Travis B. Williams

Persecution in 1 Peter: Differentiating and Contextualizing Early Christian Suffering

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This impressive book is probably also the most comprehensive study available concerning the topic of persecution in 1 Peter. While there have been many previous studies in forms of articles and a few larger sections in some commentaries, this volume will probably remain a standard presentation and a must reading for students of 1 Peter for years to come both because of its comprehensive discussion and its tightly knit argumentation. That is not to say that all readers will be convinced by all its arguments, but a serious discussion of the topic persecution in 1 Peter should not be carried out without engaging in its views and arguments.

The study consists of eight chapters (3–335), four appendices (339–86), and an impressive bibliography of fifty-nine pages. If we consider each of these pages to contain twenty-five references (I counted just a few pages), that amounts to a bibliography of 1,475 books and articles! Hence the book is also a gold mine of persecution-related bibliography.

These praises notwithstanding, there are also some issues in need of further discussion and some not so convincing arguments set forth. I will present several of these at the end of this review.
The first chapter deals, as usual in most dissertations, with issues such as (persecutions in) previous research, the purpose of the study, difficulties in historical reconstructions, and the questions of authorship and date of 1 Peter (Williams: probably pseudonymous, written sometime ca. 60–90 CE). The purpose of the study is to determine the nature of suffering in 1 Peter by “situating the letter against the backdrop of conflict management in first-century CE Anatolia” (16). This plan is then carried out in exploring the location and identity of the Petrine readers (chs. 3–4) and in contextualizing the conflict in 1 Peter by describing conflict management in Roman Anatolia and investigating the legal status of Christians in the Roman world (chs. 5–6). Then, on the basis of the insights worked out so far, the nature of conflict in 1 Peter is investigated by focusing on the cause(s) and the form(s) of conflict in 1 Peter (chs. 7–8).

After dealing with the usual introductory matters in chapter 1, Williams deals with “Social Conflict in Social-Psychological Perspective” in chapter 2 (35–59). This procedure, he asserts, will help us to gain a more precise articulation of the struggle between Christians and non-Christians in the first century CE. Three central questions become important: By whom were the Anatolian Christians opposed? Why did the Anatolian Christians encounter conflict with outsiders? What forms did this conflict take, and what forms could it have taken? Then Williams proceeds to investigate and describe how to define social conflict (“the strategic interaction between individuals or groups which results from a [perceived] deprivation by an independent other,” 39); furthermore, he deals with stages of social conflict, strategic choice in social conflicts, forms of conflict escalation, and psychological processes and amplifying factors in conflict escalation.

The next chapter deals with “The Geographical Setting of 1 Peter” (61–90). Here Williams focuses on whether the readers lived in rural or urban settings, trying to pinpoint the target audience of the letter, trying to demonstrate that the cities of Anatolia were Hellenized and urbanized to the point that a kind of homogeneity can be assumed. Williams finds that an urban setting is most plausible. Then he deals with the impact of Roman rule in areas, for example, road-building and urbanization. He argues here that urban existence would have been much more uniform than suggested by many other recent studies.

Chapter 4, the last in section 1, deals with the social profile of the addressees of 1 Peter and focuses on the question of the ethnic composition and socio-economic statuses of the addressees of 1 Peter (91–128). For a long time the readers have been considered as being primarily of non-Jewish backgrounds, though some surmise that the readers might have comprised some Jewish Christians, too. Very few argue that the readers were primarily ethnic Jews. Williams comes down on the side of those arguing that 1 Peter had primarily a Gentile Christian readership as the intended audience; by “intended audience” he also
seems to mean “the real audience” (95). Furthermore, considering the socio-status(es), he provides a very insightful discussion (see also his appendix on 375–86) on this issue. Williams himself develops an economic taxonomy, arguing that the readers for the most part were of limited economic standing, a standing that would have deprived them of the possibilities of special privileges in conflict situations (e.g., in courts). Hence Christians would have been vulnerable to several kinds of attacks from their opponents.

