



Texts in Context

Radical Trust in the Just Judge: The Easter Texts of 1 Peter

MARY H. SCHERTZ

The epistle readings for the Easter Season 2005 are taken from 1 Peter—a difficult text for the North American church in several ways. For many of us, communal suffering, which is the background of this text, is virtually unknown. It is not that those of us who are middle class, Caucasian church members in this country do not suffer. All of our lives are touched by pain. The ravages of disease, the losses of both sudden and lingering death, the destructive vagaries of nature, including human nature, economic upheaval, and other circumstances beyond our control are ours as surely as they are anyone's. Few of us have suffered as communities, however; few of us have been discriminated against and oppressed as groups—and that is the circumstance in 1 Peter. Unless we have stretched our souls to get in touch with the experiences of poor people or other disadvantaged people, our ability to imagine the situation of these texts—and the lives of many people around us and around the world—is limited.

Another difficulty that greets us in our effort to understand, interpret, and appropriate these texts is the very nature of lectionary readings. I, like many biblical scholars who care about how the Bible is read and heard in the church, am ambivalent about the use of the common lectionary. Those of us who follow it are

First Peter's call to obedience and suffering has sometimes been sorely abused in the church's interpretation, turning a blind eye to violence against the oppressed. But this letter can also serve as a call to renounce violence, as did Christ himself, in a way that can transform evil into good.

assured of some variety and breadth in our biblical diet. The lectionary, however, sometimes chops texts into nearly nonsensical fragments—often disregarding natural literary units and frequently excising anything that is difficult or offensive to modern sensibilities. The result is that, for all the good intent of those who chose the readings, the text as text does not always receive a good hearing in the congregation.

That truncated hearing is especially true in this set of texts. The common lectionary avoids the most offensive passages in the letter—the references to the slaves in 2:18 and to the wives in 3:1–6. Still, most of us are aware of these troublesome passages, and that knowledge colors our reading, as it should. The lectionary choices also mask the care with which this letter has been crafted. The structure and content are intimately related. It really needs to be read as a whole to understand it. Especially in the case of 1 Peter, the format of the lectionary readings inhibits understanding.

LITERARY STRUCTURE

The heart of the letter is 2:11–3:12. This section contains those problematic instructions to the slaves and wives of the community but it also sets up the central ethos of the letter. Here, the issue of submitting to authorities (governments, masters, husbands) is set within a larger understanding of good and evil and what it means to live the example of Christ within a particular social situation of oppression and persecution. These texts about submission are arranged in a particular literary pattern that we sometimes call a *chiasm*, after the Greek letter *chi* (our letter X), because of its crossover construction. We are more familiar with this literary form than we think. From antiquity into our own time it has played a vital role in ordinary communication. We find it in literature, to be sure, but also in advertising, sports writing, comedy and drama, and newscasting, as well as in some of our more memorable political speeches. One famous example is John F. Kennedy's, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."¹

In the case of 1 Peter, chiasm operates at a couple of different levels. There is a larger chiasm at the conceptual level and then a smaller, tighter, more literary chiasm at the center of the larger chiasm.

Concentric circles of instruction

The central unit of the letter moves in pairs of instructions from the edges in to the center. There is an instruction in 2:11–17 for *everyone* in the community to be subject "for the Lord's sake" to every human institution. In 2:18–20, the *slaves* are to be submissive to their masters. Then, at the center of this chiasm is another chiasm—the christological hymn in 2:21–25, in which Jesus is described as not reviling when he was reviled and not threatening when he suffered. On the other side

¹See Mardy Grothe, *Never Let a Fool Kiss You or a Kiss Fool You: Chiasmus and a World of Quotations That Say What They Mean and Mean What They Say* (Viking: New York, 1999), for an enchanting and enlightening survey of the ubiquitous chiasm throughout history and in all areas of interest.

of the hymn, the *wives* are to submit to their (nonbelieving) husbands in 3:1–6. Finally, in 3:8–12, *all* are not to return evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but instead to pursue peace. Schematically, it looks like this:²

1 Peter 2:11–17

All: Be subject to every human institution...but live as free people.

1 Peter 2:18–21

Slaves: Be submissive even to overbearing masters...but be aware of God, whose approval you have.

