Bernard Green


This book takes us on an illuminating journey through the history of Christian communities in Rome as far as the reign of Constantine. Important recent scholarship is distilled, analysed and subjected to critique with Dom Green's characteristically careful but elegant style. In engaging with important current research themes – such as the relation of Jewish and Christian communities or the interpretation of catacomb art – this book is both of use to the scholar and teacher of early church history, and accessible to the general reader.

The work is divided into five chapters which cleverly combine a thematic approach within a broadly chronological structure. Thus, the first chapter discusses 'origins' (Peter and Paul; the persecution of AD 64; Jews and Christians in Rome). The next ('Community') examines Christian groups under the leadership of Marcion, Valentinus and Justin Martyr, analysing the variety of beliefs in the one God alongside more practical considerations of leadership and worship. One of the great strengths of the book is the ability of the author to contextualise his discussion within what we know about religion elsewhere in the empire. Thus, the situation of Jews in Rome is compared with Jews in Alexandria (pp. 8–10); the section on Monarchians (pp. 102-5) discusses their possible origins in Asia Minor and the opposition from North African theologians such as Tertullian, whilst carefully explaining why they could be regarded as a phenomenon of particular importance to Roman Christianity. On the so-called 'parting of the ways' between Christianity and Judaism, Green notes that while there is a consensus in current scholarship that Judaism in these centuries was notably for its 'energy and creativity and religious devotion', there is disagreement about the nature of the split – for example, as to whether it should be envisaged as 'competition or complex interaction' (p. 57). Very helpful is Green's conclusion that the split may well have happened in Rome earlier than and differently from other locations – reminding the reader of the importance of caution when extrapolating conclusions about Christianity in Rome to the wider empire.

Leadership and unity are possibly the most contentious issues in any scholarship on early Christianity in Rome. In contrast to Peter Lampe, who has argued for a more 'fractionated' church until the end of the second century, Green argues that the evidence (especially of *1 Clement*, but also of the letter of Ignatius to the Romans) points to a community which is basically united from around the turn of the first and second centuries. This view still raises some questions for the present reviewer – not least whether one can legitimately
argue that ‘Marcion and Valentinus both led groups which were clearly separate from the church which counted Justin Martyr as a member’ (p. 119). (Was this clear to everyone? If it was so clear, why did Marcion’s and Valentinus’ views stimulate so much reaction?) While Green’s demarcation of Marcionite and Valentinian theology is lucid and convincing, he perhaps does not fully address the question of their social distinctiveness. This caveat aside, Green’s discussion of Christian leadership in Rome is extremely nuanced and very careful not to read back later ecclesiology into this era of development. In particular, whilst noting the limited nature of any evidence for this period, he reveals that there is some evidence to suggest that while churches in Asia were organised around ‘a bishop aided by presbyters and deacons’, the church in Rome was led by a ‘team of presbyters’ (p. 94). Ignatius’ letter to the Romans (which, unlike his other letters, does not mention a bishop) does not prove that Rome had no bishop; rather the evidence seems to suggest that the team of presbyters regularly used ‘one spokesman’ (p. 93), or ‘president’ whose role was ‘to be the voice of traditional discipline and orthodoxy in the community’ (p. 96) – a role which grew in significance as challenges in these areas were presented by rival leaders such as Marcion or Valentinus.

Chapters 3 and 5 deal with the question of Christian persecution before and after the era of Diocletian. In Chapter 3, Green focuses not just on violence against Christians, but on the broader question of Christian self-definition in this period: there is, for example, a fascinating discussion of the origins of the term ‘gentile’ (Latin, *gentilis*) to mean ‘non-Christian’ (pp. 128–30). Green also leads the reader through the complexities of the Novatianist controversy very deftly: again, the question of Roman ecclesiology is acknowledged as complex and contentious. Various readings of Cyprian’s concept of church unity are surveyed, with Green suggesting that his text *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* would be read anachronistically if read to assert a clear doctrine of Roman papal primacy. ‘When Cyprian speaks of Peter, he is not referring specifically to the bishop of Rome as his successor, but rather speaking of all the bishops, each of whom occupies Peter’s chair among his own people ... the unity of the church depends upon the exercise of apostolic, petrine, authority by each bishop and all the bishops’ (p. 159). The discussion of persecution in Chapter 5 nimbly shifts focus from Diocletian’s personal Roman piety to the broad, empire-wide context of his actions (the Persian wars) and then to the severe consequences of persecution on the senior clergy in Rome. Some – including the bishop Marcellinus – succumbed to threats and handed over the Christian scriptures as demanded: ‘Arguably, this was to weaken the papacy for over a decade’ and even a century later Donatists from North Africa would insult Roman Catholics with the memory of these events (p. 213).