The Catholic Epistles, despite being grouped and named as such since at least the fourth century (HE 3.23.25) and appearing along with Acts in the textual tradition as the Apostolos, do not constitute a collection of texts with a distinctive and closely shared theological perspective. Add to this much neglected collection the letter to the Hebrews, often attributed to Paul in the early tradition (e.g. Clement of Alexandria in HE 6.14.2-4) but now never seriously argued to be his, and we have a group of texts which, while sharing internally and with other early Christian texts some common theological convictions, encompasses considerable variety. It would therefore seem appropriate to consider each text’s individual perspective, rather than offer a synthetic treatment.

In order to make my task manageable in the available space, I shall focus on three examples from this group of letters: James, Hebrews, and 1 Peter. (The Johannine Epistles are considered along with the Gospel of John in chapter 7.) I shall take as my key questions the following: What is the character of the messianism evident in this text? What notion and means of redemption is envisaged, and how is this related to the text’s messianism? And in what ways, if at all, does this particular type of messianism represent a form of resistance?

For our general understanding of what constitutes messianism we may follow William Horbury’s broad definition: ‘the expectation of a coming pre-eminent ruler’, including ‘the treatment of a present ruler in a messianic way’ (Horbury 1998: 7). The term Messiah, ‘in its etymological sense’, denotes ‘God’s eschatological Anointed One, the Messiah’ (Charlesworth 1992: 4). I should also make clear that in this essay my primary aim is to outline the contours of the specifically ‘Christian’ messianism set out in James, Hebrews, and 1 Peter, rather than to determine whether this depiction of Jesus does or does not derive from an existing facet of Jewish messianic belief.

Redemption may be understood in a broad sense to refer to the means by which those in some kind of negative situation – whether of suffering, oppression, or their own wickedness – may be rescued from that situation by some other (person/divinity, etc.), and more specifically, and etymologically, as the act of purchasing back, or freeing by payment of ransom.

My understanding of what constitutes resistance, and the forms it may take, is primarily shaped by the work of James C. Scott, especially his already classic
Building on his earlier work on peasants in Malaysia (Scott 1985), but casting his net much more widely, Scott insists that we must not restrict our definition of resistance to the open and physical forms of rebellion that are comparatively rare, of generally short duration, and usually quashed by superior force. Scott’s interest is in the many and diverse ways in which subordinates express and practise their resistance to oppression. One such mode of resistance is through what Scott calls hidden transcripts, modes of discourse generally kept hidden from the public stage, where the official, sanctioned transcript dominates. Such a ‘hidden’ transcript may be expressed when the oppressed meet away from the gaze of their oppressors, as in the visions of reversal and judgment expressed in African-American slave religion, visions, of course, often directly indebted to biblical language and imagery. Other modes of resistance may appear on the public stage, but in ways which (generally) avoid direct and personal confrontation: anonymous rumours and gossip, euphemisms, ambiguous gestures and ‘accidental’ acts of insubordination, and so on.

The letter of James

The letter of James is notoriously non-messianic, at least in terms of explicit references to the Anointed One, o( Xristoj, which appear only in 1.1 and 2.1. There is no good reason to doubt that James is a Christian text, despite some earlier suggestions to this effect, but the letter’s focus hardly falls on the Messiah.

Nevertheless, the relevant material in James, explicit and implicit, does allow us to sketch something of the content of its Christian messianism. In the opening address, describing the letter as addressed to the twelve tribes in the Diaspora, James describes himself as qeou kai kuriou Yhsou Xristou douloj (1.1). Here Jesus is acclaimed, as in Paul and elsewhere in the NT, as Lord and Messiah. These are

---

1 For recent applications of Scott’s work to New Testament studies, see Horsley 2004.


3 The letter’s authenticity is also much debated, but I shall not enter that argument here.

4 It is possible that qeou also refers to Christ – ‘slave of Jesus Christ, God and Lord’ – but this seems highly unlikely here (so Ropes 1916: 117; Laws 1980: 46; Johnson 1995: 168; but cf. 2 Pet 1.1; Tit 2.13).
acclamations of Jesus that reach back to the earliest layers of early Christian tradition (cf. 1 Cor 16.22; Rev 22.20; Mark 8.29; 14.61-22).

The reference in 2.1 is more intriguing, in at least two respects. First, it is unclear whether the πιστίς Ἰησοῦ́ here should be taken as an objective genitive (‘faith in our Lord Jesus Christ’) or a subjective genitive (‘the faith of…’). Luke Timothy Johnson (1995: 220) argues cogently for the latter: elsewhere in the letter faith is clearly directed to God (2.19,23), and echoes of Jesus’ teaching in the declarations in 2.5 (cf. Luke 6.20) and 2.8 (cf. Mark 12.31, citing Lev 19.18) suggest that the idea here is likely to be that the αὐτοί/ share (ἐλευθερεύεται) the (Torah-based) faith practised and announced by Jesus.

