

Research Paper

1 Peter: Living Under Empire

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It is easy to ignore that First Century Christians lived under the rule of empire. While it is clearly apparent from reading the canonical texts that their stories are unfolding within the Roman Empire's territory, the canonical authors rarely stopped to discuss explicitly imperial rule or the implications that it had for Christians. In the canonical Gospels, the obvious forces of evil are personal sin, the influence of the legalistic Pharisees, and the power of Satan and the demons. The Pauline corpus emphasizes sin's power too and also forcefully engages in various intra-Christian debates and conflicts. Throughout the New Testament, there is only occasionally explicit critique of Roman economic policy, specific laws, and particular political figures. While the Empire certainly provides a backdrop for much of this early Christian writing, the canonical authors rarely discuss directly the struggles that come from living under an empire's authority.

1 Peter is an interesting exception. Much of the text lays out what a Christian's role should be as a member of society and as a subject of imperial authority. It also gives us a glimpse into an early community of Christians who were actively dealing with life as subjects of empire and, even more importantly, as members of a minority religion whom society did not necessarily accept or respect. In the following discussion, we will examine the author's vision of how the community should handle this tension through the lens of postcolonial theory. Unfortunately, because postcolonial theory remains a relatively new scholarly field, postcolonial theorists have yet to perform much criticism on 1 Peter specifically. What follows will be a mostly exegetical analysis of 1 Peter seen through the lens of some generic principles that postcolonial theory puts forward.

Postcolonial Theory: Understanding Hybridity

Before we look specifically at 1 Peter, it is important to establish a basic model of how subaltern peoples cope with life under a controlling power. Some postcolonial theorists today argue that resistance is central to the subalterns' existence but that this resistance, while deeply embedded within the subaltern community's actions and behavior, is much more often subtle than explicit. Subalterns rarely clash with their society and government head on in the form of explicit secession, rebellion, or violence, for they know that such strategies are usually ineffective. It is only when they see a viable chance of victory through such severe measures that they will resort to them; otherwise, they usually depend on other outlets that, while indirect, still weaken the controlling authority's power. As Richard Horsley argues, "Subordinated people... have developed a whole range of different forms of resistance that should be discerned as part and parcel of more complex political processes, forms of resistance in which the rare outbursts of rebellion and revolution are rooted and nurtured."¹

It is also the case that subalterns rarely launch a full boycott of the entire dominant culture. Instead they fly under the radar, so to speak—living within the dominant culture while quietly twisting its values and traditions just enough to maintain continuity with their own values and traditions. Within postcolonial theory, such a phenomenon is known as "hybridity"—the practice of subalterns technically existing within the rules and expectations of the controlling authority by fusing their own values with the forms of the dominant values. Homi Bhabha argues:

¹ Richard A. Horsley, "Introduction: Jesus, Paul, and the 'Arts of Resistance': Leaves from the Notebook of James C. Scott," in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) 7.

Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the ‘content’ of an other culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power—hierarchy, normalization, marginalization, and so forth.²

In short, their resistance will permeate their entire existence and appear on many, subtle fronts. They will be hybrids, taking the form of the dominant culture while being driven by the values of their own.

Likewise, while overt resistance is rare, it is also rare for a subjugated people to capitulate completely and fully embrace the values and expectations of the controlling power. More likely, the subalterns are subtly developing hybrid strategies for staying faithful to their own beliefs while avoiding too much government attention. This means that even in an environment in which the controlling power appears to have secured its hold on its citizenry, resistance and opposition is probably quite vibrant in hidden ways.

As Horsley argues,

Living constantly under the repressive power and sometimes the regular surveillance of the dominant, the subordinate learn to wear masks of obedience. Unable to say what they are really thinking or to act on their feelings, they learn rather to act the part they are given in life while on the public stage.³

Thus, according to postcolonial theory, it is not the perceived dominance of the governing power but hybridity that is the true story of the subaltern’s relationship with the larger society. Bhabha writes—specifically referring to a colonial environment—that

² Homi K. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 33.

³ Horsley, “Introduction,” 9.

we should look for “the *production* of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions.”⁴ Finding hybridity in 1 Peter will be critical to understanding its message about living within the Roman Empire.

