

BOOK REVIEW

Jobes, Karen H., *Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011). xvi + 478 pp. Hdbk. US\$44.99.

Karen Jobes is the Gerald F. Hawthorne Professor of New Testament Greek and Exegesis at Wheaton College. She has written this textbook for those Bible students who will read the biblical text itself in its entirety alongside the book. The glossary at the end of the book and the Questions for Review or Discussion at the end of each chapter are intended to make the material easier to understand. Although Jobes writes from her own evangelical understanding, this textbook is intended to be used 'in such a way that leaves adequate room for other viewpoints to be engaged in the classroom' (p. xvi). In general, this book can be used as an introduction to the non-Pauline epistles in the New Testament for entry-level seminary students.

The book consists of an introduction and fourteen chapters divided into four parts: Hebrews, Letters from Jesus' Brothers, Letters from Peter and Letters from John. Each chapter has virtually the same format. It opens with a title page specifying the goals for that chapter. In the first section, the reader is notified why the canonical book or chapter is important, followed by a chapter outline and discussions. The content is full of quotation boxes, colorful photographs, illustrations, charts and maps. Each chapter closes with key terms and dates, questions for review or discussion, and a bibliographical list for going further. At the end of the book are a glossary, and four indexes for Scripture, Extrabiblical Ancient Texts, Authors and Subjects.

In the Introduction, in addition to the explanation of the historical background of the first-century church, Jobes explores the questions of pseudonymity and the process of canonical recognition for Hebrews and the General Epistles. She offers no definite solution to the problem of authorship, but inclines to be in favor of the traditional ascriptions.

She agrees with Robert Wall's canonical approach that posits a unifying theology that makes this collection of canonical books a true unit.

The first four chapters, which are Part One, are devoted to the book of Hebrews. Chapter 1 handles basic questions. Jobes says that the specific recipients and occasion are undetermined. She suggests that the book was written between AD 60 and 70 by (quoting Eusebius) an author 'only God knows!' (p. 42). Hebrews was written in the form of a sermon, touching on the theological topics of Christology, God, the Holy Spirit, the New Covenant, Heaven, Dualism, Faith and Angelology. Of particular interest is that, according to the older traditional canonical placement, the book of Hebrews was associated with the writings of Paul, but Jobes, taking the more recent 'canonical approach', associates Hebrews with the General Epistles, as the title of her book suggests. Chapters 2 to 4 deal with three theological issues in the book of Hebrews: Divine Revelation, Christology and Soteriology.

The author of Hebrews asserts with certainty that God has spoken. The book of Hebrews, characterized by dualism, contrasts two ages of revelation (the past and these last days), two audiences (the ancestors and us), and two modes of revelation (the prophets and the Son). One of the main hermeneutical concerns in study of Hebrews is its use of the Old Testament. Jobes wrestles with the challenges of the use of the Septuagint in the book of Hebrews to support arguments, the Trinitarian attribution of the Old Testament quotations as proof of divine inspiration of the Old Testament and the making relevant of the Old Testament revelation by the gospel of Christ. Jobes astutely observes the curious fact that the author of Hebrews states that God's final revelation is in Jesus, but 'there is not one of them [Jesus' words] in the book of Hebrews' (pp. 75-76).

The two foci of Christology in Hebrews are discussed in Chapter 3. Speaking of Jesus as the preexistent Son of God shows that he has Messianic connotations. 'The Son as Messiah is here proclaimed not only to have an eternal rule, but is proclaimed by God to be God!' (p. 93). Jesus as High Priest completes God's sacrificial system, the system that is foreshadowed in the old covenant, by offering himself to die for sin. The author of Hebrews demonstrates that Jesus does not belong to the levitical order, but to a superior order of the Melchizedek priesthood. These two foci of Hebrews' Christology blend together in the ascension, 'where Christ is both crowned as the King of the

universe...and where he presents the final sacrifice of his own blood' (p. 111).

Having clarified the identity of Jesus, in Chapter 4 Jobes pursues the topic of soteriology in Hebrews, which is based on the objective, historical death and resurrection of Jesus. The author of Hebrews warns Christians not to take salvation for granted, and then calls them to obediently live out their faith for their whole lives in every season and circumstance, as did the great cloud of witnesses.

The two letters from Jesus' brothers are placed together in this textbook. Three chapters are devoted to the Epistle of James. In Chapter 5, Jobes carefully examines the introductory issues of James, such as the genre, original recipients, and the purpose of the letter. She suggests that this letter was written by James, the half-brother of Jesus, sometime between the mid-40s and AD 62, although so many things about this epistle remain uncertain. The practical theology of James provides a necessary framework to balance faith in Jesus and Christian behavior, in which ethical questions important even today about the integrity of one's speech, poverty and wealth are considered. The exploration of the implicit Christology of James in Chapter 6 focuses on the parallels with Q and the Synoptics. Jobes believes that 'James is a thoroughly Christian thinker who forms an important bridge from the ethical tradition of first-century Judaism to the kingdom ethics preached by Jesus Christ' (p. 198). In Chapter 7, Jobes compares the teachings of the 'royal law' in James with the Jewish wisdom tradition. As a letter of 'faith in action' (p. 221), James presents the readers with ethical exhortations to godly behavior in areas such as speech, wealth and poverty. 'By choosing to love one's neighbor as oneself, the Christian is choosing the way of wisdom' (p. 230). Chapter 8 deals with general issues and the theology of the Epistle of Jude. In particular, Jobes contributes ten pages to Jude's use of the Old Testament, the Pseudepigrapha, and its relationship to 2 Peter. The book of Jude is important for its time and for today's Christians alike because we too live in an age when the church has to face 'the discouragement and confusion within and about the Christian faith' (p. 234).

