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Early Christians in the Roman Empire

by Christopher Haas

The Christians as the Romans Saw Them by Robert W. Wilken (Yale University, 1984, 214 pp., \$17.95). *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* by Stephen Benko (Indiana University Press, 1984, 180 pp., \$20.00). *Christianizing the Roman Empire* by Ramsay MacMullen (Yale University Press, 1984, 183 pp., \$18.00).

"Thus we two faced each other across the trench in solemn colloquy." (Homer *Odyssey* 11:81-82)

"... between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us." (Luke 16:26)

For many years, classicists and students of the New Testament and early church have gazed at each other across a broad chasm which has traditionally separated their disciplines. Surprisingly, they both tend to go about their business on either side of this canyon in a strikingly similar fashion, employing a methodology which is concerned primarily with textual matters or with questions internal to their chosen literary works. On occasion, a few bold academic engineers have painstakingly constructed interdisciplinary bridges which have spanned the gap. Indeed, during the last years of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of this century these bridges carried a veritable flood of traffic between the disciplines. However, most of this traffic was one-way, as many New Testament scholars crowded onto what came to be a rather unreliable bridge, across which they "discovered" the pagan mystery cults and their similarities to Christianity. Other interdisciplinary work proved to be built more solidly, especially that of A.D. Nock (1902-1963) and F.J. Dölger (1879-1940). Generally though, after the Second World War communication between the two fields of inquiry slowed to a trickle, with the migration of F.F. Bruce from Classics to New Testament studies being a noted exception.

Within the last ten to fifteen years, however, there has been increased activity in both camps, as scholars have become more interested in the socio-cultural settings of their beloved texts. The field of Roman social history has witnessed tremendous advances during this period, owing to the work of scholars such as Claude Nicolet, Moses Finley, Keith Hopkins, and Ramsay MacMullen. Likewise, studies concerned with the social setting of the New Testament and early church have blossomed during these same years, pioneered by Gerd Theissen, E.A.

Judge, R.M. Grant, and Abraham Malherbe. The phenomenal success of Wayne Meeks' *The First Urban Christians* attests to this new interest in sociological questions. Perhaps more remarkable is that the recent developments in both disciplines have been carried out, for the most part, independently of one another, and they have since resulted in renewed exchange between the worlds of *Antike und Christentum*.

This interdisciplinary interest is best exemplified by Robert Wilken's *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, Stephen Benko's *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*, and Ramsay MacMullen's *Christianizing the Roman Empire*. Their almost simultaneous publication in 1984 indicates how strong these new currents are in interdisciplinary research, and they represent both the strengths and the limitations of this new trend. Although Wilken and Benko approach their subject from the *Christentum* side and MacMullen brings to bear a classicist's perspective, all three strive to present a pagan's-eye view of Christianity. Moreover, they set forth those elements in early Christianity that made the new religion an object of scorn and persecution as well as a force that attracted increasing numbers of converts throughout the Roman world.

In many respects, Robert Wilken's book is the most accessible of the three being reviewed, partly because his aims are modest ones: "By focusing on the comments of Roman and Greek writers on Christianity, I show how pagans thought about religion and philosophy and the society in which they lived, while at the same time shedding light on early Christianity" (p. xv). The success of Wilken's book is also due to his ability to keep his intended audience in focus, the general reader as well as "students of Christian history and theology." Only twice does technical verbiage raise its formidable head in the text: *lares* (Roman domestic deities) appear on p. 26 with no accompanying definition, and the Greekless general reader comes face to face with *thiasarchês* on p. 45. My only other suggestion along these lines would be to include a map to orient the reader in locating Wilken's colorful pagan spokesmen.

