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ROME, CAESAR, AND THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF 1 PETER

by
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A persistent debate in the study of 1 Peter has been the nature of persecution described in the letter. Two approaches have dominated the topic. One classic approach suggests that the persecution was widespread, persistent, and official (i.e., persecution by a governmental entity).[2] The recent consensus is that the persecution was local, sporadic, and unofficial (i.e., persecution deriving from the social community).[3]

The present article argues for a median approach, which suggests the persecution was widespread, sporadic, and socio-political (i.e., accusations by the populace could lead to official persecution).[4] There are both exegetical and historical reasons to maintain each of these points. We will look first to the historical reasons by examining the background of Anatolia and then the background of the recipients. It will be argued that the religious milieu in which the Anatolian residents found themselves provides sufficient explanation for the type of persecution found in the text. An exegetical analysis of some of the key passages will then corroborate that this historical analysis is consistent with the experience of the readers.

Historical Background of Anatolia

Peter's readers were scattered throughout Anatolia (1:1). Though the five regions Peter was writing to were diverse in many ways, they all

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[2]For a detailed list of past proponents as well as an explanation for their views, see Travis B. Williams, "Suffering from a Critical Oversight: The Persecutions of 1 Peter within Modern Scholarship," *Currents in Biblical Research* 10 (2012): 277–82.

[3]Dubis, in an article researching trends in scholarship on 1 Peter, notes this explicitly: there is a "consensus that the persecution of 1 Peter is local, sporadic and unofficial, stemming from the antagonism and discrimination of the general populace" (Mark Dubis, "Research on 1 Peter: A Survey of Scholarly Literature since 1985," *Currents in Biblical Research* 4 [February 2006]: 203).

[4]A similar approach has been suggested recently by Williams, "Suffering from a Critical Oversight." This article complements Williams's work by grounding this approach in the social setting of the recipients, particularly regarding their relationship to the Imperial Cult. Further, this essay broadens the question of persecution, addressing aspects of the nature of the persecution (e.g., its consistency and extent).

shared the experience of being under Roman rule. The various locales either peacefully surrendered to Rome or were annexed militarily.[5] For generations, the region had politically switched hands (from the Persians to the Greeks and then to the Romans). A definitive shift took place with the rule of Augustus, the first Roman emperor (27 B.C.–14 A.D.). During his reign, Anatolia was divided into various provinces, with Roman governors stationed in each.[6]

Wherever Rome went, it brought the Imperial Cult with it.[7] Indeed as Garnsey and Sailer say, "Rome's main export to the empire was the cult of the emperors."[8] This is especially the case in Anatolia, where the Imperial Cult was established early and took deep roots.[9] However, before considering the role of the Imperial Cult in the letter of 1 Peter, it is necessary to consider the religious milieu of the Anatolian readers.

Gods, kingdoms, and ethnicities were not separable in the ancient world. One did not determine his gods; his birth determined them. In the words of Hurtado, "What we call 'religious identity' was simply a component of ethnic identity."[10] The Romans understood this, and they generally made allowances for the local customs of the people they conquered.

Anatolians thought not of the God but the gods, accepting the existence and power of the gods of other peoples. Further, it was generally understood that the gods of the people who conquered were demonstrably stronger than the gods of the people who had been conquered. Thus, many who had been conquered would change their allegiance to the gods that had conquered theirs. Other times, the conquered peoples would continue to worship their own gods, yet add the worship of the conquering gods as well.

After the annexing of Anatolia, the Imperial Cult came in great force. Initially, the Imperial Cult focused on Roma, a feminine personification of the god of Rome. And while the worship of Roma never officially fell away, attention in the age of Augustus and following

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[5]For a detailed description of the expansion of Rome in Anatolia, see David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950).

[6]Simon Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–2.

[7]It has become popular to argue that the Imperial Cult did not exist; rather, Imperial Cults existed (Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: A History*, vol. 1 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 348). Clearly, there was a diversity of ways in which the cult was practiced and presented. Nevertheless, there was also a broad unity that lay behind the diversity. Accordingly, the idea that there was *an* Imperial Cult should not be lightly discarded. It was a unified system with diverse practice and application.

[8]Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 188.