Imperial Expectations on Christian Family and Social Values

We should devote particular attention to the hybrid fusion of the author’s and the imperial society’s family and social values because, as we shall see, the author spends a significant portion of the text laying out specific teachings on family and social order. Donald Senior argues that during this time period, the imperial hierarchy was very interested in maintaining a rigid social order to maintain social stability. This order started at the top with the emperor himself and went all the way down to the internal structure of families:

As far back as Aristotle, hellenistic culture was convinced of the link between household order and the order of society. To violate or tamper with the patriarchal lines of authority within the household would undermine the authority of the ruler. The king or emperor was the head of the “household” of the state; his functionaries derived their authority from his position as *paterfamilias*. Thus a well-ordered household was symptomatic of the nation’s social fabric.⁵

Because of this expectation, any hybrid moves made by early Christians would have had to be especially sensitive to this conservative social expectation. Anything that would have smacked of departure from imperial expectations would have been suspect, and as Senior also argues, Christians were already a concern simply because they were a sect branching off from mainstream culture: “Roman society was especially wary of new

⁴ Bhabha, “Signs,” 35.

⁵ Donald Senior, “The Conduct of Christians in the World (2:11-3:12),” *Review and Expositor* 79 (Sum 1982) 431-2.

religious movements, fearing that their influence would undermine traditional values and, more alarmingly, erode loyalty to the state.”⁶ Christians therefore had to appear to be following Roman patriarchal values if they were to avoid undue notice from government and society.

Mary D’Angelo argues that a good way to avoid this notice was for the subaltern group actively to advertise to Roman society the orderly and normal conduct of the their families: “The display of familial orthodoxy, particularly as incumbent on women, offers a guarantee of the moral and religious excellence of the community, and a basis of apologetic appeal to emperors, governors, and all in authority.”⁷ She gives the somewhat earlier example of the Jewish writer Philo, who composed the *Legation to Gaius*, a defense of the Jewish lifestyle to the Emperor Gaius Caligula. In it, Philo argues that despite the fact that Jews do not embrace polytheism, their conservative family structures and behavior nevertheless make them good citizens. At one point, D’Angelo writes that Philo describes a journey that a group of Jews took and explicitly discusses that they moved “in companies arranged by gender and rank, men and women alike divided into elders, young people and children.”⁸ Philo also “stresses that [the Jews’] devotion to raising their children is a guarantee of their peaceable nature... and that their devotion to the temple, which came to them from their grandparents and ancestors... is a function of their filial piety.”⁹ In other words, the Jews have developed a good, conservative culture that can easily fit into Roman family values. This is a perfect hybrid response: the subaltern community folds its own values into those of the greater society in order to both

⁶ Senior, “The Conduct,” 428.

⁷ Mary R. D’Angelo, “*Εὐσέβεια*; Roman Imperial Family Values and the Sexual Politics of 4 Maccabees and the Pastorals,” *Biblical Interpretations* 11 (2 2003) 141.

⁸ D’Angelo, “*Εὐσέβεια*,” 146.

⁹ D’Angelo, “*Εὐσέβεια*,” 147.

preserve its own identity and be palatable to the controlling power. We will see if 1 Peter follows these patterns. However, before proceeding to examine the text's hybridity, we need to understand the specific issues and context surrounding 1 Peter.

Authorship, Date, and Context

Although the text takes the form of a circular letter that the Apostle Peter wrote to several Christian communities in the Empire (1:1-2), today there is on-going scholarly debate over whether the text is authentic or pseudepigraphical. The closest thing to a consensus view today is that the text was written in the couple of decades immediately following Peter's death in the 60s C.E. Raymond Brown reports that authorship in 70-90 C.E. "now seems to be the majority scholarly view."¹⁰ Likewise, David Horrell affirms that "Most scholars favour pseudonymity and a date sometime in the last three decades of the first century CE."¹¹

If Peter did not write the text, then the question of who did becomes essentially impossible to answer. Horrell reports a growing belief among scholars that the text came from a distinct school of Peter's followers who wrote it to reflect and carry on the historical Peter's teachings and views.¹² However, Horrell himself argues convincingly that there is no evidence that such a distinct group existed and rather that "1 Peter draws on varied Christian traditions" and thus that its message cannot be traced back to the historical Peter.¹³ This unfortunately means that we may never know Peter's personal perspective on how Christians should have lived in and related to the Roman Empire or

¹⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 722.

¹¹ David G. Horrell, "The Product of a Petrine Circle? A Reassessment of the Origin and Character of 1 Peter," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 86 (2002) 29-30.

¹² Horrell, "The Product," 30-32.

¹³ Horrell, "The Product," 38.

even the extent to which Peter would have concurred with 1 Peter's teachings. Despite this fact, however, 1 Peter remains very meaningful for this discussion in that at very least, it was the work of an early Christian living under the Empire. We can also be assured by the text's preservation and eventual canonization that its message was coherent with the beliefs of a broad group of other Christians.

