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The Living Stone and a Chosen People: Vocation, Community, and Task in 1 Peter 2:4-10

STUART L. LOVE

One of the leading ways to explore the meaning of vocation/calling in the New Testament is through the biblical theme of election. The New Testament uses the word “elect” (*eklekton, eklektoi*) in a variety of ways. At Jesus’ crucifixion, Luke states, “And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his *chosen one!*’” (23:35).

In turn, the disciples of Jesus are also God’s elect. At the end of the age, Matthew tells us, the angels will gather the elect “from the four winds, one end of heaven to the other” (Matt 24:31).¹ Paul asks, “Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies” (Rom 8:33). Or, among the words of thanksgiving for blessings in Ephesians we find that God has chosen the church in Christ, “before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” (1:3). Chosen by the grace of God, the task of the elect is to do good works, “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (2:10).

However, no New Testament writing emphasizes the theme of election in such a comprehensive fashion as does 1 Peter. The term is found in the opening (1:2), in the conclusion (5:13), and three times (vv. 4, 6, 9) in a climactic passage that concludes the first subunit of the letter’s body (2:4-10). John H. Elliott states, “Nowhere in the NT does the theme of election assume the dominating significance that it has in 1 Peter.”² This article will explore the meaning of election in the climactic passage, 2:4-10. But first, it is necessary to say a few words about the life setting of 1 Peter.

THE LIFE SETTING OF 1 PETER

1 Peter is written to churches of Asia in the midst of severe suffering and social tension (2:19-24; 3:14-15; 4:12-19; 5:10). Throughout the letter, Christians are taught not to consider their plight a disgrace. Rather, they are to “glorify God” because they “bear this name” (4:16). Their suffering grows out of a widespread alienation within the social and cultural life of the communities in which they reside.

At stake, Paul Achtemeier reminds us, is the very “nature of the Christian community in its relationship to its surrounding world.”³ For example, in the opening verses of chapter 1, three interrelated words, “exile, diaspora, elect” (*parepidēmos, diasporas, eklektos*), describe the Christian communities, over and against their surrounding social setting. Two of these words, exile and diaspora, are not found in 2:4-10, but are indispensable to understanding the passage.

Dispersion (Diaspora)

The term diaspora appears only in verse 1 in 1 Peter. In its basic meaning, it refers to Israel as a dispersed ethnic population tied together in its history and its cultural identity to the land of Israel. Here, the word probably demands a metaphorical interpretation, referring not exclusively to Christians who have a

Judean heritage but to all Christians in the five provinces of Asia, who, like exiled Judeans, dwell as strangers in their surrounding culture.⁴ Elliott summarizes their vulnerability:

For the early Christian movement, living as an alien people scattered in territories once beyond the borders of the traditional homeland posed the perennial problem encountered by Diaspora Israel and all displaced, dispossessed, and disenfranchised peoples: the maintenance of a distinctive communal identity, social cohesion, and commitment to group values, traditions, beliefs, and norms in the face of constant pressures urging assimilation and conformity to the dominant values, standards, and allegiances of the broader society.⁵

Israel's dispersion provides a prototype of the church's experience in the world.

Exiles (parepidēmos) and Aliens (paroikos)

The second term, exiles in its present form, is rarely used in the Bible (see Gen 23:4; Ps 38:13; 1 Pet 1:1, 2:11; Heb 11:13). It refers to one, whether by choice or not, who lives in a foreign land. Like the word dispersion, it often denotes a social condition of vulnerability, punishment, or calamity. People in the Roman Empire of the first century frequently lived far from their original homes. A classic example of an exile in the biblical heritage is Abraham (Gen 23:4). Three times in 1 Peter this word or its equivalent appears (1:1, 17, 2:11) and describes Christians in the midst of intense suffering and social estrangement.

In the third instance (2:11), a second word translated alien is used, "Beloved, I urge you as aliens (*paroikous*) and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul." Aliens in Roman society were those who lacked full citizenship. Seneca,⁶ for example, asserts that in all major cities of his period there was a large group of people from other locations. When linked to the term exile, the word alien, *paroikous*, intensifies what Elliott refers to as "the precarious condition of the believers as aliens and 'outsiders' in Asia Minor society."⁷

Frequently in the Bible, God's people are described as resident aliens in the face of perilous social circumstances. Examples that come to mind in the Old Testament include Abraham (Gen 12:10; 15:13; 23:4; Deut 26:5), Lot (Gen 19:9), and the Israelites (1 Chr 29:15; Ps 39:12; 119:19; 120:5-7). Stephen notes that Abraham's descendants would be "resident aliens in a country belonging to others" (Acts 7:6) and that Moses was a resident alien in Midian (Acts 7:29; see Exod 2:11-22). Truly, the heritage of ancient Israel was that of a "wandering Aramean" (Deut 26:5-7). Paul in Acts 13:17 reminds his audience, "The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors and made the people great during their stay (*residence as aliens*) in the land of Egypt." The life setting of Christians in 1 Peter is related most specifically to the heritage of ancient Israel.