[9]Price, *Rituals and Power*, 20.

[10]Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 79.

was progressively towards the emperor who ruled the Roman empire. The transition was an easy one to make. The emperor, the one chosen by the gods to rule, was progressively himself considered a god. Debate continues concerning whether people genuinely believed the emperor to be a god;[11] the discussion need not sideline us here, for whether he was "really considered" a god or whether he was only considered a deified human, the result was the worship of Caesar.

That the Imperial Cult was active in Anatolia is evidenced archaeologically. Ten temples or sanctuaries were built in the region by 50 A.D. and seven more were added before the end of the century.[12] Price, wanting to write on the Imperial Cult, decided to write on its presence in Anatolia because "the evidence for this area is far richer than for any other part of the empire."[13] In a detailed map, he shows 177 places in Anatolia where archaeological digs have shown evidence of Imperial Cult activity.[14]

If one asks why the Imperial Cult followed wherever Rome went, the answer is that religion and politics were not separate in the ancient world. Though modern Westerners take for granted the separation of church and state, such a distinction is a product of the Christian worldview.[15] After being conquered by the Romans, Anatolians naturally took to the gods of the Romans, first Roma and then the emperors.

Debate exists concerning whether the growth of the Imperial Cult was a result of Eastern ruler cults or the impressive increase in Roman power.[16] The answer is likely both. Some of the people already accustomed to ruler cults would have taken quite naturally to the Roman emperor's divinity. On the other hand, the change in political structure led to a change in religious and social structures.

Harland reminds us that in Roman times, the "social, religious, economic and political were intricately inter-connected and often

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[11]For example, Williams thinks that 1 Peter presents a straw man interpretation of the Imperial Cult by taking the divinity of the Caesar seriously (Travis B. Williams, "The Divinity and Humanity of Caesar in 1 Peter 2,3: Early Christian Resistance to the Emperor and His Cult," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 105 [2014]: 147). On the whole, Williams appears to have embraced the historical error of thinking that "the Romans, allegedly so like ourselves, could not really have taken the imperial cult seriously" (Price, *Rituals and Power*, 17). Cf. G. Alföldy, "Subject and Ruler, Subjects and Methods: An Attempt at a Conclusion," in *Subject and Ruler: The Cult of the Ruling Power in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Alastair M. Small, Journal of Roman Archaeology (Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1996), 255.

[12]Bruce W. Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars: The First Christians' Responses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 59.

[13]Price, *Rituals and Power*, 20.

[14]Ibid., xxv.

[15]Ibid., 18–19.

[16]Ibid., 23–52.

inseparable."[17] Accordingly, Feldmeier can say that during the New Testament era, "The State itself was interpreted religiously; indeed, it was a sacred institution."[18] The intricate way the Anatolian believer's social experience of religion and politics weave together defy Western categories.[19]

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Imperial Cult for Anatolian residents was its ability to forge a united social identity.[20] The empire would not survive without a social bond, and the Imperial Cult was the glue of that bond.[21] The Imperial Cult provided a shared vision of life across the far reaches of the empire. Though the people had vastly different backgrounds and interests, they shared a religious-political vision cast for them through the Imperial Cult. Without this, the empire could not have been sustained.

There are two aspects of the Imperial Cult that provided social structure. First, as Mitchell notes, the Imperial Cult was successful in uniting the empire by creating and perpetuating "new traditions and patterns of civic life."[22] He adds, "Without the imperial cult there might have been little substance to civic life over much of the empire."[23]

These new patterns of civic life dominated the calendar. Indeed, they entirely modified the calendar. The beginning of the year was changed to Julius Caesar's birthday, and all the major holidays and festivals were related to the emperor.[24] The athletic games were saturated with sacrifices and honors given to the Caesar.[25] The newly minted

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[17]Philip A. Harland, "Imperial Cults within Local Cultural Life: Associations in Roman Asia," *Ancient History Bulletin* 17 (2003): 88.

[18]Translated from Reinhard Feldmeier, "Die Außenseiter Als Avant-Garde Gesellschaftliche Ausgrenzung Als Missionarische Chance Nach Dem 1. Petrusbrief," in *Persuasion and Dissuasion in Early Christianity, Ancient Judaism, and Hellenism*, ed. Pieter Willem van der Horst, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology, vol. 33 (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 165, emphasis original.

