



Mark Glen Bilby, *As the Bandit Will I Confess You: Luke 23, 39–43 in Early Christian Interpretation*. Cahiers de Biblia Patristica, 13. Strasbourg: Université de Strasbourg, 2013. Pp. 371. Paper, €39,50.

This book, which began as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Virginia under the supervision of Harry Gamble, is the first thorough, critical analysis of the early Christian interpretation of the Lucan story of the “Good Thief” who was crucified with Christ. It is also an example of the reception history of the Bible at its most illuminating.

The book is divided into three main parts. Part I, “Prolegomena,” introduces the differences between Luke’s story, in which the two criminals crucified with Christ serve as foils to each other, and the Markan/Matthean tradition, in which both criminals revile Christ. The differences have vast implications. As Bilby points out, “By transforming what were (in *Mark* and *Matthew*) mere background characters into more vivid participants in their own drama with Jesus, the *Gospel of Luke* gives birth to a narrative that would grow, adapt and move, not in a single direction, but in many” (26). The book traces this growth, adaptation and movement up to 450 CE by a skillful use of reception criticism, beginning with Tatian’s *Diatessaron* as the most plausible of many claimants to represent the first clear reception of the story of the Good Thief. Over the course of the book the author examines “over 600 distinct texts by over a hundred ancient authors (authentic, anonymous or pseudonymous)” (30). Readers of this journal will be interested but not surprised to learn that Augustine treats this passage more times (more than 60) than any other ancient author. In discussing these texts, Bilby often quotes extensive passages in Greek, Latin and Syriac, with his own translations into English. One can better appreciate the complexity of the author’s task when one recalls that for commentators such as Origen it is often necessary to rely on texts not in their original language. Bilby discusses his sources, methods and approach (principally a “history of trajectories” approach [p. 34]) in ways that will be helpful to students and scholars alike.

Part II of the book focuses on two controversies inspired by Luke’s account. The first involves the apparent contradiction between Luke’s narrative, in which the two criminals are sharply contrasted, and the Markan/Matthean tradition, in which the two criminals are indistinguishable. The second controversy, which drew far more attention from ancient interpreters, involves the words of the Good Thief and Jesus’s reply. When the Good Thief confesses Jesus’s innocence and prays to be remembered by Jesus when he comes into his kingdom, Jesus replies, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Controversy arose over how Jesus’s being in Paradise that very day could be harmonized with Jesus’s descent

into the lower parts of the earth (Eph 4:9) and above all with his resurrection on the third day.

Part III, “Themes,” is by far the longest part of the book and explores the various functions the Good Thief served in preaching and teaching in early Christianity. These included his being a model of prayer, beatitude, supersession (Christianity replacing Judaism), Nicene orthodoxy, justification by faith without works, penitence, confession, catechesis, martyrdom, baptism, asceticism, simplicity of language, and “death-bed conversion.” The Good Thief is even portrayed as the second “Second Adam” (279–287), who reverses the path taken by the original Adam in his departure from Paradise. But the predominant interpretation of Luke’s model criminal in early Christianity was that of martyr. The first and only explicit turning away from this line of interpretation was Augustine’s in his writings against the Donatists. But from 419, in a controversy with Vincent Victor, he changed his position. This change casts fresh light on the dating of four of Augustine’s anti-Donatist sermons. As this reference to Augustine suggests, Bilby’s history of trajectories approach does not preclude extended treatments of major figures. Thus, in addition to Augustine, we find (not unexpectedly) Origen, Ephrem Syrus, and John Chrysostom being treated repeatedly and at length. What is unexpected is the author’s suggestion that “bilingual Syria (which can lay claim to both Ephrem and Chrysostom, along with a host of other influential interpreters and texts) is probably *the* most creative and influential center of biblical interpretation, in the 4th- and 5th-centuries CE” (319). The entire monograph is full of such surprises.

Another aspect of Bilby’s history of trajectories approach is its ability to reveal notable connections, which were often established quickly and over long distances. Thus there is a striking echo of John Chrysostom in Augustine’s sermon 234, where Augustine pictures the Lucan crucifixion scene as a school, with Christ as the schoolmaster, the cross as his *cathedra*, and the Good Thief as his attentive student (171–172). Inspired by homiletic traditions and lectionary customs in the East, legends of the Good Thief arose that are remarkable in their diversity (e.g., he is given different names in different legends). These legends testify to the spread of his cultus.

With regard to the book as a whole, the numerous footnotes, which are often lengthy and detailed, are very helpful. The book includes tables both in the text and at the end of the book which enable the reader to compare passages etc. conveniently. The book has an index of scripture passages and an index of ancient authors and texts, but it lacks an index of subjects, and this omission makes the book far less useful than it might have been. Apart from this, the book is an example of the reception history of the Bible at its most impressive. Bilby’s reading is both vast and

extremely subtle. He often lays out a multiplicity of plausible meanings—even of individual words—without forcing any one upon the reader or leaving the reader overwhelmed and baffled by the multiplicity. Where the author does choose to pursue one possible interpretation, he regularly succeeds in uncovering connections which are fresh and richly suggestive. Bilby writes as clearly and concisely as any reader could reasonably hope for. This book will be of interest to scholars across a broad range of specializations. Highly recommended.

Eric Plumer
University of Scranton