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REVIEW ARTICLE

Ordering Knowledge in Early Christian Studies

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Brill encyclopedia of Early Christianity. Authors, texts, and ideas. 6 vols. Edited by David G. Hunter, Paul J. J. van Geest and Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte. Pp. clxvii + 867; cx + 801; cx + 863; cx + 871; cx + 866; cx + 866 incl. 15 ills. Leiden: Brill, 2024. €1,695. 978 90 0470 449 7

Six volumes, 5,000 (double-columned) pages, 650 authors, 1,350 lemmata:[1] how is such a behemoth to be reviewed? The first decision is to confine what follows to the hardcopy edition, which, while decidedly not portable, does permit random and intentional sampling, as well as reflection on the materiality of such an enterprise. Many users will probably access the digital version online, driven by its potential (not tested here) search facilities as well in pursuit of the internal cross-references, and perhaps by the promise of additional entries and regular updates; for the first of these *desiderata*, print-readers must turn to the table of contents which lists all the entries (vol. i, pp. v–xxxiii) and to the index (vol. vi. 578–823), on which more below.

One might ask the intention of an encyclopaedia, and, in particular, of this one: what distinguishes it from similar enterprises? Despite, or perhaps in pushback against, the threat of a descent into chaos in the face of the repeated shibboleth of 'the diversity of early Christianity/ies', recent years have seen the proliferation of collaborative edited attempts to impose some

[1] So the press release by the University of Tilburg, home of Paul J. J. van Geest: https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/current/press–releases/encyclopedia–early–christianity–1350–lemmata–published.

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control – 'Handbooks' (especially 'Oxford'), multi-authored and thematically ordered 'Histories' (especially 'Cambridge'), 'Dictionaries' and 'Lexicons', as well as 'Encyclopaedias', some eye-wateringly ambitious in scale and length (*Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum*; Brill's *Religion past and present online: Encyclopedia of theology and religion*), others, even if equally voluminous, more targeted (the de Gruyter *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its reception*).

As an 'Introduction' to the *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (*BEEC*) Angelo Di Berardino (listed as 'consultant editor') offers an overview more particularly of 'encyclopaedic' history, especially pertaining to this field (i, pp. clvi–clxviii), an interesting read whose purpose is not entirely clear. Since Di Berardino is himself the editor of a similar encyclopaedia, which has expanded through two editions and its subsequent English (and other) translations, it seems unlikely that he is predicting that now all such activity has achieved its apogee.[2] Despite the initial pretence of the label, no encyclopaedia can claim to be fully comprehensive:[3] choices must be made both regarding content, to which we shall return, and structure. Here the basic structure is alphabetic rather than arboreal: sixteen 'section editors' are named, who presumably were tasked with choosing and assigning entries and contributors, but there is no discernible trace of their differentiated responsibilities in the final compilation, unless perhaps in some, otherwise inexplicable, duplication, for example, between the contiguous entries entitled 'King, Kingdom' and 'Kingdom of God', or 'Monarchianism' and 'Monarchians'. It has been suggested that the rise of the alphabetic encyclopaedia reflected a challenge to assumptions of the unity of knowledge or to the dominant authority of religious doctrine.[4] Such an encyclopaedia of early Christianity seeks to provide a reliable conspectus of its subject but simultaneously bears witness to the impossibility of that being either unified or co-ordinated: there can be no relation between the starting point ('Aba') and end point ('Zosimus'), or any clear journey between them.

In practice, however, there are numerous interconnections that it would be counter-productive to ignore, and that are signalled by cross-referencing (→).

[2] Angelo Di Berardino, *Dizionario patristico e di Antichità Cristiane*, Casale Monferrato 1983; English translation, Angelo Di Berardino and Adrian Walford (eds), *Enyclopedia of the Early Church*, Cambridge 1992. The second enlarged edition (*Nuovo Dizionario patristica e di Antichita Cristiane*, Casale Monferrato 2006–8) was translated as Angelo Di Berardino (ed.),Thomas Oden and Joel Elowsky (consulting eds), *Encyclopedia of ancient Christianity*, Downers Grove, Il 2014. Both English editions included additional entries through agreement with Di Berardino.

[3] Neither can a review be comprehensive: in what follows examples have been chosen randomly as illustrative and not as exceptional.

[4] Jeff Loveland, *The European encyclopedia: from 1650 to the twenty-first century*, Cambridge 2019, ch. v .

