
Designation of the Readers in 1 Peter 1:1-2

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The salutation of 1 Peter conforms to the conventional three-point opening employed in first-century correspondence: writer, readers, greeting. Each of these three parts might be expanded according to the author's purpose and the situation confronted. Peter expands each part and gives each of them a distinctive Christian content. But his major expansion is in connection with the designation of his readers. They are his chief concern in writing.

Peter's lengthy designation of his readers presents certain problems for the interpreter. The passage is not beset with textual problems but contains some uncertainties concerning the intended connections in the language employed. The passage is here quoted in the American Standard Version as most adequately reflecting the order of the original: "To the elect who are sojourners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ."

In the original there is no definite article in this lengthy designation, implying that Peter is concerned with the spiritual character rather than the mere identity of his readers. In view of the difficult situation which they face, Peter's "concern is to emphasize, in the most solemn manner, the supernatural vocation of his correspondents, which should be their sheet-anchor in their trials."¹ The entire designation constitutes a unit, but for purposes of study three points will be noted: the readers' true

character (v. 1b), their geographic location (v. 1c), and the spiritual supports of the readers (v. 2a).

The Essential Character of the Readers

“To the elect who are sojourners of the Dispersion” (v. 1b) renders three words in the original (ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις διασπορᾶς). The added place names make it obvious that specific groups of believers are in view, yet the absence of any article imparts a qualitative character,² “to such as are” That the terms are intended to have a figurative import seems obvious.

The interpreter at once faces the question whether the first word (ἐκλεκτοῖς, “elect”) is to be taken as a separate noun or as an adjective modifying the following noun. Under the former view a strictly literal rendering would be, “to (such as are) elect ones, sojourners of (the) Dispersion,” while the latter would be, “to (such as are) elect sojourners of (the) Dispersion.” The former view identifies the readers under two separate and distinct concepts: they are elect individuals and are also sojourners. The latter view fuses the two thoughts into one two-sided designation: they are “elect sojourners.” The former view makes it possible to separate the two concepts and even to transfer “elect” to verse 2, as is done, for example, in the Authorized Version.

In form the word ἐκλεκτός is a verbal adjective, but it may also function as a noun. When used alone with the article it naturally serves as a noun (Matt. 24:22; 2 Tim. 2:10; etc.), but it can also be a noun without an article (Matt. 22:14; Rom. 8:33; Titus 1:1; etc.). Peter may here have intended it as a noun, but the grammatical structure does not suggest it. It is more natural to accept παρεπιδήμοις (“sojourners”) as the governing noun of the expression, modified by an adjective preceding it and another noun, in the genitive, following it. This is in keeping with Peter’s use of ἐκλεκτός as an adjective in 2:6, 9, although in both of these instances the adjective follows the noun. Support for the view that it is a separate noun is doctrinal, based on the three prepositional phrases in verse 2.

This writer accepts it as preferable to regard ἐκλεκτοῖς as an adjective and to render the phrase, “to such as are elect sojourners of the Dispersion.” Then Peter’s designation fuses a heavenward relationship and an earthly relationship in his characterization of his readers. This double character of the readers underlies all that follows in the epistle.

The verbal adjective "elect" is passive, marking the readers as the objects of the electing action of God who is the unnamed agent. They were chosen by God to be His own in order that they might be partakers of the heavenly inheritance being reserved for them (1:4). United by faith with Christ, the "cornerstone, elect, precious" (2:6), they now constitute "an elect race" (2:9). As "elect sojourners" they now form a separate group, distinct from the world and subject to its hatred and persecution. In themselves they were ordinary people, possessing no innate superiority to their unsaved neighbors, but the initiative of God has made them what they are.

The doctrine of election is a family truth intended to foster the welfare of believers amid the vicissitudes of life. Unfortunately this doctrine, which the human mind cannot wholly comprehend, has been the occasion of much controversy among the saints. The sacred writers did not enter into all the problems that cluster around this doctrine, nor did they attempt to harmonize it with

that other great truth, taught in Scripture and revealed in conscience — the freedom of the human will; their statements of the two apparently conflicting doctrines balance, but do not explain, one another; . . . they teach us by their silence that the proper attitude of the Christian, when brought face to face with mystery, is rest in the Lord, humble child-like confidence in his love and wisdom.³

The designation "elect sojourners of the Dispersion" also indicates Peter's keen awareness of their difficult earthly status. The noun rendered "sojourners" (*παρεπιδήμοις*) occurs in the New Testament only in 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11; and Hebrews 11:13. The compound term portrays the readers as living alongside a people to whom they do not belong, constituting a superimposed alien element. They are resident aliens, temporarily living alongside the natives but not a true part of them. Nor do they expect to be regarded as natives of the place where they now reside. Hebrews 11:13 uses it of the Old Testament saints, while Peter uses it metaphorically of the present status of believers. Called to be God's people, they recognize themselves as temporary residents in this world who are on their way to their heavenly home, to which they eagerly expect to be removed by the summons of their Lord.

