

## INTRODUCTION

### Why This New *Genos*? Christian Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter

#### Why This New *Genos*?

Since I see, most excellent Diognetus, that you are extremely interested in learning about the religion of the Christians and are asking very clear and careful questions about them – specifically, what God they believe in . . . neither recognizing those who are considered to be gods by the Greeks nor observing the superstition of the Jews . . . and why this new race (καὶνὸν τοῦτο γένος) or way of life has come into the world we live in now and not before – I gladly welcome this interest of yours.

So begins the Epistle of Diognetus (1:1).<sup>1</sup> But these questions are also an appropriate way to begin this study: According to 1 Peter, who are these Christians, this new γένος, who worship neither the gods of the Greeks nor the God of the Jews? Why has this new γένος come into the world now and not before? This book argues that 1 Peter offers original, provocative answers to Diognetus's questions.

In this book, I argue that the ascription of believers' ethnic identity in 2:9–10 is founded on the complex metaphor of divine regeneration and its familial entailments. Just as physical ethnic identities are established primarily by birth into a particular group, the Petrine author ascribes to believers a divine regeneration that ushers them into a new ethnic community.<sup>2</sup> Those who have been begotten anew have become a new γένος, the people of God.

However, ethnic membership is not a matter of birth alone: it is a social construct that must be taught, negotiated, maintained, and

<sup>1</sup> Translated by Michael W. Holmes in *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Unless stated otherwise, "the author" will refer to the author of 1 Peter. None of the arguments here rest on any theories of Petrine authorship.

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defended. It is a process of socialization that stretches from infancy to childhood and finally adulthood. The author of 1 Peter was keenly aware of this. He therefore deploys the complex narrative metaphors of conception, birth, growth, and formation to describe believers' spiritual formation as Christians. He does this through a series of coherent, interlocking metaphors taken from the realms of procreation, family, cult, and ethnicity. This language reaches its climax in 1 Peter 2:9–10 where Christians are described as a  $\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ ,  $\xi\theta\omicron\nu\varsigma$ , and  $\lambda\acute{\alpha}\omicron\varsigma$ . However, the significance of these interlocking metaphors and their theological implications for 1 Peter have not been fully examined.

### Regeneration in Previous Studies of 1 Peter

Though the complex metaphor of divine regeneration undergirds 1:3–2:10, it was not until Samuel Parsons's 1989 unpublished thesis that a study focused specifically on regeneration in 1 Peter.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it was not until Heinz Giesen's 1999 article, "Gemeinde als Liebesgemeinschaft dank göttlicher Neuzeugung," that an investigation focused on divine regeneration in 1 Peter appeared in print.<sup>4</sup>

Before Parsons, four articles and four unpublished doctoral theses investigated the theme of regeneration, broadly defined, in the New Testament and early church.<sup>5</sup> The first of the published studies was by Paul Gennrich in 1907, followed by Adolf von Harnack in 1918, Otto Procksch in 1928, and Erik Sjöberg in 1950.<sup>6</sup> While there is

<sup>3</sup> S. Parsons, "We Have Been Born Anew: The New Birth of the Christian in the First Epistle of St. Peter (1 Peter 1:3, 23)" (Rome: Pontificia Studiorum Universitas a S. Thoma Aq., 1989).

<sup>4</sup> H. Giesen, "Gemeinde als Liebesgemeinschaft dank göttlicher Neuzeugung: Zu 1 Petr 1,22–2,3," *SNTUA*, no. 24 (1999): 135–165.

<sup>5</sup> The unpublished theses are M. V. Murrell, "The Concept of Regeneration in the New Testament" (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1963); W. D. Mounce, "The Origin of the New Testament Metaphor of Rebirth" (PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1981); and W. Schweitzer, "Gotteskindschaft, Wiedergeburt und Erneuerung im Neuen Testament und in seiner Umwelt" (PhD thesis, Eberhard-Karls-Universität, 1943). I include Schweitzer here for the sake of completeness, though I have been unable to consult it.

<sup>6</sup> P. Gennrich, *Die Lehre von der Wiedergeburt: Die christliche Zentrallehre in dogmengeschichtlicher und religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1907). A. v. Harnack, "Die Terminologie der Wiedergeburt und verwandter Erlebnisse in der ältesten Kirche," *TU* 42 (1918): 97–143. O. Procksch, "Wiederkehr und Wiedergeburt," in *Das Erbe Martin Luthers und die gegenwärtige theologische Forschung: Theologische Abhandlungen D. Ludwig Ihmels zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag 29.6.1928*, ed. R. Jelke and L. Ihmels (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1928). E. Sjöberg, "Wiedergeburt und Neuschöpfung im palästinischen Judentum," *ST* IV, nos. I–II (1951–1952): 44–85.

much that is commendable in these studies, several patterns of weakness emerge. First, the scope of these studies means that only modest attention can be given to 1 Peter.<sup>7</sup> Gennrich's work surveys the theology of regeneration up to the 19th century. Harnack covers forty-six expressions divided into eight groups. For example, divine regeneration is discussed in Harnack's 5th section which is listed as "5. Κτιζεσθαι, Καινή κτίσις, Παλιγγενεσία, Ἀναγεννάσθαι, Γενῶσθαι ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, Υἱοὶ (Τέκνα) θεοῦ, Σπέρμα τοῦ θεοῦ."<sup>8</sup> Though Procksch's study is more focused, he nevertheless discusses most of the relevant New Testament texts.

