

BOOK REVIEW

John Granger Cook, *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000; [repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002]). xvi + 385 pp. Pbk. US\$24.95.

It would be difficult to find a volume more tightly-focused on the interests of this journal, both in title and intent, than John Cook's latest work. Given Cook's previous focus on the persuasive power of linguistic structure in Mark, it is no surprise to see that he maintains a similar emphasis on persuasion; here, rhetoric is his preferred lens. 'This book', he proposes, 'will hopefully contribute to an understanding of the debate between Hellenism and Christianity that resulted from the Christians' efforts at recruitment' (p. 16). Cook's project, while grounded in the interpretation of Christian texts, is also a study of the polemic dialogue between his sources. The world he evokes is not that of a pitched battle of pagan critique and Christian apologetics, but rather a war of mutual criticism, a war of propaganda.

The book is in large part a survey of Hellenistic responses to the sacred literature and practices of early Christianity; Cook's acknowledged goal is to construct, whenever possible, 'a sort of pagan's commentary' on the New Testament texts, 'using the Synoptic Gospels, John, and Paul as a structuring mechanism' (pp. 17, 103). His survey does not attempt a broad sampling, but a deep and thoughtful analysis of five consequential thinkers: Celsus, Porphyry, the pagan voice in Macarius Magnes's *Apocriticus*, Hierocles and Julian.

Cook begins with rhetoric types as a point of entry. Students new to the tools of rhetorical and literary discourse will find this a helpful introduction, though there is also sufficient detail to hold the interest of longtime scholars; in either case, the review helps Cook to establish the deliberative style and often apotroptic (dissuasive) tone present in many of his selected texts. He also notes the Hellenistic world's attention to

persuasive factors found most often in epideictic reasoning, especially the skilful combination of ἦθος (the speaker's moral character), λόγος (the speech and its proofs), and πάθος (emotional appeal to the audience). Building on this introduction, Cook addresses his five subjects in chronological order, though he often retraces his earlier steps to make points regarding the later critics.

Celsus receives the first and most thorough treatment of the critics profiled. Focusing attention on the critic's reading of the Gospel accounts as fiction, Cook establishes a spectrum of credibility for the biblical texts, running from mythical stories to literal history; this focus remains relevant in contemporary theological debate. Celsus's arguments are filtered (and possibly rearranged) through Origen in *Contra Celsum*, so Cook must be careful when making his own changes to the texts, as he does in 'recasting' Celsus's objections to follow the narrative order of the Synoptic Gospels. Matthew's account is of primary interest to Celsus, who attacks the credibility of the life, teaching and death of Jesus. He finds the resurrection distasteful and even contrary to nature; no god, as Celsus conceives of deity, would suffer such a demeaning and painful death, or allow a return to life in an ignoble state—for Celsus objected to the gross physicality of the resurrection on philosophical grounds, and to the Gospels' concern shown for lowly Palestine on geographical grounds. He finds little of value in the cross, the supposed support from the 'mythical' Hebrew Scriptures, or the prophetic and apocalyptic statements of the New Testament. Ultimately, Cook portrays Celsus as a 'defender of the cultural consensus' who 'viewed his work and philosophy as a definitive refutation of Christianity and its basis' (pp. 99, 102).

Cook finds an even more effective refutation in the work of Porphyry. Writing in the third century, Porphyry constructed a polemic based on exegesis of the Christians' Scriptures and harsh criticism of their apologetics. Porphyry apparently admired Christ as a teacher and gave him a modicum of respect as a heroic protagonist, but he was angered by Origen's allegorical combination of Greek philosophy and Jewish religious tradition. Cook observes the charges of impiety and impropriety that flew between Christians and pagans: Porphyry identifies Christ's teachings as impious and his mixing with 'sinners' as unsuitable behaviour, while Jerome later responds by labeling Porphyry, Celsus and Julian as "'impious" commentators' (pp. 134-35). Cook establishes Porphyry as an exegetical critic, feared by the

Christians for his ability to point out inconsistencies in their attempts to harmonize the Synoptic accounts; he subsequently labels the skilled ‘technique of finding contradictions’ as ‘Porphyrian’ (p. 160), and locates the critic’s legacy in a furious response of Christian counter-propaganda. Students of hermeneutics will find ample room for analysis here, as the conflict between competing frameworks is seldom more historically evident. Porphyry, Cook asserts, tries to show ‘that Hellenistic culture provides more adequate grounds for understanding texts than Christianity does’ (pp. 163-64).

Cook readily admits that the pagan of Macarius’s *Apocriticus* may be a fictional construct, but the work still represents the most extensive example of extant pagan commentary on the New Testament; certainly it is also the most ‘historically obscure’ of Cook’s sources, but it remains important for its dual attack on the Gospel accounts and the Pauline Epistles (pp. 168-69). The length of consideration is second only to that reserved for Celsus. Macarius’s philosopher, like Celsus, is concerned with the fictional character of the Gospels, and unconvinced by their attempts at historical narrative. Cook cites repeated application of ‘Porphyrian’ exegetical methods, as when the philosopher pronounces the Passion narrative to be a ‘discordant’ example of ‘inconsistent mythmaking (ἀσύμφωνος...μυθοποιία)’ (pp. 196-97). The critic points out internal inconsistencies in Paul’s writings, and thinks the apostle’s eschatology too bizarre to be credible; like Celsus, Macarius’s pagan cannot tolerate the apocalyptic nature of Christian hope, as it ‘disturbs the order of creation which should remain everlasting (αἰώνια)’ (p. 242).

