

# ○ READING THE READERS IDEOLOGICALLY

## PROLEGOMENA TO A STUDY OF 1 PETER

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Biblical scholars write with varying degrees of self-disclosure, and the certainty or universality of the interpretations they produce seems to be inversely proportional to the amount of information they share regarding their own social location and its impact on their interpretations. In this paper I will analyse the interpretations of three different commentators of 1 Peter (John Elliott; Charles Talbert; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza) paying close attention to how their ideologies impact their re-presentations of the Roman Empire in particular, and their assessment of the influence the Imperial presence had on the content of the letter.

All biblical scholars need and build upon the work of those who have gone before, creating the annals of the hallowed realm of scholarship. Our shelves are filled with volumes upon volumes of this scholarship, much of whose authoritativeness projects objectivity. Each new generation of scholars is instructed to draw upon the wealth of knowledge contained in this hallowed realm, and in doing so are to dutifully master and perpetuate the perspectives it contains. Due to the nature of the biblical texts and the role they play in the formation of faith and faith communities, many scholars are driven by a pressing need to have definitive or universal conclusions and interpretations of them. While the underlying goal of finding ‘the’ interpretation of texts and their contexts is understandable at some level, this need for certainty ultimately overshadows the subjective and ideologically informed reality of interpretation. The result is that many biblical scholars produce interpretations of scriptures without referencing or accounting for their own location in life. Thus their own perspectives and ideology, which do influence how they understand texts, are assumed to be irrelevant to the interpretive task. Yet, no matter how hard a scholar tries, she cannot step outside her own skin or detach herself from her life experiences and deeply held convictions.<sup>1</sup>

Although the scholars I have chosen to analyse here are fairly prominent voices within contemporary biblical scholarship, 1 Peter is not necessarily the primary focus for research for all three. This paper is a part of my ongoing interest in and dissertation topic of 1 Peter and the application of various theoretical-critical approaches to it. Since my goal here is to illustrate the relationship between ideology and representation or interpretation, I have chosen scholars who represent, in my estimation, a range of interpretive perspectives. I hesitate to label any of these scholars or their work, and in particular to use the highly problematic linear and divisive designations such as ‘right’, ‘middle’, and ‘left’. But if one will grant such an imaginary spectrum of perspectives, I understand these scholars to occupy these three locations. 1 Peter then is the common ground that allows for an assessment of these scholars’ ideology, which highlights how subjective interpretations truly are.

How is it that one goes about assessing the ideology that underlies someone else’s interpretation of a text? In fact, what exactly *is* ideology? As noted by Edgar and Sedgwick (2003: 189), ‘it can plausibly be suggested that a theory of ideology is fundamental to any critical social or cultural science. However, the exact meaning of the term is often elusive or confused’. It does

seem appropriate that the word 'ideology' is so difficult to define, since it is related to all aspects of a person's life. I offer at this point my own working understanding of ideology. I think that all people have and embody their own ideological convictions; ideology is not in itself a negative thing; and it is somewhat informed by the amount of education and self-awareness of the individual.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, while I disagree with Terry Eagleton's assessment that feminism should not be considered an ideology,<sup>3</sup> I do agree with Eagleton (1991: 5) that ideology is, at its most basic level, an issue of beliefs and of questions of power. Ah, the 'p' word. You knew it was coming, did you not? In this sense, I do agree with the common understanding that ideology serves to legitimise the power and position of the ruling or dominant class. Eagleton's explanation of six different legitimising strategies is worth quoting at this point.

A dominant power may legitimate itself by *promoting* beliefs and values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such 'mystification', as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. In any actual ideological formation, all six of these strategies are likely to interact in complex ways (Eagleton 1991: 5–6).<sup>4</sup>

He then notes the problem with the 'dominant' piece of this definition, which is that not all sets of belief have to do with the beliefs of the dominant class – a point well taken. I do think that some people embrace a set of beliefs that are not in their own best interest. These people can accept and perpetuate a harmful ideology, which justifies or rationalises the status quo, out of a need to survive or a lack of will/resources to resist it. There are, of course, others whose ideology and place in life empowers them *to* resist or fight against those in power. Thus, at the end of the day all people have an ideology; but it is that of those in power that functions as normative for a given society.

In light of my understanding of ideology I now offer a re-interpretation of Marx's famous observation, 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas' (Marx and Engels 1970: 64), as an explanation for how ideologies function within biblical studies: 'the interpretations of traditional biblical scholars are normative for all scholars in biblical studies'. Even as I make this claim I am aware of the many problems with such a 'cut and dry' assessment of a system or locus of power relations. Certainly there are scholars who do not give assent to this kind of normativity, rather their every effort is in countering such a ridiculous claim that tradition must be maintained and that only scholarship that resonates harmoniously with traditional interpretation is deemed 'worthy' or 'correct' in some objective manner. But at the same time, there is no getting around the fact that their efforts take the form of a struggle. Thus, let us follow through a bit with the comparison that I began above.

