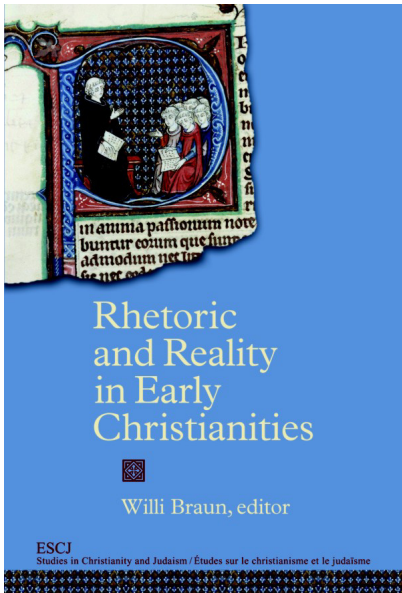


RBL 06/2006



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.
Pp. x + 257. Hardcover. \$59.95. ISBN 0889204624.

John S. Kloppenborg
University of Toronto
Toronto, ON, Canada M5S 1H8

This volume of essays, which originated in a 2000 seminar at the Congress of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Alberta, draws attention to both to the gap between the ideas or *logos* of early Christian discourse and its persuasive force and to the gap between the rhetorical presentation of reality in early Christian discourse and the difficulties involved in reading that reality from the text. In the words of the editor, Willi Braun, the aim of the volume is “to destabilize the habit of seeing the persuasion of and to early Graeco-Roman Christianities as the effect of ideas, which one can put up for inspection and analyze on the model of a stationary, stable text” (4).

Eight essays follow the editor’s introduction. In “The Rhetoric of Social Construction: Language and Society in the *Gospel of Thomas*” (27–47) William E. Arnal argues that, in contrast to Philo, who held that while the language of biblical texts conceals meanings not immediately present at the ‘surface’ or literal level, the true meaning is nonetheless not incompatible with the surface meaning, the *Gospel of Thomas* takes the opposite view. The true meaning of a text is concealed in ordinary language and yet does not subsist at a deeper level to be reached according to the skill of the interpreter’s intellect. Instead, it is antiworldly, eluding the grasp of the wise, but nonetheless there to be “found.” Whereas Philo’s hermeneutical theory implies “an intellectual hierarchy that

provides a model for social order” (30), *Thomas’s* vision of the kingdom “encodes a social vision in which perfection, salvation, the presence of the Father, and the like, is hidden *within* the world at large, utterly opposed to it, and yet, to the unenlightened, and at the present moment, indistinguishable from it” (33). *Thomas’s* willing embrace of seeming contradictions—for example, poverty is an evil in sayings 3 and 29 but blessed in saying 54—deconstructs language itself: “the Kingdom *is* the destruction of linguistic (and other) distinctions, or is the realization that such distinctions are unsustainable and unreal” (38).

In an elegantly argued essay, “Melito of Sardis, the Second Sophistic, and ‘Israel’ ” (49–74), Laurence Broadhurst engages the view of Miriam Taylor (*Antijudaism and Early Christianity* [SPB 46; Leiden: Brill, 1995], that Melito’s anti-Jewish rant should be seen as an intramural exercise in Christian theorizing and “cannot simultaneously be interpreted as referring to a living Judaism from which useful information can be gleaned about Jewish-Christian interaction” (141). While Broadhurst concedes the point that Melito’s “Israel” cannot be naïvely identified with the Jews of Sardis, he shows through a careful analysis of Melito’s debt to the techniques and interests of the Second Sophistic that “Israel,” despite Melito’s manipulation of the term, represents a real, not a symbolic or imaginary, opponent.

“Early Christian Heroes and the Lukan Narratives: Stephen and the Hellenists in Ancient Historiographical Perspective” (75–97) by Todd C. Penner, the author of *In Praise of Christian Origins: Stephen and the Hellenists in Lukan Apologetic Historiography* [Emory Studies in Early Christianity; London: T&T Clark, 2004], begins by noting that, despite various acknowledgments of the artificial and fictional aspects of Luke’s account in Acts, commentators have clung to the historicity of the Hellenists of Acts 6. This is because, Penner argues, the Hellenists provide a model of Torah- and temple-criticism *within* Judaism that serves then as a model for later developments in the Jesus movement. But, he insists, *historia* is not simply a subsidiary feature of Acts’ narrative; Acts is *historia*, and the persuasiveness of historical accounts does not rest on the historicity of this or that incident but on the rhetorical canon of the plausibility and aptness of the entire narrative. Acts 6 is replete with elements that contribute to the aptness of Luke’s overall narration: an interest in widows and in the demonstration by the early Jesus community of *philanthropia*, Luke’s interest in exemplary features of the Christian *politeia*, the inclusive (and Greek) character of (part of) the community at Jerusalem, and the way in which the Hellenists serve as a foil in a rhetorical *synkrisis* for accusation of *misanthropia* and injustice. Did the “Hellenists” exist? Penner surmises that Luke, composing a rhetorically plausible narrative sometime in the first third of the second century C.E. knew very little of the origins of the earliest Jerusalem church but composed nonetheless an apt narrative of those origins.

