Introduction

READING ANCIENT TEXTS

What inspires people to read a text written two thousand years ago? For some readers, the biblical text carries a religious or spiritual message that they want to explore. Other readers may be drawn by curiosity about a text that was written long ago and which continues to influence the current political and cultural decisions of some members of the larger cultural milieu of the twenty-first century. Others may approach the text as an artifact of the ancient past with little connection to our current time. The reasons for reading the biblical text in general and 1 Peter in particular are various. The goal of this commentary is to introduce readers to the text of 1 Peter so that they can gain a deeper understanding of the message of the letter and become familiar with some of the most recent scholarship on it.

Reading an ancient text well involves making use of a variety of skills. It will help the reader if he or she is familiar with the history that shapes the first-century Greco-Roman world, the cultural values and ways of thinking that were important to the people of that time, and the literary artifacts of that society, including the Old Testament and other types of literature common at that time. These other types of literature include: apocalyptic literature which communicates a vision of the end times often mediated by an angelic messenger (e.g., Revelation and 1 Enoch); public and private letters written for a variety of audiences; and other types of works common at the time such as written speeches, novels, plays, histories, and geographies. All of these types of literature help us to understand the culture in which 1 Peter was written. In addition, the reader will be aided by being aware of the ways that humans make and communicate meaning, and will

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Ruth Anne Reese
Excerpt
More Information

be careful to attend to the types of words that are used and the way they are used. Attention is given to quotations and metaphors, to allusions and analogies, and to the rhetoric and logic of the text.

Readers may understand that our ways of making meaning are embodied and experienced rather than disembodied and abstract. Our Western tradition has often disconnected reason and logic from the body and has identified metaphor, image, and the poetic as emotional and irrational. Yet, recent advances in our understanding of cognition have shown that metaphor derived from experience forms the central core of our ability to think.[1] Many of these metaphors are so deeply embedded in our thinking that we use them unconsciously as part of our everyday language. For example, we think of the person as a container – as having a space that can be filled with such things as knowledge, love, anger, or passion. And, continuing the metaphor, if a person is a container, then the space the person inhabits has an inside and an outside even as a container does.[2] These stock metaphors reflect our experience as embodied selves and form the scaffolding of our everyday life together and our capacity to communicate with one another. One of the challenges for interpretation is to understand not only the surprising metaphors that sparkle from the pages of the text but also the ordinary metaphors that reveal the building blocks of meaning. On the one hand, many metaphors are shared across cultural boundaries because they are rooted in shared human experiences.[3] Thus, everyone by virtue of their birth has some connection to family. On the other hand, even shared metaphors are transformed by the lived experiences of different peoples and different times. For example, the experience of family (a prominent metaphor in 1 Peter) in the Western world of the twenty-first century has significant differences from the experience of family in the first century. One of the tasks of the interpreter is to highlight similarities and differences between twenty-first-century experiences of and appropriation of the world and first-century experiences and appropriations. Failure to highlight these similarities and differences can lead to interpretations based on faulty

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[1] Bonnie Howe, *Because You Bear This Name: Conceptual Metaphor and the Moral Meaning of 1 Peter* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 60.

[2] Howe, *Because You Bear This Name*, 296.

[3] Howe, *Because You Bear This Name*, 188.

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Excerpt
More Information

connections, especially ones derived from thinking that our own metaphorical structures (e.g., our contemporary understanding of "family") are the same as the metaphorical structures used by the author of a first-century text. Some of this work will be carried out in the "A Closer Look" sections that highlight aspects of the historical and cultural realities of the time period we are examining. In addition, the main part of the commentary will also attend closely to metaphor and to the ways in which these metaphors press the readers of 1 Peter towards particular knowledge, resulting in certain behaviors.

Readers may also recognize that 1 Peter was never a purely informational letter but was designed to encourage those who read it and to exhort them to a particular type of life described as standing fast in the grace of God (5:12). While this commentary uses historical and theological material to illuminate 1 Peter, it also seeks to encourage contemporary readers of 1 Peter to consider what this exhortation written in the first century might mean for twenty-first-century readers. Here, the challenge is to engage the imagination of twenty-first-century readers in such a way that they might not only read the text but allow the text to read them and challenge them in ways that draw out a response. One metaphor that is being effectively applied to the work of interpretation is the metaphor of performance. Our interpretation of a text is a performance of that text, much as musicians interpret Bach when performing a work by the composer.[4] This commentary not only offers its own performance of the text but encourages readers to perform the text as well – both in their growing understanding of 1 Peter and in their appropriation of its wisdom. Some of this work will be done in the sections labeled "Bridging the Horizons."

