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Gentiles and Israel in 1 Peter's Ethnic Imagination

Short Abstract

This thesis is a focused study of the ideas associated with ethnicity in 1 Peter, such as ἀναστροφή πατροπαράδοτος (1.18), γένος ἐκλεκτόν (2.9), and τὰ ἔθνη (2.12; 4.3). I argue that these terms reveal something important about the letter's non-Jewish Christ-followers: They have been incorporated into Israel in a manner akin to the incorporation of non-Israelites in the Old Testament. They are not a “new ethnicity”, but they have been redeemed from the ancestral traditions of their former peoples and transferred into YHWH's ancient and holy people.

The study is organised into five main themes connected to ethnicity:

- 1) The Use of Israel's Titles
- 2) Resident Foreigners and Non-Native Insiders
- 3) “Gentiles” as an Outsider Label
- 4) Motifs of Family and Kinship
- 5) “Christians” as a Collective Name

In engaging these five areas, this thesis seeks to provide a more comprehensive study of ethnicity in 1 Peter than existing publications. Individually, each of these five themes contain arguments which shed new light on 1 Peter's ethnic discourse, such as the interpolation of the readers into Israel's family tree in 1 Pet 3.6 by describing them as “Sarah's children”, a concept with rabbinic parallels. Collectively, my findings across all five themes indicate that many discussions on 1 Peter wrongly present the Church as a *replacement* or *copy* of Israel. On the contrary, the letter's ethnic language invites us to see Christ-followers as a people *incorporated* into Israel's ongoing story.

Word Count: 240

Long Abstract

“Where you go, I will go,” Ruth tells Naomi, “Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1.16; NRSV). A Moabite by birth, Ruth embraces the people of Israel, their way of life, and their God. She enters Bethlehem as a vulnerable foreigner but is surprisingly welcomed and protected. Eventually, she becomes ancestor to Israel’s kings and – according to the New Testament – to Israel’s Messiah. Was Ruth an Israelite?

Ethnicity and religion are closely connected categories, both fundamentally affecting one’s way of life and worldview. “Gods run in the blood,” writes Paula Fredriksen concerning the ancient world,¹ and there has been increased interest in how the language of ethnicity is employed in early Christian self-definition, with several scholars arguing that Christianity did not “transcend” ethnicity but used ethnic discourse to describe the community of Jesus.² Underlying this discussion is an important question about early Christian identity: What changes does a person – especially of non-Jewish background – experience when they convert to Christianity? Were first-century Christians a people group distinct from Jews and Greeks?

Despite its relative brevity, 1 Peter has proven to be a fruitful context to ask these questions. The letter contains a significant number of passages denoting ethnicity as well as numerous references to Israel’s story and scriptures, even though many of the implied readers were probably Gentile. This dissertation is therefore guided by two related research questions:

- 1) Does the ethnic language of 1 Peter imply that the readers constitute a “new ethnicity”?
- 2) How does 1 Peter conceive of the relationship between the letter’s readers and the people of Israel?

Building upon the work of David Horrell, Katie Marcar, and Janette Ok, I argue that 1 Peter *does* use ethnic language such as ἀναστροφή πατροπαράδοτος (1.18), γένος ἐκλεκτόν (2.9), and τὰ ἔθνη (2.12; 4.3) to disassociate the implied readers from their former way of life and incorporate them instead into Israel’s story. However, I demonstrate that the writer does *not* present the Jesus community as the replacement of Israel nor a copy of Israel, contrary to the positions adopted by many scholars. Within 1 Peter’s ethnic imagination, non-Jewish

¹ Fredriksen 2006:232.

² E.g. Buell 2005; Concannon 2014; Hodge 2007; Horrell 2020.

Christ-followers have joined the people of Israel in a manner akin to the incorporation of non-Israelites into Israel throughout the OT. Like Ruth, they have exchanged “their people” for the people of Israel, and 1 Peter uses the language of ethnicity to illustrate and emphasise this transformation.