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General entries, for example, on 'Apostolic Fathers', 'Apologists' or 'Cappadocians', inevitably incur some overlap with the individual entries on the members of those categories, just as city or doctrine entries highlight specific writers. Here discerning readers will benefit from the different authorial perspectives, although in some cases editorial intervention and co-ordination would have won economies of scale and focus. Further 'arboreal' structure is introduced by the subdivision of some entries into subsections with separate authorial attribution, although the decision to do this is neither clear nor predictable.[5] Thus, 'Dead' is subdivided: 'I. Care of the dead' (there is a separate entry on 'Funeral'); 'II. Cult of the dead' (there is a separate entry on 'Cemetery' but not one on catacombs); 'III. Realm of the dead' (there is a separate entry on 'Hades' but not one on 'Heaven'). 'Apostle(s)' is divided into 'I. Apostle/Disciple' (focused on the New Testament); 'II. Apostles, Apocryphal Acts of the' (although each of these has its own entry and the canonical Acts of the Apostles is listed under 'Acts, Book of'); 'III. Apostles' Creed' (also discussed under 'Creeds'); 'IV. *Apostles, Epistle of the*' (in this case there is no cross-referenced entry under *Epistula apostolorum*).

Some help is also afforded by the extensive index (see above), which presumably has been compiled by tagging relevant terms in the text. Inconsistency in nomenclature and in the use of English, Latin or transliterated Greek does generate multiple entries: for information on the same text one must look up 'Passio Perpetua', 'Passio Perpetuae', 'Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas', 'Passion of Perpetua', 'Passion of Perpetua and Felicity', 'Perpetua', 'Felicitas', 'Felicity' (who, unlike Perpetua, also has a personal lemma to herself), each with different, sometimes overlapping, page references.[6] Even so, through the index many more topics can be researched than from the headings of the entries.

The size of the *BEEC* is not simply a matter of the extent of its coverage, but of the length of its entries. It would be misleading to describe these as 'lemmata' as in a dictionary, for while some are terse and succinct, many are essays and merit being cited as such and their individual authorship credited. Inevitably, given the number of entries, some contributors (listed after the preface by institutional affiliation) are specialists, others are those with a more generic interest, and the editors pay tribute to the contributions of postgraduate students. However, the considerable variation in length at times may reflect uneven overall control rather than what most would consider the importance of the topic or the originality of the discussion:

[5] This may explain why Di Berardino, Oden and Elowsky, *Encyclopedia of ancient Christianity* is advertised as having 3,220 entries as opposed to 1,350 here.

[6] There are also alternative spellings such as Filastrius and Philastrius. As explained earlier, how this impacts the search facility of the digital version has not been tested by this reviewer.

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so, 'Epictetus' (4.5 columns), is followed by 'Epicurus/Epicureans' (20.5 columns), and by 'Epiphanius of Salamis' (7.5 columns); 'Nestorianism/Nestorius' (see below) has 8 columns and '*nous*' 17 columns.

Despite what was said above about the implied neutrality and non-teleological character of an encyclopaedia, in contrast to the deliberately shaped 'Handbook' or 'History', recent explorations have alerted us to the intersections between knowledge and power in the amassing and presentation of information, not only in the modern heyday of the genre, but also in late antiquity, the period of most of the sources cited herein.[7] As has been said of Pliny's 'Natural history', often seen as the progenitor of 'the encyclopaedia', 'It was an instance of knowledge given institutional form, for a purpose, created under particular social and political circumstances, and it still bears the marks of that creation.'[8]

With that in mind, the brief editorial preface (i, pp. xxxv–xxxvi) outlining the decisions made regarding the scope of 'Early Christianity' merits careful attention and reflection. The 'Early Christianity' of the title indicates a period, a phenomenon, but also a field of study, and the editors specify their intention to include 'some discussion of the history of modern scholarship'. In practice, while some contributors integrate such discussion in their account of the topic, the sources, and the questions to be answered, in others it appears as something of an afterthought, poorly integrated into the confident explanations that precede. An occasional enigmatic coda, 'A history for this topic is not applicable', signals either the originality of the contributor's research, or invites further investigation. This reviewer was intrigued by its appendage to the seven columns on 'Anthony (Poet)' (i. 353–7), whose *Carmen* is introduced as 'a characteristic example of early Jewish-Christian apologetic literature, likely dating from the end of the 2nd century CE', and is carefully analysed in the substance of the entry; that the consensus of scholarship for over two hundred years has ascribed the work (*PL* v.261–82) to Paulinus of Nola (fourth century) or to one of his followers is nowhere mentioned.[9] Perhaps in a future edition or revision of the digital version his place among the Apologists will be taken by Theophilus of Antioch, who appears to have missed out. Yet such quibbles are perhaps inevitable in a work of such magnitude. Used judiciously, many

[7] See Loveland, *European encyclopedia*; Monika Amsler (ed.), *Knowledge construction in late antiquity*, Berlin 2023; Jason König and Tim Whitmarsh, *Ordering knowledge in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge 2007; and Mark Letteney, *The Christianization of knowledge in late antiquity: intellectual and material transformations*, Cambridge 2023.