1 Peter 2:21–24

The example: Follow in his steps...who did not revile in return...but trusted the one who judges justly.

1 Peter 3:1–6 (7)

Wives: Be submissive to husbands...but do not let yourselves be terrorized.

1 Peter 3: 8–12

All: Do not return evil for evil...but seek peace and pursue it.

The hymn about Christ

None of this submission and nonretaliation is especially palatable for red-blooded Americans, although the central hymn of the nonretaliatory Christ is more attractive to my own Anabaptist tradition than to many Christians. But whether we find any of these sentiments attractive or not, there is one very important point that is made in the hymn that helps us understand not only 1 Peter but the biblical literature of the oppressed in general. Without that point, we lack an important canonical key to the Bible as a whole, as well as a vital notion about the biblical God in relation to the poor and oppressed of our world.

For the communities to whom this letter was written, the most important meaning of the cross is not that Jesus died for sinners. Jesus is not, in this view, a substitute; he is not a sacrifice. He wasn't even a victim, although that may be hard for us to understand. For the communities to whom this letter was written, the crucial meaning of the cross is Jesus' two-step decision, articulated in 2:23. His first decision is not to retaliate, not to revile in return for reviling. But his second decision is even more important because it grounds his first decision. His second decision is to entrust himself to the just Judge. This is not suffering for the sake of suffering. This is not condoning suffering. This is not giving up to suffering. This is not God making Jesus suffer. Rather, the life and ministry of Jesus, what he has been moving toward since at least the temptations, culminates in this testimony that reconciliation—between God and people as well as among people—is not a

²There are a couple of verses that do not seem to fit into this pattern well, namely 2:25 and 3:7. I deal with these verses, as well as with the pattern as a whole, more extensively in "Nonretaliation and the Haustafeln in 1 Peter," in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 258–286.

matter of containing evil but of transforming evil. It is a freely chosen, decisive action. It is a simple but powerful decision to break the cycle of violence. At the heart of the cross is a relinquishment of revenge. At the heart of the cross is a handing over of revenge to the just Judge.

This community is trying to live out, the best way they know how, their understanding of the cross in the light of the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say...do not retaliate, love your enemies.” The grounding for this belief is theological—it is rooted in Jesus’ radical trust in a radically free God, who hears the cry of the oppressed, the cry of the victim of violence, and who judges justly. Jesus, in his final hours, entrusts his body, his mission, and his destiny to this just Judge.

The slaves and wives, the members with the least social stature in the community, are elevated as the primary examples of this radical trust that Jesus modeled for the entire community. We might criticize, rightly, the letter’s placing the most difficult burden of this example on the “weakest” members of the community. Certainly the history of the way these passages have been interpreted against the freedom of both enslaved persons and abused wives should alert us to the dangers of designating groups within a community for particular functions and roles. But, as thankful as I am for our conscience against slavery and spouse abuse, to give this text a faithful reading we should not ignore the evidence that these slaves and wives were given the highest moral authority (after Jesus) in the internal life of the believing communities.

Radical trust is at the very heart of this letter—the radical trust modeled by Christ, by the slaves and wives, by the entire community dedicated to pursuing peace rather than returning evil for evil. This idea, that believers do not need to seek revenge because their God hears their cry and will judge justly those who wrong them, is at the very center of the identity of these believers. It is that radical trust that permeates the letter from the beginning to the end. It may be hard for us, but if we do not understand that revolutionary concept of letting God judge our enemies and make our justice for us, we will not really understand this letter. With this overview of the letter in mind, let us look at the Easter lections.

THE EASTER TEXTS

Second Sunday of Easter (1 Pet 1:3–9)

This passage sets the framework for what is to come. Although the letter is addressed to “exiles” (1:1) and although there is plenty of evidence coming up that life is not all that serendipitous for the addressees, the tone established here is one of exuberance and joy. It reminds me of the unexpected lightheartedness that I encountered among the Palestinian Christians in Gaza and the West Bank when I attended a Palestinian liberation theology consultation. Life as I observed it there was harder, dirtier, more dangerous, and more hopeless than anywhere I had ever been. So why the gentle teasing? Why the laughter? Why were these families sharing their

enjoyment of one another with these strange North Americans in the most generous hospitality imaginable?

