



BY BOBBY KELLY



Pilgrim Motif *in 1 Peter*

As part of their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Christians follow the road from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

COREL PHOTO

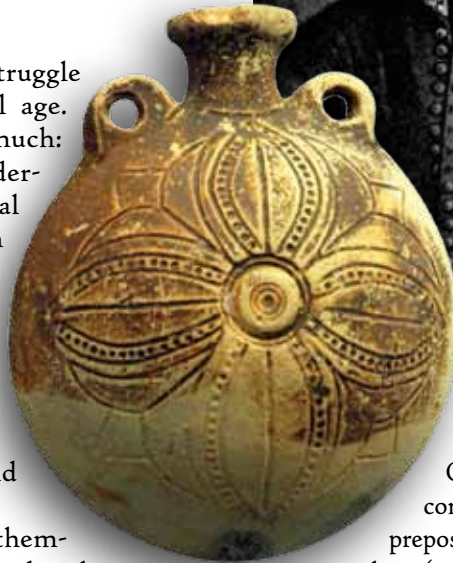


The image of the Christian life as a journey and the Christian as a pilgrim on that journey was popularized most famously by the seventeenth-century British Baptist pastor and author John Bunyan.

BUNYAN WROTE *PILGRIM'S Progress* while in prison for preaching in churches not sanctioned by the Established Church of England. Bunyan's allegorical portrayal of Christian on an adventurous and dangerous journey from this world, the "City of Destruction," to that which is to come, the "Celestial City," captured powerfully the life and struggle believers face in this present evil age. The opening words communicate much: "As I walked through the wilderness of this world,..."¹ The fictional character Christian was pointed on his way by Evangelist, opposed by Obstinate and Atheist, overcame the Slough of Despond and the Valley of the Shadow of Death, received help from Faithful and Hopeful, and finally entered the heavenly city. Bunyan, however, did not invent the pilgrim motif.

That the early Christians saw themselves as pilgrims on a journey is evident by their earliest designation: people of the "Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22). Similarly, Paul presented the Christian life as "a walk," as in Galatians 5:16: "I say then, walk by the Spirit" (HCSB). Thus, a consistent motif emerged in the New Testament of the Christian life as a journey, and those who choose to live the Christian life as pilgrims or sojourners in a foreign land but journeying into a future with God in heaven. Nowhere is this motif more prevalent than 1 Peter. Peter picked up on the notion of going to heaven, but unlike much popular theology, Peter did not focus on the conclusion of the journey "when we die," but rather on the present experience of living as strangers journeying in a foreign land. In order to capture the essence of how Christians were to live in a pagan society presently, Simon Peter employed the image of a pilgrim.

Below: From the region of ancient Mesopotamia, this pilgrim flask is a copy of a leather container. Reliefs from Palmyra show these containers slung next to the saddles of cavalry soldiers.



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Left: Born in Bedfordshire, England in 1628, John Bunyan became a follower of Christ and eventually a preacher. In 1660, he was arrested for preaching at a church that had not been officially sanctioned. While in prison, he wrote several books, including his best-known work, *Pilgrim's Progress*. He was arrested more than once but was finally released in 1678. He then died about 10 years later.

Greek Terms for Pilgrim

Peter referred to his readers in 1 Peter 1:1 as "temporary residents," using the Greek term *parepidemos*. This term is a compound word combining the two Greek prepositions *para* (meaning "beside" or "along") and *epi* (meaning "upon" or "over") along with the noun *demos*. Combined, the prepositions have the sense of distance from something. *Demos* originally had to do with "race" or "family" and later developed the sense of people living in a district or community. Taken together the compound word meant stranger, sojourner, or one who resided in a place temporarily. In essence, the term meant a stranger in a strange land. Sojourners did not hold citizenship in the host country. As aliens, they had few rights and privileges and were viewed suspiciously by the permanent residents.

The term appears twice in the *Septuagint* (abbreviated LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. When Sarah died, Abraham requested a burial plot for her among the Hittites (Gen. 23:4). He requested: "I am an alien and temporary resident among you. Give me a burial site among you so that I can bury my dead."² Abraham and Sarah certainly knew what it was to be strangers in a strange land. In response to God's call (Gen. 12), they had lived their

lives as resident aliens and pilgrims. Their descendants, the people of Israel, likewise knew the experience of living as temporary residents, aliens, even exiles in Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. In light of their experiences, Sarah's being buried in a foreign land seems appropriate.

The second usage of the term *parepidemos* in the *Septuagint* comes as a cry from the Psalmist:

“Hear my prayer, LORD,
and listen to my cry for help;
do not be silent at my tears.
For I am a foreigner residing with You,
a sojourner (*parepidemos*) like all my fathers”
(Ps. 39:12; LXX 38:12).

The psalmist lamented the transitory nature of life. As

a result he realized all that matters is one's relationship with God. While the psalmist was a current resident of this world, he was only a foreigner and pilgrim whose true home was with God.

