

BOOK REVIEW

Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 3rd edn, 2006). 331 pp. Pbk. US\$21.99.

The third edition of *The Apostolic Fathers in English* furthers Michael Holmes revision of J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer's classic introductory text begun in the second edition. Holmes is Chair of the Department of Biblical and Theological Studies at Bethel University, with a primary interest in New Testament and early Christianity. This edition is meant to secure the text's continuing value as an introduction to the writings of the post-apostolic church through improved and gender-inclusive translation, improved presentation and layout, expansion of the footnotes and revised introductions.

The Apostolic Fathers in English is designed primarily as an introductory volume for students in patristic studies. The volume opens with a helpful introduction to the historical circumstances of the Christian church during the time in which these documents were authored. Thereafter the text is composed of translations of significant writings from the orthodox early church, accompanied by introductions to orient the reader. The introductions use the typical style found in biblical commentaries, discussing author, date, occasion, text variants, etc. with variations as dictated by the subject matter. Bibliographies are included in each introduction.

The first documents presented are *1* and *2 Clement*, each of which is given its own introduction. This is in accordance with the understanding that *1 Clement* is an epistle from Rome to Corinth addressing a schism, whereas *2 Clement* is best read as a record of a notable sermon, possibly preached in Corinth soon after the resolution of the schism, which was eventually attached to *1 Clement* in the codices.

Following these are the seven letters of Ignatius of Antioch, grouped together under one introduction. These letters, which Holmes reasonably regards as authentic, provide a fascinating view into the post-apostolic development of theologies of Christ's divinity and humanity, of

ecclesiology and of martyrdom. Immediately following is the *Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians*, which is historically connected to the same occasion as the Ignatian letters and includes a wealth of Old and New Testament references in its hortatory discussion of righteousness. Logical progression places *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* next in the volume. As Holmes insightfully notes, this narrative aims to present a theology of ‘martyrdom in accord with the gospel’ (p. 143), which was an increasingly pressing need for the church.

Next is *The Didache*, or *The Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles by the Twelve Apostles*, an instructional document compiling several apparently early materials, including ethical teaching, directions for church order and interaction with traveling apostles and prophets, and a short (truncated?) apocalypse. Holmes notes numerous similarities to New Testament passages in the footnotes, though the only plausible direct relationships are with Matthew, and perhaps Luke.

The Epistle of Barnabas uses the form of an epistle to deliver a polemical interpretation of Old Testament Scriptures to assert Christianity’s superiority over Judaism. As Holmes notes, it is one of the early examples of the allegorical method of interpretation that would flourish in early and medieval Christian exegesis. This is followed by *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a composite of accounts of visions (in apocalyptic style but of ethical content), short homilies (the ‘Commandments’), and allegories (the ‘Parables’). A popular document in the early church, *The Shepherd* exhibits ‘a Christianity whose piety (much like that of *The Didache* and *Barnabas*) is centered on observing the divine commandments and self-control’ (p. 200).

The Epistle to Diognetus is included as an early example of Christian apologetics, or rather of two partial apologetic documents that became conflated due to accidents of history. Finally, the fragments of Papias provide ‘some of the very earliest testimony about the early church’s stance on the millennium and the authorship of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Revelation’ (p. 302). To these are appended additional fragments from Irenaeus, which contain traditions believed to be handed down from the post-apostolic period. A comprehensive index and maps close the volume.

The essential component of a work like this is the translation of the texts themselves. Certainly from the perspective of the English-speaking reader, Holmes has carried out this task masterfully. The translations read fluidly and accessibly as English text. Moreover, the

quality and style of the original authors shine through the translations remarkably well. Especially notable is the translation of Ignatius, whose lively prose appears to lose little of its bounce in this rendering. The importance of this attention to style becomes evident in the comparison of different texts: differences between the tenor and nuance of Polycarp's exhortation to righteousness and that of *The Shepherd* are invaluable in helping the reader grasp the divergence between the underlying theology and piety of the works.

Holmes's decision to use gender-inclusive language as much as possible in this edition is a welcome one. For the most part this program is executed well, though there inevitably remain a few awkward phrases. A slight improvement could be obtained by replacing the occasional use of 'humans' with the simpler 'men and women' or 'people'.

The third edition no longer notes instances where Holmes's text and interpretation differ from Lightfoot's, opting instead to expand the number of cross-references to Scripture provided in the footnotes. This is a wise change, since the typical reader of the work is far more likely to be interested in the latter than the former. However, Holmes makes a significant misstep with the decision to simplify the footnote references to textual variation. Unlike the simple references found in popular Bible translations, these notes are likely to be read by students who would benefit from greater detail regarding matters of textual criticism. Holmes directs interested readers to the apparatus provided in the Greek and English parallel edition, which is both inconvenient to the reader who has this text in hand and potentially discouraging to introductory students who have not yet acquired their Greek but are nevertheless interested in textual matters. Since earlier editions already contained more detail, the decision to reduce the information available appears both unnecessary and unhelpful.

The introductions are well-written and useful for general orientation to the texts. Moreover, Holmes sketches for the reader the current state of scholarly debate surrounding each text. An introductory collection is not, however, the place to engage in debate with fellow scholars, and the reader will need to look elsewhere for in-depth discussion of dating, authorship, etc. The bibliographies included in each introduction have been updated with the most recent scholarship and provide ample direction for further investigation. Unfortunately, the introduction to the fragments of Papias is a low point among these otherwise excellent introductions. Holmes's discussion of the relationship of Papias to Jn

7.53–8.11 suffers from too much compression of somewhat convoluted subject matter, and consumes an inordinate amount of space that could otherwise have been used to enrich understanding of the rest of these fascinating fragments. Holmes appears to be trying to make the best of Lightfoot's inclusion of Jn 7.53–8.11 while disagreeing with the decision to do so. Holmes's solution (retaining the passage while highlighting those parts of it that he conjectures Papias actually knew) is less than satisfying, since it provides us with little real information about either the passage or about Papias. One wonders if it would not have been better to simply omit the passage, and make a note to that effect in the introduction.

The refreshed layout and presentation in the third edition is a substantial help to the reader. Clearly displayed chapter and verse numbers make quick reference to the texts an easy task. The insertion of subheadings into the translation provides helpful orientation and guidance to the reader—along with the concomitant risk to the reader's interpretive freedom. The footnotes are clear and unobtrusive, opting not to interrupt the main text with markers and instead to identify both the location and words being referenced within the footnote itself. A few typographical errors can be found, almost all of which involve missing spaces between a closing quotation mark and a subsequent uppercase letter. The footnote for *Ignatius to the Ephesians* 15.1 contains a reference to a phrase that actually occurs in 15.3.

The index of ancient sources at the end of the volume will be useful to anyone curious about what influence works like 1 Samuel, Sirach, Titus, or the *Gospel of Thomas* might have had on the Apostolic Fathers. The maps detailing the spread of early Christianity and the route of Ignatius are helpful for setting these documents in their geographical context.

The third edition of *The Apostolic Fathers in English* will be an excellent resource for students entering patristic studies or for scholars in related disciplines who do not need access to the original texts. Those who have or plan to have competence in Greek, or who are interested in text critical matters, may opt for Holmes's third edition of *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*.

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