Second, it is difficult to know how to take the reference to glory at the end of the verse. Among the various possibilities two are particularly worthy of consideration: one suggestion is that the intention is to refer to ‘our glorious Lord’ or ‘Lord of glory’ – despite the ‘extraordinary separation’ (Johnson 1995: 220) between κύριος and δόξα with ‘glory’ probably a way of referring to Christ’s resurrected state. The separation between κύριος and δόξα is indeed a difficulty here. A second, attractive possibility, therefore, is to take δόξα as in apposition to what precedes, and thus as a description of Jesus as ‘the glory’. The Hebrew Bible refers frequently to God’s glory (יהוה דוד לאענוה), and in some texts this ‘glory’ refers specifically to the manifestation of God’s presence (Exod 33.18-34.8; cf. 2 Macc 2.8), sometimes apparently in human-like form (Ezek 1.26-28). This seems to have fostered the development of a ‘glory Christology’ in Paul (see Newman 1992; Segal 1992: 334).

5 Whether Jesus regarded himself as the Messiah is of course open to debate, but that the early Christians rapidly made this identification of him is clear.
7 So Johnson 1995: 221, citing Luke 24.26; Acts 22.11; John 17.5; 1 Cor 2.8; 15.43; 2 Cor 4.6; Phil 2.11; 3.21; Col 1.11; Heb 2.7 and 1 Pet 1.11 as instances where δόξα serves ‘as shorthand for the resurrection’. The grammatical awkwardness here probably explains the omission of τὸν δόξαν in some later MSS and their transposition to follow πιστίς (‘faith in the glory of our Lord…’) in a few others.
8 For arguments to this effect, see Laws 1980: 94-97; Adamson 1976: 103-104 (who argues for the transposition of ἡμῶν to read ‘our glory’: this seems to me an unnecessary move). On the ‘genitive in simple apposition’ see Wallace 1996: 94-100.
9 For a concise overview, see Fossum 1999; and specifically on the Septuagintal background, Brockington 1955.
Although an absolute christological use of do&ca would be striking for the NT it seems at least plausible that the writer of James would thus identify the Messiah.

The double reference to the parousi/a tou~ kuri/ou in 5.7-8 is most likely, given its frequent use in early Christian texts, a reference to the coming (again) of Christ (cf. 1 Thess 2.19; 1 Cor 15.23; 2 Pet 1.16; 3.4; 1 John 2.28, etc.), which the author sees as near (h!ggiken; cf. Mark 1.15 par.; Rom 13.12; 1 Pet 4.7, etc.). His messianism is thus, as is that of early Christianity generally, characterised by an imminent eschatological hope.

There are other texts in James which may indicate something of the form and content of the author’s messianic beliefs, but it is less than certain that the references are specifically messianic. It is possible that the kalo_n o!noma by which believers are named, and which is the cause of hostility, is the name of Christ (2.7). It is also possible that 5.6 provides another messianic ‘title’, describing Jesus as o( di/kaioj. Most commentators take this rather as a general reference to the righteous (poor) who are persecuted by the rich; but it may be that a specifically christological reference was intended and/or heard, given other clearly messianic uses of the term in the NT (Acts 3.14; 7.52; 22.14). The murdered Messiah may be seen as the exemplary di/kaioj, without the category being restricted to that single figure; his suffering followers, like the suffering righteous of former times (e.g. Psa 37; Wisd 2.10-3.8) follow in the steps of the suffering di/kaioj.

More generally, James is notable for its focus on wisdom (1.5; 3.13-18), such that the whole letter has been described as the ‘wisdom of James’ (Bauckham 1999). Richard Bauckham argues that the kind of wisdom set out by James has close parallels

---

10 Comparable references to Christ as the glory might be found in Acts 7.55 (if the kai/ is read epexegetically) and 1 Pet 4.14 (which could be rendered: the spirit of the glory and of God), though neither of these is secure. For other relevant NT references, see Fossum 1999: 351-52. Cf., later, Justin, Dial 61.2: do&ca kuri/ou... kalei=tai.

11 Cf. 1 En 53.6: ‘the Righteous and Elect One…’.

12 E.g. Laws 1980: 205-206; Dibelius-Greeven 1976: 239; Johnson 1995: 304; Davids 1982: 179-80. Not only is the referent of di/kaioj uncertain, but so also is the sense of the final phrase of the verse. Does it refer to the non-resistance of the di/kaioj against his murderers or should it perhaps be taken as a question – ‘Does he not oppose you?’ – with either the di/kaioj (Davids 1982: 180) or God (Johnson 1995: 305) as the implied subject?

with the wisdom taught by Jesus: ‘[t]he wisdom of Jesus functions for James as the focus and principle guiding his appropriation of other Jewish traditions. His wisdom is the Jewish wisdom of a faithful disciple of Jesus the Jewish sage’ (Bauckham 1999: 108; see pp. 93-108; 2004). There is no indication that this focus on wisdom reflects a wisdom Christology, as, e.g., in Col 1.15-20. But James’s depiction of ‘the wisdom that comes down from above’ (3.15, 17) does at least hint that, as perhaps with do&ca in 2.1, the author might have been willing to see the Messiah as the embodiment of divine sofi/a.