In this analogy the traditional biblical scholar is compared with the ruling class. The 'ruling scholars' are those who contribute to, and thus perpetuate, traditional biblical scholarship, which is then considered 'central' to the field. Any scholar whose contribution is discordant with tradi-

tional insights, due to either direct challenges of the ‘ruling scholars’ or indirect challenges made by bringing in elements that do not ‘properly’ belong, is given the condescending pat on the head, if that much, and her work is deemed purely experimental or peripheral, if not dangerous and seriously misguided. But all of these reactions are possible because there is some existing normativity that some rebel against, to varying degrees, and others revel in upholding. The dynamics that play into these possibilities are too numerous to name, much less fully analyse in this essay. But I sense the need of acknowledging some of them for the sake of noting how complex the situation is and how difficult it is to grasp in a meaningful way.

Perhaps one wants to speak in terms of power relations, which exist in relations between non-equals but require both parties’ consent; or in terms of the *habitus* of an academic field, which is inculcated in graduate school, if not firmly rooted in one’s upbringing, and serves to produce practices, attitudes and dispositions that give assent to certain standards without question; or perhaps one would like to talk in terms of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, in particular because his ‘culture and consent’ brings to light the fact that there is opposition within the field that is allowable within the contested zone, a safe space for contrary opinions that is ultimately under the governance of the ruling scholars; or perhaps you prefer to think in terms of one of my favourites, Althusser, adapting his thoughts on the ISA into an Ideological Academic Institution, which will see to the reproduction of the resources that perpetuate the field, thus bringing to the fore the internal conflict that comes from privileging continuity with tradition over discourse that challenges the assumptions upon which tradition rests. Whatever approach to the discussion that one finds most fruitful, an honest assessment must at least acknowledge that, as with any system or social structure, the relations of power and ideological ‘normativity’ are quite complicated within the fields of biblical studies.

Thus we have come to a question of ‘who, exactly, is among the “ruling scholars”?’ Just because someone affirms tradition does not mean that she is in a position of power over others. Likewise, not everyone in positions of relative power is towing the traditional line, so to speak. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is a great example of the latter. A former president of the Society of Biblical Literature, she is highly respected among many feminist biblical scholars for the work she has done and continues to do, but there are plenty of ‘ruling scholars’ whose respect for her is only as a colleague, a human being, not for what she has produced. Thus, how did she become an SBL president? According to Althusser, and this is a theory I find remarkably appropriate, the granting of the position is an indication of her influence, for some, and her prominence within the field; but in the end it serves more to keep her in check than to put a stamp of approval on her work. Perhaps my point is made, or made stronger, by the reference to the concise selected bibliography I was handed several years ago of +/- 200 scholars whose work was deemed essential for incoming graduate students in New Testament (in a school different from the one I now attend). Of these scholars, only three were women, and two of them were co-editors with a male scholar. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s (then) twenty year-old book *In Memory of Her* was the only representation of a woman’s voice alone. While this book is certainly important as a touchstone for feminist biblical studies, it is ludicrous to suggest that it is capable of communicating all that feminist critical work contributes to the area of ‘New Testament’ studies today. Ah, but perhaps if we look at the situation from the ‘half-full’ perspective, we will see that IAI (Ideological Academic Institution) at work. Her work *is* important enough (but her work alone?) to need to list it, even if for the sake of refuting its merit, which indeed is what happened.

This line of thinking leads to another aspect of someone's ideology that must be addressed, which is: when speaking of an ideology as a belief system, what is it that we think it is seeking to establish or to maintain by its influence and application? As Raj Mohan notes,

at the functional level, ideologies offer coherent sets of values around which individuals and groups may organize. It is important to emphasize that the functions of myths and ideologies differ considerably. The former tend to organize and integrate individuals and groups while ideologies often have the opposite effect, segregating and consolidating groups in opposition to each other (Kinloch and Mohan 2000: 8).

The overriding 'myth' that there is such an integrated organisation as a society of biblical scholars covers over or hides the deeper reality that multiple ideologies, with varying degrees of influence, are at work. The very processes of determining the distribution of funds, conference space and time, not to get into publication and hiring concerns, are frighteningly governed by some abstract centralised IAI. What is it that the dominant ruling ideology, by its application, maintains? Aside from order, continuity, and tradition it is difficult to say. Perhaps I shall leave the question for the reader to contemplate for now.

Presumably only the person making an interpretation can explain her underlying motivations, but at some level her ideology is evident in her interpretation of a text. Thus, I will be doing an ideological assessment of three other readers by applying what is determined about the placement and life context of each reader to the content of their commentary, and more specifically to how their commentary re-presents the Roman Empire and the church communities. In determining the placement of each commentator, I will employ an approach set out by Fernando Segovia (1998: 237–277). Because he is conscious of how a person's life context is inextricably related to that person's interpretation of all aspects of life, he has carefully created a schema for analysing various aspects of a person's life context, which is intended to be a guide for this assessment rather than authoritative in itself. As noted above regarding the problematic 'right', 'left' and 'centre' designations, I acknowledge a similar issue with dualistic designations that are ultimately reinscribed by the axes applied in this assessment. But I employ them nonetheless as a means of addressing reading positions of interpreters, realities that actually defy such clear designations.