This concept of the Christian life is beautifully illustrated in the *Epistle to Diognetus*, an anonymous work dating from the second century:

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by either country, speech, or customs They reside in their respective countries, but only as aliens. They take part in everything as citizens and put up with everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their home, and every home a foreign land. . . . They find themselves in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. They spend their days on earth, but hold citizenship in heaven.⁴

The earthly status of the readers is further described by the genitive "of the Dispersion" (διασπορᾶς). This term supplements the thought of their alien status. The compound noun, made up of the preposition *διά*, basically meaning "through," and the noun *σπορά*, "a sowing," indicates that the readers are scattered minority groups. "The Dispersion" was a standard Jewish term to denote the Jews living outside of their Palestinian homeland, scattered abroad among the Gentiles (cf. John 7:35). In James 1:1 the expression, "to the twelve tribes which are of the Dispersion" (ASV), seems best understood as denoting Jewish Christians outside of Palestine.⁵ Those who hold that Peter also was writing to Jewish Christians see confirmation for that view in this term. But Peter's use of the term, which is accompanied by neither the definite article nor the mention of "the twelve tribes," is not parallel to James 1:1. It is more natural to hold that Peter uses the term in a metaphorical sense to picture his readers as a scattered minority in a non-Christian world. They were not closely unified groups surrounded by an alien environment but minorities dispersed far and wide in various areas. But the designation does not mean that those addressed were scattered individuals or unorganized local groups; chapter 5 makes clear that those addressed composed organized churches.

The use of the two terms, "sojourners" and "dispersion," to describe the earthly status of the readers is not tautology; they describe the readers from two different points of view. "Sojourners" views them in relation to the land in which they are now living as aliens; the "dispersion" links them to their true homeland from which they are now absent. Although now living in an alien land, far removed from their homeland, they yet have the assurance of their coming ingathering to their true heavenly home.

The Geographical Location of the Readers

The five nouns, "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia," mark the geographical locations of the readers and

indicate that this is an encyclical letter. The genitives denote the dispersion of the readers as related to these five areas. How widely they were dispersed in each of these regions is not evident. That Peter intended his letter for all Christians in these areas is clear from 5:14, "Peace be unto you all that are in Christ."

Pontus was the generally rugged region south of the Black Sea extending east from Bithynia into the highlands of Armenia. In 65 B.C. the area was divided, the western part being united with Bithynia under one administration, while the eastern portion continued under the rule of a Greek dynasty. Jews from Pontus were present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9). When Christianity was first introduced into this region is not known.

Galatia formerly denoted the district in central Asia Minor ruled by the Celtic Galatians; but in 25 B.C. the area was made a Roman province with parts of Phrygia, Lyconia, and Pisidia added to it, so that the province extended considerably farther to the south than the old ethnic Galatia. No Jews from Galatia are mentioned as being in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. On his first missionary journey Paul established churches in the southern part of the Roman province (Acts 13:13-14:23). According to the North Galatian theory Paul also established churches in the northern part of the province during the second missionary journey (Acts 16:6). But the South Galatian theory, which generally holds the field today, rejects the view that Paul conducted a missionary campaign in the northern part of the province. Under this view no information is available as to who first carried the gospel into the northern parts of the province of Galatia.

Cappadocia was a mountainous inland area in the eastern part of Asia Minor. In A.D. 17 the area became a Roman province. Jews from Cappadocia were in Jerusalem during the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9), but apart from this reference no further mention of the area appears in the New Testament. When and by whom the gospel was first brought into the area is unknown.

Asia here, as in all its twenty-one occurrences in the New Testament, denotes the province and not the continent of Asia, or even Asia Minor. It covered the western shores of Asia Minor and extended inland to the borders of Galatia. It was constituted a Roman province in 133 B.C. and in New Testament times was staunchly pro-Roman. The province was effectively evangelized during Paul's ministry at Ephesus on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10).

