Book Review: 1 Peter

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personal references and allusions, I cannot rid myself of the “feeling” that if this really was not Paul writing, something is just not right. I feel tricked. Can things really be that much different in our day than they were back then? Did not the Church fathers exclude pseudonymous works from the canon for that very reason? Wilson agrees that they did (p. 11). Is it then the case that our sophisticated computer-generated word and syntactical searches have demonstrated what native speakers much closer to the time in question and in touch with the remembered traditions could not, namely that Paul really was not the author? Are all the supposed differences and developments in Paul’s diction and thought incompatible with Pauline authorship? I remain unconvinced, not on the basis of dogmatic concerns to protect a doctrine of inerrancy but on the one thing to which Wilson repeatedly draws our attention: the evidence in the text before us.

For pastors who can work with their Greek NT and for teachers in colleges, universities, and seminaries, this commentary will prove to be a goldmine of information. The proofreading for this highly technical volume is first rate.

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In an era when so many biblical commentaries are being published, it is difficult for any new work to stand out as noteworthy. However, this recent commentary on 1 Peter by Karen Jobes distinguishes itself in the midst of the crowd, primarily through careful interpretation and a consistent effort to make a unique contribution. Jobes adds to our understanding of this letter not so much by following the latest methodological trends but rather by pursuing solid historical and grammatical research.

The introductory section of the commentary (pp. 1–57) offers detailed and helpful discussions on the significance of the letter, the historical circumstances surrounding the author and recipients, the purpose and theology of the book, and its literary unity and genre. Jobes’s discussion on the authorship of 1 Peter clearly moves the conversation forward. Both those who argue for 1 Peter as a genuine letter of the apostle Peter and those who consider it to be a pseudonymous work hold to a similar view concerning the level of Greek in the epistle. The general opinion has been that the Greek is too good to have come from a Galilean fisherman like Peter. So how is it possible to account for the language of 1 Peter? Some have insisted that someone other than Peter must have written the letter, while others have proposed that Peter used an amanuensis. In both the introduction and a final excursus (pp. 6–8, 325–38), Jobes challenges the common assumption about the quality of the Greek in 1 Peter. With considerable detail, she demonstrates that 1 Peter exhibits bilingual interference, in particular, the type of syntactical interference to be expected from a Semitic author for whom Greek was a second language. An analysis of the extent of Semitic interference in the Greek of 1 Peter, of course, does not establish that the letter was written by the apostle Peter, but it undercuts one important argument used to support the claim that 1 Peter must be a pseudonymous work.

In the introduction, Jobes spends a considerable amount of time uncovering the historical circumstances of the recipients of 1 Peter (pp. 19–41). For Jobes, the recipients were Christians who had originally lived in Rome but who moved to Roman colonies in Asia Minor. In their actual, historical situation these believers were living as foreigners, which Peter then used as a basis for explaining their spiritual situation. They needed to understand that the deeper, underlying reason for their alienation from society was
because of their commitment to Christ. They were citizens of the kingdom of God living within the present world as resident aliens. One of the strengths of Jobes’s commentary is in how she consistently explains the importance of Peter’s message for the original recipients of the letter in light of their historical circumstances. At the same time, Jobes sprinkles throughout her commentary applications for present-day readers (e.g. pp. 154, 162, 196, 206, 230–31, 263, 267, 294). One notable example involves her explanation of the relevance of Peter’s household code for husbands and wives today in which she seeks to balance theological foundations and cultural factors (pp. 209–12).

Throughout the commentary, Jobes explains various viewpoints on interpretive problems in the letter, and yet she also clearly states her own position and the supporting evidence for it. Sometimes the evidence moves her toward a minority position. For example, she carefully defends her view that the pure spiritual milk of 1 Pet 2:2 is not a metaphor for the Word of God but rather is a metaphor for the believer’s experience of the Lord himself (pp. 132–41). Jobes argues her case in part on the basis of the use of Psalm 33 lxx in 1 Pet 2:1–3, which highlights another strength of the commentary—Jobes’s analysis of the use of the OT in 1 Peter. I found her section on the use of Isaiah 53 in 1 Pet 2:21–25 to be particularly helpful (pp. 191–200). At other times, Jobes feels that the evidence leads her to adopt majority positions. Along with a majority of recent commentators, she argues that Christ’s message to the spirits in prison in 1 Pet 3:19 was Christ’s victory proclamation after his resurrection and during his ascension in which he expressed his authority over all creation, including the demonic spirits who had been held under the restraint of God because of their exceptional wickedness before the time of the flood (pp. 237, 242–45).