Second, two related pitfalls result from these types of studies. The first is the temptation toward harmonization: themes from Paul or the Gospels are read into 1 Peter. Thus, the regeneration language in 1 Peter has often been read baptismally based on comparisons with John 3:5 and Titus 3:5.<sup>9</sup> At the extreme, some scholars postulated that 1 Peter preserved a baptismal homily or liturgy, though the letter never discusses baptism and regeneration together.<sup>10</sup> On the flipside, these types of studies underemphasize the distinctiveness of Petrine theology. Because these studies focus on words or phrases, it is not within their scope to appreciate the significance that these themes play in each text. This is particularly noteworthy in 1 Peter since regeneration is a major theme in the first half of the letter, but the significance of this theme and its connection to other figurative language is undeveloped in scholarly studies, especially studies focused on individual words.

Third, these studies often discuss a constellation of issues which, besides baptism previously mentioned, are secondary or not relevant

<sup>7</sup> For a modern example of this approach, see W. Popkes, "Rebirth in the New Testament," *JEBS* 6, no. 1 (2005): 5–10.

<sup>8</sup> Harnack, "Terminologie der Wiedergeburt," 97.

<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that baptism is mentioned only in 3:21, many commentators have interpreted the letter's regeneration language baptismally. Procksch, "Wiederkehr und Wiedergeburt," 15–16.

<sup>10</sup> Bornemann argued that 1:3–5:11 was a *Taufrede*, a baptismal homily. W. Bornemann, "Der erste Petrusbrief – eine Taufrede des Silvanus?" *ZNW* 19 (1920): 143–165. For more on the legacy of this theory and a critique, see Herzer, *Petrus oder Paulus? Studien über das Verhältnis des Ersten Petrusbriefes zur paulinischen Tradition*, WUNT 103 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 215–222 and D. G. Horrell, "The Themes of 1 Peter: Insights from the Earliest Manuscripts (The Crosby-Schøyen Codex ms 193 and the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex containing P<sup>72</sup>)," in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, *LNTS* 394 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 45–72, 67–70.

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to 1 Peter, such as the possible influence of the mystery cults,<sup>11</sup> the language of new creation/renewal,<sup>12</sup> and the term *παλιγγενεσία* (Matt. 19:28; Titus 3:5).<sup>13</sup> This book will investigate these questions when they are prompted by the text of 1 Peter, but this analysis will not be driven by them. Another common point of discussion is the origin of regeneration/rebirth language.<sup>14</sup> Because of the goals of this study, questions of origin and conceptual evolution will be discussed insofar as they shed light on 1 Peter but will not drive the investigation.

Finally, these studies do not fully appreciate the gendered aspects of the Petrine imagery. The Petrine imagery of begetting is masculine, but the related imagery of a nursing infant is feminine. This inattention to gender is exacerbated by English translations of such as “born again/aneu” which obscure the gendered aspects of the metaphor. A study with explicit attention to the gendered dynamics of the text is called for.

After Parsons, Petrine regeneration has been the subject of three significant article-length studies and one unpublished thesis.<sup>15</sup> In 1999, Giesen argued that the theme of communal, fraternal love in 1:22–25 and 2:1–3 is one of the letter’s central ethical exhortations and is grounded on divine regeneration.

Petrine regeneration was then taken up by Jens Herzer in *Petrus oder Paulus?* in 1998.<sup>16</sup> Herzer investigated the possibility of Pauline

<sup>11</sup> Though discussion of the mystery cults appears in these works, their influence is consistently mediated or denied. Gennrich notes that nearly all the relevant sources are late and doubts that they had any influence on Christianity, *Die Lehre*, 40. Harnack also concludes that the mysteries did not influence early Christian teaching of regeneration, “Terminologie der Wiedergeburt,” 110–112. More recent scholars also discount the importance of the mysteries for interpreting 1 Peter. The most ardent of these is Mounce, “Metaphor of Rebirth,” 2–5, 44. Serious comparison with the mysteries was all but extinct until it was revived in 2011 thesis by Keir Hammer. See Hammer, “Disambiguating Rebirth: A Socio-Rhetorical Exploration of Rebirth Language in 1 Peter” (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2011). For more, see pg. 64 fn. 5.

