



The Purpose and Life Situation of
FIRST PETER

BY RUDY D. GONZALEZ

TO THE COMMUNITY of biblical scholars, Peter's first epistle remained in the shadows for years. This was largely because of an overwhelming fondness for Paul and his letters. But things have changed in recent years. And as providence would have it, Peter's message may be just what the church needs to hear today.

Where?

First Peter is a "general" (sometimes called a "catholic" or "encyclical") epistle because it was meant to have broad appeal.¹ Though some challenge that kind of designation today, we certainly get this sense from the extent of the region 1 Peter intended to reach—dispersed believers in five of the larger provinces of Asia Minor (1 Peter 1:1).²

Taking a closer look at how the provinces unfold can be revealing. Peter began in the north with the region of Pontus, touching on the southern coast of the Black Sea. Then he continued clockwise to include Galatia, then Cappadocia to the east-south-east. The apostle then made an abrupt 180-degree turn to include the province of Asia at the extreme western region of the peninsula before turning north to finish with Bithynia, closely identified with Pontus. Someone familiar with the region at the time could not miss it; Peter's list suggests a rough circle.³ By doing so, he set the stage to speak of something prevalent across the Asian subcontinent, all of which helps us to appreciate several important facts about the early spread of the gospel.

At the time Peter wrote this epistle (ca. A.D. 62-64), Asia Minor had a landmass covering some 291,000 square miles, a bit larger than the state of Texas and generally characterized as rugged, mountainous, of an "unhealthy climate" and filled with bandits.⁴ Given the region's size, terrain, and dangers, the fact that the gospel had achieved such broad penetration within the span of no more than 30 years was impressive. When one considers that Asia was divided into small and mutually hostile states, surely

Left: Nestled 3,900 feet up the hillside, the Sumela Monastery faces the Altindere Valley in northern

Turkey. The first monastery on the site dates to A.D. 386. Located on the Black Sea, this region was part of

the Roman province of Galatia in the first century. Peter addressed believers living in Galatia, and others.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ MURRAY SEVERANCE

Left: Silver tetradrachm of Prusias I, king of Bithynia 228–182 B.C.

Above: Stone mason working

at Philippi. Simon Peter spoke of Christ as "the stone that the builders rejected—this One has become the cornerstone" (1 Pet. 2:7b, HCSB).



ethnic diversity only compounded the difficulty of the mission. Yet despite the issues and perceptions that can tear at the social fabric of any diverse confluence of humanity, followers of Jesus were coming together under a common experience in Christ, as we shall see below.

Who?

The implication of 1 Peter causes us to ask how such a broad distribution of Christians might have come about. We know Paul established churches in the area of Pamphylia and southern Galatia as early as A.D. 48-49 (Acts 13:13-14:28). Later, Paul traveled through those same areas where he had previously founded some churches (15:40-16:5). Though his initial stay at Ephesus was brief (18:19-21), he returned to the Asian city during his third missionary journey, with churches being started during that time (18:23-19:14). Was Peter writing to churches Paul founded? Cephas never mentioned Paul in the letter, so we do not know. Regardless, early Pauline churches and those that other believers founded certainly took their evangelistic mandate seriously. Acts 16:5 confirms that the churches



Right: The Harbor Street as viewed from the corner of the Grand Theater at Ephesus. The Caster River, which emptied into the harbor at Ephesus, eventually filled the harbor with silt. Centuries earlier, Harbor Street led to the water's edge.

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

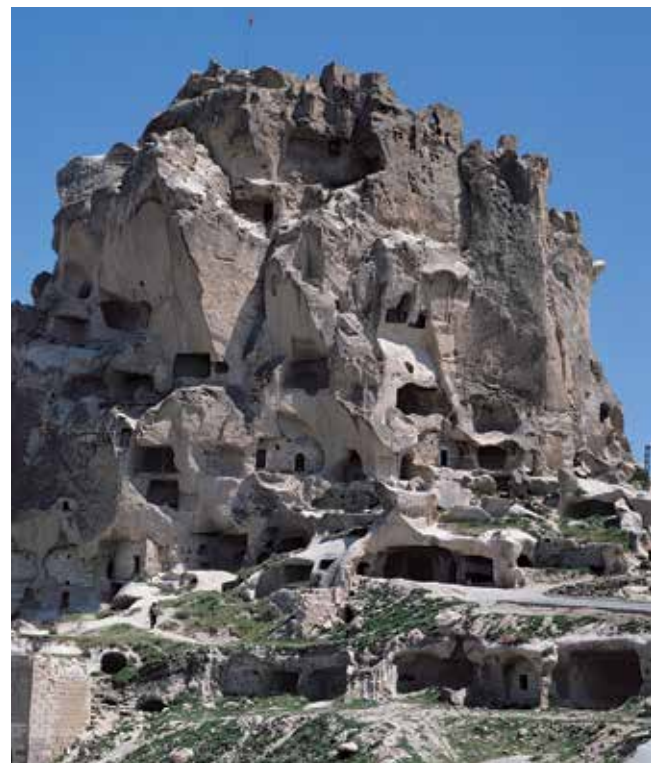
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“were strengthened in the faith and increased in number daily.”⁵ Over the span of 10 to 15 years, those pioneer works had surely penetrated their world and not just numerically.