[8] Trevor Murphy, *Pliny the Elder's Natural History: the empire in the encyclopedia*, Oxford 2004.

[9] One might observe that there is an entry for 'Anthony' in the first edition of Di Berardino's *Encyclopedia*, but not in the second; he also appears in some online out-of-copyright reference works: no encyclopaedia starts from scratch.

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of the entries and the attached bibliographies will serve very well the editors' intention of meeting the needs of researchers at the beginning of their exploratory journey, as well as of providing an accessible overview or reference point for more general readers.

In recognition of the overall direction of recent scholarship towards 'diversity' or plural 'Christianities',[10] 'Christianity' is an inclusive and umbrella term 'covering a wide variety of historical phenomena'. This is richly substantiated by the equitable generous treatment given to the individuals, systems and multiple writings which in previous accounts of 'Early Christianity' may have been dismissed under the cursory labels, 'heresy', 'Gnosticism' or even 'Nag Hammadi' – although there are also entries under each of these headings. Readers for whom the avalanche of texts discovered or edited since the Second World War is still territory that they find difficult to navigate or to pay considered attention to, will find here sober and respectful analysis and bibliographical support.

While this approach is signalled and justified by the subtitle, 'Authors, texts, and ideas', its reverse is the editorial decision that 'the material side of early Christianity' is left 'largely out of consideration' and 'geography is not covered to the full'. In the light of the material turn and of interest in 'lived religion' in recent scholarship, some may regret the former, although in practice iconography can hardly be ignored where there is a focus on reception, such as of biblical figures,[11] and entries such as those on 'Baptism', 'Cemeteries', 'Altar', 'Vatican' and various martyrs or saints, necessarily include discussion of material realia and of archaeology (although the encyclopaedia is largely devoid of illustrations).[12] The 'not … to the full' coverage of geography is also somewhat perplexing; many cities, especially the locations of councils or of major churches or thinkers, are well represented, but one wonders why (*i.a.*) 'Africa', 'Ariminian Churches in the Germanic Kingdoms', 'Baleares' and 'Galicia' got through the net,[13] but 'Syria' did not, and therein 'Edessa' is represented but 'Nisibis' is not – although there is an entry on 'Old Syriac' (the language of the first to the third centuries CE), but for Coptic one must look under 'Bible'. Here, it is worth remarking that the article on 'Nestorianism/Nestorius' (see above) acknowledges that the latter probably did not teach the former, and does give a brief account of how that label has been applied, but there are no entries on any of the often-preferred identifiers,

[10] See P. Fredriksen, *Ancient Christianities: the first five hundred years*, Princeton 2024.

[11] There are also some explicitly iconographic entries such as that on 'Orant' but these are haphazard; for example, the entry on 'Cross, Crucifixion' is entirely about the method of Jesus' death, with nothing on the history of representation.

[12] See now L. Rutgers, N. Christie, R. M. Jensen and J. Magness, (eds) *The Cambridge encyclopedia of late antique art and archaeology*, Cambridge 2025.

[13] This is not to dismiss these significant contributions, which demonstrate the importance of local developments and of relevant scholarship.

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such as dyophysites, the Church of the East, Parthia or Persia, or the Assyrian Church.

The editors further decided that 'the end of the 6th century CE should be the cut-off point', thus joining the on-going debates signalled by other histories of early Christianity,[14] and by advocates of 'late antiquity'. Not least in the light of the observation closing the previous paragraph, some may baulk at the reason given, 'as by that time Christianity was established as the orthodox, Catholic Church in both West as well as in the East. The formative debates on the nature of God and Christ had been more or less settled, and the biblical canon had been selected and approved by church councils' (i, p. xxxv). That last claim is somewhat nuanced by the substantial entry under 'Bible' (ii. 1–57), and in particular by the subentries on the language versions. Unsurprisingly, the endpoint is not systematically observed, both because of the nature of the sources, reception and tradition, but also in the apparent desire to preserve the memory of figures or texts of contested date which only survive through yet later manuscripts or sources.[15] Even so, the eastern Church is not as strongly represented – an issue addressed by other encyclopaedias by extending until the seventh century or beyond.[16]

