

CHRISTIAN AND SOCIETY IN 1 PETER: CRITICAL SOLIDARITY

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Abstract

In a combination of a structural and a sociological approach, the 'world behind' and 'the world in' the text of 1 Peter 1:13-25 is explored in order to derive some implications for the 'world' which opens up 'in front of' this text within the socio-political situation in South Africa today. It is argued that the concept of a holy life which is expected from a Christian, might perhaps be 'translated' into critical solidarity: as Christians we are involved strangers. We should live in critical solidarity with our world, our society and our country.

In recent developments in the methodology of New Testament studies much attention has been given to structural and sociological methods of exegesis (for structural methods cf. eg. Louw 1983; Vorster 1983; and for sociological exegesis cf. eg. De Villiers 1982; Meeks 1983; Malherbe 1983; Elliot 1981; Kee 1980; Stambaugh & Balch 1986 - to name but a few of the never-ending flow of publications on these approaches). Since these two approaches stem from two totally different scientific disciplines (Literary Theory and Sociology) with different philosophical presuppositions, each has, to a great extent, thus far developed individually. (An important exception is the book on Philemon by Petersen [1985] in which he successfully combined a literary and sociological approach). Each method has offered and is still offering invaluable aid to the interpretation of the New Testament - materially as well as methodologically. I believe that a combination of these two exegetical methods could be very valuable in the interpretation and preaching of the New Testament.

The reason for this endeavour to combine two totally different methods of exegesis could well be ascribed to what Vorster (1987:374-394) calls the holistic epistemological paradigm dominating the methodology of New Testament studies

today. Whether or not we are conscious of the influence of this paradigm on our work, we cannot deny that in their interpretation of the text today there is a tendency among New Testament scholars to take into account all relevant information gathered by as many different methods as possible. The danger of unfounded eclecticism and the mixing of the 'unmixable' in this holistic way of thinking is evident. Sound philosophical reflection is necessary in the combined use of exegetical methods of such widely different backgrounds.

However, philosophical and methodological reflection of this nature will not form part of this paper. The purpose of this article is to give a practical illustration of an integration of structural and sociological exegetical methods in an interpretation of a specific passage in the New Testament. Theoretical discussion will, therefore, be limited. This practical orientation leads to a reflection on the possible meaning of the passage for Christians today. It is aimed at the concrete situation of proclaiming the gospel. In actual fact, this article is an adaptation of a sermon preached in the Reformed Church of Cape Town on August 2, 1987. Obviously, not all the exegetical detail given in this article reached the pulpit, and, on the other hand, much more was said than appears here. Nevertheless, I hope to retain something of the vividness and the dynamic character of the proclamation event. Moreover, this article does not pretend to be a fully worked out and detailed scientific exegesis of the passage.

The focal point of the article is an interpretation of the command, 'But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do ...' in 1 Peter 1:15.

In the first place the 'world' behind the text is shortly discussed by means of socio-historical exegesis (mainly based on information given by Goppelt 1982:151-164). In this approach it is assumed that varied correlations between the literary, theological and sociological features and dimensions of the text and its impact on its social contexts exist (Elliot 1981:8); and that elucidation of these correlations will help us understand more clearly the text as an expression of actual Christian experience (Rohrbaugh 1987:103. For a distinction between sociological and socio-historical exegesis, cf De Villiers 1982:22).

Secondly, a discourse analysis of the pericope 1 Peter 1:13-25 is made - an investigation into the 'world' in the text. In this approach the purpose is a 'mapping out' of the semantic structure of the text (Louw 1982:95). By means of this explicit exposition of the sequence of thoughts and the attention given to their interrelationships, it enabled a motivated explanation of the meaning of a proposition in terms of the rest of the immediate textual context.

Finally, the insights gained by both these phases is combined in an exploration of the 'world' which opens up in front of the text (for the term 'world' used in this sense, cf Petersen 1984:38-51 and Smit 1987:30-34, 61-64).

1. The world behind the text

1.1 Historical circumstances

Although there are widely differing opinions among scholars regarding the time of writing of this letter (cf Rousseau 1986:6-11), I believe (with Goppelt 1978:27-30, 1982:164) that there is enough ground to take it between 60 and 90 AD.

