

Preface

AMONG THE ROLLING HILLS and fertile valleys of the earliest non-canonical Christian writings known as the Apostolic Fathers, the *Shepherd of Hermas* looms like Mount Everest. Its slow, difficult ascent challenges even the most seasoned scholars. A few engage in brief excursions then rapidly return to their normal academic pursuits. A small handful will set out to conquer the mountain, only to be humiliated in defeat. Most prefer to enjoy its majesty from afar. Part of the problem involves its length. One can journey for days and still be pitching tents in its foothills. But the bigger problem is a result of its numerous obstacles that hamper progress toward comprehension.

A brief account of my own personal and professional relationship with the *Shepherd of Hermas* illustrates this point. Years ago, while I was still doing PhD coursework, several friends—most of whom were fellow doctoral students—gathered early in the morning once a week for “the Apostolic Fathers Reading Group.”¹ Our purpose? To read carefully and discuss deeply the writings of the Apostolic Fathers—from *Didache* to *Diognetus* and everything in between.

You may be tempted to imagine a kind of elite society of sophisticated intellectuals gathered around a thick oak table strewn with ancient texts, sometimes discussing, sometimes debating the details of translation and interpretation. Resist that temptation. You would do better to recall that scene in *Dead Poet’s Society* when a group of pimple-faced kids are gathered in a cave making fools of themselves, reading bits of verse they do not understand, carrying on side-conversations that have nothing to do with anything, and departing none the wiser into the night.

During those weeks of fun and fellowship around the Apostolic Fathers, we flew through most of them before screeching to a halt at the *Shepherd of Hermas*. We spent one morning working on some introductory issues and the

1. The group was hosted by my long-time friend, Gene Burrows, who “graciously” put up with the rest of us: John Adair, Gary Cook, Stuart Parsons, and me.

first several sections. I am not sure about the rest of the group, but I walked away dazed and confused. We never even decided whether the author's name was supposed to be pronounced HERmiss or HerMOSS.

Before we gathered for what was supposed to be the last meeting to discuss the *Shepherd*, I made the decision to pull the plug on the whole debacle, abandon the *Shepherd* halfway through, and move on to Diognetus and the fragments of Papias. We clearly did not have the wherewithal, spiritual maturity, or intellectual prowess to handle the rest of the Parables. None of us were of a mind to “man-up,” as the Elder Lady would have told us. Only one of the members of the Apostolic Fathers Reading Group expressed great dismay that we had abandoned ship before hitting the proverbial iceberg called “Similitude 9.” To this day, Dr. Gary Cook—the solitary fan of the *Shepherd* in our group—complains about that. In response, we teased him with the nickname “Shep.”²

Who would have thought that a couple of decades later I would be co-authoring this translation and commentary on the *Shepherd of Hermas*? Not me. In fact, I probably would not have thought it likely even five years ago. Though the *Shepherd* occupied an important place in my doctoral dissertation on second-century incarnational Christology and early catholic Christian identity, and although I had written some papers and essays on the *Shepherd* over the years, the *Shepherd* was not what I would call my *forte*. Even in my upper-level elective on the Apostolic Fathers at Dallas Seminary I can only afford Hermas, the Elder Lady, and the Shepherd two sessions for discussion. This is not nearly enough time even to begin to formulate the right questions.

Nevertheless, when one of the editors of the Apostolic Fathers Commentary Series, Dr. Paul Hartog, approached me at an academic conference and asked me to take on this project, I could not say no. The conversation lasted several minutes, and the follow-up to that original hallway chat several more, but the gist of it was, if I may paraphrase: “Svigel, you're at the top of my list of (willing) *Shepherd of Hermas* scholars. You're also at the bottom of the list.” Since then, however, I had the honor of supervising a PhD dissertation on the *Shepherd of Hermas* by Dr. Caroline Buie, whose research and insights formed the framework of the introductory material and commentary of this work. Collaborating with her on this project made the mountain climbing much easier.