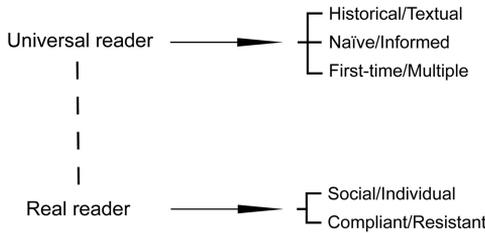
The first step asks where a scholar lands on a universal/real reader axis in accordance with the degree to which the commentator locates her or his interpretation. A 'universal reader' offers no contextualisation historically or culturally and thus interprets and communicates objective universal reality. A 'real reader' locates his or her interpretation historically and culturally, making clear that 'reality' as such is a subjective construction.

For each end of the universal/real reader axis, Segovia suggests secondary constructs. The universal reader can be assessed by the historical/textual, naïve/informed, and first-time/multiple reader axes. The historical/textual axis refers to whether a reader places herself in the time or culture in which the text was produced or reads the text as if she was the intended audience the implied author had in mind. The naïve/informed axis refers to the innocence or sophistication of a reader, which comes from experience reading the text and any appropriate background knowledge. The first-time/multiple reader axis handles the way in which a reader approaches a text: does she read with fresh eyes, seeing the text for the first time and following the development

of the text carefully, reacting and speculating as only a first read allows; or does she reflect a great deal of mastery over the text, aware of the themes, patterns and cycles within the text and reflecting an awareness of the text as a whole.

The secondary axes for a real reader are the social/individual and compliant/resistant reader constructs. The social/individual construct brings to light whether the interpretation reflects an individual – and perhaps her psychological – location, or is intended to inform issues associated with a particular social group’s concerns. The compliant/resistant reader construct simply notes the degree to which an interpreter either accepts – and thus submits to – or rejects the teachings of the text at hand (Segovia 1998: 240–242).

A basic schema of Segovia’s axes would ideally use a three-dimensional grid; but I will offer a simpler, two-dimensional version here for reference.



I am aware of, and certainly agree with, Hans Georg Gadamer’s note of caution that ‘the critique of ideology is itself an ideology, for there is no fundamental standpoint outside of ideology from which critical reason can proceed independently of hermeneutics’ (Gadamer 1976: 18–43). As much as I would like otherwise, I am not able to remove myself from my assessments of others’ works and their underlying ideologies. Thus, it is important that I clarify my own social location: I am a woman of a Protestant confessional upbringing, with a ten year detour into non-denominational and Bible church settings, and a Masters degree from a prominent Presbyterian seminary. I have asked questions over the years in response to the role the church and its scriptures has had in granting me authority and leadership positions within various church and para-church settings as well as in denying me certain positions and in silencing me and my voice. Since the questions continue to go unanswered I continue to raise them. This questioning has led to what I intend to be a constructive critique of the role and interpretations of the scriptures of the church, for the sake of changes that will lead to fullness of life for all people. In terms of Segovia’s axes, it is my intention to read as a ‘real reader’, and I prefer the social implications over the individual, because it is in and through community that real social change can take place. Due to my particular upbringing and connection to the Christian tradition, I understand the desire to be compliant to the various messages created from these texts. For this reason it is important to me that I draw attention to and resist texts and/or interpretations of them that are harmful for some people and in particular those that sustain and/or perpetuate oppressive and exploitative systems, structures, and relations. I cannot comprehend how a person’s location in life does not impact every aspect of her life, including her interpretations of sacred scripture and the needs she might expect those scriptures to address. In this paper I will be using what I can grasp of the location of each scholar as a lens through which to understand their interpretations of 1 Peter and the implications for the church of these interpretations. Given my own motivations as I approach these texts, I

make no excuses or apologies for favouring what I deem to be life-giving and liberatory interpretations.

With all these things said, I will move into an analysis of these three scholars, beginning with Charles Talbert, then John Elliott and finishing with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

## CHARLES TALBERT

Distinguished Professor of Religion at Baylor University, Dr. Charles Talbert is a white southerner – by birth, education and academic appointments – and a ‘faithful’ Baptist, facts which cannot be overlooked when assessing his interpretational perspective. According to Segovia’s categories, noted above, Talbert’s interpretations of scripture, based upon close attention to textual issues, consistently belie a universal reader location. His scholarship, marked by his meticulous research and sharp mind, offers what he considers to be the correct understanding of the purpose of the texts in question and thus in what way all members of the church can be edified or formed by them.<sup>5</sup> His presence in a seminar or conference session is extraordinary for the respect he receives and the fear he evokes. He speaks and is responded to as a member of the ruling class of scholars, something he has earned by his thorough and exacting scholarship.

