Roman Colonization and the Origin of 1 Peter

Antiochus III was not the last ruler to displace people in order to strengthen the rule of his empire through colonization. In fact, territory gained by expansions of the Roman Empire was also colonized by displaced peoples (Noy 2000: 19). Roman colonization had begun in Italy in the earliest days of the republic and became standard procedure as the empire grew by conquest and annexation. Under Augustus,

a deliberate plan was adopted, whereby the newly annexed districts were to be Romanized by founding colonies with civic institutions modeled on those of Rome, established especially in that part of the province which had been least affected by contact with the Graeco-Roman world. Through these regions also roads were constructed to serve as the means whereby this contact might become increasingly closer. (Magie 1950: 1.466)

Such colonization was intended to accomplish one or more of three purposes: (1) to romanize an area, introducing Roman language, culture, and politics to the native populations through the colonists; (2) to provide a strategic military presence, especially on the frontier; and (3) to foster and accommodate commerce between distant places in the empire (Brewster 1993: 139; Salmon 1970: 13–28).

The policy of urbanization through colonization was an active principle of the Roman emperors in the first century. Under the *pax Romana* (Roman peace) established by Augustus, business, commerce, and personal travel occurred with relative speed and ease along well-established Roman routes, making such a strategy possible. After the time of Hadrian, the creation of cities became increasingly less frequent, though the process never completely stopped.

*Claudius colonizes Asia Minor.* Although most of the emperors colonized various regions of the empire, Claudius was the one who made the title of *colonia* a status much sought after by the provincial cities (Salmon 1970: 137). It is particularly striking that Claudius (reigning AD 41–54), whose administration was characterized by conquest and expansion, established Roman cities in *all five* of the regions named in 1 Pet. 1:1. Of all the emperors, Claudius was the one who left the greatest legacy in Asia Minor through the establishment of cities and roads (Mitchell 1993: 1.95–98). Coins and inscriptions from Asia Minor, as well as extant writings of Pliny, provide relevant historical information that Claudius established a *colonia* as a mark of imperial favor in *each and every one* of the regions named in 1:1.

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5 For instance, Augustus colonized Africa (Rostovtzeff 1926: 318) and Asia Minor (Frank 1962: 376); Tiberius colonized Caesarea in Cappadocia (Brewster 1993: 143); Claudius established colonies in Asia Minor and also in Thrace, Britain, and Syria (Rostovtzeff 1926: 251; *CAH* 10:679); Nero, in Italy (Alston 1998: 120); Vespasian, in Spain, Germany, the Danubian provinces (Rostovtzeff 1926: 111), and Asia Minor (Magie 1950: 1.570); Domitian, in the borderland of Lydia and Phrygia (Magie 1950: 1.570); Trajan, in Dacia, Thrace, and Moesia Inferior, though he forbade emigration from Italy (Rostovtzeff 1926: 250, 358).
There were good reasons for Claudius to colonize Asia Minor. The political boundaries in Asia Minor were still in flux during the middle of the first century, generating the need to establish strategic administrative centers where none had previously existed and to provide a military presence in unstable times. Of all the emperors of the first century, Claudius was most aggressive in his establishment of new cities throughout the empire (Levick 1990: 164–65; Rostovtzeff 1926: 84). Roman colonies were established (1) sometimes where no town or city previously existed, or (2) by simply conferring civitas (citizenship) status on existing prosperous cities whose populations were deemed culturally and politically worthy, or most often (3) by pumping Roman money and colonists into small towns that had become strategic due to changing political circumstances.

Claudius followed the second and third ways of colonization in the five regions named in 1:1 (Scramuzza 1940: 144; see map at the beginning of the introduction). In Pontus, Claudius conferred the status of a Roman colony on the old settlement of Andrapa, which then took the name Neoclaudiopolis (Jones 1971: 159; Magie 1950: 1.546–47; CAH 10:679). In Galatia, the ancient city of Iconium received a new political advantage from Claudius and took the name Claudiconium (Magie 1950: 1.547). Claudius also established another colony in the Galatian area of Trocmi called Claudiopolis (CAH 10:679). The ancient settlement of Archelais in newly annexed Cappadocia was given the status of a Roman colony (Jones 1971: 179; CAH 10:679; Levick 1990: 158, 178; Magie 1950: 1.547). In the province of Asia the Seleucid community of Laodicea became romanized with the name Claudiolaodicea (Magie 1950: 1.547). And finally in Bithynia the town of Boli was conferred with a new status that required its name to become Bithynium-Claudiopolis (Jones 1971: 164; CAH 10:679; Magie 1950: 1.546). Elsewhere in Asia Minor Claudius also established five colonies in Pisidia and Lycaonia (CAH 10:680; see also Levick 1990: 158, 178; Magie 1950: 1.547; Momigliano 1934: 64–65) as well as in Syria at Ptolemais Acco (Levick 1990: 183) and in Thrace (Rostovtzeff 1926: 251). It is striking that Claudius—and perhaps only Claudius—established colonies in each of the five regions specifically named in 1:1.