If the letter of James gives little explicit information as to the form of messianism the author held, it gives even less insight into his notion of redemption. It is clear enough that the letter regards its addressees as suffering trials and temptation (1.2-4, 12; 2.6-7; 5.13), and as needing to avoid and escape from wickedness and sin (1.21; 5.15-20). Their trials are intended to produce endurance (1.3-4), a quality appropriate for those who have hope for their salvation (5.7-11). This eschatological hope – that those who humble themselves before God will be exalted (4.10) – is focused on the imminent parousi/a tou~ kuri/ou (5.7-8). But, in contrast to the letter to the Hebrews, to which we turn next, there is no indication as to how the Messiah, or specifically his death (and resurrection), might play some redemptive role. Forgiveness of sins is evidently the Lord’s prerogative (5.14-15); but the means to forgiveness of sins, insofar as it is discussed at all, is mutual confession and prayer in the community (5.16) and specifically – assuming the implicit link between sickness and sin – anointing and prayer on the part of the elders (5.14-15). It is the power of prayer that is stressed here (5.16-18). Salvation is clearly seen as a result of accepting the Gospel, the ‘implanted word (lo&goj)’¹⁴ that has ‘the power to save’ (1.21), but how and with what role for the Messiah remains unstated. Indeed, as is often noted, the heart of the religion James calls for is defined in practical, ethical terms (1.27), and it is this faith-evident-in-works that saves (so 2.14). James’s concise definition of true religion (qrhskei/a) in 1.27 thus contrasts with the christologically focused creed in 1 Tim 3.16. This observation should by no means be taken as an implicit criticism of James, a fate the letter has suffered too often due to its negative judgment by a (Protestant) Christianity centred upon Pauline doctrines. Recent work, calling attention to the importance of the ethical focus of James, has indeed gone some way to correcting that injustice and highlighting the

¹⁴ This can hardly be a christological reference (cf. also 1.18), but almost certainly refers to the Gospel (so Johnson 1995: 202). But cf. the comments of Reumann 1999: 130-31.
theological importance of James’s radical ethics (see e.g. Maynard-Reid 1987; Chester 1994; Bauckham 1999).

Just as James’s messianism is not clearly linked with the letter’s evident hope of redemption, nor is it explicitly connected with the forms of resistance the letter expresses. To say that is already to imply that he letter does express resistance, as indeed it does, but this is not grounded in the letter’s messianism – unless we see in 5.6 a reference to Christ as the paradigmatic and nonviolent victim of the rich and powerful, a theme we will see in some respects in 1 Peter.

The letter of James expresses resistance to the world in general, seeing a clear and sharp distinction between friendship with God and with the world (1.27; 4.4-5), and resistance to the rich and powerful in particular. The letter insists that God has chosen the poor and not the rich to inherit the kingdom (2.5) and candidly labels the rich as oppressors (2.6). James does not give us any more precise indication about who it is to whom resistance is directed. In encouraging the readers of the letter – implicitly at least, grouped on the side of the poor – to wait patiently for their promised salvation (5.7-11), the author exclaims a vituperative woe upon the rich, drawing upon the language and imagery of the prophetic tradition (e.g., Isa 3.14-15; Amos 2.6-8; Zeph 1.11-15; Mal 3.5) to detail vividly the miserable reversal-of-fortunes that awaits the rich, whose wealth is amassed at the expense of the poor (5.1-6; cf. Luke 6.20-25; 1 En 94.6-99.16). Such an outburst forms a fine example of what Scott (1990) terms the hidden transcript, the discourse of the oppressed which is generally – for pragmatic reasons of survival – hidden from the oppressors’ view. In public settings, where the powerful call the shots – in court (2.6) or with one’s employer (5.4) – due deference, however insincere, is usually the sensible strategy. Yet when the oppressed have opportunity and means to communicate with one another, away from the gaze of the powerful, they articulate their own vision of the world and the future. ‘Symbolic inversions’ (Scott 1990: 166-72) are one form this envisioning often takes. Vivid and violent depictions of the fate of the rich, anticipations of a reversal of fortunes, find frequent expression in slave religion and folk tales, popular songs and carnival dramas, as Scott so well shows. And of course, in some of these instances, such as among the slaves of the American South, biblical imagery and language provides resources for resistant transcripts. Such expressions of the dreams of the oppressed should not be dismissed as merely the opiate of the masses (Marx) or as safety valves that actually ensure the stable continuation of the system. Rather, as Scott persuasively argues, they are dangerous and potentially

15 Cf. further Crossley 2006: chap. 3.
disruptive of the established power relations, precisely because, by articulating a
different version of reality, they call into question the inevitability and rectitude of ‘the
way things are’. Especially powerful are those moments when the hidden transcript is
expressed openly in the full gaze of the dominant, whether such expressions are quickly
silenced by rapid and violent reaction or whether they foster further overt expression
and action, such as to renegotiate the structures and patterns of social relationships (see
Scott 1990: 202-27). The inclusion in the Christian canon of texts such as James –
along with Luke’s Gospel, the book of Revelation, and so on – has ensured that such
potentially explosive expressions of open hostility to the rich and powerful, with all
their destabilising possibilities, cannot altogether be ignored, though their force has
frequently been softened through various forms of spiritualising or psychologising
exegesis.

The Letter to the Hebrews
If the letter of James offers only minimal glimpses into the form of Christian
messianism held by the author, the letter to the Hebrew contains an *embarras de
richesses*. This anonymous letter, the authorship of which is likely to remain unknown
and even the genre of which is uncertain, constitutes the richest and most sustained
expression of christological belief in the New Testament. It is also one of the NT texts
most thoroughly infused with OT quotations and images, many of which are explicitly
used to express convictions about the nature and achievements of Jesus the Messiah.

