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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Abstract

Review by Timothy N. Mitchell of *Inside Roman Libraries: Book Collections and Their Management in Antiquity*. By George W. Houston. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2014, 327 pp., \$59.95.

Review by Timothy N. Mitchell of *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts: Reconsidering the Bauer Thesis*. Edited by Paul A. Hartog. Eugene: Pickwick, 2015, 276 pp., \$25.60.

Review by Nicholas Dodson of *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Rafael Rodriguez. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015, 184 pp., \$27.95.

Keywords

George Houston, Roman Libraries, Bauer Thesis, Paul Hartog, Orthodoxy, Heresy, Rafael Rodriguez, Oral Tradition, New Testament

Cover Page Footnote

Book Reviews

Inside Roman Libraries: Book Collections and Their Management in Antiquity. By George W. Houston. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2014, 327 pp., \$59.95.

Inside Roman Libraries invites readers into a fascinating and detailed examination of manuscripts, library structures, furniture and book storage, and attendants, of book collections during the height of the Roman Empire. This work will no doubt find a ready readership amongst classical scholars and students, but New Testament researchers would do well not to overlook this important work. *Inside Roman Libraries* opens fresh new ways of understanding the world of early Christian books. This review will highlight some of these new insights and how they broaden our understanding of early Christian manuscripts and book collections.

George W. Houston, professor emeritus of classics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has focused his research in the areas of ancient libraries, Latin epigraphy, Latin literature, and Roman technology. He was a Fellow at the American Academy in Rome and directed the Classical Summer School at the American Academy in Rome. Houston's extensive knowledge of Roman book collections is apparent in every chapter of the work as he asks probing questions of the evidence and teases out every scrap of information that can be gleaned from the data. He stated simply that the subject of the work was "everything that one might find inside a Roman library" (p. 1).

Inside Roman Libraries is divided into six chapters. The introduction begins the work with a description of the book roll and its features. Though the scholarly literature covering the book roll is extensive, Houston efficiently surveyed the important features so that an unfamiliar reader would be able to successfully grasp the following chapters.

Chapter one investigates the many ways a Roman would go about obtaining copies of books in order to build a collection. The chapter is divided into two main sections: "acquiring volumes one or a few at a time, thus gradually building up a collection; and acquiring large numbers of volumes and even whole libraries at one time" (p. 12). Some of the methods surveyed by Houston that were used to acquire books slowly were; borrowing a book from a friend and making a copy, having a slave make a copy, buying a copy already made from a book dealer, commissioning a professional scribe to make a copy, and receiving a book as a gift. Some of the methods given by Houston that were used to acquire book collections all at once were; buying a partial or complete book collection, receiving a book collection as an inheritance, and confiscating book collections as a result of war.

Chapters two, three, and four move on to discuss in detail specific Roman era book collections and their characteristics. Rather than examining the physical remains of books, chapter two investigates lists of books that survive from library collections. Houston discussed the ways that the lists categorized books by genre and the ways the lists may have been used as tools for cataloging and retrieving books in a library.

Chapter three explores the extensive findings at the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum that was buried by ash during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. The physical features of the book rolls are examined, their useful lifetimes are considered, and the various stages of the history of the collection are reconstructed.

Chapter four studies three separate book collections that were discovered in the Roman city of Oxyrhynchus by Grenfell and Hunt. The first find consisted of sixteen manuscripts that most likely belonged to the personal library of an avid reader. The second find consisted of four rolls of the family library of Aurelia Ptolemais in Oxyrhynchus. The third find was the largest at

about seventy manuscripts. The physical features of the rolls are examined and the useful life of the books are considered in each of the collections.

Chapter five examines library structures and the equipment housed in them. Houston surveyed statements in ancient sources as well as Roman era wall paintings and other artifacts to glean information on methods of storing and shelving books as well as the furniture that would have been needed in a library. The structural remains of the library of Celsus in Ephesus and the library of Rogatianus in Thamugadi (in modern Algeria) are investigated by Houston who calculated the number of books that these libraries may have housed.

