

Article

# The Problem(s) of Reading 1 Peter after Supersessionism

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**Abstract:** Recently, there has been a growing interest in the creative identity formation strategies found in 1 Peter, especially concerning the way that the letter appropriates the Jewish scriptures and Israel's privileges, promises, and vocation. While some find these strategies to be beneficial, others regard them as problematic because they promote a posture of supersessionism toward Israel. Some have suggested that the problem of supersessionism can be ameliorated by noting the silence in the letter regarding the relationship between Israel and the gentile addressees. This silence creates theological and hermeneutical space to go outside of the text itself to resolve the tension. But the move to go outside of the text can create its own problems because of the influential "standard canonical narrative", which fills the silence and exerts pressure on the reader to replace Israel with the church. This article seeks to demonstrate that the text of 1 Peter itself pushes against a supposed supersessionist posture in part because such a reading is inconsistent with the claims made about God, but also because the implicit narrative in the letter along with the exhortations to distance oneself from a gentile way of life necessitate that the addressees "appropriate Israelhood" without expropriating Israel.

**Keywords:** 1 Peter; supersessionism; post-supersessionism; replacement theology; identity formation; Jewish-Christian relations; standard canonical narrative; postcolonial criticism

*In a way virtually unique among Christian canonical writings, 1 Peter has appropriated the language of Israel for the church in such a way that Israel as a totality has become for this letter the controlling metaphor in terms of which its theology is expressed . . . In 1 Peter, the language and hence the reality of Israel pass without remainder into the language and hence the reality of the new people of God. As a result, that language is more than simply illustrative—it is foundational and constitutive for the Christian community in a way that has not always been recognized by those who have studied this epistle.*

(Achtmeier 1996, p. 69).



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## 1. The Problematic Identity Formation Strategy of 1 Peter

The once-marginalized letter of 1 Peter now has become a popular place to explore the social dimensions of early Christianity and in particular the way in which Christian identity was shaped in the early church.<sup>1</sup> Concomitant with this recent interest in the identity formation strategies of 1 Peter is a renewed appreciation for the way in which Second Temple Judaism is a determinative context for understanding the writings of the New Testament, and as a result, recent studies in 1 Peter have revealed the manner in which the identity formation strategies of the letter are deeply dependent upon the Hebrew scriptures, Israel's vocation, Jewish identity markers, and Jewish restoration ideology (e.g., Schutter 1989; Bosetti 1990; Dubis 2002; Mbuvi 2007; Horrell 2011; Liebengood 2014; Sargent 2015; Horrell 2015; Doering 2016; Egan 2016; Botner 2020; Marcar 2022). In particular, Primopetrine scholars have noted the way in which Israel categories, privileges, and concepts are appropriated in order to educate and exhort newly formed followers of Jesus Christ who are trying to figure out what it looks like to be faithful to God in the midst of social alienation and persecution as well as how to engage with their unsympathetic neighbors and the polytheistic Greco-Roman culture around them. What is more, in light of

the scholarly attention the letter has received of late, pastors and practitioners increasingly have been drawn to 1 Peter in order to better understand the church's mission in and for the world, especially where Christians find themselves trying to live out their ecclesial vocation in a post-Christian or even anti-Christian context (e.g., Volf 1994; deSilva 2000; Fagbemi 2007; Chester and Timmis 2012).

For some, these recent studies in 1 Peter helpfully have highlighted an often-underappreciated letter that is abundant with resources and creative strategies to aid in Christian identity formation and mission. But for others, the way the author of 1 Peter grounds and forms Christian identity is perplexing and some would even say deeply troubling.<sup>2</sup> The problem arises when we bring to the fore two key features of the letter. First, there seem to be convincing indications that the original recipients of 1 Peter were predominantly if not exclusively gentile in makeup (see for example 1 Pet 1:18, 21; 2:9–10; 4:3–4).<sup>3</sup> Second, as I have already stated in brief, the foundational strategy by which the author seeks to develop a missional identity is to appropriate Israel categories, prerogatives, and privileges and then apply them to this predominantly or exclusively gentile audience. This can be seen most readily in a few examples in the first two chapters of 1 Peter: the recipients are introduced as “elect sojourners of the Diaspora” (1:1)<sup>4</sup> to whom the prophets have prophesied (1:10–12); they are exhorted to be holy as God is holy (1:15–16; applied from Lev 11:44; 19:2; 20:7, 26); and they are given the privilege of being a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation” (2:9; drawn from Isa 43:20 and Exod 19:6) who bear the vocation of offering acceptable spiritual sacrifices to God (2:5) and proclaiming the mighty acts of the one who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (2:9; appropriated from Isa 42:12, which is an allusion to the event of the exodus from Egypt).

Granting these two features of the letter, and in light of our post-holocaust, post-colonial, globalized world which has fostered a growing awareness of the way in which religious texts can be used to inculcate prejudice and discrimination in a variety of forms, some have raised concern that the message of 1 Peter promotes a supersessionist posture toward Israel; that is to say that the letter appears to suggest that the church replaces Israel as the new(er) and true(r) people of God.

