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*Civilized Piety: The Rhetoric of Pietas in the Pastoral Epistles and the Roman Empire*


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*Pietas* (Greek εὐσέβεια) is defined in several related ways in the book. Essentially, in godward contexts, the term means dutiful devotion to the worship of the gods or “affectionate dutifulness” (6). The fact that the concentration of the New Testament usage of the εὐσέβ- word group is found in the Pastorals—and nowhere else in the Pauline corpus (with Acts and 2 Peter providing the remaining minority of New Testament instances)—warrants attention. Hoklotubbe’s detailed study makes a case for identifying that purpose in the ancient author’s persuasive construction of a “culturally dignified and civilized Christian identity for his audience to embody” (7), such that readers might navigate the potentially threatening waters of popular prejudice. This means aligning Christian behavior with “popular notions of proper filial piety and reverence directed towards the Roman emperor”—both essential strategies if the Christian community is to deflect prejudice and claim cultural legitimacy and institutional conformity (8). This rhetoric of piety, Hoklotubbe writes, shows the pseudonymous author of the Pastorals “negotiating” the imperial situation in the hope that Christians might be persuaded to show themselves to be loyal and obedient subjects of the empire and good neighbors, “without compromising their exclusive devotion to a countercultural Jewish messiah who had been crucified by the Romans” (11).
There are six chapters framed by an introduction and a conclusion. The brief introduction (1–12) argues that the Christians were perceived to be uncivilized. This was a vulnerable and therefore dangerous position and explains why Christians were sporadically persecuted in apostolic and subapostolic times. The perception had its roots in the origin of the movement, a point to which Tacitus eloquently testifies in his famous description of Christians in Rome at the time of Nero (Annals 15.44). Christians not only were devoted to a man who had suffered a death reserved for criminals, but they did not offer sacrifices to the emperor, they promoted women to positions of authority, and they affirmed the equality of slaves and masters. The Pastorals were written to “navigate the dicey waters of imperial prejudices toward the Christian movement and to institutionalize a particular ecclesial structure, complete with behavioral norms that pertain to women and slaves” (2), thus effectively reinscribing gender and social inequality. Hoklotubbe places his research firmly in the scholarly trajectory that examines the social-political realities of the early second century for their potential to illuminate the “meaning and goals of the Pastorals” (3). He declares his intention to focus on “piety” as an “ideal way of life” (4). This piety is grounded in and inspired by the Christ-event, as 1 Tim 3:16 makes clear.

Chapter 1, “Piety in Caesar’s House” (13–54), examines the crucial role that Augustus played in establishing the shape of pietas for the next 150 years. Augustus’s own pietas is memorialized in his widely disseminated Res gestae divi Augusti. His devotion to the gods, his restoration of temples and cults, his well-ordered household, his esteem for ancestral traditions—all undermined in the era of the civil wars he had now brought to an end—set an empire-wide standard that was inscribed in the widely influential Aeneid. The emperors Trajan and Hadrian, in whose reigns the Pastorals were written (see 26), both were at pains to underscore their piety. This is chiefly demonstrated in their coinage. The women of these successive imperial households are also models of piety. Rome’s exceptional piety (39) explains her imperial domination. By contrast, devotees of foreign superstitions (Christianity was one of these) were held not to participate in the culturally ascendant pietas exemplified by the Roman elite. Pliny’s correspondence with Trajan (Ep. 10.96–97) demonstrates the extent to which Christians faced actual violence because of their distinctive beliefs, the exclusivity of their devotion to Christ as divine, and the potential for their way of life to be perceived to be deficient when compared to the standards and conventions of pietas. It was essential for the author of the Pastorals to persuade his addressees that within the contours of Christian piety lies a recognizable Roman piety (52).