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter 1

What do we mean by ethnicity? This opening chapter discusses the conceptual underpinnings of this dissertation, engaging with the work of social theorists like Rogers Brubaker and Benedict Anderson as well as several scholars of early Christianity.³ I also address the concerns raised by critics, such as Erich Gruen, Philip Esler, and Steve Mason, who have challenged the idea that Christianity was regarded in antiquity as a kind of ethnicity.⁴ I demonstrate how ethnicity is a malleable but important means through which people across time have sought to organise themselves and others based on perceived physical, cultural, and historical factors, noting how David Horrell, Katie Marcar, and Janette Ok have fruitfully applied these social-scientific perspectives in their respective studies on 1 Peter.⁵ The remainder of this chapter contains discussions on 1 Peter’s historical context, as well as methodological considerations regarding the Catholic Epistles and their relationship to other early Christian writings.

Chapter 2

“In 1 Peter, the language and hence the reality of Israel pass without remainder into the language and hence the reality of the new people of God.”⁶ This statement by Paul Achtemeier in his influential *Hermeneia* commentary on 1 Peter is widely cited and widely shared by biblical scholars. After all, 1 Pet 2.9 describes the readers as γένος ἐκλεκτόν, βασιλείον ἱεράτευμα, ἔθνος ἅγιον, λαὸς εἰς περιποίησιν, a series of appellations which refer to Israel, echo Jewish Scripture (Exod 19.5-6; Isa 43.20-21), and are inherently ethnic in their language. Moreover, in the following verse Peter reminds the readers that they were once οὐ λαός but are

³ Anderson 2006; Brubaker 2006; Buell 2005; Buell and Hodge 2004; Concannon 2014; Hodge 2007.

⁴ Gruen 2020; Mason and Esler 2017.

⁵ E.g. Horrell 2011, 2013, 2016; Marcar 2022a, 2022b; Ok 2019, 2021.

⁶ Achtemeier 1996:69.

now λαὸς θεοῦ (2.10), paraphrasing the prophet Hosea's words to the northern kingdom of Israel (Hos 2.23 = 2.25 LXX). Peter's use of these texts thus leads many to assume that the community of Jesus is a *replacement* or *copy* of Israel in 1 Peter's ethnic imagination.⁷ Others concede that we simply cannot know where Israel fits in 1 Peter's worldview.⁸

Contrary to the preceding positions, I argue that the idea of the Church as Israel's *replacement* or *copy* in 1 Peter's mind rests on shaky historical assumptions concerning "Church" and "Israel" as distinct entities in the writer's worldview. Moreover, while Peter does not say anything *explicitly* about Israel, his frequent use of Israel's Scripture and story means that we cannot merely take an agnostic approach; underpinning the letter must be some conceptualisation of Israel and the readers' relationship to it. In this chapter, therefore, I argue that the readers have been incorporated into Israel's *ongoing story*, supporting a position taken by Kelly Liebengood and Gudrun Guttenberger.⁹ As Guttenberger argues, "The honorary titles of Israel are attributed to the addressees, not *instead* of Israel, but rather as *part* of Israel, as new members of the group."¹⁰ Focusing primarily on 1 Pet 2.9-10, I demonstrate why this is the most defensible method of interpretation on historical and literary grounds. Foreigners have always had a place among the people of Israel within Jewish Scripture, and for 1 Peter, the salvation of non-Jews by birth is a key component of Israel's restoration, an idea represented most vividly in Ezek 47.21-23 which envisions Israel's eschatological land being inherited by native-born Israelites *and* גרים, a concept which I develop in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Immediately after alluding to Hosea's prophecy concerning Israel, 1 Peter turns to the readers and addresses them as πάροικοι καὶ παρεπίδημοι (2.11). Many believe that this phrase primarily denotes social exclusion and marginalisation. Reinhard Feldmeier posits, for instance, that the terms imply a "clear distance" to the surrounding society's values, ideals, institutions, and politics.¹¹ This chapter challenges that assumption. Without denying that the

⁷ E.g. Achtemeier 1996; Bauman-Martin 2007; Jobes 2022; Joseph 2012; Reese 2022.

⁸ Doering 2016:276; Horrell and Williams 2023:1.687-688.

⁹ Guttenberger 2013, 2015; Liebengood 2023.

