Book Review


Recently, German-language commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter have been published every year in renowned theological series. Last year (2022), the Fulda New Testament scholar Christoph Gregor Müller presented his EKK commentary to be reviewed. The year before (2021), the reviewer’s BNT commentary on both Epistles of Peter and the Epistle of Jude was published. In 2020, the author duo Gerald Wagner and François Vouga issued their commentary in the HNT series, and in 2019 Theo K. Heckel published a NTD commentary on the Catholic Epistles. The prelude to this eruption of interest in the First Epistle of Peter was Martin Vahrenhorst’s 2016 ThKNT commentary.

Each of these commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter represents the individual profile of an important German-language commentary series. At the same time, the interpretations and analyses comprised in these works justify the existence of these different exegetical series: Indeed, the commentaries mentioned in combination with Reinhard Feldmeier’s interpretation published in 2005 in the ThHKNT series offer an approach to the writings attributed to the “primordial apostle” from diverse perspectives. Precisely this

2 G. Wagner and F. Vouga, Der erste Brief des Petrus (HNT 15/2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).
4 M. Vahrenhorst, Der erste Brief des Petrus (ThKNT 19; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2016).
5 R. Feldmeier, Der erste Brief des Petrus (ThHKNT 15/1; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2005).
accumulation of diverse expertise focused on the First Epistle of Peter may be regarded as a stroke of luck in the history of reception.

In the series of Protestant-Catholic Commentaries (e/k/k), Chr. G. Müller’s commentary on the Epistle of Peter succeeds the interpretation by Norbert Brox (1935–2006) from 1979,6 which has been influential over the last four decades. Brox’s interpretation of a main representative of the Catholic letters, which for a long time was not the focus of great interest, went through four editions. The last of these was published in 1993 (revised and enriched with literature, but substantially unchanged).

With all due appreciation for Brox’s work, the reader will soon realise the necessity and value of this new start within the e/k/k series when using Müller’s volume. To state it in advance: Müller brings out the complexity of the historical influence (“Wirkungsgeschichte,” p. 101), which was only rudimentarily addressed in the previous volume. The fact that not only the Roman Catholic perspective, with deeper insights into the effect of the epistle on the (Roman Catholic) liturgy, but also the impulses for Protestant theology are shown to advantage, is to the author’s credit. The influence on Protestant theology can be seen, for example, in the general priesthood of believers (pp. 194, 207–212) or in the biblical motto (1 Pet 2:7) for the fifth thesis of the Theological Declaration of Barmen of 1934 (p. 242). Here, the ecumenical orientation of the commentary – and specifically Müller’s exchange with his Protestant syzygos (as stated in the preface, p. 7) Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr as commentator of the Epistle of James in the e/k/k series – proves its worth.

The series-specific focal points include a decided look at the historical influence and ecumenism as well as a thorough examination of the history of research and the (current) secondary literature. In his 76-page bibliography (pp. 11–86), Müller offers nine historical and thematic sections. Here, a reduction in the number of sections would have been more user-friendly.

At first glance, it does not seem easy to claim one’s place within the phalanx of current commentaries, also in terms of content. However, Müller knows how to set his own exegetical-theological accents. The overall orientation of a commentary is determined by the respective outline of the biblical scripture commented on. While Müller recognizes “erstaunliche Übereinstimmungen” (astonishing correspondences, p. 97) here, this is only true if you look from a distance. Looking more closely, the differences become apparent. It is precisely in the differences, which are nevertheless clearly recognisable, that the various basic orientations of the commentaries are reflected. Regarding the First

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Epistle of Peter, every attempt at an outline is a compromise. Each of the commentators mentioned so far places a different emphasis on structural features on the one hand and on theological-contextual connections on the other. Decisive for the respective outline is whether the repeated form of address of the recipients as Ἀγαπητοί (1 Pet 2:11; 4:12) is understood as an attention-grabbing rhetorical device within a train of thought or as the beginning of a new section. Also, is ἀμήν rather a continuing affirmation within an argument or more the conclusion of a passage? The commentaries of the reviewer and the reviewed currently form the most consistent examples of the two contrasting fundamental approaches to structuring the First Epistle of Peter.

Because Müller understands each of the two “amens” (ἀμήν, 4:11; 5:11) of the First Epistle of Peter as the conclusion of a central section and evaluates each of the two salutations with “beloved” (Ἀγαπητοί, 2:11; 4:12) as the beginning of another main section, the delimitations of the last three parts of the letter (D–F; approx. two thirds of the epistle’s volume) (and thus the end of the part “C”) follow automatically.