It is these spokesmen who receive pride of place in Wilken's book, and he does an admirable job of allowing them to speak clearly to us across the centuries. Wilken has not simply collated all of the references to Christianity in pagan literature, a sort of updated version of P. de Labriolle's *La Réaction païenne* (1934). Rather, he has carefully chosen the most articulate critics of Christianity from the pagan literary and philosophical elite: Pliny the Younger, Galen, Celsus, Porphyry, and the apostate emperor, Julian II. Wilken begins with Pliny and his much-discussed exchange of letters with the emperor

Trajan, and uses these letters as the springboard for a two chapter digression on Christianity as a *collegium* and Christianity as a *superstitio*. The *collegia* were Greco-Roman societies formed as craft guilds, burial societies, or cult organizations. Much of Wilken's discussion here is patterned after his able survey, "Collegia, Philosophical Schools and Theology" in S. Benko and J.J. O'Rourke, eds., *The Catacombs and the Colosseum* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1971), pp. 268-291. He points out the intriguing parallels between the *collegia* and the organization of the church, but skirts the oft-debated issue whether these similarities affected the legal status of the church during this early period. His discussion of the widespread characterization of Christianity as a *superstitio* includes observations by Plutarch, Tacitus, and Suetonius, providing us with a concise account of Roman religious scruples and the ways in which ancient society was permeated by religious concerns.

Important as this is, it serves as no more than stage dressing for the last four chapters, each setting forth in detail the views of Christianity's most eloquent critics. These chapters constitute one of the best surveys in English of the criticisms offered by Galen, Celsus, Porphyry and Julian. Wilken demonstrates how these attacks were grounded in Greek philosophical concepts, and how the pagans, in effect, set the agenda for early Christian theology by assailing emerging doctrines which required more defensible intellectual underpinnings: creation *ex nihilo*, the incarnation, the resurrection of the body, the role of Christ in a monotheistic religion, and the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Especially on this last point, Wilken exhibits great sensitivity to the pagan arguments, no doubt the fruit of several years of research best exemplified by his recent *John Chrysostom and the Jews* (1983).

While Wilken's book serves as an admirable introduction to pagan views of Christianity, it should be pointed out that these are the opinions of only a tiny fraction of the empire's inhabitants. Perhaps the book should be better titled, "The Christians as Selected Members of the Pagan Literary Elite Saw Them." This narrow focus is not necessarily to be faulted; in part, it is determined by the survival of scanty source material. Even Porphyry's literary output is extant largely in fragments. Nevertheless, an exclusive concern with the educated literary elite ignores the seemingly inarticulate mass of the pagan population, whose religious views we can only discern from material remains and from humble inscriptions—including some tens of thousands of funerary inscriptions and domestic altars. Exploiting such sources, however, is a daunting task and even some of the most well-received surveys of Roman reli-

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gion, such as J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz's *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (1979), confine their analysis to the views of certain literary spokesmen. Upon closer observation, it may turn out that the pagan man in the street has more in common with his unsophisticated Christian neighbor than with Neoplatonic philosophers of the likes of Porphyry and Julian.

Early on in his introduction, Wilken sets forth another line of analysis which he pursues throughout the book: that the pagan criticisms of the church "tell us something significant about the character of the early Christian movement" (xiv). Arguing from the premise, "How something is perceived is an aspect of what it is," he concludes that the "attitudes of others, and the roles assigned by society to individuals or groups, define and shape identity" (pp. xiv, 31). This is an intriguing thesis, with great potential for revising conventional interpretations of the early church. Patricia Crone has raised a storm of controversy in Islamic studies by arguing in a similar fashion, that the best sources for the early history of Islam are the criticisms and observations of contemporary Byzantine writers, (see her *Hagarism*, 1977, co-authored with Michael Cook; and the Introduction to her *Slaves on Horses*, 1980). Wilken gives us glimpses of how such a line of reasoning can prove useful in his discussions of anti-intellectualism in the church (pp. 78-79), and of pre-Nicene conceptions of Christ (p. 107). Unfortunately, he hesitates to follow this argumentation vigorously, for example, when he dismisses as a cross-cultural *interpretatio* Tertullian's description of the church as a *collegium* in his *Apology* (pp. 45-46). Just as Wilken has clearly shown early Christian theology to develop as a response to pagan criticism, could not the organization and liturgy of the church (its inner "social world") evolve as a response to the social expectations of its first observers and recently-converted members?

Stephen Benko has sought to address these issues in his *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*, a little book which is sure to both fascinate and enlighten students of early Christianity. He limits his discussion to the second century, a formative period which set the course for Christian/pagan interaction before Constantine. Taking Wilken's methodology a step farther, Benko states, "The Premise of this book is to give the pagans the benefit of the doubt and to assume that they have been right" (ix). Such an assumption gives rise to the book's most provocative chapters in which Benko assesses pagan accusations that the Christians were promiscuous, engaged in ritual murder and cannibalism, and also practiced magical arts.

