

BOOK REVIEW

David E. Aune and Frederick E. Brenk (eds.), *Greco-Roman Culture and the New Testament: Studies Commemorating the Centennial of the Pontifical Biblical Institute* (NovTSup, 143; Leiden: Brill, 2012). xiv + 214 pp. Hbk. US\$144.00.

This collection of essays represents the final of four volumes dedicated to commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Pontifical Biblical Institute. Despite a number of challenges, the Institute recognizes the importance of the Greco-Roman world for understanding the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament.

The first article, by Justin Taylor, examines a segment of socio-rhetorical criticism of the New Testament. According to this theory, ancient writers could expand on a saying, or *chreia*, according to a determined set of rules laid down by teachers of rhetoric. Assessing the theories of Vernon K. Robbins, Taylor tests whether a *chreia*, specifically Mk 8.31, helped produce the Passion Narrative in the Gospel of Mark. Using the rules laid out in the *Progymnasmata*, a rhetorical handbook written in the first century CE by Ailius of Alexandria, Taylor arrives at the conclusion that Mark's Passion could not be deduced from a *chreia*, and instead he claims that the Passion Narratives existed as complete narratives.

The second article is by Troels Engberg-Pedersen, who is well known to biblical scholars for comparing New Testament writings to Stoic doctrine. Claiming that Stoicism was the predominant philosophy in the first century, he argues that the Gospel of John, with regards to the principles of *logos* and *pneuma*, has its philosophical origins in Stoic doctrine. He criticizes scholarship for attempting to understand the concept of the *logos* by way of the Old Testament or Platonism, arguing that understanding John in light of Stoic doctrine provides a more intelligible reading.

Bruce W. Winter seeks to shed light on the probable influence of the Roman Imperial Cult on Paul's converts in Corinth. There is, according

to Winter, ample evidence to suggest that the Imperial Cult had an energetic presence in the province of Achaëa of which Corinth was the capital. The Jews in Corinth, as well as the Christians, became exempt from the many festivals in honour of the emperor, but only if they restricted their meetings to once per week. Winter asserts that this exemption is evidenced by the lack of cultic language in the Corinthian letters.

Dieter Zeller highlights the ambiguity surrounding the term ‘paraenesis’ in New Testament research. Zeller defines paraenetic sayings as those which resemble short wisdom sayings. He claims that those sayings found in Romans 12 parallel in paraenetic qualities those found in the sayings of the Seven Sages. An example of such a saying, similar in style to those found in Paul, would be ‘Fear the gods; Honour parents; Respect friends; Obey the laws’ (p. 78). In conclusion, Zeller asserts that Paul’s admonitions in Romans 12 reflect ‘OT wisdom, which is continued in Jesus’ sapiential admonitions, to Greek thought and feeling’ (p. 86).

Frederick E. Brenk discusses the Greco-Roman concept of love as it relates to Paul’s letters. Love literature, he says, ‘is mostly unknown to us, and remains largely unstudied by modern scholars’ (p. 88). Utilizing three writings of Plutarch, Brenk constructs a framework to help us understand the background of Paul’s attitude toward love and marriage. For Plutarch, *eros*, or lust, is juxtaposed with *philia*, or friendship. *Eros* is described as an irrational desire, whereas *philia* as lasting mutual love. With regards to marriage, Plutarch encourages young husbands to study philosophy in order to admonish their wives also. Plutarch, like many other Greek philosophers, saw love as divine and warns that an act of *eros* could be psychologically and ethically harmful to both the subject and object. Therefore, marriage was treated in a highly ethical way by both Romans and Greeks. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7 are similar in that they advocate a type of sexual ethic reserved for marriage, an arena in which *agapē*, or God-like, self-giving love can be practiced. However, Brenk concludes that Paul, like Plutarch, moves away from the traditional views of love and steps out onto ‘new paths’ (p. 111).

Gretchen Reydam-Schils discusses the apparent differences between Clement of Alexandria and Paul’s precepts called the ‘Household Codes’. Taking into account the opinions of various Greek writers, Reydam-Schils discusses the development of a common *schema* between Clement and these philosophers with regards to the management

of the household. Clement marks distinctions between the sexes, which are then contrasted with Paul, who wants to transcend sexual-social distinctions in Christ (Gal. 3.28; Col. 3.11). However, this appears to be a problem for Clement due to the physical differences between men and women with regards to childbearing. Clement accommodates this by suggesting that women progressively abandon their femininity as their relationship with Christ matures, and that being a woman and a spouse are merely stages that are outgrown.

Adela Yarbro Collins offers a heuristic study of a typology of ascents as portrayed in Hellenistic, Jewish and Christian literature. Ascents, according to Collins, should not be viewed as a genre of literature, since such ascents appear in a variety of writings. From here, she points out a large number of examples in which the protagonist ascends to a higher plain, so to speak, for a number of reasons. Such a portrayal in narrative exhorts its readers to lead a life with respect to postmortem punishments and misfortunes.

