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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

MITCHELL, MARGARET M. *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. 194. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1107407077.

Margaret Mitchell is dean and professor of New Testament and early Christian literature at the University of Chicago Divinity School. In *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, Mitchell addresses the impact of Paul's Corinthian letters on early Christian exegesis, demonstrating not so much how early Christian authors commented on the texts but how they commented with them.¹ She argues that Paul inaugurated the Christian use of what she terms "the agonistic paradigm of interpretation," in which the goal of biblical interpretation is "utility to the purpose at hand, however contextually defined."² Paul's attempt to clarify the meaning of his letters to the Corinthians was an "inner-biblical process that fashioned a store house of hermeneutical principles from which his devoted followers in years to come would justify their own interpretive feats."³ Thus the Corinthian correspondence became the hermeneutical *diolkos*⁴ of early Christian biblical interpretation.

The book is addressed to an audience with some background knowledge of ancient hermeneutics in scholarly discourse and is intended to complicate as well as redraw the map of patristic exegesis. Margaret Mitchell's style is

1. Margaret Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ix.

2. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, x.

3. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, x.

4. The *diolkos* was a well-worn pathway in ancient Corinth, which was intended for the transportation of goods from the Aegean to the Adriatic and from Asia to Italy. See Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 4.

straightforward, and she divides the book into six chapters that build off one another. In each chapter she demonstrates the problem that occasioned Paul's particular hermeneutical techniques, details the execution of these techniques, and then shows how later Christian authors imitated Paul via the Corinthian correspondence.

Chapter 1 argues that the Corinthian correspondence was occasioned and spurred on by misunderstanding and conflict. In the back-and-forth between Paul and his community, the apostle "negotiated and renegotiated the meanings of his prior utterances."⁵ By so doing, Paul drew a map of tactical hermeneutics. Thus, Mitchell concludes, "The Corinthian correspondence is the *diolkos*, carrying the cargo of hermeneutical tools from one end of the empire to another, from the first through the fourth centuries."⁶

Chapter 2 argues that the exegesis of Paul and subsequent early Christian authors was heavily rooted in ancient rhetorical training.⁷ Students of rhetoric in antiquity were taught to be skilled users of a set of commonplace techniques, which could be employed on both sides of an argument to determine the meaning of a text.⁸ Paul, Theodoret, Athanasius, and Origen all show familiarity with these techniques, and Mitchell terms their scriptural interpretation the "agonistic paradigm of exegesis."⁹

Chapter 3 treats Paul's anthropological hermeneutics, or the taxonomy he creates in the terms "spiritual" (*pneumatikoi*), "physical" (*psychikoi*), and "fleshy" (*sarkikoi*).¹⁰ The meaning of a text is accessed in accordance with the elements of which the reader is composed. Some individuals are more perceptive to the true meanings of scripture because they are more spiritual and less fleshy. Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Origen employ and expound upon this anthropological schema, which according to Mitchell, is "one of the most influential pieces of hermeneutical cargo to pass across the Corinthian *diolkos*."¹¹

Chapter 4 introduces the Pauline visual metaphors of the "mirror" and the "veil." The mirror is a metaphor Paul invokes to refer to those passages which offer a partial glimpse or indistinct perception of divine realities, while the veil alludes to the covering or hiding of certain truths (1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 4:3-4).¹² These two images comprise what Mitchell calls the "veil scale," which describes

5. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 8.

6. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 9.

7. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 22.

8. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 22.

9. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 24.

10. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 41.

11. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 51.

12. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 59, 72.

the strategic calibration between the perfectly clear and the utterly obscure meaning of a text, “depending on the hermeneutical, rhetorical and theological needs of the case at hand.”¹³ Paul and later authors (via Paul) steered the meaning of texts in particular directions, either by declaring that the text is completely clear as it stands or by exploiting its ambiguity.¹⁴

Chapter 5 addresses Paul’s use of “visible signs” and “multiple witnesses” in order to demonstrate the truth of his claims.¹⁵ In Paul’s agonistic context, “self testimony was inadmissible and singular testimony was insufficient.”¹⁶ Therefore, Paul rhetorically introduces the witnesses of the “fool” and “a man I know” as forensic proof for the legitimacy of his apostolate (Deut 19:15; 2 Cor 11:1–12:13). In like manner, he invokes the visible sign of his “thorn in the flesh” in order to show that he has the true signs of an apostle (2 Cor 12:7–10).¹⁷ Athanasius, John Chrysostom, and Origen later employed the same techniques, using various texts and characters as witnesses.

Finally, chapter 6 addresses Paul’s conception of the ends of interpretation. Paul and others appeal to the spirit of his words versus the words themselves, his intent when he wrote them, and the effect they had on the community in order to show that “what matters in textual interpretation is not the words as mere significations.”¹⁸ The proper goal or end of interpretation is often the actions and effects it produces.

I found Margaret Mitchell’s study to be both interesting and illuminating. The importance of the Corinthian correspondence for the study of early Christian hermeneutics cannot be overstated. These texts contain the very first examples of a Christian author both interpreting his own writings and citing or alluding to (mis)interpretations of his previous letters. Thus one catches a glimpse at Paul’s formation of self-identity, early conceptions of authorial intent, and the influence that ancient secondary education and literary practices had on the composition and interpretation of Christian documents. However, I felt that Mitchell’s handling of Paul’s engagement with ancient rhetorical training¹⁹ was not brought adequately to its logical conclusion. That is to say, I would have appreciated a more explicit and detailed treatment of how early Christianity not only developed from its cultural context but also took common practices and adapted them to its own particular needs. This adaptation

13. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 59, 77.

14. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 77.

15. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 79–80.

16. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 80.

17. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 89.

18. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 105.

19. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 22–24.

created, in essence, a new type of literary/interpretive culture, founded largely in Greco-Roman rhetorical training but filtered through and perpetuated by Paul's letters.

Mitchell's study also has implications on our conception of how some early Christian authors viewed the "meaning" of a text. According to the hermeneutical practices of Paul and others, meaning was not inherent in the text itself. Rather, it depended on the thesis of one's argument. And while I do not think that Paul and others would have ever said this explicitly, their hermeneutics reflect this mentality. Agonistic Christian hermeneutics suggests that the effects of interpretation are just as significant as interpretation itself. Paul negotiated the meaning of his words (interpretation itself) in order to preserve his authoritative identity in the community, to maintain his intimate relationship with the Corinthians, and to evoke a penitent and corrective response in those who needed to repent (effects of interpretation). Thus Mitchell exposes the many levels of significance in early Christian hermeneutics.

Finally, Margaret Mitchell successfully continues the work of Averil Cameron, Francis Young, and Elizabeth Clark in redrawing the map of patristic exegesis. She calls upon biblical scholarship both to steer away from the inveterate dichotomy of Alexandrian allegorists versus Antiochene literalists and also to account for the manner in which early Christians strategically incorporated textual evidence for their arguments. In this respect, it might be said that Paul's Corinthian correspondence also serves as the *diolkos* in the formation of a new conceptual agonistic paradigm of interpretation in biblical and patristic studies. As Mitchell writes, "Students were not trained to become allegorists or literalists but rather to adapt evidence to the case at hand."²⁰ All in all, Margaret Mitchell's book is a competent treatment of the hermeneutical impact of Paul's Corinthian letters on early Christian exegesis.

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20. Mitchell, *Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 170.