

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 88:4

October 2024

Table of Contents

Seminex: Looking In from the Outside	
Mark Braun	291
Gospel Reductionism: Then and Now	
David P. Scaer	323
Caesar Jesus? The Kingship of Jesus and Political Authorities in Luke and Acts	
Kendall A. Davis	347
Theological Observer	367
Holding Fast to a Lamp Shining in a Dark Place	
Book Reviews	371
Books Received	381
Indices to Volume 88 (2024)	383

Theological Observer

Holding Fast to a Lamp Shining in a Dark Place

An online article by John McWhorter trumpets that the classics department at Princeton University decided some time ago that it is possible to receive an undergraduate degree in classics without having actually to *learn* either language—neither Latin nor Greek.¹ Dan-el Padilla Peralta, a Black colleague of that department, has declared that the gatekeeping protocols of classics have been explicitly aimed at disavowing the legitimate status of scholars of color. Classics, in other words, is a bastion of White supremacy—and the Princeton decision, ironically, was supposedly intended to get more Black and Brown students into the field. McWhorter points out that the Princeton decision has deprived students—yes, African American students in particular—of the “pleasant challenge of mastering Latin or Greek.”

The McWhorter article was written a few years ago. I decided to go to the Princeton classics website² and see for myself what has transpired in the meantime. What I discovered did not quite square with the media hype. My impression is that Princeton, like most schools with classics departments nowadays, is trying to deal adroitly with the ongoing problems of declining enrollment and educational pragmatism. Yes, if I am reading the program of study correctly, it is possible to take a course in ancient literature, “whether read in the original or in translation.” But five of the eight courses that constitute the classical studies major must be taught by classics faculty (three electives may be taught by non-classics faculty). One course must deal substantially with classical reception, also fulfilled by study of another language relevant to the student’s interests (Akkadian, modern Greek, etc., at any course level). I remember thinking, while looking at the online degree requirements, that to get into classics at Princeton a potential applicant likely would have had to be reading Latin for at least a number of years—maybe since elementary school. Hence, it struck me that the undergraduate program did indeed enable future classicists to “chart their own path through the Department’s offerings”—maybe (putting the best construction on things) to get into an even more impressive graduate program at another prestigious university. I saw no hint of Princeton responding in any way to the racial issues identified in 2021 in the McWhorter article. It seems impossible to me (judging by just the website) to determine whether changes made back then

¹ John McWhorter, “The Problem With Dropping Standards in the Name of Racial Equity,” *The Atlantic*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/06/princeton-classics-major-latin-greek/619110/>.

² Available at <https://classics.princeton.edu/programs/undergraduate/tracks/classical-studies-track/>.

were designed to attract more Black or Brown students to classics and, if so, they have been successful in this attempt.

However, I will agree with McWhorter that to deprive students of any race of “the pleasant challenge of mastering Latin or Greek” seems particularly reprehensible in light of what classics offers still today. Typically what one must go through, according to McWhorter, is a “phase of drudgery—learning the rules, memorizing vocabulary,” etc., before passing into a phase of mastery and comprehension, “like dealing with scales on the piano before playing sonatas.” By not really learning Latin and/or Greek, students are discouraged from even beginning the process. Thus far McWhorter.

Along these lines, I am greatly cheered to see students “getting Greek” in the Advanced Greek course I teach, usually in the winter quarter of each academic year. These students, to be sure, often are the best Hellenists at the seminary—having taken Beginning Greek, Gospels I (Matthew selections), Gospels II (Luke/Mark selections), Gospels III (John selections), and Pauline Epistles (Galatians and Romans selections), to say nothing about the five one-hour New Testament Greek Readings courses obligatory for the Master of Divinity degree. Nevertheless, in Advanced Greek, I often see massively improved competency in the language as students pass from the deciphering stage to much more confident reading ability. As I am fond of quipping to all the Greek students I am privileged to teach at the seminary, “One cannot fly until one can run; one cannot run until one can walk; one cannot walk until one can crawl; and one cannot crawl until one has been born smilingly into the world.” And being born smilingly into the world is the whole point and purpose of *beginning* Greek. This is where the process *begins*, and hopefully will continue and increase throughout one’s entire lifetime and ministry as a pastor in Christ’s church.