Unfortunately, while the text's message is still meaningful, our remaining inability to give a precise date hinders our knowledge of the socio-political context in which the author was writing. For this discussion, we will have to rely largely on internal clues to determine the text's context. It is certainly clear that the Christians in question are in some degree of tension with the larger society. The author says that they have been enduring suffering from their neighbors for holding different moral standards: "Let the time that is past suffice for doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you" (4:3-4).¹⁴ However, while it appears that society is ostracizing them, the text lacks any clear discussion of an actual persecution. The author does discuss "the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you" (4:12) and calls on the community to remember "that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world" (5:9). However, Brown argues that while these passages "suggest a universal imperial persecution," there is no evidence for such a systematic crackdown until the Second Century and thus the author "may mean no more than harassment and the common

¹⁴ All quotations of 1 Peter are from the *Revised Standard Version. Revised Standard Version*, National Council of Churches of Christ in America, Online, Available: <http://www.hti.umich.edu/r/rsv/browse.html>, 6 June 2005.

Christian demand to take up the cross.”¹⁵ Senior agrees with this general interpretation: “the references to suffering seem to speak more of ridicule and misunderstanding than actual legal proceedings.”¹⁶

The fact that the author never indicates that the government is directly responsible for these hardships greatly strengthens this interpretation. The author does not discuss anything regarding Christians being executed or arrested or having their property confiscated. Likewise, there is no indication that Christian practice has been outlawed or that Christians have had to meet in secret or keep their identities secret. In fact, the author explicitly calls on the community to speak openly about their beliefs, a command which assumes both that they are known as Christians and that discussing their faith is feasible: “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (3:15). It is also important to note that the author never stresses that the Christians’ theology *per se* is creating tension. Rather it is their unpopular ethics and personal behavior—particularly regarding what sound like wild parties in 4:3-4—that are primarily generating anger towards them. As Brown nicely sums up the situation, “Christians are suffering, being reviled and abused by their fellow Gentiles who cannot understand the strange turn that the gospel has produced in the converts’ lives, making them asocial.”¹⁷

1 Peter’s Message on Living Under Empire

Turning now to the text itself, it is important to understand that the author does not follow an easily discernable structure for his letter, frequently reiterating points and

¹⁵ Brown, *An Introduction*, 718-19.

¹⁶ Senior, “The Conduct,” 427.

¹⁷ Brown, *An Introduction*, 711.

freely moving back and forth between general rationale and specific commands. This tendency doubtless contributes to what Charles Talbert notes as an “absence of any widespread agreement today on the plan of 1 Peter.”¹⁸ However, while not going too deeply into controversial territory, the following summary highlights the passages in the text that appear to be a hybrid response.

The author opens with a reminder that their community has been restored to God through Jesus’ resurrection and that as a consequence, they will be saved and be brought into heaven (1:3-5). He goes on to remind them, “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials” (1:6). In other words, while they may face hardship in the short term, ultimately they have already won the truly important battle—gaining restoration with God—and are guaranteed eternal peace in heaven. It cannot be emphasized enough how foundational this belief is for everything else that will follow in the text. The author is saying that power, political control, and worldly prosperity (all of which the Empire has) do not indicate success. It is the Christians, who have support from God and membership in his eternal kingdom, who are the true winners. The author has thus declared the Christians—not the Empire—to be eternally significant: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9). The Christians have done the only thing that truly matters, becoming “a holy nation” under God’s eternal love and authority. This thinking is a key building block to the text’s hybridity: the author has both refused to accept the Empire’s

¹⁸ Charles H. Talbert, “Once Again: The Plan of 1 Peter,” in *Perspectives on First Peter* (Mason, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986) 141.

supreme authority and has not called for explicit confrontation. Something between the two—a hybrid response—will now have to be offered.

The author then calls upon the community to live righteous lifestyles: “So put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and envy and all slander. Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord” (2:1-3). This puts the author into a more confrontational pose with society, for, as we saw in 4:3-4, this means at times rejecting socially accepted and even expected behavior and facing ridicule for doing so. However, it should be remembered that while this tension is drawing unwelcome attention on them, the Christians’ behavior here does not appear to be a confrontation with the government. Their conduct appears to be unpopular in the eyes of their fellow subjects rather than illegal or contrary to an overt government command. The Christians appear to have some latitude in these controversial areas, and thus the author is calling on them to do what is right within the scope of their options. They will live peacefully in society, but they will not engage in their neighbors’ degenerate conduct.

