



*The Second Annual Study Day for RCEC at ETF centers around the theme “Integrity and Orthodoxy in Early Christian Literature,” and the following topics will be featured this coming Saturday.*

## Was there a mainstream Christianity?

*Normal and normative Christianity in the first two centuries*

The orthodox reconstruction of early Christian history has largely been abandoned by scholarship. According to the revisionist model, orthodoxy was just one branch of Christianity that pushed aside its rivals. While the arguments of revisionist historiographers necessitate some adjustments to the traditional view, their central thesis remains unproven. The easiest way to explain the victory of orthodoxy over its rivals is its clear majority at all stages.

The oldest extant Christian literature is orthodox. All of the alternatives are explicitly reacting to an orthodoxy that is older or better represented. Orthodox leaders, however, do their utmost to remain true to tradition. Furthermore, the testimony of outsiders (Plinius minor, Celsus) is in line with the claims of orthodox Christianity.

The common revisionist explanation of the scarce literary remains of heterodoxy is orthodox suppression. However, the deciding factors for the preservation of literature are intensive use in liturgy and community teaching. The only efficient measure to ensure that literature gets lost is to stop copying it.

-Gie Vleugels

## Revisionist history in the second century?

*A case for the authenticity of orthodoxy*

The authenticity of a document was a serious concern in antiquity, but modern researchers tell us that they only served the ideological ends of orthodoxy and cannot be trusted. A quick review of NT documents, Marcion, the *Acts of Paul*, and *Gospel of Thomas* shows that a claim to authenticity indeed has serious ideological implications. The paper reviews, however, ancient Greek and Jewish literary criticism, which shows that apostolic authority, oral succession traditions, and canon closure adequately and credibly account for the rise and rejection of pseudonymous literature. The study of authenticity thus remains a valuable tool in the reconstruction of early Christianity.

-Jack Barentsen

## Is Presbyteron Kreitton?

*Dating documents in Early Christianity and today*

The proposed RCEC handbook on early Christian literature belongs to a time-honored tradition of collecting texts for the benefit of Christian readers. Once one selects the documents, how should they be handled and related to one another? A review of ancient and modern approaches to historical issues provides clues for response.

Ancient sources show that the old takes priority but without neglecting the new and how all available material should be consulted. Modern approaches sift a growing volume of data with ever changing methodologies, and focus on history as knowledge about the past. Use of the historical critical tools for dating has implications for the study of individual documents and the project as a whole.

-Martin Webber

## Was Earliest Christianity Gnostic?

*Origins and date of Gnosticism*

The idea of pre-Christian Gnosticism by W. Anz (1897) advanced by History of Religions scholars gained a strong impetus with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945, lost steam in the 1960s, but now regains a level of popularity in our heyday of pluralism. Still, no primary textual evidence for Gnosticism earlier than the second century exists; Irenaeus gives the earliest extended account of the Gnostic sects, some of which has been verified by the Nag Hammadi Library itself (esp. *Apocryphon of John*); and most, if not all, of these texts show dependence on the New Testament. Moreover, *Epistula Apostolorum* and other early sources also seem to strengthen Irenaeus's accounts.

-Michael Choi



### *The Pre-Nicene New Testament*

Robert M. Price  
Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006  
ISBN: 978-1-56085-194-3  
xxvi, 1209

How might a radical version of *The Message*, the highly personal Bible translation by Eugene Peterson (NavPress, 2003) look? Probably like *The Pre-Nicene New Testament* by Robert M. Price (Signature Books, 2006). Price, editor of the *Journal of Higher Criticism* and prolific author, presents fifty-four documents of how the New Testament before Nicea 'might have looked if it had been assembled under different circumstances' (xxv). In addition to various versions of the 27 documents found in the canonical New Testament, he has included 27 others from the history of Christian literature in a broad sense.

The book begins with an introduction giving background and justification for this alternative testament (vii-xxv). There Price (hereafter P.) announces his goal: 'to try to strip away the Nicene, that is, the orthodox, traditional gloss from the underlying early Christian texts' (xxiii). He assumes for the process a great diversity of early Christian writings, which had wide circulation and functioned first more as expressions rather than source and criteria of faith (x). He also assumes that editing took place by many of the parties involved, including Marcion (xi) and Catholic apologists (xii). Nowhere in his introduction does he offer any criteria for his selection although he rehearses the four standards applied by Catholic writers: catholicity, orthodoxy, apostolicity, and numerology (xix-xxii). He states that he has personally translated the works, which does not mean that he consulted the best critical texts, but sometimes works from English translations (for example in the case of 'Hymns of the Just', better known as **1QHymns**, 888). One suspects this is true of other texts as well ('Epistle on Works Righteousness', 'Apocalypse of Peter', and perhaps '3 Corinthians').

