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Blossom Stefaniw, *Christian Reading: Language, Ethics, and the Order of Things*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019. x, 249 pp. ISBN: 9780520300613. \$95.00.

At the start of this volume, the narrative voice announces that it is “a book about defining and shaping the world through reading, a book about fragmented pasts” (1). The oscillation between abstraction and concreteness atomized in that early announcement is emblematic of Blossom Stefaniw’s main object of study—the work of the grammarian as fundamental for the setting, transmission, and reproduction of textualized and embodied world-making in the late ancient world. At the center of this cultural sequencing is Didymus the Blind, a fourth-century Alexandrian Christian author whose traditional characterizations in the scholarly record emphasize a set of rarefied identities such as “exegete,” “theologian,” “allegorist,” or “Origenist.” *Christian Reading* aims not to deny these identities but to challenge and sideline them for the sake of examining the impact and depth of “teaching in the Bible” as an enterprise that postulated normalcy, shaped subjectivities, and shared worlds. Stefaniw sets on this task as part of a productive dialogue with the work of Edward Watts, Jason König, C. Michael Chin, Robert Kaster, Raffaella Cribiore, and Anne Browning Nelson, as well as the theoretical insights of French theorists such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.

The book’s first chapter, “Narrative History of the Tura Papyri,” risks a speculative account of the plausible displacements in the life of a cache of documents that contain various works of Didymus along with others by Origen. As oceans rise and empires fall, the possible travels of the papyri take us from classroom to monastery to their eventual discovery in the summer of 1941 in a tunnel in a quarry cave above the village of Tura; later they pass through editorial projects by German scholars that ultimately made them available to “Blossom” as her professional career unfolds. Reminiscent of Saidiya Hartman’s preoccupation with the shape and content of our archives and our positionality in regard to them, this chapter emphasizes that all readable pasts are the result of contingencies, vulnerabilities, and labors with no particular telos. This is an important contrast because in many ways the task of the grammarian as explored by Stefaniw is a struggle against such fragility. What may appear as an ordinary truth — “Didymus the Blind was teaching grammar on the basis of particular books of the Bible” (42)—will also reveal the truth-building effects of the ordinary.

Chapter Two, “Reading with a Grammarian,” defends the argument that Didymus’ extant works on Psalms and Ecclesiastes are transcripts of classroom lessons offered to Roman youths. The back and forths, expansions, digressions, revisions, and repetitions in these texts reveal ancient classroom dynamics where learning, tedium, and impatience could meet. The world of Didymus’ classroom is that of Dionysius Thrax and Quintilian, and the concrete skills of this grammarian include the same methods of comparison, contrast, definitions, categories, and dialectic. The biblical content of these lessons makes manifest two key insights that will be fleshed out throughout the book. First, reading the Bible is not obliged to serve only “religious instruction or theological investigation.” Second, what we are witnessing in the lessons is a process of cultural metabolism that reveals the expansive role of grammar in this historical juncture: “Grammar metabolizes history and time and subjectivity by breaking a text down into its component parts and reassembling it in order to synthesize new knowledge which is different from but entirely dependent on the original kind of knowledge. What grammar does with knowledge is the textual metabolism of late ancient culture” (79–80).

Chapter Three, “The Textual Patrimony: Knowledge, Language, and Reading,” focuses on the cultural “patrimony” and the process of “metabolism” actualized in various technical exercises and epistemic results. Grammatical instruction exists as a relation of teaching and learning how to work with syntax and semantics by way of refining reading skills in the service of literary criticism: identifying a speaker, defining terms, moral evaluation, exploring literary devices, textual variants, etymology, and principles of interpretation. The cultural work of the grammarian is realized at an increasing level of abstraction in the work of homogenization and attachment. These strategies make teaching in the Bible a catalyst of an “epistemic feat” with a crucial cultural impact: “The peculiarly Christian aspect of [Didymus’] teaching is not necessarily the fact that he teaches from the Bible, but his particular genius in weaving Christian history into the larger patrimony, the leaps he is able to make to erase the difference between Aristotle and the incarnation. Those swift and tenuous moments are where Christian knowledge is produced” (135).

The fourth chapter, “The Intellectual Patrimony: Ethics, Logic, and the Order of Things,” further explores the cultural impact of the grammarian’s work as part of a “thick imbrication” (185). This process has various dimensions. On one level, it addresses matters of conduct (virtues and passions) not exclusively anchored in the ascetic behaviors of the Greco-Roman world. It also addresses the content of the natural sciences as they turn into Christian

knowledge, subverting the often-discussed dynamics of borrowing and tensions (i.e., Athens vs. Jerusalem) by positing a more daring and daunting dynamic: “Knowledge becomes Christian not because it is particular to Christians or superseded by them, but when the universal patrimony is rendered as biblical text” (150). Stefaniw explicates the matters of Christian cultural innovation in its interaction with *paideia* not taking place under the dynamics of salvage but on the imagination of totality as the work that “has to articulate one thing as total (Christianity) while sustaining the totality of the other (the cultural patrimony) from which it draws its breath, all while concealing the irruption of Christianity onto the map as a new thing.” Rather than merely reconciling the pagan and the Christian, “the problem is to navigate novelty and totality, the relationship between the new world and the whole world” (188).

In the fifth chapter, “Christian Reading: Chronography, Cartography, and Genealogy,” Stefaniw explores the expansive registers of Didymus’ grammatical instruction. Teaching grammar by teaching the Bible implies something beyond interpellation; it creates an object-subject that is, following C. Michael Chin, “entextualized” and localized at the threefold interconnection of *mimesis*, *oikonomia*, and *cosmos*. Teaching in the Bible collapses and appropriates disciplines like zoology, astronomy, and botany for an object-subject who learns to manage a home, conduct oneself in an empire, and inhabit a world. A brief epilogue reinforces the idea that Didymus operates in the realm of the totalizing discourses of writers like Jerome, Augustine, Eusebius, and Epiphanius by setting the ordinary *qua* ordinary; put simply, “Didymus is producing ordinary knowledge for ordinary people by the ordinary means” (222). The ordinary juxtaposes stealthy innovation and manifest continuity as instances of the life of power.

Scholars interested in Biblical reception, late ancient pedagogies, encyclopedic cultures, and the scales, gradations, and practices of the organization of knowledge in the late ancient world have an important point of reference in this book. Moreover, Stefaniw’s contribution opens up questions about totalizing discourses, geographical developments, and the contours of local knowledges that may help us understand other variants in the cultural dynamics at play in this study. Ultimately, *Christian Reading* is a convincing call to think beyond Christian exceptionalism as we investigate the refulgence of fragmented pasts.

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