[19]As Price argues, "The cults of the Roman emperor performed by the Greek cities of Asia Minor during the first three centuries A.D….confound our expectations about the relationship between religion, politics and power" (*Rituals and Power*, 1).

[20]Gwynaeth McIntyre, *Imperial Cult*, Ancient History (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 74–75.

[21]Crossan and Reed use this very analogy: "The pervasiveness of Roman imperial theology's emperor cult across the Mediterranean was one of the key features of Paul's world. It consolidated the various parts of the empire together into a single whole and was the glue that held the *oikoumene*, or civilized world, together" (John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* [New York: HarperCollins, 2004], 142).

[22]Stephen Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 117.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Perrin, "The Imperial Cult," 32.

[25]Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars*, 5.

coins perpetually reminded the populace of the lofty and divine nature of their supreme ruler.[26] The trade guilds organized around Caesar and paid him tribute and honor.[27] In the words of Perrin, "When the writings of the New Testament were produced, the Imperial Cult had already infiltrated every aspect of Roman life."[28]

Second, the Imperial Cult provided a "formula for the fundamental structure of the social system."[29] That formula showed each social class where they stood in rank, and it revealed how one could improve or lower in rank. On the very top stood the god, the emperor. The closer one was to the emperor, the more social position one maintained. This was true at both the individual and communal levels. The priests were closer to the emperor, and so the positions were socially prestigious. Communities that honored the emperor most were also socially favored.

The emperors encouraged this system, providing prodigious benefits to those cities that showed great honors. Accordingly, Anatolian cities sought the title of being a "Temple Warden," a place where an Imperial Temple was built.[30] And these temples would be placed in the most prominent place in the city, showing honor to the emperor and consequently receiving rewards for loyalty.

The effect of the social system was predictable: "There were intense social pressures brought to bear…to reciprocate with appropriate divine honours to and for emperors in their temples because of the enormous benefits and other blessings brought by the pax romana socially, economically and politically."[31]

The social pressure did not merely exist in the marketplace and public spaces; it existed in its most powerful forms within the family unit. The wives, children, and servants were expected to serve the gods of the paterfamilias. Insubordination at this level would be shameful and likely result in severe retribution.

Historical Background of 1 Peter's Readers

Having provided the broad background of the Anatolian region,

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[26]Thomas Scott Caulley, "The Title *Christianos* and Roman Imperial Cult," *Restoration Quarterly* 53 (2011): 201; Williams, "The Divinity and Humanity of Caesar in 1 Peter 2,3," 136.

[27]Harland, "Imperial Cults within Local Cultural Life," 107.

[28]Perrin, "The Imperial Cult," 32.

[29]Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 327.

[30]Carter notes the existence of 35 temple wardens in Anatolia by the end of the first century (Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2006], 77). Additionally, Pate highlights one Anatolian city and its pride for being a Temple Warden (C. Marvin Pate, "Revelation 2–19 and the Roman Imperial Cult," *Criswell Theological Review* 17 [2019]: 69–70).

[31]Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars*, 2.

we can now turn to a specific background of Peter's readers. They were Gentile converts from Hellenistic paganism who lived in the latter portion of Nero's reign. Two factors suggest a primarily Gentile audience. First, the list of vices from which the readers were redeemed includes things not normally indicative of a Jewish lifestyle (e.g., orgies, drinking parties, lawless idolatry; 4:3).[32] Second, and more importantly, Peter notes that the readers were "saved from the empty ways inherited from [their] forefathers" (1:18). It is unlikely that Peter would have described the past life of Jews as empty without further clarification. When these two arguments are combined with the geographical density of Gentiles in the region of Anatolia, it is clear why the modern consensus is that the readers were Gentiles.