**Populating the colonies.** The emperors determined how to populate these newly designated colonies, usually by sending at least three hundred colonists who had cultural and political loyalties to Rome (although in one case 6,000 colonists were settled; Rostovtzeff 1926: 316). The aristocracy of Rome generally encouraged colonization, for it presented a socioeconomic opportunity for those who would otherwise remain poor and discontented in the city of Rome. Sometimes slaves in the city of Rome were freed and granted citizenship if they would emigrate to a newly founded colony (Frank 1932: 58; Noy 2000). Some residents of Rome eagerly volunteered to emigrate, for as colonists they were given homesteading land, and their families often became a part of the elite local leadership within a generation or two (Rostovtzeff 1926: 317, 327). If the colony was of military value, the emperors often populated it with veterans of the Roman army.

Although colonists were not automatically granted Roman citizenship, colonization did create a class of provincial city-dwellers who would be the best supporters of the Roman regime, which had given them such opportunities (Salmon 1970: 15). The creation of new urban centers of commerce also

provided an opportunity for the native indigenous population to become merchants and shopkeepers, creating a new economic class in Asia Minor. But it was also not uncommon for the emperor or senate to deport a group viewed to be troublemakers in Rome to colonize a newly acquired territory in some remote area of the empire (Frend 1967: 108). Expulsion of noncitizens from urban areas was a common occurrence throughout Roman history for a variety of reasons and sometimes for no obvious reason at all. At times, whole populations were forced to emigrate because they were perceived as disruptive of the pax Romana (Noy 2000: 41), or because the emperor had confiscated their lands (Rostovtzeff 1926: 250, 318), or because demands on the food supply needed relief in times of famine (Noy 2000: 27–39).

The choice of the target group was often based on religion, ethnicity, or occupation. Because of a famine during the reign of Augustus, all foreigners except doctors and teachers were expelled from Rome (Noy 2000: 39). Philosophers, who were perceived as being too “Greek,” were repeatedly expelled from Rome. The famous philosopher Epictetus returned to his town of Nicopolis in Asia Minor because of such an expulsion in AD 89 (Noy 2000: 45). Expulsions by the Romans for a variety of reasons are documented from the second century BC through the fourth century AD. The common feature of all of them, however, is that their targets were perceived as being “foreigners” (Latin: peregrini; Gk.: parepidēmoi; Noy 2000: 46).

Not only were those deported from Rome often “foreigners” (i.e., not citizens of Rome), but they were often viewed as foreigners at their destination as well. Because colonists immigrating from Rome generally benefited from resources often confiscated from the local indigenous population and because colonists enjoyed the official sanction of Rome, they were naturally viewed as foreigners by the native populations, and at times with great resentment (Mitchell 1993: 1.178; Salmon 1970: 150). Sometimes colonists even became a target of violence and persecution by the native population (Magie 1950: 1.548; Salmon 1970: 150). By virtue of being Roman colonists, the people who settled in the colonies were granted some category of Roman rights (often Latin rights), if not full Roman citizenship (Goodman 1997: 136–37; Momigliano 1934: 66–67; Scramuzza 1940: 143; Stevenson 1939: 166). However, because cities reserved the right to bestow local citizenship, even colonists with Roman citizenship were not automatically made citizens in the city in which they found themselves living as colonists until they earned it or bought it through benefaction. And even Roman citizens could be quite poor, since citizenship provided a legal status that did not reflect economic or social standing (Alston 1998: 215). Moreover, upper-class provincials who were citizens of their city but were foreigners with respect to Roman citizenship nevertheless tended to acquire privileges of Roman status even though they may never have technically achieved Roman citizenship (Goodman 1997: 136–37; Sherwin-White 1974: 254). Hence, citizenship in the Roman period was a complicated issue, and therefore the word “foreigner” could be applied in various contexts to various people depending on the reference point. This resulted in complex social relationships accompanied by serious tensions that played out differently between citizens and noncitizens, free and slave, rich and poor in each city (Garnsey 1974: 159–65; Sherwin-White 1974: 254; Levick 1967: 189; MacMullen 1974; Mitchell 1993: 1.177–78; Rostovtzeff 1971: 318–19).