¹⁰ "...Zugeschrieben werden die Ehrentitel Israels den Adressaten nicht *anstelle* Israels, sondern *als Teil* Israels, als neuen Gruppenangehörigen" (Guttenberger 2013:135; emphasis original, translation mine).

¹¹ "Die Selbstbezeichnung als *impliziert* also – zumal dann, wenn sie zur zentralen Selbstbezeichnung wird – in heder Hinsicht auch *eine deutliche Distanz zur Gesellschaft, zu ihren Werten und Idealen, aber auch zu ihren Institutionen und zu ihrer Politik*" (Feldmeier 1992:21; emphasis his, translation mine); cf. Münch 2009:140; Reese 2022:55-56.

readers were facing persecution, I show that the two LXX passages which use *πάροικος* and *παρεπίδημος* do not denote marginalisation. In fact, *πάροικος* and *παρεπίδημος* typically translate the Hebrew words *גר* and *תושב* respectively, descriptions which do not refer to excluded outsiders but to *welcomed* foreigners. I show how the *גר* especially has a privileged place in OT law and prophecy as a non-native insider who participates in Israel's covenantal relationship with YHWH alongside native Israelites, providing the "raw materials" for Jewish understandings of conversion in the Second Temple and rabbinic literature.¹² In fact, a few other NT texts, such as the Jerusalem Council's letter in Acts 15.22-29, may have likewise been shaped by OT material concerning *גר*. I therefore argue that 1 Peter describes its readers as *πάροικοι καὶ παρεπίδημοι* to describe their new status as incorporated members of Israel and demonstrate why this makes better sense of the passage's literary context.

Chapter 4

1 Peter's use of "Gentiles" (*τὰ ἔθνη*) in 1 Pet 2.12 and 4.3 is the focus of Chapter 4. While many have written on Paul's use of this lexeme, its appearance in 1 Peter has received far less scrutiny. Yet the letter poses us a puzzle: Why does Peter refer to the community's slanderous and sinful critics as *τὰ ἔθνη* when most of the letter's readers were probably non-Jews by birth?

Betsy Bauman-Martin, John Elliott, and Karen Jobes answer this question by positing that our writer is redefining the term *τὰ ἔθνη* to mean all non-Christians – including Jews.¹³ I argue against this interpretation, citing the lack of supporting evidence and the historical implausibility of this assumption. Building upon the preceding chapters, I instead propose that 1 Peter is not redefining the term *ἔθνη* but redefining the ethnic status of its readers; now that they belong to Israel, they are no longer "Gentiles". This has parallels, for instance, with rabbinic writings concerning *גר*, who are not Jewish by birth, yet remain categorically distinct from *גוי*. In other words, "Gentiles" is an ethnic category which is not solely determined by one's genealogy, but by one's relation to YHWH and his people Israel.

¹² Donaldson 2007:508.

¹³ Bauman-Martin 2007:170; Elliott 2000:466-467, 721; Jobes 2022:241; this position is also implied by other writers (e.g. Reese 2022:133, 234; Vahrenhorst 2016:111-112).

Chapter 5

Ideas relating to family and kinship are scattered across 1 Peter, starting with the letter's declaration that believers have been given "a new birth into a living hope" by "God the Father" (1.3-5), but have also been "ransomed from the futile conduct inherited from [their] ancestors" (1.18) and are now "children of Sarah" (3.6). Marcar's and Ok's respective studies on 1 Peter's ethnic discourse thus pay significant attention to kinship language, with Ok arguing, for instance, that Peter is constructing a "new line of patrilineal descent" for the readers with God as their father.¹⁴ In this chapter, I engage with some of their findings, contending that the language of rebirth and patrilineal descent do not necessarily imply a change of peoplehood, but instead focusing on the letter's denigration of "ancestral traditions" (1.18) and affirmative reminder that the readers are "children of Sarah" (3.6) as examples of ethnic discourse. Finally, I observe that the use of ἀδελφότης in 1 Pet 2.17 and 5.9 is an example of kinship language which is unattested in Greco-Roman associations but finds some semblance in the construction of "secondary kinship" between Jews and Spartans in 1 Macc 12.10 and 12.21. This example complicates modern categories of "real" and "fictive" kinship. It helps us see how ancient peoples could conceive of differences in ethnicity while constructing kinship relations on a secondary level.

