

## BOOK REVIEW

Vinzent, Markus, *Writing the History of Early Christianity: From Reception to Retrospection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). vi + 485 pp. Hbk. \$135.00.

Historians have many tasks and adopt many approaches. Markus Vinzent of King's College London adopts a 'retrospective' approach to early Christian history in his monograph, *Writing the History*.

This method asks why and how the historical consensus has become a contemporary consensus, working its way from the present into the past instead of the other way around. In this process, 'former marginalia may become core, non-starters may prove to become outsets' (p. 30) and the distinction between primary and secondary sources becomes blurred. The author notes that 'Each stage of a perceived transformation has to be seen more in light of what the particular stage contributed to the picture than in the light of what earlier traditions provide' (p. 48). Readers later learn that this approach parallels that of modern textual critics, where the concern is more about what the variant readings and history of change has to say about the text than about the definitive conclusions of an 'original'.

The author attempts to unfold this method in the initial sections of the monograph by appealing to various films and books, while also summarizing some of the more contemporary concerns of post-modern deconstructive criticism. Vinzent locates his 'retrospective angle within the contemporary, post-postmodern space' (p. 39). He sympathizes also with 'the first premise of New Historicism, "contingency", according to which neither the author nor the text can escape radical openness—neither is ever a "perfect, unsubstitutable, freestanding container" of all the meanings' (p. 45). Collections of documents, like the writings of the New Testament, therefore take a backseat in reconstructing Christian history—not just because of skepticism, but because of an 'optimism' that resists 'being dominated by a set of texts and evidence that are themselves the result of earlier historiographic agendas, driven by precisely the form of retrospective apologetic, hagiographic,

institutionalized and institutionalizing sets of writings' (p. 47). The scholar may 'see, independent of the choices made by others, what is significant for their own research' (p. 47). Yet, despite such optimism, Vinzent believes 'the retrospective viewer who recognizes her- or himself as the personal outset of historiography has the primary task of self-critical reflection to avoid an even bigger solipsism or dogmatism than one encounters in any chronological historiography' (p. 49). Furthermore, 'in retrospection, I would like to understand people, rather than entities' (p. 51), and avoid the hazards of forged 'facts' (p. 52) which are subject to political agendas.

The core of the book's study focuses on the inscription of Abercius, research on Hippolytus of Rome and Aristides of Athens, and the writings of Ignatius of Antioch. Much of the investigation is technical, exploring competing recensions and unfolding the evolution of second- and third-century Christian artifacts. The last chapter on Ignatius is perhaps the most interesting to readers immediately wondering how the author's method functions and what implications it may have on early Christianity. Vinzent thoroughly discusses the three major recensions of Ignatius' writings and explains in penetrating detail how they evolved, why the middle recension became dominant (and why it perhaps should not have), and how the variations between them reflect the hands and thoughts of others. As he summarizes:

Before we can gain an insight into the second century through the writings of Ignatius, we first need to cut through thick layers of historical uses of a legacy. In that regard, I would like to endorse Lightfoot's earlier quoted statement, but reverse its main thrust: 'The history of the Ignatian Epistles in Western Europe, before and after the revival of letters, is full of interest', he rightly wrote at the beginning of his section on the 'Spurious Ignatius'. That scholarship, however, should peel away 'each successive stage' of what Lightfoot called 'forgery', from 'the bulk of the Ignatian literature' and draw out those elements 'which the educated mind accepts as genuine', is, in my view, an a-historical venture; instead of reducing the texts 'till at length the true Ignatius alone remains', I advocate facing an often changing Ignatius, who throughout history has truly impacted the various discourses. He was always the product of certain social, political, ethical and religious constellations, and also served a religious practice, as we can see in homilies and readings on feast days that related to his various works (p. 409).

*Writing the History* is not a typical work of revisionist history, but it certainly serves to open doors to various kinds of revisionism. While that should be welcomed for many reasons, Vinzent's work was not always persuasive.