In some cases, Christians in Asia Minor probably were actual resident aliens who—as merchants, traders, artisans, teachers, or tenant farmers now converted to Christ—found the uncertainty of their social status increased by their faith commitment.

Certainly, the phrase resident alien also carries a metaphorical thrust. Out of their election to God in Christ, these Christians suffered and were slandered as they refused to conform to the values of the larger society. Achtemeier observes, "Used of Christians, it describes the fact that because of their unwillingness to adopt the mores of their surrounding society," they could "expect the disdainful treatment often accorded exiles (e.g., 1 Pet 4:3-4)."⁸ Elliott believes that 1 Peter "reflects an historical process in which the condition of *some* addressees as actual strangers and resident aliens" constitutes "the experiential basis for eventually characterizing the condition of *all* Christians in a secular society."⁹

Out of their election to God in Christ, these Christians suffered and were slandered as they refused to conform to the values of the larger society.

These Christians are “homeless” not because their real home is in heaven (Phil 3:20) or because they are to look for a heavenly home or country (Heb 11:13-16); rather, they are homeless here and now. But in the midst of that reality, they have a home with God (1 Pet 2:5, 4:17). Achtemeier concludes:

The phrase ‘aliens and exiles’ is thus not only a description of their present reality, it is also a description of a status they are to maintain, lest by abandoning that status and reverting to their former values and customs, they estrange themselves from God.¹⁰

This is a major dimension of the life setting in which the theme of election should be read in 2:4-10.

ELECTION IN 1 PETER 2:4-10

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will
not be put to shame.”

⁷To you then who believe, he is precious, but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner,”

⁸and

“A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
But now you are God’s people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy. (NRSV)

With this passage before us, a number of structural elements related to its message should be noted. First, 2:4-10 may be divided into two interrelated sections, verses 4-8 and 9-10. Important to both sections is the identity of Christians. In the first instance, Peter’s readers, the church, are described as “living stones” (in relation to Jesus Christ, the “living stone”) that are being constituted by God into a “spiritual house to be a holy priesthood” (2:5). Peter quotes Isa 28:16, a stone text, and then ties it to two other texts that also describe stones (Ps 118:22; Isa 8:14). By sharing the life of the risen Lord, Christians constitute with Jesus Christ a home formed by the Holy Spirit (2:5, cf. 4:17). Homeless within their society, they have a home with God.

In the second section (9-10), Christians are characterized by identity images of ancient Israel drawn from Exod 19:6 and Isa 43:20-21. In the Exodus passage, all of Israel, not just the tribe of Levi, is to be “a priestly kingdom” consecrated for service to God (see Isa 61:6), a “holy nation” set apart and belonging to a holy God. If Israel agrees to hear the Lord’s voice, she will be his “special possession” (see Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps 135:4). In the Isaiah passage, Israel is described as “my chosen people, the people I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise” (Isa 43:21). In other words, Israel is created by God to bring glory to God in a new exodus (see Isa 43:7).

Accordingly, the first section of the 1 Peter passage (4-8) stresses the inseparable connection of the church's identity to Christ. The second section (9-10) secures Gentile Christians in Asia Minor to the rich heritage of God's people, ancient Israel. This twofold identity is essential to their election.

Second, the chosen status of the believers in the section (v 9a, "a chosen race" literally "an elect stock") is associated with the elect status of Christ, "the living stone" rejected by mortals "yet chosen and precious in God's sight" (2:4). The rejection of Christ probably points to the ongoing rejection suffered by Christians in Asia Minor—that is Christ is rejected through the denunciation of the Christian faith by the larger society.¹¹ Nevertheless, the rejected stone is chosen and deemed precious by God. Peter's message is that in a similar way, suffering Christians derive comfort from following Christ. Achtemeier states, "they too, though rejected and alienated in their culture, nevertheless have God on their side and will ultimately be vindicated."¹²

Elliott states, "As Jesus Christ is the 'elect stone' (v 4d), as was Israel's Messiah (v 6b), so his followers constitute an 'elect people.'"¹³ There is a unified correspondence between Christ and the believing

community, elect Lord/people, that "contrasts the honor given by God to the faithful (v 7a) with the shame experienced by the nonbelievers (vv 7b-8)."¹⁴ Being God's people separates and distinguishes the believers from those who are ignorant of God and who reject Jesus as God's agent of salvation (see 1 Pet 1:14-17).

