Derek Krueger and Robert S. Nelson (eds.)


This handsomely produced, large format volume represents the fruits of a symposium held in the Byzantine Center at Dumbarton Oaks in the spring of 2013 (the proceedings of a similar symposium devoted to the Old Testament in Byzantium were published in 2010). According to its dust jacket the book reviewed here aims to address the following questions: What was the New Testament for Byzantine Christians? What of it was known, how, when, where, and by whom? How was this knowledge mediated through text, image, and rite? What was the place of these sacred texts in Byzantine arts, letters, and thought? This extremely wide range of issues is tackled in a series of stimulating papers by eminent scholars primarily from the field of Byzantine studies.

The volume opens with a survey chapter by the two editors, focussing on the different ways the New Testament functioned during the Byzantine period: the physical formats in which the texts were produced and used; the structure and contents of the books in which the texts circulated; and the broader impact of the New Testament in religious literature of all kinds as well as in wider Byzantine culture. While the chapter refers to the other contributors where appropriate and so serves as an introduction to the volume as a whole, it does much more than this as it provides a well-documented survey of the whole field.

Chapter 2, “New Testament Textual Traditions in Byzantium” by David Parker, is a spirited argument not only for taking more seriously the wealth of Byzantine evidence for the NT text, but also for rethinking the goal of NT textual criticism itself. Parker argues that the heritage of Westcott and Hort in particular is in need of reassessment (p. 23). He presents the evidence of individual ancient readings preserved in Byzantine witnesses on the one hand, and of middle and late Byzantine manuscripts which can be shown to be good representatives of early forms of the text on the other; and he demonstrates how the greatly increased availability of manuscript material and the computer tools to analyse this have led to a more complex and variegated picture than the earlier view of a limited number of text-types (p. 27f). Indeed the emphasis now is rather on the affiliations of individual manuscripts, as Parker demonstrates in detail for the Leicester Codex (pp. 29-31). All of this evidence means, Parker claims, that “we must be willing to reassess the nature of the tradition. Rather than regarding the Byzantine text as the final and feeble flickering of the apostolic beacon, we are better off considering the view that without the patience, care, and expertise of the Byzantine scholars and scribes, our
knowledge of the New Testament writings would be a fraction of what it is” (p. 29).

The text-critical theme continues in Chapter 3, “The Textual Affiliation of Deluxe Byzantine Gospel Books,” in which Kathleen Maxwell explores possible correlations between groups of manuscripts defined on art-historical grounds and groupings based on textual similarities. In this enterprise the author makes extensive use of the INTF Clusters tool to determine the textual affinities of both ‘deluxe’ and more modest Gospel Books, according to a classification that she explains on page 51. The results (documented in detail in an appendix to the chapter) are inevitably complex, and most of the chapter is devoted to their interpretation. As befits a work dealing with manuscript illustration as much as text, Maxwell’s chapter is adorned with a large number of full-page illustrations. Maxwell’s exposition more than justifies her conclusion regarding “the value of multi-disciplinary research when textual, codicological, paleographical, and artistic evidence are assessed together” (p. 71).

The next chapter, by Robert S. Nelson, deals with “Patriarchal Lectionaries of Constantinople.” The author reminds us that the lectionaries of the NT, despite their large number, have been little studied in comparison with continuous text manuscripts (p. 88), although since they were used for readings in church they represent “the single most important way that the Byzantines encountered the New Testament” (p. 87). He deals with a significant group of lectionaries, those used in patriarchal services, treating these manuscripts as “the most important technology that connected the Bible with its public in Byzantium” (p. 115). This copiously documented and richly illustrated survey, summarising previous research and drawing on the author’s own examination of some 130 manuscripts (p. 93), indicates many avenues for further research on the lectionary tradition.

In Chapter 5, “Producing New Testament Manuscripts in Byzantium,” Nadezhda Kavrus-Hoffmann gives a fascinating account addressing the questions “how, when, where, by whom, for whom, and for what payment were these manuscripts produced?” (p. 117). Although the author pays special attention to manuscripts in American collections (where she has particular expertise through her detailed work of cataloguing these artefacts), she ranges far and wide from the Stoudios scriptorium (where four out of twenty-five known manuscripts are NT texts) to the repositories in Tirana and St Petersburg where the famous purple Gospel codices Beratinus and Purpureus Petropolitanus are kept (with a careful account of the similarities and differences between these two manuscripts). We are given a detailed account of the MS Gruber 152 (housed at the Chicago Lutheran Seminary when Kavrus-Hoffmann studied it, more recently returned ceremonially to its original home in Greece), which