Finally, chapter six considers the personnel that would have maintained these ancient book collections. Houston noted that on different occasions Cicero “engaged the services of the Greek scholar Tyrannio of Amisus” (p. 218), Chrysippus (p. 219), and Dionysius (p. 219) to acquire high quality books and organize his personal collection and that of his brother Quintus. Houston investigated the various responsibilities of the managers of the Imperial library in the Temple of Apollo in Rome (p. 221) and the Imperial library in the Portico of Octavia in Rome (p. 222-223). Some of the responsibilities of the lower-level staff were; procuring a roll, locating an exemplar, copying, correcting, and repairs. The meager information on the commissioners of the Imperial libraries is examined. Finally, Houston investigates the difficulties and troubles that the library staff may have encountered in operating the library.

Houston’s work on Roman libraries shines new light on our understanding of early Christian book collections. In chapter one Houston efficiently surveyed the ways a Roman could go about acquiring a copy of a book. Buying a book from a book-dealer (p. 16-17), borrowing a book from a friend (p. 18), and borrowing a book from a public library (p. 19-20) were some of the options available. An early Christian who wished to acquire a copy of a Christian work, say for example a copy of Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*, would have searched through similar channels. However, a Christian who desired a copy for themselves, or even for their Church library, would likely have made inquiries through personal connections only (see the discussion in Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, p. 104). The Christian who was seeking a copy of *Against Heresies* may have written a letter to an individual (for example, the Philippian Church wrote to Polycarp requesting copies of Ignatius’s letters, *Pol. Phil.* 13.2), perhaps even Irenaeus himself, or to the leader of a large Church congregation that had a book collection. It seems unlikely that Christian writings would have been available from a professional book-dealer, though the possibility is not completely out of the question as the Christian opponent Celsus had access to Christian writings (i.e. Origen, *Cels.* 2.34). Perhaps Celsus obtained them from a professional book-dealer.

It is possible that educated, wealthy Christians donated their personal libraries to Churches, or even to Christian schools. For example, in the case of Origen and Pamphilus in Caesarea, their personal book collections were ultimately connected with the school and this extensive library became renowned for its holdings. As time progressed, these collections likely retained their history and identity as Houston noted that the book collections of Lucullus and Sulla (p. 36), and the collections “Callinia, Atticiana, and Peducaea,” mentioned by Galen (p. 29), retained their identity over several generations.

Major centers of Christianity, such as Antioch, Smyrna, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome very likely had sizable book collections. It is to these centers that a Christian would have sent inquiries seeking copies of Christian literature (for example *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *Herm. Vis.* 2.4). Perhaps early Christian scholars, philosophers, or theologians, visited these Churches, in

order to make use of their libraries in their studies as Houston described Cicero, Cato, and others making use of the library of Lucullus (p. 19), and the library of Sulla (p. 36).

Houston's investigation of the useful age of book rolls is particularly illuminating for Christian book collections. After examining the book rolls from the library at the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum, Houston wrote that "most of the rolls in the Villa collection were some 120 to 160 years old when Vesuvius erupted" (p. 120). The book collections at Oxyrhynchus gave a similar result with the average life of a book roll being 150-200 years (p. 175). Houston listed that a couple of the oldest manuscripts in the Oxyrhynchus collections were 200-300 years old and in one case around 500 years old when they were discarded (p. 175).

The statements made by Tertullian that the apostolic Churches were still reading the original apostolic documents (*Praescr.* 36) reach a new level of plausibility when considering the average useful life of papyrus noted by Houston. This is helpful in the case of Irenaeus as well who indicated that he consulted ancient copies of Revelation when he was studying a textual variant at Rev 13:18 (*Haer.* 5.30). It would not be unusual then for there to be manuscripts of New Testament writings more than a hundred years old still in use at the time Irenaeus and Tertullian were writing.

Houston's examination of the book lists in chapter two enlightens our understanding of statements made by Eusebius in his Church history concerning the works that a particular author produced during their lifetime. For example, Eusebius listed out the works of Clement of Alexandria, stating specifically that he had all of the books of one particular writing in his library (*Hist. eccl.* 6.13). Perhaps Eusebius referenced a specific book list that catalogued the holdings of the Caesarean library which was similar to the lists studied by Houston in chapter two.