The next section, contextualizing the conflict in 1 Peter, comprises two chapters: the first deals with “Conflict Management in Roman Anatolia” (131–78), followed by a chapter on “The Legal Status of Christians in the Roman World” (189–236). In the first of these Williams tries to sketch some types of conflict-management strategies available, and he divides these into two kinds: separate action and third-party actions. Relevant separate actions he finds to be physical violence, economic oppression, and spiritual affliction, the latter comprising, inter alia, what is usually called magic procedures such as defixiones, the use of curse tablets. As third-party strategies he discusses the use of civic courts, which might involve policing systems, local officials, provincial courts, provincial jury courts, and Roman provincial governors. This chapter represent a fine and informative discussion and presentation of various judicial and some nonjudicial means that might have been used against Christians.

What, then, about the legal status of the Christians in the Roman world? This is the focus of the sixth chapter (179–236). Williams’s main hypothesis here is that there was what he calls “a detrimental downturn” in the legal status of the Christians during the time of Nero rather than during the second and/or third centuries and that after this point all Christians “shared the same perilous legal status: the profession of Christianity came to be seen as effectively illegal in that it was treated as a punishable offense if one was charged before the governor’s tribunal” (179). In arguing for this view he works his way backward from the persecution of the Christians under Decius (249–251 CE) and down to the times of Nero in the 60s CE.

One major issue is rightly given some attention here: If Christians’ status was “effectively illegal,” how can one understand the rather sporadic nature of the persecutions of the Christians? Williams explains this by pointing to the accusatorial nature of the Anatolian judicial processes and the nature of the relationship between Christians and society. This chapter seems to be one of the best in this study, filled with many interesting observations and suggestions that cannot be mentioned in a brief review such as this.

In the third and final section Williams deals with “The Nature of Conflict in 1 Peter.” This section is likewise divided into two chapters: “The Cause(s) of Conflict in 1 Peter” (240–97), and “The Form(s) of Conflict in 1 Peter” (299–335).
Taking 1 Pet 4:3–4 as his point of departure in chapter 7, Williams discusses what types of social activities/institutions the Christians might here have been involved in before they became Christians and thus what contexts they later withdrew from. As some of the most prominent, plausible, and almost inescapable institutions, Williams describes the social reality and life of voluntary associations, of the imperial cult, and of the worship of traditional gods. Withdrawal from these settings might have represented causes of conflict in their Anatolian settings. As to the next social cause for conflict, Williams focuses on suffering for “good works”/“doing good.” Again, Williams demonstrates his wide reading and discusses several interpretations of this doing good, such as B. W. Winter’s proposal that these good works refer to public social acts for the benefit of the city. To Williams, the good works considered here are more to be understood as the issues denoted by the many paraenetic sections in the letter, that is, personal virtues and interpersonal goodness, even, for example, endurance, hospitality, and abstinence.

The second part of this chapter discusses “Legal Cause(s) of Conflict,” focusing especially on 1 Pet 4:1–16. Williams here argues strongly for his own theses that the Christians were suffering for the Name alone. Hence Christianity was “effectively illegal,” and thus the Christians addressed in this letter could have been punished or suffer in other ways simply because of their adherence to the Christian faith (281).

The final chapter deals with “The Form(s) of Conflict in 1 Peter” (299–326), followed by a conclusion (327–35). Williams here discusses verbal assault, physical abuse, legal actions, adding some conjectured forms of conflict as spousal tensions, economic oppression, social ostracism, and spiritual affliction. But his main proposal in all this is that a dichotomous view of persecution is completely inadequate: both informal as well as formal measures, both unofficial and official, were taken against Christians. General animosity could easily turn into legal accusations; hence separate actions and “official” measures should not be pitted against each other.

This work, which is a slightly revised version of Williams’s doctoral thesis carried out under the supervision of David G. Horrell and submitted to the University of Exeter in 2010, is an impressive piece of work. Let me nevertheless raise several questions or issues that stayed in my mind while reading his work. First, in reading chapter 2, on “Social Conflict in Social-Psychological Perspective” (35–59), I was surprised to find that Williams drew only on modern Western works dealing with modern Western conflict theories. Considering the recent insights of works focusing on the ancient Mediterranean world and its values and influenced by social (or cultural) anthropology, I find this procedure somewhat strange, to say the least. Neither is it clear to me how much this chapter actually did pay off for the later chapters. Second, when Williams in chapter 5 works out his view on conflict management in Roman Anatolia, how much are these
aspects really typical for just Anatolia? Might they have been rather typical for the whole Roman world?

Nevertheless, such questions should not prevent anyone from engaging herself or himself with the many good discussions of both social and legal issues of this work and the insights they provide into the social world of the first Christians.