This post-Pauline era is introduced by three important historical events between 63 and 70 AD which decidedly influenced the early church:

1) Between AD 60 and 64 three of the most prominent figures of earliest Christianity died as martyrs: Paul, Peter and James, the brother of the Lord. This diminished the very important dynamic character of the church during the first decades. In various regions the situations in the churches also started to develop differently, for example, in Palestine-Syria and Western Asia Minor each church developed its own unique character, influenced by local circumstances.

2) The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD. This event had two direct consequences for the early church:

* The Jewish-Christian church was badly impoverished, hence it lost much of its influence on Hellenistic Christian communities;

* The influence of Palestinian Judaism was practically obliterated and the influence of Hellenistic Judaism was enhanced. As a result, the relationship between the church and Judaism also changed significantly.

3) In AD 64 Christians were prosecuted by Nero in Rome (searching for scapegoats, he blamed them for the fire which destroyed much of Rome). This event also changed the relationship between Christianity and the Roman empire. The church was no longer seen as a sect of Judaism, but throughout the empire it was recognized as a distinctly new religion and throughout the world of the time discrimination against it became commonplace.

1.2 Circumstances in Christian communities

The self-understanding of the Christian communities also saw major changes during the sixties, mainly because of two factors:

1) In the first place there was the typical 'second generation' problem, so well-known in the history of mission work. The second generation usually tries to institutionalise that which the first generation brought into existence by their dynamic participation. Through ritualism and legalism (sacraments and fixed church structures with codes and laws for the church and ordinary life) they try to compensate for the newness and meaningfulness which characterised the era of the first generation. To a certain extent this development is unavoidable since the novelty of a repentance movement as such cannot continue indefinitely in the same manner.

The second generation Christians developed forms and structures hitherto unknown in the church. The liturgy, church government and ordinary daily way of life of

Christians started to take fixed shape. There was a strong tendency among them to conform to the way of life from which they were saved earlier with their conversion to Christianity. Conformity with the general Hellenistic way of life thus became one of the major issues in the church.

2) The second factor was the delay of the *parousia*. Because of the expectation of an imminent *parousia*, the first generation did not bother to develop structures for the church nor became involved in worldly structures. Obedience to the code and principles of the Sermon on the Mount freed them from the conventional way of life and they became *paroikoi* (strangers) within society. (For a comprehensive discussion of the sociological significance of the concept *paroikos* in 1 Peter, cf Elliot, 1981:24-47.) Nevertheless, they did not withdraw themselves from life as, for instance, the Qumran community had done (Meeks, 1983:105). They remained in the cities and continued to go about their daily lives in the streets and neighbourhoods, the shops and agora. They stayed within their marriages, families, occupations and society, expecting the end to be in their lifetime. The *parousia* not taking place became a crisis for the second generation Christians. A tension between the new way of life of the eschatological community and the structures of historical life developed. The longer they waited for the *parousia*, the more people became disappointed and fell back into their old ways of living.

1.3 Theme

Against this background (and, of course, because of the contents of the letter itself) Goppelt (1982:164) is well-founded in formulating the theme of 1 Peter as 'Christian responsibility in society' (in contrast to the more familiar practice of taking 'Christian suffering' as theme. The issue of suffering was rather the occasion for the composition of the letter and a consequence of its theme).

1.4 The kind of society presupposed by the letter

The letter's reference to 'Babylon' (1 Pt 5:13) as the place from whence it was sent, is almost unanimously interpreted by twentieth century scholars as being Rome (Rousseau 1986:9). It was addressed to Christians in Asia-Minor between 64 and 90 AD (probably at the beginning of this period, cf 4:12). Thus it was already more than twenty years since Paul had started his missionary work and Christianity had already spread all over the known world. Everywhere the circumstances of Christians was characterised by social discrimination, although not full persecution.

Christians were not systematically prosecuted by the civil authorities and brought to court. The negative tendency towards them was a phenomenon of their social world, the milieu in which they worked and lived. The enmity consisted of slander and malicious accusations (2:12, 3:15) which probably occasionally led to trials in court. Merely being a Christian could be the cause of suffering (cf 4:15ff).

What was the reason for this discrimination? The answer is given specifically in the letter itself: 'For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose

to do ... They think it is strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you' (1 Pt 4:3f). Some background information about the general Hellenistic *Weltanschauung* could help us to explain this attitude of the gentiles (cf Wilken 1984).