The comparisons made above between Roman libraries and early Christian book collections merely scratch the surface. New Testament scholars will certainly find new ways of approaching the manuscript data and ancient sources. George Houston's *Inside Roman Libraries* deserves a place in the library of every student and scholar of the New Testament and early Christianity.

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Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts: Reconsidering the Bauer Thesis. Edited by Paul A. Hartog. Eugene: Pickwick, 2015, 276 pp., \$25.60.

In 1934, while Hitler solidified his political power over Germany and began to turn the gears of his war machine, a book was published with little fanfare by German scholar Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*. A second edition was published in 1964 and was translated into English in 1971 with the title *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. Bauer's book began to influence a new breed of English speaking academics as his thesis created a paradigm shift in early Christian studies in the universities of America and Europe. Award winning professors and scholars such as Bart Ehrman, Elaine Pagels, Helmut Koester, James Robinson, and many others have largely adopted the basic outlines of Bauer's thesis. In broad strokes, he argued that in certain geographical regions, what later came to be referred to as "orthodoxy" was actually preceded by "heresy." *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts: Reconsidering the Bauer Thesis* re-examines the historical evidence in fresh

new ways, challenging some of Bauer's original claims, and its recent adaptations by modern scholars.

A broad array of experts contributed to *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts* (listed in alphabetical order): David C. Alexander of Liberty University; Rex D. Butler of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary; the late Rodney J. Decker of Baptist Bible Seminary; Paul A. Hartog of Faith Baptist Seminary; Bryan M. Litfin of Moody Bible Institute; W. Brian Shelton of Toccoa Falls College; Carl B. Smith of South University; Edward L. Smither of Columbia International University; Glen L. Thompson of Asia Lutheran Seminary; William Varner of The Master's College (p. xi-xii).

In Chapter one, "The Bauer Thesis: An Overview," Rodney J. Decker orients the reader to the work of Walter Bauer. Though he summarizes Bauer's other research and highly praises his lexical work enshrined in BDAG (p. 9-10), Decker focuses the chapter on summarizing Bauer's "paradigm shaping book," *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. First, he sketches the broad outlines of Bauer's thesis without entangling the reader within the minutia of Bauer's arguments (p. 11-17). Next, taking up the bulk of the chapter, Decker surveys several major responses, both positive and negative (but mostly negative), that have been leveled at *Orthodoxy and Heresy* since its publication, from the first critical response by H. E. W. Turner in 1954, to Köstenburger and Kruger's book published in 2010 (p. 17-32). Decker concludes the chapter by declaring, in the words of Darrell Bock, "if the two central Bauerian positions are flawed [diverse origins and Roman influence], why does the overall thesis stand?" (p. 32).

In chapter two, "Walter Bauer and the Apostolic Fathers," Paul Hartog concentrates on *I Clement* and Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* by continuing the argument originally made by Paul Trebilco that focused on the Churches of western Asia Minor and the letters of Ignatius. Hartog critiques the following points of Bauer's thesis, that Thessalonica was steeped in heresy (p. 37), an embattled Smyrna with a gnostic "anti-bishop" was pitted against Polycarp (p. 38), Philippi had a gnostic "anti-bishop" and heretics had the "majority rule" (p. 39, 40-41, 44, 46-47), the pastoral epistles were late anti-Marcion writings (p. 42-43), before Irenaeus "sure traces of Galatians" are limited to Polycarp (p. 43), the "return of peace" to Antioch was a cessation of heretical in-fighting (p. 45-46), *I Clement* was primarily "an anti-heretical missive" (p. 47-51), the Roman Church served as "an intrusive guardian of orthodoxy" (p. 47-53), and there was a strict dichotomy of authority, "orthodoxy" verses "heresy" (p. 53-59). Hartog concludes that, after a close reading of *I Clement* and Polycarp, "particular details of Bauer's thesis do not fare well" (p. 59).

