

2020 BNTS plenary papers

Thursday evening

Professor Grant Macaskill, University of Aberdeen, 'The Entangled Enoch'

The Ethiopic and Slavonic Enoch texts contain a wealth of material that is relevant to our understanding of ancient Judaism and Christianity, and the entanglement of their literary traditions. Tracing this entanglement and establishing provenance for sections of the Enochic literature has been notoriously difficult, however, and New Testament scholars have either bypassed this material, in recognition of the methodological dangers associated with its use, or have used it naively, unaware of those dangers. This paper will consider evidence that suggests a particularly close relationship between the parts of the literature preserved only in Ethiopic and Slavonic (in very different language groups and cultures) and that further suggests connections with literature commonly associated with Syria. This will allow us to consider whether these Enochic texts might have passed through (or come from) the distinctive cultural environment of Syria and to consider the implications that this might have for how they relate to New Testament writings and to Jewish and Christian literature from the early centuries of the Common Era.

Friday evening

Professor Hugh A. G. Houghton, University of Birmingham, 'New Light on the Oldest New Testament Catena Manuscript'

Two hundred years ago on the island of Zakynthos, the British and Foreign Bible Society was presented with a manuscript which turned out to be two documents in one. On the face of it, the book was a Byzantine Gospel lectionary copied in the thirteenth century. Yet it was soon realised that this liturgical Bible was written on pages from a much older book, whose parchment had been reused as a palimpsest. The remaining traces of the original writing showed that the erased text was a commentary on the Gospel according to Luke in the format known as a catena, a compilation of extracts from early Christian writers. Although the gospel text was published in the nineteenth century—and shown to be an important early witness to the text of Luke—the rest of the manuscript has remained largely unstudied.

Following the acquisition of Codex Zacynthius by Cambridge University Library after a nationwide campaign, the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded a research project at the University of Birmingham from 2018 to 2020 to produce a digital edition of the manuscript. Multispectral images created from high-resolution digital photographs have enabled the recovery of the full text of the original document for the first time, along with a complete transcription of the lectionary and the first-ever English translation of a catena. The commentary turns out to be a key source for the preservation of extracts from Severus of Antioch, who was condemned as a heretic, and has enabled the identification of previously unknown sources. The lectionary, meanwhile, opens a new window on Byzantine book production through a series of marginal comments written by its newly identified copyist, abbot of a monastery in Rhodes. This presentation will describe the work and findings of the project, and introduce the new digital edition and open access studies of the manuscript.

Saturday morning

Dr Meredith Warren, University of Sheffield, 'Tasting Death: Sensory Metaphors & Other Worlds'

'To taste death' is a phrase used in many texts in antiquity as a metaphor for dying. Where it is used, tasting death is an ordinary human experience that is avoided by some 'quasi-angelic' few or by those who follow Jesus, but his turn of phrase is also used in non-Jewish, non-Christian sources (e.g. Theocritus, Epigram 16), indicating that its use permeates the wider ancient Mediterranean cultural landscape. As a means to encourage more engagement with sensory analysis in the discipline, this paper will explore the use of sensory metaphor in communicating culturally-accepted understandings of death. As humans ourselves, we know what it is like to live in bodies, to translate the world through our senses, and to feel powerful and transformative emotions. The gap, however, between our bodies and ancient bodies is immense, held apart by time, geography, culture, and language; the gap between ancient experienced reality and its textual legacy only complicates matters. This paper therefore also approaches some methodological questions at the foundation of sensory analysis, using the sense of taste, cognitive linguistics, and metaphor theory as examples. Taste breaches the body's boundary in a way that makes it an apt metaphor for death; mouths are a gateway into the body, into which we insert items of food or communicate in the most intimate way. The boundary point is breached in the ingestion and digestion of food, a process which makes internal that which had been external. Taste operates to create an association between the eater and the thing ingested. I aim to demonstrate how a sensory analysis of the use of this metaphor enables us to better comprehend its function in ancient sources, and thus the value of approaching our materials with the senses in mind.