More conceptually striking was the decision 'to bridge the divide between the fields of New Testament and patristics', by including entries on the former. This is to take seriously the truism among New Testament scholars that 'the New Testament is a fourth century product', and also that, if the term 'Christian' is to be used even of writings that do not (yet) adopt it, then at least some texts in the canonical New Testament (most notably 2 Peter) may postdate other 'early Christian writings' (arguably the *Didache* or *1 Clement*). Hence, there is a brief entry on 'New Testament' under 'Bible', but the individual writings are treated separately: just as '*Ebionites, Gospel of the*' and '*Egyptians, Gospel of the* (Greek)' have their own entries, so too does 'Luke, Gospel of'.[17] Indeed, this can lead to some unexpected conjunctions: the entry on 'John the Apostle' is subdivided: 'I. *John, Acts of*'; 'II. John, epistles of'; 'III. John, Gospel of'; 'IV. *John, secret*

[14] See H. Leppin, *The early Christians: from the beginnings to Constantine*, Cambridge 2023; Fredriksen, *Ancient Christianities*; and n. 16 below.

[15] For example, the entry on Theodore of Raith which opens 'Verifiable information about Theodore of Raith is scarce' and is followed by ten columns on a work ascribed to him and tentatively dated *c.* 620 CE.

[16] There is no article on Eznik of Kolb although there is one on Isaac of Nineveh; the article on 'China' would need supplementing by specialist studies. Di Berardino's *Encyclopedia* continues to the seventh century as does Everett Ferguson (ed.), Michael McHugh and Frederick Norris (assoc. eds), *Encyclopedia of early Christianity*, 2nd edn, New York 1997, explicitly to include more attention to the Church in the East.

[17] See above on 'Acts, Book of'. The canonical/non-canonical divide is retained in the italicisation of titles and in the structure of the list of ancient sources.

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revelation of';[18] 'Revelation, Book of', without an authorial attribution, has a separate entry. Similarly, under 'Paul the Apostle' (v. 163–268), an initial article on the man himself is followed by separate subentries on the canonical and non-canonical writings which bear his name, in alphabetical order, with 'Paul, Romans' coming last after '*Paul, Revelation of* (Nag Hammadi)'.[19]

Yet, what are the consequences for how the New Testament writings are approached when they are located within the broader field of early Christianity? In effect, the answer appears to be, 'not much'. Most of these entries, invariably written by New Testament scholars, are much the same in shape and content as they would be in an introduction to the New Testament, with a focus on historical-critical questions of sources, literary structure, purpose, authorship, date, audience and primary theological characteristics. Any discussion of their reception or influence in the Early Church is unsystematic and haphazard. Often, this is to miss an opportunity or to fail to reflect the fluidities that are now increasingly recognised as part of the emergence of 'the New Testament'. For example, there is no discussion of Marcion's Gospel in the entry on 'Luke, Gospel of', nor any indication of the impact of recent debate about their relationship.

Similarly, thematic topics assigned to New Testament scholars often go no further than its textual boundaries: the discussion of 'Judaizers' focuses on Paul, especially Galatians, with only passing reference to the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Ignatius' *Epistles* and John Chrysostom.[20] The articles on 'Love' and on 'Judgement' are explicitly limited to 'biblical concept' – although those on 'Agape' and on 'Day of the Lord', which partly overlap with these, do go further into later Christian sources. This is not a one-sided problem: scholars at home in patristic studies are sometimes uncomfortable with topics that have their roots in the New Testament or even into the second century. Indeed, at times the second century poses its own challenges; there are careful articles on Justin, Irenaeus, and more extensively on Ignatius (which has no truck with the growing trend to question the dating) and Polycarp; however, those entries on other names which perforce begin 'little can be known' sometimes then proceed to paraphrasing or summarising Eusebius, with precise dating added, and later sources, without either recognising the ecclesiastical historian's own agenda or clearly demarcating where reception and tradition set in. One solution to this self-imposed challenge of dealing

[18] In contrast to the entry on Paul (see below) there is no general discussion of what might be said about John or the early traditions about him.

[19] The list begins with 'Paul, 1 Thessalonians' followed by 'Paul, 2 Thessalonians', because these are treated separately whereas there is a single entry under 'Paul, Corinthian correspondence'. There is a separate entry on '*Paul and Thecla, Acts of*', even though '*Paul, Acts of* already appears in the preceding 'Paul the Apostle' entry.

[20] There is no entry under the much-contested term 'Jewish Christians' although there is an entry on 'Ebionites, Ebionitism'.

