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**Achtemeier, Paul J.  
Epp, Eldon Jay, ed.**

***1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter***

Hermeneia

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Two quotations from Achtemeier's preface reveal the kind of commentary this is. First and more important, "Because the commentary represents an encounter with the text of 1 Peter as it appears in the New Testament, I have sought to avoid the expedient of blaming ill-understood or partially relevant portions drawn from earlier traditions to explain the obscure portions of the letter." Second, "It has not been my intent to prove wrong all who preceded me with commentaries on 1 Peter, nor have I sought as a matter of principle to occupy the safe middle ground between extreme scholarly opinions. I have avoided neither the conventional nor, on occasion, the more radical suggestions when in my estimate they best explain the available evidence" (p. xvi). The result is a classic commentary in the great tradition, recalling the Macmillan series, the French *Etudes Bibliques*, and some of the better volumes of the ICC. Its closest relative in the Hermeneia series is H. Attridge on Hebrews. It is not a commentary trying to be a monograph, nor is it beholden to current fads or cutting edge methodologies. Achtemeier is explaining 1 Peter, not rewriting it, and we all have reason to be grateful.

In his extensive introduction Achtemeier tackles first the question of authorship (pp. 1-43). For a number of reasons he opts for pseudonymity, but not without facing honestly the two strongest objections to that position: first, the argument that "such a practice was in fact morally repugnant to the culture in which 1 Peter arose" (p. 39), and second, "the question of why the name Peter would be chosen for a letter so transparently Pauline in its conception" (p. 2). In some ways he is more convincing in what he admits than in what he positively affirms. Achtemeier admits that "Falsification of authorship was in fact not routinely regarded as harmless; the *Gospel of Peter* was rejected as a falsification, as was the *Acts of Paul* when the true author became known." But he makes the point that "it was the content more than any moral repugnance at pseudonymity which prompted the rejection" (p. 40). He attributes the presence of pseudonymous works in the

NT to "the principle that what disciples publish should be regarded as their master's work" (citing Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.5), and appeals as well to the notion of the "therapeutic lie" (Plato, Cicero) or "salvific deception" (Chrysostom, Jerome, Origen) for the sake of a greater good. These factors, he claims, "combine to provide the framework within which pseudonymity would be . . . tolerated in writings of sound character and condemned in writings that did not promote such salvific ends" (p. 41). Achtemeier is probably right that content mattered more than pseudonymity in the ancient church, but his candor about "therapeutic lies" is not likely to convince traditionalists. Tertullian's comment, moreover, was about Mark writing with Peter's authority and Luke writing with the authority of Paul, not about pseudonymity. These Gospels were, after all, handed down as writings of "Mark" and "Luke," not of "Peter" and "Paul" respectively.

As to "Why Peter?" Achtemeier shows a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, he argues that "the assignment to Peter would have been intended to designate its contents as apostolic, rather than specifically Petrine." Peter is not so much "Peter" as simply the generic "Apostle." Yet at the same time he admits that such an attribution "would best be explained if the letter were the product of a Petrine group who looked to Peter as their teacher" (p. 42). This carries over into an ambivalence about the whole issue: "Although 1 Peter does not demonstrate some traits usually associated with pseudonymity -- it defends no particular doctrine or church order against attack, it lacks the kind of references often included to make authorship credible -- their absence does not render it impossible" (p. 43). Later, when he has the opportunity to tie in Silvanus (1 Pet 5:12) and Mark (5:13) with the pseudepigraphic goals of the writer, he backs off, to the extent of entertaining the possibility that Silvanus might be "a different person from the one mentioned in other parts of the NT" (p. 351) and that Mark too could be "a Mark otherwise unknown" (p. 355). While admitting that these are matters of conjecture, he seems unwilling to press the implications of pseudonymity very far, and in some ways his argument for it is rather muted. Behind this I see a tacit recognition of a certain residual strength in the traditional view of Petrine authorship. It is a measure of Achtemeier's honesty that he does not overplay his hand.

