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Hoklotubbe's "Civilized piety" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Hoklotubbe, T. C. (2017). *Civilized piety*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press. 264pp. \$49.95. ISBN 9781481307178

Civilized Piety presents extensive research into how the rhetoric of piety was strategically used in the Pastoral Epistles and Roman Empire, from author T. Christopher Hoklotubbe, Assistant Professor of Religion at Cornell College. Hoklotubbe reveals how the ideal of piety was used as cultural currency in the Roman Empire, as seen on coins, in speeches, poetry, and temple art. Piety was believed to be a uniquely Roman trait, which marked them as superior to other races. Foreigners were often depicted as barbaric, depraved, superstitious, and potential threats to Roman values. For Romans, piety was a value integrally connected to familial roles, peace with the gods, and the endurance of the Empire.

The author of the Pastoral Epistles strategically appeals to piety in this cultural and political climate, knowing the implications it would hold as a positive trait ingrained in Roman culture. First Timothy encourages Christians to embody piety in a way that would resonate with Romans and be perceived as congruent with expected behavior of good citizens. All the while, the letter subtly maintains a tension of resistance alongside compliance by demonstrating that everything should be done in devotion to Jesus Christ, the true king.

Rather than discuss the meaning of piety, the scope of the book covers what the appeal to piety hoped to accomplish for the early church in the Greco-Roman political climate. *Civilized Piety* explains that the rhetoric of piety hoped to make Christianity viable in Roman culture and undercut prejudices without undermining the integrity of Christian beliefs. The rhetoric constructed a culturally dignified Christian identity to replace the barbaric and potentially seditious threat Romans had envisioned Christians as, in the hopes that the church could better navigate sociopolitical tensions. This rhetoric was influential among early church fathers in the coming century.

The Epistles' appeals to piety were clearly not written in a vacuum. Hoklotubbe's extensive research and footnotes give evidence of how piety was propagandized by Roman emperors and how its use in the Epistles compares with contemporary secular writing. *Civilized Piety* successfully helps readers gain a better understanding of the Pastoral Epistles by better understanding the depth of meaning and implications behind the author's rhetoric of piety. *Civilized Piety* is a fascinating read that will benefit historians and Biblical scholars. It is highly recommended for the classroom and academic library.

Reviewer

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