That they were Gentiles is significant, for Jews had certain religious exemptions by Rome. Such exemptions, though not always popular, followed the policy of allowing people to continue their own traditions. In the case of the Jews, whom the Romans considered strange and atheistic,[33] sacrifices to the emperor were not required because there was a daily sacrifice to God on behalf of the emperor.[34] Josephus indicates that the start of the Jewish-Roman war coincided with the choice of the Jewish leaders to forego making the sacrifice on behalf of the emperor.[35]

In Anatolia, the exceptions for the Jews would not have been given to the Gentile converts to Christ. First, these Gentiles were not ethnically Jewish, and therefore they did not qualify under Rome's ethnic policy. Second, by the writing of 1 Peter, Rome knew that there was a distinction between Judaism and Christianity, as the name "Christian" (4:16) clearly suggests.[36] Third, Christianity proved itself to be distinctive from Judaism by its evangelistic fervor. The Romans were generally accepting of ethnic Jews who desired to continue in their odd ways, but they were not receptive to Gentiles converting to what they deemed irrational ways.[37]

Following the explicit notation of the text that Peter was its author (1:1),[38] the date of the letter must be prior to Peter's death, which

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[32]Of course, it is possible that individual Jews were involved in each of these things; nevertheless, the question here concerns whether such vices would have been indicative of the overall lives of Jews.

[33]Caulley, "The Title *Christianos* and Roman Imperial Cult," 197–98.

[34]Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars*, 110–17.

[35]Josephus *Wars* 2.17.2

[36]D. G. Horrell, "Between Conformity and Resistance: Beyond the Balch-Elliott Debate Towards a Postcolonial Reading of First Peter," in *Reading 1 Peter with New Eyes*, ed. Robert Webb and Duane Watson (Great Britain: T&T Clark, 2007), 142.

[37]Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 54.

[38]Though controversial today, the authorship of the letter by the apostle Peter is the unequivocal tradition of the early church. For a recent defense of genuine Petrine authorship see Craig S. Keener, *1 Peter: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021).

church history records as occurring in 67 or 68 A.D.[39] The letter was likely not much earlier than that, however, and most interpreters who maintain Petrine authorship assign it a date in the mid to late 60s, during the later and most terrifying years of Nero's reign.[40]

In sum, Peter's readers were Gentiles who lived in the latter portion of Nero's reign. They were once heavily involved in the worship of their ethnic gods, as well as the worship of Caesar by means of the Imperial Cult. Some of them may have been freemen, but, based on the directives given in 1 Peter, it appears that at least some of them were slaves (3:18–24) and others were wives with unbelieving husbands (3:1–2).

A Case for a Widespread, Sporadic, Socio-Political Persecution

Having developed the historical background of Anatolia and the historical background of 1 Peter's readers, we can turn to a consideration of the suffering in 1 Peter. It will be argued that this context helps us make sense of the persecution the readers of 1 Peter were facing. More specifically, it will reveal that the persecution they were facing was likely widespread, sporadic, and semi-official.

That the readers were suffering is evident to all who read 1 Peter (cf. 1:6; 2:12, 19–21; 4:13–19; 5:9–10). The most significant controversy, however, concerns the identity of those doing the persecuting. As noted in the introduction, there are interpreters who have claimed an official form of persecution by means of the Roman government. Usually this view connects the persecution to one of the Roman emperors known for their persecution of Christians (e.g., Nero, Domitian, Trajan). And while we have argued for the letter being written during Nero's reign, there is no evidence that the persecution of Christians was organized and carried out beyond the city of Rome under Nero's reign.

Partly for this reason, the view that the persecution was more social and communal has become the dominant strand in modern scholarship.[41] On this reading, the Roman government is not involved at all. Instead, Christians who had abandoned their former way of life were being ridiculed by those they abandoned when they became Christians. Such an interpretation helpfully explains why Peter refers so often to verbal assaults (2:12; 3:9, 16; 4:14). The danger was not the government; it was the general populace. And the cost was not life or possessions; it was social position and honor.

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[39]Eusebius *Church History* 2.25.5.

[40]Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 36; Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 10; Wayne A. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 37–38.

[41]Dubis, "Research on 1 Peter," 203.