In his book, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels*, Talbert (1985) indicates nicely his approach to biblical studies and the focus of his scholarship. According to Talbert, the form (or genre) of a particular writing conveys part of the intent or purpose that the writer had in mind. It is essential that scholars have a common understanding about the form of a particular writing, in order that there may be a consensus regarding its purpose. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Talbert seeks to put an end to the perennial debate regarding ‘the’ purpose of 1 Peter, and does so by giving a proper analysis of the plan of the letter. He begins:

In view of the absence of any widespread agreement today on the plan of 1 Peter, the purpose of this essay is to offer yet another suggestion with the hope that it will be inclusive enough to reflect the various dimensions of this first-century text. In order to make such a proposal two issues must first be considered: (1) What are the criteria by which one arrives at a stated plan of the epistle? (2) What is the understanding of the letter presupposed in the plan? These questions will be addressed in this order, followed by the outline of 1 Peter that is the ultimate goal of this article (Talbert 1986: 141).

I find his need to have some definitive means of understanding this letter to be quite striking; and the need to put an end to disagreeing on the letter’s overarching purpose equally so. His analysis of the flow of thought, transitions, and logical conclusions leads him to rename the two main parts of the letter as: the *ground of Christian existence* (1:3-2:10) and the *norms of Christian behaviour* (2:11-5:11) (Talbert 1986: 141–151). These two areas are the focus of the content and meaning of this letter, thus the ‘plan’ intended by the author.

Talbert’s assessment of the persecutions behind the situation is brief, as the article is brief, and at most leaves the Roman government an inanimate presence off in the distance. According to Talbert, any persecutions these Christians were experiencing were because of a set of beliefs that resisted any atheism, in order to prevent the wrath that the neglected gods might inflict upon them. If the Christians were disruptive, it was a disruption that shook the very fabric of society,

and thus was not tolerated by any people around them. Thus, Talbert (1986: 145) asserts that the unofficial persecution of these Christians was due to their own ‘breaking with ancestral traditions in matters of religion’ by their focus upon Jesus the Christ in their worship.

While it may be that the larger community, and not the Roman government, was responsible for the persecutions at hand there is no getting around the fact that religion and government were closely related at the time. As Talbert notes, ‘It was believed not to be right to depart from the ways of the fathers in religion... This was so because it was assumed that a change of gods would lead to disruption in the fabric of society’ (Talbert 1986: 145). Any interpretation of 1 Peter, then, that avoids acknowledging the connection between religious practices and political realities is leaving out an important social dynamic that significantly informs the content of this letter.

Talbert asserts that the underlying issue at hand was *purely* religious and had no political dimensions or implications. Given my prior statement that there is a necessary relationship between these two realms, Talbert’s assertion may seem somewhat naïve; but I do not think that is the case. Living today in a (sub)culture that so sharply divides the spiritual and physical realms and values the spiritual above all else, it makes sense that Talbert would read back into the context of 1 Peter with an eye for the religious dimension alone, if not simply regarding the spiritual as the dimension that is most relevant. As we can see in other writings of his, Talbert has no problem asserting that ancient writings were concerned about one aspect of life at a time or that personal and political realms genuinely could be addressed separately.<sup>6</sup>

In maintaining such a strict separation between the personal and the political, Talbert is then free to read a letter such as 1 Peter as addressing purely the spiritual needs of its recipients. From this perspective, a person’s religious beliefs affect all other areas of her or his life, but the same cannot be said for one’s political views. When these two dimensions meet, the political realm is subsumed under the religious.

In his conclusion, Talbert is careful to note the very distinctive character (or nature) of a Christian as ‘one who has had a religious experience so radical (conversion) that it involves a break with one’s past and that the Christian community is composed exclusively of those who have had such an experience’ (Talbert 1986: 147–148). It is important for Talbert that the exclusiveness of the Christian faith not only be pointed out but also maintained as one of the distinctive marks of its existence. As we see in the opening lines of his article, if an assessment of the letter of 1 Peter does not somehow fit within or under his view ‘offered’ to any who will listen, then it is not an accurate assessment of the letter. Talbert has explicated the correct way to view this text.

We can see that Talbert’s interpretations of scripture support his perspective that Christianity is foremost about the individual’s spiritual life and faith, lived out in community. Attending to the form or structure of 1 Peter, Talbert gives priority to the words on the page. This move allows Talbert to distance himself from the political and social dimensions of the text, the situation, author and audience of 1 Peter. Thus for Talbert, a document’s form and structure take precedence over the content; something abstract (the idea of an immutable form) renders as much or more meaning than the tangible (physical and material realities that gave rise to the letter). Whether or not Peter had a strictly dualistic view of reality, Talbert has imported a hierarchical dualism, form over content, which reflects his own view of reality, the spiritual realm taking priority over

the physical. This distancing from context in turn allows for a ‘correct’ universalised meaning and application of the text. The matter of the plan, and thus intended purpose and meaning, of 1 Peter *can* be addressed briefly because it is determined by the form and rhetorical moves of the letter: all we need to know is in the letter itself.

