

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

Found Christianities: Rethinking the World of the Second Century CE. By M. David Litwa. London: T&T Clark, 2022. xvi + 319 pp. \$31.45 paper; \$90.00 hardback.

“In this volume,” explains Litwa, “I aim to tell the stories of Christians whom other Christians denied were Christian” (5). The heart of this volume consists of twenty-five chapters surveying leaders, movements, and texts from Syria, Egypt, Rome, Asia Minor, and other locations. These chapters are arranged chronologically as well as geographically. The materials serve as a scholarly yet accessible introduction to figures and texts ranging from Cerinthus to Sethians. Litwa possesses an enviable grasp of the breadth of primary source materials. Along the way, he shares numerous remarkable and intriguing episodes and details.

Within these investigative chapters, one appreciates the frequent recourse to the qualifying language of “perhaps,” “possibly,” “cannot be verified,” “the jury is still out,” “we cannot rule out,” “we do not know,” “we may speculate,” etc. (219, 254, 259, 260, 278). Litwa rightly critiques an overly simplistic approach that conveniently lumps together various movements as “gnostic” (a “single globalizing term”) without sufficient attention to subtle and sometimes significant differences (6). Litwa also notes when heresiologists coined neologisms, and he questions various eponymous labels. Behind such assessments of ancient battles over nomenclature lie meta-questions regarding self-identity, rhetorical “othering,” group coherence, and word–concept distinctions.

For Litwa there was no “essence” of Christianity (309). A “Christian” movement, in his view, could loosely be considered one that “traced their tradition back to Jesus,” “practiced Christian rituals” such as baptism, and “read Christian scriptures” (276–277). Litwa calls baptism “a distinctively Christian rite” (57), although Mandaeans (who traced their tradition back to John the Baptist rather than Jesus) practiced a similar rite and Jewish ritual washings preceded both. Litwa’s relating of the diverseness of second-century Christianity foregoes axiological assessment—in his telling, the descriptive “is” of diversity overrides any prescriptive normativity regarding developments of received commitments. Litwa describes the second century as “an era with only incipient creeds” (305). But even emergent, kerygmatic traditions raise questions concerning the framing of development.

Litwa underscores diversity: “There were always various churches filled with various people with various practices and various ideas” (308–309). Marginalized groups differed in theology proper, Christology, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, theodicy, diet, and sexual ethics. The various groups were cross-pollinated through “all sorts of interaction, borrowing, and negotiation” (308). The result was a conglomeration of “porous groups” (109). At the same time, Litwa acknowledges that he does not examine all possible groups, including the various “Jewish-Christian” movements (6), thus resembling the similarly limited approach of Walter Bauer. Litwa recognizes the existence of diverse subforms of Marcionitism (230, 237) while accepting Celsus’s representation of Marcionitism as “a major branch of Christianity” (171). But he


demurs from Celsus's portrayal of the "great church" (308). On the other hand, Litwa does resort at times to the language of "early catholic" (209, 308).

The first chapter, entitled "Setting the Scene," traces the political, cultural, and religious contexts of the second century. The chapter includes one paragraph on Judaism (28)—from which the earliest Jesus movement inherited a core theism along with Jewish sacred texts. Litwa discusses various ideas within the broader intellectual milieu that appear in adapted form among the "found Christianities," including the role of a demiurge-creator (24–25). The author of the *Gospel of Truth* "had drunk deeply" from Platonic philosophy (153). Basilides supported a form of transmigration, as found in Greek philosophical perspectives (118). Moreover, "Basilides was not afraid to adapt elements of Pythagorean, Stoic, and Platonic thought and ethics" (122). Natalius the Theodotean recycled a well-known scene in Roman literature (240). The Sethians were influenced by an Athenian mystery cult (294–295). Prodicans culled from Zoroastrian materials (269, 299). May not historians make the case that certain instances of such borrowing, unlike the reception of Jewish theism and Jewish sacred texts, were not present within the alpha strata of the Jesus movement in its Jewish-Palestinian context?

Like Bauer, Litwa's investigation passes over the first-century background into subsequent early Christian phenomena. One notes that Paul, in Galatians, already opposed a circumcision party whom he anathematized as preaching "a different gospel," preceding the polemic of Ignatius of Antioch (cf. 72). And the Book of Colossians subsequently opposed ascetic teachings that perhaps reflected a syncretism of Jewish and philosophical influence. Similar forms of asceticism appeared among Saturninians, Sethians, Marcionites, and Naassenes (303, 293). Following in Bauer's wake, Litwa highlights regional priority and plurality, how marginalized groups often enjoyed chronological precedence and enduring majority in given locales (4). One matter where Litwa's emphasis differs from Bauer's approach concerns the role of Rome. While Bauer accentuated Rome as the intervening promoter of "proto-orthodoxy," Litwa underscores (second-century) Rome as containing "the greatest variety of Christians" (297; cf. 179).

Litwa highlights the influential innovations of the leaders and groups he studies. Heracleon and Basilides are the first extant commentators on Christian scripture (299). Marcion was the "earliest known text critic who tried to discover the original readings of Christian scripture" (160). Marginalized groups influenced later baptismal rites (303–304). Litwa's selected focus on "found Christianities" impels him to pass over the triadic formulae and relevant expressions of Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, and Theophilus.

Litwa declares himself not to be heroizing or valorizing the groups and texts under examination (308). He acknowledges that the "knowing" Christians ("gnostics") were "also engaged in vigorous polemic themselves" (306). The Naassenes considered themselves to be "the only true Christians" (279, 284), and the Valentinians would have sought the conversion of the likes of Irenaeus (186). In other words, mutually exclusive truth claims were common. All can agree that "much depends on the lens through which we choose to see the figures studied in this book" (308). This reviewer of the book was struck by Litwa's extensive knowledge of diverse movements and texts within the core twenty-five chapters, even while viewing the same phenomena through an evaluative "lens" differing decidedly from Litwa's interpretive framework.

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