Achtemeier's discussion of Roman policies toward non-Roman religions and of general and local persecutions under the emperors from Nero to Trajan (pp. 23-36) is among the best to be found anywhere, certainly the best in a commentary format. He also provides a useful summary of recent discussion of the social world of 1 Peter (pp. 51-57), rightly rejecting both David Balch's theory that the letter urges "the acculturation of the church to Hellenistic social values" (p. 53) and John Elliott's view that the phrase "exiles and aliens" described the readers' actual political status in the empire. To Balch he says, "Accommodation is thus hardly the intention of the letter or the household codes; rather it is to warn against such accommodation, even if that means suffering" (p. 53). Against Elliott, he insists that Peter's language "points rather to a metaphorical than a literal intention of the two concepts," and that "any attempt to limit the readers to one social or

economic class does not conform to the actual situation of great diversity among them" (pp. 56, 57; see also p. 71).

Achtemeier looks for a "controlling metaphor" in 1 Peter, and finds it not in household imagery, nor in the exodus, nor the diaspora, but in "Israel," which encompasses all these and more (pp. 69-73). Israel is "the controlling metaphor for the new people of God, and as such its rhetoric has passed without remainder into that of the Christian community" (p. 72). The notion of the Christian community as a new Israel has been a rich and rewarding one in biblical theology, especially in the Reformed tradition in which Achtemeier stands. In these days of theological correctness it can also be a risky one, for to some it carries a hint of "supersessionism," or "displacement," and consequently of anti-Judaism, if not anti-Semitism. If the church is Israel, what place is left for the Jewish people? Achtemeier is aware of the issue (p. 72), but rightly points out that 1 Peter has adopted Israel's self-understanding as its own without a trace of polemic, or even any explicit awareness of Jewish communities in Rome or Asia Minor. He is no more able to resolve the question than I was in my 1988 Word commentary, but his careful exegesis of 1 Peter should caution us not to evoke too easily the specter of anti-Semitism in our discussions of early Gentile Christianity.

No commentary of this scope and wealth of detail should be judged primarily on the basis of how often we think it is right. Many of Achtemeier's conclusions are in any case hedged with references to "the weight of probability," or presented as "far from certain." A work like this should be judged on how thorough it has been in providing us with the tools and options necessary to reach our own conclusions. By this standard Achtemeier's commentary is a superb achievement. Achtemeier strengthens an emerging consensus (based on William Dalton's work) that Christ's proclamation to the "spirits" (1 Pet 3:19) took place not between his death and resurrection but after the resurrection, that the "spirits" were not souls of the dead but evil powers, and that the proclamation was of judgment not salvation (pp. 252-62). It has nothing to do with 1 Pet 4:6, where the evangelized "dead" are Christians now dead who, because they accepted the gospel while still alive, have the sure hope of vindication and life with God (pp. 290-91). Another valuable contribution is an excursus (one of fifteen in the commentary) on 1 Pet 2:13-17 and Rom 13:1-7, demonstrating conclusively that the two passages are very different in their attitudes toward civil authority, and above all "that the insistence in Romans 13 that rulers bear divine authority is totally absent in 1 Peter 2" (p. 181). In this sense (although Achtemeier does not spell it out), 1 Peter stands midway in its view of the Roman state between Paul and the book of Revelation.

Much of the time Achtemeier gives conventional wisdom the benefit of the doubt. Although, as he says, he does not deliberately set out to "occupy the safe middle ground" (p. xvi), he often ends up doing so. On textual matters, for example, he defends the shorter reading in 1 Pet 4:14, and "in this name" rather than "in this instance" in 4:16. On 1 Pet 2:23, he backs away from the suggestion that Jesus delivered *his enemies* (rather

than himself or his cause) over to the judgment of God because the context is one of non-retaliation (p. 201). Yet the other verbs in the verse all have the enemies as the implied object, and the notion of using non-retaliation to defeat one's enemies is by no means foreign to the NT (see Rom 12:19- 21). Every reader will bring a few such queries and quibbles, but Achtemeier has put the burden of proof where it belongs. Tradition counts for something, and would-be innovators should be held to fairly rigorous standards of evidence. Achtemeier is not shaking the foundations so much as building on the foundations. Selwyn's commentary has endured for fifty years now, and Achtemeier's will be a standard work on 1 Peter for at least that long. (8/97)