophet Isaiah, who centuries before had envisioned God setting a stone among his people, a cornerstone for the rebuilding of society. God's new social order would be built with "justice the line and righteousness the plummet." This new work would "sweep away the refuge of lies" and annul the "covenant with death" (Isaiah 26:17–18) that had overtaken the harsh, exploitative society Isaiah saw around him.

Whatever Isaiah had seen of this work in his own day, early Christians found it fulfilled in new ways through Jesus and in their own lives as living stones being built around the risen Christ, in the growing networks of peacemaking and mutual aid in the Eastern Mediterranean world. Thus, in spite of all the shaming tactics of their neighbors, they saw something precious developing among them.

> *But for those who do not believe,*
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> *"The stone that the builders rejected*
>
> *has become the very head of the corner"* [Psalm 118:22],
>
> *and*
>
> *"A stone that makes them stumble,*
>
> *and a rock that makes them fall"* [Isaiah 8:14].
>
> *They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do."* (1 Peter 2:7b–8)

The Christian community experiences a deep and painful irony. They are being *built* into a spiritual house oriented around Christ, the stone the *builders* reject. Through some mysterious moment of freedom, members of the community have moved away from participating in the usual human culture that builds up through the machinations of emulation, competition and conflict, rewards and rejections. They have begun participating in an organic process that fits them together beyond any human plan. The building culture around them rejected Jesus and continues to reject them because their gospel message and their way of life is not a comprehensible variant of the way the world works. It is so alien that it causes others to stumble. People are scandalized ("a rock that makes them fall" is a translation of *petra skandalou*). The prophet Isaiah had experienced this in his day (the eighth century BCE) when his own people were scandalized by his prophetic

call to social justice and peacemaking. Yet for him, the very same prophetic word of the Lord was like a sanctuary (Isaiah 8:14). It both caused him to be rejected and made the rejection bearable.

The community built around Christ is similarly prophetic. Their spiritual house feels like a sanctuary to them but offends others. Peter adds, "They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do." That sounds like a harsh judgment to us. But it is worth noting that we can see something of its truth around us. The social pressures of our culture exert a powerful conforming influence on us, almost determining our existence. The moments of freedom when that spell is broken and we can make real changes in ourselves and our society come not by our own power. They are our faithful response to a gracious interruption of our lives by a power from beyond us. That power and our response shift the very nature of our being. Our awareness that true freedom is a gift and not a personal accomplishment keeps us humbly open to divine motions in our hearts. It also makes us more gracious, patient, and hopeful toward others. It makes us better peacemakers.

Thus, we become a people created out of nothing by the way we have responded to a *call*. Peter continues:

> *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people*. (1 Peter 2:9a)

Instead of "God's own people," the King James Version renders the Greek here as "a peculiar people." This was an important concept for both early Christians and early Friends, but it requires some unpacking for us today.

Peter draws here from the calling of Israel in Hebrew Scripture. In Exodus 19, the Lord tells the Israelites at Sinai,

> *You have seen . . . how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now*

> *therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.* (Exodus 19:4–6)

This language is echoed in Deuteronomy 14:

> *You are children of the Lord your God. You must not lacerate yourselves or shave your forelocks for the dead. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.* (Deuteronomy 14:1–2)

"Treasured possession" is rendered "peculiar treasure" in the King James translation of 1611. "Peculiar" derives from the Latin *peculium*, meaning personal possession. But, of course, "peculiar" can also mean odd or strange. That's the only meaning still current today.

So the Israelites are not to emulate the cultural practices of their neighbors (obscurely referred to in the passage as laceration and shaving rituals). Instead, they are to live in covenant with God and with one another. Certainly, the whole earth belongs to the Lord, but Israel is a holy nation, a treasured possession of the Lord. Of course, Israel is part of God's creation, the whole earth and its many peoples, and thereby given to the ordinary laws of physics, genetic codes, and human tendencies. But Israel has also been chosen to act out something extra-ordinary. God is working out something peculiar with this people: to demonstrate divine holiness to the peoples of the earth and to be a priestly kingdom that mediates God's *shalom* among the nations. This holiness is profoundly other; it simply does not compute with the laws of nature and the sociology of human interaction. It is God's own nature. It is good, but it is good in ways that don't always fit the categories of human reckoning.