## JOHN H. ELLIOTT

John Elliott is a Lutheran pastor who has claimed his own life-long interest in 1 Peter was sparked by learning of its role in Luther’s teaching on the priesthood of all believers. One could say that, since he has been working with this text for over thirty years, and the fruit of this labour has produced several monographs of a very similar vein, Elliott is certainly concerned with maintaining continuity with the teachings of this letter that the church has passed down throughout the ages. While his research is as thorough as one would expect from an *Anchor Bible* commentary, he does, in the end, have a very compliant response to the text at hand. Elliott is located somewhere near the ‘universal reader’ end of the universal/individual-reader axis, again, what one would expect for this series. He devotes 150 pages to the various historical and textual issues related to 1 Peter, and gives detailed analyses of the Greek text throughout the commentary. All of these aspects of his commentary are fleshed out for the sake of getting as close as possible to the original setting, meaning, and means by which it would have been heard.

Elliott is primarily concerned with demonstrating that the early churches maintained continuity with their Jewish ancestors, and depicts the Petrine communities as outcasts of their own society prior to their involvement with the Jesus movement. What marks these people most is their displacement in the world, a displacement that is alleviated by their membership in the house of God. The suffering that the church endures is because of their religious beliefs, and this suffering is exacerbated by the fact that they are a splinter group of Judaism. The primary focus of their efforts is in maintaining a distinctive identity from those around them. The people of the church communities are not only of various cultural backgrounds, but are also of something of a mendicant lifestyle. People without roots are now grounded in Christ and in the house of God. These are ‘facts’ that Elliott pulls from the text; and it is with the text that he stays in developing his representation of early Christianity.

Elliott very carefully addresses the eastward military expansion of Rome, the third major power in a series of dominant occupying regimes in Asia Minor. From 133 to 17 B.C.E. all of the Anatolian provinces were annexed by Rome and served as a buffer against other forces to the east, as well as providing revenue for Rome. Yet in spite of Rome’s significant military actions and annexing of much of the region of Asia Minor, Elliott does not draw out the implications of such a presence and authority for the church community. In fact, he implies quite the opposite, by briefly addressing the situation of 1 Peter, noting that the animosity reflected within the letter was typical of what ‘displaced and foreign outsiders’ would have experienced from ‘natives’, ‘with Rome playing no role at all’ (Elliott 2000: 90).

While he has noted the Roman annexing of these territories and the settlement of retired veterans, he still maintains that, ‘only once in the letter is reference made to Rome’s authority, where respect and subordination are enjoined in regard to the emperor and his governors’ (Elliott 2000: 132). From Elliott’s perspective, the Roman Empire is excused from any role in the upheaval that was causing the sufferings of these communities. On the other hand, this letter provides the

‘most extensive theological commentary on Christian suffering found in the New Testament’ (p. 109). One of the reasons for pointing to Elliott’s (lack of) treatment of the Roman presence is that Elliott (1993) is the author of *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?*, in which he notes the importance of the social and cultural influences upon not only the content of a given text, but more specifically upon the author of that text. He further notes the fundamentally ideological nature of any writing, simply because an author cannot help but import their views and concerns into their work.

Elliott (1993: 85) does include political and cultural influences in his assertion that the author of 1 Peter was countering the imperialistic propaganda of the Emperor as ‘father of the fatherland’ in his re-imagining of God as Father of the Christian household. Elliott’s own assessment of the purposes of the letter does build upon, that is necessitate, the presence of the Roman Empire and its influence upon the churches. If declaring a new Father, in reaction to the Emperor, was not vitally important for the communities, why mention it at all? In short, Elliott needs the immanent influence of the Roman Empire to substantiate his claims regarding the letter’s purpose, and a complete removal of this influence regarding the particular life situation of the communities he addresses. How can a body be so present in a region as to require a divine counter to its role without having some impact on the daily lives of the citizens in that region? I am baffled by this assessment. By drawing upon solely the title of the Emperor and not the attending political and sociological implications of this title, Elliott assigns to the Emperor a fairly innocuous role in the context of 1 Peter.

Elliott’s view of the Jew/Gentile composition of these groups is that of a majority of commentators: both were present with a preponderance of Gentiles (Elliott 2000: 95–96). This community, as a new Jewish sect, was a conversionist movement that was ‘required to interact with rather than withdraw from society and to offer to all with whom it came into contact a vision and form of life and hope superior to what its converts had previously known’ (p. 97). It is interesting that he makes the claim that the majority were formerly Gentiles based on the area being so removed from Jerusalem. If indeed the primary identifying marker of these people was the concept of being non-Jewish *paroikoi*, as he claims, then why such a preponderance of Old Testament references?<sup>7</sup>

In his book *Home for the Homeless*, Elliott offers a distinctive re-presentation of the Petrine communities. This study is primarily devoted to the implications of the use of the term *paroikoi* in addressing the recipients. *Paroikos* and its related words are to be taken literally in terms of the identity, and thus the social status, of these communities of Christians.

In 1 Peter the terms *paroikia*, *paroikoi*, and *parepidēmoi* identify the addressees as a combination of displaced persons who are currently aliens permanently residing in (*paroikia*, *paroikoi*) or strangers temporarily visiting or passing through (*parepidēmoi*) the four provinces of Asia Minor... These terms, as their conventional and widespread usage in contemporary secular and religious texts demonstrated, indicate not only the geographical dislocation of the recipients but also the political, legal, social and religious limitations and estrangement which such displacement entails (Elliott 1981: 48).