The richness of the letter’s messianism is anticipated *in nuce* in the opening four
verses, which constitute one complex sentence: the Son, greater than both prophets and
angels, the heir of all things (κληρονομός τῶν παντῶν) and the one through whom ‘the
ages’ (τῶν αἰώνων) were made, is the radiance of God’s glory (α’παθαμαστηθησαν)
– literally ‘the radiance of the glory’; cf. on Jas 2.1 above) and the exact
representation of God’s very being (χαρακτὴς θεοῦ). He
‘sustains all things by his powerful word’ and, having ‘made purification for sins… sat
down at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (v. 3, NRSV). One could spend a whole
essay (and more!) discussing the words of this opening sentence, full as they are with
both scriptural imagery (e.g., wisdom as the agent of creation [Prov 8.22-31; Sir 24.1-
9]; the appearance of God’s glory) and points of contact with other NT expressions of
high Christology (e.g., John 1.1-18; Phil 2.6-11; Col 1.15-20; cf. Barrett 1999: 114-15).
Indeed, many of the themes of the opening verses are expanded in the chapters that
follow. It is interesting to note, however, that the specific designation Messiah, Χριστὸς,
first appears only in Heb 3.6 and thereafter, sometimes with the definite article – implying the Messiah (e.g. 3.14; 5.5; 9.14, 28; 11.26) – but not always (3.6; 9.11, 24; 10.10; 13.8, 21). For the writer to the Hebrews, the primary designation of Jesus’ identity is as ‘the Son’, though this is evidently a facet of his appointment as Messiah, as 5.5, with its quotation of Psa 2.7, makes clear (cf. also 1.5).

The first point the author develops, using a catena of OT quotations (mostly from the Psalms) to do so, is the Son’s superiority to angels (1.5-14). Whether the author is polemically insisting on this point, against those whose reverence for angelic figures is deemed too high (cf. Col 2.18; Manson 1962: 252-58), or is rather asserting the superior status of Jesus while sharing with his readers a positive regard for the angels is uncertain. A second major point concerns the humanity of the Messiah, his sharing ‘flesh and blood’ (2.14), and its redemptive significance: only by becoming like his a)delfoi/ (2.17) could he know their temptations and thus help them (4.15-5.4) and only so could he truly function as their high priest before God, obtaining forgiveness for their sins (ei0j to\ i9la&skesqai ta_j a(marti/aj tou= laou=, 2.17). The depiction of Jesus Messiah as a priestly character, specifically as high priest, is a prominent aspect of Hebrews’ messianism, though this is not to the exclusion of royal images, as (inter alia) the quotations of Psa 2.7 (1.5, 5.5), Psa 44.7-8 LXX (1.8), and 2 Sam 7.14 (1.5) indicate.

After comparing Jesus with Moses, and again stressing the superiority of Jesus (3.1-6), the author indeed develops his important theme of Jesus as high priest. Particularly striking is his conviction that Jesus is a priest not in the Aaronic line, but rather in ‘the order of Melchizedek’ (5.6). The initial stimulus for this striking and unusual identification – nowhere else in the NT outside Heb 5–7 is Melchizedek mentioned – almost certainly came from Psa 110, the first verse of which was very widely used as a messianic text in early Christianity (see Hengel 1995: 119-225). As Larry Hurtado suggests, the author of Hebrews probably ‘took Psalm 110 as a whole to be referring to Jesus, and sought to emphasize the particular christological meaning of 110:4’ (2003: 501). This led him to Gen 14.17-20, the only other biblical text to mention Melchizedek, and to a messianic interpretation of this passage too (7.1-10). The silence of the Genesis text as to Melchizedek’s parentage, for example, gives the

---

16 Lindars (1991: 37-38) and Hurtado (2003: 499) both conclude that polemic is unlikely here.
17 It is debated whether i9la&skesqai conveys here a sense of propitiation (cf. ESV) or of expiation or atonement (cf. NRSV, NIV). Cf. Lane 1991: 66 (who favours propitiation); Attridge 1989: 96 n. 192 (who favours expiation).
author scope to pronounce him ‘without father or mother or genealogy’, with neither beginning nor end, like the Son of God, a priest forever (7.3). The other key point from the Genesis text is that Abraham paid to Melchizedek, which for the author of Hebrews demonstrates ‘the innate inferiority of Abraham to Melchizedek’ and indeed ‘the superiority of the Melchizedek-type priesthood over the Levitical priesthood’, since Levi effectively also ‘paid tithes to Melchizedek’ (Tuckett 2001: 99), being ‘still in the loins of his ancestor [Abraham]’ when Abraham met Melchizedek (7.10).18

A text from Qumran, 11QMelchizedek, shows that the author of Hebrews was not alone in finding some special significance in the figure of Melchizedek; he is here depicted as ‘a heavenly redemption figure’ (Fitzmyer 1997: 267), and an agent of judgment, even as the Elohim of Psa 82.1 (11 QMelch 9-10). It seems unlikely that the two texts are directly related, however; rather they indicate distinct currents in what may have been a wider stream of Jewish (and Christian) reflection.19