Third, as indicated, the stone imagery in the first section describes the construction of a *spiritual house* that in turn depicts a *holy priesthood* engaged in worship. The identity of the church is related to a task—"a holy priesthood" that offers "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:5). This means that viewed *together*, as a body of priests, Christians present their lives of faith and love to God as a sacrifice (cf. Rom 12:1; Eph 5:2; Phil 4:18; Hebrews 12:28-13:16). Such conduct, Peter believes, will cause unbelieving outside critics to see their honorable deeds and glorify God (2:11-12).

And among the Christian groups, for example, there is an imperative that they remove all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander so they can grow into salvation—that is, by doing so they will taste that the Lord is good (2:1-2). Such is the priestly worship, the holy task, of God's elect people. Similarly, in the second section, God's people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" have the task of proclaiming "the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (2:9). This language echoes the words of Isaiah, "so that they might declare my praise" (43:21).

The combination of these two interrelated tasks—conduct and evangelism, deeds and declarations—may correspond to Peter's view of ministry in chapter 4. As good stewards of God's grace, Christians are to

serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God: whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen" (4:10-12).

Fourth, it is the believing community as a collectivity that constitutes it as God's elect. All of the Old Testament images used in this passage, including—and perhaps especially—the notion of the priesthood of believers, identify the corporate nature of Christian election. On one hand, this dismantles traditional notions of clergy and laity. On the other hand and against Luther's view of this passage, emphasis is not on individual Christians as priests but on the entire community as a priestly kingdom as found in Exodus 19:6 and Isaiah 61:6. Commenting on the phrase "holy priesthood" in verse 5, Achtemeier states:

Nevertheless, the rejected stone is chosen and deemed precious by God. Peter's message is that in a similar way, suffering Christians derive comfort from following Christ.

While this verse is the basis of the Reformation idea of the priesthood of all believers, the point of this is not the priestly status of each individual Christian, nor the idea that each is to function as priest for his or her fellow Christian. The priesthood in this context can be understood only as corporate with a function that, as the parallel with 2:9b suggests, includes a witness to all humanity.¹⁵

Elliott concurs, and in addition, ties the notion of priesthood to election, "*Election rather than priesthood is its central focus*. The theme of election that extends from the letter's beginning to its end (1:1; 5:13) receives here its most profound articulation."¹⁶ The honorific images of a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" explicate the character of the covenantal people of God at Sinai. The church, in continuity with ancient Israel, has taken over the role once assigned to Israel. The terms drawn from Hosea at the end of the passage (1 Pet 2:10) emphasize the significant transformation that has taken place.

"Once you were not a people;
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy."

Having explored the significance of vocation, community, and task in 2:4-10, what can we learn?

LEARNING FROM 1 PETER—IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

We Are Aliens and Exiles in our Social World

This is a most difficult notion in a culture in which the church does not experience actual suffering and social alienation. However, the metaphorical meaning of the language must not be lost because it is essential to the character and nature of the election of God's people. Somehow, we are strangers and aliens even when the rhetoric of our social world is "in God we trust." However, even though our cultural rhetoric may mitigate against our being exiles in the world, is it not true that the church is under pressure to assimilate and conform to the dominant values, standards, and allegiances of the broader secular society?

Somehow, varying from one social context to another, we are resident aliens—in our marriages, in the way we choose to live the single life, how we nurture our children, behave in the workplace, and make decisions about recreation.

We are also strangers to the dominant ethos in our commitment to care for the poor, in our attitudes toward interpersonal and social violence, in our treatment of issues of war and peace, and as we seek spiritual and social reconciliation for all of God's creation. The community of faith, looking into a mirror, should say, "We are not at home in this world." How much, though, have we been lulled into acceptance of our world?

An added challenge is to resist secular influences within the church that can choke out a quest for vitality in our religious experience. We are not called to be "at ease in Zion." Conversely, we must avoid a martyr's complex that too easily spawns a spiritual arrogance in its search for suffering, an unwarranted persecution that weakens our witness to the essential nature of how we are aliens and exiles in our social world.

1 Peter provides at least two examples of what it means to be alien to our context as we follow the example of Christ. First, we are to live earthly lives "no longer by human desires but by the will of God" (4:2), forsaking the way of the excesses of dissipation (4:3-4). Second, innocent suffering for the sake of Christ generates healing power within the church because of Christ's example and sacrifice for all Christians (2:18-25). The language of Christ becomes the language of Christians, "rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight" (2:4).

