Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue (review)

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David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek, editors
Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003
Pp. xix + 412 + 11 plates. $28 (paper).

Emerging out of a 2000 Brite Divinity School conference on the family and/in early Christianity, these seventeen papers (fourteen essays and three responses) provide excellent insight into the directions, methods, and materials of the burgeoning "early Christian families" industry. Balch and Osiek (whose collaborative 1997 *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* [Westminster/John Knox] arguably propelled the family in early Christian studies to new prominence) construe "interdisciplinarity" in a manner familiar to most students of early Christianity with a few twists: elements from classical studies (literary and epigraphic), archaeology, New Testament studies, early Judaism, ancient Christianity ("patristics") as well as critical insights drawn from sociology, anthropology, discourse analysis, comparative social history, and psychobiology.

The first section treats "Archaeology of the *Domus* and *Insulae*." Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (3–18) wants us to "think about Rome not so much as an undifferentiated sea of distinct units of housing, be they *domus* or *insulae* . . . but as a series of cellular neighborhoods" (13). Rigid notions of "household" that preserve class and ethnic division give way here to overflowing "housefuls" encouraging much more social mixing. Monika Trümper (19–43) surveys house-types from ancient Delos in order to balance out our Rome-centric sense of urban topography and give a better sense of the type of house in which Paul himself might have preached. In the only essay in this section to treat the family directly, Eric Meyers (44–69) lays out the ways in which archaeology (here, of Roman Galilee) corrects our sense of family dynamics, showing that the unhelpful "public/private" division of "gendered space" "simply cannot characterize this space [the house] where all manner of household, family, and everyday activities were carried on" (59).

The second section, "Domestic Values: Equality, Suffering," juxtaposes the two most dissimilar offerings in the collection. Peter Lampe (73–83) asks, "What does modern brain research have to do with theology?" (73) before introducing neurophilosophy into the study of Pauline house churches. He seeks to understand how Paul's communities negotiated the cognitive disconnection between "social" and "mental" constructs of equality (inside the house church) and inequality (in society at large). Lampe's is a creative but ultimately baffling and idiosyncratic attempt to preserve an early Christian erasure of hierarchy and explain away Paul's inconsistencies regarding social status. David Balch (84–108) asks, "What would Paul's word picture of Christ crucified look like, and would some Greco-Roman domestic paintings and sculptures have helped make his gospel comprehensible?" (88). The author draws on ancient art and art criticism to imagine the way in which common household images, such as Iphigeneia and Laocoon, inform the social and theological context of Paul's preaching.

Parts III and IV on "Women" and "Slaves" respectively are the strongest in the

volume. Suzanne Dixon's work (111–29) on family in the Roman context is an invaluable source for students of the early Christian family. Moving fluidly between magical and philosophical texts, she pointedly asks what blinders prevent scholars from imagining affective (indeed, passionate) bonds between ancient husbands and wives. Next, Ross Kraemer (130–56) examines the unusually well-documented family lives of two Jewish women, i.e., Berenice, great-granddaughter of Herod the Great and paramour of Titus and Babatha, whose documentary archive survives among detritus of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Kraemer comes to the conclusion that "the study of Jewish families, while fascinating in itself, is not as germane to the study of early Christian families as it might initially seem" since "the dynamics of Jewish families do not appear appreciably different from those of non-Jews . . . in the early imperial Roman period" (155). It is refreshing to be reminded that ancient Jews do not always serve as "background sources" for the study of early Christianity. Margaret Y. MacDonald (157–84) rehearses familiar arguments for the centrality of women in the life and leadership of the first- and second-century church. Finally, Richard Saller (185–204) provides a salutary bridge between sociocultural and economic historians by focusing on the work-value of female slaves in city and countryside.