Before analyzing these various charges, Benko (like Wilken) begins with a discussion of Pliny's encounter with Christians in Bithynia/Pontus. Benko does an outstanding job of helping his readers appreciate the concerns and presuppositions of a conscientious Roman administrator. The *carmen* which the Christians sing to Christ may be a simple hymn, but a *carmen* could also be a magical incantation. The *sacramentum* which binds

them together might be the initiation rite into a mystery cult, or it might be the oath which joins them in a political conspiracy. We follow Pliny during the course of his investigations and discover that, to many of his contemporaries such as Tacitus and Suetonius, the very name of Christian implied "certain antisocial and criminal activities" (p. 9). The only drawback to Benko's analysis of these Roman suspicions regarding Christianity is the exaggerated importance he assigns to the Bacchanalian scandal of 186 B.C. and the Catilinarian conspiracy of 63 B.C. as providing parallels for a suspected Christian cabal. While not discounting the importance of these events in Roman history, it is difficult to gauge their impact on Roman ways of thinking some 150 to 300 years later. Here again, we see how easy it is to be held captive by our literary sources, in this case Livy and Cicero. Pliny had other precedents closer at hand: the conspiracy of Caepio and Murena against Augustus, that of Sejanus in A.D. 31, the successful plot against Caligula in A.D. 41, and most importantly the Jewish insurrections in Palestine and Egypt.

After a generally weak chapter on Lucian's biography of Peregrinus (due to less-than-recent notes and an imprecise conception of Cynicism), Benko comes to the heart of his book, the three fascinating chapters on Christian immorality and cannibalism, the holy kiss, and Christian magical practices. Benko does not take the easy route of either rejecting out of hand the pagan charges of Christian licentiousness and cannibalism, or claiming that the pagans simply misunderstood Christian terminology—as in "eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man." Instead, he concludes that some of these accusations were grounded in truth, and reflected practices "found in certain Gnostic-Christian groups that advocated some exceedingly bizarre and repellent practices" (p. 63). Benko's analysis is based on extensive previous research concerning a deviant analysis is based on extensive previous research concerning a deviant Gnostic sect known as the Phibionites, and he makes clear the inner logic and consistency of their theology—albeit a theology which led to abhorrent practices. Thus, the deeds of certain fringe groups were attributed to the entire church, and the early Christians found themselves in a situation that reminds one of many Anabaptists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to whom were unjustly ascribed the excesses of John of Leiden and his colleagues at Münster in 1533-35.

In the chapters concerned with the holy kiss and magic in early Christianity, Benko broadens his field of analysis to include the entire church, not just fringe sects. He finds that the kiss employed in liturgical settings owed its use partly to a long-held Mediterranean notion that the religious kiss somehow effected "a relationship with the divine for the purpose of attaining life" (p. 98). In his discussion of magical practices in early Christianity, we see the Christians inhabiting a common thought-world with their pagan neighbors, employing methods of controlling divine powers that appear similar to

those of popular paganism. It is in this context that Benko places exorcism, glossolalia, miracles effected by powerful names and signs, (although he ignores "the laying on of hands"), as well as participation in sacred meals. This may sound curiously reminiscent of a *Golden Bough* type approach to ritual and cult, but Benko is careful to "distinguish between the appearance of magic and that which was truly magic" (p. 131). It is this sort of judicious analysis which characterizes Benko's books as a whole, and makes it one of the most insightful interdisciplinary studies to appear in recent years.

With the exception of an unnecessary final chapter outlining high-brow criticisms of the early church, Benko confines his discussion to popular images of Christianity, images which could so repel the pagan observer as to incite persecution. Ramsay MacMullen, in his *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, looks at the other side of this pagan/Christian encounter to determine the forces of attraction which prompted pagans to embrace Christianity. MacMullen's book can best be understood as a companion volume to his highly-regarded *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (1981), in which he colorfully depicts, not a monolithic religion known as paganism, but a mosaic of sects and religious systems, as well as a great variation in individual religious commitment and practice. In the book here reviewed, MacMullen finds this same variation in both pagans and Christians, and offers the friendly *caveat* that modern scholars frequently are "misled about the proportions of piety and indifference within the empire's population" (p. 6).