In fact, the discipleship of new believers had been so successful that families and close friends had taken notice of changed lifestyles; and this did not sit well with many. This then was the reason Peter wrote this epistle; the transformed lives of the believers stood in stark contrast to their former lifestyles. These changes had prompted an acute negative reaction. To be precise, believers were being subjected to harassment and mistreatments. Although this was happening broadly, we find no evidence that indicates Rome had instituted a formal policy throughout Asia Minor to persecute Christians.⁶ What is more likely is that many people had come to faith in Christ in a dramatic, life-altering way; and this was causing a kind of verbal backlash from their kinsmen and friends, more severe in some places than in others.

Why?

In this connection, Peter’s characterization of his readers as “temporary residents,” a theme he repeats (1:1,17; 2:11), is crucial to the interpretation of this letter. Passages such as 1:18; 2:10; and 4:3-4 suggest the readers were predominantly Gentiles.⁷ Although the vast majority of readers had come out of paganism, the new believers were experiencing a kind of social ostracism from communities that no longer saw them as belonging. But they were not alone. To his beleaguered audience, Peter wrote



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from his own “Babylon” (5:13), the archetypal place of exile and alienation in the biblical record (see Ps. 137; Isa. 39:5-7; Jer. 20:4-5; Matt. 1:11).

Peter acknowledged that individuals who had known and cavorted with these Christians before their



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS (5/2/20)

conversion took offense at the believers' transformed lifestyles. The result was fiery ordeals for believers (1 Pet. 4:12).⁸ But, what exactly was the nature of these ordeals? His readers, Peter explained, had recently been the recipients of "various trials" (1:6); had suffered unjustly (2:19); and had endured grief (v. 20), insults (3:9), slander (4:4), and ridicule (v. 14). Yet in spite of the many vexing injustices, the apostle never signaled retreat to the former life to avoid such tribulations. Instead, his answer to the crisis was three-fold: believers were to resist, defend, and rejoice. While those reading his epistle were to resist Satan (5:8-9), Peter expected the trials would continue, providing them with an opportunity to defend their faith (2:12; 3:13-16). These were the first two, but what about the third?

Throughout this brief epistle, Peter reminded his readers of Jesus and His suffering (2:21-23; 3:18; 4:1-2, 13-14). Jesus was their ultimate example of One who suffered unjustly. And herein is the irrefutable scandal of this epistle. Peter dared to cast Christians' suffering in a new light, even though Satan might have inspired their hardship and his willing accomplices carried it out. The apostle identified their sufferings with those of Christ, challenging them, "rejoice as you share in the sufferings of the Messiah, so

that you may also rejoice with great joy at the revelation of His glory" (v. 13). Readers should be clear—while First Peter does offer eschatological hope—the letter is not escapism, for suffering always comes with the territory and can be a source of rejoicing in our new identity in Christ. 🔥

1. In this sense, "catholic" means universal. Also, people spoke of general epistles as being "encyclicals" because the letters were intended to make the rounds, so to speak, to be disseminated to all churches in a given region.

2. For a representation of the provinces of Asia Minor in the first century, see Thomas Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 1998), 245.

3. First Peter does not mention Cilicia, Pamphylia, and Lycia, provinces along the northern Mediterranean coastline of Asia Minor.

4. Land mass estimate is taken from *Encyclopedia.com* [online; accessed 14 July 2013]. Available from the Internet: www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Anatolia.aspx. See also Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 244.

5. All Scripture quotations are from the Homan Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

6. Robert L. Webb, "The Petrine Epistles: Recent Developments and Trends" in *The Face of New Testament Studies*, ed. Scott McKnight and Grant R. Osborne (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 382-83. Webb refutes the view that 1 Peter reflects the formal persecution by the Roman Empire.

7. J.R. Michaels, "1 Peter" in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 916-17.

8. For a full analysis of the theme of suffering in 1 Peter see Webb, "First Peter in Sociohistorical Context" in *The Face of New Testament Studies*, 382-83.

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