

John Carroll University Carroll Collected

Theology & Religious Studies

6-1-1999

Review of Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture, by F. Young

Joseph F. Kelly

John Carroll University, kelly@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://collected.jcu.edu/theo_rels-facpub



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kelly, Joseph F., "Review of Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture, by F. Young" (1999). *Theology & Religious Studies*. 25.

http://collected.jcu.edu/theo_rels-facpub/25

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology & Religious Studies by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.

tion. Sidney Griffith looks at six hagiographical accounts of martyrs in the eighth century. Each is connected with monastic traditions; each suggests that Christian communities were using Arabic so effectively that they were converting some Muslims, something not happening where Greek, Syriac, or Coptic were the ecclesiastical languages. The behavior of these martyrs is quite different from the thousands converting to Islam and reflects a ninth-century Melkite view. Only one of the stories seems to be entirely fictional.

Benjamin Kedar insists that relations between "Latin and Oriental Christians in the Frankish Levant" (209) from the twelfth through the thirteenth centuries were more open than some have supposed. The Latins not only mixed with the natives; they settled most often in places where there were concentrations of Oriental Christians, whether in Jerusalem and in the countryside. There were clear borrowings of Arabic words by the Franks and ties with Jacobites, Armenians, and Copts as well as Greeks and Melkites. Elchanan Reiner shows a relationship between "different elements of the crucifixion story" as well as "medieval perception and timing of the advent of the Jewish messiah" with "ancient Galilean tradition" from perhaps as early as the second century B.C.E. (268)

Every serious historian of early Christianity should know this volume. The questions of religious pluralism are best served when the field at least goes up into the eighth century and thus includes not only Arabic-speaking Christianity responding to Islam but also Chinese-speaking Christianity responding to Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. As this book further shows, Christianity developed rather interestingly in Palestine well into the Middle Ages.

Those who rigorously pursue interreligious dialogue among contemporary communities need to learn such history. The multiple approaches of this volume (historical, literary, ethnographic, archaeological) give breadth to discussions of religious relationships. Its look at texts, including hagiography and artifacts seldom observed, changes the picture of religion in Palestine in the fifteen hundred years brought into focus. The descriptions are thick and telling.

More research needs to be undertaken in the areas raised here. The fractures of contemporary scholarship allow interesting questions to fall through the cracks. We need Northwest Semitic specialists who will study Gnostic texts and begin to tell us what their best guesses are for why the names of the gods in those ancient cultures reappear with such frequency within Gnostic treatises. The religions that Israel apparently combated not only influenced her but well may have taken on other life in these later features of Palestinian religion. Looking at such relationships can help us see how difficult it is to define any religion as a totally new appearance or to view every element of syncretism as always the worst enemy of religious identity.

Frederick W. Norris

Emmanuel School of Religion

***Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture.* By Frances Young. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xiv + 325 pp. \$59.95 cloth.**

An often overlooked truism of early Christian studies is that intellectually the church fathers were first and foremost biblical exegetes. With this persuasive and carefully structured—and well-titled—book, Frances Young puts

biblical exegesis back in the center of early Christian life as she demonstrates the interaction between biblical study and Christian culture.

Young acknowledges that scholarly approaches to early Christian exegesis have centered on the supposed conflict between allegorizing Alexandria and historicizing Antioch, a conflict in which the laurel goes to the Antiochenes whose attention to historicity matches that of modern exegetes—conclusive proof of superiority, if ever there were. Young exposes this for the nonsense many scholars have long suspected it to be. She points out that before Eusebius “history had been a literary form” (79) that emphasized invented speeches and minimized documentation. Eusebius broke from that tradition, yet he did not write history but apologetics. The Antiochenes such as Theodore of Mopsuestia went beyond him, yet not in search of historicity but rather to prevent extreme allegorists from denying the reality of the biblical narrative. Theodore himself claimed that when Paul used the word “allegory” in Galatians, “he does not remove the *historia*, but teaches those things prefigured [*protypóthenta*] in the *historia*.” The Antiochenes accepted the classical understanding of allegory but rejected a “particular tradition of exegesis which had a different background, and which shattered the narrative coherence of the particular texts, and of the Bible as a whole” (182).