Carl Smith, in chapter three, "Post-Bauer Scholarship on Gnosticism(s): The Current State of Our 'Knowledge,'" wrote that "many of Bauer's conclusions on Gnosticism must be rejected; others need to be nuanced; still others remain valid concerns with which contemporary scholarship must grapple" (p. 61). First, Smith surveys the major papyrological finds that have occurred since Bauer's book appeared and the scholarship that has occurred since their discovery, most notably the Nag Hammadi codices, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, and the *Gospel of Judas* (p. 61-72). Next, the major trends in Gnostic scholarship are highlighted, questions regarding its definition and boundaries, its origins, and areas requiring further research (p. 75-83). Smith concludes by proposing nine "steps forward" that would "bypass the current impasse in gnostic studies and address its implications for Christian origins" (p. 83-88).

In chapter four, "Baur to Bauer and Beyond: Early Jewish Christianity and Modern Scholarship," William Varner addresses "the marginalization of Jewish Christianity among many

writers on the early Church” (p. 89). This fact is particularly relevant to the Bauer thesis, in that, he failed to “include any discussion of Jewish Christianity in his volume on orthodoxy and heresy” (p. 89). Using older standard works, Varner highlights the traditionally held view of Jewish Christianity (p. 91-94). He then notes that the foundation for Walter Bauer’s thesis was laid in the nineteenth century by Ferdinand Christian Baur with his “Tübingen Hypothesis” which pitted Jewish Christians against Gentile Christians (p. 94-99). Next, Varner sketches the major developments in Jewish Christian studies of the last twenty years which have “raised serious questions about the neat and clean lines of demarcation between Jews and Christians” (p. 99-109). He finishes the chapter by giving Raymond Brown’s four groups of “Jewish-Gentile Christianity” as a way to move beyond the simplistic “binary polarity” between “Jewish Christianity” and “Gentile Christianity” found in what he refers to as the Bauer-Strecker-Ehrman thesis (p. 110-113).

Rex Butler unpacks the complexities of defining orthodoxy and heresy in the ancient Church in chapter five, “‘Orthodoxy,’ ‘Heresy,’ and Complexity: Montanism as a Case Study.” Butler notes that the term “orthodoxy” was a later adaptation that described a “normative Christianity represented by apostolic teaching and tradition” (p. 115-116). The term “heresy” on the other hand, was a neutral term that eventually gave way to its more commonly known “technical, pejorative sense” by the time of Ignatius (p. 117). In order to illustrate these complexities, Butler examines the Montanist movement of the second and third centuries (p. 119-133). Though considered heretical by Church leaders in Asia Minor by the third century, Montanism gained many orthodox adherents in North Africa represented by Tertullian and the martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas (p. 133-137). Butler is careful to point out that Montanism was rejected, not because of false doctrine, but because of “unacceptable practices” (p. 138). This is an example of how a belief that was considered to be heretical “in one community was acceptable in another” (p. 139-140).

Chapter six, “Apostolic Tradition and the Rule of Faith in Light of the Bauer Thesis,” confirms Bauer’s basic point concerning the diversity of early Christianity, but questions the tendency to refer to these diverse “Jesus-Religions” as “Christianity” (p.143). In this chapter Bryan Litfin investigates the “apostolic kerygma” of the earliest Christians “in the decades immediately after Jesus” (p. 144-153). He critically examines the application of the Bauer thesis to first century Christianity by James Dunn (p. 153-161). Finally, Litfin compares the first century Christian “apostolic kerygma”—which he summarized as “centered on the Jesus who was sent from Israel’s God to die, rise, ascend, and return to Judge the living and the dead” (p. 161)—with the *Regula Fidei* of the second and third century Church, discovering “remarkable similarity” (p. 162-165).

David Alexander and Edward Smither explore an area of early Church history ignored by the Bauer thesis in chapter seven, “Bauer’s Forgotten Region: North African Christianity.” Alexander and Smither contend that Christianity first came to North Africa in the latter half of the second century from Asia Minor and Rome, rapidly expanded by the early third century, and maintained a core unity within diverse groups (p. 168-174). They then examine the implications of Tertullian’s testimony against the Bauer thesis and conclude that Tertullian, did not passively submit to Rome, was orthodox within Montanism, and was passionate for the “Rule of Faith” (p. 174-183). The internal conflicts of North Africa between Tertullian and local leaders, between Perpetua and Church leaders, and between Cyprian and the lapsed, reveal a dialogue in the midst of conflict and an overall desire for unity (p. 183-188). Finally, Alexander and Smither conclude that Bauer’s view, that Rome played a major role in the enforcement of orthodoxy, is

contradicted by the North African Church which resisted Roman control and later influenced Roman theology (p. 188-190).