Disputed entitlements, such as land rights, were one way the problem of foreignness played out (Rostovtzeff 1926: 255, 319). From the perspective of Roman colonists, native inhabitants of the territory around the colonized cities had no share in the form of government recognized as Roman and were therefore viewed as “by-dwellers” (Latin: *incolae*; Gk.: *katoikoi*, or possibly *paroikoi*) with respect to the newly established Roman colony (Clausing 1925: 203, 217–18; Rostovtzeff 1971: 250, 334). J. H. Elliott (1981: 2000) has argued that, as *paroikoi* (2:11), all the recipients of 1 Peter were converted to Christianity from among these rural, disenfranchised native populations, who lived in relative poverty. The primary objection to Elliott’s specific social reconstruction has been that the relationships between the social and economic classes in first-century Asia Minor are too complex, and the terms that refer to them are understood too imprecisely, to validate Elliott’s hypothesis (Achteineier 1984: 130–33; Achteineier 1989: 216–17; Bechtler 1998: 17, 208; Dalton 1983: 442–44; Danker 1983: 84–88; Hemer 1985: 120–23). Furthermore, Peter’s exhortation that their women not adorn themselves with gold jewelry and fine clothes (3:3) would seem a cruel mockery if addressed to subsistence peasants. Clowney (1988: 227–28) objects that *parepidēmoi* “cannot serve as a primarily sociological description of all the Christian churches over such a vast area.” Moreover, it cannot be assumed that the *paroikoi* inhabiting the rural regions could read Greek, for most people in these regions retained their own languages (Rostovtzeff 1926: 346). Although Elliott’s theory has not gained wide acceptance, it does rightly call attention to the largely overlooked issue of the historical and social realities that motivated the letter, especially if the later dating during Trajan’s reign has been abandoned (see “Date and Authorship” above).

**Expulsion from Rome under Claudius.** Claudius was not only aggressive in colonization; for political reasons he was also a champion of the Roman gods and a conservative when it came to religious policy (Scramuzza 1940: 145, 150). Beginning with Augustus, the expansion of the empire over other cultures and the need for imperial unity forced a certain official tolerance of “superstitions” and other religions. “The cardinal point of that policy was to grant hospitality to foreign religions, but to consider them a menace the moment they took advantage of that courtesy to disturb the public peace, offend accepted morals, or engage in converting native Romans” (Scramuzza 1940: 151–52, emphasis added). When the empire expanded under Claudius to Gaul and Britain, Claudius warred against Druidism, outlawing it as an unacceptable religion because of its practice of human sacrifice (Levick 1990: 170–72). Astrology for divination was gaining great popularity in Rome, and the seers of Egypt and Babylon were being preferred to the native Italian diviners. These foreigners were expelled from Italy time and time again, and once more by Claudius (Scramuzza 1940: 147–48; Momigliano 1934: 28).

The most famous Roman expulsion occurred during the reign of Claudius toward the end of the fifth decade AD. As the Roman historian Suetonius tells us, *Iudaes impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit* (“since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome”; Suetonius, *Claudius* 4; Rolfe 1939), an event corroborated by Acts 18:2. The name *Chrestus* has been taken as a reference to Christ, but some historians argue against this
understanding (e.g., Slingerland 1989b). Current knowledge does not allow the issue to be decided with certainty, though the corruption of the same vowel also appears in early anti-Christian graffiti (Marucchi 1949: 21). The exact year of this expulsion is debated, but it apparently came several years after Claudius forbade “the Jews” to assemble in AD 41, according to Cassius Dio (Roman History 60.6.6). An expulsion of Jews from Rome in AD 49 fits well the chronology in Acts 18:2, which mentions Priscilla and Aquila’s arrival in Corinth after being forced to leave Rome. However, Slingerland (1992) argues that Jews were expelled from Rome by Claudius more than once. The historical evidence suggests that the fourteen-year reign of Claudius was a difficult time for Jews living in Rome.

