
Reviewed by Peter R. Rodgers

The New Anchor Bible commentary on 1 Peter is the culmination of a life-time of study of that New Testament letter. The sheer size of the volume is an indication of thoroughness. When one considers that J. A. Fitzmyer’s Romans in the same series dealt with sixteen chapters in 793 pages, and that Elliott produces 956 pages on a book of only five chapters, it becomes clear that this commentary is a publishing event in New Testament studies. No book review can do it justice. Elliott refers to himself as a “primopetrophile,” and it is with that same sentiment that the comments and criticisms are offered in this review.

Modern scholarship on 1 Peter has been in the habit of robbing from Peter to pay Paul. It is refreshing that Elliott does not do this. He concludes his section on the relation between 1 Peter and Paul with the observation, “The differences between 1 Peter and the Pauline writings are numerous and striking.” (40). He urges the abandonment of the search for any supposed “Paulinisms” in the letter. His detailed exegesis of 1 Peter 2:18-25 illustrates this independence of the petrine letter from Paul. Elliott notes, “In its fusion of biblical themes and motifs, kerygmatic formulas, and extensive use of Isaiah 52-53 this passage illustrates both an independence from Pauline thought and a theological formulation that is as creative as it is singular in the NT” (504). He refers to Isaiah 52-53 as “a key OT source of terminology, motifs and themes” for the theology of the earliest Christians (546). Moreover, by his sustained attention to the actual use of Isaiah 52-53 in 1 Peter Elliott avoids the fashionable resort to theories of hymnic or creedal formulations underlying the passage. He even retracts his earlier acceptance of a hymn behind the passage (549). His emphasis on the creative interpretation and application of OT material by the author of 1 Peter is promising, and indicates the direction from which I believe the most valuable studies on the letter will emerge in the future.

In a detailed comment on 1 Peter 2:5,9 Elliott summarizes the major focus of his dissertation, published in 1966 as The Elect and the Holy. He examines the phrase “royal priesthood” in the context of the letter, and especially 2:4-10, in relation to the doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers.” The doctrine gained prominence in the sixteenth century Reformation, and still enjoys popularity as “one of the basic truths of catholic ecclesiology” (449). Elliott’s translation of 2:9 “a royal residence, a priestly community” reflects his conviction, based on a thorough examination of Exodus 19:6 and the use of these terms in intertestamental Judaism, that ἱεράτευμα denotes not individual priests, but rather an active priestly community. The accompanying collective nouns “stock,” “people” (γένος, ἔθνος, λαός) and “royal residence” (βασίλειον) support this exegesis. He argues that in 1 Peter “the terms cannot be applied to the believers as individuals, but only to the believing community as community” (452). He concludes that, “Whatever NT texts might support the notion of a priesthood of all believers any appeal to 1 Peter 2 must be regarded as exegetically unfounded” (454).

Sound as Elliott’s exegetical methods and conclusions may be, his study fails to take into account the broader narrative elements of the letter. To insist on a corporate, to the exclusion of an individual interpretation of ἱεράτευμα is to miss a narrative element of fundamental importance to 1 Peter. No Old Testament passage is more formative for the narrative theology of 1 Peter than Psalm 34. Perhaps Bornemann (ZNW 19:143-165) overstated the number of quotations and allusions to Psalm 34 in the epistle, but it is clear that this is the major OT text
that stands behind the story of 1 Peter. A citation from the Psalm immediately precedes the relevant section (2:4-10). Now a curious and instructive feature of this Psalm (and others, notably 22, 69, 130) is the interplay of the individual and the community (e.g. 34:1 “I will bless...” 34:3 “Let us exalt...”). The individual righteous sufferer who cries to God for help finds that he or she is not alone, and invites the people of God to join in the praise of the God who delivers. In the narrative movement of the Psalm both the individual and the community are distinctive and important. Both, I would argue, are in focus in the story told by the author of 1 Peter, who has meditated deeply on Psalm 34.

Elliott’s other pioneering study of 1 Peter, A Home for the Homeless, (1981, 2nd ed. 1990) is summarized in Detailed Comment 2 “Resident Aliens and Visiting Strangers” (476-483). The recipients’ condition of estrangement and alienation remains, according to Elliott, social rather than cosmological. The strangers’ predicament is contrasted not to having a “home in heaven” but to having a home within the Christian community. Translations which add “on the earth” (TEV, NEB) or “in the world” (TNTV) at 2:11 are misleading.

Elliott notes that the terms παροίκος and παρεπιδήμος at 2:11 echo Psalm 39 (LXX 38): 13. But he does not develop this, insisting instead that the use of the terms was “undoubtedly inspired by Gen. 23:4 LXX” (459). Several factors, however, make Psalm 39 an attractive alternative, and may suggest new avenues for the study of 1 Peter. Psalm 39 is the plea of an exile (verse 13) who must guard his tongue (verses 2-3) and is keenly aware that life is transitory (verses 4-6). It is a cry of hope (verse 7) and a plea for deliverance from transgression (verses 8-11). These are major themes in 1 Peter. The text of Psalm 39:13 is also instructive. Elliott notes (460) that the LXX, which reads “I am an alien in your sight,” has the variant reading “in the land.” Even on the level of the LXX there seems to have been a debate as to whether the status of aliens was to be taken literally or figuratively. Elliott notes that the terms “strangers” and “resident aliens” are assumed by many commentators to be “theological metaphors descriptive of the condition of the addressees following their conversion. There is no necessary or cogent grounds for this assumption” (313). There are grounds, however, for retaining the NRSV rendering “to the exiles of the dispersion” (1:1) as a most apt translation. Recent studies have argued persuasively that the exile was a governing element in the metanarrative that all Jewish groups of the period shared (see N.T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God, London, 1992, not mentioned in Elliott’s extensive bibliography). It is the story of deliverance from exile, informed by the foundation story of deliverance from slavery in Egypt that is the theological backdrop to the Christian claim that through the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christians have been delivered from bondage into freedom. And for the early Christians, especially the writer and recipients of 1 Peter, that deliverance was articulated in terms of scriptures like Psalm 34, Psalm 39 and Isaiah 52-53. Not only the language but the logic of these passages has shaped the theology of the letter. It is therefore to the varied use of the Old Testament in 1 Peter that one must look for an indication of its metanarrative and theology. Elliott’s Detailed Comment, “Tradition and Redaction in 1 Peter 2:21-25” (543-550) in which he notes the importance and creative role of Isaiah 52-53, illustrates well the direction such a study might take.

There is much of lasting value in this commentary. The lexical studies are a treasure-trove. The Detailed Comment on 1 Peter 3:1-7 shows that Elliott is fully aware of the hermeneutical problem that passages in the epistles dealing with the role of women create for the modern reader, but he avoids the recent feminist reconstructions that are exegetically unfounded. Elliott’s treatment of the subject is a model of sensitive yet responsible exegesis.
Even on matters where I would differ with Elliott I found much that was challenging and refreshing. Perhaps the date of composition should be earlier than the period between 73 and 90 CE (138). Any date after Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because of disturbances over *Chrestus* (49 CE) would account for the anticipation of the πῦροςς (4:12). Perhaps the Apostle Peter is more closely tied to the letter, and Silvanus to its production, than Elliott will allow. In the communities of Asia Minor that received the letter it is likely that Jews still outnumbered gentiles. The persecutions may also be more “official,” involving Rome in some way. Despite these questions concerning the overall picture of 1 Peter that emerges from Elliott’s analysis, it is clear that any further discussion of the letter and its place in die developing early Christian movement will need to reckon with this landmark commentary.