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Berding's "The Apostolic Fathers: A narrative introduction" (Book Review)

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Book Reviews



Berding, K. (2017). *The Apostolic Fathers: A narrative introduction*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock. 148 pp. \$21.00. ISBN 9781532616921

This slim volume introduces the Apostolic Fathers through the means of literary fiction. Berding's historical novelization brings characters to life, putting flesh and bones on a skeletal framework of early Christianity. Through a creativity rooted in competent scholarship, he draws readers into the socio-historical world of the Apostolic Fathers. His narrative introduction is both enjoyable and informative, both imaginative and insightful. The fictional storyline is a spoonful of sugar, but the pedagogical nourishment is substantial. The narration is structured by a series of imaginary dialogues with Polycarp, beginning on a Monday morning and ending on a Friday evening, similar to the *A Week in the Life of ...* series published by IVP Academic. But the Monday-through-Friday structure serves a further purpose. The primary source material appearing in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* relates that the Smyrnaean bishop was martyred on a "great Sabbath" (8.1; 21.1). The epilogue of Berding's account (chapter eleven) serves as a flashback to Polycarp's arrest and execution on this Sabbath-day, incorporating the relevant text of the *Martyrdom* directly into the narrative. Moreover, Berding's prologue includes paragraphs from the opening of the *Martyrdom*, thereby allowing the primary source material to bookend the entire volume. The other nine chapters (two through ten) append excerpted texts from the Apostolic Fathers: *1 Clement*, the epistles of Ignatius, Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians*, the *Didache*, the fragments of Papias, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Letter of Barnabas*, *2 Clement*, and the *Epistle to Diognetus*. Each fictional dialogue thus dovetails into primary source readings, as Polycarp the protagonist shares relevant, novelized "personal experiences." Readers should, of course, constantly bear in mind that they are negotiating the blurred borderlands between imagination and reality. For those interested in sorting between the factual and the fictional, the substantive endnotes provide valuable historical information.

Reviewer

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