As Young makes clear, too much has been made of the supposed rivalry of the two ancient schools, and so we will not make too much of it here. Suffice it to say that she demonstrates that although the two schools differed on important points, these differences were far more nuanced than allegory versus history, especially if the latter term is understood as a modern exegetical category.

Far more linked than separated ancient exegetes, such as the unity of Scripture. For ecumenical reasons, modern scholars play down this notion. For example, we refer to the Hebrew Scriptures rather than the Old Testament and we insist that those writings be evaluated on their own and not with reference to the New Testament. Such an approach would be unthinkable to the early Christians and not just because of a supersessionist attitude toward Judaism. Gnostics had mocked the Hebrew Scriptures, and some even denied their inspiration by the true God. Early Christian exegetes took the language and mind (*dianoia*) of the Bible seriously, trying to understand a text’s subject matter, “the area determined by the author’s *heuresis* or *inventio*, and [next] the verbal dress in which it was decked—the *onomata* or *verba*, or what we would call the vocabulary and style” (35). Such a careful approach was especially necessary when dealing with heretics who, as heretics, could not understand the true meaning of the Bible and thus engaged in fruitless text-slinging. We may recoil at the bias, but, as Young makes clear, that is how ancient exegetes worked.

This understanding of how ancient exegetes worked arises from the author’s use of modern literary and hermeneutical theory. The first sentence of the first chapter announces that she will examine “the exegetical process whereby readers made the text their own” (9). The Hebrew Scriptures contained many challenges to the Hellenistically cultured Christians (a talking donkey, an irascible deity), and Origen could speak of the “so-called New Testament.” Only by the Christians’ making the books acceptable to their own understanding of the faith and serviceable to their spiritual and even polemical needs could the Bible win a place in the church.

The process of reception took on many forms, including physical ones such as the Christians' "producing copies of the Torah and Psalms in papyrus codices as early as the middle of the second century—sacred books in notebook format!" (13) Via this "act of appropriation, [the Hebrew Scriptures] were subordinated, demoted, long before they were accorded the title 'Old Testament'"—they were "not just re-read but re-formed" (14–15).

What they did to the Hebrew tradition the Christians also did to the classical one, using such tools as philology to understand the Bible and then claiming the Bible's superiority to the classics. "Christian culture mirrored classical culture" (47) but used different texts in its discourse, such as substituting biblical *exempla* for classical ones in rhetorical training.

People were not Christians because of culture but because of faith, and Young has fine sections on the Bible's role in the formation of people's faith. The two constantly interwove. One could not understand the Bible without faith, and yet one could not understand the faith, either as intellectual assent or personal commitment, without the Bible.

This very rich book offers more than even a long review can cover adequately, such as an exposition of the four types of typology used in exegesis. Only the visual arts have escaped the author's portrayal of the Bible's influence on early Christian culture.

This demanding and rewarding book explicates the enormous impact of biblical exegesis on early Christian culture. One should not approach that exegesis without it.

Joseph F. Kelly
John Carroll University

The Emergence of the Christian Tradition: Essays on Early Christianity. By Birger A. Pearson. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997. xiv + 241 pp. \$19.00 paper.

Birger Pearson, now professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has here collected a group of (mostly) previously published essays in a book whose purpose is to provide "vignettes dealing with certain aspects of early Christian history and literature" (6). Between an introduction and an epilogue, these "vignettes" run the gamut from a critical discussion of the work of the Jesus Seminar (chap. 2) to a mainly straightforward presentation of the large role philanthropy played in the emergence of early Christianity (chap. 10). On the scale between these notes is found a wide range of essays—both in terms of subject matter (for instance, chapter 9 is an essay à la Walter Bauer on social unity and diversity in the early Egyptian church) and technical precision (chapter 4 uses largely philological analysis to identify the echo of a classical myth in 2 Peter 2: 4). The result is largely a window into the manner and method (though Pearson himself eschews the word "method") of a scholar in the "late afternoon" (215) of a distinguished academic career.

Birger Pearson is most known in the world of early Christian studies as a scholar of early Egyptian Christianity and Gnosticism (though he would refer to the latter as the Gnostic religion). This is largely through his important philological and history of religions work on the Nag Hammadi Coptic manuscripts, a corpus that generally reflects both a Gnostic and an Egyptian provenance. The essays that comprise chapters 5–8 of this book reflect this aspect of the author's career. In a short review I can only comment on one of