

BOOK REVIEW

Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005). xxxvi + 539 pp. Hdbk. US\$34.95.

Craig Evans's new volume represents a significantly reworked and expanded form of his earlier title, *Noncanonical Writings and New Testament Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992). The book is intended as a reference work, not something to be read through in sequence. Written at a level accessible to students, *Ancient Texts* should also be useful to veteran scholars who require (as most of us do!) occasional reorientation and re-introduction to less familiar areas of ancient literary study; librarians may want to keep a few copies on hand as well, for their own use and to offer as a research aid.

In an introductory chapter, Evans gives a brief overview of the writings he will survey and sets out the value of this investigation in facilitating New Testament exegesis. Word and concept meanings, syntax, and socio-historical, religious, exegetical, hermeneutical and canonical contexts are all determined in part by the New Testament authors' literary environment; so the corpora surveyed here 'help us understand how biblical literature was interpreted and what role it played in the life of the Jewish and Christian communities of faith' (p. 5), and by extension, how the same literature is to be interpreted, and what role(s) it may play, in the modern age. This review joins Evans in his corpus-by-corpus survey, concluding with assessments of his book's methodology and organization.

Evans begins with Old Testament Apocrypha, moving from the origins of the name to a synopsis and bibliography for each book considered. He sets aside another section of the chapter for discussion of the 'political and theological themes' presented in the Apocrypha: 'God' is rendered as one (broad!) theme, made more specific with reference to particular titles, attributes, and activities, such as the *ex nihilo* innovation of 2 Macc. 7.28 (p. 22). Other themes include

Zionism, defense of the Hasmonean dynasty, the Messiah, resurrection, eschatology, and the canon of Scripture.

The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha is an ‘amorphous’ collection of several literary genres from various compositional eras, with some of these differences evident within individual works, as Evans points out in his analysis of *1 Enoch*. Meanings and origins of various terms are made more problematic by this lack of cohesion; many of the texts have only the pseudepigraphal label in common. Evans follows the subdivisions of Charlesworth’s *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, mapping out apocalyptic works, testaments, Old Testament-expansive material, sapiential and philosophical works, prayers and psalms, and fragments; among the summaries, the reader finds special attention given to messianic and cosmological themes, as well as some of the political themes mentioned in the previous chapter (as in the denunciation of Rome in *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*). The distinctions between pseudepigrapha and apocrypha, and between pseudepigraphal subdivisions, are not always clearly drawn, but Evans often manages to provide the essence of the introductory essays in Charlesworth’s collection in a few short paragraphs.

Scrolls from Qumran and other important sites are discussed in the third and longest chapter; with summaries structured again by genre and followed with major themes, Evans notes numerous parallels between the scrolls, the New Testament, and their respective interpretive traditions, as in the appropriation of the psalms. Some traditions are fragmentary, while others are described as full ‘cycles’. Evans’s assessment continues to be weighted toward matters relevant to the New Testament, so that messianic tendencies, the *peshet* commentary style, and questions of communal identity receive extensive treatment. The bibliographies, while expansive, necessarily omit some resources that emerged shortly before publication: Magen Broshi’s article ‘What Jesus Learned from the Essenes’ (*BAR* 30.1 [Jan/Feb 2004], pp. 32-37, 64) is but one example of further reinforcement for Evans’s research.

The chapter on versions of the Old Testament explores the ‘range of possible readings’ available to New Testament authors (p. 155), with an emphasis on the languages and translation issues involved; Evans briefly extends his evaluation to English versions, though he does not explain what he means by the ‘best’ English translations (p. 157). Textual criticism occupies all of Evans’s thematic attention here, with

examples of Old Testament translation relevant to New Testament study.

Philo and Josephus are the subjects of Chapter 5, where the author highlights their evident principles of biblical interpretation and the ways in which these methods overlap with those of the New Testament. Their contributions are neither direct nor obvious, but Evans guides the reader toward carefully gleaned conclusions, from possible Philonic typology at work in Paul's and John's Christologies, to Josephus's retellings of biblical and Palestinian history.

Chapters 6 and 7 consider targumic and rabbinic writings. As with the discussion of Philo and Josephus, interpretive methods are foremost in these sections: Evans comments on the congruity of traditions (in Luke and the *Targum to the Former Prophets*) based in Hannah's song in 1 Samuel, on moments where Jesus' teachings appear to 'reflect targumic tradition' (pp. 194 and 203-207), and on similar occurrences of the deep searching inherent to midrashic exegesis (pp. 233 and 246-53), showing an interfluentiality between the New Testament and rabbinic works. Evans skillfully draws out differences in interpretation, too, as in the varying halakic connections between Hos. 6.6 and promises of atonement in Matthew and the *Pirqe Abot (PRE)*. He consistently provides SBL-recommended abbreviations for those new to these disciplines, and offers directions for further research, such as the relationship between the New Testament and the Aramaic Psalter.