Surprisingly, until recently, in the modern era of 1 Peter studies, there has been almost no reflection on or discussion of the apparent supersessionism in 1 Peter and to what degree this might be problematic as an identity formation strategy.<sup>5</sup> Instead, commentators and scholars have tended to ignore this feature of the letter, or to be indifferent, ambiguous, or implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) triumphalist regarding the way in which the church relates to “Israel in the flesh.” As one scholar has put it, “the supersessionism of 1 Peter has largely been ignored, downplayed or denied, but rarely discussed” (Bauman-Martin 2007, p. 150).

There may be some explanations for this lack of discussion and/or concern regarding the way in which the author of 1 Peter seems to transfer Israel's identity and privileges over to gentile followers of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> It may be the case that particular scholars do not accept that there was a sharp distinction between Judaism and Christianity in the time in which the letter was written, and that early rhetoric, like that found in 1 Peter, was part of a larger dialogue about what it meant to be a faithful Israelite. What we find in a text like 1 Peter, they might argue, is an intra-Jewish struggle to define who the true Israel of God is. As such, a charge of supersessionism would be considered anachronistic and thus irrelevant (Levering 2010, p. 12).

Another way that some have downplayed any charge of supersessionism is to argue that although Israel becomes “the controlling metaphor for the letter,” there is no evidence of anti-Semitism or any sense in the letter that the Jews have been rejected by God (Achtemeier 1996, p. 23). But this is an argument made from silence and raises more questions than solutions. For example, might the metaphor itself, taken to its logical conclusion, imply a replacement of Israel? Or, might the silence be interpreted as a subtle and subversive demotion of Israel in favor of the gentile church?<sup>7</sup> Or, might the metaphor be regarded in a

diminutive sense as a “mere analogy” that is not meant to communicate what is “real” or “true” about the audience?<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, one might disregard supersessionism in 1 Peter on the theological and hermeneutical grounds that such a posture toward Israel is in fact the proper way of reading not only the text of 1 Peter but also the Christian canon as a whole. Simply put, rather than reject or avoid the idea that Israel has been replaced by the church, this “replacement theology” may be seen as the correct interpretation of God’s plan as revealed in scripture (e.g., [Marshall 2004](#), p. 650). As we will see, this has been the predominant way in which the silence of 1 Peter has been filled in the history of interpretation of the New Testament and 1 Peter in particular.

Regardless of what the rationale may be, overall, there remains a silence and a scholarly inattention to this important phenomenon of identity formation in the text.

## 2. More on the Problematic Silence of 1 Peter

The relative silence on the apparent supersessionism in 1 Peter was broken in 2007 in an essay by Betsy Bauman-Martin, who leveraged the tools of postcolonial criticism in order to draw attention to the problematic identity formation strategy in 1 Peter, stressing that the replacement strategies of the letter, far from being benign, set a dangerous precedent. Bauman-Martin insists that 1 Peter scholarship has downplayed the blatant appropriation of Jewish identity and heritage by minimizing it as a mere rhetorical strategy ([Bauman-Martin 2007](#), p. 163). She argues that what is not readily acknowledged in 1 Peter scholarship is that this kind of appropriation is itself a kind of imperialism that degrades the integrity and identity of the culture that is being misrepresented and defined out of existence ([Bauman-Martin 2007](#), pp. 173–77). She summarizes her critique by arguing that 1 Peter participates in the appropriation/plundering of cultural treasures/resources of another group, rewrites the past of another group for its own benefit, endorses a hierarchy that includes an emperor, suggests but rejects true hybridization and a real diaspora consciousness, and highlights the concepts of chosenness and homeland, all through the utilization of the language of transcendence and inclusion/exclusion ([Bauman-Martin 2007](#), p. 156).

So for Bauman-Martin, while 1 Peter presents itself as a letter written to an oppressed and marginalized people, the “winning strategy involves the bankrupting of a competing oppressed group, snatching their identity” in such a way that engages in totalizing discourse that creates a universal and absolute identity of superiority ([Bauman-Martin 2007](#), pp. 176, 169). For her, this is deeply problematic and should no longer be ignored.

In the following year, David Horrell offered a more nuanced assessment of the relationship between gentile followers of Jesus and Israel in 1 Peter but not without highlighting the “ambivalent legacy” of the methods used in the letter in order to shape Christian identity ([Horrell 2008](#), pp. 102–5). For Horrell, the ambivalence is generated by silence in the text: 1 Peter neither explicitly confirms nor denies that Israel has been replaced by the church. Horrell is not alone in pointing out the ambiguity in the letter.<sup>9</sup> In a 2016 essay, Lutz [Doering \(2016, p. 272\)](#) offers a thorough assessment of the way in which 1 Peter appropriates Israel epithets and concludes that:

In view of the thoroughgoing adoption of Israel epithets, it is significant that 1 Peter does not deploy any form of the term Ἰσραήλ for the addressees. While they take on the status, role, and function of Israel, the addressees *do not become Israel*—as either an accrual to the people of Israel, a “new” Israel, or even the “Israel of God” (cf. Gal 6:16). Neither, however, are they explicitly *likened to Israel*, which would expressly distinguish them from Israel. “Israel” simply does not feature in this letter. It seems that the constitution of the new people through divine begetting would not be appropriately expressed by reference to “Israel”. If not “Israel” or “Jews”, what else are the addressees? Apart from applying Israel epithets to the new people constituted by divine rebegetting, the letter does not give us an answer.

