
In this book Balch has collected six essays published between 2003 and 2008, while adding an introduction and a seventh paper. All the essays deal with the possible messages conveyed by figural scenes in Pompeian wall decorations. The topics represented are mostly mythological, but some other themes are taken up by the experienced New Testament scholar who, as it becomes immediately clear from notes and bibliography, has acquired a vast knowledge of the discussions in the field of ancient interior decoration. His thesis is that the ideas transmitted here may also have been present in similar portrayals, not preserved in the archaeological record, in the houses occupied by early Christians and may thus have been familiar to them. There were no real house churches yet, but the houses in Corinth, Ephesus and elsewhere, mentioned by St. Paul (unfortunately not described, p. 43) may have contained the pagan imagery, so well known and frequently illustrated in books on Pompeii and seen in numerous exhibitions in Europe and elsewhere (like the large one in the National Gallery in Washington D.C., 2008-2009).

Balch first gives an overview of existing studies of houses in Pompeii and examines the expressions of religion in these private realms, e.g. the presence of images of gods and the household shrines. He agrees with those scholars who argue that not every god on the wall signifies religion, and that such depictions may have a purely decorative function like the representations of mythical adventures. In my opinion, this is prudent reasoning, but it may weaken Balch’s own wish to compare Roman mythical representations and their meaning to Christian stories. Chapter I presents larger houses in Herculaneum as examples of what house churches may have looked like, viz. accommodating groups of some 40 to 50 persons at a time gathered as an *ecclesia*. The fact that the Romans had their outer doors open, would fit a sentence of St. Paul (1 Cor. 14:23) about seeing the believers worshipping the Lord, whereas the culture of dining would match that of the Eucharist. In the houses of Herculaneum and Pompeii, *lararia* could also be focal points for worship by the family living there, including slaves and other personnel. All in all, these houses endorse the hypothesis that houses in the first century AD were suitable to serve as house churches, the more so since they were ‘accessible’ for non-Roman gods like Isis. This
goddess is highlighted in chapter II where we move from houses to the temple of Isis in Pompeii, a well-known monument. Balch argues that the tragic stories of Io and Isis in the so-called *ekclesiasterion* reflect the suffering of man, finally brought to an end through salvation by the gods, an idea that was transported to the Christian idea of salvation by Christ. He also sees some political implications, but the chapter has no clear conclusion about the relevance of this to Christian house churches. Chapter III starts almost identically like chapter II and focuses on the idea of persons offering themselves out of free will (Iphigenia, Isaac). This may be interpreted against the background of the tragic figure of Laocoon (the debate about the marble group in the Vatican Museums is taken up as well). The conclusion of this chapter is that some of the themes current in Paul’s writing were also portrayed in ancient art.

Similar observations are made in chapters IV and V, the latter dealing with a folklore story of a pregnant woman destroying a threatening monster. Again, correspondence with the East is pointed out, viz. at Ephesos, the town where St. Paul preached and the ancient painter Apelles had worked. The stories of Io and Isis are presented in the light of perspectives from the *Apocalypse* of St. John and a complicated reading is offered of scenes showing a ‘battle of stars’ and portraying an epiphany, viz. between Venus as the Morning Star and Hesperus, the evening Star. This and other scenes announce the same disasters foretold by St. John as well. Other mythical characters are discussed in chapter VI: Endymion is the counterpart of Jonah and both occur in illustrations in tombs as well as houses. Again, the myths of pagan Romans and Christians express the same ideas. The last, not previously published chapter VII discusses dining rooms (especially *triclinia*) and their decorations. The almost endless variety of themes portrayed in these locations did not differ in rich and modest houses as far as the messages of the decorative apparatus were concerned. The 194 cases studied yield an overwhelming plethora of subjects that can be subdivided into several categories, like myths, real life, Pygmies, still lives etc. Balch assumes a similar wealth of themes in other sites and connects the Campanian examples to the message of peace proclaimed by the Julio-Claudian emperors. He also points out that the Roman interpretations could be distortions like the “contemporary massive reinterpretation of the Bible to support North American Christian imperialism” (p. 238).

The author’s aim remains vague: does Balch want to add new ideas to the enormous bulk of *pompeianistica*? In that case he remains rather elementary. If he wants to inform New Testament readers, these will be
perplexed by the sometimes rather detailed descriptions of Pompeian paintings, the strange associations and reasoning lines and the lack of coherence between the subsequent sections. Both groups of readers will not get an answer to the suggestion given in the title and the question posed at the beginning: were associations between pagan and Christian mindsets prompted by impulses from Pompeian representations of ancient myths?

I am happy that Balch does not feed the vexed discussion about the presence of Christians at Pompeii, a problem tackled too often by believers of some Christian denominations, whereas there is no evidence at all (see my ‘Jews and Christians at Pompeii in Fiction and Faction’, in S. Mucznik (ed.), Kalathos. Studies in Honour of Asher Ovadiah, Tel Aviv 2006, 53-76). But that does not relieve him of the duty to provide arguments for possible connections between the Holy Land and Campania. The thesis that houses in both parts of the Roman Empire were similar is too simplistic. We know that the architecture of Hellenistic and Italic houses was taken over in elite complexes like the palaces of Herod, who was known as a lover of what we call Hellenistic art, but most inhabitants lived in traditional Middle Eastern houses. When during the Roman occupation real Roman towns like Caesarea and Scythopolis-Beth Shean were flourishing, the impact of their civilisation of course was much greater (cf. various contributions in Y.Z. Eliav/E.A. Friedland/S. Herbert (eds.), The Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East. Reflections on Culture, Ideology, and Power, Louvain/Dudley, MA 2008). But, if we follow Balch’s thesis, these people may have been acquainted with Greco-Roman imagery.

The illustrations are poor, often photographed obliquely and not well focused. This also applies to the pictures on the CD which are little more than tourists’ snap shots. Unfortunately, there are many misprints in the text and a rigorous proof reading would have performed miracles. In view of this, as well as the remarks made above about the repetitions, one wonders how a prestigious publisher like Mohr Siebeck could produce this work in this way. It does not benefit the author or his readers.

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