The problem among “the Jews” in Rome was happening about the same time Claudius was upholding the Jews’ right to city citizenship in Alexandria (AD 41) and while he was relieving Jews throughout the empire of the oppressive edicts of his predecessor Gaius Caligula (Josephus, Ant. 19.280–87). For this reason some historians call Suetonius’s historical accuracy into question, believing that Claudius actually held a pro-Jewish policy, which might have prevented the kind of expulsion that Suetonius records. Claudius, however, upheld the Jews’ entitlements to freedom of worship, residence, and business in Gentile cities provided that they did not undermine the religious and political rights of their Gentile neighbors (Scramuzza 1940: 151; Momigliano 1934: 34–38). Evangelistic Christians, whether of Jewish or of Gentile origin, could be accused of violating all three points of Claudius’s policy on religious tolerance: disturbing the public peace, possibly by their street preaching (as Paul seemed to do wherever he went); offending accepted morals (biblical morals being so different from those accepted by pagan society); and engaging in converting native Romans (which was the hallmark of first-century Christianity, as attested by the explosion of the church in those early decades).

Scramuzza (1940: 151), who is a historian and not a biblical scholar, understands the expulsion of the “Jews” from Rome in the late 40s to have been the expulsion only of prominent Christians. There were about fifty thousand Jews in Rome at that time, probably too many for Claudius to expel en masse, and so some selected group of lesser numbers was probably targeted (Momigliano 1934: 31). Moreover, in the 40s Christianity was still viewed by Romans as a sect of Judaism. This might explain how Suetonius’s reference to the expulsion of “Jews” could have included Christians, whether they were of Gentile or Jewish origin. But Acts 18:2 refers to the expulsion of “the Jews,” and Luke would certainly have distinguished between Jews and Christians. The example of Gallio indiscriminately driving away both Jew and Christian in Corinth when charges were brought against Paul may indicate the indifferent treatment that Jewish–Christian tensions provoked (Acts 18:12–17). Similarly, Claudius’s expulsion of the Jews, for whatever reason, could have included Christians, but was probably not specifically targeted at Christians as Christians.

Peter in Rome? Recently, Botermann (1996: 127) has argued that Claudius became more hostile to the Jews of Rome because of trouble among them that resulted specifically from the preaching of the apostle Peter in the early 40s. Tradition does associate Peter with Rome long before his death there
during the reign of Nero (see O’Connor 1969 for an extensive discussion of the literary, liturgical, and archaeological evidence). A reference in Ignatius (Ign. Rom. 4.3) is sometimes cited as early-second-century evidence that Peter not only died in Rome but had also resided there, yet it actually says nothing to the question. It was not until the third century that the tradition of Peter’s twenty-five-year episcopate in Rome developed (O’Connor 1975: 147). Since the time of the Reformation, Protestants have rejected this tradition because it has been used to validate apostolic succession for the Roman papacy. Moreover, both Catholic and Protestant scholars view the tradition with skepticism, since neither the NT nor any other contemporary, extant documents directly validate its historical accuracy, and the later Christian documents, such as Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History, seem to be based more on inference than on historical knowledge. However, the absence of extant historical validation does not necessarily disprove that Peter had an early association with, if not residence in, the imperial city. Furthermore, even if Peter arrived in Rome in the early 40s, it does not mean that he held a supreme bishopric there or that Peter was founder of the church at Rome.

Wenham (1972), following Balleine, argues that when Peter was released from prison in Jerusalem and fled to “another place” about AD 42 (Acts 12:17), that place was Rome (also Thiede 1988: 155). The almost unanimous opinion of scholarship, both Catholic and Protestant, has dismissed this scenario as “wholly unhistorical” and “quite inconsistent with known facts,” as J. B. Lightfoot concludes (cited in Wenham 1972: 95–96). Nevertheless, Wenham (1972), Thiede (1988), and Botermann (1996) are recent scholars who argue in similar terms for Peter’s early arrival in Rome during the reign of Claudius.

Following Harnack’s dating of Acts to AD 62, Wenham (1972) argues that Luke cryptically refers to Peter’s fleeing to “another place” (Acts 12:17) to avoid disadvantaging his defense of Paul to Roman authorities (also Thiede 1988: 154). Moreover, a cryptic reference would also protect the knowledge of Peter’s whereabouts, given that he was a fugitive from Roman law in Jerusalem, though this was probably less necessary by the time Acts was written. O’Connor (1969: 10) argues that the term could simply refer to another house in the same area, but agrees that the cryptic nature of the reference could be a security measure. Moreover, Peter’s covert presence in Rome does give a reason for his cryptic reference to “Babylon” in 1 Pet. 5:13, if he was intending to avoid revealing his personal location. (The association of “Babylon” with Rome that is found in later Jewish apocalyptic literature is arguably not the same reason for its use in 1 Peter. See “Date and Authorship” above and comments on 5:13.) Just as the Jews had been driven out of Jerusalem and sent into exile in Babylon by their oppressors, Peter had also been driven out of Jerusalem by persecution and sojourning in exile in the capital city of his oppressors. Given the good Roman system of transportation, Peter could have fled to any number of places around the Mediterranean, but in fact the only place that claims any association with Peter is Rome.

