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A Forum in Ancient Christianity: Scholars in Dialogue

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Question 1: How is your discipline influenced by other ancient Christian disciplines?

Michael F. Bird (MFB): I think a whole number of things. Obviously Second Temple Judaism (STJ) sources—written and non-written—are part of the world into which Jesus and the apostles lived and operated

and in which the NT was written. So it is crucial for any serious NT scholar to have a grasp of it (though mastering all of it is nearly impossible). Similar, the patristic materials are vital because they are the sequel to the NT. Patristic authors show us how the NT was received, the development of the nascent church, and how Christian doctrines and practices came to be formed. My specific interest tends to be reading sources and secondary literature about second temple Judaism and the patristic era that is going to shed light and help me understand more of the NT and the early church.

Matthew Y. Emerson (MYE): For me, I am typically looking for history of interpretation in both STJ and Patristic disciplines; particularly, I am looking for how both STJ and early Christian writers read the Bible intertextually. Many NT scholars look to STJ for historical background, and there certainly is fruit there, but I'm much more interested in how the OT serves as the NT's background and how the NT uses the OT. In that regard, STJ provides more help in that it compares and contrasts how other Jewish writers were reading the Hebrew Bible at the time.

As far as Patristic writers are concerned, once again what I find most interesting is how they read the OT intertextually. I find this especially helpful when reading someone from the early-to-mid Patristic periods, like Irenaeus, because there may be more hermeneutical continuity with them and the NT authors.

Charles E. Hill (CEH): Context! Occasionally knowledge from these areas can directly influence how we understand a NT passage, word, or idea; more often it plays an important indirect role by telling us how others in contemporary or near contemporary ancient settings thought and believed, and how they lived. Studying the context surrounding the NT also helps us test our interpretations and theories. A principle that guides a lot of my thinking is that the NT ought to

make sense *within* its environment, and also make sense of its environment. Jesus and the apostles made an indelible impact on their culture, and in many ways we can trace out that impact through historical study. That is exciting.

Patristic studies can provide us with interesting, enriching, and sometimes invaluable, early interpretations of Christ and the NT writings. I think this is crucial for informed and responsible exegesis.

Bryan Litfin (BL): It's probably good to remember that to a Christian living in antiquity, there would not have been a hard and fast distinction between a canonical scripture and a non-canonical scripture until late in the period. The church had many sacred, precious texts that had God's truth in them. The early ones stood out because they were from the apostles, but the world of both sets of texts was essentially the same. So that would suggest that we ought not have rigid lines between New Testament studies and Patristic studies.

In terms of STJ, we must keep in mind that the Christians were in frequent contact with the rabbis and the Jewish community, especially in key places like Alexandria, Antioch, Edessa, Carthage, and Rome. That is why you get the *adversus Judaeos* literature, which would be pointless if they weren't exchanging ideas. And then there were all types of Jewish Christians, from those called Ebionites with a low Christology to others with a higher Christology to someone like Ephrem who clearly sees himself as non-Jewish yet functions in a Semitic linguistic setting and a Jewish thought-world. There is lots of overlap here and a spectrum or gradation, not isolated bubbles.

The main thing to glean from NT and STJ studies for the early church scholar is that while we make artificial distinctions, and properly so in academia, for the people actually living in antiquity,

these worlds were basically seamless. That means you can use one scholarly field to illumine another.

Preston Sprinkle (PS): The New Testament belongs in the broader corpus of Early Jewish literature. There were many sects within Judaism during the Roman era, and Christianity is one of them. So for the STJ scholar, the New Testament—along with the Dead Sea Scrolls and Enochic literature—constitutes significant body of texts that should be studied regardless of one’s faith commitment.

A study of both the New Testament and the Patristic sources that reflect on that faith commitment simply chases down one strand of early Jewish thought and its influences (e.g Gentile Patristic writers).