David Aune examines the imagery of Rev. 3.20 in light of Greco-Egyptian divination texts. The use of the personal pronoun 'I' rests somewhat 'uncomfortably' in its present literary setting and may indicate that it originated independently of its present context. A variety of scholarly opinions have ascribed numerous allegorical interpretations this passage, ranging from echoes of Old and New Testament texts to eschatological expectations and metaphor. Aune rejects these in favour of interpreting the passage in light of Greco-Roman ritual divination. However, the polyvalent ambiguity of the text might suggest that the author was combining imagery from Jewish, Christian, Greco-Roman and Greco-Egyptian traditions.

In the final essay, John Collins discusses the *Sibylline Oracles* as a distinct genre in Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity. He argues that the *Oracles* are not modeled on apocalyptic literature, though the possible influence of the apocalypses cannot be disregarded. What Collins's research is meant to show is that the *Oracles* have their basis in Jewish and Hellenistic literature. This created currency throughout the world, perhaps even superseding any Jewish or Persian sources on which they were based.

This volume provides good argumentation regarding the influence of Greco-Roman literature on the New Testament. In my estimation, the essays included provide a good starting place for discussion in their respective areas of study. However, the book is lacking in certain areas

with regards to its depth. While this is somewhat understandable given that this volume never claims to go to great depths, its barely scratching the surface creates a number of problems. Having said this, I reserve my critiques for two of the above-mentioned essays: Taylor's examination of *chreia* and Engberg-Pedersen's Stoic *pneuma* and *logos*.

Taylor's essay, which critiques the previous work of Vernon Robbins, dismisses the idea that Mark's Passion Narrative could be based on shorter, more concise statements (i.e. *chreiai*). His assumption is based on the lack of methodological evidence found in Mark when compared to the works of other ancient authors. One of the examples given is Mk 8.31 in which Jesus says that the son of man will suffer at the hands of the priests and scribes. Taylor disagrees with Robbins and suggests that the Passion in Mark is not based on this *chreia*, but I ask what exactly *is* it based on? It is clear that Mark wants to equate Jesus with the suffering servant of Psalm 22, a point that Taylor concedes, but why is Taylor not willing to admit the Passion of Mark is based on shorter statements from Mark's own Gospel? If Mark is expanding on Old Testament references, he would most certainly expand on something within his own work. Taylor also diverges from Robbins on the point that Judas is not mentioned in the *chreia*, and yet appears in the Passion. Concerning this, Taylor misses the purpose of a *chreia*. The purpose of a *chreia* is to expand a short saying into a narrative. Using Taylor's own example of Aelius Theon's death of Epaminondas, the *chreia* tells us that Epaminondas left two metaphorical children in the form of military victories. The expansion of this *chreia* elaborates his words, calling his daughters 'immortal' and naming them 'younger' and 'older'. The purpose of mentioning this is that expansions of *chreiai* are meant to do exactly that: to expand in detail. Mark's addition of Judas and the other disciples in the Passion serve to tell us *how* the events predicted in 8.31 transpired, thus providing more detail as to how the story unfolded.

My second critique concerns Engberg-Pedersen's essay. He suggests that we read the Gospel of John in light of Stoic doctrine relating to *logos* and *pneuma*. It seems that his argument reflects what can be called 'adoptionism', that is, Jesus was not pre-existent and that he was 'adopted' by God at his birth, thus becoming the *logos*. Can it be said that adoptionism is a Stoic doctrine? It is fair to connect John's use of *logos* with Stoicism, but Engberg-Pedersen goes too far. With regards to the *logos* and *pneuma* descending on Jesus, we are not told that the *logos* descended on Jesus at all. Instead, the *logos* becomes Jesus. Jesus is

also concerned with dichotomizing earthly and heavenly knowledge (cf. Jn 3). At this point, *pistis* is introduced as a result of properly understanding Jesus' words. Engberg-Pedersen suggests that the *pistis/pneuma* relationship equals the cognitive/physical aspect of Jesus' words. Basically, *pneuma* resides in an earthly person, and *pistis* is generated intellectually. Not only is this argument largely Platonic, something that Engberg-Pedersen criticizes, it also misses the mark with regards to its application. If Jesus is largely concerned with epistemology, it would make sense that traditional understandings of *logos* be employed. Amongst many different roles, the *logos* was the facet of God's character that enabled proper interpretation. Jesus' criticisms of Nicodemus in John 3 are actually criticisms of Israel's teachers and their inability to properly interpret Scripture. In other words, if they were interpreting Scripture properly, they would be aligned with the *logos*, and Nicodemus would not be confused by heavenly matters. It is also characteristic of the *logos* to breathe understanding on people in order to aid interpretation. Jesus does this very thing to his disciples in Jn 20.22. Engberg-Pedersen fails to compel with his argument due to his lack of explanation with regards to what exactly *is* Stoic about his interpretation. He himself claims that his argument contains no proof to justify it, but that the justification will come as a result of how persuasive his argument is to experts of John.

This collection of essays provides a wide range of scholarly opinions on various topics in relation to the composition of the New Testament. However, as mentioned above, the essays, especially the ones critiqued above, do not provide the depth necessary to substantiate the claims they make. I recommend this book as an introduction to various topics and as a helpful tool to build an introductory bibliography. However, it is not so useful for those who are seeking in-depth argumentation and analysis.

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