The superiority of Christ’s priesthood, with its once-for-all perfect sacrifice, compared with the Levitical priesthood and its repeated sacrifices, is the dominant theme of the following chapters. Indeed, the contrast is explicitly depicted as one between a new, better covenant and an old, faulty one now rendered obsolete, pepalai/wken (7.18-19; 8.6-13; 9.11-15; see Haber 2005). The kind of ‘dualism’ evident here in Hebrews, not least in the contrasts drawn between earthly patterns (u(podei/gmata) and heavenly things (9.23), between the law with its repeated sacrifices as the earthly shadow (skia&) and the true form itself (au0th_n th_n ei0ko&na, 10.1), has often been seen as an indication of Platonic, or more directly Philonic, influence. At the very least, however, the author’s ‘dualism’ is horizontal as well as vertical, eschatological as well as eternal, such that the ‘former’ things point forward to, and are fulfilled and consummated in, the new covenant made possible by Christ (cf. Barrett 1999: 122-25; Hurst 1990: 13-17). Moreover, as L.D. Hurst (1990) has shown, direct influence from Platonic or Philonic thought is by no means demonstrable, and a more plausible view may be to see the author of Hebrews as

---

18 The author’s reference to the tithe in 7.5, which appears to suggest knowledge of post-biblical Jewish priestly tradition, is one of the pieces of evidence William Horbury (1983) picks up to suggest that the writer to the Hebrews knew and was influenced by post-biblical developments of the idea of Pentateuchal theocracy in (probably) Palestinian Judaism, rather than by sectarian or visionary strands of first-century Judaism.

developing OT thought along lines influenced by certain strands of early Christian thought (Acts 7; Paul) and Jewish apocalyptic.

Central to this section (9.1-10.18) is the comparison between the repeated sacrifices of the old covenant and the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, a comparison drawn by depicting Christ’s sacrifice and high-priestly actions in terms of the ritual of the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev 16; m. Yoma): public sacrifice (cf. 10.10; 13.12); the entry of the priest, with blood, into the Holy Place (9.2-5, 12, 24-26; 10.19-20); intercession and atonement made by the high priest (2.17; 4.14-5.10); return of the priest to the waiting people (9.28). The author insists that the repeated sacrifices of the old covenant can never really deal with sin, can never ‘make perfect’ (teleiwsai) those who worship (10.1-2), while Jesus’ perfect and unrepeatable sacrifice achieves precisely that (10.10). It is interesting to notice that the author does not shrink from an implication of this striking claim: if anyone deliberately sins after such a sanctification, no further sacrifice for sins remains, but only ‘a fearful expectation of judgment’ (10.26, ESV). Similarly, the author insists that repentance for apostates is impossible (6.4-6). (Despite this author’s apparent optimism, Christians were not, of course, made perfect, and the Church had soon to face precisely the issues of post-baptismal sin and the return of apostates.)

It should already be clear from the above that redemption is central to the letter to the Hebrews, and, indeed, is inseparable from its messianism, since the letter focuses so heavily on the Messiah’s function as both priest and atoning sacrifice, his once-for-all achievement of forgiveness for God’s people. This redemption has been obtained by the shedding of blood, the offering of a perfect sacrifice. The Messiah’s humanity means that he can be sympathetic and understanding towards human frailty, such that those who seek salvation should ‘draw near with confidence’ (4.16). As the parallels with the Day of Atonement suggest, participation in the assembled company of worshippers is, if implicitly, fundamental to sharing in this redemption. More specifically, faith is seen as crucial to this drawing near (10.22, 39), as it is to living in the way to which God calls his people (11.1ff). Faith belongs alongside hope and love (10.22-24), an echo of the famous Pauline triad (1 Cor 13.13) but also – since love is closely linked with good works (10.24) – an echo of James’s insistence that faith without works is dead.

For this comparison set out in brief, see Barrett 1999: 124-25. It is interesting, as Barrett notes (p. 127 n. 28), that the author makes nothing of the scapegoat idea.
But does the messianism of the letter to the Hebrews, and the pattern of redemption it includes, in any sense sustain a mode of resistance? Unlike the letter of James, here there is no open hostility towards the oppressive rich, no vision of a coming reversal when the poor will be lifted up and the rich punished. There is, however, a sense that the people of God live in an awkward and tense relationship with the world: they are ‘strangers and exiles on the earth’ (11.13; cf. 1 Pet 1.1, 17; 2.11), a wandering people looking towards their heavenly country (11.16). This world is a place of sin, not yet subject to the Son’s rule (2.8; 11.7). Indeed, it is clear that the followers of the Messiah to whom the letter is addressed have suffered hostility from the world, and can expect to do so in the future (10.32ff; 12.3-4). In this, they are experiencing a similar fate to that suffered by the ‘great cloud of witnesses’ (12.1), the exemplars of faith who suffered at the world’s hands (11.1-40, esp. 32-38). Most of all, they are following the Son himself, ‘who endured from sinners such hostility’ (12.3), though they have not yet had to follow him to the point of death (12.4). The ‘struggle against sin’ (12.4) is a struggle against hostility in the world, as the parallel with 12.3 makes clear. Unlike in James, where again the addressees enduresuffering, here the Messiah explicitly represents a path for his followers to tread, of enduring the shame of suffering for the prize that lies ahead (12.2). He is a pioneer, the first of many sons (2.10-18; cf. Rom 8.29). This imagery, which we find again in 1 Peter, is important to the letter insofar as it presents the Messiah as a sympathetic fellow-sufferer in order to encourage his followers to faithfulness despite their suffering. And the author’s exhortation to his readers to hold firmly to their original confidence (3.14; cf. 3.6; 4.16; 10.35) is also a call to perservere in their way of life, resisting pressures to turn away.