Chapter 2, “Piety in God’s House” (55–110), finds Hoklotubbe showing how the Pastorals can be read as a response to the ubiquity of imperial piety. The author of the letters exhorts his addressees to honor the emperor “in all piety [ἐν πάσῃ εὐσεβείᾳ] and holiness” (1 Tim 2:2). Hoklotubbe argues that Josephus, a representative of a similarly marginalized group, the Jews, was similarly motivated in his Contra Apionem. Josephus contends that Jewish piety—especially its venerable origin in the Mosaic law and the consistency of its virtues with Roman moral values—is consistent with Roman piety. By exhorting his readers to be dutiful in their prayerfulness for the emperor, the author of
the Pastorals is enjoining on his readers nothing less than what imperial subjects might regularly pray for the emperor: peace, tranquillity, and good governance. Hoklotubbe argues that the incidence of savior and mediator language ascribed to Christ in 1 Timothy (see 74–79) need not indicate a polemic intent on the part of the author challenging the use of such language in Roman ideology to dignify the emperor. While it is true that for the author’s contemporaries there were many saviors and many mediators such that the claim that Jesus was both savior and mediator would not have appeared unusual, the description of Jesus as the one mediator (1 Tim 2:5) means, in my view, that Hoklotubbe’s admission that “some early Christians” might have interpreted the Pastorals “as offering an indirect or even ‘hidden’ challenge to Roman ideology” (75) highly probable. Nevertheless, Hoklotubbe offers a more nuanced interpretation of these terms than is often encountered in scholarship. The author, he argues, is negotiating a way forward for the Christian communities that holds together both stances of accommodation and resistance toward the imperial authorities and their values (see 77–78 and nicely argued in the chapter’s conclusion on 105–10) in the interests of commending the loyalty of the Christians and their adoption of “compliant postures toward imperial power” (78). Outright challenge and polemic were not options for early Christians. This chapter also revisits the role of women in the ἐκκλησία, requiring their submission to their husbands and reinscribing patriarchal mores. Here Hoklotubbe resists the view of Bruce Winter in his Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) that the behavior castigated in 1 Tim 2:9–15 is consistent with that of liberated, ostentatious, and pushy Roman women in the churches. Rather, the author of 1 Tim 2 is putting all women in their place, subordinating them to male authority and depriving them of teaching authority over men in the interests of commending the piety of the churches in their social context. Finally, Hoklotubbe discusses the opponents, the false teachers, of the letters. Whatever can be understood of the content of their teaching, its effect means that they are “disruptors” of the household of God and enemies of piety because of the sway they hold over women and their undermining of conventional gender roles and family duties (see 95–98). The virtues so highly prized among the Romans for the flourishing of the empire should be seen to be present in the ἐκκλησία.

Chapter 3, “Honoring Piety in the City” (111–25), focuses on the cityscape where inscriptions publicly and inescapably inscribe the content of Roman pietas. Hoklotubbe describes several inscriptions found in Ephesus, the probable city of origin of the Pastorals (14 n. 3), commemorating late first- or early second-century Salutaris’s foundation of an annual lottery and the bestowal of new images for the procession of Artemis. The inscriptions celebrate Salutaris’s benefactions. They were motivated by competition and the passion for fame, virtues both, and thus underlined the benefactor’s piety.

Chapter 4, “Honoring Piety in the Ἐκκλησία” (127–48), shows how the cultural practices on display in the inscriptions plays out in the Pastorals. Hoklotubbe argues that in 1 Tim 6 the author seeks to persuade the wealthy not to benefit the false teachers who are enemies of pietas but the teachers
whose teaching accords with the truth as that is defined by the author. This means supporting those teachers who stand in direct succession from Paul and Timothy and from Timothy to those ecclesial officials—the bishops, elders and deacons—whose teaching accords with and promotes piety. The final section of the chapter (145–47) revisits a contentious issue in Pastorals research, the author’s commendation of what Martin Dibelius termed “christliche Bürgerlichkeit.” The phrase was translated as “Christian citizenship” in the Dibelius-Conzelmann commentary on the Pastorals in the Hermeneia series (Fortress, 1972). During the last thirty-five years or so a number of monographs have appeared that have taken exception to Dibelius’s views arguing that they portray the Christian life as banal and accommodationist. Hoklotubbe is bound to spark further debate because his argument leads to the view that the rhetoric of piety in the Pastorals is consistent in many respects with Dibelius’s contention. If the churches addressed in the letters are to embody piety, Hoklotubbe argues, they are indeed being exhorted to do all that they can to be perceived as “civilized and loyal enough subjects according to Greco-Roman sensibilities and tolerance” (147).