As the letter of 1 Peter goes on to say, the suffering believers in first-century Asia Minor had little tangible hope in the comforts of home and security that we think we need to be happy. But they had a living hope and a genuine faith. Radical trust in the God who judges justly frees those who renounce violence to live in joy and to work for justice. It is what Zacchaeus learned when Jesus came to his house, and it is what these believers in 1 Peter also know.

Third Sunday of Easter (1 Pet 1:17–23)

In this Easter text, we meet the concept of God as judge that becomes so important to the entire letter. In verse 17, the two faces of God are juxtaposed. The God that we invoke as “father” is also the one who judges each impartially. In our own context, the metaphors of God as father and judge have both become problematic and, of the two, the image of judge is perhaps the more difficult. Sometimes we beat each other over the head with God as judge—judgment applies to those with whom we do not agree. More often we downplay notions of God’s judgments. Many of us, heirs of overwrought guilt complexes and fed up with fearsome notions of the wrath of God, want to ignore that aspect of the biblical God entirely in order to emphasize and concentrate upon the love of God. However, both facets are present in the canon and often, as here, juxtaposed.

How do we keep the images of God as lover and judge in tandem? I learned the most about this tension from a good friend in graduate school—an African American woman who knew the ugly face of racism firsthand. She taught me to imagine my enemies accounting for their actions before the face of God. Several shifts in one’s perception take place in this exercise. First, there is the satisfaction of imagining that the wrongs one has suffered will be addressed in unarguable ways. But there are two companion perceptions that are more important. One begins to see the enemy through the eyes of God—to recognize that God loves this enemy unconditionally. Also, one can hardly imagine others standing before the face of God accounting for their actions without recognizing the essential democracy of both God’s judgment and God’s love. If others are subject to the God who loves and judges them, so am I.

Truly, there is an ultimate accountability—every person and every nation comes before God for judgment, but also for love. In that accounting, none of the accouterments of life—status, wealth, talent, beauty, wisdom, strength, influence, power—have any meaning. The standard is love of God and love of humanity. Although there is no avoiding the judgment, the Judge is the one who also loves us as a “father,” to use the metaphor of 1 Peter. This God who judges us is the one who knows us better than we know ourselves, loves us unconditionally, and frees us to live in the joy with which the letter began. This recognition of the truth, this obedience of the mind, brings forth new love (1:22) and new life (1:23).

Fourth Sunday of Easter (1 Pet 2:19–25)

As noted above, this passage is what I consider the heart of the letter. In addition to the extensive chiasm noted in the overall literary structure of this passage, this christological poem is also arranged chiastically. In the following layout, notice the remarkable symmetry of the lines. In Greek, these symmetries are more apparent. I have tried here to preserve as many of the resonances in language, grammar, and concept as possible. The artist leads us gracefully into the very center of the hymn—with the middle “who” clause. There the structure is a line of twelve syllables followed by a line of six and then, again, a line of twelve. The emphasis, as I have been suggesting, of both the hymn and the letter is the Christ who did not return violence for violence but entrusted himself to the just Judge.

For to this you have been called,
because Christ suffered also for you,
leaving you an example,

So that you should follow in his steps—

WHO did not sin,

and there was no deceit found (in his mouth στόματος).

WHO, being abused, did not reply with a curse, (12)

Suffering did not threaten, (6)

But entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. (12)

WHO himself bore our sins (in his body σώματος on the tree),

So that free from sins, we might live for justice.

For by his wounds you have been healed.

Fifth Sunday of Easter (1 Pet 2:2–10)

In the letter, this text comes before the previous one, but in the lectionary it follows it. Why, I am not sure—but I find the question interesting. In this position, this text assures us that, as difficult as we may find the example of the nonretaliatory Christ, nevertheless, yes, this figure is the cornerstone of our faith. For me, the lectionary ordering of the texts takes on an ironic cast in our contemporary setting. Surely, the nonretaliatory Christ, the Jesus who relinquished revenge and entrusted himself to the just Judge, has not had much honor in our own time—especially of late. The cornerstone rejected by the builders, the stone over which the builders fall instead of using it properly—there are very likely as many reasons for the twenty-first-century church to read this text soberly and reflectively as there were for the first-century believers. This text may have even more rhetorical power read after the christological hymn than before it.