In some ways, therefore, the letter does sustain a pattern of life and belief which we may define as one of resistance. What the letter does not define more precisely is the identity of those who are resisted, though the parallel drawn between those ‘sinners’ who opposed the Son and the opposition faced by his followers might suggest that ‘the rulers of this age’ are at least included here (cf. 1 Cor 2.8). As in 1 Peter, where we get somewhat more clues as to the focus for resistance, it is the readers’ commitment to their Messiah and to the God of their Messiah that generates hostility from the world; it is this that makes them strangers and exiles. This living-at-odds with the world, and

---

21 The image of the wandering people of God was famously seen by Ernst Käsemann (1984 [1939]) as the central theme of Hebrews.

22 *Pace* Elliott 1981, who argues that the addressees of 1 Peter already had the actual socio-political status of *paroikoi*. Cf. further Feldmeier 1992; Seland 2005: 39-78.
with the dominant powers in that world, may thus be seen as a mode of resistance, a refusal to conform even when physical coercion is threatened.

*The First Letter of Peter*

Like the letter to the Hebrews (and like Romans), 1 Peter contains more Old Testament quotations than most of the NT writings. A number of these quotations are clearly read by the author, ‘Peter’, as messianic, and thus both inform and reflect the letter’s Christology. The letter’s focus is not as heavily christological as is Hebrews’, but it does present a rich range of messianic images, not least since it draws together a wide range of early Christian teachings (see Horrell 2002).

As William Schutter (1989: 100-23) and Paul Achtemeier (1999: 144-47) have pointed out, a key statement about the author’s approach to reading the scriptures, a ‘hermeneutical key’, is outlined in 1.10-12, the closing verses of the letter’s introductory thanksgiving. The subject of the prophets’ enquiry – that is, the Jewish prophets of the Hebrew Bible, not Christian prophets (pace Selwyn 1952: 134) – was the ‘salvation’ revealed in the last days (cf. 1.5). Moreover, the spirit of Christ was present among them (ἐν αὐτοίς; cf. 1 Cor 10.4), showing the sufferings and the glory that lay ahead for the Messiah. Given this explicitly Christian-messianic view of scriptural prophecy, it is no surprise that the author found in Isaiah’s suffering servant (Isa 52.13-53.12) a depiction of the sufferings of Christ (2.21-25), saw messianic significance in a collection of ‘stone’ texts (2.4-8), and, indeed, ‘has, in a way singular among Christian canonical writings, appropriated without remainder the language of Israel for the church’ (Achtemeier 1999: 142; cf. 1996: 67-73).

One obvious focus of attention is the three messianic passages identified long ago by Hans Windisch as *Christuslieder*: 1.18-21, 2.21-25, and 3.18-22 (Windisch 1930: 65, 70). Building on Windisch’s observation, Rudolf Bultmann (1947) reconstructed the author’s *Vorlagen*, arguing that a single christological credal confession (*Bekenntnis*) underlay 1.20 and 3.18-19, 22, while a separate hymn (*Lied*) was adapted in 2.21-24. Bultmann’s attempts to separate out fragments of tradition from the author’s own contributions are, as he partly acknowledges, somewhat speculative, relying on distinctions between what is poetic and prosaic, and on assumptions as to how symmetrical and rhythmic an original creed or song would be. Nonetheless, the

---

23 Debate continues concerning the authorship of this letter, with a range of possibilities: that Peter wrote it; that Silvanus (5.12) acted as secretary and wrote it, with or without Peter’s direct guidance; that a Petrine circle produced it; or that it is pseudonymous.
observation that these passages contain traditional material seems well-founded, and their content per se makes them important sources of the author’s (and his predecessors’ and contemporaries’) messianic convictions.

The first such text, 1.18-21, begins with a statement about the readers’ redemption (ελυτρώθη). Their purchase – for this is the metaphor of redemption here – has been made not with silver or gold, but ‘with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a flawless and faultless lamb’ (1.19). John Elliott (2000: 374) notes the similarities of language here with Heb 9.12-14: both texts, without any direct dependence, use the language and imagery of Israel’s sacrificial cult (cf. Exod 24.3-8) to depict the redemptive achievements of the Messiah. The opening of 1 Peter has already made brief reference to another such image: the sprinkling of blood (1.2; cf. Exod 24.8; Num 19.4).

According to Bultmann’s analysis (1947: 294), the credal material proper is contained in v. 20, where two well-known christological motifs are found: that of the Messiah’s being ‘foreordained (προεγνώσθη) before the foundation of the world’ (cf. John 17.24; with echoes of the Wisdom tradition, e.g., Prov 8.23; Sir 24.9) and ‘made manifest (φανερώθη) in these last times’ (cf. Rom 16.26; Col 1.26; 1 Tim 3.16; 2 Tim 1.10). These ideas are also paralleled in Jewish texts that suggest belief in the preexistence of the Messiah, hidden before his coming, or return. For Bultmann (1947: 295), v. 20 provided the beginning of the credal tradition that then continued in 3.18, though the following verse (1.21) also contains material central to early Christian faith: that God raised the Messiah from death and glorified him (cf. Acts 2.36; Rom 1.4; Phil 2.9-11, etc.).

