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The Macmillan Book of Earliest Christian Meditations

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There are errors of omission in the Table of Abbreviations; occasional slips were noted in spot checks in the index; and the bibliography does not always cite the most recent or most accessible editions of the works surveyed. Especially lamentable is McLean's seemingly haphazard approach to the Apocryphal books, which sketch an important trajectory into the NT writings. Some works not in the Table of Abbreviations show up in the index anyway (Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom of Solomon), but more often they are simply ignored. This is most unfortunate. Some errors might have been caught simply through more careful editing, but the problematic fashion in which the Apocryphal works (and the Gnostic tractates) have been treated comes at the level of design and execution.

Meanwhile, McLean has produced a handy guide to the early exegesis of the Scriptures of synagogue and church. While its shortcomings mean that the work will be less useful to professional scholars, it nonetheless effectively opens out the world of early biblical interpretation. One hopes McLean will find a way to enhance this promising start—an electronic edition of a work like this makes very good sense, for example. It is also unfortunate that such a slim volume is priced so steeply: this is a deterrent to many who would benefit by having this volume in their library.

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The Macmillan Book of Earliest Christian Meditations
Forrester Church and Terrence J. Mulry
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Macmillan Publishers, 1989
xi + 190 pages

With this volume the editors have completed a trilogy that began with *The Macmillan Book of Earliest Christian Prayers* and continued with *The Macmillan Book of Earliest Christian Hymns*. Their aim in this anthology of devotional materials is "not to produce a carefully annotated scholarly work but rather to offer an accessible ('user friendly') collection of devotional literature for the spiritual refreshment of lay people, ministers, and scholars" (ix). The collection of writings drawn from the devotional literature of the first six centuries not only invites meditative-devotional reading but also furnishes fascinating glimpses into the spiritual life of the earliest Christians and their theological-ethical articulations.

The anthology is composed of seven sections, each with an introduction that emphasizes *genre* more than themes or content. Section I, "The Source", draws from the NT sayings of Jesus, Hebrews and James. Section

II, "The Blossoming of Reflection: Second-Century Meditations", draws from the early Fathers (the First Epistle of Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus) and from the Gnostic writings of Nag Hammadi. Section III, "Out of Africa: Third Century Meditations", presents the Latin writings of Tertullian, Cyprian, and Commodian, and the Greek writings of Clement and Origen. Section IV, "Wisdom From the Desert", introduces us to early Christian monks, both Greek and Latin, and, perhaps, to the most enjoyable part of the collection. Section V, "Episcopal Wisdom: Fourth-Century Meditations", features Saints Ambrose, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. Section VI, "Two Pillars of the Church: Fifth Century Meditations", focuses on the more familiar Saints Augustine and John Chrysostom. Section VII, "Mystical Wisdom", presents a "soaring devotional piece from the turn of the sixth century by Pseudo-Dionysius". A "Source and Name Index" (which lists only names and titles, not bibliographical sources—which, despite the editors' disclaimer, is a pity) and a "Devotion and Topical Index", together with brief biographies of the editors, completes the volume. In this day of ubiquitous paperbacks it is a pleasure to admire and handle a handsome hardbound book!

Apart from the lack of bibliographical sources, I was frustrated by the practice of placing the name of the author or document at the *end* of each selection rather than at the beginning. Granted that the purpose is meditation, nevertheless one is also "in conversation" with the author, and I, at least, find it important to know who my "spiritual advisor" is. Besides, it is important for a prayerful reader to be aware that contemplating, say, the sayings of Jesus in the Nag Hammadi (Gnostic) texts is something other than meditating on the sayings in the NT Gospels. Besides these minor irritants, one always wonders of anthologies why just *these* authors/selections were made. Other than presenting an historical sequence, no principles of selection are given, though there is a hint embedded in a paragraph expressing appreciation to their mutual teacher, Helmut Koester of Harvard Divinity School, for teaching them "how intricately connected the strands and genres of Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian literature are" (xi).

Moving through the anthology from familiar NT texts like the Beatitudes through the heady world of the Gnostics and the earthy asceticism of the desert fathers into the mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius is an intriguing journey, somewhat akin to a studious walk through an historical museum display—in this case, a museum of the history of ideas, doctrines, and communication of the Christian faith. One striking theme, noted by the editors, is the inseparability of theological reflection and ethical consequence, often expressed as the contemplation of "virtue and vice". The roots of this theme lie both in OT "Wisdom" and Greek and Latin moral philosophy, and here we observe Christians taking it up in order to teach and preach the faith. The ancient Wisdom tradition (cf. Proverbs) venerated prudent and practical "smarts"; in Greek thought reason is exalted and wisdom becomes morality. The Gnostics push this further, so that wisdom

becomes knowing which becomes synonymous with faith; yet this "knowing" becomes esoteric, and the trip through the Nag Hammadi texts is a dizzying experience. Orthodox Christianity increasingly sheds the Gnostic surrealism: wisdom becomes ethics drawn more and more from the Nicene expression of the faith; the monastic ideal turns ethics into asceticism; the esoteric knowing of the Gnostics is channelled into Christian mysticism.

The contemporary Christian, awash in a society that seems to have lost ethical standards and values, will find this early Christian emphasis on "holy living" of deep interest. The Christian, it was assumed, will live "differently" and so "stand out" in society. To accomplish this, it was assumed the Christian will draw on the resources of the church in order to put off the vices and put on the virtues on the order of Jesus Christ, i.e., the fasting Christ in the wilderness of temptation. Yet alongside this stern ethical and ascetic Christianity lies the mystical Christianity. "Let him who has love in Christ keep the commandments of Christ," exhorts first Clement (second century). "When there is a question as to whether a man is good, one does not ask what he believes, or what he hopes, but what he loves," observes Augustine. "Just as there lies hidden in a will, before it is opened, the fortune of the deceased master of the house," the Gnostic Gospel of Truth muses, "so it is with the all, which lay hidden while the Father of the all was invisible.... For this reason Jesus appeared...." And Dionysius sings, "Through these things [the divinest and the highest of the things perceived by the eyes of the body and of the mind] [God's] incomprehensible presence is shown walking upon those heights of his holy places which are perceived by the mind; and then it breaks forth, even from the things that are behind and from those that behold them, and plunges the true initiate unto the Darkness of Unknowing wherein he renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible, belonging wholly to him that is beyond all things and to no one else... , and being through the passive stillness of all his reasoning powers united by his highest faculty to him that is wholly Unknowable, of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding."

Perhaps these are still the hoped for fruits of the Christian, virtue and ecstasy.

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