

## Lessons from Corinth: Review of John A. Jillions, *Divine Guidance*

Michael Plekon

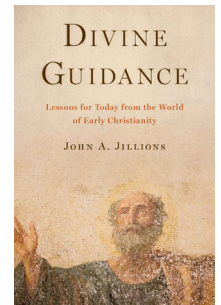
The importance of understanding the social, political, and economic context in which a biblical text was written and received in order to properly read and interpret it has been a central principle of biblical scholarship for some time now. This movement started with the well-known work of Wayne Meeks in the 1980s, followed by Bart Ehrman's classic university text, and more recently N.T. Wright and Michael Bird's voluminous study of the New Testament world and the history, literature, and theology of the first Christians. The latest contribution to this movement is the work of John A. Jillions, *Divine Guidance: Lessons for Today from the World of Early Christianity*.

Jillions provides us with a brilliant and finely focused look at how the different social strata of Roman Corinth, the community to which Paul was so intimately related, understood and experienced divine presence, power, and action. The Corinth that Paul inhabited was diverse, complex, and urban. Its culture and the Christianity born there were shaped by Greek, Roman, and Jewish religious literature and experience. Reading this book, one quickly understands that Paul's preaching and teaching cannot possibly be understood without some grasp of the surrounding social, political, economic, and religious culture. It is a real "dig," if I can use the archeological term. Jillions himself calls it an "archeology,"

and—no pun intended—he leaves no stone unturned.

What an amazing journey Jillions then invites us to take, through the texts of writers who shaped religious thinking and practice in the first century BC. These writers range from well known figures such as Homer, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Livy, Seneca, Pliny, Plutarch, and Cicero to less familiar ones such as Propertius, Petronius, Lucan, and Posidonius. Jewish sources are also carefully inspected, and not just the Tanakh, but the Dead Sea scrolls, Pseudepigrapha, the writings of Philo and Josephus, and a number of rabbinic sources.

As with our world today, the people of mid-first century Corinth had conflicting ideas about their gods. These gods, aware of and active in human events, along with a complex network of oracles, prophets, priests, and other functionaries who mediated between the divine and the people, were subjects of much contention. While the pantheon was culturally accepted and even trusted, skepticism around the religious project lingered. Many versions of the ever-present "people's religion" were crudely transactional—which is understandable, given the need for healing and protection in a hard, dangerous world. At the same time, some in this culture already discerned the need for communion between the di-



John A. Jillions, *Divine Guidance: Lessons for Today from the World of Early Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

vine and mankind, a turn from religion based in superstition towards a reverence for what is neither visible nor controlled by our actions and words. Paul himself, a diaspora Jew and a Roman citizen, brought a nuanced view of both his own tradition and those with which he was familiar in Asia Minor and Greece.

Jillions sets out a demanding yet rewarding course for us, a feast of the ancient religious world in which the gospel was planted by an apostle, the most gifted and complicated of them all. The text of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, perhaps the most familiar of Pauline writings, takes on new and richer meaning when placed in the world of Jesus' followers. We understand it in the context of this specific city, with its chief pastor and preacher exasperated and perturbed by the people's antics, yet caring and solicitous to bring them back to the crucified Christ and the Spirit.

We have startling lessons to learn from the Corinthian church, Paul, and the streams of spiritual wisdom that shaped them. Like us, the Corinthians struggled with class conflict in their community, and Paul confronts them with the social injustice they perpetrated and with the truth of the Lord's Supper, the one bread and cup of the Lord who challenges their factions and prejudices. Other serious issues they faced included living in a culture, state, and economy that had little in common with their faith; tensions about which teacher to follow; division among members leading to litigation; distort-

ed marital and family relationships; disorder in worship; private antagonisms erupting publicly in the community; and distorted views on death and resurrection.

This brilliant study not only schools us on religious experience and practice in the ancient world, but also enables us to see the striking connections between the early church and our own time. This puts us in the docket today, a time when sectarian and fundamentalist tendencies are passing as regard for church tradition, and it is thought theologically correct to denigrate the visions of other Christians and persons of faith. It is encouraging to hear Paul, having seen and experienced much doubt about the almost magical interference by the divine on the part of Roman, Greek, and Jewish writers, insist that God acts with, in, and through the community of Corinth. These disciples of the Lord are fallible. They allow disagreement and fear to distort their liturgy and life. Yet it is through their reliance on the crucified Christ and the Spirit that their love for each other reunites and strengthens their mutual belonging.

Through this wonderful study, Jillions has offered up a remarkable service for the English-speaking world. A parish pastor become national church administrative officer, with years of experience teaching and guiding students, Jillions offers his wealth of understanding of scripture, the early church, and faith. We are indebted to him for this welcome and urgently needed work. ✱



*Michael Plekon* is an emeritus professor of sociology and religion and culture at the City University of New York-Baruch College and a priest in the OCA.