In chapter eight, “Patristic Heresiology: The Difficulties of Reliability and Legitimacy,” W. Brian Shelton critically reviews the methodology, reliability, and role in the development of doctrine, of the second and third century Christian heresiologists such as Hegesippus, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Dionysius, and Epiphanius (p. 195-202). Shelton discusses several aspects of these writers, “the nature of rhetorical exploitation,” “the nature of truth claims among pre-modern thinkers,” the continuity of the “Rule of Faith,” “the discernment of authorial intention,” the fact that the early Church was under Roman persecution, and the “inevitability of religious bias” (p. 202-212). He concludes that “the heresiologists cannot and should not be ignored, discarded, or dismissed as merely prejudiced” when reconstructing early Christianity (p. 211).

Bauer’s reconstruction of the early Church in Rome is critically examined against the scholarship of the last half century by Glen Thompson in chapter nine, “Bauer’s Early Christian Rome and the Development of ‘Orthodoxy.’” First, Thompson reconstructs Bauer’s perspective of the Roman Church by piecing together comments and inferences scattered throughout Bauer’s work (p. 215-18). He then surveyed the relevant studies of the early Roman Church and concludes that, contrary to Bauer’s reconstruction, Rome had no unified center of ecclesiastical authority during the late first and early second centuries (p. 218-225), Rome had no “unique brand of doctrine” that it imposed upon the rest of the Mediterranean (p. 225-228), and Rome had no “long-range vision” of using the authority of Peter and Paul to impose its brand of orthodoxy (p. 234).

Finally, Paul Hartog completes the discussion in chapter ten, “From Völker to this Volume: A Trajectory of Critiques and a Final Reflection.” Hartog compares the harsh review of Walther Völker, published shortly after the publication of Bauer’s work in 1934, with the scholarly trajectories of the following decades (p. 235-242). He then criticizes “scholars with a traditional penchant” who are too quick to argue that “orthodoxy” must have preceded “heresy” in every geographical location (p. 242-248).

There are a few shortcomings to *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts*, these will be discussed first. A quick glance at the first few pages that describe the contributors may give the (false) impression that only evangelical scholars have taken issue with the Bauer thesis. This, of course, is not the case, and all of the authors referenced a broad array of scholarship, yet it would have been good to have seen a chapter written by a scholar such as Larry Hurtado, Mark Goodacre, or Richard Bauckham.

The most glaring and unfortunate omission was that, other than the Nag Hammadi codices, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, and the *Gospel of Judas*, there was no engagement with the significant papyrological finds made before and after Bauer’s thesis first appeared. The sheer-number of New Testament papyri discovered that date from the second and third centuries, when compared to the few remains of gnostic and apocryphal writings discovered, brings the Bauer thesis in serious doubt, at least in the case of Egypt.

In relation to Bauer’s arguments surrounding Edessa, the discovery of P. Dura 10, a harmony of the four canonical Gospels on a fragment of parchment, reveals that by the beginning of the third century the four canonical Gospels had gained a wide enough acceptance to be gathered into a harmony and deposited in the eastern most city of Syria. This is in stark contrast to Bauer’s reconstruction of a primarily “heretical” Christianity in Edessa that flourished until the “orthodox” bishop Rabbula finally stamped out the remnants of heresy in the fifth century.