Wherever read, this text with its upside-down values and unexpected definitions of what the surrounding cultures prize and what God prizes should make us pause and take a look at our own values and commitments.

Sixth Sunday of Easter (1 Pet 3:13–22)

Again, it is so important to understand this letter as a whole. This text par-

ticularly is notoriously difficult to understand apart from its context—and some would contend that it defies understanding even if we take the letter as a whole into consideration!

It begins with a gentle reassurance, following the instruction to the whole community to return good for evil in accordance with the example of the slaves and the wives who are, in turn, models of the nonretaliatory Christ. Zeal for what is right carries its own invincibility. Even if one suffers for justice, a distinct possibility in this letter, there is an untouchable center. The believers are blessed. They participate in a rock-solid condition of the heart and mind that simply cannot be destroyed—even by death. The passage next disabuses us of any notion that nonretaliatory behavior is a passive response to evil. Christians are to be ready to make a verbal defense of their hope—and they should also not discount the power and effectiveness of this witness to shame and to disempower their enemies. At any rate, whether or not such actions are successful in tangible ways, they may rest in the approval of God.

This passage closes with the complex imagery of Jesus preaching to the imprisoned spirits, Noah and his ark, baptism, resurrection, and exaltation. These images may never be entirely transparent to modern readers. Still, they are analogies from which believers can draw comfort. The nonretaliatory Christ, the one who trusted himself to the one who judges justly instead of returning evil for evil, was vindicated by God in the resurrection. That same Christ also evangelized and won over the imprisoned spirits. Even though the effects of following this example may not be apparent, there is an indestructible theological power in this obedience. The nonretaliatory believers are bound together in baptism as safely and securely as the citizens of the ark adrift in the sea of chaos.

Seventh Sunday of Easter (1 Pet 4:12–19)

The text for the last Sunday of the Easter Season is the climax of the part of the letter that is concerned with the relationship between the believers and the world around them. (The Lutheran lectionary uses 1 Pet 4:12–14; 5:6–11 for this Sunday.) After this passage, the author turns to internal considerations—the governance of the church—how leaders should lead and how the believers should gather themselves together like sheep in a sheepfold, trusting God to guard against the prowling lions around them.

In this passage the essential democracy of the theme of judgment is sounded once more. The believers are reminded that God's judgment is not reserved for the enemies of God. Judgment actually begins with them, as believers. In light of that judgment, the judgment of the loving Father, the believers are urged to entrust their souls to the faithful Creator. In this simple statement there are echoes of earlier themes. The believers give over their souls to God the faithful creator the way Jesus gave over himself on the cross to the one who judges justly. In both cases, there is a relinquishment, a radical trust.

There is a wordplay in 4:19, more clear in the Greek than in most of our

translations. The faithful Creator in 4:19 resonates with “every human creation” (often translated institution in our versions) in 2:13, to which the believers are supposed to be subject. Wordplays are notoriously difficult to translate gracefully—but we might well wonder whether the author of 1 Peter is indulging in some irony. The very human creations to which the addressees are encouraged to be subject (in 2:13) are themselves subject. The creations are subject to the Creator to whom the Christians entrust themselves. Human institutions—whether political or social—are not ultimate authorities by any means. Both people and institutions are ultimately subject to the faithful Creator.

There is no doubt that 1 Peter is a difficult book for contemporary faith. There was a time when I refused to preach or to teach this letter because it has been so misused against abused women in the church. I did not want to contribute to that interpretive travesty. I still feel strongly that this letter should never be used to justify systemic oppression. I think the letter and its history of interpretation should instead caution us against assuming that any particular group has a special obligation to be submissive to authorities.

Yet I have also come to see the power of this letter for communities that, in solidarity with one another and with the oppressed of the world, choose to renounce violence and to give the just Judge, who loves the world as a parent loves a child, their radical trust. There are many such communities and their leaders who have sought and pursued peace, Martin Luther King Jr. not the least among them. His legacy, and 1 Peter’s, bear witness to all the earth that nonviolence can and does transform evil into good. ⊕

MARY H. SCHERTZ is professor of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. She is an editor of Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology.