

Voices of Early Christianity: Documents from the Origins of Christianity

Kevin W. Kaatz, ed. *Voices of Early Christianity: Documents from the Origins of Christianity*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2013. 277 pp. \$100.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781598849523.

This volume is part of ABC-CLIO/Greenwood's *Voices of an Era* series of primary documents (ranging from antiquity to early modernity) packaged with introductory materials and reflective questions intended to improve inquiry-based classroom learning. The included documents are organized in six major topical sections: Early Christian Life, The Church, Early Christian Women, Conflicts of the Early Church, Persecution, and Church and Politics. Each section has three to twelve subsections. Each subsection has a brief introduction and suggestions of things to "keep in mind while you read" and one to four primary text selections on the topic of the subsection, followed by items labeled "Aftermath," "Ask Yourself," "Topics to Consider," and "Further Information." The documents cover early Christianity, that is, the period from the New Testament to the Council of Nicaea. Kaatz has also included a few Hebrew Scripture texts to illuminate early Christian doctrines and practices based in part upon Christian interpretation of Hebrew Scripture.

Every theological library and many general academic libraries surely already own multiple editions of many of the primary texts of early Christianity, along with, most likely, more than one edited collection intended to represent the period comprehensively or thematically — Bettenson, Stevenson, Wiles & Santer, and the recent offerings by Bart Ehrman come readily to mind. Where possible, Ehrman uses modern critical editions as sources for translations of primary texts. Kaatz has chosen nearly all of his from public domain sources (an exception is the Nicene Creed, which he translates himself). For the present volume, then, to distinguish itself among such company would require the "value-added" materials — the introductions and so forth — to be superb. Quite simply, they are not.

I admit I got off on the wrong foot with this volume. One of the first things I noticed when flipping pages is that feature at the end of each subsection called "Aftermath." The Oxford English Dictionary defines *aftermath* as "a period or state of affairs following a significant event, esp. when that event is destructive or harmful," or "a (usually undesired) thing remaining or left after the end or exit of something; an unwelcome consequence or effect." I would like to believe Kaatz simply intends to suggest the "lasting significance" of early Christian thought on whatever the topic of the subsection — marriage, the Eucharist, the end-times, etc. — but describing the significance as the "aftermath" is off-putting to say the least. Unfortunately, closer examination of the volume did little to alter my initial impression.

The organization of the documents is arbitrary and confusing. The documents in each section are arranged more or less chronologically; however, there appears to be little thought given to the ordering of the sections within the whole book. Why, for example, are "Early Christian Life" and "Early Christian Women" separated by a section on "The Church"?

If a single word would suffice to describe this work, it would be "sloppy." Kaatz states in the introduction that the latest documents are the Creed and Canons of Nicaea (CE 325) but in fact includes selections from Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* (after CE 337) and Athanasius's *Discourses against the Arians* (CE 339-361). I noticed this discrepancy when I was trying to figure out why the documents of that Council are included in the section on "The Church" and not in the section on "Conflicts of the Early Church" where other anti-Arian writings are included. In fact, I am at times led to wonder how familiar Kaatz actually is with the body of material he has assembled.

Elsewhere he makes this similar factual misstatement about the scope of his book's contents: "In the first and second century, there are three sources outside of the New Testament that lend credence to the existence of Christ: Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius" (3). Surely he means to say *non-Christian* sources, that is, sources that can presumably be treated as objective because they are not written by insiders. Of course there are hundreds of extra-canonical texts of the first two centuries which mention Christ, several of which are included in this very volume. This is simply sloppy description,

which unfortunately abounds in this volume. When dealing with matters of such significance as the question of whether Jesus existed or not, one would hope a historian would exercise greater descriptive care. I expect the “aftermath” for any institution using this text would be confusion and misunderstanding of Christian origins.

Generally, the added contextual materials are tedious and pedantic. “Paul seems to put little effort into baptism or think that it is totally unimportant” (19). You can basically open the book to any page at random, and unless it happens to be a page consisting entirely of a long excerpt from a source (that is, with none of the editor’s own words on it) you will find such gems as, “The divorce rate in the United States is close to 50 percent, which means that half of all marriages end in divorce” (55). Does this publisher pay by the word?

The volume is also marred by Kaatz’s posturing. For example, he opines, “In many Christian churches, women are not allowed to become deaconesses and priests.... If you are Catholic, how do you feel about this position? Do you think women are unsuited to hold a priestly office? ... Consider the limits the Church put on women, and consider why men put limits on them” (129). I think it is highly appropriate to include documents related to women’s service as deacons in the early Church in a volume of documents of the early Church, but I’m also sure it is not the place of a reference book to goad Catholic students into feeling guilty over their Church’s teaching on the subject.

Kaatz consistently refers to heretical groups as “other Christians” and suggests repetition of that tiresome old line that the adoption of orthodox doctrine was politically motivated, arbitrary, and anti-diversity. “Consider who in modern Christianity is doing the same things that Athanasius did to religious groups that differed with him” (197). Indeed.

In summary, every religion or theology collection needs at least one volume that does what this one claims to do. Chances are very great you already have one that does it better. If not, go out and buy one of them.

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