Philostratus (*Vita Apollonii* 5.33) writes about the Jews: 'They cannot share with the rest of mankind in the pleasure of the table, nor join in their libations or prayers or sacrifices: (they) are separated from ourselves by a greater gulf than divides us from Susa or Bactra or the more distant Indies' (= LCL-translation, I, 541).

The Hellenists tolerated this attitude of the Jews mainly because they were a separate ethnic unity. According to Celcus (*C Cels* 5.34) it was part of the order of the world that every nation should preserve their religion and customs and should tolerate those of others. Yet this absolutism of the Jews was experienced as very strange in the fundamentally sincretistic Hellenistic world, but it was tolerated.

To the Hellenistic world the Christians were guilty of more seriously trespassing the basic categories of Hellenistic metaphysics. According to popular philosophy a principle of nature was that all people should live together in peace and harmony (*eirene* and *harmonia*). Since the Christians were not a distinct ethnic unity but family, friends, neighbours, colleagues and fellow citizens, contradiction and suspicion were evoked when Christians distanced themselves from the Hellenistic way of life and laid claim to the offensive notion of religious absolutism (cf Meeks, 1983:100).

According to Celcus (*C. Celcus* 1.3, 5.33ff; 8.14) the religious absolutism of the Christians affronted the Hellenists so much that Christianity was seen as a *stasis*, rebellion against the divine harmony. Hence, Suetonius could speak of Christianity as a 'new and mischievous superstition' (Nero 16=LCL, II, 111) and Tacitus called them 'a class of men, loathed for their vices' of whom vast numbers were convicted by Nero, 'not so much on account of arson as for hatred of the human race' (*Annals* 15.44 = LCL, IV, 283-285). Nonconformity was understood as *odium generis humanum*. The Christian movement was revolutionary not because it had the men and the resources to mount a war against the laws of the Roman empire, but because it created a social group that promoted its own laws and its own patterns of behaviour (Wilken 1984:119).

Goppelt (1982:164) maintains that the letter was written shortly after AD 64, since this conflict with society was still quite new and unprecedented. 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you, as though something strange were happening to you' (1 Pt 4:12).

With this background, we can now move on to an exploration of the world in the text. In the first place an outline of the discourse structure of 1 Pt 1:3 - 3:12 is given. The purpose of this outline is to show how the argument is developed and to expose the position of our passage within the broader textual context. Thereafter, the third paragraph in the outline is analysed in more detail and some explanatory comments are made. Finally, we take a quick look at the meaning of the concept 'holy' in the rest of the Bible.

Goppelt

2. The world in the text

2.1 An outline of the discourse structure of 1 Pt 1:3 - 3:12 1)

1. Exordium (1:1-2)

2. Rejoice and control yourself, even in suffering, because through Jesus Christ we have received a living hope for God's grace and salvation. (1:3-12)

3. THEREFORE, be holy - that is: fear God and love your neighbours. Your previous life-styles have been changed by Jesus Christ, the living Word, to that of God's obedient children. (1:13-25)

4. THIS MEANS THAT as newborn babies you should grow up in, and build upon Jesus Christ who is the true nutrition and the elected (but also rejected by the unfaithful) cornerstone in order to love one another, serve God and witness to the world as his elected people. (2:1-10)

5. THEREFORE, my brothers, I urge you to accept your status as 'rejected' in this world by keeping up your unique life-style as a witness to outsiders. THIS MEANS THAT: (2:11-12)

6. you should submit yourselves to the authorities as conduct of a God-fearing brotherhood; (2:13-17)

7. the slaves amongst you should submit to their masters - even if it means suffering unjustly like Christ, your supreme example and Shepherd; (2:18-25)

8. wives and husbands amongst you should treat their spouses like God-fearing people should, as a witness to convert your non-believing spouses, as well as preserving your relationship with God. (3:1-7)

9. TO CONCLUDE: your interpersonal conduct should be marked by love, forgiveness, peace and righteousness in order that you may receive God's blessing and not his rejection. (3:8-12)

1) Cf Rousseau (1986:507) for a closely corresponding analysis of 1 Peter.