Again, this is the continuing scandal of the stone rejected by the builders and of the living stones that are being built around it. The otherness of this people is defined by the transcendent Other who has called them together. They don’t exist as God’s “treasured possession” for their own sake but for the sake of communicating God’s strange beauty to others. The radical Otherness of God relativizes all kinds of otherness among peoples and in creation, so nothing human or in all creation should be alien to this people. Peacemaking begins here. And this is why God’s “peculiar people” have peace finding their purpose. Their very otherness creates new possibilities of relatedness and peace among all peoples.

Indeed, Peter continues, this new people has been called into being

> *in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*
>
> *Once you were not a people,*
>
> *but now you are God’s people;*
>
> *once you had not received mercy,*
>
> *but now you have received mercy*. (1 Peter 2:9b–10)

Like Elijah on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:11–13), this people has experienced the “mighty acts” of God not in the special effects of earthquake, wind, or fire but in the hearing of the gospel message and the perception of a still, small voice calling them to a new life. We exist to communicate and extend this liberating call from God. This “marvelous light” makes our former existence look like darkness. It is light precisely because we see ourselves and others in a profoundly new and empathetic way, no longer beholding one another with envy or contempt and no longer aiming to emulate or compete with each other.

The early Church was drawn from a variety of cultures, religions, and ethnic identities. Its members were not "a people." The call of God—and only the call of God—made them a people. Few of them had formerly enjoyed much honor, or "mercy," in their society. But now they have received an astonishing mercy, and they pass it on with the same generosity toward others as they proclaim "the mighty acts of him who called you."

Thus ends the description of the peculiar people, the "treasured possession" of God. They are built around Christ who, in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, "has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2). They are with Christ at God's right hand, chosen to be a people for God's specific purposes among the nations. But God is *ambidextrous*. The divine also works in secret, ironic, left-handed ways in the wider world, among people and nations that may not know God or aim to serve God's purposes. People's intentions, good or bad, can be bent toward divine intentions through patterns beyond human comprehension. This paradoxical sense of God's purposes in society and history is crucial to understanding the early Christian and early Quaker commitment to peace. I will say more about it a little later.

Precisely at this juncture, Peter turns to the interaction of the beloved community with the wider world.

> *Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.* (1 Peter 2:11–12)

These are individuals who once fit in with prevailing categories and norms, or at least struggled to fit in. Now they are a truly a people living out of place, like aliens and exiles. They once learned from their elders and

peers what to desire and what to strive for. Now they live at some remove from those acquired tastes.

“The desires of the flesh” does not mean simply physical drives or sensual yearnings. Rather, the Greek word *sarx*, translated as “flesh” here and in the letters of Paul, generally has more to do with a self-determined existence and ego-driven behavior. The ego generates desires that make war on the soul. The Greek word *psyche* is translated as “soul” here. It is “mind” in the fullest sense, or “personality” in its deepest, abiding registers. Ego-driven desires make conquest of the soul. They turn us into demanding, competing, consuming, and conflicting persons. It is not just a war upon the soul. When the flesh wins that war in us, it moves outward, forming competing classes and power blocs that generate conflicts in society and wars among nations.

Similar teaching comes from the Letter of James:

> *Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder.* (James 4:1–2a)

God’s call reorients our minds and shifts the very nature of our being. It also reveals the deepest motives of hatred, conflict, and war. But, it also opens the wellsprings of mercy and compassion.

Therefore, Peter counsels early Christian congregations to conduct themselves honorably in the world, to live as paragons of virtue among their pagan neighbors even though they are indeed “maligned as evildoers.” There is outside evidence for this slander by the early second century. For example, the Roman provincial official Tacitus noted that Christians in Asia Minor were “hated because of their vices” and “anti-social tendencies.” He offered no details and had no direct knowledge of Christians. Such slanders were common against

nonconformists in ancient, shame-based societies. But their night-time dinners ("the Lord's Supper") and their disregard for local civil-religious observances were bound to arouse suspicion. The Roman historian Suetonius described Christians as "animated by a novel and dangerous superstition."[6] Again, no details are given, but there is evidence that early Christian avoidance of meat sacrificed to idols hurt the business of butchers in some towns, contributing to their unpopularity.

