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*Prophets and Gravestones: An Imaginary History of Montanists  
and Other Early Christians (review)*

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William Tabbernee

*Prophets and Gravestones: An Imaginary History of  
Montanists and Other Early Christians*

Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009

Pp. xxx + 338. \$29.95.

Like the edge of the forest in dark fairy tales, the borderland of creative writing that lies between fact and fiction is for serious scholarly writers a threatening land of known and unknown risks. Even in historical narrative, few dare to publish unless they are willing to face scorn as less-than-serious scholars or are, alternatively, experts of such stature that they can welcome such risk as an opportunity to teach and inspire. Fortunately for early Christian history, William Tabbernee is a natural raconteur of the latter camp. His creative narrative of Montanism between 178 and 787 C.E. evokes the fine scholarship and imaginative appeal of J. G. Davies' *Daily Life of Early Christians* (1953) and *Social Life of Early Christians* (1954), with a detailed scope drawing from available sources that exceed anything Davies might have dreamed possible fifty years ago.

Tabbernee's vision for accompanying readers on a tour using the personal voice is evident from the outset by his bookending of prologue and epilogue with identical first lines: "The two middle-aged men are weary. It has been a long and tiring journey" (7, 305). He anticipates audience temptation to box him into telling either fact or fiction by providing an introductory "note" explaining exactly what he intends the book to do. Here he defends and defines the role of imaginative history as the most effective way to provide "as exhaustive an account of the four centuries of Montanist activity and belief as is possible to do on the basis of all the extant primary textual and archaeological information of this group of Christians" (xxiii).

There is no better guide to all the known facts about Montanus and his ecstatic "New Prophecy," that second- and third-century movement best known for the way it affirmed women's roles in prophecy and church leadership, announced a "New Jerusalem" near the cities of Tymion and Pepouza in the Roman province of Phrygia, and influenced that arch-legalist Tertullian in his old age. A past NAPS and current seminary president, Tabbernee is, after all, the archaeological scholar who literally put Montanism on the map, documenting his finds in the readable and multi-lingual *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism* and (with Peter Lampe) *Pepouza and Tymion: The Discovery and Archaeological Exploration of a Lost Ancient City and an Imperial Estate*.

Tabbernee uses *Prophets and Gravestones* (appropriately dedicated to the Montanist prophetesses) to personalize the attitudes and actions of historical (and fictional) characters as they relate to life and church politics that encountered, responded to, and eventually condemned and demolished the Montanist movement. In thirty eight narrative chapters, Tabbernee suggests how, for example, "Marcella receives a perturbing guest," "Hippolytus finds his inspiration," "Eusebius writes a history of the church," "Jerome reflects," and "a Montanist goes on pilgrimage." Most chapters are subdivided into discrete, creative accounts of staged

movements in the story, supported by clear but non-intrusive source references for each section and more extensive notes at the end of each chapter that enable—indeed force—the reader to separate fact from creative possibility. The facts are further supported by an extensive bibliography, historical timeline, six maps, and forty drawings or photographs from the author’s personal collection.

True to its roots as after-dinner tales told on site over five archaeological field excavation seasons, the book crosses boundaries in its appeal and source adequacy for a range of readers, from advanced researchers to undergraduate students and the popular press. Despite its length, it offers a portable, affordable, and appealing sound-bite introduction to “Christianity as a whole in the first six centuries of the Common Era” (xxiv).

As a literary venture, the book has some limitations. Readers may be less than satisfied with the author’s fictional style in which, in the view of this reader at least, Davies remains the greater master. Tabbernee’s constant use of the present voice may feel forced, as in, for example, “Hippolytus is so excited he can hardly contain himself. He has bought a statue” (139). Modern idiom occasionally distracts (“He has packed his boots” [255]). Some asides seem scientifically anachronistic (“Hermogenes learned painful lessons as a young boy when . . . he would come home with ticks embedded in his flesh” [221]). Reflections may seem more like author fancy than good fiction, distracting rather than snaring readers’ creative sight (“If he owned that cat, he imagines, he’d call him Linus, after the bishop” [63]). An audience expecting an easy story may be put off by the natural scholar’s occasional dense packing of archaeological fact and definitions better placed in the notes, such as, for example, “[N]ow that Serapion has the correspondence in his hands again, he remembers that it consists not only of Apollinarius’ own letter but also of some subscriptiones—brief appended statements and signatures of those present at the synod confirming that they concur with the synod’s findings” (96). And despite its length the book could be more complete: one wishes that the short online study guide (with its daunting URL [xxxiv]) had been included with the print text.

But these are minor complaints. Tabbernee’s use of personal and present more often brings the sources to life, moving us to new connections with these characters. *Prophets and Gravestones* is a daring, solid, and creative venture into a rare and undervalued crossover genre. It is hoped that such an imaginative history will pave the way for many more.

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