He further underscores that ([2016, p. 276](#)):

Israel is appropriated without being expropriated. The confirmation to the addressees to be an elect people of God is carried out without a corresponding announcement of the rejection of the “first” people. The addressees somehow stand in connection with Israel. However, the precise relation to Israel of those addressed as elect remains open precisely because of the situative focus of the letter that is entirely concentrated on strengthening the addressees in distress.

For Doering, this ambiguity generated by silence in the text means that drawing on 1 Peter for Christian–Jewish dialogue is “extremely difficult” (Doering 2016, p. 276). He suggests that those who wish to draw any conclusions regarding the relationship between the church and Israel from 1 Peter need to acknowledge that to do so “requires us to fill aspects not actually covered by the situative focus of the text, or at least to read the text alongside other New Testament witnesses that are more explicit on the matter” (Doering 2016, p. 276).

In a similar vein, Horrell suggests that the silence in 1 Peter creates hermeneutical and theological space for readers and communities either to allow for Israel to continue as the people of God on the basis of their original covenant with God or to deny Israel its special place as the people of God. But he also highlights that a supersessionist reading of the silence in 1 Peter is problematic, in part, because it raises a theological inconsistency: “what has become of God’s faithfulness to the covenant” (Horrell 2008, p. 104)? In the end, Horrell urges readers to fill in the silence of 1 Peter “within a wider theology which constructs a positive place both for the Church and for Israel” (Horrell 2008, p. 105). And he challenges Christian theologians with this question: “Can the identity of the Church be claimed and sustained without at the same time implying that the Jews have lost their status as God’s people” (Horrell 2008, p. 102)?

What is important to note for the purposes of this essay is that for both Horrell and Doering, the problematic silence of 1 Peter requires readers to go outside of the text itself if they wish to resolve what could be interpreted as a problematic supersessionist strategy of identity formation in the letter.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. How the “Standard Canonical Narrative” Problematizes the Silence of 1 Peter

But this suggestion to go outside of the text is complicated by the fact that the predominant reading strategy that has been employed for centuries problematizes the silence of 1 Peter. In his 1996 monograph, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, one of the primary arguments that Kendall Soulen advances is that the problem of the doctrine of supersessionism is more foundationally a canonical narrative problem (Soulen 1996, p. 13). Soulen defines a canonical narrative as “an interpretive instrument that provides a framework for reading the Christian Bible as a theological and narrative unity” (Soulen 1996, p. 13). A canonical narrative reflects both theological as well as hermeneutical decisions about how the Christian Bible, that is the Old and New Testament, fits together as a whole. For Soulen, it is simply not enough to repudiate supersessionism and re-affirm God’s covenant fidelity with Israel. Rather, since Christian doctrine presupposes a storied account of God’s relations with humankind, and since this storied account forms the bedrock of the church’s convictions, practices (including hermeneutical strategies), and posture, the church must engage in a thoroughgoing reassessment of its standard canonical narrative (Soulen 1996, pp. 13–14).

In his analysis of the writings of Justin and Irenaeus, whom he contends lay the foundation for this standard canonical reading, Soulen identifies three kinds of supersessionism that he argues have been passed down to the present. First, the standard canonical narrative contains an *economic supersessionism* which tells the canonical story about God designing carnal Israel from the very beginning to become obsolete with the coming of Jesus Christ and the creation of the church. Everything that was covenanted to Israel is made redundant by its ecclesial equivalent: “The written law of Moses is replaced by the spiritual law of Christ, circumcision by baptism, natural descent by faith as criterion of membership in the people of God, and so forth” (Soulen 1996, p. 29). Soulen refers to this telling of how the

canon fits together as *economic supersessionism* because the obsolescence of carnal Israel is an essential feature of God's overarching economy of redemption for the world. Israel is transient because its role in the economy of redemption was always only to prepare salvation for its spiritual and universal form (Soulen 1996, p. 29). The hermeneutical and theological framework of economic supersessionism is encapsulated by the following comment from Melito of Sardis:

The people [Israel] was precious before the church arose, and the law was marvelous before the gospel was elucidated. But when the church arose and the gospel took precedence the model was made void, conceding its power to the reality the people was made void when the church arose.

(Soulen 1996, p. 29)

As Soulen notes, economic supersessionism is often accompanied by a second type that he calls *punitive supersessionism*—the notion that God abrogates his covenant with Israel because Israel has chosen to reject Jesus Christ and his gospel message. For this reason, God turns his back on and punishes the Jews.

Soulen also identifies a third type of supersessionism, which he considers to be implicit and thus more profoundly problematic. *Structural supersessionism*, Soulen argues, undergirds the standard canonical narrative, in which the Christian canon implicitly is unified in a manner that renders the Hebrew scriptures largely indecisive for shaping conclusions about how God's purposes engage creation in universal and enduring ways (Soulen 1996, pp. 31–33). That is to say that God's history with Israel does not contribute much of anything to the essential narrative of God's redemption and consummation. Instead, if God's interactions with Israel were to be completely omitted from an account of Christian faith, this would not disturb the logic of the standard canonical narrative (Soulen 1996, p. 32). For Soulen, the absence of any explicit mention of Israel in the church's foundational creeds illustrates the existence and influence of *structural supersessionism*. It appears, he argues, that the Christian conception of God, salvation, and life is minimally impacted by God's identity as the God of Israel. As a result, the prophets are reduced to finding prophecies that point to the coming of the Messiah; the Pentateuch is only as valuable as it helps us understand sin, forgiveness, sacrifice, and our inability to keep God's commands. Soulen underscores that in the standard canonical narrative, redemption supersedes consummation as the hinge on which the canonical narrative turns. As a result, the catastrophe and remedy of sin becomes the *telos* of God's interaction with the world rather than consummation, the eternal fellowship between God and his people.<sup>11</sup>