Chapter 5, “The Mystery of Philosophical Piety” (149–78), focuses on the author’s claim in 1 Tim 3:14–16 that the true nature of the divinity provides the distinctive grounding for Christian piety. “Great is the mystery of piety,” writes the author, before concisely rehearsing the content of the faith. Piety, as understood in the letters, could never be a matter of mere dutiful ritual observance (153). Greco-Roman philosophers concur, Hoklotubbe notes. Correct knowledge of the divine was crucial for good living (154). But why does the author of the letters use the language of mystery? In the popular mind, the mysteries, such as those to be accessed at Eleusis, disclosed esoteric knowledge and superior piety. Philosophers such as Philo (160–69) and Plutarch (170–77) traded on the prestigious cultural capital associated with the mysteries in defining the content of sound knowledge about the divine. Philosophers contend that the true meaning of the rites and myths associated with the mysteries are found in their respective theologies, which in turn give rise to sound piety. The author of 1 Tim 3:14–16 is employing the same rhetorical strategy when speaking of the mystery of piety and grounding that piety in decidedly Christocentric terms.

Chapter 6, “The Mystery of Pastoral Piety” (179–203), shows how 1 Tim 3:14–16 functions as the “rhetorical summit” of the Pastorals (184). The passage audaciously posits a distinctive knowledge of the divine centered on the Christ-event as a mystery generative of true piety (185). Such piety is to be radically distinguished from the “corrupt belief and practices of rival teachers” (185). Hoklotubbe argues that the false teachers of the Pastorals are portrayed as sophists, enemies of sound knowledge about the divine. They are castigated in the philosophical tradition. They peddle suspect wisdom, indulge in complex disputes, and prey upon uneducated women and children (188). Their piety is suspect. Their teaching foments dissension and blasphemies (1 Tim 6:4–5). By contrast, God’s grace trains believers in true piety, which is well-nigh identical to Greco-Roman ideals (see Tit 2:11–12; 3:3–7). Finally, Paul is presented by the author of the letters as the true philosopher/mystagogue in contrast to the false teachers who stand outside of the apostolic
tradition. The author is commending Christianity as a “pious mystery” (203). Such a presentation of the apostle and his gospel would have deeply resonated in Greco-Roman culture.

In the conclusion, “A Pious and Civilized Christian in the Roman Empire” (205–18), Hoklotubbe draws the threads of his argument together. The author of the Pastorals undercut prejudicial understandings of Christianity as a seditious and foreign superstition and commended believers standing in the Pauline tradition as truly pious. The false teachers, on the other hand, stand outside the apostolic tradition and are presented as promulgators of sophistry with all its attendant dissension and potential for social mischief and without any claim to true knowledge about God and the piety that such knowledge inspires. The use of εὐσέβεια in the letters empowers believers to use the language of piety about themselves, thus potentially disarming or “disrupting” prejudice in wider society when outsiders recognize something familiar and respectable about the Christian way of life (216).

Hoklotubbe is to be commended for his detailed engagement with the use of pietas/εὐσέβεια in manifold contexts, especially its appearance in coins and the inscriptions. Attention to the political, social, and literary setting of biblical books always pays dividends for understanding. This is certainly true of this monograph because of the ease with which Hoklotubbe not only uses the relevant inscriptions but also negotiates the philosophical and literary setting of pietas/εὐσέβεια. Indeed, Hoklotubbe’s grasp of the complex social situation in which the Pastorals were written means his conclusions flow naturally and persuasively, supported as they are by expertly handled evidence. Scholarly attention to the rhetorical strategies of the New Testament writers has been one of the happy outcomes of the last thirty years or so of biblical research. Civilized Piety makes an outstanding contribution to this enterprise, even more so given the relative paucity of such treatments with respect to the Pastorals.