
Laura Salah Nasrallah’s book deals with one specific aspect of the growth and development of the early Christian Church in its immediate cultural context. The work has a fairly narrow temporal scope, dealing with Christian literature from the second century (specifically, the Acts of the Apostles, Justin’s *Apologies*, Athenagoras’ *Embassy*, Tatian’s *To the Greeks* and Clement of Alexandria’s *Exhortation*); conversely, it spans a broad geographical range, travelling through sites in Rome (Trajan’s forum), Greece (Olympia and Athens), Anatolia (Aphrodisias) and studying statues which were replicated throughout the Roman empire (the Knidian Venus and the image of Commodus as Heracles). ‘Roman’ in Nasrallah’s title, therefore, indicates not so much Rome the city, as the Roman Empire. But it also indicates Nasrallah’s intention to reflect ancient discussion of what was ‘Roman’ as distinct from ‘Greek’: one of her key concerns is to show that it is too simplistic to talk of Christianity’s development vis-à-vis ‘Greco-Roman’ culture; rather, Christians’ interactions with their contemporaries took place in the context of ‘culture wars’ which were being fought precisely over the question of what was ‘Greek’ and ‘Roman’. Questions of Christianity’s borrowing from, imitation of, dependence on or hostility to Greek or Roman culture thus have to be understood in relation to second century debates about the equally complex and ambivalent relationship of Roman to Greek culture. In this sensitivity to the complexity of early Christianity’s relationship to its environment, Nasrallah’s book is an excellent example of the way in which much modern scholarship is endeavouring to view early Christianity as being not only in, but part of, the surrounding communities in all their cultural, ethnic and social complexity. Nasrallah also engages in the complex debate about the place of Rome in the Empire, seeking ‘to complicate the model of centre and periphery that has often been used to talk about the Roman Empire’ by showing Christians and pagans whose literary or architectural mapping of the empire reveals a notion of a space with several competing centres.

Laura Salah Nasrallah’s book is divided into seven chapters which deal with several overlapping themes and concepts. One of her key contentions is that Christian apologetic (and related literature) did not invent a new discussion about true justice, piety and divinity (as some previous
discussion has seemed to suggest); rather it engaged in a broader pre-existing debate about them. A closer study of this debate as it can be traced in second century literature (both Christian and other), statuary and architecture shows that concepts such as justice, piety and divinity were already contested terms and were closely tied up with other contested concepts such as power, *paideia* (a term which embraces both ‘culture’ and ‘education’) and ethnicity – all concepts which have also been scrutinised by recent cultural theorists and historians of late antiquity. Most of Nasrallah’s chapters deal with one or more of these contested concepts. After the Introduction, which lucidly sets out her method and aims, Chapter One interrogates the notion of an ‘apology’ in the second century context, setting it alongside another form of complex public address – that is, monumental architecture in public spaces which connect the donors both with the gods and with imperial power. Through her examination of the fountain of Regilla and Herodes Atticus at Olympia, Nasrallah argues that both the fountain and Christian apologetic are products of high status individuals ‘who engaged in a culture war about the value of Greek *paideia* in the high Roman Empire’ (p. 50). Christian apologetic, in this interpretation, less defines Christianity against paganism or Judaism per se, than it arrogates to Christianity a cultural and religious high ground in distinction from certain kinds of inferior, superstitious practice (which could be found in several different religious traditions) (p. 50). Chapter Two reads Justin, Tatian and Lucian alongside one another. All travelled west from the east (Syria); all offered vivid rhetorical *ekphraseis* (descriptions) of their journeys, and all at points criticised various traditional cult practices which they interpreted as uneducated and superstitious. In a complex move they used their acquired Greek *paideia* to critique ‘Greek’ religion, whilst asserting the value of their eastern homeland in a way that challenged its dismissive labelling as ‘barbarian’. The chapter closes with a discussion of the Sebastion at Aphrodisias: whilst the material is rigorously researched and well-presented, this particular comparison seems less successfully to illuminate Nasrallah’s argument than some of the artworks she chooses in other chapters – it seems difficult for her to use the architecture to say anything distinctive which has not already been indicated by her really excellent literary analysis.

In chapters 3 and 4 Nasrallah moves from individual monuments to the cities of Athens and Rome. In Chapter 3 she illuminatingly sets the Panhellenic league of cities under Hadrian (the ‘Panhellenion’) alongside the ‘league’ of cities visited by Paul in Acts. She convincingly argues that the