

THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF
ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY

The first three hundred years of the Common Era witnessed critical developments that would become foundational for Christianity itself, as well as for the societies and later history that emerged thereafter. The concept of “ancient Christianity,” however, along with the content that the category represents, has raised much debate. This is, in part, because within this category lie multiple forms of devotion to Jesus Christ, multiple phenomena, and multiple permutations in the formative period of Christian history. Within those multiples lie numerous contests, as varieties of Christian identity laid claim to authority and authenticity in different ways. *The Cambridge History of Ancient Christianity* addresses these contested areas with both nuance and clarity by reviewing, synthesizing, and critically engaging recent scholarly developments. The twenty-seven thematic chapters, specially commissioned for this volume from an international team of scholars, also offer constructive ways forward for future research.

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ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY

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Editors' Preface

The historian David Olusoga notes, “civilisation is slippery; the word has multiple and contested meanings.”¹ Much the same could be said of the term “ancient Christianity.” This heuristic term is slippery because within it lie multiple forms of devotion to Jesus Christ, multiple phenomena, multiple permutations in the formative period of Christian history. Within those multiples lie contests, as varieties of Christian identity laid claim to authority and authenticity in different ways.

The contributions to this volume focus largely, but not exclusively, on Christianity in the pre-Constantinian era. In that era, Christ-devotion was getting a variety of footholds within the Greco-Roman world, prior to Constantine’s legalization of Christ-devotion, which itself helped to unify his diverse empire. The imperial decision of 313 proclaimed tolerance toward Christianity, and Constantine followed that by assembling the First Council of Nicaea in 325, which produced the Creed of Nicaea. Consequently, by the second quarter of the fourth century, Christianity was in a much different place socially and politically than it had been in the first decade of that century, and those differences are inexplicable apart from Constantine. The contributors to this volume are mindful of this shift in context, and deal with it in different ways, depending on the topics they discuss. The inauguration of the Constantinian era is more consequential in some instances than in others. It functions within this volume more as a “milestone” along the way than a “border wall.” While each essay in this volume foregrounds pre-Constantinian data, it is within the author’s own judgment to determine the extent to which discussion of that data should overshoot the arrival of the Constantinian period.

¹ David Olusoga, “Civilization Revisited,” *The Guardian*, 3 February 2018.

Editors' Preface

The contents of this volume discuss select issues around which productive conversations about nascent Christianity have emerged in recent years. There is more to be said about ancient Christianity than the topics covered here, but issues engaged within this volume are ones that have drawn particular attention in the past two decades or so.

The four essays in the introductory section (“Contested Contexts”) set the stage for the volume. They focus on issues of diversity and uniformity within Christian discourse and practice, the rhetoric used by Christians regarding others beyond their number, and the extent to which Constantine can be used (and overused) to help explain the development of, and certain developments within, ancient Christianity.

The second section of the volume (“Contested Figures”) contains four probes into the reception history of three key figures: Jesus Christ and the apostles Paul and Peter. These essays consider the nature of the data in a variety of sources, illustrating the contests whereby Christians aligned these figures along different trajectories of Christian identity.

Ancient articulations about Christian identity were frequently tugged this way and that owing to convictions about Judaism, the Marcionite program, and gnosticizing tendencies. How was the heritage of Christian identity to be conceptualized in relation to these robust forms of influence? Moreover, how was Christianity related to (or to be seen in relation to) the currents of education, literature, and philosophy of the classical world? Further, how was Christian identity to be fashioned in relation to the canonization and interpretation of Scripture? The essays in Part III (“Contested Heritage”) engage these issues.

A fourth section (“Contested Cultures”) examines the placement and posture of ancient Christianity in relation to certain cultural settings and influences. How was Christian identity configured in relation to social forces within urban contexts of the Roman world? In relation to cultic devotion toward the Roman emperor and his family? How are we to assess the stories and experiences of Christian martyrdom? What does the material record tell us about Christ-devotion in this early period? In what ways do we see Christ-devotion entering the material record? And if Christianity was a “bookish” culture, how was its own identity preserved within manuscripts of its own heritage?

Early Christian theologians deliberated on matters they considered to be of pressing interest – theological matters concerning creation, the triune character of God, and resurrection, and ecclesiastical matters concerning

Editors' Preface

the observance of the Eucharist and the various church offices. The essays in the fifth section of the volume (“Contested Beliefs”) consider those disputed issues that Christians leaned into with a keen sense of urgency.

A final section (“Contested Bodies”) explores issues pertaining to embodied life in early Christian perspectives. To what extent were genders of masculinity and femininity, as well as sexuality itself, socially constructed phenomena within early Christian discourse? How did Christian theological discourses navigate the social phenomenon of slavery? Or the incongruities of poverty and wealth? And to what extent did Christians have connections to other Christians who had died – either to assist the deceased in their postmortem existence or to be assisted by them? And how did Christians commemorate the deceased and understand their corporate gatherings at the grave sites of the deceased?

As someone should once have said, “A thankless heart is the playground of the devil.” There are enough devils in our dangerous world, so the thankfulness of the editors embraces the whole of this volume. A huge debt of thanks is owed to each of the authors within this volume. They were invited to participate in this project in the days prior to COVID-19 and produced their contributions despite the setbacks that came with the pandemic. From them we have learned much, and we are thankful for our associations with them. We also thank Beatrice Rehl at Cambridge University Press for overseeing the project. Eric Brewer, while undertaking his own graduate studies program in early Christianity, resourced the project enormously – not least as its early copy-editor and indexer. His eagle eye and tireless efforts have been mainstays of the volume’s progress. Bobby Martinez, Mandi Becker, and Solomon Svehla also provided valuable editorial work and helped ensure that the project came to completion. It is not an exaggeration to say that this volume would not exist without the excellent work of these four graduate assistants. And of course we would be remiss if we did not thank our families for humoring us in our fascination for the study of ancient Christianity.