If a key point in 1.18-21 is the notion of the Messiah’s pre-existence, or at least, his pre-creation conception in the divine purpose, then the second traditional section, 2.21-25, focuses on the sufferings of Christ, presenting him as a model for discipleship, specifically for slaves suffering under wicked masters (2.18-21). As Achtemeier (1999: 147) notes, the Isaianic suffering servant material (52.13-53.12, esp. 53.3-12) is here clearly and explicitly used messianically, compared with its surprisingly restricted use elsewhere in the NT (Achtemeier notes Matt 8.17; Mark 10.45; Luke 22.37; Acts 8.32-


25 See 2 Bar 30.1; Pss Sol 18.5; 1 En 46.1-4; 48.2-6; 62.7; 4 Ezra 7.28-29; 12.31-34; 13.26. The relevance of some of these texts depends on the conclusion that the Son of Man in 1 Enoch is identified with the Messiah; see further Charlesworth 1992: 29-30; VanderKam 1992.

26 Windisch comments (1930: 57): ‘Natürlich ist Christus auch persönlich präexistent gedacht (φανερώθη)’. 
33; Rom 4.25a: ‘The fullest citation is Acts 8.32-33, and while it is understood to refer to Jesus, it receives no further explication. When Luke does come to describe the Passion, he ignores the Isaianic material.’

Isaiah’s language is drawn on to depict the Messiah’s sufferings as redemptive: he bears his people’s sins in his own body on the cross; his wounds bring healing to others. As with Hebrews, though depicted here in distinctive ways, the model of redemption is sacrificia and vicarious. We may note some contrast of emphasis here, compared to the generally more participatory model which seems to dominate Paul’s thought, with its theme of suffering and dying with Christ, though images of sacrificial atonement are also used. But 1 Peter and Hebrews are also clear, as is Paul, that the suffering of Christ marks a way for his disciples to follow.

In arriving at 3.18-22, the third of the credal christological sections, we arrive at probably the most enigmatic text in 1 Peter, and among the more enigmatic in the NT, the details of which, especially in vv. 19-21, cannot concern us here. We find the gist of previous christological sections recapitulated (he suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous), before we move to the depiction of Christ’s ‘journey’ in the Spirit. William Dalton (1989) has made a convincing case that the journey here is not a ‘descent into hell’ in the days between death and resurrection, but rather a post-resurrection journey of ascent, as the risen and vindicated Christ ascends to his place at God’s right hand. On this journey, Christ made announcement (khru&ssw, not euaggeli/zw) of his victory to the imprisoned spirits – the wicked angels of Gen 6.1-4 (cf. 1 En 6-16), so Dalton again convincingly argues – and now sits at God’s right hand, with ‘angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him’ (3.22, NRSV). This description of the Messiah’s triumph, as Bultmann (1947: 290) notes, parallels other early Christian depictions (1 Cor 15.25-28; Phil 2.9-11; 3.21; Col 2.15; Eph 1.10) – though Bultmann, with a now outdated notion of Gnosticism’s influence on NT texts, sees this cosmic depiction of Christ’s work of redemption as a ‘charakteristisch gnostische Auffassung’. Its focus on the vindication and enthronement of the Messiah places it in logical connection with 1.18-21 and 2.21-25, since the three texts in order

27 Achtemeier 1999: 147. Peter Doble (2006) has recently suggested that the Psalms are more likely Luke’s source for the idea of a Davidide who suffers ‘according to the Scriptures’. On the subject of Isaiah 53 in the NT, see further Bellinger and Farmer 1998.


29 Achtemeier (1996: 240) describes it as ‘the most difficult passage in the entire letter’, though Norbert Brox (1979: 196) regards 4.6 as ‘noch dunkler’.
highlight Christ’s pre-existence and incarnation (1.20), his suffering and death (2.21-25), and his glorious vindication (3.22; cf. Horrell 1998: 69).

What this leaves out of the picture is 2.4-10, aptly described by Richard Bauckham (1988: 310) as ‘a particularly complex and studied piece of exegesis’. There are two key themes in this section: Jesus as the precious and electstone, and the church as the elect and holy people of God (see also Elliott 1966). Both themes are introduced in vv. 4-5, two verses which serve to summarise and encapsulate the substance of the midrashic material in vv.6-10, where the OT texts are cited and interpreted. Three texts cited in vv. 6-8 are linked together by the catch-word li/qoj: Isa 28.16; Psa 118.22; Isa 8.14. The author of 1 Peter is hardly being innovative in reading these texts messianically; they are already cited as messianic texts elsewhere in the NT (Mark 12.10-11 and par.; Rom 9.32-33; cf. Acts 4.11). Nonetheless, in drawing the three texts together – uniquely in the NT – and weaving them into this rich exposition of christological and ecclesiological identity, the author of 1 Peter makes a significant contribution to the development and expression of Christian messianism.

In this brief sketch of some of the key messianic texts in 1 Peter we have already seen something of the images of redemption which the author uses. The readers of the epistle have been purchased by the precious blood of Christ. They have been purchased from what the author denotes as their futile ways – one indication that the addressees are probably (mostly) Gentiles (1.14, 18; 4.2-4) – in order that they might attain salvation on the last day, which is coming soon (1.5-9). This sure and certain hope of redemption, again set in an imminent eschatological framework, is the basis for hope and joy, despite suffering.