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with the whole period 'as an organic whole' is to divide the topic into two or more entries by different contributors; 'Faith' is dealt with under 'I. New Testament and Apostolic Fathers', and 'II. Apologists', which actually covers a series of authors concluding with Theodoret of Cyrrhus; 'Christology' (ii. 390–403, see below) is divided into three, covering the first to third, the third and the fourth centuries and beyond. However, there are numerous exemplary articles which demonstrate that a more integrated approach is possible, such as those on 'Asceticism', 'Sin' or on 'Mary', and those on the reception of biblical figures, for example on 'Micah' and on 'Moses'.[21]

Yet if Paul belongs to 'early Christianity', and if Gospel characters such as Jairus (Mark v), Tabitha (Acts ix) and Zacchaeus (Luke xix) merit an entry – albeit largely because of their reception, particularly iconographic – what about Jesus? This may have posed something of a quandary for the editors, provoking a somewhat eclectic (last minute?) response; at 'Jesus' there is a cross-reference to 'Christ, Jesus' – note the comma (ii. 347–67). Under the latter heading three substantive sections deal with 'II. Birth and infancy narratives', covering the canonical and non-canonical Gospel sources; 'III. Descent into hell' and 'IV. Genealogy of Jesus Christ', focusing on the Matthean and Lukan versions and a few early commentators; these are sandwiched between 'I. Introduction', a one-column attempt to justify these 'as themes that have been important in the early church as well as the modern study of Jesus', and 'V. Quests for the historical Jesus', both by Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, a New Testament scholar and one of the editors. Inevitably, other aspects of the ministry of Jesus are extensively dealt with elsewhere, such as under 'Cross', 'Miracles', 'Parables', 'Son of Man' etc., primarily from the perspective of New Testament scholarship, and the entry on 'Christology' (see above) is succinct but informative, but the question of where, or with whom, early Christianity starts is left for others to continue to debate.

A corollary of such debates is the status of what the editors include as the 'Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts' of the early Christian movement. The latter is addressed in multiple ways, through historical contextual discussion of individuals and places, through entries on emperors and on the imperial cult, on the mysteries and Mithras, on the various philosophical schools, and on generic topics, such as 'Christianity and classical culture' or 'Church and Empire'. By contrast, there is little acknowledgement of arguments for locating some writings from the earliest period as 'within Judaism' or of those who emphasise the continuing dynamic between Jews and Christians. The articles on 'Christians and Jews', i.e. on the 'parting of the ways' debate, and on 'Anti-Judaism' provide comparatively brief and conventional overviews weighted towards the first two centuries, with the

[21] There is a separate entry on 'Forgiveness of sins' which is again very heavily weighted towards New Testament writers.

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predictable addition of John Chrysostom. There are precise and authoritative articles on 'Judaism', 'Judaeo-Hellenism', 'Messianism', 'Talmud', 'Tannaim', 'Tosefta', 'Bath/Mikveh', 'Tzizit/Tefillin' which maintain the integrity of their topics, as well as entries on 'Midrash' and 'Rabbi', even if their interest is as much on the New Testament. However, the entry on 'Law/ Decalogue/ Torah' has four columns on Jewish views followed by ten columns on the attitudes of Jesus, Stephen and Paul; rather more balanced is the entry on 'Temple/Jerusalem'.[22] Some more thematic entries do include the Jewish roots, but others are more dismissive, for example, 'For a history and discussion about the beginnings of apocalypticism … the reader is referred to other literature' (under 'Apocalypse/Apocalypticism/Eschatology') – which for some readers would leave Jesus rootless.[23] The helpful entry on 'Biblical interpretation' does have a section 'Contested meanings' which opens, 'In the earliest period Christians differentiated themselves from Jews and one another about the meaning of the Scriptures', but there is less about recent exploration of the continuing exegetical interaction.

This review has concentrated on the editorial shaping of the project, and on its consequences and success. As noted above, examples have been selected at random, for it is impossible to do justice to the work and the wealth of scholarship and knowledge constrained(?) within these six volumes. It must be repeated that, while some entries are more introductory, many are not just authoritative accounts of their subject but serious contributions to them. Perhaps the most easily-followed and persuasive of these are well structured essays, with subheadings, an easily-followed argument, some indication of the present state and future directions of research, and a concise but up-to-date bibliography; others are flowing manifestos, often less transparent of where the author stands in the spectrum of scholarship – although the extent of self-reference may invite some circumspection. While the duplication is at times unnecessary (especially where the same author is involved), readers will learn much by approaching the same topic under different headings, from different perspectives and in different settings. Congratulations and thanks for their service to the field must be given to the army of contributors, and to the editors who have finally brought this project to a stage of completion.

[22] There is a further entry on 'Jerusalem' which gives half a column on 'Jewish Jerusalem' but extensive discussion of New Testament and then Christian sources through to the seventh century.

[23] There is no separate entry on 'Eschatology', but those on 'Judgement' etc. have been noted above.

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