The next three chapters review New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, the writings of the early church Fathers, and Gnostic works. Evans stresses the importance (and pejorative nature) of labels here, and the simultaneous independence and intermingling of literary traditions. The *Gospel of Thomas*, for instance, begins to answer some of the questions of Synoptic development: though not a version of Q, *Thomas* 'is certainly an example of the Q genre' (p. 258). Evans's own analysis could lead to fruitful classroom discussions on generic distinctions, and perhaps on historicity as well; the historical reliability of sources and the early church's awareness of pseudepigraphy will continue to be dominant issues in the field. Evans presents the patristic writers as preservers, translators and interpreters of tradition(s); students will appreciate the help he offers in negotiating this chapter, with parenthetical reminders (John Chrysostom is not to be confused with Dio Chrysostom, p. 275, repeated in Dio Chrysostom's entry under Greco-Roman authors, p. 290) and recommended series for studying

and citing these early works. Studies of Gnostic literature are organized around the Jesus traditions, the New Testament's nascent Christologies, and the Mandaean materials. This chapter and the previous one are quite brief; additional space might have been given to some of the themes that emerge from studying these corpora, in such a way as to complement the prescribed primary and secondary sources.

'Other Writings' features brief descriptions of important Greco-Roman literary figures (where an indication of each figure's primary compositional language would have been welcomed by newcomers) and a further précis on each author known to have commented upon Jesus or early Christianity. Next comes a survey touching on *Corpus hermeticum*, Samaritan writings, and the vast collection of 'nonliterary' papyri, public inscriptions, epitaphs (including the putative James Ossuary), coins and ostraca. From Achilles Tatius to Zosimus, the Greco-Romans are valued most here for the background information they provide, filling in the New Testament's rich context. Evans also summarizes Dodd's parallels between the Hermetica and the Johannine corpus, in keeping with his own mandate to seek out parallels and other features with a 'bearing' on the New Testament. Evans's attention to the imperial cult under the headings of inscriptions and coins is helpful, given recent interest in these areas, though a sampling of relevant ideological considerations—perhaps from Paul Zanker, Larry Kreitzer or John Crossan—might have helped to cement these connections in the otherwise excellent bibliography.

The last chapter offers examples of New Testament exegesis by way of illustrating the value of the surveyed literature. He draws examples from the Pauline epistles and the canonical Gospels: Qumran's interpretation of Isa. 61.1-2 illuminates Jesus' sermon at Nazareth, as he invokes and then seems to betray his hearers' messianic hopes; comparison with the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* potentially reverses the Parable of the Talents/Pounds; patristic interpretation of LXX Ps. 46.6 recontextualizes Paul's christologically advanced language in 1 Thess. 4.16. Evans closes his study about two-thirds of the way through the volume.

The remainder is given to six appendices and three extensive indices. A brief chart of Apocrypha-inclusive canons (Roman Catholic, Greek and Russian Orthodox, and Coptic) is followed by a listing in canonical order of 'Quotations, Allusions, and Parallels to the New Testament'. Such a title is itself open to interpretation: though it is intended as

illustrative rather than comprehensive, readers are left to discern the differences between these categories, and to discover whether Evans's unstated criteria match their own. Appendix 3 is also concerned with parallels, here between canonical and pseudepigraphal Gospels and Gospel-sources; the fourth appended piece measures Jesus' parables next to rabbinic (largely tannaic) parables, while the fifth marks similarities between Jesus' miracles (both canonical and apocryphal) and the recorded acts of Jewish holy men. The final appendix amounts to a short essay on messianic claimants of the first and second centuries CE, covering biblical and historical precedents, messianic would-be kings, and messianic prophets and priests. A quick-reference index of ancient writings and writers, cross-referenced with chapter numbers indicating more detailed discussion, is included along with the customary indices of modern authors and ancient sources. While an additional subject or thematic index would be valuable, it would be almost prohibitively difficult to arrange with any coherence.

Given the amassed information Evans must present, organization is of paramount importance to this book. In most chapters, bibliographies are handily divided into categories that focus respectively on text, general survey, commentary, and critical study. More broadly, presentation is dictated by the roles each corpus has played, either in influencing the shape of the New Testament or in reflecting comparable developments. Evans alights frequently upon processes of redaction, examining the recasting, reworking, and editing of biblical and literary traditions. It is often the *degree* of this effect that concerns Evans, and such assessments can be subjective: where he finds 'little influence' (p. 58) from the *Psalms of Solomon* in the New Testament, Richard Horsley and Neil Silberman credit the same source with a powerful shift in messianic expectations, hopes that would have been fundamental to the New Testament authors' initial worldview (*The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997], p. 15).

Degrees of influence are also pivotal to Evans's investigative methodology. The portion of his introduction reserved for 'method' is strongly inclined toward discerning the Old Testament's presence in the New Testament, framed with well-chosen criterional questions; but stating that after considering these questions, 'one's exegesis will be in large measure complete' (p. 7) risks reducing the importance of the literature outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition, along with the

questions posed by some newer forms of New Testament criticism, such as those based in narrative, performance and orality, linguistics, rhetoric, and imperial studies. The emphasis on hearing the Old Testament in the New also colors Evans's language, as his use of words like 'recalls' suggests levels of (synchronic?) intertextuality (e.g. pp. 71, 194) that may trouble some readers. As was mentioned earlier, at other points the author's choice of words opens up attractive conversational possibilities: he describes midrash and pseudepigraphy as both literary conventions *and* phenomena, drawing attention to the communal and ecclesial ramifications of these practices. Overall, Evans's commentary is a cogent supplement to his selection of primary sources. While readers may well dispute his finer points and even some of his methodological choices, they will value his book as much more than a simple reference text.

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