The text’s hybridity truly comes out with the author’s direct discussion of family and societal roles (about which, as we have seen, the government very much does have expectations). In 2:11-3:7 he lays out how the Christians are to behave in the larger society. He opens with a general command to the whole community (2:11-17), taking on a very hybrid tone as he commands them to be good members of society: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right” (2:13-14). The author is calling on submission to the dominant power, but he is doing so

on his own terms. He is not doing so because the Empire is truly supreme (although, of course, the government could easily construe that to be their reasoning) but rather because God has established the Empire to do his work on Earth. Thus the author is saying that the political leaders are actually servants to a God in whom the leaders do not even believe, and thus Christians can serve them—not for their sakes but for God’s.

He then gives a very explicit summary of his commands: “Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (2:17). Senior makes an important observation about this passage. “Only to God does the Christian owe ‘fear,’ a word used in 1 Peter to describe an attitude of respect and religious awe reserved for God. The emperor must be ‘honored’—just as everyone else is, a subtle and challenging egalitarian statement which could hardly be accidental.”¹⁹ God remains squarely at the center of the author’s focus, and the Christians should submit to the authorities not because the emperor is worthy of “fear” but because he is worthy of “honor” through the fact that God is worthy of “fear.”

The author moves on to emphasize specifically the submission of two groups of Christians: slaves (2:18-25) and wives, many of whom are married to non-Christian husbands (3:1-6). It is no coincidence that the author emphasizes these two groups. Because many of them lived in non-Christian households, they were the most visible. As Senior writes, “their behavior was viewed by non-Christians as a barometer of how compatible Christianity might be with Greco-Roman society.”²⁰ The author commands the slaves to fulfill their duties faithfully: “Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to the kind and gentle but also to the overbearing” (2:18). Likewise,

¹⁹ Senior, “The Conduct,” 431.

²⁰ Senior, “The Conduct,” 432.

he tells wives to be submissive to their husbands, and he also calls them to engage in modest behavior: “Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of fine clothing, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious” (3:3-4). All of this fits in well with D’Angelo’s notion of advertised conservative social and family values. The author is calling upon the Christians to fit in where they are supposed to in the patriarchal chain of command and to fulfill their culturally-determined duties as well as possible.

Importantly, the author changes his focus quite significantly when discussing the community’s internal order (3:8-12, 5:1-5). They are to be loving and “have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind” (3:8). Instead of focusing on those in subordinate roles submitting, as he had done during his discussion of Christians’ role in overall society, the author spends most of his time commanding those in authoritative positions to lead well.²¹ He calls on the community’s elders to lead “not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock” (5:2-3). Thus among themselves, the Christians are to be the exact opposite of the dominant society: they are to be loving and supportive, with none either lording it over or being servile towards anyone else. As Brown summarizes the author’s message, “amidst the hostility of their neighbors they can survive if they love, support, and serve one another.”²² The celebration of power which

²¹ Importantly, in the fifteen verses (2:18-3:7) that the author devotes to specific groups in larger society, fourteen are commands to subordinate groups (eight to slaves and six to wives) and only one is to a superior group (husbands). However, in the five verses (5:1-5) devoted to specific groups within the Christian community, four are commands to those in leadership (the elders) and only one is to subordinates (the youth).

²² Brown, *An Introduction*, 711.

permeated Roman society is absent from the author's vision of how the Christians should order themselves. They are to love and serve each other, regardless of who is leading and who is being led.

Assimilation or Group Identity?

We have now seen some definite cases of the author molding his own values to be (or at least appear to be) compatible with dominant social expectations (hybridity). However, the exact extent to which the author emphasizes adhering to cultural expectations is further analysis. In 1982, John Elliott and David Balch debated this subject at a meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature.²³ An examination of their subsequent writing on the topic will be helpful to this discussion.

Balch believes that the author was attempting to have the Christians assimilate as much as possible into society. Balch agrees with Senior and D'Angelo that the Roman Empire was engaged in a campaign during this time to promote its version of familial ethics to strengthen society, including making women subordinate to men.²⁴ However, Balch argues that, in dealing with these expectations, the author has moved beyond what we have been calling hybridity into outright capitulation. Balch observes that the Mosaic law called for the eventual freeing of slaves and that Jewish tradition celebrated the Exodus of slaves from Egypt.²⁵ The author brings up none of this and instead merely calls upon slaves to remain submissive to their masters. Balch also argues that the author is

²³ John H. Elliott, "1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy: A Discussion with David Balch," in *Perspectives on First Peter* (Mason, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986) 61.

²⁴ David L. Balch, "Hellenization/Acculturation in 1 Peter," in *Perspectives on First Peter* (Mason, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986) 80-82.