<sup>12</sup> See Gennrich, *Die Lehre*, 13–27. Harnack, “Terminologie der Wiedergeburt,” 106–122. Procksch, “Wiederkehr und Wiedergeburt,” 1–18, esp. 7–13.

<sup>13</sup> A significant study on one of these issues is J. Dey, *ΠΑΛΙΓΓΕΝΕΣΙΑ: Ein Beitrag zur Klärung der religionsgeschichtlichen Bedeutung von Tit 3,5* (NTA Bd. XVII. Heft 5; Münster: Verlag der Aschendorffschen Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1937). See also Gennrich, *Die Lehre*, 1–13. Harnack, “Terminologie der Wiedergeburt,” 106–122.

<sup>14</sup> Mounce specifically articulates this as the goal of his project. Mounce, “Metaphor of Rebirth,” 7–8.

<sup>15</sup> In his 2011 thesis, Hammer curiously, and unconvincingly, argues for renewed attention to the significance of the mystery cults. Hammer, “Disambiguating Rebirth.” For more, see pg. 64 fn. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Herzer, *Petrus oder Paulus?*, 196–226.

influence on 1 Peter. He concluded, “Im Durchgang durch die wichtigsten formalen und inhaltlichen Bereiche konnte eine direkte Abhängigkeit weder von den Paulusbriefen noch von den deuteropaulinischen Schreiben festgestellt werden.”<sup>17</sup> Though this is not the place for a full evaluation of Herzer’s method or results, his conclusion that baptism and rebirth in 1 Peter are different is worth repeating.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between Pauline and Petrine baptismal material is only possible if rebirth and baptism are understood as one event, but this is not the case in 1 Peter where they are kept distinct.<sup>19</sup>

In 2005, Feldmeier published the study, “Wiedergeburt im 1. Petrusbrief.”<sup>20</sup> Feldmeier offers careful exegesis and valuable insight specifically on 1 Peter. He reminds his readers to navigate the narrow way between overemphasizing parallels (both Hellenistic and Christian) or creativity (of Christianity or 1 Peter).<sup>21</sup> Regeneration was a flexible concept that could be adapted by an author for their own purpose.<sup>22</sup> At the end of his chapter, Feldmeier gives ten theses on the meaning of rebirth in 1 Peter.<sup>23</sup> Rather than list these here, they will be integrated into the exegesis of this study.

This brief survey has shown that there is a need for a fresh look at regeneration in 1 Peter, with special attention to dynamic workings of metaphor.<sup>24</sup> Petrine regeneration has been underinvestigated in the history of scholarship, and what scholarship there is is inadequate or limited. Positively speaking, the fields of New Testament studies and Second Temple Judaism have made enormous progress in the decades since much of the work previously discussed was

<sup>17</sup> Herzer, *Petrus oder Paulus?*, 257.

<sup>18</sup> Herzer, *Petrus oder Paulus?*, 215–222. For a critical response to Herzer, see D. G. Horrell, “The Product of a Petrine Circle? Challenging an Emerging Consensus?,” in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, LNTS 394 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 7–44, 12–20.

<sup>19</sup> Herzer, *Petrus oder Paulus?*, 216–218.

<sup>20</sup> R. Feldmeier, “Wiedergeburt im 1. Petrusbrief,” in *Wiedergeburt*, ed. R. Feldmeier, *Biblich-theologische Schwerpunkte 25* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 75–99.

<sup>21</sup> Feldmeier, “Wiedergeburt,” 78–81.

<sup>22</sup> Feldmeier, “Wiedergeburt,” 79.

<sup>23</sup> Feldmeier, “Wiedergeburt,” 93–98. Much of the content of this chapter is summarized in Feldmeier’s commentary in his “Excursus 7: Rebirth.” See R. Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 127–130.

<sup>24</sup> In the final stages of this book’s production, I discovered Ursula Ulrike Kaiser’s *Die Rede von “Wiedergeburt” im Neuen Testament: Ein metapherntheoretisch orientierter Neuanatz nach 100 Jahren Forschungsgeschichte*, WUNT 413 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018). Unfortunately, the volume appeared too late to be consulted for this study.

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written. Scholarly attention to metaphor has also recently blossomed in fields as diverse as cognitive linguistics, applied linguistics, psychology, literature, and philosophy. The rich insights, terminology, and methodology of this work has great potential for application in biblical studies. Metaphors are not just rhetorical tools for crafting memorable turns of phrase – they can be a powerful means for shaping identity and framing intergroup dynamics. The extended metaphor of Petrine regeneration as a device for shaping Christian identity has yet to be fully examined in its historical, theological, and social complexity. This investigation will therefore avail itself of recent advances in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity to interpret 1 Peter with a fresh methodology that gives due attention to the dynamic power of metaphor.