The papyri also bring into serious doubt the “isolation” that would have been needed for Bauer’s thesis to be tenable. P.Oxy 405, a late second or early third century fragment of Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*, and P.Oxy 4706 and P.Land 1.4, both late second or early third century fragments of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, indicate a highly mobile Christian community in Egypt that was in contact with the Christian communities in Lugdunum, Gaul and in Rome. If, as Bauer surmised, Egyptian Christianity was primarily “heretical” into the third century, a copy of Irenaeus’s anti-heretical polemic would hardly have turned up in Egypt a few decades after its composition in Gual. Coupled with this, if Rome was the “orthodox” juggernaut that Bauer claimed was opposed by a “heretical” Egyptian community, then it is strange to find two fragments of the “orthodox” *Shepherd of Hermas*, most likely written in Rome, in Egypt dating to within a few decades of its composition. When considering the publication practices of the ancient world, that these documents would have only been copied through popular request, they paint a picture of a fairly “orthodox” Egyptian Christianity that was in friendly communication with Rome and Lugdunum in Gaul at the end of the second and the beginning of the third century.

Despite the above deficiencies, the essays in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts* move the dialogue over Christian origins forward in significant ways. Though the authors have an evangelical penchant, Walter Bauer is not made out to be public enemy number one. Readers may be surprised to find that several aspects of Bauer’s thesis have received an affirmative review. Hartog, in the closing chapter, highlighted “four positive areas” of the Bauer thesis confirmed by the authors in the work, a recognition of early Christian diversity, that the early Christian writers cannot be divorced from “the ecclesial, social and political situations and struggles in which they were immersed” (p. 238), that the heresiologists should be read with a critical eye, and an overall “appreciation for Bauer’s geographical methodology” (p. 239).

The authors are also careful to include often overlooked, important evangelical scholarship published in evangelical journals. For example, Paul Trebilco’s “Christian Communities in Western Asia Minor into the Early Second Century: Ignatius and Others as Witnesses against Bauer” was published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, an academic journal that is often scorned in the wider scholarly community. Yet, Trebilco’s work is taken seriously by several authors in the book. This is a refreshing treatment of evangelical scholarship, which is often dismissed out-of-hand by the broader academic community.

The authors’ criticisms of Bauer’s thesis can be summarized in these seven statements; Bauer’s argument that various cities in western Asia Minor were primarily “heretical” does not hold up to a close reading of *1 Clement* and Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians*; Bauer’s views on Gnosticism must be refined in light of recent scholarship and papyrological discoveries; the Bauer thesis failed to take into consideration any element of early Jewish Christianity; though “orthodoxy” is a late term, there was a “normative” Christianity that developed early on, and this “normative” Christianity was later expanded upon and codified within later official Church creeds; that the first century Roman Church was not a unified ecclesiastical organization that imposed its brand of theology across the Mediterranean; North African Christianity, and to a lesser degree, Christianity in Asia Minor, influenced the theology of Rome and not the other way around; the early heresiologists should not be completely ignored, as Bauer did, when reconstructing early Christianity.

Overall, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts* is an important contribution to the scholarship on early Christianity. The authors are careful not to allow their conservative theological views to color their investigation and they are quick to affirm areas of Bauer’s thesis

that have stood the test of time. Because Bauer's thesis has pervaded nearly every aspect of early Christian studies, this book should be given a fair hearing alongside any discussion of early Christianity.

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Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed. Rafael Rodriguez. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015, 184 pp., \$27.95.

Rafael Rodriguez's *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed* seeks to offer the neophyte in issues concerning orality studies the requisite information to handle the terminology and concepts in this field. Rodriguez also attempts to show his readers how research into orality and its relation to the New Testament can offer fresh insight and perspective on the Scriptures. Though he contends that this resource should help to make orality studies accessible to both undergraduate and graduate/seminary students, it becomes clear early on that the book, while it does effectively introduce one to the field of orality studies, is not for the lay reader or the beginner in biblical studies itself. While the first goal of guiding the novice into orality studies is primarily met, the author's achievement of the second goal, to show how these studies bring fresh insight to the New Testament, is, due to the author's somewhat curious conclusions about oral traditions, not so clearly met.

