

Braun, Willi, ed. *Rhetoric and Reality in Early Christianities*. Studies in Christianity and Judaism/Études sur le christianisme et le judaïsme 16. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005. x + 257 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 9780889204621. \$85.00.

The publication of a collection of papers five years after the conference in which they were presented often is like a great dinner served a day after it is prepared. There is a bit of staleness to it, and one would rather eat what the chef was preparing now, even if of a more simple fare. Fortunately, that is not always the case here, even though these 2000 conference papers are not published until 2005. For the most part, articles have been updated for publication, at least in regard to the bibliographies, some of which are quite extensive. Also, not all of the articles come from the conference, although it is not possible to determine how those particular chapters came to be part of this collection, or even which articles these were and when they were originally written.

The collection reviewed here comes from a conference held at the University of Alberta in the spring of 2000. Most of the authors are Canadian academics. Of the nine chapters, Braun's "Rhetoric, Rhetorality, and Discourse Performances" attempts to situate each article within the project. Most of the articles are case studies of ancient documents or of specific modern treatments of ancient documents, rather than more theoretical discussions of rhetoric. For the most part, the authors of these articles share a view of the text as *part* of a broader set of rhetorical performances, as do, for the most part, the modern authors who occasionally are examined by them. But there the sharing ends, and we have diverse and sometimes starkly conflicting senses of how to understand the rhetorical situation of a text and its community. Indeed, we might label the larger efforts in scholarship on this subject as "rhetoric and reality in the modern treatment of early Christian rhetoric," so diverse are conclusions about the same document. I use the word "document" intentionally here, for no matter how broadly we define the field of rhetoric, it is to a text that generally we gather for discussion: for example, the *Gospel of Thomas*, Melito's *Peri Pascha*, Acts, and Colossians. Even the chapters that focus on a

social phenomenon have that phenomenon made accessible by texts, as in John Kitchen's "Raised from Dung': Hagiography, Liberation, and the Social Subversiveness of Early Medieval Christianity" and Theodore S. de Bruyn's "Philosophical Counsel versus Customary Lament in Fourth-Century Christian Responses to Death." Luther H. Martin's "Performativity, Narrative, and Cognition: 'Demythologizing' the Roman Cult of Mithras," reminds us, however, that there is the rare exception, where text and dogma seem to make no appearance on a stage dominated by image and rite.

Each chapter plays with rhetoric to some degree. William E. Arnal ("The Rhetoric of Social Construction: Language and Society in the Gospel of Thomas") examines the contradictory images of *Thomas* and ponders the correspondence between the language of the text and the experience of its society. Laurence Broadhurst ("Melito of Sardis, the Second Sophistic, and 'Israel'") looks specifically at Melito's comments about Israel in *Peri Pascha*, setting the language in the context of Second Sophist rhetoric. In light of this, he examines the treatments of Mariam Taylor and Judith Lieu, both of whom try to pick apart the rhetorical fabric of the text and each of whom come to starkly different conclusions, with Broadhurst siding with Lieu. Todd Penner ("Early Christian Heroes and Lukan Narrative: Stephen and the Hellenists in Ancient Historiographical Perspective") examines the Hellenists of Acts and the Stephen speech. Although his treatment of Greek historical writing is illuminating, one wonders whether he needs to date Acts perhaps as late as the fourth decade of the second century and whether he needs to promote his interpretation by pointing out its utility to revise negative Christian interpretations of Judaism. Margaret MacDonald ("Can Nympha Rule This House? The Rhetoric of Domesticity in Colossians") deals with the household codes of Colossians and the surprising leadership role that Nympha seems to have, seemingly in contradiction to the household codes. MacDonald challenges the readings of both Fiorenza and Dunn, and speculates that Nympha "may have known that she could work around the rules." The chapters by Kitchen, de Bruyn and Martin have been mentioned already, and deal with a somewhat later period of a non-Christian phenomenon. The

final chapter, by Chad Kile, is titled “Feeling Persuaded: Christianization as Social Formation,” which is a way into discussing the Christianization of the ancient world, where it is still possible to find that phenomenon largely described in terms of doctrine and belief. This view is more troubled by the survival of so-called *remnants of paganism* that *survive* within the Christian church. Kile finds in theories of social formation a more adequate key that helps to eliminate the incompatibility between Christianization and supposedly “non-Christian” sensibilities and practices.

Are the articles successful? Yes, as individual articles, each contributes something worthy of consideration for anyone working on that particular topic. Is the book successful? That is less certain, although we can say that the articles, as a whole, are successful in pointing out that scholars must be aware of the broad dimensions of rhetoric in studies of the ancient world. But we are a long way off from finding in this new focus on rhetoric, no matter how broadly cast, the key by which the world of early Christianity will now become significantly more accurately described. What we do learn well from this book and from the larger efforts in the field of rhetoric is that in our squeezing of the rhetorical “turnip,” a fair amount of the spilled blood seems to be coming from wounds inflicted by scholar on scholar rather than from the turnip itself.

In the struggle over rhetoric and reality, we should not privilege one above the other. Rather, much like a play in which there is both script and performance, each equally being “the play,” so it is generally with the traditions we study. There is “the preached” and “the performed”; there is what is taught from the pulpit and what is taken home by the parishioner. And a point that is easily missed in the discussions of rhetoric is that these are more compatible than contradictory, two sides of one world rather than foreign territories oceans apart.

Tom Robinson,
University of Lethbridge