

REVIEW

NEW READINGS OF EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

Markus Vinzent, *Writing the History of Early Christianity: From Reception to Retrospection*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. vi + 485. Hardback, £105.00/\$135.00. ISBN 978-1-108-48010-9.

Markus Vinzent's lengthy and important book opens with an ambitious seventy-six-page 'Methodological Introduction' with a bibliography listing around 300 items. The primary target of this sometimes diffuse discussion is a linear approach to 'church history' that begins with 'the early church' and proceeds through predictable stages (Middle Ages, Reformation, Enlightenment, or whatever) towards Modernity and the Present. Vinzent's 'retrospective' model aims to put this into reverse. We should start with our own present and work our way back towards the early church. In the book as a whole, four case studies seek to demonstrate the merits of such an approach.

Two of Vinzent's four studies are concerned with material objects and with the complex processes of reconstruction and reinterpretation that underlie their present display in the Vatican's Museo Pio Cristiano and Bibliotheca Apostolica respectively. The first is purportedly a tombstone in which a second-century bishop of Hieropolis named Abercius identifies himself as 'citizen of a chosen city' and 'the disciple of a holy shepherd who pastures flocks of sheep on mountains and on plains'. He proceeds to boast of his visit to Rome and Syria, led by faith and enjoying a constant supply of large fish drawn from a fountain and *οἶνον χρηστόν* (Christ-wine?) mixed with bread. At least that is what the early twentieth-century reconstruction of the tombstone has him say, based on the interpretative efforts of the Scottish archaeologist William Ramsay, supported by the formidable scholarly prestige of J. B. Lightfoot in England, Theodor Zahn in Germany, and Giovanni Battista de Rossi in Rome. The reality, painstakingly uncovered by Vinzent, is that the full inscription is found only in a legendary sixth-century *Vita Abercii* and that it coincides in part with inscriptions on two separate tombstone fragments discovered in the vicinity of Hieropolis (not Hierapolis). In one of these it is not Abercius but an Alexander who describes himself as 'citizen of a chosen city', while the travelogue and its reference to fish is found in the other. It is

possible that Ramsay and his supporters are right and that the *Vita* preserves the full text of bishop Abercius' inscription, the partially extant original of which was later copied by Alexander; possible, but unlikely. Vinzent's excellent text-critical work demonstrates that this 'queen of Christian funerary inscriptions' (de Rossi) is most probably the work of the author of the *Vita*, based (it is true) on the Hieropolitan funerary monuments but repurposed to generate the hagiographical story-line and to ensure verisimilitude. Vinzent's chapter-title ('Pious Fraud Now and Then?') rightly hints at continuities between the late antique hagiographer and his modern scholarly apologists.

The following chapter is also concerned with a questionable reconstruction of an ancient artefact located in Rome—in this case, the base of a statue of a seated figure inscribed with a list of Christian literary works and tables for calculating the date of Easter, starting from 'the first year of the reign of Caesar Alexander' (222 CE). The list includes works attributed to Hippolytus by later writers such as Eusebius and Jerome, and two of them (an extant *Χρονικῶν* datable to 235 CE and a lost treatise *Περὶ τοῦ παντός*) are seemingly claimed by the anonymous author of the *Refutatio omnium haeresium* (10.30.3, 32.4), a work important to classicists for its preservation of fragments of pre-Socratic philosophers. (In my view the latest editor of the *Refutatio*, David Litwa, is too sceptical in denying its attribution to Hippolytus.) So the statue is evidently a statue of Hippolytus—Vinzent does not follow his colleague Allen Brent in questioning the Hippolytus link. The only problem is that the statue, reconstructed in the sixteenth century as a male figure in philosophical garb, was originally a female. Pirro Ligorio, who discovered the statue and recreated it in its present form, also left a sketch of the statue pre-restoration that depicts a seated female with a single breast bared. Ligorio no doubt replaced the ancient female figure with a specially made modern male one in honour of his patron, Cardinal Ippolito D'Este. According to Vinzent, the original female figure represented Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, who by the third century had become a popular emblem of Rome. This statue was either specially created by Christians or (perhaps more likely) reused by them in honour of Hippolyta's masculine namesake.