The primary argument against Peter’s presence in Rome in the 40s is silence. There is no early historical evidence that would indicate his presence, but there is also no historical evidence that contradicts the possibility or that offers an alternative. R. Brown is among those scholars who consider
the absence of any mention of Peter’s early presence in Rome by Luke in Acts or by Paul in Romans to imply that Peter did not first reach Rome until the early to mid-60s (Brown and Meier 1983: 103). Even J. B. Lightfoot bases his conclusion on silence: “If silence can ever be regarded as decisive its verdict must be accepted in this case” (quoted in Wenham 1972: 96). Inference from silence is always precarious, and while the silence in Acts about Peter’s whereabouts is curious, it does not disprove Peter’s early presence in Rome, especially if there is now some possible historical connection between Claudius and the original destination of 1 Peter.

As Wenham (1972) points out, a twenty-five-year period of Peter’s association with Rome fits neatly between the period from Agrippa’s reign in Palestine (AD 41–44) and Nero’s death in AD 68, corresponding respectively to Peter’s flight from Jerusalem and his execution by Nero. In the absence of a competing theory, most NT scholars at least acknowledge the strong tradition that Peter died during Nero’s reign in Rome about 66–67. Ramsay (1893: 283) alone argues that Peter actually survived Nero’s reign and lived to write 1 Peter about AD 80, but his theory is merely noted as a curiosity by other scholars.

Moreover, Peter’s first arrival in Rome in the early 40s would explain how the tradition of a twenty-five-year Roman episcopate from AD 42 to 67 arose. Eusebius may only be inferring that Peter resided and held office in Rome for the full extent of the apostle’s traditional association with Rome. However, the earliest use of the term ἐπίσκοπος (episkopos, overseer) referred not to the ecclesiastical office of bishop, as it later came to mean, but to leadership of the church more generally (as the related participle is probably used in 5:2; see comments). As Wenham (1972: 97) points out, “If Peter twenty-five years before his death worked for a time in Rome and kept in touch with the church thereafter, he could rightly have been regarded as its overseer.” While Peter’s association with Rome may have begun shortly after he fled Jerusalem, and ended with his death there, it is not necessary to conclude that he spent the entire twenty-five years in residence or that he held any position resembling the later bishopric. Neither the fact that Peter was not in Rome at the end of the decade of the 40s, when he was in Jerusalem and Antioch, nor his apparent absence from Rome in 57, when Paul wrote to the Roman church, proves that he could not have been in Rome previously. It is well documented that people traveled between Rome and the East with relative speed and ease, especially by sea (Casson 1974; Noy 2000: 56). Repeated trips were not uncommon, as documented even among less prosperous Christians. The inscription on the tomb of the craftsman Flavius Zeuxis in Asia Minor records that he had sailed seventy-two times to Rome (Casson 1974: 128; Noy 2000: 56)! The crisis in the early church that created tensions between Jerusalem and Antioch would have provided a motivation for Peter to leave Rome and to make an extended visit to both cities. Moreover, Agrippa’s death in 44 would have made it relatively safe for him to do so. Given the time span in view, Peter could have traveled to be present at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), in Antioch (Gal. 2:11), and possibly in Corinth as well (1 Cor. 1:12). From consideration of literary and archaeological evidence, Marucchi (1949: 22) concludes that Peter most likely arrived in Rome during the reign of Claudius, between 41 and 54, left when the edict of Claudius
was published in about 49, and did not return to Rome again until shortly before his death.

Concerning Peter’s association with Corinth, it is worth noting that Priscilla and Aquila arrived in that city after being expelled from Rome by Claudius (Acts 18:2) and that at a later time some in the Corinthian churches had loyalties to Peter (1 Cor. 1:12). Whether Priscilla and Aquila became Christians in Rome or only as the result of Paul’s ministry in Corinth is unknown, but the theory that some Christians in Rome who previously knew Peter there ended up in Corinth after the expulsion provides another explanation of Peter’s following in the Corinthian church.