Hierocles and Julian are treated only briefly, but Cook does well to evoke the historical moments in which they wrote. Hierocles is depicted as an active persecutor, employing the powers of law and logic to guide Christians back to a more culturally-acceptable path. In the midst of the Great Persecution of 303, his work functions as an apologetic for pagan society, using deliberative rhetoric as much for protreptic reasoning—preaching the benefits of the Hellenist world and worldview—as for dissuasive argument. Cook implies a sense of desperation here. ‘One senses that paganism felt the power of Christian persuasion and needed to find ways to defuse the threat’, he states, and later asks whether these critics could ‘feel the pillars of Olympus tottering’ (pp. 275-76). Cook wisely investigates Julian’s ‘apostate’ status, as his conversion from Christianity to Neo-Platonism indicates just how unimpressed Julian

was with Christ—and Christians. As Porphyry did before him, Julian finds fault with the Christian attempt to harmonize elements of Judaism and Hellenism, and he engages with deep issues of textual criticism, comparing the Gospel accounts with one another and with the traditions of Greek mythology. Julian brings his own experience to bear in attacking such practices as baptism, and condemns Christian attitudes regarding the differences between their own worship practices and those of the pagans. He echoes Celsus's skeptical comments on polytheism: why should the supreme God identify with one small area such as Israel, rather than the whole earth? Cook skillfully highlights arguments that sound surprisingly modern; Julian's polytheism is grounded in the logic of historical example, the antecedent of contributions from Paul Tillich and other theologians.

Cook's conclusion sums up the critics' unfavourable response to Christianity and the New Testament, revisiting the distinctions drawn between true and false, fact and fiction, in a battle of both political and religious propaganda. Seeking to distill his findings in a coherent format, he structures his critics' shared objections around the Apostles' Creed, forming a sort of *via negativa* Pagans' Creed. The familiarity of the Creed makes it a natural choice for this final review, but the critics' views are taken somewhat out of context in order to formulate the appropriate responses; readers are left knowing only what these men did *not* believe, and little about what they *did*. Given the chance, what positive statements would they have affirmed, relative to their interpretation of the New Testament, as part of a common credo?

Several answers can be inferred from the points that Cook traces throughout his book. Social criticism is one such factor that gives shape to Cook's analysis, as these critics shared a concern over the character of Christian converts, and the likelihood of damage to the social fabric. Celsus is pictured as a 'social conservative', preserving the status quo of Hellenism; Christians deserved to be persecuted for dishonouring the emperor and the gods, for the alternative was 'social anarchy' (pp. 17, 90). Porphyry sought to discourage conversions, and targeted Origen as an 'apostate' pagan (pp. 128-33). Macarius's pagan opponent described Paul's opinions as uneducated, even 'ignorant (*ἀπαίδευτον*)' (p. 217). Hierocles urged 'wayward Christians' to repent and return to a more credible worldview, while Julian, according to Cook, made it his goal to 'reclaim the world for Hellenism' (pp. 274, 283). Another example might be the common quest to understand the content of Christianity's

sacred literature, albeit with hermeneutics decidedly different from those of the early Church. Celsus even goes so far as to formulate an ‘alternative christology’ (reconstructed by Cook, pp. 69-70). These critics read stories from the Gospels as examples of myth, conceived in a manner compatible with the mythic accounts they know. Cook is often forced to reconstruct arguments based on incomplete texts, but his conclusions would be stronger if he took more time to tie together the promising threads that unite these critics in a common cause.

Cook’s work is an intriguing experiment in intertextuality. After each section of commentary, he offers succinct one-sentence summaries that serve as a digest of material recently covered; these sections often refer to similar views espoused by earlier and later critics. These inter-critic comparisons help to build Cook’s case for a coherent debate, stretching across the centuries, but the ‘debate’ is only visible after the fact, through a diachronic (and at times synchronic) reading of the pagan critics and their Christian counterparts. Cook pictures opposing sides of a battlefield, with the ‘arsenal of Hellenistic literary criticism, rhetoric, historical criticism, and philosophy’ pitted against the ‘extraordinary persuasive power of ancient Christian texts and proclamation’ (p. 340). His underlying assumption, both here and throughout the book, is that his selected critics have enough in common to be addressed as a united front against Christianity. Can ‘Hellenism’ and ‘paganism’ be used interchangeably? Can we speak of ‘the pagans’ as a cohesive and unified group?

Cook, in restructuring his subjects’ thoughts around the New Testament corpus, successfully demonstrates a shared interest in undermining the spread of Christianity; each critic is portrayed as responding to perceived problems and inconsistencies in Christian texts. He mines with enviable facility the overlapping strata of textual commentary, unearthing facets of similar thought. Beyond this unsurprising overlap, his case for a common Hellenist/pagan agenda is less convincing. But the author’s use of rhetoric remains a helpful analytical device, and readers are unlikely to find such a thorough and thoughtful comparison of early New Testament criticism in any other individual source. Especially for readers already familiar with the structure of the New Testament canon, Cook’s text clearly provides an array of responses to Christian literature and practice in the ancient world—and illustrates Paul’s references to the message of the cross as

scandalous, even 'foolishness' (1 Cor. 1.23), in the eyes and ears of the Greco-Roman world.

Matthew Forrest Lowe
McMaster Divinity College