

## BOOK REVIEW

Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). xxvii + 516 pp. Pbk. US\$34.00.

There has been a popular trend in biblical studies to see Christianity's origins in its Jewish context. After all, Christianity began as a sect within Judaism and Jesus was understood as the Jewish Messiah. All of this is good and helpful in understanding this very important influence on Christian origins. However, it could easily lead to a lack of attention toward the Greco-Roman context. It must be remembered that it was to Greco-Roman audiences that most of the New Testament documents were written. Even Judaism itself had developed within a Greco-Roman context. For this reason, Hans-Josef Klauck's *The Religious Context of Early Christianity* is an important resource. Since there is no such thing as one Greco-Roman religion, Klauck breaks down the ancient religions according to their type.

The first section is on civic and domestic religion. Often the focus for religious tendencies is on providing hope and stability for the average person. Klauck provides a very good summary of what religion looked like on a popular level in the ancient world. People went to temples, celebrated feasts and buried their dead with strong religious beliefs tying numerous aspects of their lives together. Even when the specific god being worship varied, the patterns remained the same for the way the religion shaped society.

Of particular importance for New Testament studies is research into ancient mystery cults. Numerous people in the ancient world went beyond the popular religious practices and were initiated into cults with secret rites. These cults may have included the worship of the same gods as popular religions, but in the mystery cults new forms of exclusivist fellowship with allegorical interpretations of common texts created great differences from what happened in the public temple. Klauck provides a very helpful overview of the development of

mystery religions, focusing on Eleusis, Dionysus, Attis, Isis and Mithras. As there are some similarities to early Christianity, especially in its Gnostic forms, this research is quite helpful for filling in the contemporary religious context.

As much as people may have participated in civic religion or mystery cults, there were also other forms of religious activity. Practices such as healing, oracles, magic and astrology were very popular. These practices cut across religious lines and were found even within early Judaism.

One of the themes found in the New Testament, especially in Revelation, is that of emperor worship. Early Christians found themselves in the position of having to choose between worshipping Jesus and worshipping Caesar. Klauck helps the reader to understand how emperor worship developed from its earliest stages. While New Testament comparisons appear throughout this book, in this section on emperor worship, Klauck takes the time to work through the points of contact with Christianity.

In the book of Acts, readers encounter Paul's confrontations with various philosophical schools, often with little understanding of their beliefs and the differences between them. Klauck takes the reader on a tour of the development of the pertinent philosophical schools, focusing on Stoicism, Epicureanism and Middle Platonism. Klauck demonstrates both the points of contact and the radical differences between these philosophies and early Christian teachings.

The final section of the book is a study of Gnosticism. While Gnosticism is often considered as being within Christianity (either as a heresy or a valid early form), Klauck demonstrates the pre-Christian origins of the movement. Gnosticism was as influenced by the same Greco-Roman social forces that led to mystery religions as it was by Christian belief systems. Klauck's study of Gnosticism within its Greco-Roman context allows students of early Christianity to see Gnosticism from a fresh perspective.

There is value to this book. Klauck makes it clear in his introduction that, while it is too much to suggest pagan origins for Christianity, it is valid to speak of points of contact and even influence between Christianity and other Greco-Roman religious movements. This balanced position is quite refreshing.

The difficulty with this book is that it attempts to do too much. By bringing together such a variety of religious thought, the author almost

promotes the idea that there is something called 'Greco-Roman Religion'. Certainly there are connections between certain forms of Hellenistic spirituality. However, the value of looking at civic religion and Gnosticism together is doubtful. What is the common thread that brings all of these movements together? Where is the line to determine what is a Greco-Roman religion and what is not? Why not include Hellenistic Judaism, which had become almost as Hellenized as some of the eastern religions that developed into mystery cults? The criteria the author uses for examining the religions in this book are not always clear. This is especially seen in Klauck's decision to look at Gnosticism as one of the religious backgrounds of Christianity.

Despite these concerns, Hans-Josef Klauck's *The Religious Context of Early Christianity* is a useful work, helpful for students of the New Testament. Klauck repeatedly makes connections between Greco-Roman traditions and the New Testament in a way that sheds new light on early Christian beliefs. This book is accessible to the beginner and is detailed enough for the scholar. A careful study of this book will greatly improve any understanding of the New Testament world.

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