Chapter 4 turns its attention to the *Apology* on behalf of Christians attributed to Aristides of Athens and said by Eusebius to have been addressed to the Emperor Hadrian on the occasion of a visit to Athens in 125 CE. A rendering of this work is extant in Greek, incorporated in the late tenth century into a novel entitled *The Life of Barlaam and Ioasaph* and approximating to a Syriac translation of the whole *Apology* and an Armenian translation of its opening section that functions in effect as an epitome. While emphasising the impossibility of recovering an original text from later versions, Vinzent also argues for an original *Sitz im Leben* after the Bar Kokhba revolt, in view of the clear differentiation of Christian and Jewish views—an argument that requires

a post-Hadrianic dating to the reign of Antoninus Pius, in agreement with the Syriac version. A useful synoptic table is provided of some of the material common to the versions, but Vinzent's attempt to identify genuine mid-second-century readings from among the variants seems to me to be questionable, along with his concern for supposed editorial motivations underlying the differences. More weight might have been given to the fact that the Greek adaptation to the novel and the truncated, epitome-like Armenian version are distinct works based on a text represented in full only by the Syriac version, rather than all three being versions of the same thing. Nevertheless, extensive agreements of the Greek and/or the Armenian with the Syriac suggest that the quest for the text in approximately the form known to Eusebius and still earlier readers is not quite as hopeless as Vinzent suggests.

Vinzent's final 'retrospective' case study is a monograph-length *tour de force* that occupies nearly half of the book. It is devoted to the letters attributed to Ignatius of Antioch, the most celebrated of early Christian martyrs other than the apostles Peter and Paul. To cut a long story short, the letters are transmitted in three different versions. Modern editions are based on the 'middle recension', a seven-letter collection in which Ignatius communicates his thoughts about church order, false beliefs, and above all his own starring role in the drama of martyrdom as he is escorted across Asia Minor on his way to the longed-for encounter with wild beasts in Rome. This is the version of the Ignatian collection known to Eusebius, and its restoration from later accretions is generally regarded as one of the success stories of early modern scholarship. Until the seventeenth century the received form of the collection was a 'long recension' in which the seven letters were expanded and supplemented with a further series of at least eight letters to communities and individuals. There is also a 'short recension', however, consisting of just three letters from the seven of the intermediate series, all themselves abbreviated. It is attested in a pair of Syriac manuscripts acquired by the British Museum in the 1840s, and their editor William Cureton argued forcefully in a series of publications that this represented the original form of the Ignatian collection. If this argument had prevailed, modern editions of the 'Apostolic Fathers' would have contained short Ignatian letters to Polycarp, the Ephesians, and the Romans, and the seven-letter collection (Ephesians–Magnesians–Trallians–Romans–Philadelphians–Smyrneans–Polycarp) would have joined the long recension in total obscurity. That this did not happen was due in large part to the defence of the intermediate, seven-letter recension mounted by Theodor Zahn in Germany and J. B. Lightfoot in England.

Vinzent's dual strategy is to side with Cureton in the debate with Lightfoot and to rehabilitate the long recension as interesting in its own right rather than an unfortunate corruption of the 'authentic' martyr. The short recension came first, the intermediate soon followed, and a further expansion into fifteen letters took place at some point after Eusebius. In another blow for Lightfoot, Vinzent

also sides with F. C. Baur in declaring the entire correspondence in all its forms to be pseudonymous and fictitious. If there ever was an Ignatius of Antioch compelled to travel all the way from Antioch to Rome to be martyred, he did not write any of the letters attributed to him.

The three recensions of the Ignatian letters are accessible in Cureton's 1849 edition, including a retroversion of the Syriac into Greek, and a full English translation is readily accessible in Volume 1 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* series (pp. 45–131). Read on their own terms, the Syriac representatives of the short recension are characterised by a relative lack of personalia—names, places, instructions—and by remarkably abrupt endings. The Syriac Ignatius concludes his letter to the Ephesians with the words:

Henceforth, the Son being manifest, magic disappeared and every chain was loosed and the old kingdom was destroyed and the error of wickedness was annulled. Henceforth all things were disturbed because the destruction of death was intended, and what was perfected by God received its beginning.

At that point the author or scribe lays down his pen. The equivalent passage in the intermediate recension (*IgnEph* 19.3) is followed by the conditional promise of a sequel (20.1–3) and by requests for prayer that also provide information about the author's current situation (21.1–2). To my mind, the short form of this letter looks very much like a truncated version of the intermediate one, intended to highlight matters of theological substance at the expense of mere biographical interest. If so, Lightfoot and Zahn are probably right and Cureton and Vinzent probably wrong. In spite of Vinzent's protestations, external evidence for the early existence of the short form is negligible. As in the case of the Armenian Aristides discussed above, the Syriac Ignatius might be understood as a kind of epitome of the received text-form.

Reservations about Vinzent's conclusions should not detract from his achievement in highlighting the significance of the reception process and questioning the conventional bias towards the original object at the expense of its subsequent transformations in new contexts. Vinzent's concept of 'retrospection' retains the traditional scholarly concern to differentiate earlier from later strata; what he abandons are the evaluative categories that prioritise a supposedly 'authentic' second-century Ignatius over the degenerate figure represented by the long recension. As Vinzent's title suggests, implications for 'writing the history of early Christianity' are far-reaching.