

Foreword

Among the writings to have come down to us from Christian antiquity, the Shepherd of Hermas is by all accounts a strange and most enigmatic text—strange and enigmatic, that is, to modern scholarship, which has been poring over its pages only to find what Robert J. Hauck described as the “many puzzles in this puzzling little book.”¹ Some of the greatest intellects of the early Christian Church, such as Irenaeus of Lyon or the Alexandrians Clement and Origen, as well as many others after them, read the very same book with close attention and regarded it as an important catechetical and mystagogical work of great use to God-seekers. Indeed, if there is anything puzzling about the Shepherd, it is the fact that this text never scandalized the doctrinal certainties of its contemporaries or later orthodoxy.

Perhaps our comprehension of texts such as the Shepherd is hampered by the undeniable discontinuity between the implied readers of much of early Christian literature, and the actual ones in academia. The Shepherd has high expectations of its readers, some of which are incomprehensible, unreasonable, or impossible for scholars. When Hermas is given a booklet to read and copy, and finds that he can only decipher and copy each letter in turn, unable to make out syllables and utterly frustrated in his attempt to read and understand, his solution is the following: “Fifteen days later, after I had fasted and earnestly asked the Lord, the meaning of the writing was revealed to me” (Vis. 2.2 [6.1]); When he has difficulty making sense of the parables, he addresses the *angelus interpretes*: “I do not understand nor am I able to comprehend these parables *unless you explain them to me*” (Sim. 5.3 [56.1]). Needless to say, becoming existentially involved in the text, undergoing spiritual conversion, and exercising oneself ascetically is not what the guild of Early Christian Studies is set up to do. While the Shepherd claims to bear witness to divine revelation, a scholarly approach to ancient texts is by definition one that maintains a critical distance to the text.

The study of visionary experiences is one area where the academy has shifted in the past fifty years. A distinguished expert of Jewish apocalyptic literature, such as Michael Stone, who insists, in some of his seminal essays—“Apocalyptic, Vision, or Hallucination?” (1974), “On Reading an Apocalypse” (1989), and “A

¹ Robert J. Hauck, “The Great Fast: Christology in the Shepherd of Hermas,” *Anglican Theological Review* 75 (1993): 187–98, 187.

Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions” (2003)—that “a kernel of actual visionary activity or analogous religious experience” lies “behind the pseudepigraphic presentations of the religious experiences attributed to apocalyptic seers by the Jewish apocalypses of the Second Temple period,” knows full well that, back in 1974, “this was not the regnant view” and that “the religious life and experience ascribed authors are rarely taken into account.”² By the time of his 2003 essay, however, a rather blunt declaration—that these “are religious works, by religious people, and we must consider religious experience when we interpret them”—had come to carry quite a bit of weight. We are more aware today of the blind spots inherent to the project of giving scholarly accounts of texts claiming to report spiritual experiences and setting out to draw and guide their ideal readers into similar experiences by means of the very act of reading.³

The essays in this volume published, quite fittingly, in De Gruyter’s series, *Ekstasis: Religious Experience from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, are representative of this new and welcome strand of scholarship. They revolve around key topics of import: the Self and Subjectivity, Visions and Experiences of the Divine, and the Experience of the Shepherd as a Text.⁴ Even though scholars are, *qua* scholars, not about to (pretend to) recover a misremembered pneumatic tradition of overwhelming visions and ineffable revelations, or try to experience—at their writing desk?—the necessary breakdown and refashioning of the self, or trade in their libraries for the kind of apprehension of spiritual truths that one reads about in the Shepherd, we are, it seems, more disposed to taking seriously and wrestling productively with the range of experiences described in the Shepherd of Hermas.

Bogdan G. Bucur

² Michael E. Stone, “Apocalyptic, Vision, or Hallucination?” *Milla Wa Milla* 14 (1974): 47–56; repr. in *Selected Studies in Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha with Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 419–28; idem, “A Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions,” *HTR* 96 (2003): 167–80; quote from 167.

³ Bogdan G. Bucur, “Scholarship on the Old Testament Roots of Trinitarian Theology: Blind Spots and Blurred Vision,” in *The Bible and Early Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Christopher Beeley and Mark Weedman (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2018), 29–49.

⁴ Colleen Shantz, “Opening the Black Box: New Prospects for Analyzing Religious Experience,” in *Experientia, Volume 2: Linking Text and Experience*, ed. Colleen Shantz and Rodney A. Werline (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2012), 1–15; and Frances Flannery with Nicolae Roddy, Colleen Shantz, and Rodney A. Werline, “Introduction: Religious Experience, Past and Present,” in *Experientia, Volume 1: Inquiry Into Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Rodney Alan Werline, Frances Flannery, and Colleen Shantz (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2008), 1–10.