

1-2005

Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew [Review]

Rubén R. Dupertuis

Trinity University, rdupertu@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/relig_faculty



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Dupertuis, R. R. (2005). [Review of the book *Lost Christianities: The battles for scripture and the faiths we never knew*, by B. Ehrman]. *Religious Studies Review*, 31, 96. doi: 10.1111/j.1748-0922.2005.0005.x

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

those interested in early Christianity in Asia Minor.

Thomas Witulski

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster

LEAVING THE FOLD: APOSTATES AND DEFECTORS IN ANTIQUITY. By Stephen G. Wilson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004. Pp. xvii + 158. \$25.00, ISBN 0-8006-3675-9.

After a survey of apostasy in general, Wilson uses sociological methods to study ancient Jewish, Christian, and pagan apostates in particular. He freely acknowledges his debt to previous and contemporary scholarship, and in fact finds special inspiration in the works of J. G. Barclay on Jewish apostasy. Definition of terms occupies a large portion of Wilson's treatise. Thus, apostates (a religious term) are defectors (sociological expression): both refer to persons who forsake the essential tenets and customs of a given societal grouping. Dissidents, on the other hand, are erring persons who remain within the organization. Loss of an apostate from one association is gain for the group to which the apostate newly adheres; to have a convert, you must have an apostate ("your loss is our gain"). Apostates were dangerous because their defection called into question the basic beliefs of the forsaken group, just as converts were valued because they legitimized the joined group's beliefs and practices. Apostasy, like conversion, existed in the eyes of the beholder. Gentile converts to Judaism and Christianity became, in effect, apostates from paganism. Jews converted to Christianity were (at a certain epoch) considered as apostates from Judaism and so also the rare Jew who was converted to paganism. Wilson buttresses his survey with apposite references to the NT, Philo, and other Jewish writers. His treatise provides a handy reference to a subject that has not been as extensively explored as its necessary correlative—conversion.

Casimir Bernas

Holy Trinity Abbey

THE DIDACHE: FAITH, HOPE, AND LIFE OF THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES, 50-70 CE. By Aaron Milavec. Mahwah, N.J.: The Newman Press, 2003. Pp. xxxviii + 984. \$64.95, ISBN 0-8091-0537-3.

THE DIDACHE: TEXT, TRANSLATION, ANALYSIS, AND COMMENTARY. By Aaron Milavec. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003. Pp. xxii + 111. \$9.95, ISBN 0-8146-5831-8.

For Milavec, the *Didache* "represents the preserved oral tradition detailing the . . . training of gentile converts . . . for full, active participation in the house churches committed to the Way of Life . . . the lived practice . . . characteristic of one branch of the Jesus movement flourishing during the mid-first century." A "pastoral manual" revealing how Jewish Christians "adapted their Judaism for gentiles,"

it "represents the first concerted attempt by householders . . . to adapt the way of Jesus to the exigencies of family, of occupation, of home," whose framers, considering themselves to be "poisoned on the threshold of the end time," passed on their "secrets of surviving and thriving until the Lord comes." In his estimation, the *Didache* offers a glimpse of a very early Christian tradition unconnected to Matthean, Pauline, or other variations within the early Christian movement. In short, Milavec proposes nothing less than a fundamental re-orientation regarding the origins, historical context, genre, and purpose of the *Didache* that is paradigmatic in its approach (complete with the requisite nod to Kuhn) and comprehensive in its scope. Fully conversant with virtually all contemporary scholarship on the *Didache*, Milavec has produced a stunning *tour de force* that offers a powerful and challenging alternative vision—a work of the imagination as well as of the intellect—of this intriguing and still astonishingly controversial document. Moreover, he presents his case in a manner that is fully in accord with formal academic conventions yet also deeply personal and revealing in its involvement with the document. The longer volume (which should be in every research library) presents a detailed and comprehensive commentary on the text, while the shorter volume (which is easily accessible for a wider audience) summarizes Milavec's key insights in a "study edition" format (complete with discussion questions). In either form, Milavec's claims to have recovered the hidden inner unity of the document will alternately (and sometimes simultaneously!) stimulate, provoke, frustrate, fascinate, and challenge the reader, prompting all the while deep admiration for the author's magnificent achievement.

Michael W. Holmes

Bethel University

LOST CHRISTIANITIES: THE BATTLES FOR SCRIPTURE AND THE FAITHS WE NEVER KNEW. By Bart Ehrman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. xv + 294. \$30.00, ISBN 0-19-514183-0.

This book is an introduction to the basic content of non-canonical early Christian texts, exploring them both as evidence for the diversity of early Christianity and for what they can say about the formation of the New Testament canon. It is divided into three sections. The first uses the concept of forgery to introduce a number of important extra-canonical texts (including *Gospel of Peter*, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*). The second section takes a closer look at some of the different forms of Christianity attested by non-canonical literature, specifically discussing groups he labels Marcionites, Jewish-Christians, Gnostics, and proto-orthodox. The last section discusses the sometimes-nasty discourse surrounding the politics of canon in the first four

centuries CE, resulting in the ascendancy of proto-orthodox forms of Christianity and the exclusion and suppression of alternatives. Written at a time of great interest and even anxiety over issues of canon, orthodoxy, and heresy, Ehrman's accessible and nuanced introduction to what is a complex and difficult subject is timely. A companion book, *Lost Scriptures* (Oxford, 2003) makes readily available selections of many of the primary texts Ehrman discusses in this book.

Ruben R. Dupertuis

Centre College

History of Christianity

THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY: FROM BIRTH TO GLOBAL PRESENCE. By Jakob Balling. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. Pp. x + 294; illustrations, maps. \$26.00, ISBN 0-8028-3944-4.

Balling has translated and briefly updated his 1986 history of Christianity, presenting a four-part paradigm of historical contexts: earliest, Mediterranean (including Eastern and non-Chalcedonian), "old European" (divided by the Reformation into "time of the church" and "time of the churches)," and "world" (modern West and emerging global churches). He emphasizes both continuity over time and change through interaction with social contexts, focusing on the ways that the church, through its worship and teaching, offered a coherent and all-encompassing interpretation of history, divine and earthly order, and the human condition. Difference and tension (church and sect, collectivism and individualism, social control and delegitimizing of control) are shown to coexist within this continuity of tradition. Balling's thematic organization encourages students to reflect on the "big picture." The strongest section is the "old Europe," where Balling delineates Christianity's role as "co-creator of a civilization." This work is an insightful survey of ancient and Western European Christianity (with intriguing glimpses of Christianity in other contexts). Instructors using it in an introduction to church history would need additional American and non-Western readings. Numerous and often refreshingly unfamiliar black and white illustrations.

Nancy Weatherwax

University of Missouri, Columbia

THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF RELIGION: VIOLENCE IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM. Four Volumes. Edited by J. Harold Ellens. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004. \$300.00 (set), ISBN 0-275-979-X (set). **Volume 1: SACRED SCRIPTURES, IDEOLOGY, AND VIOLENCE.** Pp. xxvi + 293, ISBN 0-275-97972-5. **Volume 2: RELI-**