A final note on the *Shepherd* itself. Though over the last twenty years I have gained a greater respect for, interest in, and knowledge of the

2. I feel somewhat vindicated, though, that Gary abandoned his fling with the *Shepherd* and embraced Athanasius for his doctoral dissertation.

Shepherd, I do not claim to understand it completely. In fact, only a self-deluded fraud would claim to have mastered that indomitable work. Even the third reader of Dr. Buie's dissertation, Dr. Carolyn Osiek—one of the most esteemed *Shepherd of Hermas* scholars in the world—would admit the same thing. What the book of Revelation is to the New Testament, the *Shepherd* is to the Apostolic Fathers (minus the countless self-published expositions and best-selling fictional adaptations).³

For all its lingering mystery, though, the *Shepherd* is a treasure trove of wit, wisdom, and wonder. The fear-induced disregard I had for the *Shepherd* twenty years ago stands in drastic contrast to the awe-induced reverence it enjoyed in (most of) the early church. In the patristic period, the *Shepherd of Hermas* was highly valued as an inspiring—if not inspired—work. Nevertheless, even for modern “fans,” it continues to vex scholars with regard to date, authorship, and integrity. We will address these issues—and many, many more—in due course, but I urge you not to let the problems, puzzles, and peculiarities of the *Shepherd* distract you from its powerful images and even practical principles.

Michael J. Svigel

3. At times, as Dr. Buie and I wrestled with translation and interpretation issues, I partly hoped the Shepherd himself would show up and let me ask some follow-up questions to Hermas's own incessant interrogation. I would have gladly endured his merciless ridicule for just one or two additional clarifications.

SAMPLE

Acknowledgments

WE WOULD LIKE TO express our appreciation for the support, assistance, and encouragement we received from several people during the many years working on this project. First, we appreciate countless unnamed teachers, colleagues, and students who have provoked and prodded us in various ways toward this project—and through it. Their questions, answers, and even puzzled stares provided fodder to continue to feed this burden.

We also thank Dr. Paul Hartog and Dr. Shawn Wilhite for their hours of tedious labor on the manuscript at its various stages as well as the editorial team with Cascade Books for their tireless hours moving this project from concept to completion. Also, we thank Jack Riniker, Joseph Walton, and Autumn Wilson for their assistance in the editing and proofreading process. I (Mike) also want to thank my institution, Dallas Theological Seminary, for generously granting me a sabbatical during which I completed the bulk of the translation.

Finally, we thank our families. I (Mike) want to express my love and appreciation to my wife, Stephanie, and children, Sophie, Lucas, and Nathan, for their years of encouragement and for being the antithesis of Herma's out-of-control household.

When I (Caroline) approached Mike for suggestions of dissertation topics that dealt with the early church and sanctification, I confess that I was a bit naïve to the magnitude and difficulty of the work. It did not take long, however, to become fully immersed in the world of Herma, an utterly unique voice heralding from the early church, whose impishness, wisdom, and cleverness never ceased to engage my attention. Very often I thought that his method and message would be relevant for today's churches.

I could not have climbed this mountain alone, however, without the host of advocates that spurred me onwards. It is to these people that I owe my gratitude for helping me achieve the summit of completion. To my family, Tommy, Rebecca, and Creighton, I am deeply grateful for the

positive encouragement, overt love, and obvious pride you had in me and my work. This alone helped me to persevere to the end. As a distant mentor and advisor, I owe Carolyn Osiek many, many thanks for her work on the *Shepherd*. Her insights into the document formed much of the foundation for my thought development and helped to unravel the complexities of the language and expression. I also owe an enormous debt to Dr. Jeffrey Bingham, who opened the doors to the fascinating world of the early church. His quiet wisdom inspired me to emulate him as I pursued a topic I had never considered before. To my colleague, David Hionides, many thanks are due for his insight and guidance in navigating the PhD world. Last, but not least, I thank my co-writer, Mike, who clarified some ideas that I found difficult. It is my hope that many will find our writer, Hermas, to be as delightful and insightful as I have found him.

Michael J. Svigel

Caroline Buie