Saller's valuable contribution segues directly into the essays on slavery. Dale Martin (207–30), J. Albert Harrill (231–54), and Carolyn Osiek (255–75) explore the historiographic possibilities afforded by the presence of slaves, the "insider-outsider" (Harrill's phrase) of the Roman (and Christian) household. Martin analyzes epigraphic evidence on the variety of households to argue that "we must allow our imagination more room to think about how human beings in antiquity experienced both family and slavery" (230), covering similar ground as his important 1996 *JRS* article. Harrill turns to literary representations of slaves in apologetic and martyrological texts to demonstrate how they effectively employ Greco-Latin portrayals of slaves as a "moral polarity" of fidelity and betrayal. When such stock figures come into Christian discourse, they reinforce "the very ideology of the Greco-Roman family that it was trying to subvert" (254). Osiek poses a devastatingly simple question: was the routine sexual exploitation of slaves considered *porneia* in earliest Christianity, particularly in light of repeated exhortations to slaves' full "obedience"? Her conclusions (like the New Testament texts themselves) are ambiguous, an ethical gap in earliest Christianity that, Osiek suggests, still remains disturbingly unresolved today.

Two essays, by Beryl Rawson (277–97) and Christian Laes (298–324), treat "Children." Rawson provides important detail on Roman attitudes toward children through analyses of funerary remains and customs. She concludes that contrary to common opinion Christians perhaps pay *less* attention to small children in funerary contexts. Laes opens up study of a fascinating and understudied component of the Roman household: the *delicium*, or "pet-child" (usually indicating a slave whose sole functions were affection and entertainment), a broad term of familial art that, Laes argues, can help us understand the strange intersections of domination, affect, and desire in the ancient household.

Three concluding essays focus on the foregoing articles from the perspective of their "Implications for Theological Education." Amy-Jill Levine (327–36)

(whose rhyming encomiastic verses summarizing several of the essays make this volume worth the price) reminds us that "bad history makes bad theology" as she places the contributions in dialogue with the "culture wars" explored by other historico-theological volumes produced by the "Religion and Family Project" (underwriters of the conference and of this volume). Timothy F. Sedgwick (337–34) similarly and more positively engages these other volumes (by Dan Browning and Lisa Cahill) in order to praise the theological "constructs" made possible by historical research. Finally, Margaret M. Mitchell (345–58) expertly and judiciously weighs the perils of opening up ancient history to the hungry ears of contemporary theologians and seekers but ultimately comes to a positive conclusion as she reminds us that both the object of study—the "family"—and the field of study itself are always "under construction" (358).

Balch and Osiek have gathered together the "heavy thinkers" of early Christian family studies, concerned not only with "what can we know" but also the very pressing questions of "how do we know it" and "what do we do with it once we know it." Some offerings are odd (Lampe) or repetitive (Trümper, MacDonald), but all are well-written and well-researched, representative of the varying and exciting directions in the study of the early Christian family. These essays together will prove invaluable for advanced students and scholars of the ancient Christian social world.

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Ross Shepherd Kraemer, editor
Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World: *A Sourcebook*
New York: Oxford University Press, 2004
Pp. xxviii + 48. $74 (cloth), $24.95 (paper).

Ross Shepherd Kraemer's, *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*, is not simply a revision of her book originally published as *Maenads, Marytrs, Matrons, Monastics: A Sourcebook on Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World* (Fortress Press, 1988). Rather in this entirely updated version Kraemer has provided a virtual cornucopia of primary texts that explore women's religious experiences from the fourth century B.C.E. to the fifth century C.E. and ranges from Greco-Roman experiences to the Jewish and Christian traditions. This new edition contains forty new entries ranging from such diverse sources as Plutarch, Justin Martyr, Acts of Thomas, Josephus, and the diaries of Egeria. Included is a wide range of sources from inscriptions to literary texts as well as religious texts. Each entry is marked with a brief introduction, sources for English translations of the text, and extensive bibliographies. This volume provides a treasure throve for both students and scholars alike in exploring women's religions in antiquity.

The work is divided into six sections. The first section, "Observances, Rituals, and Festivals," contains selections (mostly from male authors) on a wide range of