Bithynia lay along the southern shore of the Black Sea west of Pontus. In 65 B.C. it was united with the western portion of Pontus as a single province. Bithynia is not mentioned in Acts 2:9-10. On his second missionary journey, Paul, for some unstated reason, was divinely restrained from working in Bithynia (Acts 16:7). Just when Christianity first entered the province is not known. The well-known letter of the imperial legate, Pliny the Younger, to the Roman Emperor Trajan in A.D. 112 indicates that by then Christianity had already been entrenched in the area for many years, with the result that the pagan temples were almost deserted.⁶

It has been debated whether these five names are here to be taken in the sense of Roman provinces or as designations of old geographical areas.⁷ Under the former view the designated area was larger and included all of Asia Minor north and west of the Taurus Mountains. The view that the reference is to the Roman provinces is most probable. Bennett observes, "In New Testament times there was no general name in use corresponding to Asia Minor; hence this list is the natural way of describing that area."⁸ The existence of Christian churches in these provinces bears eloquent witness to much unrecorded missionary work during the first thirty years of the Christian church.

The order of these five names has evoked considerable discussion. Bigg speculated that the Christians of Pontus were contemplating a great mission and had asked Peter for guidance; since the movement was their own, Peter's messenger would naturally begin with them.⁹ But nothing is known of such a mission in Pontus and it finds no basis in the letter. Beare conjectured that Pontus and Bithynia were named first and last since the persecution being experienced by the readers was centered there.¹⁰ But this is based on Beare's late dating of the epistle (in A.D. 111-112) and the unwarranted assumption that there was little or no persecution in the other areas mentioned.

The most probable suggestion seems to be that the order used indicates the anticipated route of travel by the bearer of the letter. Under this view the order has been appealed to for evidence concerning the perplexing problem of Peter's location at the time of writing. If Peter was in the city of Babylon, it is difficult to see why Pontus should be mentioned first; the natural thing would have been to begin with Cappadocia, since it was nearest Babylon. If Peter was in Rome, the messenger could have taken a ship to some Pontic port and begun the overland journey from there;

but if the messenger came from Rome, the logical place for him to disembark would have been at Ephesus, so beginning with Asia. The order is difficult for either view. If the order indicates the route of the messenger, the exact route taken must have been determined by some considerations no longer known. The number of churches or their distribution in these areas is not known.

The Spiritual Supports for the Readers

The three prepositional phrases in verse 2 seem best understood as connecting directly with Peter's prior designation of the readers. They enlarge on the divine aspect in their characterization as "elect sojourners of the Dispersion" and are intended to give them spiritual support in their afflictions because of their faith. Peter undergirds their faith through a portrayal of the activity of the entire Godhead in their Christian experience. This reference to the Trinity was not evoked by a need to defend the doctrine but to strengthen suffering saints.

The precise connection of these three phrases has been differently viewed. It is common to connect them directly with the term "elect" with which Peter began his designation of the readers. This connection lies behind the transposition of "elect" to verse 2 in the Authorized Version. But this connection is not obvious from Peter's word order, for while one would expect the word "elect" to stand immediately after "Bithynia," no less than seven nouns intervene to make this connection improbable.

Even more improbable is the view which connects these three phrases with "apostle," a view held by various ancient commentators and supported by Cook.¹¹ It faces the difficulty of the even larger amount of material between "apostle" and these phrases. Nor is it likely that Peter would thus return to a defense of his apostleship after his identification of the readers (contrast Gal. 1:1-2). The letter gives no indication that Peter felt it necessary thus to enlarge his apostolic office.

More probable is the view that these three phrases modify all of verse 1, applying to both writer and readers.¹² Obviously they are applicable to both Peter and his readers as fellow believers. But it is much more natural to take these phrases as a part of the entire dative construction identifying the readers. Since these three phrases in verse 2 stress the divine action in the lives of the readers, they do have a close relation to their status as God's elect.

But they do not merely give a closer definition of their election, instead they relate to their total position as “elect sojourners of the Dispersion.” “It is because they are ‘chosen’ by God that they are now exiles of the dispersion in the world.”¹³

