

BOOK REVIEW

Karen H. Jobes. *Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. xvi + 478 pp. Hdbk. US\$44.99. ISBN 2010051062.

Karen Jobes, Hawthorne Professor of New Testament Greek and Exegesis at Wheaton College, has crafted an excellent textbook from an openly confessional standpoint. As she tells us in a preface on “How to Use This Book,” she realizes that “not everyone who reads this book will be a believing Christian,” but for readers “who come to this as agnostic or skeptical, remember that ‘to learn a belief without belief is to sing a song without the tune’” (p. xv., quoting a poetic statement from novelist Ursula Le Guin as repeated by Joel B. Green, “Living as Exiles: The Church in the Diaspora in 1 Peter,” in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, edited by Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], p. 312). Right from the start, then, Jobes places belief and ecclesiology at the forefront of her study of Hebrews and the General Epistles, including the Johannine Letters. The book is thus “packaged,” and almost ideally suited, for an introduction in confessional, undergraduate contexts (or adult lay education in church contexts, as the duality of the title indicates), but it might also present an intriguing study for readers less evangelically oriented, as it opens a window into contemporary interpretation and application that many commentaries and surveys would be content to leave closed.

Jobes’s introductory chapter begins with socio-historical context, anticipating readers’ questions about the origin of the books under study. Under the heading “The Period of Doctrinal and Ecclesial Unification (AD 60–100),” she previews issues addressed later and more fully, including the implicit conflict

between the reign of Augustus as “son of God and savior” and “a kingdom of God that was not to be contained within geopolitical, ethnic, or national boundaries” (pp. 3–4), the influx of Gentile believers, and the challenges presented by first- and second-century philosophies that they brought to church with them. Jobes gives the remainder of the introduction over to a discussion of pseudonymity, pseudepigraphy, and canonicity, which she treats carefully here and throughout the volume, with respect for a range of viewpoints on authorship. The point she employs as a touchstone is a “lineage of recognition” (pp. 11–12, and implied in subsequent treatments of the canonicity of individual epistles, e.g. pp. 175–77) that has deep exegetical significance. As she explores the General Epistles’ role in the development of the New Testament canon as a whole, it becomes clear that her book is as much a contribution to New Testament theology as it is a survey.

The four chapters of part one are devoted to Hebrews, which Jobes terms “The Book of Better Things.” This refers to the prominence of types and typology in Hebrews, but the first chapter also introduces the kind of structure that readers can expect over the course of the study, from the opening objectives Jobes recommends (such as “To be able to list literary characteristics of the book,” p. 23) to the “Key Verses,” “Challenges Presented,” “Chapter Outline,” “Outline of the Book,” “Chapter Summary,” “Key Terms and Dates,” “Questions for Discussion” and the “Going Further” bibliography she provides (pp. 24–25, 51–55). She addresses the likely composition of the audience originally addressed in Hebrews, the major theories on where they might have lived, the questions of the book’s genre and its date relative to Roman persecution and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, and the identity of the writer—though she (unfairly?) dismisses Harnack’s option, Priscilla, as “a curiosity of New Testament scholarship” (p. 41). Her overviews of Hebrews’ theology and canonicity are both thorough and succinct.

Chapters 2 through 4 concern Hebrews’ attention to divine revelation, its Christology and soteriology. Chapter 2, “Famous Last Words,” speaks of contrasting times (“in the past” versus

“in these last days”) and modes in which God has spoken and the audiences so addressed. Jobes deals with the challenges of understanding divine speech (as represented in Hebrews and in contemporary hermeneutics) and the author’s simultaneous use and relativization of Old Testament quotations; she also charts the author’s Trinitarian attributions of the quotations. In the third chapter, Jobes unpacks the rich imagery Hebrews deploys to portray Christ, and the actions and superiority over angels that it attributes to him. In addition to substantial emphases on “High Priest” and “Son of God,” there are also charts supplying Hebrews’ other titles for Jesus in English and transliterated Greek, with compiled references where they may be found. Occasionally, the relationship between *Letters to the Church*’s text and illustrations must be inferred, as when Jobes moves from general comments on the use of the title “Son of God” on first-century inscriptions and coins, to the frequently cited (Priene calendrical) resolution of Asia Minor’s Provincial Assembly, which appears in a text box but needs to be more clearly connected to the nearby text (p. 91). But the mutual influence between priestly and filial Christologies is well explained, as is the messianic sense of “Son of God” in both the Jewish and Roman matrices. Having spelled out the soteriological actions of the Son in chapter 3, Jobes is free to spend the next chapter on Hebrews’ theology of salvation specific to perseverance, perfection, sabbath rest, eternal life, and atonement for sin. Notwithstanding further illustration-related concerns such as the problematic caption, “Adam and Eve cast from Eden by Gustave Dore” (p. 121), the chapter is nearly flawless, capped with excellent discussion questions (p. 143: “how would you minister to someone who fears he or she has become apostate?”).