Clearly, the most important contribution MacMullen makes to the field of early Christianity studies consists of his methodological observations regarding "conversion" in the ancient world. He takes issue with the prevailing view that conversion, to be counted as such, must be "intense and consuming." Moreover, he helps his readers set aside the modern Western assumption that religion should be equated with doctrine and belief. In the ancient world, actions flowing from a quite-often simple allegiance counted for far more, and he concludes, "It would be arbitrary to insist on a stricter definition of 'Christian' than did the church itself" (p. 52). How does one classify a tribe of desert bedouins whom the church chroniclers depict converting *en masse* to Christianity?

While only a third of the book deals with the period before Constantine, some of MacMullen's most intriguing observations regard the "points of contact and modes of persuasion" before A.D. 312. Here, he details ideas first adumbrated in *Paganism* . . . (pp. 96, 135) and later developed in his article, "Two Types of Conversion to Early Christianity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 37 (1983): 174-192. On the examination of the sources he finds that a demonstration of supernatural power, particularly "the manhandling of demons," was "the chief instrument of conversion" during this period (pp. 27-28). This is even more surprising, considering that most of these acts of wonder-working were essentially private, not public, since the Christians

found it prudent to avoid public attention by the early second century. Indeed, MacMullen goes so far as to assert that "after St. Paul, the church had no mission, it made no organized or official approach to unbelievers; rather it left everything to individuals" (pp. 33-34). While this may be overstating the case, one can see how there would be many opportunities for individual proselytizing in the teeming urban centers so vividly described by MacMullen in his *Roman Social Relations*, (1974). The only other type of conversion he sees is that of the convinced intellectual, such as Justin Martyr or later Augustine, but he argues that these celebrated conversions have received attention disproportionate to their real historical significance. Edward Gibbon and his later disciples might reply that the siphoning off of intellectual talent to the church in the fourth century ensured the downfall of the Western empire, a fact of more than passing significance.

This, of course, carries the discussion past Constantine who made all the difference in the fortunes of the early church. MacMullen recounts the familiar story of imperial patronage and increasing coercion throughout the fourth century, a combination of forces which he labels "flattery and battery." He also describes the ways in which Christianity both transformed and was in turn shaped by its surrounding culture, exploring the vague "shared territory" existing between Christianity and paganism—from amulets to emperor worship.

This is not an easy book. Although it will certainly appeal to specialists, large portions of MacMullen's book should also be mandatory reading for those interested in the history of conversion, evangelization strategies, and the contextualization of the Christian message in various cultures. Strengths such as these demonstrate the utility of bridging the gap between *Antike und Christentum*.

BOOK REVIEWS

The End of the Ages Has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus

by Dale C. Allison, Jr. (Fortress, 1985, 194 pp.) Reviewed by Joel B. Green, Ph.D., Acting Dean and Assistant Professor of New Testament, New College for Advanced Christian Studies, Berkeley, CA.

Based on a 1982 Ph.D. thesis at Duke University, this study argues for a pointedly eschatological interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection from the very beginning of the Christian movement: "The eschatological prophecies of Jesus were believed to have met their initial fulfillment in the Messiah's death and resurrection. Thus had dawned the great Day of the Lord."

Allison is clearly indebted to C.H. Dodd, H.W. Bartsch, and A. Strobel—each of whom emphasized "realized eschatology" ("The end of the ages has come!") in his own way. He argues, however, that none of these scholars

has either adequately accounted for the presence in the early church of a realized eschatology or properly nuanced this aspect of the NT message. Moreover, against G.B. Caird and others, he maintains that the language of realized eschatology is not the language of metaphor: to claim that the Messiah had come was to claim that the eschatological promises had been fulfilled, and this claim must be taken at face value. The why and how of this claim constitute the point of departure for Allison's study.

