

BOOK REVIEWS

Elliott, John H. *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981. xiv + 306 pp. \$24.95.

In his investigation into the epistle of 1 Peter, John Elliott continues the attempt to break away from parochialism in dealing with biblical documents. He does so in moving away from a purely literary and theological orientation and in paying more attention to the social milieu out of which the document arose. Accordingly, his treatment places an emphasis on how the ethos of the community impinged upon the thought of the writer (or the school) responsible for the document.

Much of the work produced in the decade since this enterprise began to blossom has gone the route of purely sociological analysis—i.e., utilization of modern sociological theories in endeavoring to explicate the social reality of a given document or its audience. Such attempts, however, are inadequate as are the literary and theological investigations of traditional exegesis. Very little has been done toward combining exegesis with sociological investigation based on a socio-historical description, in an effort to be as faithful as possible to the totality of the message of a particular NT document.

Elliott's work has, in my opinion, come the closest to such an ideal, by engaging in what is called sociological exegesis, which Elliott defines as "the analytic and synthetic interpretation of the text through the combined exercise of the exegetical and sociological disciplines, their principles, theories and techniques" (pp. 7-8). He has rightly pointed out that the terms "social" and "sociological" must not be confused or used indiscriminately (p. 3). The former has more to do with social description and the latter with theoretical analysis. Elliott's major contribution, however, is his combination of a socio-historical description and the application of a sociological model in order to ascertain the "how" and "why" of the circumstances which lay behind the production of the document.

The epistle of 1 Peter lends itself well to Elliott's methodology, for not only is it an exegetical gold mine, but it is also an ideal document for the exploration of social issues. It is in dealing with the latter that the strength of Elliott's book lies. He finds that the central focus of 1 Peter concerns

"the interaction of Christians and society" (p. 49) and that the epistle is "a response to the typical set of problems created by the tension between sectarian particularism and societal pressures for conformity" (p. 225).

The thesis of *A Home for the Homeless* hinges on two words which the author finds to be "not merely linguistic but also sociological and theological correlates" (p. 23): viz., *paroikos* and *oikos*. Both terms provide the clues to the social setting of the audience and also provide the socio-religious response of the author(s).

The first word, *paroikos*, analyzed in chap. 1, identifies the addressees of 1 Peter as aliens and strangers in the territories in which they reside. This alienness/strangerliness is social and historical, and it should not be spiritualized, Elliott argues. If this be the case, then *diaspora* in 1 Pet 1:1 also has a sociological component, characterizing, as Leonard Goppelt notes, "the [the addressees'] position *in society*" (p. 46; the quotation comes from Goppelt, with emphasis supplied by Elliott). So also, the term *Babylon* in 5:13 expresses a religio-historical dimension of the Petrine audience's estrangement in society (pp. 39, 47-80). Elliott is, thus, adamantly opposed to translators who modify the Greek original by adding such words and phrases as "on earth," "earthly," "in this world," etc., in such verses as 1:17 and 2:11. The translations "pilgrims," "exiles," and "sojourners" also suffer from an imprecision which detracts from the social significance of the text, and they conjure up false associations, because they are based on unfounded assumptions (pp. 41-47). This is not to say that Elliott fails to recognize the religious implications of the terms, but these implications, he feels, in no way "vitiates the social conditions of the strangers and aliens to whom they are applied" (p. 48).

After setting forth in chap. 1 his presupposition concerning 1 Peter's audience as social *paroikos* (whom, incidentally, he identifies as rural tenant farmers [p. 63]), he develops in chap. 2 a "social profile" of these addressees. First, he proposes a social description which utilizes historical, geographical, legal, economic, religious, etc., data (pp. 59-73). Second, by using sociological theory, drawing on Bryan Wilson's sociological studies of sects, he places the recipients in the category of "sectarian" (pp. 73-78).

Then, utilizing this sect typology, Elliott attempts to explicate the socio-religious strategy of 1 Peter—a topic treated particularly in chap. 3. By identifying the audience as conversionist sectarians and by utilizing the sect typological model, he is able to demonstrate how the letter strategically counteracts the "demoralizing and disintegrating impact which social tension and suffering had upon the Christian sect" and how it presented reassurance of their "distinctive communal identity" (p. 148).

Chap. 4 treats further, in considerable detail, the strategy which, according to Elliott, is utilized by the author(s) of 1 Peter (based upon the model

presented in chap. 3). By the use of the word *oikos*, the letter presents a response to the *paroikos*-ness of the recipients. Elliott is quick to point out that we must move away from the exclusively cultic meaning of the word *oikos* in 2:5 and 4:17, for this sort of interpretation has "obstructed any curiosity concerning the political, economic and social implications of the term" (p. 165; cf. p. 169). It is the social orientation that is stressed here; the recipients of the letter are members of an *oikos* in an historical alien country. This gave a sense of belongingness or community. Thus, Elliott concludes that "the alternative to [the] predicament of *parokia* was not a future home in heaven but a place within the Christian fraternity here and now" (p. 233).

As already suggested, the strength of Elliott's attempt at a sociological "exegesis" lies in the sociological aspect of his endeavor. On the other hand, one is pressed hard to identify any thoroughgoing exegesis involving a literary, grammatical, and syntactical analysis. Most of what could be called exegesis in the usual sense is rather a word-study (and a good word-study, I may say) of *paroikos* and *oikos*. Of course, some analysis of the passages in which these words occur is attempted, but there is nothing of the nature that one would be comfortable to describe as genuine, thoroughgoing exegesis. A greater balance in this respect would have been achieved and a truer picture painted, had Elliott paid greater attention to this aspect of methodology.

Nevertheless, *A Home for the Homeless* is, without a doubt, a landmark production, particularly so in the sociological enterprise in NT studies. To engage either in Petrine studies or in the field of "Sociology and the NT" without taking into account Elliott's work is to proceed at the risk of being inadequate.

Finally, a word on format: The notes are placed at the end of each chapter, a practice that is always problematical in works which have such extensive and rich footnotes that are vital to the main body of material. It would have been much more convenient for the reader had the notes been in footnote style on each page—or, at least, all gathered at the back of the book. In addition, a basic bibliography, lacking in this volume, would have been an asset both to students of 1 Peter and to those engaged more generally in the "Sociology-and-the-NT" enterprise.

In closing, I would state that my foregoing criticisms should not be allowed to detract in the least from the excellent work produced by Elliott. In fact, I would consider this work somewhat of a masterpiece.

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