Margaret MacDonald (“Can Nympha Rule This House? The Rhetoric of Domesticity in Colossians” [99–120]) considers the irony of Colossians, with its *Haustafel* that prescribes the subjugation of wives to husbands (3:18), being read aloud in the house of Nympha (Col 4:15), clearly a household head. Nympha, perhaps a widow, was exempt from the restrictions of Col 3:18. But MacDonald helpfully points out that in this context the citation of the *Haustafel* has an apologetic as much as a prescriptive function.

Other ironies, now involving slavery, are explored by John Kitchen in “Raised from the Dung: Hagiography, Liberation, and the Social Subversiveness of Early Medieval Christianity” (121–59). Beginning with the observation of Orlando Patterson (*Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982]) that the institution of slavery has deeply marked the symbolic structure of Christianity, Kitchen points out the irony of ascetic monks as slave-owners. But drawing on Patterson, he sketches a contradiction in Pauline theology that conceived of salvation, on the one hand, as freedom from slavery to sin but re-enslavement to Christ and, on the other, as the restoration of humanity to a prelapsarian condition of freedom. The first, “conservative,” view was elaborated in the medieval period when a slave might be freed, now to become a slave to the saint who freed him. But against Patterson, Kitchen believes that the more liberative pole of Pauline thought was not entirely lost but found some expressions in the *Life of Saint Martin* by Sulpicius Severus, a pole that he describes as “subversive.”

Theodore de Bruyn (“Philosophical Counsel versus Customary Lament in Fourth-Century Christian Responses to Death” [161–86]) concerns the practice of consolatory discourse in the Cappadocians and invokes Roy Rappaport’s theory of ritual (*Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999]) to argue that the philosophical discourse of consolation “achieves effects that are similar though not equivalent to the effects of ritual” (169): it assumes acceptance by the participants, placing obligations to perform upon the participants, and thereby establishes a community between the writer and the recipient (170). Both ritual lament and philosophical consolation aimed at managing the disruption caused by death, ritual lament by heightening the liminal status of the participants, consolation by moving them toward reintegration. In the end, of course, the ritual lament proved more durable and stronger than Christian funerary liturgy, for it gave greater expression to the disruption that death causes and afforded the mourners—dominantly women—“a privileged moment of association and ‘truth-telling’—something they would not readily relinquish to the male leadership and set texts of the Christian liturgy” (179).

In an extraordinarily incisive essay, Luther Martin (“Performativity, Narrativity, and Cognition: ‘Demythologizing’ the Roman cult of Mithras” [187–217]) draws on cognitive psychology to argue that the reason for the lack of clear evidence for a coherent Mithraic

mythology and doctrine—despite notable attempts to reconstruct them—is due to the fact that Mithraism was transmitted not in a “doctrinal mode” but an “imagistic mode of religiosity”—a distinction made by Harvey Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Imagistic modes employ a “diversity of precepts and practices that are based on the local exegesis associated with small-scale, face-to-face groups” (189) and are presented episodically in infrequently performed rites. These appeal not to semantic memory, which systematizes, but episodic memory, or “flashbulb memory,” which stacks up analogically related memories to organize them autobiographically. Thus the initiate, who had been subjected to an intense and theatrical but infrequently performed rite of symbolic death or mock execution, was linked to the group not by means of an articulate series of doctrines but through the imagistic character of the Mithraeum, with its standard iconography of tauroctomy.

The final essay, by Chad Kile (“Feeling Persuaded: Christianization as Social Formation” [219–48]) is critical of views of the character and diffusion of Christianity that privilege ideas over social networks, and especially social formations. The latter are connected to what Kile calls “feeling persuaded,” achieved not so much by intellectual persuasion as by “coalitional psychology.” Whereas Martin suggests that, in comparison with Mithraism, Christianity was much more in the “doctrinal mode,” Kile draws attention to the imagistic character of exorcisms as singular, dramatic, and emotionally charged events likely to appeal to episodic rather than semantic memory. “Participation in the cult of the saints, in rituals of exorcism, for example, might require little prior explicit knowledge of Christian doctrine, yet could still pay dividends for social attraction and cohesion” (238).

Although the essays are wide-ranging in their focus and approach, what is common is their attention to the complexity and ambiguities of persuasion, whether it be the use of fabrication in *historia*, the antilogical nature of *Thomas’s logos*, the bipolar features of Christian discourse on slavery, or nondiscursive forms of persuasion. There is not an essay in the volume that is not worth reading, and each in its own way suggests a program for further research.