

The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies

Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 1048 pp. \$150.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780199271566.

In her 1986 collection, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity*, Elizabeth Clark asked, "What is the present state and probable future of historical theology in the field of Patristics? The question can be succinctly answered: less theology, more history." Following a veritable tradition of the Oxford Handbook series, this latest publication is a most welcome addition to research in early Christian studies, and a continuing blossoming of Clark's earlier prediction of the shift in approach from "less theology" to "more history" in this field. Edited by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, this one-volume reference work provides an introduction to the impact of the Christian movement in western and eastern late antiquity. However, unlike a handbook on dogmatic or systematic theology, or a confessional historiography, the early Christian history, culture, ritual, structure, and authority here are examined through interdisciplinary lenses incorporating disciplines such as the classics, ancient history, art history, and newer fields of the humanistic sciences. As stated on the book jacket, the volume itself is intended "as an essential research tool for advanced undergraduate and post-graduate students, and specialists in any area who wish to consult a brief review of the 'state of the question' in a different area of sub-specialty from their own."

The *Handbook* is divided into eight parts arranged thematically with contributions from forty-eight scholars, overall a collection of forty-five essays. Part 1, "Prolegomena," provides a very useful introduction to the book as a whole, with its three essays providing a basic framework for understanding how this discipline has developed from an ecclesiological perspective to a more academy-based subject. The three authors are to be commended for their succinct essays, providing an understanding to how the development of new social, cultural, anthropological, and literary methodologies influenced and encouraged this change. These newer emphases saw, among other things, the patristic writers not as authors of Christian doctrine but as "producers of a reputed literature" (50) and early Christian identity formation not exempted from the belief that "hybridity, not purity characterizes historical processes" (81).

Part 2, "Evidence: Material and Textual," provides four illuminating essays on the types of evidence that allow for historical reconstructions of early Christianity. These essays cover investigations from evidence found through general archaeological work, but extend to specialized fields such as the study of visual culture, palaeography, epigraphy, and codicology. This study of a broader spectrum of material culture has allowed scholars to better understand the dynamics of early Christianity's cultural engagement and social transformation of society. The six essays in part 3, "Identities," further illuminate the social history of early Christianity by focusing on specific identities and labels that characterized and polarized the growth of specific groups in late Christian antiquity. In this section are essays on "Jews," "Pagans and Christians," "Gnostics," "Arians," "Pelagians," and "Manichaeists," as well as information about the relationships between these groups. On the whole, these essays provide a useful summary of these selected movements, their complex relationships, tensions with the emerging "orthodox" movement, and how present-day studies are moving away from the stereotypical views that have accompanied these identities and labels.

Part 4, “Regions,” covers the geographical spread of Christianity both in the east and the west, and how the formation of different Christian groupings was a product of the interaction between the diversity of local indigenous culture and social experience. Hence, while Christian tradition often pictured its missionary spread as well-organized and linear in movement, interdisciplinary studies suggest that differing human environments and sociological milieus help shaped unique traditions and identities both in the east and west. Part 5, “Structures and Authorities,” provides essays on how early Christianity organized itself through institutional, social, and political distinctions, and canonical formation. While early patristic studies in the institutionalization of Christianity was primarily theological in character driven by church polity, interdisciplinary scholarship has brought a further understanding to this process by noting other factors such as politics, economics, and gender constructions that shaped the formation of ecclesiastical institutions and structures. Topics covered here include monasticism, the relationship between clergy and laity, church and empire, and women and gender, plus the formation of creeds, councils, and canons.

Part 6, “Expressions of Christian Culture,” and part 7, “Ritual, Piety, and Practice,” combine a total of sixteen essays covering the various aspects by which early Christianity practiced and “proclaimed” its identity both within itself as well as beyond its boundaries. Ranging from individual to collective expressions, the essays here provide a most useful overview to the articulation of specific literary and ritual habits performed in Christian antiquity. These essays include “Apologetics,” “Homiletics,” “Poetry” and Hymnography,” “Prayer,” “Asceticism,” and the “Eucharistic Liturgy.” Part 8, “Theological Themes,” finally “returns” to the traditional themes such as the doctrine of creation, God, and Christology that are often found in most theological discourses that focus more on theology and less on history. The *Handbook* concludes with a chapter on “*Instrumenta Studiorum*: Tools of the Trade,” an extensive guide introducing and acquainting readers with the necessary reading list one would need to engage with if one is to familiarize oneself with research into early Christianity. A general subject index and index of persons, both ancient and modern, completes the *Handbook* sufficiently to allow the reader quick access.