One reason for highlighting the work of Soulen is to show that the standard canonical narrative exerts significant hermeneutical and theological influence (often unknowingly), especially for those who read New Testament texts with a canon consciousness—because that consciousness brings with it an inherited reading strategy. The reality is that the vast majority of those who read and study 1 Peter do so within the framework of this inherited reading strategy, which offers an (often unexamined) way of understanding how Israel relates to the church. Soulen has convincingly shown that the problem of supersessionism in Christian theology goes beyond the explicit teaching that the church has displaced Israel as God's people in the economy of salvation and *missio Dei*; rather, the problem is a result of the way in which Christians (scholars, theologians, pastors, and practitioners) have traditionally understood the theological and narrative unity of the Christian canon as a whole (Soulen 1996, p. 33). Put bluntly, while the vast majority of Christian traditions have been engaged in debates about virtually every aspect of Christian theology for centuries, these debates have occurred largely within the hermeneutical and theological parameters established and relatively unchanged by the standard canonical narrative (Soulen 1996, p. 16). Soulen's work highlights that for most of its existence, the church has not sought to understand nor articulate itself in light of God's fidelity to the people of Israel. Instead, it has proclaimed itself to have replaced Israel as the true, spiritual people of God, comprising the faithful of all nations, in relation to which the old carnal Israel existed merely as a temporary foreshadowing.

But more foundationally, the point of reflecting on the standard canonical narrative is to underscore that it problematizes the suggestion to go outside of 1 Peter to resolve the silence of the text regarding the relationship between the church and Israel. Horrell and Doering have encouraged readers to fill the silence of 1 Peter from outside theologically and canonically, respectively. But Soulen's work shows that this approach to ameliorate the silence of 1 Peter is likely to be problematic because the doctrine and hermeneutical posture of supersessionism originates as a theological and canonical problem of misreading the narrative unity of scripture. Stated plainly, the standard Christian canonical narrative, which is on the one hand a theological construct and on the other hand a hermeneutical framework, conditions many readers, especially those reading within the confines of the Christian tradition and canon, to be blind to the tension that is present in 1 Peter, which is generated by the author's application of Jewish identity, prerogatives, and privileges to gentile followers of Jesus. This may offer one explanation for why much of modern 1 Peter scholarship has tended to downplay, disregard, or ignore supersessionism in the text: 1 Peter has been seen to cohere with and affirm the "standard canonical narrative" in which the earliest Christian communities are seen as fulfilling Israel's promised destiny, as inheriting Israel's privileges and identity, and in effect replacing Israel as God's people. In short, the problem is that many have not seen this as a problem.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. The Textual Pressure to Solve the Problem(s) of 1 Peter

But in spite of this strong hermeneutical influence, in what follows, I will demonstrate that attentiveness to the text of 1 Peter actually confronts and challenges the standard canonical reading strategy described by Soulen, pushes against the purported silence, and raises questions about its supposed supersessionist posture. I will show that 1 Peter provides, on its own terms, a way for gentile followers of Jesus to situate themselves within the story of the God of Israel and his interaction with his people. I will do this by highlighting two features of 1 Peter that exert pressure on the reader to "appropriate Israelhood" without at the same time replacing Israel.<sup>13</sup>

I will begin by focusing on the way in which 'god' is described in 1 Peter and how this particular God is incomprehensible outside of an implicit narrative that is unique to Israel's account of the world. Second, I will attend more carefully to the way in which the identity of the addressees is re-oriented such that they are to find a new way of life in a kind of "Israelhood" that cannot be understood in a supersessionistic manner. As we will see, this reading will press against some of the concerns that Bauman-Martin has raised from her postcolonial criticism perspective, and it will offer a way of beginning to reimagine from within the text itself the relationship between Israel and gentiles who loyally align themselves with Jesus.

##### 4.1. "God" and the Implicit Narrative of 1 Peter

We begin with the question, *Which god is the author of 1 Peter referring to in the letter?* In what follows, I want to briefly attend to the implicit, and in some cases explicit, ways in which God is referred to and described in 1 Peter. As we attend to these references to God in 1 Peter, we will see that the author appeals to Israel's scriptures, epithets, privileges, and prerogatives in order to draw the readers into an implicit narrative that is organically connected to both the God of Israel as well as to the hopes and expectations of the people of Israel. That is to say that the author is not merely using Israel as an analogy for identify formation but instead is grounding all claims about reality in terms of God's self-revelation and promises to Israel.

