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Resident Aliens: A Social Class?

One of the most influential studies on 1 Peter in recent years demonstrates that the terms used in this letter for “aliens and exiles” (*parepidēmos* in 1:1; 2:11; *paroikia* in 1:17; *paroikos* in 2:11) were used in the Roman world to refer to a particular social class of people with the legal status of “resident aliens.” Such persons lived without recognized citizenship; they were “homeless” in a social-cultural sense and often were subjected to abuse and oppression. This observation leads to the contention that 1 Peter was written to Christians who belonged to this marginalized social class. Many aspects of the letter may be understood from such a perspective.¹

Most scholars, however, think that Peter uses this label in a metaphorical way to refer to his readers’ spiritual status. An analogy may be seen in the manner in which he treats slavery. Many of the readers were actually slaves, but all Christians become slaves in a metaphorical sense and thus stand to learn from the actual slaves how to bear up under unjust suffering (see 2:18–21). Likewise, some of those who received this letter probably were “resident aliens” in a literal sense, but even those who were not should realize that they have become such as a result of their faith. Thus the pastoral counsel to those who are literally “homeless” in this world applies to all Christians, as all are separated from their true home in heaven.

1. See John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).