

*What Are They Saying about the Formation of Pauline Churches?* by Richard S. Ascough. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998. Pp. vii + 133.\*

Here is a helpful new release in the successful series *What Are They Saying About . . . ?* The purpose of this series is to acquaint readers with recent research on a particular area, a much-needed service in light of the increasing flood of literature in biblical studies. The question taken up in the present volume is that of the model for the Pauline churches. The author, following Wayne Meeks, organizes his discussion under four major headings: (1) Synagogues, (2) Philosophical Schools, (3) Ancient Mysteries, and (4) Voluntary Organizations. In addition to this, Ascough considers the household and house churches in the introduction, contending that, since households are the basic building blocks of any organization, it is not helpful to view the household as the basic model for the Pauline churches.

In keeping with the series format, Ascough's exploration takes the form of an extended annotated bibliography, including critical interaction with each scholar's findings and concluding summaries at the end of each section. Regarding synagogues, the author points out that first-century Judaism was multifaceted; that our information about it is limited; that Christianity in all likelihood did not derive its missionary impulse from the synagogue; and that several other differences between the synagogue and the Pauline churches apply. For these reasons the author considers the use of synagogues as an analogy for the churches planted by Paul to be problematic.

Ascough's investigation of philosophical schools as possible models for Paul's churches comes up empty. The situation is similar with the ancient mysteries, despite the efforts by Bousset, Reitzenstein, and Bultmann earlier in this century to demonstrate such an indebtedness on the part of Christianity. The final category is that of voluntary associations, be they of a religious, social, or professional nature. Again, important differences apply. Christian churches are found to be more exclusive religiously, yet more inclusive socioeconomically. In addition, Voluntary associations usually were not comprised of people interested in instructing their members in ethical principles.

Interestingly, the author first concludes that a strong, universal missionizing tendency seems to have been unique to Christianity. Other organizations' efforts at propagating their beliefs and soliciting new members were either not as intentional or methodical, and they lacked a universal thrust. Second, Ascough points out that "there is no way of fitting everyone of the churches to which Paul writes under the rubric of any one of the models proposed" (p. 95), and that Paul's churches may have taken on certain characteristics from their respective locales. As a result, Ascough advocates a pluriform approach to understand the models underlying the Pauline churches:

For example, as already mentioned, the Christian communities at Philippi and Thessalonica might be more easily categorized as voluntary associations since there is no evidence of synagogues in the area, the language does not reflect clearly a philosophical school or the mysteries, and there is little indication of the familial structure of the house churches. However, the Corinthian congregation, with its many divisions (1 Cor 1: 11- 12), might better be understood as a collection of house churches, some of whom understood themselves to be philosophical schools. The churches in Galatia, with their emphasis on the law, might have been more inclined to use the synagogue for their organizational model . . . (p. 98).

Ascough's work should not be understood as a detailed monograph on the subject. As an entrance point into this fascinating area of research, however, this volume is very helpful indeed. By way of a critique, one wishes that more attention could have been given to the ecclesiology found in Paul's writings, including references to the church as

"God's household" or as the "body of Christ." For one would reasonably expect that Paul's theology of the church bred a certain kind of community, at least in terms of its overall ethos and orientation. Also, in light of clear similarities in liturgy and organization, the author seems to be a bit too quick to dismiss the synagogue as a model for Paul's churches.

At the same time, Ascough's short book helpfully points to the early church's flexibility in adapting to local circumstances, a flexibility that should also characterize contemporary churches. The present volume is a welcome addition to the *What Are They Saying . . . ?* series and is recommended for anyone seeking to engage in research in the formation of Pauline churches.

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