

Book Reviews

Christian Responses to Roman Art and Architecture: The Second-Century Church Amid the Spaces of Empire

Laura Nasrallah. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010.

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Reviewed by Carly Daniel-Hughes, Concordia University, Montreal.

Christian Responses to Roman Art and Architecture brings readers into the Roman Empire of the second-century in which imperial subjects debated justice, piety, and identity, both in writing, and in stone. Early Christian literature, Laura Nasrallah argues, was composed in a “landscape of having to repeat,” a space of cityscapes filled with monuments, and above all, statues. The study sets a host of early Christian apologies beside the “build environment” that populated the cities of the Roman Empire in the second century. In it, Nasrallah reads this literature as a cultural product of the Second Sophistic, a time when Greek elites vied to display their *paideia* (education), and carved out a place for themselves under imperial rule. Nasrallah focuses largely on a series of Christian apologies composed in Greek, The Acts of the Apostles, Tatian’s *To the Greeks*, Justin Martyr’s *First and Second Apologies*, Athenagorus’ *Embassy*, and Clement’s *Protrepikos* and shows them to be taking up larger negotiations over ethnic identity that occupied the inhabitants of the Empire.

Chapter one takes up the main methodological point of the monograph: how can we understand early Christian apologetic literature in its broader cultural context? Scholars have variously debated the audience and intent of these Christian writings, and have rarely come to agreement about these issues. Offering a fresh approach Nasrallah places them in terms of the “culture wars” of the Second Sophistic. In these texts, she argues Christians address Emperors and claim that their communities are filled with pious loyal subjects steeped in *paideia*. Early Christians’ rhetoric, she notes, can be understood alongside similar claims made by Greek elites found in monumental architecture. Here she examines the Fountain of Regilla and Herodes Atticus in Olympia to illustrate that it, too, is addressed to the imperial family. In this monument life-size imperial portraits appear in the lower register of the fountain’s visual program, below Atticus and Regilla’s own more prominent portraits. The visual effect of Herodes Atticus’ monument reveals the civic lineage and pedigree of this sophist in ways that link him to the imperial hierarchy.

In the first half of the monograph, Nasrallah continues with the approach outlined in the initial chapter. She juxtaposes early Christian literature with contemporaneous monumental architecture in order to contextualize early Christian debates over ethnic identity and Roman imperialism. In chapter two she shows how Justin Martyr, a Greek, and Tatian, a Syrian, participated in “geographical thinking.” Conceiving themselves as outside the Empire in different ways, these Christian writers claimed Greek identity and figured Rome as a violent consumer of this cultural heritage. Setting this argument next to the Sebasteion, a massive imperial cult complex in Aphrodisias, Nasrallah notes how it likewise reflects ambiguity about the nature of Roman imperial power. Large friezes feature various *ethne* (nations) in the form of captive women subjected often violently to Roman overlords. This monument, she states, reminds its viewers of their vulnerability in relation to imperial power.

Chapter three reads Paul’s missionary journeys in the Acts of the Apostles as Luke’s attempt to produce a “Christian *oikoumene*” (inhabited universe). Paul’s adventures map the Roman world in a series of Greek cities held together by allegiance to the Jesus movement, which Luke calls “the Way.” Paul’s vision, Nasrallah suggests, shares its impetus with the Emperor Hadrian’s “Panhellenion,” a coalition of Greek cities, or “civic league,” that he founded. In chapter four Nasrallah examines the writings of Justin Martyr together with the Forum of Trajan in Rome, which presented subjugated Dacian prisoners surrounded by images of the emperor that signal triumph. She argues that Justin’s assertions of piety and justice at once rejects imperial violence, while also repeating its logic. Justin ultimately “imitates the dominating moves of empire” in his apologies, by submitting Roman authority to the trial under the authority of “the cross” (165).

Chapters five through seven focus specifically on Christian responses to portrait statues. Here Nasrallah examines Athenagorus’ Embassy with an exquisite portrait bust of Commodus as Herakles. At once a criminal and a hero, Herakles provides a conflicted symbol for Commodus’ imperial power. Nasrallah suggests that such imagery helps to elaborate Athenagorus’ charge in his *Embassy* that the Empire abounds with a crisis of representation. In chapter six Nasrallah reads Tatian’s *To The Greeks* as a critique of Roman consumption of Greek culture. The study of art is a problem for Tatian—a view that Nasrallah notes contrasts sharply with that of other Greek writers who see it as the sign of true *paideia*. For Tatian, and Athenagorus as well, viewing Roman sculpture does not edify the viewer, but only generates within them “unproductive desire.” Nasrallah’s final chapter considers Christian responses to a prized antique portrait statue: the marble Aphrodite of Knidos. In his *Protrepikos*, Clement argues that portraiture blurs lines between the human and divine. Rejecting the assertion that statues render humans with the attributes of the gods, Clement, Nasrallah suggests, unsettles the value of the

Knidian Aphrodite. The incarnation made it possible that all humans could become divine, he concludes. His notion of “theosis” (becoming divine), nonetheless, stills bears the traces of an elite philosophical vision precisely because it rests on the ideal of “self-mastery.” What, she asks, about those subjects—slaves in particular—who could not spare their bodies from abuse and degradation by others? Is “theosis” possible for all bodies?

Christian Responses to Roman Art and Architecture is a challenging, though rewarding, read designed for advanced students and scholars of early Christianity as well as Roman art and architecture. Filled with analysis of primary materials, both literary and archaeological, the book is rigorously researched and artfully composed. Readers, however, will be disappointed if they are looking for a single argument. This volume does not advance an over-arching thesis, but moves the discussion of early Christian literature and Roman architecture in various directions. Its key contribution resides in rethinking the category of apologetics, which has long occupied scholars in the study of early Christian texts. Nasrallah unsettles the category by reading these Greek second-century writings in terms of the discourses over identity and representation that dominated the literature and architecture of the Second Sophistic.

The Composition of the Book of Psalms

E. Zenger. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Louvaniensium CCXXXVIII. Leuven/Paris/Walpole, MA: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2010. ISBN 978-90-429-2329-4. Pp. xii+ 826.

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A volume of the Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense on the composition of the Book of Psalms, the book is a comprehensive presentation of the currents in psalm studies. Methodologically speaking, the book enriches the traditional approaches with new dimensions of analysis. In addition to the theological, literary, liturgical and socio-historical contexts in which the psalms were studied, the book also discusses the ethical dimension and the spatial dynamics of psalms. Space and time in semantic aspect of analysis, anthropological and cosmological approaches, and hermeneutical analysis of speech, the metaphorical/symbolic aspects of language are also employed. The literary analysis of the compositional structure of the psalms also speaks of the vertical (paradigmatic) and the horizontal (linear-sequential) dimensions, numerical analysis and quantitative analysis. The originality of the methodology is powerfully illustrated in the article which discusses the reception and transformation of the