The Petrine Epistles are dealt with in Part Three, in which three out of four chapters center on 1 Peter, and one on 2 Peter. In Chapter 9, general issues of authorship, date, purpose, and themes are introduced. Having considered all aspects of the arguments, Jobes believes that Peter the apostle wrote 1 Peter to those in northern Asia Minor, perhaps

with the aid of an amanuensis. The theme of Christology introduced in this chapter is further elaborated in Chapter 10. Unlike in Hebrews, Christology in 1 Peter ‘focuses specifically on the suffering and execution of Jesus and his subsequent resurrection and ascension’ (p. 301). Here Jobes extends her splendid study of Petrine Christology in three specific passages in 1 Peter: the hermeneutical foundations of Peter’s Christology in 1.10-12, the image of the Suffering Servant in 2.21-25, and the victorious, vindicated Savior in 3.18-22.

Chapter 11 deals with ethical issues in 1 Peter. Basically, Christians are transformed and receive a new identity through the saving acts of Jesus Christ. The *imitatio Christi* becomes a ‘spiritual quest’ (p. 344) for Christians living in a pagan society. In Chapter 12, on the one hand, Jobes presents the message and theological themes, such as God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and Eschatology, of 2 Peter, and, on the other, she wrestles with debatable issues, such as pseudepigraphal authorship, genre, date and audience, and relationships to 1 Peter and Jude.

The two chapters in the last part of the book are devoted to the study of the Johannine Epistles. In Chapter 13, Jobes highlights the challenges presented by the book of 1 John, in particular, the identification of the ‘we’ authorship, and the hamartiology evolved from the ‘sin’ passages such as 3.9 and 5.16. Jobes rightly summarizes this chapter by saying, ‘The assurance of eternal life is attained by (1) believing rightly about Jesus...to atone for sin; (2) dealing rightly with sin by...seeking the cleansing of the Lord...; and (3) loving others as God defines love’ (p. 433). Chapter 14 is the shortest chapter of this textbook. The importance of 2 and 3 John is reflected by their obvious messages of grace and truth, and their relation to the teaching of love. Jobes concludes the chapter by challenging the readers to think about the ‘larger issue’ of these two shortest epistles in the New Testament, that is, the issue of spiritual authority. ‘That is still a most pressing question for Christian churches today’ (p. 448).

This book is highly recommended as an entry level seminary textbook, at least for the following reasons: first, Jobes’s scholarly attitude is commended. When facing debatable issues, which are so numerous and so common for the Catholic Epistles in terms of their canonicity and textual evidences, authenticity of authorship, date, genre and recipients, Jobes does not avoid the questions. Instead, she tries to cover all aspects of them. Secondly, Jobes’s academic content is good. Just to give a few examples, Jobes guides her reader to look at James through

the lens of James, not that of Paul. The material of James is Q-related but not Q-dependent. Personally, I think her elaborations of Petrine Christology and the Jacobean 'Royal Law' are the best parts of her book. Moreover, the bibliographies at the end of each chapter add value to this book as an academic resource. Thirdly, the book is very readable. It is intended for classroom use, and is thus free from difficult nuances. Yet, it is full of theological terms made simple, as reflected by the glossary. The colorful maps, summaries and quotations from ancient and contemporary writers make this book easy to comprehend.

However, there are three areas in which I am disappointed. First, without an integration of the General Epistles as a corpus that speaks with one voice, this book is just another textbook on the topic with balkanized, updated materials in plain language with colorful visual aids. There are rich materials for each epistle, but each epistle is detached from the others. If each epistle is the tree and the collection of the General Epistles is the forest, I cannot see the forest for the trees. The question why these canonical books were grouped together is still untouched. Heterogeneity is the impression I get after reading this book. Secondly, although Jobs tries to consider the issues of each book as broadly as possible, her consideration sometimes lacks depth. One obvious example is her handling of the manuscript P⁷², which is only briefly mentioned in the 'text and canonicity' section on Jude, 1 and 2 Peter. Jobs fails to inform the reader of the arrangement of these three canonical writings together with seven non-canonical ones in P⁷², and, more important, the theological implication of such arrangement. Thirdly, most disappointing is the inconsistency in her approach to the theology of the General Epistles. Jobs believes that the identification of a unifying theology of the General Epistles, such as Robert Wall's 'unifying theology', assumes and demonstrates an underlying historical reality that connects the authors of these books in some substantial way (p. 17). However, at the same time, she divorces her textbook from such unification by elaborating the theologies of individual books and writers. If one expects from this book a fresh new investigation, even at an entry level, of the integration of the theology of the canonical writings of James, Peter, John and Jude, this textbook is unpromising and disappoints such expectation.

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