The God who is blessed, trusted in, and hoped for in 1 Peter is far from being a generic supreme higher power. Instead, the author of 1 Peter identifies this particular God as the creator (1 Pet 1:20; 4:19), as the one who made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants (implicit in 1 Pet 3:5, and more generally with the reference to the prophets found 1 Pet 1:10–12), as the one who delivered these descendants from Egypt through the Passover (implied in 1 Pet 1:19), and as the one who has promised to once

again deliver them from their self-inflicted exile (implied in the usage of Isaiah 40, Ezekiel 34, Isa 43:20/Exod 19:5–6, Isa 28:16/Ps 118:22/Isa 8:14; Hos 1:6, 9, 10; 2:23; and Isaiah 53).<sup>14</sup>

It is this particular God who is also said to have raised Jesus Christ from the dead, which is a hope unique to the people of Israel.<sup>15</sup> As the author of 1 Peter details the accomplishments of this particular God that raised Jesus Christ from the dead, he does so in terms that are unique to Israel's way of understanding what God is up to in the world and what he has promised for his people. For example, the salvation that the God of 1 Peter accomplishes through Jesus Christ is said to conform to the programmatic new-exodus prologue of Isaiah 40 (1 Peter 1:24–25), the covenantal renewal promises of Hosea 1:6, 9–10/2:23 (1 Pet 2:10), and Israel's national hopes for redemption from exile found in Isaiah 53 (1 Peter 2:22–25).<sup>16</sup> Jesus himself, the agent of God's redemption in the letter, is also characterized in terms that only make sense in a Jewish framework—as the lamb without blemish (1 Pet 1:19), the rejected cornerstone, who is nevertheless esteemed and chosen by God (1 Pet 2:6–8; Isa 28:16; Psa 118:22; Isa 8:14), and as the chief shepherd who heals and cares for the flock of God (1 Pet 2:25; 5:4; Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 34; Zech 13:7; Psalm 23).<sup>17</sup> According to the author of 1 Peter, to trust in Jesus is to put one's hope in this particular God, the God of Israel (1:21); this hope involves seeing the world the way an Israelite would see the world, embracing the metanarrative of Israelite self-understanding.<sup>18</sup> Foundational to this metanarrative of hope is the expectation that this God of Israel is going to judge not only his people but the entire world, vindicating those who remain loyal to the one true God and his Messiah (1 Pet 2:4–10; 2:12; 4:18/Ezek 9:6). This coming judgment and vindication are said to be executed by Jesus Christ at his "revelation," and for this reason, the author of 1 Peter urges the addressees to place their hope completely in the grace that will be brought to them on that day (1 Pet 1:13).

Additionally, the people who place their hope in this particular God are said to have been "ransomed" (a concept that originates in Israel's exodus narratives) from the futile ways of their forefathers (1 Pet 1:18); they are exhorted to live in keeping with the foundational covenant stipulation established by the God of Israel in the wilderness: "you shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet 1:15–16; Lev 11:44); and their vocation, or mission, is described in terms that echo both God's call for elect Israel as they were delivered from Egypt and also God's promises of redemption for exiled Israel in Isaiah: "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" (1 Pet 2:9; Exod 19:5–6; Isa 43:20–21).<sup>19</sup>

I bring these implicit (and at times explicit) assumptions about God in 1 Peter to the surface to make three points. First, this is a uniquely Israel-centric way of telling the story of the world, of talking about who God is, and of describing what this God is up to in the world. It is important to underscore that the addressees are being asked to do more than think of Israel as an analogy; rather, they are being called to embrace a uniquely Israelite way of conceiving of and being in the world.

Second, the addressees are organically connected to and included in this story because of their association with Jesus. While it is true, as some have pointed out, that the addressees are not said to become Israel, they are nevertheless seamlessly placed within the story of God's redemption of Israel through the Christ and incorporated into the hopes of Isaiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, and the Psalmists. In this regard, the text seems to necessitate that the addressees "appropriate Israelhood," that is, to embrace an Israelite understanding of the problem of the world and the way in which this one true God of the world intends to resolve the problem. In short, he calls them to orient their lives around a particular hope (1 Pet 1:13; 3:15) that would prove to be utterly meaningless were Israel to be expropriated. To be a new people (1 Pet 2:9–10), they must see themselves as a part of a new story, belonging to a people and a history that has preceded them.

Finally, the claims that the author of 1 Peter makes about God and what this God has accomplished through Jesus make supersessionism deeply problematic because such a posture toward Israel is internally incoherent in the text. For example, the assumption for

the author of 1 Peter is that the God of Israel, who is characterized as the creator of the world and the one who formed, covenanted, and remains faithful to Israel (and not some generic notion of deity), has acted decisively in and through Jesus to bring to culmination the promises he made to Israel for the sake of the whole world. To be more specific, the author states that the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1:3) is in fact the God of Israel; that what this particular God has revealed about himself in Jesus is to be understood within the context of and in continuity with what he has revealed about himself through his covenant and history with Israel (e.g., 1 Pet 1:10–12). This covenantal history with Israel has been inscripturated in the Hebrew Bible (or what Christians refer to as the Old Testament), and when the author of 1 Peter appeals to the Hebrew scriptures to establish a point about, for example, Christology or the mission of the people of God, he is more foundationally appealing to the reliability and trustworthiness of this God of Israel. If we were to read 1 Peter in such a way that the author replaces the privileges and mission of Israel with “the church,” then this calls into question just how reliable and faithful this God is that the author refers to fundamentally in his letter.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, the implicit narrative of 1 Peter forces gentile followers of Jesus to understand and articulate their own identity in light of God’s ongoing fidelity to the people of Israel. Additionally, the way in which the author of 1 Peter narrates the story of God in the letter underscores the *telos* of God’s dealings with Israel (as expressed in the Abrahamic covenant), namely the blessing of eternal fellowship with God through Israel for all the nations. That is, the goal of God’s interactions with Israel is consummation and communion and not merely redemption.