The opening pages of this Introduction begin by laying a framework for understanding 1 Peter. This framework addresses such issues as the author and audience of the letter, the location to which it was sent, and the genre of the writing. It will also begin to take up some of the material that relates to the cultural setting of the letter, its place in the canon, and its theological significance.

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[4] Stephen C. Barton, "New Testament interpretation as performance," *SJT* 52:2 (1999): 179–208.

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Ruth Anne Reese
Excerpt
More Information

NEW APPROACHES

For centuries biblical studies, including the writing of commentaries, has been dominated by historical criticism. Historical criticism focuses on the sources of the text and its historical setting in order to facilitate understanding of the original meaning of the text. Over the centuries, historical critics developed a number of methods – including source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism – to help uncover the world behind the text and the development of the text itself. During the last fifty years, a variety of new methods have made their way into biblical studies. Sociohistorical methods offer new insights into the historical world by attending to the work of sociologists and anthropologists. These studies contribute to our understanding of social values (such as honor and shame) that drove the cultures of the first century. And when read alongside the biblical text they help current readers to hear it with an awareness of its sense for the original audience. Additionally, newer methods attended to the text itself by focusing on metaphor, narrative, and the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament (intertextuality). While historical-critical commentaries also note these types of issues, new research related to metaphor and cognition, the narrated nature of human existence, and intertextual relationships has transformed our understanding in these areas. Furthermore, scholars remind us that the readers of the first century were more likely illiterate and thus “hearers” rather than readers. A focus on memory and orality draws from contemporary sociology as well as from ancient handbooks on rhetoric and speech. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to the dominance of historical criticism has come about through attending to the location of the reader or interpreter of the biblical text. New contributions have been made through the use of feminist and postcolonial criticisms that attend to the ways in which biblical texts have been heard and received by women and minorities. These types of criticisms also remind us of the power of the Roman Empire and highlight it as a ubiquitous background for the study of any New Testament book. One of the purposes of this commentary is to provide updated interaction with recent scholarly developments in the study of 1 Peter. There are many resources available in the historical-critical mode (and indeed the work of historical criticism has not been exhausted), but this commentary will also highlight a variety of new

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Ruth Anne Reese
Excerpt
More Information

approaches and insights that draw from some of the more recent methods and approaches to have gained ground both in biblical studies more generally and in the study of 1 Peter in particular.

SETTING, POWER, AND MAJORITY–MINORITY RELATIONSHIPS

The book of 1 Peter is a letter written to small groups of Christians scattered across Asia Minor, a geographical region consisting of several provinces in the Roman Empire. In the first century, Rome was the center of the world. There, Caesar Augustus and the emperors who followed ruled as the head of a vast and expanding empire, holding together a territory stretching through parts of what is today Europe, North Africa, Turkey, and the Middle East. From Rome, Caesar wielded power over the provinces and set about continual expansion of the empire through conquest, especially to the north and west. Living in the central city of Rome or wielding power as a subordinate of Caesar brought honor, status, and recognition. Meanwhile, the provinces and their peoples gained and lost status and reputation depending on their relationship with Rome and the ruler of the empire. Provinces and cities that provided material support and honor for the empire were rewarded with monuments and benefactions that affirmed their commitment to the governing power of Rome.

By the latter half of the first century Asia Minor already had a long history of interaction with Rome. Around 129 BCE Rome had established its first province – Asia, part of current-day Turkey (see map of Asia Minor) – in the region when the king died and left his land to the Romans. About 50 years later, the region of Bithynia was also bequeathed to Rome. And in 66 BCE the general Pompey won the region of Pontus and went on to create one province with the name Bithynia-Pontus. Galatia was added by Augustus to the growing Roman Empire in 25 BCE.[5] By the mid to late first century BCE both the North African provinces and the provinces of Asia Minor were important regions with longstanding relationships with Rome. Of course, as provinces, these regions were subject to an immense tax burden which drained resources away from the local region towards Rome. Meanwhile, Rome became the administrator of justice and peace in the provinces, replacing the kings that had once ruled these regions.

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[5] Travis B. Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter : Differentiating and Contextualizing Early Christian Suffering*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum: 145 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 354.