Müller divides the apostle’s letter into the six main parts A–F. The three chapters C–E, characterised as paraenetic, are thus framed by the prescript (A; 1:1–2) and the letter’s conclusion (F; 5:12–14). Between the opening section (A) and the paraenetic sections (C; 1:13–2:10 + D; 2:11–4:11 + E; 4:12–5:11), Müller delimits the B section (1:3–12), which he titles “Eulogie und Dienst der Propheten” (Eulogy and Ministry of the Prophets). The two caesurae before and after the B-part are not due to structural features in the aforementioned sense.

With his division into six main parts of equal rank, Müller is the most consistent of the commentators mentioned here and oriented towards structural features: Heckel offers three main parts, with a corpus divided into three subsections. The first part for Heckel comprises sections A and B in Müller. Vahrenhorst’s basic structure is similar to Heckel’s, though Vahrenhorst treats the proem (1:3–12) as a separate section, thus resulting in four parts. Wagner/Vouga divide the epistle into seven sections. Particularly noticeable is their exclusion of 5:8–11 as a separate epistolary conclusion, followed by a “postscript” (5:12–14). Feldmeier’s four-part division is characterised by the division of the epistolary corpus into 1:3–2:10 and 2:11–5:11.

The reviewer divides the letter into four main parts, including the first two verses designated as the letter opening, solely according to content criteria. While the reviewer has to explain the aforementioned salutations (Ἀγαπητοί) and the two occurrences of ἀμήν as non-structural, Müller has to accept that references to content can also be detected beyond the identified structural features. Thus, for Müller, the subsection “7 Priester im Ensemble (2:4–10)”
(7 Priests in the Ensemble, pp. 189–220), which is now in a main section (C) together with 2:1–3 “6 Vernünftige Milch” (6 Reasonable Milk), would have fitted well under the heading of the immediately following main section “D Paränetische Weisungen zum Lebenswandel” (D Paraenetic Instructions on the Way of Life, pp. 221–342). Similarly, subsection 15 (pp. 333–342), which Müller entitled “Die Zeit ist nahe (4,7–11)” (The Time is Near [4:7–11]) and which he places in the main section D (pp. 333–342), could also have found its place in the directly following main section E (pp. 343–388), which bears the title “Paränetische Weisungen im Zugehen auf das Ende (4,12–5,11)” (Paraenetic Directives in Approaching the End [4:12–5:11]; italics added by the reviewer).

Brox avoids such collisions between thematic categorisations and structural signals by diagnosing 20 individual sections without main chapters or other overarching structures. Müller’s fine division into 19 units, albeit with completely separate headings, corresponds in many cases with Brox’s division. However, only 18 numbered sections appear in Müller’s work. The last section, which Müller titles “F Brief-Schluss (5,12–14)” (F Letter Closure [5:12–14], pp. 389–395), is not specifically numbered, unlike the “A Briefpräskript (1,1–2)” (A Letter Prescript [1:1–2]), which is numbered “i” (pp. 105–124).

Noteworthy in Müller’s outline is his summary of 1 Pet 3:8–17 in the section “12 Abwendung vom Bösen (3,8–17)” (12 Turning Away from Evil [3:8–17], pp. 290–305), which all other commentators mentioned here divide into at least two sections. Here, a thematic-theological characteristic of Müller’s interpretation comes into play, which can perhaps best be described by contagious discipleship (cf. pp. 168, 401)—a leitmotif of the First Epistle of Peter recognised by Müller, even if he does not use the term in this way.

Form (structure) and content are interdependent. It is therefore not surprising that each attempt at identifying a structure is accompanied by corresponding theological emphases: each commentator not only contributes his or her own proposed outline, but also his or her theological concept linked to the text of the First Letter of Peter or discovered in it. This concept, in turn, is bound to the guidelines of the respective theological series. In other words: The editors of a series choose as commentators those whose basic orientation most closely reflects the profile of their own series. In Chr. G. Müller, with his focus on the historical influence (Wirkungsgeschichte), his sense of ecumenism, and his appreciation of the worldliness of the believers in Christ who have become strangers to the world, the series has found a suitable exegete.

Müller’s commentary is meant for scholarly use. While an interpretation for the congregation is expected to provide certain answers and definitions where the text leaves open possibilities of understanding, Müller takes pains to present precisely the diversity of possible interpretations. This results in his rather
literal and philologically accurate translation, which is not always easy to read. This is especially the case when up to three translation suggestions are presented (e.g., 1 Pet 4:3a, p. 322) and when additions in round and square brackets (e.g., p. 381), which are supposedly necessary for the German sentence structure or for understanding, are added.

