

KATHARINA BRACHT (ed.), *Methodius of Olympus: State of the Art and New Perspectives*. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, Bd. 178, Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2017, x+319 pp., €129.95, ISBN 978-3-11-043429-3.

The Christian Father Methodius, Bishop of Olympus (the *Lycian* Olympus, not the Greek one!) is a figure of whom, I must confess I knew nothing, and whose acquaintance I am glad to make, through the medium of this interesting collection of papers, arising out of a conference held in February 2015, at the University of Jena, where Katharina Bracht is Professor of Church History. She provides a most useful introduction to this collection: 'Methodius of Olympus: State of the Art and New Perspectives' (she is also, one may add, the author of an important study of Methodius, *Vollkommenheit und Vollendung: Zur Anthropologie des Methodius von Olympus*, Tübingen, 1999).

Methodius 'flourished' in the latter half of the third century, dying (probably) in 311 CE, in the Great Persecution of that time, and composed a number of works, mostly in dialogue form. Time has not been kind to these. Only one, in fact, survives fully in Greek, his *Symposium*, a remarkable work, inspired to some extent by that of Plato, but comprising a sequence of speeches by a group of ten consecrated virgins, of whom the most notable is that Thecla who was the companion of St. Paul, on the topic of chastity (*hagneia*). Others, such as the dialogues on free will, and on the resurrection (which contains trenchant criticism of Origen), and on leprosy (metaphorically understood!), survive only in Old Church Slavonic or even Armenian.

It is not surprising, then, that fully six of the fourteen essays in this volume (the first five and the ninth) concern the *Symposium*. They are as follows:

1. Dawn LaValle Norman, 'Coming Late to the Table: Methodius in the Context of Symptotic Literary Development.'
2. Katharina Bracht, 'Eros as Chastity: Transformation of a Myth in the *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus'
3. Mirosław Mejzner, 'Methodius: Millenarist or Anti-Millenarist?'
4. Amy Brown Hughes, 'Agency, Restraint, and Desire: Virginity and Christology in Methodius of Olympus.'
5. Federica Candido, 'The *Symposium* of Methodius: A Witness to the Existence of Circles of Christian Women in Asia Minor
— and then, in a somewhat different mode:
9. Janina Sieber, 'Methodius' *Symposium* from a Philological Perspective.'

Norman provides a general discussion of the rationale behind Methodius' choice of Plato, rather than the sympotic alternatives of Xenophon, or, in the more recent past, Plutarch or Athenaeus, as models, and concludes that Methodius has Plato particularly in his sights as leader of a rival philosophical system.

Bracht herself carries this line of thought further, giving a good survey of the treatment of *eros* in Greek literature both before Plato and by Plato himself, particularly in the *Symposium*, indicating how Methodius could, with some plausibility, substitute *hagneia*, in the sense of sexual purity, for *eros*, on the basis of an interpretation of Diotima's account of the ascent to the Beautiful, which could be seen as leaving all physical sexual relations behind.

Mejzner (who has himself edited the *De Resurrectione*, with Benedetta Selene Zorzi, in 2010) turns to the most interesting question of Methodius' use of the concept of 'millenarism' in *Logos 9* of the *Symposium*, the discourse of Tusiane. In fact, he judiciously concludes that Methodius simply 'entertains' the idea, allowing Tusiane to expound it, but actually opts for a two-way distinction between earthly life and heavenly resurrection, without the complication of a thousand-year earthly reign of Christ intervening.

Amy Brown Hughes examines the link between virginity and Christology. As she says, "In Methodius, the Platonically infused language of ascent constructs a discourse in which virginity flourishes as a 'performing' Christology." In fact, the virgins have redirected their erotic impulses to the other world, where they can look forward, in the fullness of time, to being rogered transcendently by the Bridegroom.

Next, Federica Candido calls attention to the remarkable feature of Methodius' *Symposium*, namely that it is perhaps the only work of ancient literature in which the protagonists are exclusively women, and raises the question as to whether this might afford some evidence of actual circles of ascetic women meeting to study the Scriptures in various parts of Asia Minor.

The final paper concerned with the *Symposium*, that of Janina Sieber, is really a brief philological study of the various editions of the work, such as those of Jahn, Fendt, Bonwetsch and Musurillo, with a view to showing up their inadequacies, and the desirability of a new version, such as she herself proposes to provide before long.

The rest of the collection concerns the various other works of Methodius, such as are predominantly preserved in either Old Church Slavic or Armenian. First, we have a study (6) by Jon Dechow, 'Methodius' Conceptual World in his Treatise *De Resurrectione*', which sets out Methodius' reaction, from a 'literalist' standpoint, to the creative efforts of Origen to develop a philosophically respectable theory of the resurrection of the body, the problem being that the resurrected body, in Origen's interpretation,

becomes a good deal too rarefied for the average member of the faithful to comprehend. Dechow takes us in detail through Methodius' efforts to save the theory, which involves having to confront Paul's rather troublesome pronouncements in I Cor. 15: 42-50.

Following on this (7: 'Bilder und Vorstellungen des Todes in Methodius' Schrift *De Resurrectione*'), Selene Zorzi takes us through the various images and concepts, drawn both from art and from nature, utilized by Methodius in his efforts to buttress his theory of the resurrection, and apportioned into the mouths of the various participants in the dialogue.

Next, Roberta Franchi (8: 'Where does the Impulse to Evil come from?'), in the context of a study of Methodius' dialogue *On Free Will*, gives an account of the various theories as to the origin and nature of evil current in second and third century CE philosophical and religious circles. For Christian thinkers such as Methodius, the impulse to get up to no good is an inevitable consequence, or accompaniment, of the gift by God of free will, symbolized by the behaviour of Adam and Eve in the Garden.

The remaining papers concern topics that are rather more exotic, at least for this reviewer. Anna Jouravel (10: 'Beobachtungen zu Methodius' Schrift *De Lepros*'), concerns Methodius' little dialogue *On Leprosy*, which involves an allegorical interpretation of the elaborate provisions laid down in Leviticus ch. 13 on how to deal with various types of leprosy, but Jouravel is chiefly concerned with the ways in which the Old Slavic translator has truncated his original. Yannis Kakridis (11: 'Die argumentative Form von Methodios' *De Autexusio* in der slavischen Übersetzung') is also concerned with the Slavic tradition, this time in respect of Methodius' dialogue *On Free Will*, on which he contributes some interesting reflections on Methodius' structuring of the dialogue, and what the Slavic translator does with that.

Next, Nikolai Kiel (12: 'Die Rezeption von Ps.-Justins Auferstehungsschrift bei Methodius von Olympos') gives an account of the use made by Methodius of various second-century sources in his dialogue *On the Resurrection*, but in particular the treatise of Pseudo-Justin on the subject.

Lastly, we have two learned contributions by scholars of Armenian: Suzanne Zeifelder, (13: 'Zum Problem der Willensfreiheit bei Eznik von Kolb und Methodius von Olympos') and Armenuhi Drost-Abgarjan (14: 'Die Rezeption des Methodius von Patara in der armenischen liturgischen Literatur'), both of which shed interesting light on Methodius' Nachleben in Armenia.

All in all, a most valuable collection of papers, which contribute significantly to our appreciation of a Church Father to whom the fortunes of literary survival in Greek have not been kind.

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