With part two, “Letters from Jesus’ Brothers,” we turn to James and Jude. Jobes thoughtfully assesses the primary candidates for James’ authorship, the probability of an early date of composition (the late AD 40s or 50s), parallels with 1 Peter, the veracity of James’ ossuary, the genre, intended recipients, and the purpose of this “diaspora letter” (p. 165). Among the epistle’s major themes that Jobes highlights are trials as tests of faith, the dynamics of poverty and oppression, godly speech, the role

of the law, and a slightly longer treatment of the interrelationship of faith and good deeds. The next chapter compares James' often implicit Christology to that of Q and the Synoptics. As James speaks of Christ as Lord and (along with God) Law-giver and Judge, and as he echoes the Sermon on the Mount (particularly in 2:8, notes Jobes), readers are brought near to the text and to the Lord that its author quietly proclaims. The supporting materials are excellent here: for instance, the possible interpretations of the genitive *doxēs* (2:1) are explained simply enough for beginners in Greek to understand, but in such a way as to prompt experienced or dedicated students toward further exploration. In debt to Richard Bauckham's work, chapter 7 covers the "Royal Law" James expounds in the form of wisdom and ethics; it also acknowledges the overlap of the intertestamental traditions of wisdom and apocalyptic literature and possible readings of the "perceived tension" between James and Paul (pp. 217–21). The pictures have a clearly mnemonic function here, as when photos of a heated argument and a forest fire illustrate 1:19–20 and 3:6. The section closes with a single chapter on Jude, noting such features as its theology, its use of the Old Testament and pseudepigrapha, its likely audience, and its relationship to 2 Peter; here, as elsewhere, Jobes asks her own audience to read the book in as few sittings as possible before they begin the chapter.

Part three centers on the Petrine epistles, which speak, Jobes argues, to the present century as well as the first, for "we are now living in a post-Christian society that appears to be growing more similar to first-century Roman society year by year" (p. 268). First Peter's encouragement to live faithfully has thus rarely been more urgently needed. In the process of introducing 1 Peter's authorship, date, purpose, themes, and household codes, Jobes also begins to discuss the book's Christology, which she elaborates in the next chapter. The irony that it was Peter (whether genuine or pseudonymous in identity), having been chastened for misunderstanding Christ's mission, who would lead the church in articulating the necessity of the Messiah's rejection, is beautifully elucidated. Jobes's meditation on 1 Peter's exemplary Christology comprises perhaps the

book's finest chapter, from its rationale ("it is important to understand Peter's Christology in order to successfully live the Christian life and to disciple others to do so as well," p. 300) to its explanation of the harrowing of hell and its concise unpacking of the resurrection as both a historical and a hermeneutical event. Chapter 11 considers "foreigners and resident aliens" as principal images that define the *imitatio Christi* in Petrine ethics, which Jobes engages with help from Joel Green and Miroslav Volf, among others. Next she reflects on 2 Peter's authenticity, genre, eschatology, theological themes, and relationships to 1 Peter and Jude, taking care to summarize complex information pertaining to the letter's authorship and origins.

The fourth, final, and shortest part of the book surveys John's letters. Chapter 13 draws attention to the "we" of 1 John, the Johannine community, the similarities the epistle shares with John's Gospel and other letters attributed to him, its genre, purpose, themes (including its dualism, Christology, hamartiology, and the challenges it faced in confronting adoptionism and docetism) and canonicity. Although the definition and use of terms such as "epideictic rhetoric" could be more nuanced in this context, the chapter remains a more than adequate introduction to the epistle and its hortatory themes. Chapter 14, "2 and 3 John: Notes of Grace and Truth," further resolves the dialectics of love, truth, and hospitality established in the previous chapter. For Jobes, the task of gaining "insight into the realities of a congregation in the early church" offered in these letters is so vital as to constitute one of the recommended goals for the chapter (p. 437). Once more, simple measures prove effective in clarifying the content of the biblical text, as she uses a text box to review 3 John's cast of characters and later asks readers to recount "reasons that the addressee of 2 John may have been an individual and her family and reasons it may have been a congregation of Christians" (pp. 445, 449).

Jobes's book meets at least two needs at once. It is an excellent survey of a portion of the Bible too often underrepresented in New Testament introductions. But its christological priorities also commend the volume as a supplemental text for more specialized studies: for example, I have added selected

readings from it to a prospective course syllabus on the Christologies and spiritualities that inform our theologies of leadership. Educators who elect to use Jobes's text may wish to supplement her glossary, or at the very least to alert students to the fact that not all of the bold-faced terms in a given chapter necessarily appear in the "Key Terms" box at the chapter's end (to anticipate the question, "Will this be on the test?"). Errors in the text are infrequent and inconspicuous, save for a missing line of text (p. 310) and the occasional issues with illustrations and captions noted above; even these detract little from the strength of this highly recommended study.

Matthew Forrest Lowe
Hamilton, ON