2.2 Discourse analysis of 1 Pt 1:13-25

1 13 Διο αναζωωσαμενοι τας ψυχας της διανοιας υμωννηθοντες
 τελειως ελπισατε επι την φερομενην υμιν χαριν εν αποκαλυψει
 Ιησου Χριστου

2 14 ως τεκνα υπακοης μη συσχηματιζομενοι ταις προτερον εν
 τη αγνοια υμων επιθυμιας
 15 αλλα κατα τον καλεσαντα υμας αγιον
 και αυτοι αγιοι εν παση αναστροφη γενηθητε
 16 διοτι γεγραπται οτι αγιοι εσεσθε οτι εγω αγιος ειμι

3 17 και ει πατερα επικαλεισθε
 τον απροσωποληπτως κρινοντα κατα το εκαστου εργον
 εν φοβω τον της πασοικιας υμων χρονον αναστραφητε
 18 ειδοτες οτι ου φθαρτοις, αργυριω η χρυσιω ελυτρωθητε
 εκ της ματαιας υμων αναστροφης πατροπαραδοτου
 19 αλλα τιμω αιματι ως αμνου αμωμου και
 ασπιλου Χριστου
 20 προεγνωσμενου μεν προ καταβολης κοσμου
 φανερωθεντος δε επ' εσχατου των χρονων δι'
 υμας
 21 τους δι' αυτου πιστους εις θεον
 τον εγειραντα αυτον εκ νεκρων και δοξαν αυτω δοντα
 ωστε την πιστιν υμων και ελπιδα ειναι εις θεον

4 22 Τας ψυχας υμων ηνικότες
 εν τη υπακοη της αληθειας
 εις φιλαδελφιαν αυποκριτον
 εκ καθαρας καρδιας αλληλους αγαπησατε εκτενωσ
 23 αναγεγεννημενοι
 ουκ εκ σπορας φθαρτης
 αλλα αφθαρτου
 δια λογου ζωντος θεου και μενοντος
 24 διοτι πασα σαρξ ως χορτος
 και πασα δοξα αυτης ως ανθος χορτου
εξηρανθη ο χορτος και το ανθος εξεπεσεν
 25 το δε ρημα κυριου μενει εις τον αιωνα
 τουτο δε εστιν το ρημα το ευαγγελισθεν εις υμας

2.3 Remarks on the discourse analysis

The whole passage consists of only four sentences. The verb of each sentence is in the imperative mood (underlined in the analysis). It is thus four commands which are given here. The first sentence could be seen as a hinge between the preceding pericope and the remainder of this one: because of all that was said so far, direct yourselves now towards the future, set your hope on the grace to be given to you when Jesus Christ is revealed (1:13). Sentences 2, 3 and 4 form the core of the argument in this pericope: the command given in 2, be holy, is explained in 3 and 4. Thus: to be holy consists of two things: fear God (command 3, vs 17) and love each other (command 4, vs 22). This explanation of the character of a holy life is thus in accordance with Jesus' resumé of the essence of the law in Matthew 22:37-39: love God and your neighbour.

To confirm the authority of the command to be holy, a quotation from Scripture is given. This is the normal practice of New Testament authors. In this case, the quotation comes from the so-called 'Holiness Code' (Lv 19-25). Both the third and the fourth commands are motivated: Command 3 - you can and must fear God because with the blood of Christ you were redeemed from your previous empty way of life, the kind of life which excludes a true reverent fear of God; Command 4 - you can and must love one another because you have been born again, i.e. through the work of the Holy Spirit. This passage thus makes possible a well motivated proclamation of the triune God. Both the indicative and the imperative for a well-balanced homily is given by the text itself.

2.4 The meaning of the word 'holy'

To clarify the world of the text even more, it is worthwhile to look briefly at the meaning of the concept 'holy' in the Bible (cf Woods 1975).

Holiness is one of the most typical concepts of Old Testament faith. The holiness of God is most strikingly characterized in Hs 11:9: 'For I am God, and not man - the Holy One among you.' Two aspects of God's holiness is hereby emphasized: i) the 'otherness' or uniqueness of God, His majesty and incomparability with any creature being, and ii) his nearness and involvement in the affairs of his people, his persistent love and graciousness. Both the transcendence and immanence of God should therefore be associated with this concept.

This dual sense and richness of the concept is also found with regard to the holiness of God's people. With reference to Israel's position it is a statement, but with reference to Israel's character it is a demand. Israel was set apart physically to fulfil God's work with mankind and a life committed to God and the serving of their fellow-men was demanded of them. Holiness means forsaking sin and following the commandments of the law. To this end a whole body of ceremonial, legal and moral requirements was designed. It is summarized in the Holiness Code (Lv 17-26) from which the quotation in 1 Pt 1:15 is taken. In this Code cultic and moral elements are intermingled. Thus, holiness is both a cultic and an ethical concept. Cultic sanctity is

imperfect without ethical sanctity. Cultic purity itself demands personal purity (Woods 1975:176).