The background detailed above provides another possibility: the persecution was socio-political, meaning it began as social tension but had the possibility of rising to governmental attention. Though the Imperial Cult was always active throughout the New Testament era, during Nero's reign the "divine" identity seems to have been taken more seriously than during the reign of many other emperors. For instance, though it was not common for current coinage to present the living emperor as a god (usually this was reserved for deceased emperors), Nero was the major exception. This is because Nero encouraged his own worship.[42] Further, though the term "the Lord" was sometimes used of other emperors, it was used especially for Nero.[43]

The persecutions of Nero against Christians are famously attested, being documented by the Roman historian Tacitus.[44] The persecution detailed there related to Nero's desire to distract from the rumors that he had personally burned Rome in 64 A.D. However, Nero's reign made a definitive shift in 62, when he was influenced in an "extreme monarchist" direction.[45] His own sense of identity combined with a growing sense of paranoia concerning his position would have set him in opposition to any who showed the least sense of disloyalty.

Because the cult involved idol worship, Christians in Rome could not take part.[46] This lack of engagement would have been perceived as

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[42]Michael Amandry, Andrew Burnett, and Pere Pau Ripolles, *Roman Provincial Coinage*, vol. 1 (London: British Museum Press, 2005), 47.

[43]Joseph D. Fantin, *Lord of the Entire World: Lord Jesus, a Challenge to Lord Caesar?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 201–2.

[44]In 2015 Brent Shaw argued that Tacitus was expressing the modern distaste for Christians back into the first century ("The Myth of the Neronian Persecution," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 105 [2015]: 73–100). Defenses of Tacitus have been raised (Christopher Prestige Jones, "The Historicity of the Neronian Persecution: A Response to Brent Shaw," *New Testament Studies* 63 [2017]: 146–52; Pierluigi Leone Gatti, "Much Ado about Nothing: An Answer to B. D. Shaw's The Myth of the Neronian Persecution," *Augustinianum* 59 [2019]: 201–15), and counter defenses offered (e.g., Brent D. Shaw, "Response to Christopher Jones: The Historicity of the Neronian Persecution," *New Testament Studies* 64 [April 2018]: 231–42.). It is beyond the purview of this article to address this issue; nevertheless, if 1 Peter was written during Nero's reign it gives evidence both that Christians were identifiable in that period and potentially that Nero was actively against Christians.

[45]*Annals* 15.44; *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, s.v. "Nero," by Leandro Navarra, 906.

[46]Of course, there were likely some who rationalized doing so, but the commands throughout the New Testament concerning idol worship certainly applied to the Imperial Cult. For the most significant defense of the idea that Christians could partake of the Imperial Cult and yet remain "in their heart" committed to Christ, see, Warren Carter, "Going All the Way? Honoring the Emperor and Sacrificing Wives and Slaves," in *A Feminist Companion to the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 14–33. For a defense of the historic view that Christians could not take part in the Imperial Cult without committing idolatry see, Sean du Toit, "Practising Idolatry in 1 Peter," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 43 (March 2021): 411–30.

a lack of loyalty. As Tacitus records, the real reason Nero was willing to persecute Christians was because they were "hated by all men" on account of their "infamous abominations."[47] Such "abominations" were likely, at least in part, misunderstandings of Christian practices. But how were they so misunderstood? Likely Christians were misunderstood because they distanced themselves socially from Imperial Cult activities, which were the social fabric of society.

There is no evidence that Nero pursued a program of persecution towards Christians outside Rome. Nevertheless, Tacitus indicates that Nero rounded up a "vast multitude" of Christians.[48] Could such acts remain in Rome alone? Is it not more likely that news of the emperor's attitude towards Christians spread throughout the empire?

Anatolian residents, having heard of the formal persecutions of Christians by the emperor, would have taken note of the activity of Christians in their midst. As noted before, throughout the Roman world, "religion was not a private matter. Rather, its observance was explicitly public, very communal, and quite political."[49] Christians could not secretly avoid the Imperial Cult. And their refusal to engage was viewed as disloyalty to Rome.[50]

Anatolians had observed some within their own community convert to Christianity, stop attending the festivals, and stop offering sacrifices. These Christians were meeting together weekly and had formed incredibly strong bonds of fellowship. Word had come from Rome that Nero, their great benefactor, was systematically strengthening his reign by removing those who were disloyal. One problematic group was the Christians. With such imperial confirmation, the Anatolian's concern about their Christian neighbors turned to conviction against them.

