

Book Review

1 Peter

I. Howard Marshall

The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. Downers Grove, IL/Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1991. ISBN 0-8308-1817-0, hardback, pp. 1-184, \$20.00.

Reviewed by Edgar R. Lee, S.T.D., Senior Professor of Spiritual Formation and Pastoral Theology, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary.

Having gathered dust on my library shelf until tapped for a recent study of 1 Peter with my Sunday school class, this little volume by renowned New Testament scholar and long-time professor of New Testament exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, I. Howard Marshall, has now established itself as one of my favorite commentaries. Part of *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, it “seeks to move from the text to its contemporary relevance and application” (p. 9).

Many exegetes in writing their commentaries shy away from application but Marshall, consistent with the aim of this series, does not. “...[A]lthough it was written to a specific situation, 1 Peter had a message for all Christians in the first century. As a result, we can without too much difficulty loosen it from its first-century setting and read it as a message for Christians today” (16). The reader will quickly detect, however, that Marshall has his interpretative priorities straight: “We have to find out first what the author was saying to the original readers, and second, how what he was saying to them applies to us” (16-17). This approach is what makes this commentary so useful in teaching and preaching.

Without being unduly technical or boring, Marshall acquaints his reader with the best of scholarly study, objectively and

tensely evaluates various points of view for difficult passages, and clearly expresses his own judgments that are always judicious and respectful of the text in the finest evangelical exegetical tradition. For each unit of text, Marshall provides overviews and summaries that help the reader pick up the flow of Peter’s thinking. Then he provides brief but insightful exposition that can quickly and precisely inform the preparation of one’s lessons or sermons. In many passages, Marshall structures his exposition with clear and obvious points that readers can easily import directly into their lessons and sermons (with attribution, of course!)—a tremendously helpful format for teachers and pastors.

In two short and plainly written introductory chapters, Marshall summarizes what may be known about the background of the letter. Standing against prevailing scholarly opinion which commonly asserts that Peter’s name in the title of the letter is a pseudonym, Marshall insists the author is “Peter, the original leader of the twelve apostles” (15). “If ever there was a weak case for pseudonymity, surely it is in respect to this letter” (21). The literary quality of the Greek in which 1 Peter is written is usually a major reason to challenge Petrine authorship. Against that notion, Marshall emphasizes that Peter grew up in a bilingual community and, moreover, seems to have

had the assistance of Silas in writing the letter (1 Peter 5:12).

The origin of the letter is most likely Rome, apparently signaled in the closing salutations, “She who is in Babylon...sends you her greetings” (5:13). “Babylon” is a readily recognizable pseudonym for Rome (173). The recipients seem to have been resident in what is now the northern rim of Turkey along the Black Sea, then divided into several administrative areas of the Roman Empire. “They were a set of scattered groups and perhaps isolated individuals in a wide territory” (14), all under the threat of occasional persecution and possible loss of their property. While Marshall does not hazard a precise date, he sets the letter within the historical circumstances of the mid-60s of the first century.

Of the key theological emphases highlighted by Marshall, we may particularly note that “Peter has a developed doctrine of suffering” (27), clearly coming to terms with the fact that believers may indeed suffer from time to time, but only in the providence of God and only to test and strengthen. When it happens, “joy is possible despite present suffering” (40). Also worthy of note: “Peter has a lively sense of the spiritual dimensions of Christian experiences...angels, the devil and other evil powers. Above all, he believes that Christ has already overcome supernatural evil powers and made them subject to himself; ultimately, the evil powers cannot overcome Christians...” (27). The Holy Spirit is especially prominent in the letter, “active both in prophesying the coming of Christ and in the preaching of the good news about him (1:11-12). He sanctifies believers and, in the midst of suffering and persecution, he is especially present with them...” (27).

Nowhere is Marshall’s exegetical and theological skill more apparent than in his

handling of the controversial passage on Christ’s proclamation to the spirits in prison (3:19-20). Sifting carefully through both current and historical exegesis, he exposes the weakness of several popular alternatives and suggests the spirits are evil supernatural beings imprisoned in the heavens to whom Christ made a proclamation of victory after his resurrection.

His treatment of 1 Peter 4:10-11 is a superb contribution to a Pentecostal-charismatic theology of ministry. “These two verses form an amazingly compact and complete summary of New Testament teaching on ministry” (145-146). The twin gifts of *speaking* and *servicing* are broad designations that actually cover all the spiritual gifts mentioned by Paul in his letters. Members should faithfully use their gifts just as they should pray and show love. While elders have primary pastoral oversight of the members, “other tasks of ministry should be carried out by any members of the congregation who have spiritual gifts. The gifts are not in any way confined to the elders or to any other group separated from the rest of the congregation” (146).

Marshall has demonstrated his world-class scholarly credentials in other commentaries but in this one we see him as a Baptist pastor carefully exegeting the Scriptures and then making useful application of biblical truth in a way that inspires and informs his ministering colleagues throughout the English-speaking world. One might split hairs on a few points of interpretation but this commentary is a “must purchase” for any serious pastor-teacher who wants to get a good handle on 1 Peter.