As for the race issue, McWhorter points out that Pan-African civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois taught Latin and Greek “for a spell” and would have been astonished to learn that classics somehow smacks of White privilege. I am a great fan of Frank M. Snowden Jr., an African American classicist educated at Harvard, whose book *Blacks in Antiquity*³ garnered for him the Charles J. Goodwin Award of Merit of the American Philological Association in 1973.⁴ Snowden’s book includes a picture of a bronze statuette of a “Negroid” boyish orator from Alexandria during the Hellenistic age.⁵ As most classicists know, any ancient orator—“boyish” or otherwise—would have been expected to declaim lengthy passages of Homer from

³ Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1970).

⁴For a list of previous award winners, see “List of Previous Goodwin Award Winners,” Society for Classical Studies, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://classicalstudies.org/awards-and-fellowships/list-previous-goodwin-award-winners/>.

⁵ Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 189, fig. 64.

memory, if not passages of Thucydides, Demosthenes, or Pindar (which is some of the most difficult Greek known). Nor would it have made the slightest difference if the boyish orator were “Negroid” or not: My point is that *any* educated person (of whatever race) would have been expected to declaim Greek in this manner—which means that classics from time immemorial has *united* the diverse races of humanity, not excluded them or set them at each other’s throats.

Hence, in applying these matters to ourselves, we would be well advised to encourage all students coming our way (such as those studying for the Office of the Holy Ministry) to learn as much Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and German as possible. It should be unthinkable to exclude someone from learning Greek, for example, on racial grounds—or, for that matter, on the basis of one’s God-given sex (that is, female diaconal students might be encouraged to study the languages as well). In places on earth where the gospel is expanding, such as in Africa, Greek should be taught rigorously and with aplomb—not just the Catechism and systematic theology, as important as these theological disciplines are. Where the gospel is under attack, such as in America and the West, Greek and the classics should be even more aggressively cultivated—such as in our Lutheran schools, and among homeschoolers. Luther supposed that the languages were essential for the study and exposition of the word of God, and also for the training of the young to become good citizens. The reformer’s words, though widely known, are too little heeded nowadays:

And let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and, as the gospel itself points out [Matt 14:20], they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments. If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall not only lose the gospel, but the time will come when we shall be unable either to speak or write a correct Latin or German. As proof and warning of this, let us take the deplorable and dreadful example of the universities and monasteries, in which men have not only unlearned the gospel, but have in addition so corrupted the Latin and German languages that the miserable folk have been fairly turned into beasts, unable to speak or write a correct German or Latin, and have well-nigh lost their natural reason to boot.⁶

⁶Martin Luther, *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524), in *The Christian in Society II, Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976), vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986), vols. 56–82, ed.

Yes, let *us* take a lesson from our “deplorable” universities in America nowadays—where, for the most part, careerism has displaced learning for its own sake and the liberal arts have taken a terrible beating from virulent wokeism. It is to the point where, as in Luther’s day, students are increasingly unable to speak or write coherent English (to say nothing about Latin!)—but, then, why should they, with powerful AI algorithms on the rise? Do the hoary classics have anything to contribute to the current malaise? I think so. If modern universities cannot (or will not) teach the Greek and Latin languages in their pristine glory, then let the church do so, say I. If academic conferences purportedly dedicated to the Classics or the Bible waste time on diversity (however defined) and such esoterica as South Sea Islander exegesis, deviant sexualities, disability studies, the environment, and the like,⁷ then let us poor benighted Lutherans host our own conferences wherein the essential disciplines of the traditional liberal arts canon are not overlooked.⁸ Anyone who can write a cogent philological abstract should be welcome to the table, say I, be they Black, Brown, White, or any of the other skin tones God created long ago—provided only that each contributor respect our commitments, which are biblical and Lutheran.

It is a priceless privilege—and not a chore—to study Greek and Latin at all nowadays, and for pastors actually to get paid for studying and teaching the word of God to their congregations. Let us not take this privilege lightly. We are living in dark times, to be sure, but other Christians long before us cultivated the languages and preserved the gospel through even darker times. Now it is our turn: “And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet 1:19 RSV).

John G. Nordling
Professor of Exegetical Theology
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana
john.nordling@ctsfw.edu

Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), 45:360.

⁷ Such topics were standard fare at the recent Society of Biblical Literature conference I attended in San Antonio November 18–21, 2023.

⁸ Themes of the past six Lutheranism and the Classics conferences have been church fathers, history, poetry, philosophy, beauty, and humor. (Our first meeting in 2010 was basically a kickoff for the Lutheranism and the Classics movement.) Our eighth meeting, scheduled for October 3–4, 2025, will be cohosted with the Consortium for Classical Lutheran Education and focus on education.