²⁵ Balch, "Hellenization/Acculturation," 97.

embracing non-Jewish patriarchal values, and he goes so far as to say that “the OT does not emphasize the subordination of wives.”²⁶ He also believes that the author’s attitude is a betrayal of the egalitarian lifestyle of Jesus and his early followers, particularly with regard to the women whom the canonical Gospels report to have accompanied Jesus. He concludes that the difference between the canonical Gospels and 1 Peter “suggest a significant shift in values from the early rural Palestinian Jesus movement to urban, hellenistic, ‘diaspora,’ Petrine, Jewish Christianity.”²⁷ The author, thus, is ceding as much ground as he can to Roman society in order to prevent additional persecution, and he is compromising traditional Jewish values to blend in with the greater society. As Balch summarizes his point, “The household values in Israelite society were radically different from the structure of the Greco-Roman house, and the Jewish author of 1 Peter is acculturating.”²⁸

Elliott disagrees and says that the text attempts to create not acculturation but a sense of group identity, noting that “traditions in 1 Peter all served the common aim of reinforcing a sense of distinctive communal identity, promoting the internal cohesion of the community, and providing it with a persuasive sustaining rationale for continued faith, commitment, and hope.”²⁹ He acknowledges that the author does discuss the need for people to carry out their socially-defined duties, but he also says that this can be explained by the fact that the author considers these social structures to be a given and thus that the Christians had no choice but to live within their confines: “Slaves and wives were not advised to terminate their relations with unbelieving owners and husbands

²⁶ Balch, “Hellenization/Acculturation,” 97.

²⁷ Balch, “Hellenization/Acculturation,” 98.

²⁸ Balch, “Hellenization/Acculturation,” 97.

²⁹ Elliott, “1 Peter,” 66.

because slaves had no legal power or right to do so, and because of Christian valuation of the marital bond and the envisioned possibility of spousal conversion.”³⁰ Elliott believes that Balch overemphasizes the author’s willingness to compromise and “fails to examine the evidence of a predominant stress upon the necessity for dissociation and nonconformity, a stress that is bolstered by emphasis upon the believers’ distinctive communal identity and divinely conferred status as the elect and holy household of faith.”³¹ He further argues that rather than the role of slaves and wives being a capitulation to Roman society, the author is saying that “servants/slaves and wives provide the model for all Christians to emulate.”³² Thus, for Elliott, the author does not capitulate to the Empire by accepting the reality of its social structure but rather is seeking to create group identity and morale despite the fact that the Christians must live in an oppressive social hierarchy.

While both Balch and Elliott provide interesting angles on the author’s attitude, Elliott’s argument seems to be sounder from the perspective of postcolonial theory. Returning to Horsley’s original argument, usually a subaltern group will not be in a state of open defiance with the dominant power. However, the lack of open defiance should be interpreted to indicate the presence of hybridity rather than capitulation. According to postcolonial theory, subalterns rarely actually accept the dominant values even when they appear to be doing so. They instead meld into the structure of dominant society in order to preserve their own values as best as possible. Elliott does a better job of understanding this dynamic and is not caught up like Balch in thinking that the absence of direct confrontation indicates acculturation.

³⁰ Elliott, “1 Peter,” 71.

³¹ Elliott, “1 Peter,” 72.

³² Elliott, “1 Peter,” 73.

Conclusion

According to postcolonial theory, subalterns rarely openly rebel against or fully accept the values and traditions of the dominant society. Instead, they often try to incorporate their own values into the dominant society's and create a hybrid identity that is both faithful to their own traditions and gives the appearance of being faithful to the dominant traditions. For subalterns under the Roman Empire in the First Century C.E., compatibility with the government's desire for a conservative social structure was essential for developing hybridity. The author of 1 Peter, most likely writing towards the end of the First Century, accomplishes this by justifying submission to the social order with Christian theology. The author accepts that Christians should submit to the emperor and other political leaders, but he says that Christians should do so not because of the Empire's self-understood supreme power but because it is the Christians' God who has given power to those leaders. Likewise, we call on those Christians who are in subordinate social positions (most particularly slaves and wives married to non-Christian husbands) to accept their status gracefully. However, on the side he calls on the Christians to have far more loving and supportive relationships among themselves. In all of this, the author is adopting behavior that makes the Christians compliant with dominant culture, but he consistently does so only so far as he needs to and always under the umbrella of his own theological rationale. He is thus becoming a hybrid, a melding of expected Roman behavior and his own Christian belief. He is calling on Christians to live gracefully in this world as they await assumption to their true citizenship in heaven.

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