The diversity of the topics addressed in the five chapters of the First Epistle of Peter means that the commentators set different emphases. Müller, too, weighs the various topics of the letter and thereby reveals his own profile: He names the importance of 1 Pet 3:20–21 for the development of the Christian theology of baptism (p. 320) but is far from reducing the First Epistle of Peter in its entirety to a baptismal paraenesis, as Perdelwitz (p. 165) does. In contrast to Jens Herzer, Müller emphasises the Pauline imprint on the Epistle of Peter (pp. 92–93, 158, 167, 338, etc.) but without questioning the Petrine character. Müller rightly emphasises that the aspect of foreignness is a central momentum of the letter but gives less weight to this motif than Feldmeier. Despite the alienness of the believers in Christ in the world, according to Müller, their orientation to this world is of decisive importance. Believers in Christ find their true home precisely in their alienation from the world (pp. 123, 167–168). Müller understands their suffering and their alienation from the world as a suffering turned towards the world in following Christ.

Regarding the introductory questions, Müller judges “conservatively” with good reasons. He understands the First Epistle of Peter as a pseudepigraphical letter written under the reign of Emperor Domitian in the 90s of the first century (p. 96), likely in Rome (pp. 94, 392). Müller diagnoses the presence of an abundance of Old Testament references and considers them (in contrast to Wagner/Vouga) to be essential for understanding the epistle’s line of thought.

Müller notes several tensions in the First Epistle of Peter. He mentions the importance of the Old Testament scriptures, especially Isaiah, the Psalms and Proverbs (pp. 254–255, 404–405) and points to the presupposed knowledge of Scripture reflected in them on the one hand and the intended Gentile Christian audience on the other (pp. 117, 255). Müller does not imagine that the author of the epistle might have phrased some of his statements less with his audience in mind than soli deo gloria (but cf. pp. 255, 340).

According to Müller’s assessment, the apparent discrepancy between worldliness and alienness is due to the fact that, for the author of the First Epistle of Peter, the imminent eschatological expectation no longer had the same urgency (p. 344) that it still had in the first generations after the death

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of Christ. With regard to the concept of church leadership found in the last chapter of the epistle, Müller recognises a milieu of Pauline-charismatic and Jewish-Christian-presbyterial constitution (pp. 376, 402).

Müller shares the idea of offensive non-violence (“offensive Gewaltlosigkeit,” p. 261), which Wagner/Vouga have emphasised. However, he sees it less as the central theme of the letter than as one of several leitmotifs. Müller generally ties the missionary aspect of Christian action (pp. 205, 231–232, 372, 286) and that of resistance through good deeds (pp. 302, 304) to the motif of following in Jesus’ footsteps (1 Pet 2:12; e.g., p. 406).

Müller highlights some aspects that are important through word creations, inventing, for example, the German verb “frohbotschaften” (roughly translatable with “bringing glad tidings,” e.g., pp. 142, 329). This way, he emphasises that believers are on the one hand taken from this world through the saving act of Christ, but at the same time are placed as strangers in this very world. Their foreignness (Fremdsein) and their following in the footsteps of Jesus (1 Pet 2:12) are always intended as a foreignness and a following that act both upon and in the world (p. 402). If one wanted to summarise the core message that a commentator reads out of the First Epistle of Peter in a few words, then for Müller it would be a worldliness directed towards change. That results precisely from the awareness of not belonging to the world and of being a stranger in the world (p. 168). The term “effektiver Altruismus” (effective altruism, p. 232) is used; in accordance with his understanding of the First Epistle of Peter, Müller dedicates his commentary to those who are humiliated (“den Erniedrigten,” p. 4).

He chooses a photo by the Point Alpha Foundation (p. 397) as a colourful closing image that can be understood as a signpost. It bears the title “Weg (xiv. Station)” (Road [Station xiv]) in reference to Christ’s Way of the Cross. Müller deliberately places it between the body of the commentary and a retrospective (pp. 399–406). Point Alpha was the spot of Müller’s homeland, where, it was said, the Cold War was at its fiercest in the second half of the twentieth century.

Müller dispenses with digressions and indices. His interpretation ends with the words from 1 Pet 2:12 that are formative for his commentary as a whole: “Gehen in den Fußspuren Christi” (Walk in the footsteps of Christ, p. 406), which Müller wants to be understood as both indicative and imperative.

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