Greco-Roman Culture and the New Testament: Studies Commemorating the Centennial of the Pontifical Biblical Institute

David E. Aune and Frederick E. Brenk

This is the last of four volumes published to commemorate the centenary of the Pontifical Biblical Institute. The preface provides a short history of the school and its research interests as the basis for this collection of essays which explores the inter-relationship of the New Testament with its Greco-Roman contexts. The nine essays which make up the bulk of the book explore a number of themes across a range which includes philosophical and religious material, and come from the pens or computers of highly-regarded scholars. Most are concerned with themes which are primarily drawn from philosophical and religious material. Bruce Winter’s article on the imperial cult at Corinth (“The Enigma of Imperial Cult Activities and Paul in Corinth”) interrupts this pattern by drawing significant evidence from archaeology and inscriptions. Significantly, this same essay also identifies how Gallio’s judgment impinges on themes of identity, suggesting that the Christians in Corinth were identified as Jewish by the Roman authorities.

As the title suggests these essays focus on the Greco-Roman dimension of the subjects under consideration. On occasion this appears to give an imbalance. Thus Adela Yarbro Collins’ overview of heavenly ascent literature (“Traveling Up and Away: Journeys to the Upper and Outer Regions of the World”) offers a heuristic typology of the different ascent types, which includes Second Temple literature such as the Enochic writings, but barely references the earlier helakhot literature, and so risks divorcing such material from Ezekiel. This essay also shows how compartmentalized New Testament research may become; the social scientific model adopted by scholars like Malina and Pilch rates no reference in what is primarily an engagement with literary sources.

Justin Taylor (“The Role of Rhetorical Elaboration in the Formation of Mark’s Passion Narrative [Mark 14:43–16:8]: An Enquiry”) revisits the chreia hypothesis, to reject Vernon K. Robbins’ claim that the passion
narratives are expansions of chreiai into a longer narrative. The elephant in the room here is the view that chreiai, which might attribute the same stock materials to a number of historical personages, are not essentially reliable historiographical literary forms. The essay focuses on Robbins’ own central claims about the expansion of chreiai, but in so doing reveals how much his work has limited the exploration of chreiai. The dominant assumption is that chreiai are expanded, and this has become the focus of such explorations: whether such claims are compatible with the practices recorded in the grammatical exercises of antiquity. Yet those same exercises include the condensing of chreiai. It is worth asking whether the texts claimed as the brief original chreiai which are then expanded or elaborated (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34) might not have been the results of a process of condensation or abbreviation.

Elsewhere a common pattern involves the nuancing of the world of Greco-Roman philosophy. Most clearly seen in Troels Engberg-Pedersen’s reading of the Johannine Logos (“Logos and Pneuma in the Fourth Gospel”) against a background of Stoicism, this approach questions the dominance of Middle Platonism as the governing characteristic of the philosophical landscape. This tendency itself emerges in later Christian tradition which privileged Platonism and tended to ignore the, by then, less fashionable schools: a tendency which is revealed in Reydams-Schils’ essay (“Clement of Alexandria on Woman and Marriage in the Light of the New Testament Household Codes”). Engberg-Pedersen makes a persuasive case for the reading of John 1, 3 and 6 against a primarily Stoic background: a strategy which resolves a number of issues that remain difficult if viewed through the prism of Platonism. Similar patterns emerge in Frederick Brenk’s article on love (“Most Beautiful and Divine: Graeco-Romans (especially Plutarch), and Paul, on Love and Marriage”) which also engages with Epicurean thinking as mediated through Lucretius and Philodemus.

Whilst many of the essays engage with the better known philosophers, Dieter Zeller’s “Pauline Paraenesis and Greek Gnomic Wisdom” looks to gnomic traditions to consider their similarities with the Pauline literature. The research here also raises the possibility of how gnomic utterances might have shaped the preservation of Jesus’ teaching, particularly in those gospels addressed primarily to Graeco-Roman audiences.

The essays also share a convergence in terms of their method. Unlike the earlier history of religions school (whose work is well summarised in Adela Yarbro Collins’ article), the focus is on resonance rather than genealogy; that is, it is concerned to show how the New Testament texts use the literary forms
and thought forms of Greco-Roman culture to appreciate how texts were read and understood rather than where they had come from. In itself, this suggests a move away from preoccupations with Christian uniqueness and the implications that shared forms and expressions undermined the value or claims being made about the subject matter. The significance for this as a reading strategy is well seen in David Aune’s essay (“The Polyvalent Imagery of Rev 3:20 in the Light of Greco-Egyptian Divination Texts”). Aune claims no origin for the understanding of Jesus in such materials, but rather their significance as a means of reading the text. As a result, this, in turn, suggests that more modern readings of the text as symbolic of conversion may be rejected. It is worth noting that A.D. Nock’s *Conversion* which precluded modern conceptions of conversion from the Greco-Roman world would indicate the same. As a result, such a popular interpretation of Rev 3:20 as Holman Hunt’s “The Light of the World” famously described by the late Robertson Davies as depicting Jesus going to the outside privy and finding it already occupied, is revealed as a modern rather than a classical reading.

The essays in this volume stress the significance of Greco-Roman culture in the interpretation of the New Testament, not, as has sometimes happened in the history of biblical studies, because of ideological presuppositions critical of Christianity or Judaism, but because it is a vital part of the multicultural matrix from which the New Testament writing emerged, and deserves to be read in tandem with other offerings which stress the Judaic context.

Fergus J. King
University of Newcastle, New South Wales