CHAPTER EIGHT

LIVING IN THE NATION, IN THE HOUSEHOLD, AND IN THE BODY

τὴν ἀναστροφὴν ὑμῶν ἐν τοῖς ἐθνεσιν ἐχοντες καλήν

Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles (2.12a)

Ἐν τοῖς ἐθνεσιν: Christian Morality In Social-Political Reality

Peter begins his letter with words that open up a large landscape—literally, virtually all of Asia Minor; figuratively, the whole socio-political world; theologically, a cosmos that stretches into heavenly space and moves outside ordinary time. The intended range of recipients of this letter is wide; neither is the scope of its moral discourse small:

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance (1.1–2).

This salutation evokes a question Peter will answer in his letter: Who are the ‘exiles of the dispersion,’ and to whom and where do they belong? This section of the study focuses on the way Peter uses certain experiences and understandings from the socio-political domain to shape his moral discourse. Foregrounded here are the primary social understandings that arise from people’s experience of peoplehood itself—of belonging to a nation or ethnic group. The way such experiences constrain identity and behavior is a central component of Peter’s message.

I will argue that Peter essentially answers the where-do-believers-belong question: you belong ‘in Christ’ (ἐν Χριστῷ). As followers of Jesus, they now belong, above all other allegiances and identity markers, ἐν Χριστῷ. But that belonging, that identity, is also expressed in the language of national and ethnic identity; the ‘Christians,’ Χριστιανοί (4.16), are also the ‘People of God,’ λαὸς θεοῦ (2.10). If ‘in Christ’ answers the ‘where’ question, ‘the People of God’ answers a to-whom—
do-they-belong question. Moreover, those questions and answers cannot be rightly heard without considering the nuanced social-cultural framing Peter proposes when he invites readers to ‘live in reverent fear/awe during the time of your exile.’

Attention is turned in this section, then, to the conceptual metaphorical dynamics of this belonging at the level of peoplehood. The aim is to find out what conceptual metaphor analysis reveals about the ways in which Peter’s moral discourse relies on a reframing of group identity and to consider some potential inferences this reframing or schematization might evoke for readers of the letter.

People Who Belong As A People

Peter directly addresses the tacit identity question raised by the salutation in the portion of the letter that immediately precedes his plunge into specific ethical advice.

NRSV: But 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. 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 (2.9–10).

Into this short section Peter packs a number of powerful metaphors that map geo-political and ethnic religious source concepts onto a target domain he names only ‘you.’ But clearly, ‘you’ stands for the Christians as a group, the collectivity that later would be named the church and that in this epistle is named ‘Christian’ (Χριστιανός, 4.16).

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1 ἐν φόβῳ τῶν τῆς παροικίας ὑμῶν χρόνων ἀναστράφητε (1.17b).