Jobes deals with the exegetical details of the Greek text but does not get lost in them, since she maintains a focus on the overall message of the book and its relationship to the historical circumstances of the original recipients. The flow of thought in the book is traced through summary statements found at the beginning of every section and also at the end of many of them. Perhaps one weakness of the commentary is that Jobes never really explains the underlying methodological basis for her outline of the book. She divides the letter into three major sections (1:3–2:10; 2:11–4:11; 4:12–5:11), but she offers little by way of explanation as to how she arrived at this outline or why it might be superior to other possibilities. In addition, her outlines of individual passages can be confusing at times. For example, Jobes claims that in 1:13–2:3 Peter prescribes four actions, each expressed through an aorist imperative (although by my count the passage actually contains five aorist imperatives), but then without explanation she divides the passage into two main parts (1:13–21; 1:22–2:3) rather than four (pp. 107–8, 122).

One of the more innovative aspects of Jobes’s commentary is her proposal concerning the recipients of the letter. Peter refers to his readers as foreigners (1:1) and resident aliens (2:11). While such terms take on a metaphorical sense in the letter, Jobes does not want to exclude the possibility that they also carried a literal sense for the original readers. Most studies assume—without argument—that the Christians addressed in 1 Peter were native to the provinces mentioned in the letter opening (Pontus, Cappadocia, Galatia, Asia, and Bithynia) and that they accepted their Christian faith while living in their native residence. However, no reasonable explanation is given for how converts to Christianity came to be spread over this vast and sparsely populated region of Asia Minor, especially since no historical evidence exists to support the notion that traveling Christian missionaries targeted the northern part of Asia Minor in the first century. That early missionary activity took place in most of the provinces mentioned in the opening verse of 1 Peter is sheer speculation, as is the contention that Peter himself may have traveled in these areas.

Jobes suggests an alternative possibility: that the believers to whom Peter wrote became Christians elsewhere, at a place that brought them into association with Peter,
and then subsequently found themselves scattered throughout Asia Minor, living as foreigners in a new residence. In his letter, Peter took their literal status as foreigners and resident aliens and transformed it into a spiritual metaphor. Peter wrote to encourage them in light of their present suffering and their alienation from society due to their commitment to Christ. Jobes suggests that the process of Roman colonization in the first century helps to solve the puzzle concerning the recipients of 1 Peter. She points out that the emperor Claudius (reigning AD 41–54) was aggressive about colonizing Asia Minor and that he established Roman colonies in each of the provinces mentioned in 1 Pet 1:1. Christians could have been among the people sent from Rome to colonize cities in Asia Minor. Jobes argues that Peter’s presence in Rome would have brought him in contact with these believers or at least made him aware of their circumstances and need for encouragement. Therefore, Peter wrote his letter from Rome to Roman believers who had come to live in colonies in Asia Minor. Peter’s “foreigner” metaphor “was triggered by a real event or experience instead of just being pulled out of thin air” (p. 39).

Jobes defends her proposal with a number of arguments, two of which seem to me to be not sufficiently supported or even necessary. First, she argues that the expulsion of the Jews from Rome under Claudius—a decision that may have been precipitated by disturbances within the Jewish community over the arrival of Christianity—could have led to Christians being deported to Roman colonies. However, Jobes provides inadequate evidence for the idea that exiles from Rome typically became Roman colonists. Second, she argues that Peter arrived in Rome for the first time early in the reign of Claudius. However, as Jobes admits, there is no early historical evidence for Peter’s presence in Rome in the 40s. It is insufficient for Jobes to respond by arguing that Peter could have been in Rome during that time because he had to be somewhere. In addition, the whole point seems unnecessary because news about the significant difficulties of Roman Christians scattered in colonies in Asia Minor could have come to Peter’s attention while he was in Rome in the 60s. Then, in light of such news, Peter could have felt compelled to write a letter of encouragement and instruction. Jobes herself seems open to this possibility on p. 39.

Overall, I found Jobes’s discussion of the historical background to 1 Peter to be convincing, especially when compared to other proposals. Her approach has the benefit of helping us to recognize the extent to which the original recipients would have felt their status as foreigners, a feeling greatly increased by their commitment to Christ. Of course, the message of 1 Peter is relevant beyond the audience of its first readers, since faithfulness to Christ inevitably leads believers into conflict with some aspects of the prevailing culture. As Jobes states, “First Peter challenges Christians to reexamine our acceptance of society’s norms and to be willing to suffer the alienation of being a visiting foreigner in our own culture wherever its values conflict with those of Christ” (p. 5).

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