Overall, this one-volume handbook has been well gathered, with a format and setting that is attractive, well-organized thematically, and easy to read. The contributors assembled are authoritative in their own disciplines, and the extensive range of essays provides an illuminating, lucid, and enlivened perspective to the various disciplines and subdisciplines involved in the study of early Christianity. A few selected essays should illustrate this rich texture. Michele R. Salzman’s essay “Pagans and Christians” explores the development of such traditional labeling showing how growing scholarship sees “the category of ‘pagan’ as a Christian construction, and a rather late one at that” (187). Furthermore, rather than the conflict model predominating traditional accounts of this relationship, newer studies have focused on accommodation and assimilation as alternative models in understanding the Christianization of the Roman empire. “Women and Gender” by Ross Shepard Kraemer provides a helpful essay on the significant progress made over the last thirty years of research, noting that such a topic would probably not have been included in a similar publication then. Allan D. Fitzgerald’s “Penance” and Georgia Frank’s “Pilgrimage” discuss and illuminate two forms of piety and practice in early Christianity that perhaps are not as well known today, but nevertheless provide an important area for study. The first involved a specific form of repentance and pardon aiding the individual’s conversion experiential process, while the second was a practice meant to enrich and embody the encounter of the believer with the sacred through space, time, and the material world. Finally, Susan Ashbrook Harvey’s contribution on “Martyr Passions and Hagiography” presents a fascinating essay on current research of a phenomenon well attested to in early Christianity.

The essays in the *Handbook* also include suggested reading lists plus focused bibliographies. Collection development librarians would also benefit from these reading lists and comprehensive bibliographies, including the chapter *Instrumenta Studiorum: Tools of the Trade*, as a tool for retrospective collection development.

The *Handbook* also provides a useful starting point for beginning graduate students in early Christianity looking for a basic overview of their field of study. As the essays cover both the historical developments and possible areas for future research, the *Handbook* can provide a good source for students beginning to explore research and dissertation topics. Two examples will suffice: Mathijs Lamberigts' essay on "Pelagius and Pelagians" gives an account not only of the controversy in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, but also shows how recent historical studies have "rehabilitated" Pelagius as a theologian of the Church "distancing himself explicitly from the heterodox movements of his time" (264). These studies can be further developed with more comparative and detailed examination of different "Pelagian" writings, plus Pelagian and non-Pelagian works so as to better understand and clarify developing orthodox and heterodox doctrinal definitions during that historical phase of Christianity (274). J. William Harmless' essay on "Monasticism" surveys the "traditional" accounts of monastic "founders," but then shows how the landscape has been reworked over the last fifty years to include social, anthropological, and women's studies that have reshaped these "traditional" stories. Further research is needed, however, to reevaluate the existing conceptual categories of monasticism and asceticism so as to better illuminate both the dynamics as well as the specific nature of these two early movements in relation to one another (509).

The editors are to be richly commended for their accomplishment in meeting their goal of "introducing readers to a wide variety of ways in which early Christian studies are conducted . . . (and creating) an aid to research both for the beginners and for more seasoned scholars entering an unfamiliar sub-specialty" (2). A reader interested in early Christian studies would find in this volume an excellent starting point, reference aid, and stimulus for a pursuit of further enrichment and research in this field. One area that could have been considered for inclusion in the volume, however, is an essay on the development of eschatological thought in early Christianity. As noted in a separate publication by Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology*, the theme of the "hope of the early Church" emphasized in a number of ways what was an inseparable and essential component of early Christian faith. It began simultaneously with the birth of the early Christian movement, and though primarily centered on the Christological and moral dimensions, nonetheless provided reflections on the human and social conditions in which early Christians were immersed. On a more practical level, the *Handbook* could perhaps have included specific timelines, chronological tables highlighting significant events or leaders (both ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical), and a brief annotated list of early Christian writers and/or literature. Though available in other textbooks, having those within this volume would make for ease of reference.

On the whole, this is a volume that exemplifies the authority one has come to expect from the Oxford Handbook series, and would enhance any library collection. The essays in the *Handbook* not only make a serious contribution to the growing interdisciplinary approach to early Christian studies, but also merit a place in any library collection for their currency, relevance, strength, and immense help in providing a resource for study and research.

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