But Peter views these problems from an eschatological (end-time) perspective. He believes, like most early Christians, that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus have inaugurated a turn of the ages, which will soon reach its climax. A "day of visitation," Christ's manifestation in some form more obvious than his presence by the Spirit, will soon confirm the new reality these Christians are already living. But Peter's point is not about divine retribution for all those who don't "get it" and presently malign Christians. Instead, the "honorable deeds" of Christians will help them see the light at last and "glorify God." Again, peacemaking includes the willingness to suffer rejection and even violence in hope that the consciences of the violent and unjust may yet be reached. No one is beyond God's redemption. At the same time, however, no one in God's right hand is exempt from sharing in the sufferings of Jesus in this drama of redemption.

Meanwhile, Peter offers rather pragmatic counsel, similar to Paul's advice to the churches in Rome in the 50s (see Romans 13):

> *For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.* (1 Peter 2:13–15)

This advice is not patriotic or even conformist but holds civil power as largely irrelevant to the divine power coursing through these new Christian networks. In other words, get along with the powers as much as possible; they're not where the action is.

"For the Lord's sake accept" ("be subject to" is a better translation of the Greek) the chain of command, from the emperor on down. That is, follow the example of Jesus, who did not resist power or try to seize it but unsettled it from below. As a subject of the Roman Empire, Jesus didn't necessarily obey its commands. At his trial, when Jesus refused to answer Pilate, the governor threatened to crucify him. Jesus responded, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). Pilate perhaps understood "from above" as the chain of Roman command that had placed him in power in Judea. But Jesus would have discerned the left hand of God behind Pilate's temporal power. Pilate's threat to crucify Jesus was certainly real, but Jesus' response belittled the provincial governor as a pawn in a game he could not understand.

Peter acknowledges that civil power does at least provide some degree of order and justice, "to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right." In so doing, it provides the minimal conditions under which "by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish." Hence, the order maintained by civil society provides the social space within which Christian life may communicate to others and spread.

> *As servants* [or slaves] *of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.* (1 Peter 2: 16)

The Christian is accountable to God and thus not free to do everything that is permitted in civil society. Yet that servitude to divine will produces a paradoxical freedom in relation to civil society. These newly created "aliens

and exiles" are not bound by the same pressures of conformity, emulation, and competition that drive others. Their freedom is an opportunity to do good, even if that goodness is not always understood or appreciated.

Peter concludes this section of the letter with a concise epigram, the very form of which bolsters its content:

> *Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.* (1 Peter 2:17)

The first and last of these imperatives define the Christian relationship to the wider society. Honor everyone, including the emperor. Respect for all persons includes those in power, but it also relativizes them to the whole. Meanwhile, the second and third imperatives define the relationships among the Christian community and to its Lord. Love the family of believers. Fear God. The grace of the beloved community, which knows your true worth, makes bearable the thankless task of honoring everyone, despite their misunderstanding and hostility. Likewise, when you fear God—that is, live in awe of the one who has called you into "this marvelous light" and made you strangely free—you lose your fear/awe of the emperor and can simply honor him as another human being.

In a similar vein, the Letter to the Hebrews remarks, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). It is not that one has fallen into the hands of an ogre. Rather, one lives in the right hand of God, a beloved child of God and a devoted servant of divine purposes. But one also lives in a wider world of conflict and confusion, where the left hand of God works only in more oblique and ironic ways. That is, the Christian has consecrated his or her freedom to God's will but is paradoxically free from the world's expectations (as noted earlier). Others in society have retained their personal freedom but live in fear of the human institutions that the Christian simply honors (if

not always conforming to their demands). He or she sees through and past them, searching for evidence of God's left hand working through heedless institutions and apparent happenstance. The Christian may suffer or die from the machinations of confused or malign institutions—but he or she will live in fellowship with the crucified Lord, not in slavish fear.

This providential sense of the two hands of God in personal experience and human history is crucial to understanding the faith and practice of both early Christians and early Quakers. Without it, the nonviolent witness of both movements remains opaque to our modern minds.

To conclude this close reading of 1 Peter 2:4–17, I have charted out the four key terms in this essay’s title and the ways they are manifested in the text.

PEACE FINDS THE PURPOSE
OF A PECULIAR PEOPLE