Asia Minor both gave and received benefits from its relationship with Rome. When Augustus first began to consolidate power after the battle of Actium (31 BCE), the provinces of Asia Minor recognized his position with various tributes such as adopting the Roman calendar and naming months after Caesar, minting new coinage, and erecting statues. “In 29 BCE Octavian [Augustus] gave permission to establish a . . . *sacred precinct* for the goddess Roma and the heroized Julius Caesar in Nikaia and in Ephesos [Ephesus], and he instructed the [people] resident there to take part in their veneration.”[6] The cult of the emperor would grow across Asia Minor and multiple temples were built to venerate the emperor both in the lifetime of Augustus and in the decades that followed. These temples tapped into a “religious veneration of the ruler and benefactor [that] was, however, nothing new in Anatolia. Not only had shrines to the goddess Roma long existed in several places, but cults of living Romans were also practiced in earlier times.”[7]

Generally, the western provinces of Asia Minor (Asia, Galatia, Bithynia-Pontus) were relatively peaceful during the first century CE. In addition, this area was fertile and prosperous. Over the course of the first century, the region increased in wealth and had a strongly diversified economy. Of course, poverty still existed, but there is much to suggest that the region was generally economically stable and produced viable livings for its inhabitants.[8] The region had a wide variety of industries that produced goods for export, including wine, wheat, olive oil, pickled fish, fish sauce, wood, wool and other textiles, and products from mining including silver and salt. The region was also developed through the investment that Rome made in roads, cities, and governance. The only remaining map[9] of the Roman road system shows a well-connected region allowing for the transport of goods and services, as well as the deployment of military power

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[6] Christian Marek, Peter Frei, and Steven Rendall, *In the Land of a Thousand Gods: A History of Asia Minor in the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 314, italics original.

[7] Marek, Frei, and Rendall, *In the Land of a Thousand Gods*, 313.

[8] Marek, Frei, and Rendall, *In the Land of a Thousand Gods*, 312–13.

[9] *Tabula Peutingeriana*, thirteenth-century manuscripts held in the Austrian National Library.

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Ruth Anne Reese
Excerpt
More Information

when needed. The eastern province of Cappadocia, like Galatia, was rural. Cappadocia also formed part of the outer border of the Roman Empire. Military installations and the building of roads to transport soldiers and goods helped to fortify the border against invasion. The letter of 1 Peter is not addressed to cities but rather to regions. While the province of Asia had a number of prominent cities, many of the other areas addressed were rural in nature and maintained local social and religious traditions long after accepting rule by the Roman Empire. Such practices were maintained alongside allegiance to Rome. The book of 1 Peter is identified as coming to small groups of believers spread across the region of Asia Minor from the elder, Peter, an apostle of Jesus located in Rome (identified cryptically in 5:13 as “Babylon”).

Both the writer and the recipients of 1 Peter were embedded in a deep hierarchical understanding of reality.[10] For Jews and Christians, at the top of the hierarchy was God. Below God were angels and then humans, then animals, and then plants. Other hierarchies were contained in the categories below God. In the first century, the emperor stood at the apex of the human category and below him were the senate, equestrians, governors, and magistrates. Far below these were peasants and slaves. The hierarchy could shift (after all, slaves of Caesar’s household held more status than some free people), but that there was a hierarchy of position, honor, and status was a given reality in the first century. Most of the people directly addressed in the letter – slaves and wives, particularly – were among the least powerful people in the Roman Empire. Those addressed were not the rulers of the day nor the people whispering in the ears of the rulers with the hope that the empire might turn in their direction; rather, they were the lowly of the provinces. And while the provinces in which they were living were prosperous and fertile, the likelihood is that the communities who received 1 Peter “consisted of a mixed socioeconomic background . . . some – although probably a very small percentage – would have been able to accumulate a moderate or even a substantial surplus of funds. Nevertheless . . . the large majority of the readers would have found themselves in an unstable and precarious financial situation.”[11] And while the letter is written from Rome and comes from the foremost of Jesus’

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[10] Howe, *Because You Bear This Name*, 228.
[11] Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter*, 128.

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Excerpt
More Information

disciples, Peter too is a minority (a Jew) living in the majority (Gentile) culture of his day. He is writing from Rome where he is living as a foreigner separated from his home in Judea. He writes to others who have also come to experience minority status by virtue of their entrance into new relationship with God and with each other through their relationship with Jesus Christ. Thus, even in the midst of a fair amount of prosperity and the blessings of benefaction on the part of Rome, 1 Peter is still insider literature "responding to the needs of a multicultural, scattered, and vulnerable population."[12]

And here what we have learned from majority–minority relations in the twenty-first century can help us understand 1 Peter more fully. One of the realities of minority cultures is that they must live in two worlds and understand two languages. Minorities live within the cultural context of their minority community – this may include different foods, a different mother tongue, and different cultural values. At the same time, in order to survive, they must live and function within the majority culture as well. This means that they must be familiar with the language and culture and customs of the majority that surround them. On the one hand, they must be able to function and even flourish within that cultural setting. This can involve reproducing, "sometimes verbatim, the propaganda of the socially and politically dominant . . . in order to bend it to their favor by appealing to those elements of it that support their interests."[13] Those who belong to a minority culture are intimately aware of the messages and practices of the dominant culture. On the other hand, in order to retain their cultural identity, they cannot fully assimilate to the culture around them. Shively Smith notes that "1 Peter prescribes, in paraenetic fashion, a double consciousness in which its addressees observe two distinct cultural systems and oscillate between two parallel realities – [in this case], living under human authority and living under God's sovereignty."[14] In contrast, those born into a majority culture do not have to learn another language or another set of customs and conventions in order to thrive. In reality,

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[12] Shively T. J. Smith, *Strangers to Family: diaspora and 1 Peter's Invention of God's Household* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 3.