These factors were the precipitating issues for the writing of the letter and thus were the basis for the strategy employed by the author (Elliott 1981: 59).

Later Elliott (1981: 62, 65) also analyses the effect the geography of Asia Minor had on the type and size of communities, concluding that the people were mostly rural residents, comprising 'domestic pockets' spread across the region. He also notes that the different types of life-styles that would be present due to the diversity within these regions would be in the mind of someone wishing to give them some cohesion, and that the role of Rome would be negligible in these areas.

In sum, Elliott is careful to note the Roman government's dominance over this region, he firmly rejects that this presence affects what the Christians in those areas were experiencing, and yet asserts that Peter was specifically countering the imagery associated with the Roman Empire. Clearly Elliott is trying to 'have his cake and eat it too'.

It is most interesting to me that Elliott claims to be 'challenging the domain assumptions' in his work. While he may raise questions of some sociological assumptions, which need to be challenged, he does not make explicit which ones he sees himself to be countering. New information within any field should serve to change the overall perspective of a given topic. Elliott successfully adopts and employs a new critical approach to scripture; but instead of challenging domain assumptions, he only solidifies the previously existing foundations of traditional interpretation of this letter. This approach and its findings are well in line with his interest to build upon the traditions of the church and resonate with traditional scholarship in this area.

## **ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA**

I will close this section of the paper with an analysis of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's critical feminist postcolonial commentary. But before I do, I should acknowledge what the reader may have already figured out by now: due to my own location and what drives me in biblical studies in general, Schüssler Fiorenza's work has been formative for me, and I find that it continually offers a space for liberatory interpretations of scripture. My analysis of her commentary will be affected by this bias, yet her method and interpretation stand alone. Hopefully the reader will be able to distinguish between my predisposition to value her method and the method itself.

By her title, the reader is aware that Schüssler Fiorenza is approaching the text critically, that she is going to address power dynamics as they might play out in terms of male/female relations and re-presentations, and that she will be looking for ways that the Roman empire is an active presence behind and in the text itself. From the outset of her commentary, Schüssler Fiorenza strives to acknowledge her own presence in the midst of her interpretations, or to name her own perspective as much as possible. Her own location is one of a biblical scholar, reared in the Catholic Church. She has seen and experienced harmful applications of scripture and knows that for many people groups who have no or little voice in male-stream society, the very text that gives them comfort is also the source that serves to keep the systems of oppression in place. Instead of avoiding these texts, she seeks to bring to light what has been said, and find ways of interpreting them in life-giving and liberating ways. Her contributions to biblical scholarship make her a highly respected scholar for many people; the nature of her voice and work, however, relegates her to a position of secondary importance for many who 'toe the traditional line'.

Schüssler Fiorenza's methodological approach is initially similar to that of Talbert's and Elliott's: she attends closely to the text. However, instead of interpreting as a universal reader, she strives to interpret from the real reader end of the spectrum. Her self-proclaimed hermeneutics

of suspicion and liberation leave no doubt that she is a ‘resistant reader’, interested in the social impact of the scriptures.<sup>8</sup>

She also attends to the dynamics present *under* the surface. For Schüssler Fiorenza, the author of the letter is not simply writing from Rome, here renamed Babylon, but is sending out communication from the ‘metropolitan centre of imperial Rome’ (Schüssler Fiorenza forthcoming: 6) to the colonial subjects living in Asia Minor. Her choice to name the recipients as colonial subjects indicates her conviction that these various dimensions of life cannot be separated from but inform one another.

Her re-presentation of the Petrine communities is primarily concerned with acknowledging the presence of wo/men,<sup>9</sup> if it is valid to do so, and the power dynamics at work both horizontally – within a network of relations – and pyramidically, as seen in kyriarchal relations of domination. Regarding the presence of wo/men she concludes – based upon the conventional use of kyriocentric language in generic terms, and the fact that slaves and wives are specifically addressed within the body of the letter – that wo/men were indeed a part of the Petrine communities.

The second issue of kyriarchal power relations/dynamics comes to the fore in her re-presentation of the Petrine communities as she points out the ambiguity connected with the use of *adelphotes* and *oikos* terminology. Simply put, these terms can both be taken to imply strictly familial relations, as we might hear them today; or they may also convey the ‘brotherhood’ of social institutions, which were essential for the stability of the Roman Empire. The author’s choice of words in calling the addressees ‘transients’ and ‘migrants’ (*parepidemoi*) is equally ambiguous. Are these labels intended to give them a ‘political-individual’ identity instead of the more communal-democratic sense associated with *ekklesia* terminology, or are they to be understood as many commentators interpret them today – as communicating that the ‘fatherland’ of the recipients is in heaven? In both cases, there are power relations in the background that she thinks must be considered in the process of her re-presentation of the Petrine communities.

