

BOOK REVIEW

Bruce W. Longenecker, with excerpts from Ben Witherington III, *The Lost Letters of Pergamum: A Story from the New Testament World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). 192 pp. Pbk. US\$16.99.

Bruce Longenecker maintains and encourages a healthy respect for narrative in *The Lost Letters of Pergamum*. The subject is a major focal point of this epistolary novel, easily traced from the dedication and preface and throughout the ‘letters’ themselves. Personal narrative, even when ‘largely informed by the imagination’ (p. 9), holds a powerful appeal at multiple levels of this text: for the book’s protagonist, its fictional ‘editor’, the author and, ultimately, the reader. Regarding his narrative, Longenecker offers the following thesis statement—a rare but welcome feature in a work of fiction:

My hope is that readers of this narrative will not only enjoy the story line for its own sake...but will also profit from a better appreciation of the historical context of the early Christian writings and, thereby, develop sharper instincts for understanding the writings of the New Testament in their contexts.

When he fulfills this goal, Longenecker’s project holds great promise for interdisciplinary discussion.

The author deliberately draws his story from the *world* of the New Testament, not the New Testament itself. Working from the premise of Rev. 2.13 (‘Antipas, my faithful witness...was put to death in your city [Pergamum]—where Satan lives’), Longenecker imagines the backstory that might have led Antipas, a Roman citizen and benefactor, to Christian faith and a martyr’s death. In the form of a collection of letters, the reader observes Antipas as he begins corresponding with Calpurnius, son of Theophilus of Ephesus. Calpurnius soon introduces Antipas to a friend of the family—Luke, a scholar who has written ‘a historical account of an intriguing man from Galilee and his followers’ (p. 29). Luke, having

undertaken this task at Theophilus's request (Lk. 1.3; Acts 1.1), is drawn into the correspondence and gladly responds to Antipas's thoughts on his monograph. Antipas is curious but cautious with regard to Christianity, warning Luke of the potential dishonor in associating with such zealous political rebels as Christians are purported to be. Yet as he investigates the lives of Pergamum's Christian communities, Antipas is profoundly affected by their ministry and witness. He learns to see religious faith in a different light, at first using terms like 'savior' to refer to Zeus, but later apprehending Christ as savior firsthand.

The relational groundwork for a spiritual conversion is thus laid through the series of Antipas's reading digests and Luke's responses. The former's familiarity with life in Galilee and the surrounding regions makes him a natural dialogue partner for Luke, who grounds his subtle evangelism in scholarly discussion of areas of mutual interest—and in prayer (p. 58). Luke encourages his friend to join a local group of Christians, despite Antipas's initial discomfort with the mixing of social classes that he finds there. The Pergamene citizen develops close friendships with the Christians, and ultimately allows himself to be put to death before the emperor in place of one of these, offering a moving statement of faith prior to his execution. These last details are reported to Luke by another Christian believer, in the context of increasing persecution from a city devoted to emperor worship. The letter collection, preserved for other Christians as a testimonial of Antipas's experiences, salvation and unselfish death is later 'found' and translated by the editor.

Longenecker's exploration of one man's journey to faith within the matrix of the late first-century Greco-Roman world is worthy of many an encomium. He has a sharp eye for historical detail, and from his preface it is clear that he holds himself accountable for constructing a truly historical novel, rather than a work of fiction that happens to be set in the ancient world. His characterization is strong, believable, at times even endearing. As he demonstrates in his thesis statement above, he is always conscious of context, and he ensures that his characters are equally aware of the subject. Antipas, for example, remarks upon the way in which the various contexts of his conversations with other Christians (usually regarding his copy of Luke's monograph) shaped the content of those discussions (pp. 101ff.). In some instances the characters' contextual observations are just as relevant to our own time as to theirs. Antipas's comments on imperial allegiance, from his initial loyalty to Rome to his investigation into the 'empire of God', seem especially

timely in the context of ‘regime changes’ and other current, international events.

On a few occasions, the characters are perhaps too much aware of modern contexts, as when small anachronisms of literary criticism creep into the text. Would Antipas’s study of Pergamene and Alexandrian versions of Homer really have been so focused on ‘narrative inconsistencies’ (p. 37) between the two? Similarly, while Luke’s comparison between Christ’s followers and the Qumran community is welcome, would he have actually described Isa. 40.3 as a ‘programmatic text’ for both groups (p. 71), and would he have phrased it as such? Antipas uses ‘utopian’ as an adjective evoking an age of messianic promise (pp. 77, 126); while the reference is appropriate, the term is somewhat misplaced. These are smaller points of dispute, primarily matters of ‘translation’ that do little to detract from the narrative. But when Longenecker sets himself the task of speaking on behalf of New Testament figures, even as ‘characters’, his choice of words must be given careful scrutiny.

Particularly ingenious is the use of the editorial plot device. The imagined presence of Longenecker’s fictional editor, the scholar whose archeological team first found the Pergamene correspondence, allows the author to interject historical details in brackets and footnotes, without overburdening the text or the reader. Longenecker’s appendices include a cast of ‘characters’ (walking the line between a formal index of persons and a ‘dramatis personæ’) and a concluding explanation of the narrative’s historical and fictional aspects. Credibly, Longenecker’s ‘editor’ records several pieces of the correspondence as having been ‘lost’ to the passage of time; a complete series of letters would have been difficult to preserve, especially given the frequency with which Luke and Antipas wrote over the course of their brief friendship.

Finally, the novel’s emphasis on narrative constitutes its most problematic weakness, and its greatest source of strength. As a work of fiction, *Letters* provides valuable insight into first-century urban life in the Roman Empire, and speculates on some intriguing possible events in early church history. Luke reflects on the differences and parallels between his own Gospel account and John’s, agreeing to edit the latter’s manuscript ‘for wider circulation’ (p. 96). What new frontiers would open up for source criticism, if it were true! But the truth of the source becomes the source of the problem: the novel can only speculate and appeal to other sources for further research, as Longenecker gratefully acknowledges Witherington’s scholarship. *Letters* would make an

excellent supplement to any New Testament course, but it cannot stand alone—nor does its author intend that it should (pp. 10-11).

The promise of this novel is not limited to its ability to speculate regarding biblical history; its reliance upon narrative also addresses the category of story. A critic such as James Barr would probably appreciate the use of story in this volume, maintained even through an epistolary medium in which narrative is not always evident (see Barr's, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999], pp. 356-60). Barr concedes that not all Scripture takes the form of narrative, but the broader category of story still applies as a framework enriched by the addition of 'non-narrative parts' (Barr, p. 356). As with Scripture, so it is with Scripture's contextual world: *The Lost Letters of Pergamum* validates the potential for interacting with the biblical narrative, and even with its history, with both imagination and authenticity. As a project in the areas of narrational and historical imagination, Longenecker's book is an exercise that encourages dialogue in biblical studies and early Christian history, but also on broader, story-oriented themes of common interest to other fields of study.

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