Chapter one serves as the introduction to the entire work and, appropriately, addresses some introductory issues concerning orality and how it is related to the New Testament texts. Because this work is a primer on the whole discussion, Rodriguez begins by explaining what oral traditions have to do with studying the New Testament, since, after all, the New Testament is composed of written documents rather than being an oral product. He is clear at the outset that everything one can study about the New Testament and about its time period is something written and moreover, "none of the NT texts appear to be transcriptions or descriptions of an oral performance of the Jesus tradition... There is no first-century oral Jesus tradition. Period" (p. 2). This seems to undermine the need for this whole book itself, but the author does later explain there is reason to believe that early Christians told stories about Jesus, both orally and in writing (e.g., low literacy rates in the ancient Roman world and the high value placed on orally transmitted tradition). Therefore, though the questions surrounding how the Jesus tradition was transmitted are complex, there is for Rodriguez still some value in understanding orality of the period.

The author goes on to note that even the meaning of orality is not very clear when one looks at different works on the topic. He reveals here, early in his work, that though many works that discuss orality address it in the context of the composition of the New Testament works, which he believes is unhelpful and so intends to address orality as it relates to the interplay of various types of media and tradition. He continues on to emphasize that, when studying the New Testament, one is only ever studying the written texts, and that one should not let all the talk of oral tradition confuse that fact, which does seem to be a helpful reminder in the midst of the misunderstanding this topic may create. In setting up the topic and laying out the plan of the book, Rodriguez has revealed, though not overtly, that his agenda is to show that the task of searching for the oral tradition "behind the text" is a lost cause, so those interested in gaining

insight into this aspect of New Testament studies, which is on the rise among academics, are not likely to find in this author, one who is friendly to that task. This immediately brings into question why he seeks to pursue this topic if he understands it as a lost cause, but it will become evident as one continues on, especially into Part Two, that he does attempt to find something redeemable in orality studies.

The second chapter begins Part One and the body of the work, in which Rodriguez offers his most useful information for the beginner in orality studies. Chapter two, “The What of Oral Tradition and NT Studies,” is essentially a glossary of terms that are common to the field of orality studies. This is helpful, as there are many unfamiliar terms common in this field of study, and many terms such as audience, economy, etc. are utilized in ways much different from their normal usage. Of particular interest in chapter 2 are definitions such as those of *Oral Text*, in which the author hints at his distrust toward one’s ability to locate written texts specifically derived from oral tradition, and *Orality*, in which the author gives no definite meaning, but rather explains the lack of stable meaning across this field. While the definitions and discussion of these terms is invaluable for entering into and grasping the concepts of orality studies, one can see that the author’s agenda is shaping the way he defines and discusses these terms.

Chapter 3, “The Who of Oral Tradition and NT Studies,” is structured in the same way as chapter 2 and functions as another glossary, but this time addressing the major contributors to oral tradition studies. In the beginning of the chapter, however, Rodriguez gives some important discussion about the relationship of present day orality studies and the form critics of the early 20th century. He explains:

Contemporary biblical media criticism frequently begins with the form critics, and rightly so. However, as I will argue over the course of this and the next chapters, the form critics got us started on the wrong foot. We have not simply advanced beyond the original contributions of Dibelius and Bultmann. We have begun to ask fundamentally different questions from those that arrested the attention of the form critics. Contemporary media criticism is, in many ways, a reaction against twentieth-century form criticism (p. 33).

Though he tips his hat to the early form critics, he essentially rejects their approach and that of those who utilize it later in the book and begins his discussion of important players in the field of orality studies in the post-form-critical era. Rodriguez goes on to offer some rather insightful and in-depth, though brief, discussion of important scholars in this field and their most valuable, in his opinion, contributions and corrections to it. He does an excellent job of summarizing their approach and the important features of their major works as well as identifying possible weaknesses in them. As with the previous chapter, this is invaluable resource to one entering into orality studies, as it gives good explanation of major author’s and work in the field and is an excellent starting point for grasping the history and various approaches to topic.