Attending to the social implications of *parepidemoi* and *paroikoi*, based upon Rostovtzeff (1953, 1957), she suggests that their social status might be higher than that of native peoples, which would bring with it additional persecutions. ‘Hellenistic Diaspora Jews would have qualified for such colonial “middle class” status except for their different customs and perceived religious exclusiveness which earned them the label *superstition* on the one hand and their history of militant struggle against Roman imperial occupation [on the other]’ (Schüssler Fiorenza forthcoming: 12).

The final aspect of her commentary that is relevant to this discussion is Schüssler Fiorenza’s handling of the perennial debate over the Jew/Gentile composition of the Petrine communities. Most poignantly, she notes that 1 Peter neither mentions Israel directly nor describes the ‘Christian’ community as the ‘new Israel’. ‘Israel is not yet seen as the “other” of the community but as its constitutive identity’ (Schüssler Fiorenza forthcoming: 16); thus she describes the Petrine community as a ‘Jewish messianic community living in the dispersion and whose self-identity was determined by the large number of converts in their midst’ (p. 17).

Schüssler Fiorenza cannot talk about the Petrine community without acknowledging their socio-political location. Although she does not re-present the Roman Empire directly in her commentary she does hold its presence and socio-political influence in the background of her interpretation of 1 Peter. As the rhetoric of the letter is ‘fitting’ for whatever the situation may

have been, she cannot analyse the rhetoric without recourse to the possible socio-political dynamics within Asia Minor.

There can be no doubt that Schüssler Fiorenza's re-presentation of the Petrine communities reflects her own ideologically informed interpretation of scripture. The same can be said of all commentators. Her interest in giving voice to wo/men's contributions compels her to illuminate their presence within the formative Christian communities. Her interest in transforming kyriarchal relations of dominance fuels a need to address their presence within – and thus affirmation from – the scriptures of the Church.

## CONCLUSION

Inasmuch as our location in life informs our ideology, our ideology – in this case – informs our interpretation of sacred texts. In the task of 'reading the readers' of 1 Peter, I have attempted to state, briefly, the location of each scholar according to a universal/real reader continuum and the attendant other elements set forth by Segovia in this type of assessment. I have also tried to show how the location of each scholar, that is to say their ideological perspectives, informs their respective approaches to scripture, interpretations of it and re-presentations of the Roman government and the Petrine communities. Allow me to ask the question again, 'what is it that a person's ideology establishes or maintains by its influence and application?' In part, a person's ideology directly impacts the extent to which she seeks to maintain or critique the traditions of the church and traditional (normative?) interpretations of scripture.

Since Talbert, a member of the ruling class of biblical scholars, sees Christianity as an exclusive religion, we should not be surprised that his scholarship is marked by conclusive and universal claims of certainty that set people in opposition to one another. He gives us a perfect example of Mohan's claim about myths and ideologies: the former integrate people, the latter set people against one another (Kinloch and Mohan 2000: 8). There seems to be a clear connection between the need to produce an overarching understanding of this text, thus creating the ruling interpretive paradigm for it, and the need to maintain a normative 'voice from the centre' of biblical scholarship that is formed through certain form and text focused methods while eschewing as irrelevant any ideologically minded theories and methods. Since an objective meaning can be found, supposedly, there is no sense muddying the waters with so many subjective critical approaches. Consequently Talbert is not required (or perhaps sees no need) to acknowledge his own biases, motivations, or life context.

Elliott similarly holds fast to the traditions of the church and values a 'right' interpretation of the scriptures. At the same time, his understanding of the boundaries of Christianity is not as rigid as Talbert's is and his interpretations do not exclude others as strictly. Elliott acknowledges that he has a vested interest in 1 Peter, specifically regarding the 'priesthood of all believers', which is an essential element of his understanding of Christianity. Though quite telling, this bare statement is the essence of his self-disclosure. As a member of the ruling class of biblical studies, Elliott is not expected to name his presuppositions, and what he does acknowledge is appreciated. His scholarship is an example of how normativity and traditional interpretations are maintained even while engaging new methods and theories for biblical studies. While his eagerness to include new approaches is itself questionable to some within the 'ruling class', he stands vindicated in his efforts since his conclusions are within the bounds of what is allowed within traditional bib-

lical studies. Elliott then becomes, for me, a fascinating example of what is truly at stake for the dominant ideology, the 'ruling class'. As long as the fruit of his research does nothing to stir the waters of what is acceptable, Elliott and his work are commendable. I do wonder had he allowed his social-scientific lenses to change what he sees in the texts, and thereby affect a significant difference in his interpretations of the texts, would his resultant scholarship then be regarded as secondary in nature, or not rigorous enough, compared with traditional biblical scholarship? But his ideas are safe since they do not upset, but rather support, the dominant ideology.

Schüssler Fiorenza, on the other hand, approaches the interpretive task with as much self-disclosure as possible and an interest to critique 'traditional malestream' interpretations. She offers a critique for the sake of the transformation of a system / structure in order that all people might thrive. While she is highly respected by many of the American Academy of Religion / Society of Biblical Literature constituents for her thorough research and consistently theoretical interpretations (she has even been a president of the SBL), her work and her voice are still considered as coming from the periphery, not the centre, by traditional scholars. Feminist discourse may be more common today than it was twenty-five years ago, due to the number of people engaging with it and valuing what it offers to biblical interpretation, but it remains in the 'other' category according to the ruling class ideals and ideology.

