
There are altogether 24 articles in this volume which collates the various presentations and addresses given at the triennial international conference, Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church, held at the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, in July 2005. The conference also incorporated the Western Pacific Rim Patristics Society.

The range of articles is impressive. There are essays on biblical themes: for example, the earliest Jerusalem Church, the mission to the Jews, the death of Jesus in its ancient context, the desert and the temple in first century Judea, the figure of Martha in the tomb traditions. There are articles on Chrysostom, Severus of Antioch, Evagrius and Gregory of Sinai, Maximus and Irigaray, Gregory the Great etc. There are 7 articles on Augustine.

Of these 24 articles, 5 are by Japanese scholars, all of whom are associated with the ‘Japanese Association for Eastern Christian Studies’. Their studies range from ps-Macarius to Augustine (3) and Nikitas Stithetos the biographer of Symeon the New Theologian. It is particularly interesting to read the survey given by Naoki Kuwabara of the University of Tsukuba on the state of Patristic studies in Japan at the present moment.

It is equally pleasing to see the number of Australian contributors to the volume. They give evidence of the sophistication of theological studies in Australia and of the outstanding impetus give by the Centre for Early Christian Studies based in the Australian Catholic University. There are also contributors from Europe and the United States.

Prior to publication, the articles were meticulously reviewed by scholars of high standing and thus the reader is assured of their quality.

It is not possible to survey each article. A few points may be made to show the value of the range given.

Philip F. Esler, of The Arts and Humanities Research Council, Bristol, in his ‘Understanding the Death of Jesus in its Ancient Context: Perpetrator and Victim Perspectives’, gives a valuable account of the cultural and literary context of Jesus’ death. In particular he notes the corruption of the temple hierarchy and the collusion of Caiaphas with the Roman occupying power during his long reign as High Priest (18-36 CE). He notes that Jesus would clearly have been a threat to the priestly ascendency. He holds – pace Morna Hooker – that in order to understand his ordeal, Jesus would have seen himself, as did other members of his group, as living out the experience of the Suffering Servant of the Fourth Song in Isaiah.

The study by Allie Ernst, University of Queensland, ‘Which Way to the Tomb of Jesus? Martha as Myrrhbearer in Image, Text and Liturgy’, shows a well-attested and early tradition of Martha as one of the women at the tomb, a feature not indicated in the canonical Gospels. She shows that while the four Gospels have the full authority of the Church they must be understood in a wider set of early traditions. The Gospels are again shown to be a selective rendering of the early Christian tradition.
The article by Raymond Canning, Australian Catholic University, Canberra, ‘Mark God’s Humility. The Humility of God and the Humility of the Teacher: Augustine’s De catechizandis rudibus’ refers in passing to the note by Robert Dodaro (Secret Justice) on the value of Augustine’s teaching on humility for showing how people “outside the beliefs and the sacraments of the church might be saved”. (p.311) This casual comment provides a useful suggestion for a theme in interreligious dialogue.

Shigeki Tsuchihashi, of Chuo University, Tokyo, studies ‘Aspects of the spiritual Struggle in ps-Macarius’ Homilies’. His footnotes refer to French, Latin and German sources (unfortunately he does not translate one of the German quotations, which is untypical in this volume) as well quote from the Greek originals. He notes the Messalian connections of ps-Macarius and compares his use of πληροφορία with that of the Cappadocians. Basil and Gregory of Nyssa hold to the meaning ‘assurance’ and feel uneasy with ps-Macarius rendering of ‘perfection’. Tsuchihashi quotes the fascinating text of ps-Macarius where the soul “covered with the ineffable glory of the Spirit, becomes all light, all face, all eye.” (p.187) This teaching will have its impact on subsequent writers; one might think particularly of Gregory Palamas.

The fulsome footnotes are particularly satisfying since they show the vast background of information supporting the articles which are like the tip of an iceberg. They give the original text in the original script as well as a translation into English. This is meticulous work. Furthermore, these footnotes give access to further works which are not so easily discovered.

One drawback of the book is the poor quality of the binding. It falls apart almost at once. This is no doubt due to the high costs of printing, especially when, as is here the case, there are extensive footnotes and quotations in a variety of languages and scripts – Greek, Coptic, Arabic. This drawback is offset by the fact that the work is also published on CD.