But was not Peter in Rome when he wrote the letter? And would that not be unlikely following Claudius’s edict? Since most Roman expulsions did not impose a permanent ban, the expelled sometimes returned at a later date after the precipitating crisis had passed. The career of Priscilla and Aquila is one example of the extent of personal travel possible to people who were in the socioeconomic class occupied by tentmakers. Originally from Pontus in Asia Minor, they were expelled from Rome, resided in Corinth, traveled to Ephesus, but were apparently back in residence in Rome when Paul wrote Romans (Rom. 16:3). And so Peter’s return to Rome sometime after Claudius’s edict would not have been impossible.

A similar problem is the whereabouts of Mark and Silvanus, who are both mentioned as with Peter when he writes (1 Pet. 5:12–13). When and where would all three of them have been together? Some speculate that the three were almost certainly in Rome in the early to mid-60s, possibly soon after Paul’s execution. However, the three were also together in the late 40s or early 50s. Both Mark and Silvanus (Silas) resided in Jerusalem before and immediately after the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:22, 36–40). Silas was one of those sent to Antioch from the Jerusalem Council (15:22, 32). Moreover, on one reading of the itinerary in Galatians, Paul’s reference to Peter’s visit to Antioch would have occurred during the same general time frame (Gal. 2:11–14). Peter, Mark, and Silvanus were in the same location in the early 50s in Jerusalem or Antioch and in the early to mid-60s in Rome, providing two opportunities during Peter’s lifetime for 1 Peter to have been written.

**A further lexical consideration.** In addition to the historical considerations, a lexical point from the text of 1 Peter must be considered in light of this theory. The major “qualification” for deportation from Rome was the lack of Roman citizenship (although citizenship was sometimes granted to some colonists who volunteered to relocate). Roman citizenship was such a key to entitlements that Claudius made it a capital crime to impersonate a Roman citizen (Levick 1990: 165; Noy 2000: 24). People who were not Roman citizens were referred to in Latin as *peregrini*, usually translated in English as “foreigners.” However, the semantic range of the English word does not fit the semantic specificity of the Latin term. *Peregrinus* “was primarily a legal term for someone who was free but not a Roman citizen,” but it said nothing about one’s social class, economic standing, or place of origin (Noy 2000: 1). As Noy points out, a *peregrinus* could be from a family who had lived in Rome for generations and spoke only Latin but still lacked citizenship. Conversely, a Roman citizen might not speak any Latin and might never have set foot inside the city of Rome but have acquired citizenship in the imperial city by
inheritance, purchase, or manumission. Moreover, “people who were born at Rome could still be considered ‘foreign,’ by themselves and others, if their attachment to another place (the birthplace of their ancestors, or the centre of their religion) seemed greater than their attachment to the city of Rome” (Noy 2000: xii). But when push came to shove in Rome or other urban areas during times of famine or other duress, it was the peregrinus who was in jeopardy of being expelled, regardless of how long he had lived there. Eventually, in the fourth century, the term peregrinus was used as the label to refer specifically to the “foreigners” (noncitizens) who were expelled (Noy 2000: 1). To confuse the sense of the term with the semantic range of the English word “foreigner” even further, within the Christian context, peregrinus later came to be vested with the sense of “pilgrim.” Interestingly, the Greek equivalent of the Latin term peregrinus is παρεπιδημός (parepidēmos, foreigner), the very term used to describe those addressed in 1 Pet. 1:1.6

While the use of parepidēmos in 1:1 does not prove that the original recipients of 1 Peter had been deported from Rome, it is certainly consistent with the colonization theory. Moreover, by suggesting that not all Christians of Asia Minor would have been described by the same sociological term, it answers the objection Clowney (1988: 228) raises to taking the term literally. Because Peter’s original readers were not citizens of the dominant power, they had been displaced and consequently found themselves outsiders both in Rome and in their new location. In effect, they were outsiders in their world, which is exactly the point that allows the metaphorical interpretation of Christians as sojourning pilgrims to emerge. This understanding may have actually contributed to the semantic shift of peregrinus to “pilgrim” in Christian contexts, reinforcing the metaphorical reference to the Christian life as a journey toward heaven, even though the word apparently did not bear that sense in the first century.

