

Heikki Räisänen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs: The Thought World of Early Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), pp. xxiv+479. \$39.00 (pbk).

This perceptive profiling of early Christian beliefs testifies to Heikki Räisänen's stamina in engaging in detail with an amazingly comprehensive collection of early Christian sources. The aim of the book is 'to give an overall account of early Christian beliefs' (p. 1). It seeks to be 'an analysis of religious thought' which also attends to the link between the verbal expression of the ideas in our sources and the social and cultural contexts in which they arose (p. 2). The approach is identified as 'descriptive', and is conceived as an alternative to the genre of New Testament theology (pp. 2–3). It foregoes 'supernatural or metaempirical concepts', and focuses on early Christian 'religious ideas' as 'human constructs', which are to be treated in methodological terms no differently from 'any other texts' (p. 3).

The first section of the book ('Roots and Starting Points') is introductory by design, and makes good in a preliminary way on the objective of contextualising early Christian ideas in their social and cultural environments. Its three chapters treat: Second Temple Judaism; Graeco-Roman religion and philosophy; and events, persons and sources. The main part of the book ('Basic Problems and Solutions') treats: eschatology, notions of judgement and afterlife, sin, salvation, Christology, the Spirit, Christian identity *vis-à-vis* Judaism, Christian identity *vis-à-vis* Graeco-Roman paganism, and second-century developments towards Christian orthodoxy. What follows is a cursory sampling of Räisänen's handling of these topics.

The treatment of eschatology (chapter 4) first sets expectations during the time of Jesus in the context of Israelite and Jewish hopes and the apocalyptic worldview. Then it focuses on the variety of early Christian eschatological views – from concrete expectations of a transformed earth (Revelation, Papias), to a kingdom of God in heaven (Paul, Synoptic Gospels), to a thoroughgoing spiritualisation of future hopes (John, *Gospel of Thomas*). It emerges that, over the course of the first two centuries, eschatological ideas undergo 'a thoroughgoing . . . process of reinterpretation' (p. 111). Chapter 5 documents differing understandings of post-mortem existence in terms of the resurrection of the body or the immortality of the soul, which Räisänen observes have their logical places in different eschatologies – the 'collective

hope for an earthly kingdom' versus 'the expectation of a direct transfer of individuals to heaven'.

Chapter 6 outlines Israelite and Jewish notions of sin and its origin, and catalogues how sin and the human condition are treated in the various stages of the Jesus movement. The treatment of 'different paths to salvation' in chapter 7 begins with a consideration of covenantal nomism, and shows the degree to which proper conduct is an important component of the Gospel tradition. With regard to how Jesus' death emerged as vicarious in some sense, Räsänen suggests that believers worked 'backward, from the event to its cause', since 'the problem to be solved was not the plight of humans, but the fate of Jesus' (p. 167).

The treatment of Christology (chapter 8) first contextualises the topic with reference to Jewish deliverers and mediators, and then moves on to such issues as Jesus' self-understanding; the contribution of the Easter experiences; and the past, present and future roles played by Jesus. Räsänen assumes that much 'christological speculation during the first hundred years or so can be traced back to the memory of [Jesus'] electrifying person' (p. 197). But the 'memory' invoked here seems too concrete to allow room for developments with no connection to Jesus which arose out of the social matrix of Christian groups over the course of those one hundred years. Räsänen also makes much of the generative role of the Easter experiences, but provides no methodological or theoretical guidance to help readers understand how such experiences should be evaluated from a perspective which treats Christian religious ideas as human constructs.

Chapter 9 deals with conceptions of God's spirit and associated phenomena, again prefacing the coverage of the Christian sources with a brief look at the Jewish and Greek traditions. Although Räsänen offers a number of cautions about the book of Acts he assumes, on the basis of Luke's reports about Pentecost and other extraordinary happenings, that 'visions continued to have a significant role in the life of the believers' (p. 232). Yet he can also observe that the 'appeal to the spirit amounts to a powerful legitimization of what has actually happened' (p. 241); and that '[t]he guidance of the spirit is impressively portrayed in stories that on examination prove fictional' (p. 241). Thus the latter judgements exist in tension with the use of the same materials as guides for how the early Christian movement developed in historical or phenomenological terms.

Chapter 10 documents the move from Jewish to Christian identity by reviewing the various ways in which our sources seek to preserve, remodel or move on from an explicit Jewish identity. The major impetus for 'a bold reinterpretation of Jewish tradition' is connected to the ecstatic phenomena covered in the previous chapter, in combination with the 'liberal attitude

to standard Jewish practice' (p. 256) of the Hellenists known from Acts. In the context of these identity concerns, Räisänen also makes much of another Lucan datum, the Apostolic Decree, which he accepts as a widely known historical ruling. None of these elements is a sure foundation for the 'description' which emerges.

Chapter 11 covers the relation of Christians to the pagan environment. Räisänen traces out the 'striking variety' of 'early Christian attitudes to social interaction . . . ranging from strict rejection to remarkable flexibility' (p. 283). Chapter 12 considers developments towards Christian orthodoxy in the second century with regard to authoritative scripture, tradition and persons; the marginalisation of women in leadership roles; and issues of inner-Christian tolerance. In the final chapter Räisänen briefly reflects on common ground and diversity in early Christian thought, underscoring the 'rather vague' nature of common denominators in the face of an impressive and 'colorful diversity' (pp. 317–18).

Overall, Räisänen succeeds admirably in providing fulsome coverage of the range of early Christian beliefs along with the analytical distinctions to be made among them. Some questions remain, notably concerning how scholars of early Christian history and thought can gain greater methodological purchase on those areas of our data (e.g. references to 'ecstatic experiences' and other extraordinary practices) which often seem to elude theoretical attention or precision. But what has been accomplished is great. Even if the range of sources covered and the wealth of topics treated makes this a formidable volume for the beginner, it is a welcome, all-embracing survey for those seeking control of the data with which to describe early Christianity.

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