For example, we read that:

the 'Abercius' inscription ... would be one of our earliest Christian inscriptions ... as the earliest surviving Christian papyri, our other earliest extant witnesses for Christians, date from the third century onwards only, the 'Abercius' inscription would be one of our earliest hard fact testimonies for any early Christian writing. Of course, we know of Paul's letters and other works that antedate the 'Abercius' inscription, but these are not preserved in any physical sense on documents from the first or the second centuries, and fragmentary papyri start from the third century only. Nor does distinctly Christian art survive from, and perhaps did not even exist during the first two centuries (pp. 97-98).

This is factually incorrect. Papyri reasonably (sometimes confidently) dated to the second century include P52 (Jn 18.31-33), P90 (Jn 18.36-40; 19.1-7), P104 (Mt. 21.34-37, 43, 45), P98 (Rev. 1.13-20), and possibly P103 (Mt. 13.55-56; 14.3-5), P137 (Mk 1.7-9, 16-18) and P77 (Mt. 23.30-39). It is also not reasonable to expect surviving Christian art from the second century, given early Christians' lack of capital, the illegality/risk of such productions prior to the Edict of Milan in 311 CE, and possible aversion to images. It is also not exactly clear why this lack of art would be significant for bolstering the significance of the Abercius inscription. Vinzent's work is not unlike others that tend to silence the primary (and most relevant) sources by quick dismissals of dating (cf. my review of *When Christians Were Jews* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018], by Paula Fredriksen, in *Reading Religion* [2018]), often feeling like one is observing a hunt for something radically novel where there is little to be found.

Vinzent also criticizes historians and scholars of early Christianity for being uncritical about the very notion of what is 'Christian' or 'Christianity'. But this is puzzling given how many historians and scholars of Christianity *do* question these categories and *are* aware of potential anachronisms, whether secular, Jewish or Christian (see Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018]; Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul was Not a Christian: The Original*

*Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* [New York: HarperOne, 2010]; Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017]; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* [New York: Random House, 1979]; James D.G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making* [3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003–2015]; N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* [2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013]; Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005]; Philip F. Esler, ed., *The Early Christian World* [Routledge Worlds; New York: Routledge, 2nd edn, 2017], to list just a few). Indeed, in reading this book, one gets the tone of the cloistered academic researcher who is preoccupied with her or his own astute intellectual journey (much of the book is written in first person, and personal opinions that should have been excised or relegated to footnotes unfortunately saturate the main text), personal travels and only recently aware of personal context. ‘Living and exchanging ideas with people from around the world’, we read at one point, ‘makes one humbly aware that Europe is a small province, the most eastern corner of Asia, but also that the United States has Asian neighbors West and East’ (p. 53). The narrative of the book is filled with such banalities, as well as nuanced introspection that only hyper-specialists could appreciate, both of which seem to cloud the book’s direction.

My greatest complaint is that its approach seems unoriginal; is ‘retrospection’ really so distinguished? The actual practice of retrospective history, as it exists in this book, is virtually indistinguishable from any other history that is self-critical, revisionist and/or conscious of reception history that questions consensus (though, given its explicitly post-postmodern reader-centered orientation, perhaps it should be called ‘introspective’ history). This has practically been the work of African-American history for the past half-century, the endless work of critical theorists, and—most pertinent for our subject matter—the bread and butter of Christian historians such as the celebrity-academics Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels. It has also been more or less the approach of modern textual critics like Eldon J. Epp and David Parker. The approach is to work backwards from the dominant text we currently have and into the earlier forms and examine how variants came into being and examine what their evolution tells us, especially in light of contemporary dominant discourse. This is not to dismiss the book *in toto* or eradicate the nuance of the author’s approach. But it is to question the entire way in which it is framed. If the author’s research is as original and

profound as he believes it to be, the author does not need to regularly assert this; readers are best left to themselves to make these judgments. (This is especially true for an academic monograph that should not suffer the ploys or strategies of popular-volume marketing departments.)

Complaints aside, *Writing the History* would be particularly valuable for those studying the patristic era and the practice of non-biblical textual criticism. The author ably assembles a mass of technical literature into topical chapters during what is perhaps the most fascinating and formative stage of Christian thought and practice.

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