Roman colonization and 1 Peter. If the theory of Roman colonization is correct, Peter uses the sociohistorical situation of his readers to explain their sociospiritual situation. In 1:1 they are addressed as “foreigners,” noncitizens, with respect to their society, but as chosen by God. In 2:11 Peter begins to exploit the sociopolitical situation of his readers in such a way as to describe Christian living more generally (see comments on 2:11). Once the letter circulated away from its original historical destination, the figurative sense naturally emerged as the predominant understanding. Although Peter’s readers may in fact have been resident aliens and strangers in Asia Minor, the cause of their deeper alienation from society is their faith in Christ (which may have been why they were deported from Rome as disruptive “Jews” in the first place). Because they are citizens of the kingdom of God, they are to understand themselves as resident aliens and foreigners wherever they may be residing.

Peter explains to these socially alienated Christians that although they may be rejected in the eyes of their society because of their commitment to Christ—perhaps doubly so, if that was the cause of their expulsion from Rome—they are in fact chosen by God and fully entitled to the promise and inheritance

of his kingdom. Moreover, these two concepts are concomitant in 1 Peter: to be chosen by God and committed to Christ is by definition to become a visiting foreigner and resident alien in the world and thereby disenfranchised from its entitlements that are based on undivided allegiance to its gods.

According to Peter, however, because they are Christians, their disadvantaged social status does not really matter. Having been chosen by God, they are participants in the new birth (1:3) that brings them into a new family and consequently bestows a new citizenship that is privileged beyond anything Rome or its provinces can offer. For all the glory of Rome is but as the grass and the flower of the field, which fades and falls (1:24). But the word of God, which has germinated within them their faith in Christ, stands forever. One need only look at the ruins in Rome today and the vitality of the Christian church throughout the world to see this truth in historical perspective.

The explanatory power of the theory of Roman colonization. Could it be, then, that a sizable number of Christians went, either voluntarily or by force, to help populate Claudius’s newly established colonies in Asia Minor? Because of Peter’s association with Rome, he writes to them after their emigration to encourage them in the faith and to instruct them how to live as Christians in their new and trying situation.

This theory is based on several points of historical evidence: (1) Claudius, and perhaps only Claudius, established colonies in every one of the five regions to which 1 Peter is addressed. (2) Colonies were typically populated by deportations from Rome and other urban centers. (3) There is the historical evidence of Roman writers of the first and second centuries indicating that Claudius did expel people in some way associated with “Chrestus.” (4) Peter is the stated author of 1 Peter. (5) The ancient tradition that places Peter in Rome during the reign of Claudius continues to be cogently argued (Botermann 1996; Thiede 1988; Wenham 1972). Even if Peter wrote in the 60s, the colonization of Roman Christians still provides a motivation for a letter to these remote regions.

Most commentators seem quite content to see the motif of foreignness to the world in 1 Peter as simply and exhaustively a metaphor for the Christian pilgrimage through this life. They feel that the spiritual application is sufficient to motivate and justify the metaphor. Perhaps that is true, but it seems odd that the entire book of 1 Peter is both framed (1:1; cf. 5:13) and saturated with the terms of exile and foreignness (e.g., the extensive use of Ps. 33 LXX [34 Eng.], a psalm of deliverance from sojourning as a foreigner). Moreover, 1 Peter is the only NT book to use the motif of foreignness to explain the life of the Christian with respect to society. Paul’s use of the foreigner motif in Eph. 2:19 is somewhat different, since it refers to Gentiles, who as Christians are no longer foreigners with respect to God’s people. This is a different thought, though not incompatible with the concept that as Christians Peter’s readers have become foreigners with respect to the larger reference group of society. The nature and extent of the “foreigner” metaphor in 1 Peter are better explained if it was triggered by a real event or experience instead of just being pulled out of thin air.