[13] Paul A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament: 244 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 180–81.

[14] Smith, *Strangers to Family*, 46.

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Ruth Anne Reese
Excerpt
More Information

majority culture persons may be unaware that minority cultures exist, or they may actively seek to undermine and/or destroy minority cultures that are different from their own. There is some debate, which will be addressed in the commentary on 1 Peter 1:1–2, about how the people addressed in this letter came to be a minority culture. But there is no debate on the fact that the group addressed is indeed a minority culture – a group of people described as living away from home (exiles or resident aliens) and scattered (Dispersion) across the provinces. This minority is being asked to live out their identity as the people of God in the context of a majority culture that ridicules and torments them for their belief. Culturally, the vast resources of power lie in the hands of the majority culture and the political systems that they control. Those who belong to a minority culture know this and yet they are not powerless. Work in postcolonial studies reminds us that "the weak also exercise agency and power through the multifarious means by which they resist their domination, whether in hidden or overt ways, and whether through linguistic means . . . or by physical acts . . .".[15] Peter's letter is designed to speak to their status in ways that encourage and empower them to live fully in a culture that they know and understand but to which they can never fully belong while belonging to the household of God. For twenty-first-century readers born into a majority culture, one challenge will be to place themselves into the minds of those living as a minority within a majority culture that is embedded in the structures of imperial control. One way that those, like myself, who belong to a majority context can try to understand majority–minority realities and colonial realities is by attending to the writings and stories of minorities who speak from within their context. Similarly, attention to the experiences of persecution experienced by Christians living in diverse times and places can also help us attend to the lived experiences of the first recipients of 1 Peter. Both of these stances require taking up a posture of listening and learning from those who in many ways find themselves in the same hierarchical position as the slaves and wives who first heard 1 Peter. Such attention includes listening to Christians who live as minorities in their nations, listening to

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[15] David G. Horrell, "Between conformity and resistance: Beyond the Balch-Elliott debate towards a postcolonial reading of First Peter," in Robert L. Webb and Betsy Bauman-Martin (eds.), *Reading First Peter with New Eyes: Methodological Reassessments of the Letter of First Peter* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 118–19.

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Ruth Anne Reese
Excerpt
More Information

those who experience a wide variety of persecutions for their faith in Jesus, and attending to the narratives of those who have experienced refugee and alien status, especially because of their faith.

SITUATION

The household of God faced persecution as part of its experience of life in Asia Minor. In light of this situation, Peter indicates (5:12) that he wrote his letter to encourage the family of God, which was spread throughout the provinces of Asia Minor.

Commentators agree that those addressed by the letter faced a variety of difficult circumstances due to their identity as part of the household of God. These experiences are described in the letter as causing grief and are identified as various trials the group faces (1:6). Over the course of the letter, the description of what its recipients faced becomes clearer. In 2:12 their "good works"[16] result in slander, insults, and verbal attacks on their character from those who are not part of the household of God. They may experience abuse (indeed, they may already have done so) (3:9), suffering (3:14), or mistreatment (3:16) for doing what is good and right in the sight of God and the household of faith. In 4:12 their situation is described as a fiery ordeal that involves suffering (4:13) and being "reviled for the name of Christ" (4:14). The experience of suffering because of faith in Jesus Christ was varied and not monolithic. It is clear that Peter understands that the trials faced by Christians are not unique to his readership as he reminds them that "your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering" (5:9).

Scholars have debated the nature of the persecution faced by the Christians in Asia Minor. Until recently the consensus was that the persecution they experienced was not orchestrated by the Roman government but was rather local and sporadic and consisted most often of verbal abuse and attacks from the local population.[17] This consensus position was in

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[16] See "A Closer Look" in the commentary on 1 Peter 2:12.

[17] Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter*, 4; Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice*, 36 notes, however, that "scholars of early Christianity make a serious mistake when they focus on the 'local and sporadic' nature of early Christian persecution . . . and ignore this much more fundamental and abiding problem" of prejudice that amounts to hatred and leads to a very high threat level.