

BOOK REVIEW

Esler, Philip (ed.), *The Early Christian World* (Routledge Worlds; New York: Routledge, 2nd edn, 2017). xxx + 1249 pp. Hbk. \$255.00.

The Routledge Worlds series is a remarkable accomplishment of cumulative scholarship. Philip Esler (Portland Chair of New Testament Studies and Director of the International Centre for Biblical Interpretation, University of Gloucestershire) has recently put together the second edition of *The Early Christian World*.

This book is the third work of its kind I have reviewed for this journal: the first being Joel Green and Lee McDonald's *The World of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017) (in *JGRChJ* 12 [2016], pp. R41-R43) and the second being N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird's *The New Testament in Its World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019) (in *JGRChJ* 15 [2019], pp. R11-R15). All three attempt to lay out the landscape of all things related to early Christianity—social, cultural, religious, historical, geographical and otherwise. *The Early Christian World* differs from these other two projects in its size (being the largest), scope (it extends into fourth century, for example), diversity of authorship (unlike the other two, it is not restricted to self-identifying Christians) and overall depth and quality of scholarship. Indeed, it is truly an encyclopedia.

Despite its small font and massive size, the book is rewarding and not as intimidating as it first appears. Ten sections divide the library of articles clearly and logically, black and white visual aids are used effectively throughout and the reading level, while challenging at times, never exceeds what one would expect for a graduate audience. The advanced reading level, however, would not be appropriate for those who are unfamiliar with the basic ideas of Christian history and literature. I would recommend it for graduate school and seminary students but not for undergraduates.

Because the contributions come from an array of scholars, readers are given various impressions about the development of Christianity. 'Complexity' may be the best one-word description of the book's portrayal of

Christianity, especially as many of the articles penetrate into specialized areas that make integration and synthesis difficult. Thankfully, however, the authors are particularly good at framing each subject and incisively showing what has changed in our understanding of that subject over time. For example, in one essay, we read that '[t]he history of scholarship in relation to Jewish Christianity has been framed, for the most part, under the dominant paradigm of an early and decisive separation of church and synagogue and the triumph of Gentile Christianity. The model has been challenged in a wide range of recent scholarship ...' (p. 139). Moss makes a similarly poignant remark later on: 'The historical period when Stephen died and Paul was writing cannot be considered a period in which Jews persecuted Christians, because Christians did not yet exist' (p. 789). Or, in another instance, Rankin suggests: '... even the title of this chapter ["Arianism"] might seem both inappropriate and unhelpful, if not indeed simply wrong. Contemporary scholarship suggests that even to speak of an "Arian" heresy makes impossible any attempt to get at the truth of what took place from the early 320s until the later fourth century over this matter' (p. 905).

As a second edition, all of the chapters were revised and new ones were added, such as 'Sex and Sexual Renunciation II', which summarizes scholarship beyond the issues of women and feminism, touching on masculinity and queer studies. Besides other good and necessary additions, there are some unfortunate exclusions in the area of theology and synoptic studies. Theology is rarely addressed as a topic in itself but can be found throughout various essays on Judaism, Paul and early doctrinal development. And oddly enough, one will learn far more about the early Greco-Roman economy than the Gospels.

Indeed, a paltry two and half pages directly discuss the Gospels, even though they are the primary literary sources for early Christianity, and these pages contain some of the standard, and often uncritical, assumptions of contemporary consensus. 'We do not even have secure answers to very basic questions such as who wrote them, where and to whom. All we can say is that they apparently circulated widely and were highly esteemed from the beginning' (p. 491). This comment is strange, then, since it is followed less than a page later by the same authors confidently stating that all the Gospels were written after Paul's letters—and after the *Gospel of Thomas*. One does not find any discussion about the questions and problems this kind of general framework might raise, such as: (a) since there is supposedly a half century between Paul's letters and that of the Gospel writers, what does this do to the consensus about theological 'development' (i.e. Christology, soteriology,

etc.) in early Christian communities given Paul's extremely advanced theologizing, 'high' Christology, statements on the resurrection and considerable influence in the development of Gentile Christianity?; (b) with Mark pushed into the 90s–110s, and with the general consensus that Mark was the first written Gospel, must one really believe that Luke–Acts was written in the 120s or later to allow for the development within the literary Gospel tradition, and is this really reasonable?; (c) what *incentive* would the original writers have had for waiting 60–100 years after the events happened to write them down, especially if the Gospels were in any way *evangelistic* and motivated by the resurrection event, as is virtually certain to be the case?; (d) how exactly does one deal with 1 Timothy's probable reference to the Gospel of Luke?; must one really push the Pastorals into the era of Ignatius or invoke an *ad hoc* (i.e. evidence-less) redaction, and is that reasonable?

I realize there are various answers to these questions, that some are not as serious as others and the validity of some may cannot be taken for granted, but my point is twofold: (1) these questions should be given some space in an encyclopedia on early Christianity, and (2) it seems that there is an uncritical acceptance of a new consensus on late Gospel origins that compromises many other aspects of this subject. For example, as I discussed in my *Reading Religion* review (<http://readingreligion.org/books/when-christians-were-jews>) of Paula Fredriksen's *When Christians Were Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), if even one of the Gospels, like Mark, was written before 70 CE, the entire model falls into a disarray. And this is just one example of the contingencies at play in these discussions. Whatever is decided on that matter, however, what remains indisputable is that *The Early Christian World* lacks basic discussion on the most important testimony about Jesus, who is central to the early Christian world, and remains at the mercy of contemporary trends. This unfortunate state of affairs is representative of the state of Gospel and New Testament studies at large and has rightly motivated the much-needed corrections of such authors as James Dunn (*Jesus Remembered* [Christianity in the Making, 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]; *Beginning from Jerusalem* [Christianity in the Making, 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008]; *Neither Jew nor Greek* [Christianity in the Making, 3; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015]), Richard Bauckham (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2017]), Larry Hurtado (*Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017]) and others.

The Early Christian World does, however, marvelously sketch out the development of later Christian doctrine through a series of 'profiles', covering Origen, Tertullian, Perpetua and Felicitas, Constantine, Anthony the Great, Pachomius the Great, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Ephrem the Syrian and Julian the Apostate. These come after chapters on 'Internal Challenges' (pp. 835-940) that cover the various movements from Gnosticism to Manichaeism. The level of detail and impact each of these carries was particularly gratifying, as they accomplish far more than a review of seminary-level surveys. This reviewer was particularly fascinated by the Manichaean chapter, which frames the group as a successful offshoot of Christianity that extended all the way to China into the 1600s and avoided many of theological problems of Western Christendom. It is unfortunate that such a rich and interesting movement is often given only cursory attention in connection with, for example, discussions of Augustine.

For a book of its size and scope, much more could be analyzed and praised, though the assessment provided give a sense of the book's strengths and weaknesses. It will probably best serve libraries for graduate students or specialists on Christian origins. As a whole, the work is a rich, wide and successful mosaic of windows that peer intensely into the early Christian world.

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