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The pseudonymous Preaching of Peter, cited by Clement of Alexandria in *Strom*. 6.5, approvingly describes Christians as a “third race,” distinct from Jews and Gentiles, thus seemingly employing the language of ethnicity to describe Christians in relation to non-Christians. This phenomenon is echoed in several other early Christian texts, such as *The Epistle of Diognetus*, the *Apology of Aristides*, and Tertullian’s *To the Nations*, thus prompting greater research in recent years into the use of ethnic language in the formation of early Christian identity.¹

*Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter* is a helpful contribution to this field of study. Janette Ok is a leading scholar in Asian American biblical hermeneutics and this monograph – a revision of Ok’s doctoral dissertation – represents the first book-length study of ethnic reasoning in 1 Peter. Ok presents her hypothesis in the book’s opening chapter:

By depicting Christian identity as an ethnic identity akin to the unique religious-ethnic identity of the Jews, Peter seeks to foster internal cohesion among the community of believers, who are struggling to forge a distinctive and durable group identity and resist external pressures to conform to a way of life unbefitting the people of God. (p. 2)

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For the remainder of the chapter, Ok clarifies her methodological apparatus for this study, engaging particularly with James D. Fearon’s understanding of “social identity” and “personal identity,” as well as Denise K. Buell’s influential study of ethnic reasoning in early Christianity.

Chapter 2 traces the conceptual development of “ethnicity” in Greco-Roman thought. Like many studies of ethnic reasoning in the classical period, Ok begins with Herodotus’ statement concerning the four main markers of ethnic identity in Hist. 8.144. Ok rightly observes how Herodotus is attempting to construct a Panhellenic identity in response to the war with Persia, and that the boundaries and definitions of ethnic identity evolved in response to socio-political factors such as the Peloponnesian War and the Roman conquest of Greece. In broad agreement with Jonathan Hall, she thus affirms that ethnic identity is a malleable concept which is “socially constructed and subjectively perceived” (p. 17). Nevertheless, Ok argues that the notion of shared ancestry – whether fictive or real – was often the predominant factor in the construction of ethnic identity in the ancient world.

Chapter 3 examines how the writer of 1 Peter employs ethnic reasoning, arguing that Herodotus’ four markers of ethnic identity – as well as Anthony D. Smith’s six criteria – are all included in the epistle as Peter seeks to forge a new cohesive group identity. According to Ok, Peter constructs a “myth of origins” with God as the readers’ father (1 Pt 1.2-3, 17). This is complemented by the letter’s language of “new birth” through Christ’s blood (1 Pt 1.3, 23), through which believers have become members of God’s household (1 Pt 4.17), sharing a sibling relationship with one another (1 Pt 2.17; 5.9). For Ok, Peter is “appropriating ethnic identity language ascribed to the Jews as a means to express how Gentile Christians belong to God” (p. 55). As she concludes this chapter, however, Ok clarifies that for 1 Peter, the Church is not replacing Israel as the people of God nor is the letter equating Christians with Jews. Rather, Peter is drawing from Jewish tradition because it is “a form of ethnic identity with religio-cultural practices at its heart” (p. 60), thus making it possible for Peter to construct

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3 Buell, New Race.
a similar form of group identity for his readers without recourse to specific territory or biological kinship ties.

In chapter 4, Ok seeks to explicate 1 Peter’s use of ethnic language through the lens of two social-scientific theories concerning ethnic boundaries and stigmatization. Fredrik Barth emphasized the importance that defining boundaries has in group identity-formation, and Ok rightly turns to 1 Peter 2.11-12 and 4.3-4 as examples of how Peter sharply distinguishes believers from “the Gentiles.” Ok argues that Peter stereotypes Gentile behaviour, “overcommunicating” and “overemphasizing” group differences and particularities to make the readers more resistant to reverting to their former way of life (p. 72). The second half of this chapter engages with studies of stigmatization by Erving Goffman and Abdi Kusow. According to Ok, Peter recognizes that the readers were experiencing stigma, which Goffman defines as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” and seeks to alleviate this problem by urging believers in 1 Pt 3.1-7 to preserve the bonds of intimacy in the household, thereby correcting any false and negative stereotypes that family members and neighbors may have had about Christians. At the same time, Kusow notes how stigmas can be contested and subverted. 1 Peter’s readers, Ok suggests, had the possibility of avoiding stigma through concealing their faith. Aware of this temptation, Peter instead reverses the process of stigmatization by imposing stigma upon the readers’ Gentile neighbors, and imputing an honored ethnicity on believers, thereby reversing the experience of stigmatization.

Ok concludes her study in chapter 5, summarizing the preceding chapters and considering the further implications of her research. Turning first to Asian American Studies, Ok confesses that Peter’s strategy may be “problematic” for Asian American Christians “who already experience the perpetual foreigner stereotype by virtue of their ethnic identities” (p. 93). Ok is more positive, however, about the potential implications for Canonical Studies, and concludes her book with the suggestion that Peter’s emphasis on community and identity formation reflects the needs of early Christians, and consequently shaped the formation of the New Testament canon.

This book is a welcome contribution to the study of 1 Peter, appropriately applying insights from the field of social sciences to biblical

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studies. One shortcoming, however, is that Ok’s study of ethnic identity in the ancient world focuses exclusively on Greco-Roman sources and is not sufficiently supplemented by Jewish conceptions of ethnicity and peoplehood. This is particularly surprising given Ok’s conclusion in chapter 3 that Peter is intentionally constructing an ethnic identity for his readers which is similar to Jewish identity. Greater attention to Jewish notions of ethnic identity may also have precipitated deeper discussion, for instance, on Peter’s use of “Gentiles” when referring to outsiders, a term with great resonance in Jewish thought. Similarly, although Ok mentions briefly in Chapter 3 that the Church does not replace Israel, she largely ignores the question of what Peter’s use of ethnic reasoning implies about his understanding of Israel and the Jews. In constructing a new “myth of origins” through which believers are included in the household of God, do Christians thereby constitute a “third race” distinct from Gentiles and Jews, thus anticipating the second-century Preaching of Peter?

Nevertheless, Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter raises important questions. In the modern period, “ethnicity” and “religion” are often perceived as discrete categories, with “religion” typically confined to private beliefs. Yet both “ethnicity” and “religion” are fluid concepts which overlap significantly as they shape one’s worldview, behaviour, and social networks. Especially in Asia, the dividing line between “ethnicity” and “religion” is often blurred; Thais are often associated with Buddhism, Pakistanis with Islam, and so on. Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter shows how the early Christian community operated within a similar milieu, spotlighting Peter’s descriptions of what “becoming a Christian” meant in a world where one’s daily rituals and deities were largely determined by one’s ethnos. If Ok is right, Peter uses ethnic language to disidentify the readers from their Gentile past and reidentify them as “a new people with a new history, present, and future,” without necessarily severing ties with non-Christian family members and neighbors. This of course raises important questions for the Church in Asia, where biological kinship tends to be highly cherished, and where many believers are stigmatized following conversion. Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter should stimulate further discussion on these issues in relation to early Christianity.

About Reviewer
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