The first part of Allison's study is largely given over to discussions of the NT evidence for an eschatological interpretation of the death of Jesus. Allison discovers in the passion narratives of Mark, Matthew, and John, as well as in Paul and Revelation, the view that Jesus' death marked the beginning of the fulfillment of eschatological expectations—that the passion partakes of the messianic woes and the vindication of Jesus belongs to the onset of the general resurrection. Particularly in the chapters of this section devoted to the Gospels, Allison engages in careful critical work, for he is interested in establishing the presence of this theme not only at the level of the NT writings but indeed from the very beginning of the Christian faith. Compared to this more technical work Allison's chapter on Luke-Acts is much less satisfying; here, in a rather cursory treatment, Allison finds no additional traces of the attempt to portray the end of Jesus as the eschatological turning point.

Having established the presence of a realized eschatology in earliest Christianity, Allison then devotes a second section of his work to explaining the rise of this phenomenon. In chapters of "Jesus and the Kingdom of God," "The Death of Jesus and the Great Tribulation," and "Correlations: From Expectation to Interpretation," he suggests that Jesus himself understood his ministry and end in eschatological categories; hence, at Jesus' vindication, his disciples understood that his expectation had in part come to fulfillment. This led to an interpretation of the passion and resurrection in eschatological categories and constituted the genesis of realized eschatology. This eschatology was not "realized" in the classical sense of the word, however; Allison prefers "inaugurated eschatology" as a label, for this focuses more on the initial fulfillment of eschatological expectations while leaving room for the further, forward-looking expectations also characteristic of the earliest church. Making use of insights from social psychology, Allison further demonstrates how natural it was that those first Christians maintained their inaugurated eschatology in spite of the fact that the kingdom of God had not arrived as hoped.

Throughout his book Allison is to be commended for his attention to technical detail, theological awareness, and for his remarkable comprehensiveness in synthesizing a huge body of data, both biblical and extrabiblical. His excursions on "Belief in the Resurrection of Jesus" and epilogue on "Theological Reflections" build helpful bridges from his sometimes arcane study to the wider concerns of theologians and the larger church.

Apart from matters of detail here and there, most questions raised in an attempt to interact with his work stem from the very narrow focus of its argument. It would be interesting, therefore, to see Allison discuss other, perhaps competing, very early interpretations of Jesus' end. While the Gospels' passion narratives do contain the sort of interpretation with which he credits them, and while Allison is right to argue for the pre-canonical character of this interpretation, are there not other interpretations with an equal claim to antiquity? Can the Lukan evidence, which also utilizes early material, be swept aside so easily? What of the salvific interpretation of Jesus' death in pre-Pauline formulae? And so on. In the end, however, Allison has accomplished what he set out to do—i.e. he has demonstrated the genesis of realized eschatology in Jesus' own expectations, death, and resurrection. He thus accounts for this important interpretation of Jesus' work and shows the continuity between pre- and post-Easter thinking.

Church, Kingdom, World

edited by Gennadios Limouris. Faith and Order Paper No. 130 (Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1986, 209 pp., \$8.95). Reviewed by Jeffrey Gros, Director, Commission on Faith and Order, National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.

In exploring the biblical understanding of Christ's work with the disciples and God's saving will for humankind, one of the most fascinating and difficult doctrines of the Christian world is the nature of God's Church. This book represents a discussion of the biblical understanding of the Church and its mission in the world from a number of perspectives around the world. The book is the record of a conference, sponsored by the World Council of Churches, asking how Christians can speak of the unity of the Church and its relationship to the renewal of human community from their biblical understanding.

The volume includes six major essays from Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions, four serious responses to these essays, and a number of discussion summaries and reports. The themes of Church and Kingdom, Church as Sign, Instrument and Sacrament, the Church and Human Community and the Challenge of Christian Witness all provide avenues for probing biblical, historical and theological reflection on God's will for the Christian community in history. For the Protestant student, the biblical essays from non-Protestant sources will provide clear and succinct insights into the faith of the majority of evangelical Christians in the world. The care given to outline the history and the biblical bases of the positions presented makes the book a valuable collection, though at times difficult reading because of the diversity of cultures and traditions represented.

A very helpful integration of scientific thinking and Christian eschatology is outlined in a Roman Catholic essay by a French scientist. While the point of view is undoubt-