The words “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” correlate their status as “elect sojourners of the Dispersion” with God’s foreknowledge. “According to” (κατά and the accusative) indicates a standard or norm; their present circumstances as elect sojourners are in full accord with the divine “foreknowledge” (προγνώσιν). This noun occurs twice in the New Testament (Acts 2:23 and here), while its verbal form appears five times (Acts 26:5; Rom. 8:29; 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:20; 2 Pet. 3:17). Only in Acts 26:5 and 2 Peter 3:17 does the term have the classical meaning of “knowing beforehand.” In the remainder of its New Testament occurrences it “is to be understood less as a passive ‘knowing in advance’ than an active ‘taking note of,’ an eternal intention to bless.”¹⁴ The divine foreknowledge of the readers involves His favorable regard for them as part of His deliberate plans and purposes. His affectionate regard for them was not due to what they were in themselves but can only be understood as the manifestation of His gracious character as “God the Father.” This double designation declares His infinite power to realize His beneficent purposes with them, while His character as Father assures His loving concern for their well-being amid trying circumstances. Adams observes, “Peter sets aside all doubts and misgivings, and opens new interpretative horizons for those who have become bogged down in the pressures of the moment. God knows about everything; indeed, He has always known. There are no surprises in all of this; it is a part of His purposes.”¹⁵

The words “in sanctification of the Spirit” indicate the means used to further the Father’s loving purposes for them. The noun “sanctification” (ἁγιασμός) points to the act or process of sanctifying rather than to the resultant state of holiness (ἁγιωσύνη). It includes the idea of consecration as well as cleansing, but the former is the more prominent element here. Peter points to the Spirit’s work of setting them apart from the world as God’s chosen people by keeping them conscious of their distinctiveness and so making them more and more holy in inner reality.

The genitive “of the Spirit” (πνεύματος) is grammatically open to two different interpretations. It may be an objective genitive,¹⁶ making the human spirit the object of this sanctifying work. Then the term is properly written with a small letter, “in sanctifi-

cation of (the) spirit." More probably the genitive is subjective, meaning that the Holy Spirit is the agent of the sanctifying. The context makes this view decidedly preferable as preserving the Trinitarian reference. But Cook suggests that this very ambiguity of the expression may be intentional, in that it "may represent the certain truth that sanctification is the result of a complex work wrought by the Spirit on the consenting will."¹⁷ If the genitive is objective, it is assumed that the sanctifying of the human spirit is the work of the Holy Spirit; if it is subjective, the truth that the human spirit is the sphere of the Spirit's work is left unmentioned as self-evident.

"Unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" expresses the intended outcome of the work of God with His people. "Obedience and sprinkling," simply connected by the coordinating conjunction, marks a delicate blending of the human and the divine in the result.

Interpreters face the problem as to whether both "obedience" and "sprinkling" are to be understood as being modified by the genitive "of Jesus Christ." Typical of the view that this genitive goes with both nouns is the rendering of the New International Version, "for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by His blood."¹⁸ This is possible and the resultant meaning is unobjectionable, but it labors under the difficulty of simultaneously giving the genitive "of Jesus Christ" an objective meaning with the first noun ("obedience to Jesus Christ") and a subjective meaning with "blood" ("by his blood"). It would be possible to avoid this problem by connecting "unto obedience" with what precedes, "in sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience." But this connection is objectionable as destroying the structural sequence of the three prepositional phrases, each beginning with a different preposition. Kelly connected the genitive "of Jesus Christ," viewed as a subjective genitive, with both nouns: "to obey as Christ obeyed and to be sprinkled with His precious blood."¹⁹ But such an introduction of the personal example of Jesus here does not fit into the context which deals with God's action in the life of believers.

In view of these difficulties it seems best to hold that "obedience" is used absolutely, as also in verse 14. The unmodified phrase "unto obedience" is then a terse reference to the human side in salvation.

"Obedience" (ὕπακοήν), a compound noun, conveys the picture of listening and submitting to that which is heard. It involves

a personal change of attitude, reversing the characteristic attitude of rebellion and self-will dominating the life of the unsaved. Rees remarks, "The sign and proof of being among the 'elect' is not an empty prating of how secure we are once we have believed, but rather how sensitive we are to the principle and practice of obedience to the Savior we have trusted."²⁰

In holding that "obedience" is here used without a modifier, Peter does not indicate to what or whom one's obedience is given. But the primary meaning seems to be "obedience to the truth," the saving truth of the gospel, as Peter expresses it in 1:22 (cf. "the obedience of faith" in Rom. 1:5; 15:18; 16:26). "Obedience is the first act, as well as the permanent characteristic of true faith."²¹

"And sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" closely links the human response with the divine provision. Peter's two-sided picture of "obedience and sprinkling of the blood" is apparently derived from the scene in Exodus 24:3-8. After the Israelites at Mount Sinai heard God's Word to them through Moses and said, "All the words which Jehovah hath spoken will we do" (24:3), Moses sprinkled the altar and the people with blood, thereby bringing them into and sealing the covenant between them and God.