Though the Roman governor was not ordered to seek out and persecute Christians, he would have taken seriously any accusation presented against them. For one thing, they were guilty of what was considered anti-social behavior, which threatened the social fabric.[51] Further, as Perrin notes, "any challenge to the religious supremacy of the emperor could be perceived as an act of political subversion."[52] What governor would not have taken seriously accusations of political disloyalty? Any hint that a governor allowed disloyalty would end a governor's career, if not his life.

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[47]*Annals* 15.44; cf. Justin, *1 Apol.* 26.7; *2 Apol.* 12; Tatian, *Or.* 25; Tertullian, *Apol.* 4; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.14.

[48]*Annals* 15.44.

[49]Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament*, 82.

[50]"Performing cultic acts before statues of living emperors…was considered the only appropriate expression of loyalty" (Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars*, 2).

[51]The believer's actions, Hurtado claims, "would have seemed to the general public a kind of religious and social apostasy, an anti-social stance" (Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 54).

[52]Perrin, "The Imperial Cult," 127.

In sum, on this reading, Rome was not officially seeking to eliminate Christians; nevertheless, Christians were viewed as a dangerous, anti-social, and potentially anti-imperial sect. Word of Nero's actions against Christians had likely reached Anatolia, increasing the fear of Peter's readers and providing sufficient grounds for formal complaints to be lodged against Christians.[53] Peter's readers would likely have been unsettled by hearing of the fate of their brothers in Rome, and they were likely filled with anxiety over whether their fellow countrymen might bring formal complaints against them.[54]

The Exegetical Case

The above analysis has sought to understand the historical background of the Roman Empire and Anatolia in particular. Further, it has sought to apply what is found in this background to the Christian converts in Peter's audience. This analysis has resulted in a reasonable conjecture concerning the nature of the persecution that existed when 1 Peter was written. In this section, we will summarize the main points of the historical background and seek to ground each of the three assertions in the text of 1 Peter.

That the persecution was widespread is suggested by the fact that Peter considers himself and the church in Rome in the same setting as the Anatolian believers. That they were enduring the same sorts of persecutions is suggested by the way he identifies himself and them in similar terms. The Anatolian believers are "elect-exiles" (1:1), and those in Babylon (i.e., exile) are "likewise chosen" (i.e., elect; 5:13). The purpose of identifying the readers as elect-exiles is to help them form a new identity in light of the social loss they have experienced by rejecting their former gods, and especially the Imperial Cult. That the persecution was widespread is further suggested by Peter's comment that the reader's brotherhood is experiencing the same sort of persecutions throughout the world (5:9).

That the persecution was sporadic and not persistent is suggested by the lack of any evidence that Nero commanded persecution outside of Rome. It is further confirmed by the text of 1 Peter, which does not

[53]This same potential series of events was suggested by an early twentieth-century interpreter of 1 Peter. Knopf suggested that "the State did not organize the persecution"; instead, "from the hatred and suspicion of the populace itself accusations arise, which are brought before the authority. This authority is consequently forced to act against the Christians" (Rudolph Knopf, *Die Briefe Petri and Judä*, KEK [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1912], 23, as trans. by Travis B. Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter: Differentiating and Contextualizing Early Christian Suffering* [Boston: Brill, 2012], 11n22). Three modern interpreters have also recently been suggesting this interpretation: Paul A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Horrell, "Between Conformity and Resistance"; Williams, "Suffering from a Critical Oversight."

[54]Holloway, envisioning a scenario very much like the one discussed above, highlights the psychological pressure on Peter's readers as they were stigmatized by their neighbors (*Coping with Prejudice*, 35).

approach persecution as something certain, but as a potential that could break out at any time. For instance, the trials of purification are to be endured "if necessary" (1:6). Though this phrase primarily highlights the divine granting of such trials, it also indicates that such trials are not permanent, and they cannot be anticipated. In addition, interpreters have long discussed Peter's use of a fourth-class conditional in 3:13, where he asks, "Who will harm you if you are zealous for good works?" Normally, the fourth-class conditional indicates a remotely possible future event.[55] Nevertheless, here, as Achtemeier argues, it is likely used "to express the fact that while Christians are not undergoing continuous suffering, they do live in an environment charged with suspicion and hostility, which has erupted and can erupt into violence and persecution at any time."[56]