One of the tests of a new theory is how well it explains issues that were puzzling or not addressed under the old theory. Looking at 1 Peter in the context of Roman colonization explains a number of
issues. The strong Jewish character of 1 Peter would be explained not only because the author was himself a Jewish Christian but also because the defining experience of his original readers was their expulsion from Rome as “Jews” regardless of whether they were previously Jewish or Gentile. Peter addresses them as of the “Diaspora” of Asia Minor (1:1) because they literally have been scattered and because as Christians they are now, both in the eyes of the pagans who expelled them and in spiritual reality, joined to the ancient people of God. If his readers were Jewish Christians from Rome but perhaps included Gentile converts among them, the puzzle is solved of how indigenous Gentiles of Asia Minor could be expected to understand Peter’s theology based on the presumption of familiarity with the LXX. Otherwise, it is difficult to imagine that before the NT existed, scattered people who had come to faith in Christ without the presence of an apostle could be well enough acquainted with interpreting the Scriptures to have caught the theological relevance of Peter’s many allusions to, and quotations from, both the OT and the teachings of Jesus. Greek would have been the common language of Peter and the Roman Christians, which eliminates the obstacle of the diverse indigenous languages of Asia Minor. Moreover, if Peter resided in Rome for a time, his own Greek proficiency would have increased markedly by using that language daily, and his exposure to Roman rhetoric would have presented opportunity for his own writing to be generally shaped by its structure. It would also more easily explain Peter’s familiarity with Seneca’s proverb alluded to in the fiery trial image, since Seneca was the most public literary figure in Rome during the middle of the first century (see comments on 1:7 and 4:12).

If Peter wrote in the early 50s, that would have been the period between Paul’s first and third missionary journeys. This may explain why 1 Peter does not address regions visited on Paul’s first missionary journey but seems to include some of those in western Asia Minor that were later evangelized on Paul’s third journey. It also explains how Peter could write to residents of Asia Minor without violating the agreement to be an apostle to the Jews (Gal. 2:8–9), though that distinction cannot be pressed absolutely. It also may explain why Peter does not write to the ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia, church) of specific cities, for his letter reflects a time when only unstructured groups of Christians resided as scattered enclaves throughout these regions. The knowledge of where the Roman colonies were located would have provided a sufficiently specific destination for a messenger to know where to deliver the letter, since no specific destinations or names are given in the letter itself. Moreover, the somewhat odd reference to elders “among” you in 1 Pet. 5:1 could reflect the same undeveloped structure (see comments on 5:1). Perhaps these individuals had been elders in their previous location but were uncertain of their role and responsibility now that they found themselves living among fellow-Christians but without a well-organized church to oversee. This would explain Peter’s somewhat unusual instructions that elders should “shepherd” the believers (which would have been stating the obvious in a well-established church) and why he must instruct the younger to respect their leadership (see comments on 5:1–5).

If Roman colonization were the means by which Christianity first came to these regions, it would
also explain why no evangelist’s name is associated with the church in northern Asia Minor. If Peter had an association with the city in which these Christians had previously lived, it would be appropriate for Peter to write to these people, whether or not he had a personal relationship with them. Colonization explains why the author speaks in general terms of his readers’ situation but does not seem to know specifics he would have known had he personally visited their locations.

Roman colonization also explains how Christianity could have come to Asia Minor relatively quickly. The coming of Christianity to these areas through colonization in the late 40s or early 50s provides ample time for the situation of relatively mild persecution described in 1 Peter to develop into the more malevolent forms of persecution that began by the early 90s, if such time was actually necessary.

Moreover, Peter’s admonition to his readers to live good lives among the pagans (2:12) and to be prepared to give a gentle and respectful answer to those who ask (3:15) may indicate an encouragement to lifestyle evangelism rather than the more overt preaching and proselytizing that may have caused their expulsion from Rome.

Surviving historical evidence is too meager to confirm this or any other proposal advanced thus far about the origin of 1 Peter. Moreover, perhaps the greatest weakness of this theory is that 1 Peter itself makes no direct reference to such an event, as might be expected. However, the letter refers to no event or situation that could directly enlighten its historical background. We must therefore content ourselves only with possibilities and probabilities. The theory of colonization provides an explanation for many previously puzzling issues, and there are no other competing theories that offer similar specificity. Taken together, this evidence offers for the historical background of 1 Peter a scenario that must be considered at least as plausible as the sheer assumption that the recipients of 1 Peter were evangelized and converted in situ.

The colonization theory also provides a more specific motivation for the letter, motivation that is lacking if the description of the recipients is read solely as spiritual metaphor. Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ, was addressing Christians who had been converted elsewhere, with whom he shares an association with Rome, and he writes to encourage them in their Christian commitment when they find themselves scattered across a desolate and pagan Asia Minor. How should they live in such a place? How should they treat each other? How will their faith survive? The later semantic extension of pareidēmos (noncitizen) explains how the original historical reference came to be understood in purely spiritual terms of “pilgrim” when the letter circulated beyond its original setting. The perception of Christians as foreigners both in Rome and in their new location yields its power to the truth that Christians are foreigners and resident aliens anywhere in a world that is hostile to the gospel of Jesus Christ.