The New covenant into which Peter's readers had been brought was sealed by the "blood of Jesus Christ," who is "the mediator of a better covenant" (Heb. 8:6; 12:24). As sprinkled by His blood, they are now the recipients of its blessings (Heb. 9:11-15). The reference to the sprinkled blood is figurative. It "necessarily carried a reference to the death of Jesus, but the emphasis lies not on the violent nature of his death but on its redemptive nature (cf. Heb. 9:22)."²²

While "unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" seems to have primary reference to the believers' admission into the New covenant, the efficacy of His blood certainly extends to their entire subsequent life as believers. They must ever be eager to obey the revealed will of God and continuously avail themselves of the blood's cleansing power (1 John 1:7). Stibbs suggests that this extension of the picture is perhaps suggested by the order of the two nouns in Peter's statement: "Our calling is to obey; but when we fail the atoning blood can still be sprinkled."²³

In looking back over Peter's designation of his readers, one is awed by the sweep and richness of his statement. If one has been prone to think of Peter primarily as an aggressive man of action,

he here reveals himself also as a man who had a firm grasp of the great spiritual realities of the faith.

This passage further reveals that its author has a marked ability to present his thoughts in a balanced, cohesive manner. Instead of making a disjointed emphasis on the doctrine of election, Peter in describing his readers as "elect sojourners of the Dispersion" presents a balanced picture of the readers which effectively fuses the divine and the human in their circumstances and experiences.

Notes

- 1 J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 39.
- 2 "The articular construction emphasizes *identity*; the anarthrous construction emphasizes *character*" (H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [New York: Macmillan Co., 1950], p. 140, italics theirs).
- 3 B. C. Caffin, "I. Peter," in *The Pulpit Commentary* (Chicago: Wilcox & Follett Co., n.d.), p. 2.
- 4 David Otis Fuller, comp., *Valiant for the Truth: A Treasure of Evangelical Writings* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1961), pp. 9-10.
- 5 D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James: Tests of a Living Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), pp. 36-38.
- 6 *Pliny, Letters and Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 2:284-91.
- 7 See the summary of arguments in Ernest Best, *I Peter*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants; Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1971), pp. 14-15.
- 8 W. H. Bennett, *The General Epistles, James, Peter, John, and Jude*, The Century Bible (London: Blackwood, Le Bas, & Co., n.d.), p. 185.
- 9 Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), pp. 69-70, 74-75.
- 10 Francis Wright Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), pp. 41-43.
- 11 F. C. Cook, "The First Epistle General of Peter," in *The Speaker's Commentary, New Testament*, vol. 4 (London: John Murray, 1881), pp. 173-74, 186.
- 12 So Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1947), p. 119; Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter*, pp. 75-76; Best, *I Peter*, pp. 70-71.
- 13 Best, *I Peter*, p. 70.
- 14 Kenneth S. Wuest, *First Peter in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1942), p. 15.
- 15 Jay E. Adams, *Trust and Obey: A Practical Commentary on First Peter* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1978), p. 7.
- 16 In an objective genitive "the noun in the genitive *receives* the action," and in a subjective genitive, "the noun in the genitive *produces* the action" (Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar*, p. 78, italics theirs).
- 17 Cook, "The First Epistle General of Peter," p. 174.
- 18 *New International Version, Containing the Old Testament and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978).
- 19 William Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter* (London: C. A. Hammond, 1923), p. 10.
- 20 Paul S. Rees, *Triumphant in Trouble: Studies in I Peter* (Westwood, NJ:

Fleming H. Revell, 1962), p. 25.

21 Cook, "The First Epistle General of Peter," p. 174.

22 Best, *1 Peter*, p. 72.

23 Alan M. Stibbs, *The First Epistle General of Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Tyndale Press; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), p.73.

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Date of Filing: October 1, 1979*

Bibliotheca Sacra

Published quarterly by Dallas Theological Seminary, 3909 Swiss Avenue, Dallas, Texas 75204

The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, and managing editor are *Publisher* Dallas Theological Seminary, 3909 Swiss Avenue, Dallas, Texas 75204 *Editor* John F Walvoord, M A , Th D , D D , 3909 Swiss Avenue, Dallas, Texas 75204 *Managing Editor*, Roy B Zuck, A B , Th D , 3909 Swiss Avenue Dallas, Texas 75204

The owner is Dallas Theological Seminary, 3909 Swiss Avenue, Dallas Texas 75204

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