

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

***A Dangerous Parting: The Beheading of John the Baptist in Early Christian Memory.* By Nathan L. Shedd. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2021. x + 218 pp. \$49.99 cloth.**

This monograph attempts to apply “social memory” theory to New Testament and patristic accounts of the beheading of John the Baptist, relating these narratives to modern studies of violence and the “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity. After an introduction outlining the approach and some previous scholarship on John’s beheading, the study proceeds in four major chapters. These deal respectively with social memory theory, ancient attitudes toward beheading, the account of John’s death in Mark, and the reinterpretation of his beheading by Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 49.3–5) and Origen (*Commentary on Matthew* 10.22). Ten pages of conclusions follow, plus bibliography and indices. The larger ambitions of the work are encapsulated by the titles and subtitles of the chapters, all of which feature the word “violence” (“A History of Violence,” “Violence Exposed,” “Cultures of Violence,” “The Violence of Memory,” and “Beyond Violence”).


In my opinion, the most valuable parts of the work are the central chapters on beheading in the ancient world and the Markan account of John’s decapitation. It is instructive to be shown, with such wealth of detail, that beheading was conceived by many ancients as a particularly dishonorable form of execution, one that affected not only the image of the victim but also, in some cases, his/her chance for a happy afterlife (because of the incompleteness of the body with which the soul was linked). Read against such a cultural script, it is *possible* that early Jewish and Christian passages such as 2 Macc. 7, 1 En. 61:5, Apoc. Pet. 4, and Tertullian, *Res.* 32.1 are pushing back by affirming resurrection for people who have been dismembered or devoured. I am not wholly convinced, however, by Shedd’s assertion that “a mutilated body posed a problem to the notion of a bodily resurrection” (75). None of the early Jewish or Christian texts cited presents this as a problem; Shedd’s contention that it was one is imported from pagan literature rather than arising out of the Jewish/Christian evidence. Therefore, it seems to me that on this subject Shedd advances a tantalizing possibility rather than establishing a probability.

Still, it is suggestive that the Markan account of John’s execution implies that his head (delivered by Salome to Herodias according to 6:28) was disposed of separately from the rest of his body (buried by the disciples according to 6:29), thus emphasizing the mutilated state of the latter. Antipas’s words at the beginning of the account, moreover, link decapitation with the possibility of resurrection (6:16). Shedd’s analysis thus makes slightly more credible Ross Kraemer’s suggestion that Antipas’s words in 6:16 should be read as a skeptical question (I paraphrase): “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead? (He can’t be: I decapitated him!)” Less convincing is Shedd’s own proposal that Mark portrays Antipas toying with the idea that *Jesus* has resurrected John—a suggestion for which there is not a whiff of evidence in the text. Even if one does not always agree with Shedd’s conclusions, however, these chapters refresh with new perspectives.

Less successful, in my opinion, are the framing chapters on the social memory approach and the parting of the ways. Frankly, I have difficulty seeing the exegetical payoff of the 32 pages devoted to “social memory” in chapter 1. Very little of this theorizing is actually invoked when we get to the texts about the Baptist, and when it is, it is not clear that it clarifies things. I am especially leery of the vague term “invisible violence” developed on pp. 38–42, which does not receive anything approaching a definition until the end of the section, when we are told that “the memory of John’s beheading. . . is invisibly violent because it can legitimize, lend approval to, and crystallize into practices of harm and injury against Jews in perpetuity”—the word “can” epitomizing the slipperiness of the claim.

The concrete evidence Shedd presents for a connection between Christian interpretations of the Baptist story and violence against Jews is meager. (A stronger claim could be made about “his blood be on us and on our children” in Matt 27:25 or “you are of your father the devil” in John 8:44). He points, for example, to *Dial.* 49.3–5, where Justin refers to John as the prophet whom “your (plural) king Herod had shut up in prison,” thus “refract[ing] the degrading gaze of John’s death to implicate Herod and the Jews” (145). Earlier in the same passage, however, Justin has referred to John as “a prophet among your (plural) people,” who told the Jewish crowds that he had come baptizing “you” (plural) in water, in preparation for the Stronger One who “will baptize you (plural) in the Holy Spirit and fire.” Downplaying this positive association between John and the Jewish populace, Shedd instead suggests that Justin is trying to connect them with Herod’s crime—a link the passage itself does not forge. Indeed, Shedd’s *idée fixe* about this seems to have caused him to mistranslate the ending of the passage, which he quotes correctly in Greek on p. 142 (Ἠλίας ἤδη ἦλθε, καὶ οὐκ ἐπέγνωσαν αὐτόν) but renders incorrectly on p. 143 in a way that advances his thesis (“Elijah already came and *you* did not recognize him”). It is true that elsewhere Justin links the Jewish people as a whole with the death of Christ, though not in a way that shuts down dialogue or incites to violence (see, for example, *Dial.* 16.4–17.3; 133.6). But I do not see a specific connection between the Baptist’s death and denigration of Jews in the *Dialogue*.

In sum, this is a provocative book that opens up new interpretative possibilities, but portions of it seem driven more by theory than exegesis.

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***The Source of Celsus’s Criticism of Jesus: Theological Developments in the Second Century AD.* By Egge Tjsseling. Leuven: Peeters, 2022. ix + 358 pp., € 79.00, hardback.**

The second-century Christian movement faced a number of poignant challenges, not the least of which was the rise of anti-Christian polemics from both the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds. Such polemics are exemplified in the second-century philosopher Celsus. Known through the excerpts available in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*,