Jarvis J. Williams (JJW): As a NT scholar, I think that the world of STJ in all of its complexity can shine a ray of light onto the NT text. Every reader of the NT text has his or her own set of assumptions and baggage that he or she brings to the text. Immersing oneself into the primary source material that may represent the kinds of ideas and cultural peculiarities that the NT authors assume, but do not always explicitly state, will help the NT scholar understand the NT in its own historical context. This doesn’t mean that the NT scholar is without his own baggage or presuppositions, but this means that he or she will be closer to the NT world than before by virtue of being immersed into the Second Temple texts.

Question 2: What kinds of works would you like to see from other ancient Christian disciplines to aid you in your own discipline?

MFB: Obviously producing more critical editions of texts is always good, especially diglots (original language plus English translation in a

side-by-side format). Here, Michael Holmes's *Apostolic Fathers* volume is awesome and Craig Evans has a *diglot* of several pseudepigraphical texts forthcoming too. To be honest, any study of an ancient author that helps us understand an author, his or her text, context, and reception is always going to be invaluable to anyone interested in the history and theology of Christianity and Judaism.

MYE: Perhaps I should avoid making this statement, but I consider myself more of a biblical theologian and hermeneutician than an NT scholar. In that regard, what I always find useful are summaries of hermeneutical approaches of particular Patristic writers, and especially summaries that help me to understand how that author approached Scripture as a unified book. This assists me in my own approach to interpretation and to the unity of the Bible.

CEH: We could always benefit from more careful expositions of Patristic exegesis and theology, explicating how early authors read the Scriptures and appropriated them. There is a lot out there to harvest for the church and the academy. New, critical editions and translations of patristic works are still needed, although good work in this area is being done. Synthetic studies that trace out the early development of ideas, scriptural interpretations, doctrines, ethics, or ecclesiastical practices are helpful. Right now I think Christology ought to be a burgeoning field, as well as studies of oral and textual culture. With the discovery and greater accessibility of NT manuscripts, there is a lot of work to be done on the history of the text of the NT.

BL: I would like to see NT scholars focus less on grammar in isolation from sociological context of the original hearers and their lived environment. You need to get a feel for the real nature of Graeco-Roman cities, the kind of thing offered by historians doing classical

studies. Many NT scholars do a great job of incorporating this, but some treat the text like a grammar machine, doing word counts and syntax studies with computers that I am not sure are really telling us much except about our own fascination with statistics, given the small sample size and the dictated, free-flowing nature of ancient letters, which make certain intra-textual resonances unlikely to be intentional and therefore meaningful.

I would also like to see less of an assumption that later Christian texts cannot illumine biblical ones because that must be an anachronism. But the cultural worlds were the same, and the people a short time afterward who heard certain meanings in Paul, for example, were likely to have understood some nuances he was implying better than we give them credit for. As far as STJ, as defined to include a later period as well, this should help us understand Jewish Christianity. Particularly fruitful work can be done here in Syriac Patristics and I would like to see that expand.

PS: I'm not a Patristic expert, but it does seem that some Patristic writers and texts tend to be anti-Semitic (e.g *Epistle of Barnabas*); but others were not. I'd be interested to see some sort of connection between early Jewish texts and authors, and certain Patristic writers who weren't anti-Semitic.

JJW: More work on how NT authors and Patristic authors received and appropriated STJ readings of Hebrew Bible texts.

Question 3: What are current trends in your own discipline that you think should influence other ancient Christian disciplines?

MFB: That's a hard one to answer since it assumes a knowledge of all three guilds. Perhaps some methodologies that are gaining traction in NT studies like social-memory could probably reap some good results if utilized in other fields.

MYE: To be honest, I think the stream needs to go in another direction. It seems to me that NT studies often gets lost in the historical and exegetical minutia, while Patristic studies is trending toward more holistic and integrative approaches. NT studies could benefit from including more literary, canonical, theological, and philosophical considerations in its projects alongside of its current emphasis on historical background and the exegesis of individual texts.

CEH: My non-researched and short answer is, I can't think of anything right now! It is not necessarily a bad thing that some of the fads in NT studies might fade out before they can be applied recklessly, I mean rigorously, to other fields. Old fashioned, plodding, historical-critical scholarship on texts and backgrounds that is well informed and well-focused will stand the test of time.