In the beginning of Part Two of the book, Rodriguez begins to make more clearly the distinction between what he views as the correct approach to oral tradition and what has, up to the present, been the more dominant approach, which follows the work of the early form critics and the work of Werner Kelber and others. The most prevalent approach has been to identify certain oral features that are residual in texts in order to identify/investigate the prewritten oral tradition behind them. This Rodriguez calls the morphological approach to oral tradition, and gives an assessment, albeit a rather obviously critical one, of it and its major followers. He contends, though without giving much support as to where this happens, that most adherents to the morphological approach, when trying to identify oral features, turn to Walter Ong’s list of features characteristic to orality. He then proceeds to show that these features can be found in

literate communication as well as oral (though he earlier said the distinction between literate and oral is not a necessary one) communications. While it may be a fair critique of media critics who follow the morphological approach, the author has not really shown that following Ong is so typical, so knocking down Ong's case does not seem to deal the morphological approach as strong a blow as he might like. He goes on to address several prominent NT scholars who follow the morphological approach, namely Joanna Dewey, James D.G. Dunn, and Terrence Mournet. He devotes a great deal of time to showing Dewey to be inconsistent in her identification of oral features in Mark's Gospel, essentially taking her to task. He is kinder to Dunn and Mournet, though still quite critical of their approach: "Both Dunn and Mournet have provided excellent (and sorely needed!) discussions of the qualities one finds in the synoptic tradition. I have no desire to dispute anything they have said, except for this one point: Neither the variability, nor the stability, nor the synthesis of variability and stability that Dunn and Mournet discuss are necessarily and essentially oral characteristics" (p. 65). He continues by further critiquing other followers of this approach, and, while he does offer some helpful insights about shortcomings of the morphological approach, such as the lack of consistency among scholars in the identifying characteristics of oral formulae and the problematic nature of referring to texts as "oral," it seems that he may be taking away too much from what one can know about the orality or oral nature of particular texts.

The other approach to studying oral tradition in the NT, the one Rodriguez follows, is to reject or deemphasize the idea that texts contain certain residual stylistic features. The contextual approach, as he calls it, "posits the oral expression of tradition as the context within which the written NT texts developed and were written by authors, recited by lectors (and/or oral performers), and received by audiences (and/or readers)" (p. 72). This fundamentally changes the questions being asked and what orality studies can contribute to NT studies. The author relies heavily on the work of John Miles Foley and his discussion of oral performance and verbal art. He explains, "We should not think of oral tradition as a source lying behind oral-derived texts. Instead, oral tradition in this model provides the context in which the oral-derived texts developed and were experienced by their readers and/or audiences" (p. 76). The "circumambient context," the oral context, is, then, what allowed the early Christian message to convey its meaning and for the early audiences to interpret and respond to that message. For Rodriguez's position, tradition and performance of the message is essential to understanding the original context of the oral-derived text, and, though he makes some interesting points about the value of the contextual evidence this approach can provide, there are some things that seem problematic. While he has spent much time showing why it is difficult to detect residual oral features in texts, he has not spent much time showing why one must believe certain NT texts are works of verbal art. He even goes on to say, "A work of verbal art need not be composed orally, in the presence of an actual live audience, in order to be intended for (and most authentically experienced in) oral performance. A text may be written beforehand, perhaps memorized, and performed before an audience" (p. 84). Certainly, if any of the NT books were written as something like a play or performance, this would be necessary and invaluable information for contextual study of the text, it is difficult to see, in light of the fact that oral features are not detectable in written texts, as Rodriguez has argued, how one would know that to be the case. It is also difficult to see why this contextual approach to orality has to be followed to the exclusion of the morphological approach. It would seem that both could be valuable to the study of the NT texts and are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

This work is certainly a valuable resource to introduce one to the field of oral tradition studies as they relate to the New Testament texts, and the author does an excellent job of giving much necessary information about the terminology and scholars whose work is prominent in the field. However, it is not necessarily a work for someone unfamiliar with New Testament biblical studies. What Rodriguez offers here is a great reference for studying this topic, though he approaches it with his own agenda and offers a method fundamentally different from what most biblical scholars understand oral tradition studies to be. His argument that the morphological approach is untenable is unconvincing, but his contention that the idea that oral tradition studies can help us understand the context is helpful. It simply does not seem necessary to dismiss the morphological approach in favor of the contextual, but rather, one could fruitfully utilize both in the study of certain NT texts.

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