Finally, that the persecution was socio-political is the most likely option considering the historical background. Indeed, that the persecution arose primarily from the Christians' lack of engagement with the Imperial Cult is, in the words of Caulley, "the simplest explanation."[57] Though 1 Peter never explicitly draws attention to Rome or explicitly notes the emperor as the problem, it does this in covert ways. First, the reference to Babylon is coded language, clearly referring to Rome.[58] Second, Peter furtively denies the divinity of the emperor. The statement that the readers are to obey all "created beings"[59] is followed immediately by "whether the emperor," clearly implying that the emperor, since created by God, is not God.[60] Further, Peter uses a chiasm in 2:17 that parallels "honor the emperor" with "honor everyone" (implying the humanity of the emperor). Further, he distinguishes honoring the emperor from the duty to "fear God." Taken together, these suggest that the emperor was a problem, and the clearest manifestation of the emperor in Anatolia was the Imperial Cult.

First Peter also appears to refer to formal legal proceedings. Williams, in his monograph on suffering in 1 Peter, powerfully defended

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[55]Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 699.

[56]Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 230–31.

[57]Caulley, "The Title *Christianos* and Roman Imperial Cult," 204–5.

[58]"There is virtually unanimous agreement among modern interpreters that the referent of 'Babylon' is actually Rome" (Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 322).

[59]Though most English versions translate this clause as "human institutions" or something equivalent, Williams has made a convincing case that the translation should be "created beings" (Williams, "The Divinity and Humanity of Caesar in 1 Peter 2,3," 133–35).

[60]Achtemeier agrees that this passage denies divinity to the Caesar in light of the Imperial Cult: "The specific qualification of the emperor as a human being almost surely points to an increasing tendency, particularly evident in Asia Minor, to regard the emperor as divine, and thus gives a polemic edge to this verse" (Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 182–83).

the presence of legal proceeding language in three passages of 1 Peter: 2:11–17; 3:14b–16; 4:12–19.[61] We will only focus on 3:14b–16. Though Peter could be referring to social conflicts outside the court, "when read against a first-century Anatolian backdrop, an implicit reference to judicial proceedings is difficult to dispute."[62] Further, if Peter refers to a legal proceeding, then the accusation of slander makes perfect sense. The readers are not being slandered in a general fashion; instead, they are being accused of evil by their peers before Roman officials.

Such an interpretation solves two exegetical challenges with which those who deny a judicial setting must grapple. First, the reference to being put to shame has been a point of debate. Does Peter refer to eschatological shame (leading to condemnation) or temporal shame (leading to salvation)? On this reading, Peter was referring to neither; instead, he was referring to the possibility that by graciously responding to the accusations made against them, Christians would overcome their accusers and be found innocent. Consequently, those who accused them would be shamed. The second exegetical challenge is related. On the non-judicial reading, verse 17 is a mere platitude: "It is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil." But if a judicial setting is envisioned, Peter is saying something significant. It is better to respond graciously and be found guilty for good behavior than to respond sinfully and have that sinful response be the reason one is condemned.

Conclusion

This article has shown that a proper understanding of the historical background of 1 Peter is helpful in understanding the type of persecution spoken of in the book. Understanding the pervasiveness, purpose, and power of the Imperial Cult suggests that the type of persecution Peter's readers feared was neither state-sponsored, nor merely social; it was socio-political. Such persecution likely originated from the believers' peers, yet it did not remain there. Instead, formal accusations were lodged against believers, and various governors and rulers were forced to act to demonstrate their own loyalty to the emperor. Because all roads led to Rome (and back!), word of the emperor's view of Christians likely spread, allowing for widespread persecution endangering Christians in even the far reaches of the empire. Finally, the persecution was sporadic. Since Nero did not command Christians to be pursued, they were only brought to court when formal charges were made against them.

In sum, the historical background and exegesis of 1 Peter strongly indicate that the suffering endured by Peter's readers was widespread, sporadic, and socio-political.

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[61]Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter*, 303–16.

[62]Ibid., 309.