Our Election Is that of a Believing Community

The communal aspect of election is difficult in a society that stresses individualism. At this point, Luther is both blessing and bane, as are those whose heritage grows out of the left wing of the Reformation—the Anabaptists and their successors (which to some extent include our heritage). Luther's emphasis on individual Christians as priests aided greatly to elevate the ordinary life to what Mark R. Schwehn calls "the arena for the achievement of human excellence."¹⁷

The danger, however, is embracing individualism to the extent of what James A. Sanders indicates as "understanding the Church as the sum of the individuals who make personal decisions to enter."¹⁸ This has the effect of setting "aside the earlier tradition of the Church being the heir of Israel, called forth by God ... and established by Christ for the whole world."¹⁹

An example may be Gordon T. Smith's book on vocation, *Courage & Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential*.²⁰ Smith emphasizes how God calls a person to take a sober look at self. Eventually, the community is included, but the movement of the writing is from the individual to the community. A better perspective is that of Michael J. Himes. In his exploration of the Holy Spirit in the world, Himes states:

But notice where we say that Spirit is to be found: in the church, i.e. in the community. That means that the Spirit of God now dwells not first and foremost in you or in me but in us. God is to be encountered in our community with others. Can we arch-individualists—for all Americans are arch-individualists—affirm that God is not found in the depths of my heart but in my life and work and struggle with other people? It is one thing to affirm the existence of God and my need for God; it is quite another to affirm that this means that I need you and her and him and them, and that without all of you I cannot find the Spirit of God.²¹

Accordingly, when vocation is anchored in a strong theology of the church, Christians are better equipped to address and serve various social issues and needs within the larger society. 1 Peter, as does the entire biblical witness, begins with the community as the place where an individual finds identity and a communal task. Care should be given that as we teach students in our colleges and universities and members in our churches about vocation that we do so from the perspective of the elect community. Is there not a tendency to accept the call of God in personal terms to the extent that the church can be left behind?

Vocation Is Tied to Task

Election is not an end in itself. It is a means of doing God's task in the world. As a "treasured possession," Israel was to obey the Lord's voice and keep his covenant (Exod 19:6). The people formed by God for himself were to declare his praise (Isa 43:21). God in Christ Jesus creates the church for good works (Eph 2:10). 1 Peter defines that twofold task; the church is to render spiritual sacrifices as a "holy priesthood" and to proclaim God's mighty acts because they have been called out of darkness into God's marvelous light (2:5, 9).

CONCLUSION

1 Peter provides an outworking of the New Testament doctrine of election/vocation. At its core, the meaning of vocation grows out of a distinctive communal identity in which the church resists assimilation and conformity to the dominant values of the broader society. Our vocation is related to our identity to Christ and to our contiguous, rich, historic heritage of being God's people.

In the midst of social estrangement within the larger society, the theme of vocation provides comfort and a living hope as the church faithfully follows Christ. To the world, our unique identity resident in our vocation is designed in part to lead those who reject the Christian message to glorify God.

Whether in the perilous or in the quiet activity of everyday life, the church with dignity and meaning considers its various forms of work. This surely includes decisions people make concerning their careers—

whether as bankers, theologians, plumbers, or fishermen. These decisions are made for the sake of Christ and the people of God.

But more fundamentally, the Christian calling in all aspects of our lives is to Christ's mission of love and service. At its core, Christian vocation means bearing the cross of Christ, upholding one another in love, and sharing in Christ's mission to the world.²²

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Matt 20:16; 22:14; 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Luke 18:7; Rom 8:33; Col 3:12; 2 Tim 2:10; Titus 1:1; Rev 17:14. At times, an individual such as Rufus can be singled out (Rom 16:13).
- 2 John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*. (Anchor Bible Commentary, Vol. 37b; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 446.
- 3 Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia; ed. Eldon Jay Epp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 80.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 5 Elliott, 314.
- 6 As cited in Achtemeier, 174, note 24.
- 7 Elliott, 366.
- 8 Achtemeier, 82.
- 9 Elliott, 481.
- 10 Achtemeier, 175.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 154.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 154.
- 13 Elliott, 435.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Achtemeier, 156.
- 16 Elliott, 451-52.
- 17 Mark R. Schwehn, "Teaching as Profession and Vocation," *Theology Today* 50, no. 3 (October 2002): 397.
- 18 James A. Sanders, "The Family in the Bible," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* Vol. 32 (Summer 2002/3): 124.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Gordon T. Smith, *Courage & Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).
- 21 Michael J. Himes, *Doing the Truth in Love, Conversations about God, Relationships and Service* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 31.
- 22 Schwehn, 399.