If we are to read 1 Peter with a posture of supersessionism that renders the Jewish people a matter of indifference to the God of Israel, this seems to be inconsistent with the foundational assumptions of the author and his usage of the Hebrew scriptures in the letter. It also raises vexing questions such as: if the God of Israel is indifferent to a people that he once promised an inheritance, then how seriously can we take promises he is said to make to other peoples at other times? Or, if the God of Israel is capable of raising up a people only to abandon them for another, how sure can we be that he will not do the same to his new chosen people? In view of these foundational claims about the God of 1 Peter, the text of 1 Peter seems to necessitate that a gentile follower of Jesus “appropriate Israelhood” without denying it to Israel.

#### 4.2. Embracing a Non-Gentile Way of Life

More can be said about the “Israelhood” posture that the addressees are called to embrace by looking briefly at a particular way in which the addressees are described in 1 Peter:

Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge (1 Pet 2:12).

You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do . . . they are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme (1 Pet 4:3–4).

These two references are particularly striking because, as we have already seen, there is a consensus within Primopetrine scholarship that the addressees are a predominantly if not exclusively gentile audience. So, what is the author doing with this move in which he seems to distinguish his predominantly gentile addressees from “the gentiles”? Contemporary 1 Peter scholars tend to explain this move as the author’s way of distinguishing believers in Jesus from non-believers or more specifically non-Christians. For example, regarding 1 Pet 4:3, Joel Green asserts that “[t]his emphasizes, yet again, the distinction between believers and unbelievers” (Green 2007, p. 138); Michaels states that “[t]he term traditionally applied by Jews and Christians alike to non-Jews is transferred to non-Christians, so as to become the equivalent of such English words as ‘heathen’ or ‘pagan’” (Michaels 1988, p. 117); Elliott claims that “[i]n most of its NT occurrences, the term *ta ethnē* continues to denote

non-Israelites in contrast to Israelites. However, in some cases, as here in 1 Peter, when *ta ethnē/hoi ethnikai* is a foil to followers of Jesus, it becomes a designation for all non-Christians who disobey (2:7; 3:1), who have rejected Jesus as Messiah and malign his followers, including pagans and mainstream Israel alike" (Elliott 2000, p. 466); and Jobes insists that "[b]oth Peter and Paul, following Jewish thought, use the designation *ethnē* to refer to those outside the community of Christian faith" (Jobes 2005, pp. 169–70).

But I contend that this reading of those two references of "gentile" demands more care. First, it seems to me that commentators are unduly anachronistic when they claim that the author is creating a third category, "Christian," that is distinguishable from Jew and gentile. Recent scholarship on the term *Χριστιανός*, which appears in 1 Pet 4:16 (as well as Acts 11:26 and 26:28), shows that the grain runs the opposite direction. Rather than create a third entity, the word is used to designate a sub-group which includes Jews and non-Jews who have aligned themselves with Jesus (Trebilco 2012, pp. 272–97). In other words, *Χριστιανός* does not constitute a new religious category nor is it meant to imply that the addressees were no longer viewed as Jews. What is more, Korner has observed that when the term *Χριστιανός* occurs in Acts, it is when "other ethnicities are depicted as being allowed entrance into a Jewish sub-group of Christ followers whose apostolic loyalty lies with the apostles in Jerusalem" (Korner 2020, p. 20; see also Korner 2017, p. 152). This observation fits well with reading that I have put forth in 1 Peter. All this is to say that at this stage in history, it is more accurate to see what is going on in 1 Peter as intra-Jewish debate about who the true people of God are (and how gentiles fit into that corporate entity), and about how God has been faithful to his covenant and his promises, rather than as the author creating a new category (Christian) that can be clearly delineated from Israel and its God. In other words, the text of 1 Peter itself does not give us warrant to create a new entity, Christian, that is mutually exclusive from Israel and Jewish followers of Jesus.