Chapter 6

Does 1 Peter's use of Χριστιανός in 4.16 indicate that the readers constitute a "new race"? By the second century CE, Χριστιανός was employed in both Christian and pagan writings to distinguish Jesus-followers as a particular *genus* or γένος, often in contrast to Jews and Greeks (e.g. *Ep. Diog.* 1.1; Tertullian, *Nat.* 1.8), with Denise Buell suggesting that 1 Peter was a forerunner of this development.¹⁵ In this chapter, we trace the emergence of Χριστιανός as a label, before considering how the movement's outsiders and insiders used it to define and describe the Jesus movement in the first two centuries CE. Interestingly, while many Christian writers used ethnic language, very rarely was Christianity depicted as one ethnicity among many, but as a people *sui generis*. I conclude this chapter arguing that 1 Peter does *not* use Χριστιανός to describe its readers as a *new* ethnicity, although it reveals a growing distinction between "Jew" and "Christian" as categories, especially from the perspective of outsiders.

¹⁴ Ok 2021:48.

¹⁵ Buell 2005:45-46.

Chapter 7

This chapter summarises and synthesises the findings of this thesis. Returning to the two primary research questions, I conclude that Christians are not a “new ethnicity” within 1 Peter’s ethnic imagination, but like the גרים of the OT, are non-native insiders among YHWH’s covenant people. “Israel” had always included those who were not genealogically descended from Jacob yet inscribed into Abraham’s family. I then comment briefly on the implications of this study, considering how this shapes not only our reading of 1 Peter, but our understanding of early Christianity and ideas of ethnicity more broadly.

Implications and Consequences

Many studies on 1 Peter rely on the assumption that “Church” and “Israel” constitute distinct entities in the writer’s mind. This thesis challenges that assumption, demonstrating both its historical implausibility and the appeal of a more fruitful alternative: The letter’s non-Jewish readers have been *incorporated* into Israel’s ongoing story as non-native insiders.

There are several important implications proceeding from this study. First, I have demonstrated that the language of ethnicity in 1 Peter fits well within a Jewish worldview; unlike the arguments proposed by Bauman-Martin, Elliott, and Jobes with regard to τὰ ἔθνη, for instance, Peter is not redefining a Jewish term, but reframing his readers’ sense of peoplehood from a Jewish perspective. Further research on 1 Peter should take this into account, considering how the letter’s ethical instructions or Christology, for instance, may likewise cohere with other Jewish sources.

Another major implication is theological: What is a biblical understanding of election? Peter’s readers are described as God’s γένος ἐκλεκτόν (2.9), and Achtemeier’s aforementioned assertion that the language and reality of Israel have passed “without remainder” into the new people of God implies that God’s election is mutable or transferrable. In rejecting Achtemeier’s position, this thesis offers a different understanding of election: God remains faithful to his covenant and people despite their disobedience, and in Christ he is redeeming Israel for himself as a people comprised of both native Israelites and “resident foreigners”. God’s election is not voided by Israel’s disobedience.

Finally, this thesis invites further reflection on conversion in both ancient and modern societies. The complex relationship between ethnicity and religion continues to affect people today, especially in cases of conversion. An example from my own context is the close connection between Islam and Malay culture in the minds of many Singaporeans – whether Muslims or Christians, Malays or Chinese – which forces Malay Christian converts to renegotiate their relationship to the ethnicity of their birth. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and perhaps all Christians ought to critically examine their ethnicity’s culture and worldview in the light of the Gospel, but it is often a neglected aspect of conversion in churches which focus on the personal dimensions of salvation. Can the Church better serve those who, like Ruth, have had to “leave” their people to follow Christ? Moreover, 1 Peter does not tell its readers to “become Jews”, and that small categorical distinction between “Israel” and “Judaism” allows the writer to perceive the fulfilment of YHWH’s promise to restore both native Israelites and non-native insiders. This thesis thus encourages us to think more deeply on how believers from all ethnicities should reimagine themselves within the story of Israel – God’s people past, present, and future.

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