Pietersen, Lloyd K.

*The Polemic of the Pastorals: A Sociological Examination of the Development of Pauline Christianity*


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This volume is a revision of the author’s doctoral dissertation, directed by Loveday Alexander at the University of Sheffield. Utilizing insights from modern sociological studies, Pietersen contends that the polemic of the Pastoral Epistles is directed against Jewish-Christian enthusiasts and visionaries who had successfully attracted members of the Pauline churches, particularly women, with a message of realized eschatology, asceticism, and thaumaturgy.

The opening chapter provides a succinct summary of the debate concerning the identity of the opponents in the Pastoral Epistles, an issue that Pietersen identifies as the most essential feature of the background of these letters. Pietersen rejects as historically problematic the notion that the heresy confronted in the Pastoral Epistles is an incipient Gnosticism and as unconvincing the view that the polemic is merely a literary device aimed at imaginary opponents. Instead, the fact that certain opponents are named (2 Tim 2:17; 4:14) suggests to Pietersen that the polemic of the Pastorals is directed at specific individuals whom the author perceives as a threat to the community.

Chapter 2 introduces the sociological models that Pietersen employs in his attempt to discern the identity of the author’s opponents. Working from the standpoint of sociology of deviance, Pietersen identifies “labelling theory” as the most fruitful perspective for the
purposes of his study. Pietersen is well-aware of the problems inherent in the use of this model for the study of ancient texts, particularly because in the case of the Pastorals we have access only to the viewpoint of the author of the letters and therefore cannot account for the dynamic interaction between those who are labeled deviants and those who ascribe this status to them. However, Pietersen proceeds with methodological caution. Drawing on the work of sociologist Harold Garfinkel, Pietersen utilizes the concept of a “status degradation ceremony,” which is defined as “any communicative work between persons whereby the public identity of an actor is transformed into something looked on as lower in the local scheme of social types” (31; Garfinkel’s definition). The Pastoral Epistles, according to Pietersen, function as a kind of status-degradation ceremony because opponents from within the Christian community—indeed, prominent insiders—are publicly denounced by an author writing in Paul’s name. Not only those passages in which either stereotypical or specific charges are leveled against the opponents, but also the numerous positive references to the value of teaching and sound doctrine function as aspects of the author’s overall polemic against false teachers. One implication of this finding is that, if the Pastorals are pseudonymous (a hypothesis that Pietersen affirms), then “the status degradation strategy of the Pastorals can only work if Timothy and Titus are still alive an active in leadership” (35). Of course, this requires one to accept the view that the Pastorals were penned very shortly after Paul’s death—a position still very much debated in contemporary scholarship.

The third chapter challenges the long-standing consensus that, because the Pastorals represent a more institutionalized form of Christianity, the original spirit of the charismatic community has faded by the time of their writing. Here Pietersen helpfully distinguishes between two senses of the term charisma. First, in Weberian terms, charisma is understood as one type of authority (along with legal and traditional authority). In this sense, charismatic authority, which is associated with the personal traits and powers of a vibrant community leader, inevitably becomes institutionalized in the community’s second generation. Second, Pietersen uses charisma to refer to the “possession of ‘spirit’ by ordinary members of the community in such a way that extraordinary manifestations of ‘spirit’ form an integral part of the life of the community” (37). Thus, according to the former definition of charisma, Pietersen concurs with the scholarly consensus that the Pastorals reflect the increasing institutionalization of the Pauline communities after the death of the apostle. However, according to the latter, Pietersen rejects the notion that the vigor of charismatic activity necessarily fades with increased institutionalization. Instead, focusing specifically on the form of religious charisma known as thaumaturgy, that is, “the demand for miracles and oracles” (38), Pietersen traces the persistence of thaumaturgical religion in the growth of Christianity through the fourth century. From a theoretical perspective, he supplements this historical sketch with work of I. M. Lewis and Bryan...
Wilson, both of whom suggest that new thaumaturgical movements frequently arise in response to unstable or marginalized social conditions.

