



Destroyer of the gods

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The Book in 3 Sentences

1. Christians were regarded as “atheists” because they refused to worship the many Roman gods.
2. Early Christianity shaped the way the world thinks today, especially how most people think of one God as opposed to the multitude of Gods in the Roman day.
3. Religious freedoms were first fought for by early Christian leaders, stating that people should not have to worship the gods of the emperor or rulers.
4. Christians were some of the first to use a codex (modern day book) as opposed to scrolls for writings that were most important to them. Later would become the Bible!



Impressions

Very intellectual and text book like. Hard to read at times.

How I Discovered It

John Mark Comer suggested it in a podcast.

Who Should Read It?

Pastors, any Christians who are interested in church history.

How the Book Changed Me



How my life / behavior / thoughts / ideas have changed as a result of reading the book.

- Made me think about early Christians, and what they had to endure. Crazy that someone had to copy Paul's letters and send them to churches and I can only imagine trying to get my hands on one to put in my codex.



My Top 3 Quotes

- early Christianity actually introduced effectively the notion of a religious identity separate from one's national/ethnic identity.
- But I repeat that, even if we were to confine attention to the four New Testament Gospels, they comprise an unprecedented body of texts: four substantial narratives of the one figure, all four written within at most a couple of decades of one another!
- My point is that our unquestioned assumption that religions are all concerned with teaching about "ethical" behavior almost certainly derives from Christianity.



Summary + Notes

Intro

Instead, Constantine adopted Christianity likely because it had already become so successful despite earlier efforts to destroy the movement.

It is simply the case that "no other cult in the Empire grew at anything like the same speed."s Of course, a few centuries later, Islam spread with remarkable success also. But, from its earliest moments, Islam's successes were sword. By contrast. often at the point of the the growth of Christianity in its first three centuries, the most crucial period, was largely by a combination of the power of persuasion, whether in preaching, intellectual argument, "miracles" exhibiting the power of Jesus' name, and simply the moral suasion of Christian behavior, including martyrdom.

"protoorthodox" Christians.

So, in grasping distinctive features of early Christianity, we will also perhaps understand a bit better origins of some things that form part of our thinking as well. We take them for granted. But in the ancient Roman period, they were remarkable.

1. Early Christians and Christianity in the Eyes of Non-Christians

Viewed as atheists

False accused of decline in economic activities

Dangerously different

First, Paul's references to his persecuting "zeal" suggest that at the point when he had engaged in this activity he saw himself as acting, not as some ruffian or bully, but justly in the spirit of Phinehas.

Second, that means that Paul's zealous actions were likely motivated by a similar concern to punish what he saw as some serious problem about the early Jesus movement that could not be ignored.

So, I propose that prior to his revelatory experience, Paul thought of Jesus as accursed. But then, as reflected in the Galatians passage, he came to see Jesus' accursed death in radically different terms, as redemptive for believers, and so part of the divine plan.

Tacitus claims that under Nero's orders "an immense multitude" of Christians were arrested, who were convicted of "hatred of the human race, and then were subjected to various hideous forms of death. In addition to suffering "mockery of every sort," they were torn apart by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set afire to serve for Nero's nighttime spectacle.

Clearly, Pliny regarded Christians as comprising a problem significant enough for him to take such strong actions: torturing Christians for information, demanding that those accused apostasize, and handing over for execution or further trials those who refused to comply with his demands.

This means that already in his day Roman jurisprudential practice, though not yet formal legislation, was being shaped somewhat in response to Christians.

Also, although Galen regarded Christianity as a defective philosophy, he expressed a certain admiration for Christians, particularly mentioning their courage in the face of death, their self-restraint in matters of sex, food, and drink, and "their keen pursuit of justice."⁴

"valour, temperance, and justice."

2. A New Kind of Faith

Becoming a Christian in this time put you at odds with family, since you denounced the pagan gods that you used to worship.

For at least many in the general populace, these city gods were guardians against such risks as plague, fire, or other disasters. So, refusal to participate in the reverence due these deities could be taken as a disloyalty to your city and as a disregard for the welfare of its inhabitants.

That is, unlike Jewish proselytes, Paul's pagan converts did not change their ethnic identity. They did not cease being what they were in terms of family, civic, and ethnic identity and responsibilities, except with regard to their religious responsibilities.

But, again, this of fellow Gentiles/pagans, meant that in the eyes had no right these converts to the Jesus-movement to excuse themselves from reverencing the gods.

3. A Different Identity

Roman culture worshipped a bunch of gods, Christians viewed worship of these gods as idolatry.

“Christ” was the key identity marker in the early church

But I repeat that the consistent line taken in the various texts that make up the New Testament and that came to be affirmed with growing force as representative of emergent "protoorthodox" Christianity was a rather exclusive one: believers were to abstain from the worship of any of the deities of the Roman world except the one God of biblical tradition and God's Son, Jesus.

4. Bookish

No one wrote like Christian's wrote. The volume was unprecedented.

Paul's letters were very long in comparison to other letters of the day

The letters required significant time to write and rewrite

Strong commitment to produce the texts. Many copies were made to send, all of the Christians dime.

Christians prioritized a book format while the Roman world preferred the scroll

But I repeat that, even if we were to confine attention to the four New Testament Gospels, they comprise an unprecedented body of texts: four substantial narratives of the one figure, all four written within at most a couple of decades of one another!

In sum, early Christians not only sent letters; they also copied and disseminated their scriptural writings and various other Christian literary texts, and in this intense activity we have another distinctive of Roman-era Christianity.

Furthermore, to underscore the point, Christian preference for the codex was not uniformly strong for all texts but, instead, particularly strong precisely for texts that they most highly valued, those that they treated as scriptures. Any explanation for why Christians preferred the codex must take account of this.

Summary

Any adequate analysis of early Christianity must reckon with its "bookish" nature.¹¹⁷ In the foregoing pages, I have surveyed the main expressions of this bookishness, which was another of the distinguishing features of early Christianity in its Roman setting. We have noted the central place of reading texts (both in corporate and in private settings), the extraordinary composition of an abundance of new texts, the considerable energies and resources devoted also to copying and dissemination of texts, and the distinguishing physical and visual features of early Christian books. These phenomena all combine to make the young Christian movement distinctively text oriented in the context of varied religious environment of that time. In short, "textuality" ¹¹⁰ was central, and, from the outset, early Christianity was, indeed, "a bookish religion."

5. A New Way To Live

He notes that infant exposure and gladiator fights were a part of Roman culture, but Christians spoke out against them.

“Behavioral demands”

Christian men were called to sex with just their wives, while the culture allowed married men sex with most women who were not married.

Christian faith requires collective effort

Sex is in marriage alone, as a hedge against sinful sexual activity of any kind outside marriage.

Christians were outspoken about device and child abuse, especially sexual abuse that was normal in the Roman world

Some philosophers held to this kind of asceticism, but not the same way that the whole of Christianity did. It was a group effort to “do everything to the glory of God”

Exhortations for husbands to love their wives and children obey parents and slaves to serve their masters and likewise were heard by all in the Christian gathering.

Conclusion

The point is that each of the distinguishing features of early Christianity discussed in this book has become for us a commonplace assumption about religion. For example, whether we align ourselves with any religious faith or not, we likely think and speak in terms of a single deity, "God." We may profess some kind of faith in "God" or deny that "God" exists. But we typically assume that there is one "God" to consider. That this is so is largely due to the impact of Christianity.

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Whether you approve
shaping behavior or not is of Christianity's influence in another
question. My point is that our unquestioned assumption that
religions are all concerned with teaching about "ethical" behavior
almost certainly derives from Christianity.