Indeed, as with James and Hebrews, it is clear that the letter’s addressees are suffering; this theme is especially evident in 1 Peter. To what extent the nature and causes of suffering are the same across all three texts is harder to discern, not least since the provenance and date of James in particular are uncertain. Sporadic and informal hostility against Christians, sometimes involving Jews, sometimes not, is evidently prevalent from the earliest days (e.g., Acts 8.1-3; 2 Cor 11.23-25; 1 Thess 1.6; 2.14; Rev 2.13), and Roman magistrates sometimes became involved (Acts 16.16-40; 17.5-9; 18.12-17). The situation for the addressees of Hebrews is apparently one in which martyrdom is not yet (or currently) a reality (Heb 12.4). The situation depicted by 1

30 There are also some parallels in the use of such imagery to express eschatological expectations about the community at Qumran (see e.g. 1QS 8.4-8, with clear allusion to Isa 28.16; 4QpIs15; Elliott 1966: 26-33; Best 1969).
Peter, I would argue (see Horrell, forthcoming), is one in which suffering arises not only from general and informal public hostility but also from the Roman judgment of Christianity as essentially seditious and criminal; a judgment, probably dating from Nero’s time, which could lead, when the process of personal accusation brought Christians before the courts, to punishment and execution (1 Pet 4.16; Pliny Ep. 10.96-97).

But how does the author of 1 Peter urge Christians to respond to this suffering, and can the letter be seen in any sense as promoting resistance? The contrasting arguments and ensuing debate of David Balch (1981; 1986) and John Elliott (1981; 1986) illustrate the difficulties here. While Balch sees the letter, and specifically its household code (2.11-3.12), as promoting a strategy of assimilation to society, in order to lessen hostility and criticism, Elliott insists that the letter reflects and reinforces the distinct identity of members of a ‘conversionist sect’, and thus deliberately resists and opposes pressures to conform. In assessing the letter’s stance on conformity and resistance, we must first acknowledge that, unlike in James or Hebrews, there is material in 1 Peter that draws on the Pauline tradition in urging believers to respectful submission to authority in the spheres of both empire and household (1 Pet 2.13, 18, 3.1; cf. Rom 13.1-7; Col 3.18-4.1, etc.). As feminist critics have forcefully shown, such teaching is at least in danger of ideologically legitimating the suffering of the weak, of abused wives and beaten slaves, suggesting that their Christ-like duty is uncomplaining loyalty, even to their abusers (see esp. Corley 1995).

At the same time, and bearing Scott’s work in mind, an assessment of the letter’s message in its original historical setting can discern that, in calling for quiet submission and outward conformity it represents a strategy for survival in a hostile world (Carter 2004: 31-33) and a means by which certain forms of ‘witness’ can be sustained (cf. 2.12; 3.1, 15, etc.). Scott’s work in particular should warn us against seeing rebellion and resistance only in texts and communities that are blatantly and overtly opposed to the established powers in the world. More usual, but no less forms of resistance, are modes of communication and action that subtly and changeably weave resistance into what is in various other respects a discourse of conformity and obedience. Indeed, the conformity 1 Peter urges does not ‘go all the way’ (pace Carter 2004); rather, it encourages its readers to retain precisely that confession on which hostility is focused: their allegiance to the Messiah, Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, which leads to their public labelling and punishment as Ἰησούσιοι (4.16). This loyalty to Christ entails

alienation from the world, and just as the hostility and persecution aims to persuade Christians to abandon this loyalty – cursing Christ and offering cult to the Roman gods and the emperor is, after all, sufficient to ensure pardon (Pliny, Ep. 96.5-7; 97.2) – so the letter seeks to sustain and reinforce resistance to this pressure to conform, even and particularly when it leads to suffering and death. In Scott’s terms, we have here a form of resistance that is not only covert, but has been uncovered and brought into the public sphere. The official ‘transcript’ presented by the empire requires a level of obeisance to the emperor and the Roman gods which Christians are not prepared to give; their guilt is indicated positively by the resistant confession Christianus sum, and negatively by a refusal to offer cult to the gods and the emperor. What probably remains ‘hidden’, at least much of the time, is the fuller discourse and world-view which sustains such resistance, of which we have seen glimpses in all three of our selected letters: that a time is coming soon when God – or specifically his Messiah – will come in judgment, to deal decisively with the wicked and to bring salvation to those who have suffered patiently.\footnote{I am very grateful to James Crossley and Francesca Stavrakopoulou, as well as to the Editors, for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.}

References

Achtemeier, P.J. 1996 1 Peter, Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress.
Adamson, J.B., 1976 The Epistle of James, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Best, E., 1969 ‘1 Peter II,4-10 - A Reconsideration’, NovT 11, 270-293.


Giovannini, A., 1996 ‘L’interdit contre les chrétiens raison d’état ou mesure de police?’, Cahiers du Centre Glotz (Paris) 7, 103-34.


Horbury, W., 1998 Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ, London: SCM.

Horrell, D.G. 1998 The Epistles of Peter and Jude, Epworth Commentary; London: Epworth.


Hurst, L.D., 1990 The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought, SNTSMS 65; Cambridge: CUP.


Schutter, W.L., 1989 *Hermeneutic and Composition in 1 Peter*, WUNT 2.30; Tübingen: Mohr.


Windisch, H., 1930 *Die Katholischen Briefe*, HNT 15; Tübingen: Mohr.