

## BOOK REVIEW

*Dialoguing in Late Antiquity*. By AVERIL CAMERON. Washington DC and Cambridge MA: Center for Hellenistic Studies and Harvard University Press, 2014. Pp. xi + 87. Paperback, \$19.95. ISBN 978-0-674-42835-5.

The genesis and goal of this volume are set out in the Preface: “This short book, based on three lectures given at the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg in 2001, and part of a larger project, aims simply to draw attention to the extraordinary richness and importance of this material, and to set out some of the main questions it presents” (ix-x). The topic is further outlined in the Introduction, as Cameron sets forth definitions for her use of the term ‘dialogue’ and establishes her particular interest in Christian dialogues in Greek to illustrate certain trends that extend from the classical and late antique Greek traditions to the Byzantine period.

The general style and technique of Cameron’s book is to introduce questions and explore the complexities and further questions that arise through a few illustrative examples. All three of the main chapters use their focal evidence to illustrate existing problems, to define gaps in previous analyses, and to consider questions and directions which might prove profitable for future scholarship. Cameron clearly shows the promise of her topic, but risks frustrating readers who want to see answers.

Chapter 1, titled “Did Christians ‘Do Dialogue?’”, introduces some major questions including what form the dialogues and debates took; under what kinds of conditions did the dialogues take place; how might they have related to other forms of Christian writing; how the debates effected social harmony, division, and-or violence; and how the dialogue form can provide insight about religious communication in the Roman empire. Much exploration is delayed until later chapters, but Cameron does make two points. First, she claims that “a more dialogic reading...with the aim of understanding their individual rhetorical strategies” (18) is required of the texts in question. The second argument in the chapter is that dialogue was steadily practiced throughout late antique and Byzantine eras,

and contributed to processes of Christianization and movements towards orthodoxy, while also interconnecting with other types of Christian writing.

Chapter 2 covers “Dialogue and Debate in Late Antiquity”. This chapter raises questions concerning the historical background and political importance of formal dialogues, questions of the level of logic expertise and formal arrangement involved in such debates, and the potential relationship between debate and religious intolerance. The probable roles and effects of debate in education, public life, and church councils of the sixth and seventh centuries AD provide most of the basis for exploration. The section considering public debates sponsored by governing authorities and the political implications that the results could have for the participants is one of the most concrete sections of the chapter, with evidence derived from both historical and textual records. This presentation of detailed information illustrates Cameron’s declaration towards the conclusion of the chapter that she is approaching her material “as a historian who is, I hope, also sensitive to literary issues” (37).

Chapter 3, “Writing Dialogue”, is based in exploring three textual examples, all “exceptional, yet at the same time highly suggestive” (39). Because each text has unusual attributes, the group presents the range of styles among the debates, and also illustrates the potential variety of questions and exploration offered. Methodius’ *Symposium* is analyzed in terms of its relationship with Plato, Origen, and the sympotic tradition. Next, Theodoret’s *Eranistes* illustrates principles of organization, including the use of *florilegia* and other appendices, and the text’s place in the history of “formalization of anti-heretical literature” (50). Last and most briefly, an anonymous dialogue between Gregentius, the Christian archbishop, and Herban the Jew before the royal court of Himar (in southern Arabia) presents some of the intricacies of dealing with the relationship between dating of the composition and historical setting of a text, and the use of narrative.

The “Conclusion” reviews the importance of two of the broadest questions that are present throughout the book and emphasizes two issues that are not treated as directly. First, Cameron reiterates her argument that Byzantine contributions to Christian history and culture deserve more consideration. Second, she claims that the dialogues and debates of late antiquity and Byzantium are crucial tools for the studies of religion and intellectual culture of the times. After reviewing these initial concerns, Cameron addresses the importance of Byzantium, and the comparisons and contrasts between the literary and utilitarian dialogues. She also includes a reminder that modern perceptions and uses of ‘dialogue’ are not necessarily the same as the older ones. Cameron concludes that the Christian dialogue

in Greek during the late antique and Byzantine periods must be treated in context, and that doing so promises to be a fruitful area for scholarly exploration.

The greatest success of the volume also presents its greatest frustrations. Cameron achieves her stated intention of bringing attention to the issues presented by her topic. The book succeeds in illustrating the level of work to be done and the value of pursuing the questions posed. The frustration comes in with the sheer amount of references to desiderata and forthcoming works. Ideas are introduced, like 'technologization', that cannot be fully explored or applied on account of the amount of work that remains to be done on the topic of Christian dialogues in Greek in the late antique and Byzantine periods. Nevertheless, Cameron's book presents a strong introduction to ideas and questions concerning a promising field of exploration.

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