One could say that the more 'central' or normative a scholar's interpretive efforts are the less self-disclosure we can expect from her, implying that, much like the view that the political realm is separated from and thus does not impact the religious, her own social location has no impact on her scholarly work. In the same fashion, the farther toward the 'periphery' a scholar's work is relegated by the ruling class, the more we can expect her to name her own ideological location, due to her awareness of its relevance in interpretations. Indeed, those who claim to be objective, offering universal interpretations, are backed by the presence and power of the dominant ideology. Those who admit to the subjectivity inherent in the interpretive task, thereby threatening the illusion of the dominant ideology, are considered by the ruling class to be doing experimental or non-essential work. Traditional scholarship says that the Talberts of the world are unquestionably good at what they do and their work is consequently labelled 'good scholarship'; and the Schüssler Fiorenzas are engaging in 'interesting' secondary or peripheral work, thus they offer scholarship that does not need to be taken seriously. The gradual acknowledgment of various forms of 'peripheral' voices in its own way serves to support the IAI. As long as the dissenting voices can be allowed but neglected, their presence is contained, confirming their secondary nature and re-inscribing the 'centre'.

All of the exchanges that I have been describing are aspects of the six dynamics of a dominant power's ideology, as set forth by Eagleton, working within the realm of biblical studies. Most specifically, if an interpretation is universal and self-evident then there is no need to explain any of the presuppositions that lead to it. There are other features at work either in the sub-texts or in the underlying rhetoric of the dominant ideology that cause scholars with dissenting views to need to defend their perspective or prove why their voice should be included in the grander dialogue. The 'unspoken or systematic logic' (Eagleton 1991: 5–6) that deems non-traditional interpretations as non-essential does so in part by establishing an atmosphere of competitiveness that leads to segregated groups in opposition to one another. Instead of being organised by a *mythos* that engenders mutuality and integration of efforts, biblical studies are dominated by an ideology that justifies and perpetuates traditional scholarship as normative and central.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A brief note on pronoun usage: while I grew up in a society and culture that assumed male pronouns were sufficient for indicating a general ‘person’, an assumption that offends me today, I do not use ‘her’/‘she’ in this paper as a corrective. In fact the mindset that the dualistic he/she or male/female is an accurate representation of all people is one I think that we would do well to move beyond in biblical studies. Unfortunately, given the constraints of the English language, I cannot satisfactorily include all people in my choice of pronouns. Thus, I gladly take up the encouragement to stay with ‘she’/‘her’ throughout, not only because these are terms with which I identify, but it also makes for smoother reading.
- <sup>2</sup> Please note that I do not think that having an education implies that a person is self-aware, nor that all self-aware people are highly educated. Like many things in life, these factors (education and self-awareness) are impacted by the attitude towards both that are formed by the environment, parental / family guidance, and internal drives of any individual.
- <sup>3</sup> I am perfectly willing to call whatever flavour of feminism a person, male or female, might embody an ideology. In fact, I would say that feminism as a topic for debate is only a concept; feminism as embodied by millions of people is an ideology, though *realised* to different degrees.
- <sup>4</sup> One of the alternatives that Foucault has suggested is to think in terms of ‘discourse’ (which would make Bakhtin an enjoyable guest to this dialogue), but this is an idea that I resist at this point. The very notion of discourse implies a relatively balanced give-and-take relationship, which is something that does not exist when dominating ideologies are at work.
- <sup>5</sup> Here I am intentionally using the concept of ‘formed’ referring to the idea of Christian formation.
- <sup>6</sup> ‘In antiquity, history was concerned with a man’s place in the process of political and social events. Biography was interested in the individual’s character, his involvement in a historical process being important only insofar as it reveals his essence’ (Talbert 1985: 16).
- <sup>7</sup> In Elliott’s 2000 publication *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, he has softened the tone of the claim, though still maintains a majority of Gentiles must have been present.
- <sup>8</sup> ‘Since the first level of communication – the historical level of author-audience – and world of 1 Peter is no longer directly accessible to us, a critical rhetorical analysis always has to begin with the second level, the level of text before it can move to a reconstruction of the first historical level of the situation to which the letter is a ‘fitting’ rhetorical response’ (Schüssler Fiorenza forthcoming: 5).
- <sup>9</sup> The use of the word ‘wo/men’ is intended to include not simply women present within a given context, but all people, male or female, who are marginalised by the men in power. If indeed who a ‘man’ is and what his life experiences can reflect is limited to that of men in dominant positions of society, then all the variations of ‘maleness’ must be identified with something other than ‘men’. The word ‘wo/men’ is a highly inclusive term, with which any persons who do not conform to traditional social norms for ‘men’ may identify.

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Cite this chapter as: Bird, Jennifer. 2006. 'Reading the readers ideologically: Prolegomena to a study of 1 Peter'. *The Bible and Critical Theory* 2 (3): pp. 30.1–30.15. DOI: 10.2104/bc060030.