In the New Testament, outside of 1 Peter the term appears only in Hebrews 11:13. After defining faith as the firm conviction of certain realities even though they cannot yet be seen (Heb. 11:1), Hebrews offers an extensive list of examples of faithful people from Jewish history (11:2-40). After listing Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah, the writer paused and stated: “These all died in faith without having received the promises, but they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and *temporary residents* on the earth” (11:13).

Although these Old Testament heroes had kept the faith, their journeys had not ended, for the full inheritance would be realized at Christ's appearing. Nevertheless, in God's strength they had maintained the journey toward God's promises with steadiness, run the race with perseverance, and pursued the imperishable city with vigor. The faithful listed in Hebrews 11 are “the pilgrims, not the perfect.”³

Pilgrim Motif in 1 Peter 1:1

Peter wasted no time introducing the image of the Christian life as a pilgrimage. He began: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ: To the *temporary residents* of the Dispersion in the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1). Peter described his readers using the Greek term *parepidemos*. They were “temporary residents” who were scattered throughout Asia Minor. As strangers in a strange land, these believers faced rejection and persecution at the hands of the nonbelievers of Asia Minor. Because these Christians were sojourners in a foreign land, people viewed them with suspicion, distrust, and a fear that was rooted in ignorance. The fact that these Christian “strangers” declined to acknowledge Caesar as Lord and refused to participate in pagan worship would have alienated nonbelievers. Their acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord alienated Jews. Thus, by living a



The Temple of Trajan in ancient Pergamum. The temple was built in the 2nd cent. A.D. to honor Emperor Trajan, who ruled from A.D. 98–117. Pliny advised Trajan that those who failed to acknowledge Caesar as lord were deserving of death.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHLITZ (11/28/16)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / LOUISE KOHL SMITH (3/22/17)

At Cappadocia, volcanic eruptions and later erosion resulted in this unique landscape. Digging in the sandstone, dwellers established houses, churches, catacombs, and even entire underground cities.

life of commitment to Jesus they faced harassment, slander, and reproach. Such is the life of strangers in a strange land.

Following the introductory greeting (1:1-2), Peter offered reassurance and hope for these persecuted and alienated Christians. They had been given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (v. 3). Until the time when the living hope reached fulfillment at the final revelation of Jesus, they would find themselves in conflict with their society's values. Although this conflict would inevitably lead to suffering in various kinds of trials, the joy that comes from their new birth would far outweigh their grief. In fact, the suffering indicated they were in the process of receiving the goal of their faith, the salvation of their souls (vv. 8-9). The proper response to God's gracious action in Christ was to (1) set their minds fully on God's grace (v. 13); (2) be holy as God is holy (vv. 14-15); (3) love one another from the heart with total commitment (v. 22); and (4) crave the pure spiritual milk of God's word (2:2-3). These Christian pilgrims were living stones in God's spiritual house, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for God's possession who had received God's mercy (vv. 4-10). Having offered encouragement and exhortation, Peter turned to the pilgrim motif once more in order to call his audience to live godly lives in a society that largely rejected God.

The Pilgrim motif in 1 Peter 2:11-12

Peter implored: "Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and *temporary residents* to abstain from fleshly desires that war against you. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that in a case where they speak against you as those who do evil, they may, by observing your good works, glorify God in a day of visitation" (2:11-12). Returning to the pilgrim motif, Peter exhorted his Christian readers to live exemplary lives within their pagan society. As holy citizens of God's kingdom, they each had a moral responsibility to live a self-controlled life that bore witness to the truth of the gospel. Peter did not deduce from their status as strangers and pilgrims *in* this world that they should seek to escape *from* this world. The Christian pilgrim must walk a delicate balance between complete alienation from this world on the one hand, and assimilation to the values of this world on the other. We can easily miss that while John could say "do not love the world nor the things in the world" (1 John 2:15), he could also say "for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16, KJV). Peter's writings also hold both together profoundly. As Christian pilgrims journey in this world, they must avoid assimilation into the hostile culture. They must maintain distance from the values and customs of a world that opposes God and refuses to acknowledge Him as Creator. And yet, they must not withdraw from the world and fail to shine forth the light of God's glory and grace.

Understanding the etymology of the term *parepidemos* and seeing the way it is used in both the *Septuagint* and the New Testament should help us avoid romanticizing the idea of the Christian pilgrim. To be a resident alien meant a person was outside of his or her homeland because of some political or economic disruption, or even military invasion. It spoke of life in a foreign land where a person felt alienated and abandoned. This is the plight of Christians as citizens of God's holy nation living as temporary residents in a pagan society. Yet, we do not sojourn alone. Jesus is *the* Pilgrim par excellence, the victorious One who leads His fellow travelers to their eternal destiny. Jesus is the courageous Pioneer who goes on ahead to make sure that the road is safe for all who follow Him. We can rest assured that He will lead us safely from this current evil age of destruction to our celestial home. **B**

1. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, n. d.), 9.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are the writer's translation; emphases added.

3. Raymond Brown, "Pilgrimage in Faith: The Christian Life in Hebrews," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* vol. 28 no.1 [Fall 1985]: 33.

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