Second, if we read 1 Pet 2:12 and 4:3–4 with the grain of the implicit narrative that I have highlighted in 1 Peter, it seems to be the case that the author is not taking Israel's identity, prerogatives, and mission and transferring them to the gentiles (as has often been the assumption or claim), but rather that the author of 1 Peter is exhorting gentiles to distance themselves from their gentile culture with its assumptions, values, practices, and hopes. To be more specific, the author is exhorting his readers to orient themselves *as gentiles* to a particularly Jewish way of life that is patterned after the life of Jesus (e.g., 1 Pet 2:21–23 mimicked in 1 Pet 3:9–12) and built upon the hopes and expectations of Israel.<sup>21</sup> We see this in the fact that, as Doering has already underscored, these readers are never called a new Israel. Their identity as gentiles is in one sense preserved. But in another sense, their identity as gentiles is disoriented or dislocated because they are called to a new *ἀναστροφή* ("way of life" or "conduct") that is on the one hand a rejection of what they have inherited (1 Pet 1:18) and on the other what they are learning as new followers of Jesus (1 Pet 1:15, 17; 2:12). Seven times in key exhortative passages in the letter, the author uses either the verb *ἀναστρέφω* or the noun *ἀναστροφή* to explain the full implications of aligning one's life with the Jewish Messiah, Jesus (1 Pet 1:15, 17, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2). This reading helps explain, in part, why the author of 1 Peter employs the unique image of "newborns" to his readers (1 Pet 1:3, 23: 2:2) who now must learn to "grow into salvation" (1 Pet 2:2). To say it another way, in 1 Peter, the gentiles who have been born-again as a result of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1:3) are ransomed from their former way of life (1 Pet 1:18) and called to learn a new culture patterned after the Messiah of Israel and shaped by the God of Israel's expectations for Israel's corporate life but distinctly as gentiles. Their new way of life in Jesus Christ is to be understood as the culmination of the promises to and hopes of Israel (e.g., 1 Pet 1:3, 13; 2:4, 25) for the sake of the world.<sup>22</sup> Read in this way, it is not that Israel has been superseded by gentile followers of Jesus. Quite the contrary: if the audience is in fact made up of an exclusive or even predominantly gentile audience, it appears that the author of 1 Peter is claiming that their gentile heritage (narrative self-understanding, hopes, way of life, values, etc.) has been replaced with that of "Israelhood". Or to borrow from

Willie Jennings, these gentile followers of Jesus, as a new-born people, have been displaced and now must learn to participate in Israel's story as guests (Jennings 2012, pp. 250–88).

As we have seen, much of the discussion regarding Israel and “the church” has insinuated that the author of 1 Peter is appropriating Israel's identity in such a way that he gives it over to the gentiles, that the gentiles are exhorted to take Israel's vocation, prerogatives, etc. as their own in such a way that replaces Israel. But I have made the case that the pressure of the text moves in the opposite direction; that is, it seems that what the text is actually doing is demanding non-Jewish followers of Jesus Christ to no longer orient themselves around the inherited way of life of the “gentiles” but rather to find their heritage as part of the house or commonwealth of the Davidic king, Jesus, who is the hope of Israel and the nations (1 Pet 2:4–10, 25).<sup>23</sup>

This does not yet answer all the questions we may have about the relationship between Israel and the church in 1 Peter or more accurately Israel and gentile followers of Jesus.<sup>24</sup> What is important to note is the author does not care to explain all that makes these two entities different but rather seeks to emphasize what these newborn gentiles share with Israel. So, while their new birth does not make them Israel, it does connect them to Israel's God, Israel's call to be holy, and Israel's hope, all shaped by Jesus Christ, the God of Israel's cornerstone and shepherd (1 Pet 2:4, 25).

This is by no means an exhaustive survey of all the ways in which 1 Peter displaces, emplaces, and reorients the implied readers to inhabit the story of Israel. More can and should be said about how the author draws on Israelite notions of inheritance and salvation (1 Pet 1:3–12), how the author places the readers into a new wilderness of testing (1 Pet 1:5–2:10),<sup>25</sup> how the readers are to conceptualize being living stones who are built into a spiritual house (1 Pet 2.4–10), how the readers are to be a royal priesthood, and how they are to receive promises which seem to have been given exclusively to Israel (e.g., Hos 1:6, 9–10; 2:23 in 1 Pet 2:10) without at the same time replacing Israel.<sup>26</sup> But for the purposes of this essay, our brief survey above has highlighted that there is enough pressure in the text to question the concerns of Bauman-Martin as well as the suggestion to go outside of 1 Peter to resolve the seemingly problematic identify formation strategy of the letter.

## 5. Conclusions

The primary point of this essay is to underscore that it is not only postcolonial criticism that exposes problems with reading 1 Peter as a text that puts forth a supersessionist identity formation strategy. Some have tried to ameliorate this problem by pointing to silence in the letter, which creates hermeneutical space to go outside of the text itself to resolve the tension. I have shown that this move can create its own problems because of the influential standard canonical narrative, which exerts tremendous pressure to replace Israel with the church.

Instead, I have sought to demonstrate in brief that the text of 1 Peter itself pushes against a supersessionist posture, in part because such a reading is inconsistent with the claims made about God in the letter and raises serious questions about the trustworthiness of this God; but also because the grain of text—with the implicit narrative and the exhortation to distance oneself from a gentile way of life—seems to necessitate that the addressees “appropriate Israelhood” without expropriating Israel. The most basic observation that I have made by attuning to two non-exhaustive features of 1 Peter is that the author seeks to make sense of both Jesus as well as the new reality of the implied readers within the ongoing story of the God of Israel's interactions with Israel. Said in another way, the addressees are not to understand their allegiance to Jesus apart from their belonging to the hopes and expectations of Israel. First Peter compels an Israel-centric way of understanding the world and one's place in it. What is more, I have noted how a close reading of 1 Peter challenges the standard canonical reading strategy described by Soulen and in turn provides on its own terms a way for gentile readers to situate themselves within the story of the God of Israel and his interaction with his people.

