Pieter W. van der Horst

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Matthew J. Grey
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah

For over forty-five years Pieter W. van der Horst has produced a wealth of wide-ranging scholarship related to the fields of ancient Judaism, early Christianity, and Greco-Roman culture. With deteriorated eyesight leading to an early retirement in 2006, van der Horst expressed concern that his research would come to a standstill and that his collection of essays compiled that year (Jews and Christians in Their Graeco-Roman Context) would be the final major publication of his work. Fortunately, van der Horst’s prediction proved incorrect on both counts. Instead, in the seven years since he expressed these concerns van der Horst has produced over one hundred articles and almost as many book reviews, with more forthcoming.¹ Twenty-four of these articles written between 2006 and 2013 have been collected into a single volume and recently published under the title Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity.

The essays collected here are all in English, fairly short, and previously published elsewhere, although some have been slightly modified from their original publication. They also treat an extremely diverse array of topics only loosely connected by their

¹ For a complete listing of these works, see 267–80 (“Bibliography of Pieter W. van der Horst 2006–2013”) in the volume under review.
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The next cluster of essays builds on van der Horst’s previous research on the Greek versions of seven Jewish Sabbath prayers (the so-called Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers) incorporated into the fourth-century Christian church order, the Apostolic Constitutions: “Greek Philosophical Elements in Some Judaeo-Christian Prayers” (100–110) considers traces of Greek philosophical notions, such as the role of wisdom in creation, the status of humans as rational beings and “world citizens,” and the shaping of bodies with four elements and five senses (cf. the writings of Plato and Philo), as found in prayers 2 and 3; “Mystical Motifs in a Greek Synagogal Prayer?” (111–22) articulates the relationship between prayer 3 and the mystical qedushah that derived from Isa 6 and Ezek 3 and was used liturgically in Qumran and hekhalot literature, although van der Horst ultimately concludes that the Greek version of prayer 3 was not itself composed by mystical circles; and “A Qedushat ha-Yom in Greek” (123–33) analyzes the Christianization of the Jewish benediction for the Sabbath found in prayer 4. Portions of these essays overlap with each other as they review the scholarship and debates on the nature of the prayers. However, each essay successfully demonstrates the theological complexities of the prayers, offers compelling suggestions as to the sources/concepts adopted or adapted by their writers, and provides important context for the processes of their compilation.

Following this section, two essays expand van der Horst’s earlier work on the Jewish diaspora in antiquity by examining the evidence for Jewish presence and integration with pagan and Christian neighbors in Phrygia (134–42) and Asia Minor (143–60), and another essay discusses an aberrant tradition of Samaritan origins found in 4 Baruch (161–72). These are followed by a cluster of studies on pagan and Christian perceptions of Judaism in antiquity, a topic of long-standing interest to van der Horst: “The Myth of Jewish Cannibalism” (173–87) discusses the development of anti-Semitism in Alexandria (ranging from Manetho to the violence that erupted in 38 CE) and Apion’s claim that Jews in Jerusalem at the time of Antiochus IV ritually ate human flesh, a claim that, in the context of Greek views of cannibalism, was meant to categorize Jews as uncivilized barbarians; “Porphyry on Judaism” (188–202) highlights the mixed appraisal of Judaism found in the writings of Porphyry, a Neoplatonist in the late third century CE who described Judaism as a “strange mythology” but an admirable ancient tradition; and “A Short Note on the Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati” (203–8) discusses a little-known Christian text from the early seventh century (Teachings of the Recently Baptized Jacob) that reports a fictional conversation among Jews being forced to convert to Christianity and that provides scriptural prooftexts (in the form of “Jacob’s” responses) to assist Christians in facilitating Jewish conversion. In regard to this latter source, van der Horst calls for an accessible English translation of the text and rightfully points out its potential for yielding important historical insights into the situation of Jews in the Byzantine Empire.
This essay is followed by two on other lesser-known texts, including the prison or consolation letters of Mara bar Serapion (considered by van der Horst to be a Syriac Christian text from the third or fourth century) and the sixth-century Latin writer Boethius (209–19), as well as the poetic writings of the fifth-century bishop Cyrus of Panopolis (220–29). The collection then concludes with three essays on interesting miscellanea from the larger Greco-Roman world, traces of which can be found scattered in Jewish and Christian literature, including the expression “without God” (230–39), the belief that sneezing was a divine omen (240–47), and traditions of “pious long-sleepers” (248–66).

I found this collection of essays to be both informative and insightful. The vast array of topics addressed is certainly one of the volume’s many strengths; simply put, there is something for everyone: students of Jewish exegesis, epigraphy, diaspora, Judeo-Christian prayer culture, ancient anti-Semitism, early Christian literature, and Greco-Roman thought will benefit from van der Horst’s erudition. The volume’s diversity and lack of a central thesis, however, makes a thorough review challenging. Naturally, scholars can find fine points of disagreement on a number of approaches and conclusions throughout these essays. For example, before concluding that 2 En. 69–73 is a Christian interpolation based on the assumption that Jews would not have allowed two high-priestly figures (Enoch and Melchizedek) to “share the (heavenly) stage” (95–99), it may have been helpful to consider the Qumran corpus for examples of a Jewish community who revered and assigned heavenly responsibilities to both figures. Also, although van der Horst is aware of the socioreligious diversity of Judaism after 70 CE, he often assumes a traditional rabbinic framework for texts and concepts that might fit better into a nonrabbinic, mystical, or priestly context and that might help to articulate some of the diversity within the post-70 Jewish community (e.g., 34, 71, 207). Finally, such a collection might have been an ideal opportunity to make a fuller range of van der Horst’s scholarship more accessible by translating many of his recent Dutch articles into English, as was done in earlier volumes of his collected essays.

These are just a few minor questions, challenges, or suggestions that some scholars might offer with van der Horst’s collection of essays, but they should not overshadow its important and multifaceted contributions mentioned throughout this review. Ultimately, *Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* provides another cause to celebrate the ongoing work of such a notable scholar. Although van der Horst again predicts that this will be his final publication of essays (xi), I hope that he will again be proven incorrect and that we will continue to benefit from his scholarship for many years to come.