Chapter 4 is perhaps the most intriguing but also the most problematic section of the book. Pietersen presents a detailed case study of Bristol Christian Fellowship (BCF), a contemporary charismatic church in England with which Pietersen has first-hand knowledge as a member, elder, and employee from 1974 to 1992. This group was founded as an alternative to traditional mainline churches and from the beginning emphasized communal fellowship, individual transformation, charismatic experience, and millenarian eschatology. Pietersen details the history of this community and its leadership with the aim of showing that, in spite of the increased institutionalization of this church over the course of its twenty-year history, the desire for signs and wonders did not diminish. In fact, during some periods, particularly when segments of the church fell under the influence of the Vineyard Church’s “Toronto Blessing,” this desire actually increased. Peterson claims that the example of BCF provides empirical evidence to support the conclusion that “institutionalization and the intensification of the thaumaturgical response can occur simultaneously within a conversionist sect” (96). This may be so, but one problem with this case study is that the author admits that the low number of responses from church members to his questionnaire (reproduced in appendix 2) rendered his quantitative data statistically insignificant. The bulk of the study, then, consists of in-depth interviews with three elders and one long-term member. Given the author’s personal investment in this community, one does wonder about the objectivity of the analysis. Perhaps another contemporary religious community would have served as a more suitable object of study, especially since one of the main advantages of modern sociology, namely, the ability to draw conclusions based on quantitative data, was not available. Or, would a comprehensive study of, say, the Qumran community—another religious group in antiquity in which (increased?) institutionalization is found together with charismatic activity—have made the point just as effectively?

A short chapter on “Second-Century Developments” asserts that the church was not fully institutionalized by the time of Ignatius. Instead, the concern for proper ecclesiastical order within the Ignatian letters, the presumably “proto-Montanist” identity of Ignatius’s opponents, and the existence of the full-blown Montanist movement late in the second century all bear witness to the ongoing tension between the increasingly institutionalized church, on the one hand, and the persistence of ecstatic religious experience and thaumaturgical demand, on the other. In short, the continued presence of charismatic smoke in the second century suggests to Pietersen the sparks of charismatic fire as a background to the Pastoral Epistles.
The monograph finally turns in chapter 6 to an exposition of the Pastoral Epistles in light of the preceding discussion. Pietersen finds in the text of the Pastorals evidence that the author’s polemic is directed against Jewish-Christian opponents who held a position of realized eschatology (2 Tim 2:18), practiced asceticism (1 Tim 4:1–3), may have engaged in ecstatic prophecy (1 Tim 1:6; 6:20; 2 Tim 2:16), and were preoccupied with myths and genealogies (1 Tim 1:4; Titus 1:14). Moreover, Pietersen contends that the opponents seem to have had particular success among women in Christian households in Ephesus and Crete. The opponents’ apparent portrayal of Paul as a thaumaturge may have had some historical connection with the picture of the wonder-working apostle in Ephesus painted in Acts 19. The popularity of the opponents within the Pauline communities compelled the author of the Pastorals to label his rivals as deviants. Pietersen claims that the rather obscure reference to “Jannes and Jambres” in 2 Tim 3:8 and the use of the term γόης in 2 Tim 3:13 reflect a tradition that identifies these opponents of Moses as magicians and sorcerers. (Appendix 1 contains the results of a TLG search on the γοη-word group in non-Christian sources from the fifth century B.C.E. until the second century C.E.) Thus, the author of the Pastorals, in order to refute the image of Paul as a wonder-working thaumaturge advocated by his enthusiastic opponents, instead presents the apostle as a preacher, apostle, and teacher par excellence (1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11). This explains, according to Pietersen, the role of stereotypical language, the qualifications for leadership, the denial of leadership to women, the limitations of charismatic activity, the emphasis on sobriety, and the importance of correct teaching and tradition in the strategy of these pseudepigraphal letters.

The brevity of this volume occasionally invites more detailed argumentation. For example, the book concludes, somewhat unexpectedly, with the very intriguing suggestion that, from the perspective of the author of the Pastoral Epistles, “thaumaturgical demand is the result of an inadequate view of creation” (143). “As far as the author is concerned,” Pietersen writes, “the persistent demand for supernatural acts of God, either in miracle or oracle, is the result of a failure to appreciate everyday life as a gift of the creator” (143). Given that Pietersen has devoted very little attention to the author’s view of creation before the last two paragraphs of the book, this important observation raises a number of unanswered questions about the theology of the Pastorals. This quibble aside, Pietersen’s work is an important contribution to the study of the Pastoral Epistles. It stands as a profitable example of the value socioscientific methods in the interpretation of the New Testament writings.