In the New Testament the holiness of the church is equivalent to the holiness of Israel as God's people. In 1 Pt 2:9 the idea of 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' is taken from Ex 19:6 and transferred to the church. Again, the double sense of the concept is retained: separation (cf 2 Cor 6:14) on the one hand, and service and commitment on the other. However, the positive sense prevails over any negative exclusivism. The church becomes the vehicle of God's activity in the world (cf 1 Cor 12:27, Col 1:18).

The supreme manifestation of holiness is love (cf 1 Jn 4:17) - as was so clearly seen in the remarks on the discourse analysis of 1 Pt 1:13-25 above.

3. The world in front of the text

In the light of the insights gained from the preceding two sections of this article, we are now in a position to reflect on the world which opens up in front of the text, i.e. the possible significance this passage could have for us today.

It seems that a Christian always lives in a certain tension between separation from the society and a commitment to that same society. I believe that one could recapitulate the meaning of the concept 'holiness' or a 'holy way of living' with a contemporary concept like a 'critical solidarity' in our stance towards our world and our society. In order to be critical, a certain distance is necessary. Yet, this distance does not cancel our involvement and our solidarity with the world in which we live.

For its first century addressees, the message of this letter was: in the midst of all your internal conflicts, in the midst of all the misunderstanding and discrimination in the society in which you are living, be holy! That means: your lifestyle should be different, distinguishable from the worldly way of living around you - you are strangers in the world. But to be holy also means to live in reverence and commitment to God and to love your fellow-men. And, to love one another inevitably entails involvement in the affairs of your neighbour and the world in which you live.

In everyday language we attach a wrong and negative connotation to the word 'holy.' We consider it to be unattainable and, in actual fact, we do not want to be called 'holy'. Take for example the (negative) expression, 'holier-than-thou'. Yet, the Bible equals the Christian as a saint and demands holiness/a holy life from him/her.

Our holiness entails that we be strangers in the world. There is a notable difference between ourselves and the world. We have forsaken the worldly way of life. Our conduct is determined by our discipleship of Jesus Christ as spelt out in our new ethical code (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount). With that as our criterion we are critical about what is going on around us.

Our holy life does not entail withdrawing from life (asceticism, seclusion in a monastery or desert). A holy life is our concrete conduct in the world in which we are living. In 1 Pt three important concrete spheres of life are mentioned: obedience to

the authorities (politics), slaves and masters (economy), and husband and wife (domestic and social life). Thus, one could say that our holy life encompasses our whole life in all its aspects.

Therefore, one must recognise that because of our Christian convictions we have a responsibility in this world and in the concrete historical structures of our world. We must enlist. As strangers we must be involved. Yet, it remains a unique kind of involvement, a Christian involvement, that is, a critical involvement.

Criticism calls for an ability to discern what is best. In this regard a prayer from the letter to the Philippians is directly relevant: 'My prayer is that your love for each other may increase more and more and never stop improving your knowledge and deepening your perception, so that you can always recognise what is best' (Phlp 1:9, JR). This attitude does not allow for an immature naïveté or a one-sided fanaticism, which only repeats old traditions or which involuntarily follows every modern tendency. Critical reflection on what is happening in our world, resulting in responsible choices, is part and parcel of our Christian life.

That means that as Christians we should always have our own point of view on the affairs of our day. Venter (1987:53) has aptly formulated this idea of critical solidarity in his reflection on a Christian stance in the political crisis in South Africa today: you agree with the conservative that the good from the past should be retained (but you know: not everything is good). You join the evolutionary reformist in that change should take place within historical continuity, because abrupt change displaces people (but you want to use the good as context of continuity and cut out the evil directly). With the revolutionary you want the evil to be uprooted and eliminated immediately (but maintain that the present good should form the bridge away from evil, knowing that evil in the human heart will be reflected in any future dispensation). In a certain sense that is a very difficult position: you agree to a certain extent with all three, so that any one could see you as a collaborator with any of the other; you differ to such an extent from everyone that you can never identify with any of them in all circumstances.

As Christians we are involved strangers. We live in critical solidarity with our world, our society and our country.

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