This introduction is followed by a presentation of the texts in English translation under 8 rubrics, also given without explanation: I. Pre-Apostolic Writings (4); II. Matthean Cycle (5); III. Marcion's Apostolicon (12); IV. To Theophilus (5); V. The Testament of John (7); VI. The Petrine Corpus (7);

VII. Heirs of Jesus (9); and VIII. The Pauline Circle (5). Each text is introduced by a short or long section which orients the reader and may or may not supply information like relevant sources consulted, and methodology followed. P. makes no distinction between non-canonical or canonical books in the traditional sense. He gives explanatory notes and comments with the translations. The translation is often freely paraphrased (much as Peterson did in *The Message*). For at least five documents P. 'fills in' or creatively imagines what must have been in the missing parts: 'Gospel according to the Hebrews', 'Gospel of Peter', '4<sup>th</sup> Epistle of Peter', 'Book of Melchizedek', and the 'Gospel of Mary'.

The book closes with a 'bibliographic essay' (1145-1188), especially emphasizing P.'s debt to the Tübingen school on 'early Christian diversity' (1154-69). He also summarizes Jesus studies (1169-80) and those on Paul (1181-85). This section is impressive in its breadth, showing P.'s acquaintance with much recent mainline NT study. There is a limited general index, a two page bibliography (to the introduction) and no text index.

Careful reading of the introductions confirms what P. has demonstrated in other publications (*Deconstructing Jesus*, Amherst, 2000 and *Jesus is Dead*, American Atheist Press, 2007 among others). He consistently accepts late dating and composite authorship for most documents, and rejects traditional, classical Christianity. He also adopts somewhat idiosyncratic views, for instance, buying into Robert Eisenman's identification of James the Just with the Teacher of Righteousness (*James the Brother of Jesus*, Penguin 1997), and then taking two Qumran documents on board as Jewish Christian. Less clear, however, is why he has arranged certain texts under certain rubrics. And he is inconsistent in his attributions. For example, although he claims 'Galatians' was written by Marcion, he gives no reason why or how '2 Thessalonians', the Cerinthian treatises to the churches at Corinth (1 and 2 Corinthians), '2 Laodiceans', 'Colossians', 'Philippians' or 'Philemon' should be taken as Marcionite. It is indeed

odd that 'Philemon' could at the same time serve as an apology for the bishop Onesimus and a Marcionite document, since P. doesn't claim that bishop was not part of the Catholic wing of Christianity. And how does one explain that the 'Preaching of Peter' (809), an Ebionite text according to P., refutes the Paul of Galatians, since the latter comes from Marcion? Presumably P. would say that these groups also opposed each other, but he does not.

Absence of clearly stated criteria in his selection of texts leaves this reader with the impression that P. has been influenced by one-sided treatments in the secondary literature (such as those of Eisenman or Crossan) or applied personal criteria in his own reading of the ancient texts. For example, why is the *Kerygma Petri* omitted from the 'Petrine Corpus', clearly ancient enough, and like other documents, known by Clement of Alexandria? How does P. decide which 'Apocalypse of Peter' had the widest circulation (here he goes with Clement, but leaves out the one from Nag Hammadi, 852)? And why are *Dialogue of the Savior* (NH III, 5) and *Treatise on the Resurrection* (NH I, 4), among countless others, omitted? Given that the RCEC has identified over 80 non-canonical documents or fragments from the first two centuries of Christianity, and that P. rejects traditional criteria, he needs to give better reasons for his choices.

Because of its scope and the viewpoints it represents, this book should be consulted in any comprehensive study of early Christian literature. But the individualism of the author (translations and interpretations) and the lack of rigor in presentation suggest that despite its almost 1200 pages it serves at best a secondary role in this effort. The translation and commentary give more insight into the personal experience of the author than into the contents and contexts of the documents he presents.

-Martin Webber,  
*Prof., New Testament*