This being the case, I contend that fresh research on the identity formation strategy of 1 Peter is in order, which requires (1) more attentiveness to the complex and comprehensive way that 1 Peter draws on Israel's privileges, prerogatives, and scriptures to invite gentiles to inhabit the hopes, expectations, and mission of Israel, (2) more inquiry into the assumptions that lead to a purported supersessionism in the letter, (3) as well as more attention to the ways the purported supersessionist posture of 1 Peter has been met with silence from many of its interpreters. In short, I contend that reading 1 Peter after supersessionism is a problem in search of a comprehensive solution.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I wish to express my profound gratitude to Professor David Horrell, Dr. Edward Glenny, and Dr. Ralph Korner for their thoroughness, insight, and critical engagement on an earlier draft of this essay. This should not be understood to mean that they are liable for any of its present shortcomings.
- <sup>2</sup> The authorship of the letter is contested among 1 Peter scholars. For a summary of the authorship debate, see [Liebengood \(2014, pp. 18–20\)](#). The arguments set forth in this essay stand whether the letter was written by the historical Simon Peter or as the Peter of the canonical tradition, in which case the letter was written no later than 92 CE. To not distract from the argument of this essay, I will use “the author” to refer to the possibility of either of these two options.
- <sup>3</sup> There is currently a strong consensus among 1 Peter scholars that the letter was written to a predominantly if not exclusively gentile audience in Asia Minor. To trace this modern consensus, see ([Michaels 1988, pp. xlv–xlvi](#); [Achtmeier 1996, pp. 50–51](#); [Elliott 2000, pp. 94–97](#)), who emphasizes a mixed audience; and ([Dubis 2006, pp. 204–5](#)). For the most comprehensive study on the audience of 1 Peter to date, see [Williams \(2012, pp. 91–127\)](#), who concludes that “it seems best, therefore, along with the majority of commentators, to posit a primarily Gentile-Christian readership as the intended audience of 1 Peter” ([Williams 2012, p. 95](#)).
- <sup>4</sup> Translation mine.
- <sup>5</sup> Three notable exceptions to this trend will be discussed below. See also ([Harink 2009](#); [Botner 2020](#)).
- <sup>6</sup> See [Bauman-Martin \(2007, pp. 150–56\)](#) for a critique of some of these possible reasons for downplaying or ignoring the apparent supersessionism of the text.
- <sup>7</sup> See [Michaels \(1988, p. 107\)](#), who questions whether there is anti-Jewish polemic that is expressed by pretending that Israel does not exist.
- <sup>8</sup> For two significant discussions on how metaphors work in identity formation, especially in 1 Peter, see ([Horrell 2011, pp. 135–43](#); [Marcar 2022, pp. 24–51](#)). See also ([Horrell 2020](#)).
- <sup>9</sup> See also [Achtmeier \(1996, pp. 69–70\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> It is also important to underscore that both Horrell and Doering, in their own ways, offer a reading of 1 Peter that does not support Bauman-Martin's claim that the letter uses imperial and colonizing strategies for identity formation.
- <sup>11</sup> [Soulen \(2013, p. 285\)](#) since has modified his critique of the standard canonical narrative: “I no longer think that supersessionism is an essential or necessary feature of the standard canonical narrative. I think of it rather as a deformation of that narrative, which can be overcome from within, by making it truer to the canon's witness to Jesus Christ and to the Holy Trinity revealed in him.”
- <sup>12</sup> With the exception of scholars such as Bauman-Martin, Horrell, and Doering mentioned above.
- <sup>13</sup> I am indebted to [Lindbeck \(2000\)](#) for this terminology.
- <sup>14</sup> For more details on the way in which these particular Old Testament scriptures are used in 1 Peter, see ([Liebengood 2014, pp. 97–103, 175–99](#)).
- <sup>15</sup> I am not here claiming that everyone in Israel hoped for resurrection but that it was nevertheless a unique confident expectation for many as demonstrated in Jon [Levenson \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> See ([Liebengood 2014, pp. 79–104](#)) for further development.
- <sup>17</sup> In this regard, even the addressees' allegiance to Jesus must be understood on Israel's terms.
- <sup>18</sup> Albeit a contested identity characterized by intra-Jewish debate on how, when, and through whom this redemption would be accomplished.
- <sup>19</sup> All scripture citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

- 20 I place “the church” in quotations because it is important to note that the term *ἐκκλησία* never appears in 1 Peter. Despite this, scholars often refer anachronistically to the addressees as “the church,” which is a historically and theological loaded term. This move subtly contributes to the problematic reading strategy I am seeking to highlight in this essay.
- 21 It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a more comprehensive account of what it looks like in 1 Peter for gentile Jesus followers to orient themselves to a Jewish way of life beyond what I have done in this essay. See Liebengood (forthcoming, Cascade) for a thorough discussion of what is included and excluded in this new orientation.
- 22 It is important to note that Israel’s own self-understanding is also re-oriented by Jesus Christ as well.
- 23 For the development of the Eschatological David Shepherd ideology in 1 Peter, see Liebengood (2014, pp. 79–104, 156–214).
- 24 While many scholars have noted that gentile followers of Jesus are never called or likened to Israel in 1 Peter, it is also the case that gentile followers of Jesus are never referred to as the church, either. See the Liebengood (forthcoming, Cascade) for a rationale for this move.
- 25 See Liebengood (2014, pp. 130–40).
- 26 For a comprehensive examination of these questions, see Liebengood (forthcoming, Cascade).

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