Critical Notice

Porphyry against the Christians:
Critical Notes on a Recent Volume of Studies


This volume collects the papers presented by some of the world’s best experts in the study of ancient pagan-Christian religions at a 2009 Paris conference devoted to the lost treatise Against the Christians by the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre (c. 234-c. 310). After lengthy neglect, the past few years have witnessed a flurry of studies, editions and translations of the fragments of this work, so that the publication of a weighty tome devoted to it is very timely indeed. In view the importance of this volume, I shall give a brief account in what follows of each of the contributions.

In “Comment le problème du Contra Christianos peut-il se poser aujourd’hui?” (p. 11-49), Sébastien Morlet provides a wide-ranging introduction to the volume. He sketches the history of scholarship on the treatise, discussing the question of its contents and date, its title, and its independent existence as a treatise, and its influence on subsequent Patristic literature. Particularly useful is his section entitled “Vers une nouvelle édition du traité de Porphyre”, which contains mini-reviews of the recent editions and translations of the Contra Christianos by Berchmann (in English), Ramos Jurado et al. (Spanish),
and Muscolino (Italian). All these works, particularly Berchmann's,\(^1\) come in for criticism, in that they either restrict themselves to translating Harnack's 1916 collection *telle quelle*, or tend to inflate the number of fragments without sufficient reflection on questions of methodology. A new edition of the fragments should be limited to texts explicitly attributed to Porphyry's *Contra Christianos*, while fragments of dubious attribution should be either omitted altogether or else edited separately. The article ends with two appendices, containing the text and translation of new fragments of the *Contra Christianos* taken from Jerome, Augustine, and Petrus Comestor, as well as the translation of two new fragments from Isho'dad of Merv, about whom one would have liked to learn more. It is hard to find fault\(^2\) with this excellent article: in particular, Morlet is certainly right to reject in no uncertain terms the thesis, produced by P.F. Beatrice and M.J. Edwards, among others, that Porphyry never wrote a work entitled *Against the Christians*, but that this title referred to a heterogeneous conglomeration of other known Porphyrian works. I shall return to this question in the context of Gillian Clark's contribution.

André Laks, in a brief contribution (pp. 51-57) entitled “Réflexions à propos de l’édition Harnack du *Contre les chrétiens* de Porphyre”, offers methodological considerations on the process of editing a collection of fragments, which he illustrates by comparing Harnack's collection of Porphyry's fragments with Diels' collection of the fragments of the Presocratics. Harnack's methodology reflects his view that Porphyry was essentially correct in his criticisms of Christianity. Laks suggests that future editors of the fragments of the *Contra Christianos* might consider dividing them into 1) biographical indications, 2) doctrinal fragments and testimonies, and 3) reception.

In “Méthodologie et collecte des fragments de Porphyre sur le Nouveau Testament chez Jérôme” (pp. 59-74), Ariane Magny proposes a methodology closely related to that of Laks, followed by examples intended to illustrate the method. Yet the paper's first part amounts more or less to saying that it is important to take into account the context of a report when studying fragments: a true but hardly revolutionary principle, even when dolled up with new-fangled terminology (“deconstruction of the cover-text”). A section on quotation in Antiquity contains many questionable assertions: claims such as “Les Anciens ne reproduisaient pas fidèlement les propos de ceux qu’ils citaient” (p. 65)

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1 It is ultimately judged to be “useless for the researcher” (p. 36). Compare, for instance, that largely negative review of Berchmann's work by Michael Simmons, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16.2 (2008) 263-265.

2 One would like to know, however, whence Morlet derives his information (p. 23) that Porphyry died in 305.