James Carleton Paget & Judith Lieu, eds.


When Robert Hooke first looked through a microscope and saw a cell, he had no idea about all the complexities that reside within the cell wall. He never could have anticipated mitochondria, ribosomes, RNA, or DNA, but later scientists with better microscopes have continued to discover that every time they zoom in, they always find more complexity. Second-century Christianity is like this in many ways. The more that this century is studied, the more complex things appear to be, from sociological and historical, to heresiological and proto-orthodox perspectives, and even the degree to which such categories are possible. If Adolf von Harnack and Walter Bauer were the first to observe the cell in our scenario, then it has been scholars in the last thirty years who have zoomed in on the layers of intricacy, especially as they relate to matters of identity and description.

Christianity in the Second Century: Themes and Developments is a collection of essays taken from the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities (CRASSH) at Cambridge in 2013. Edited by Judith Lieu and James Carleton Paget, these essays seek to map the current terrain in second-century scholarship, covering four main areas of research: contexts, continuity and discontinuity in early Christianity, interpreting texts and engaging in practice, and modelling identities. Primarily this book reflects the “changed environment” (3) of second-century Christianity studies and how these new methodologies might help us better understand the world and thought-patterns of early Christians, in order to characterize the movement as a whole (19). These essays make clear that the second century defies any attempts at broad generalizations or simple explanations.

In section one on “Contexts,” Greg Woolf argues for what he calls “convergent evolution,” which describes the transition from a world of diverse, nebulous religions into more definable entities, as religious leaders learned to pick
what worked and avoid what did not (37). Tessa Rajak follows this chapter with a look at Diaspora Judaism, reminding us that it had its own challenges and intricacies, as it sought primarily to “[negotiate] between two traditions and two domains” (50). Philip Alexander also examines Judaism by demonstrating why Rabbinics is not always the best entry point of study. Particularly missing from this approach are the competitors of the Rabbis, like the on-going priesthood, the ‘Ammei ha-aretz, and the Minim, which deserve attention if we are to understand authoritative Judaism in the second century (62-65). William Horbury takes up the challenge of “church” and “synagogue” through the Roman perspective, noting afresh that Jews enjoyed special privilege over Christians.

James Carleton Paget begins section two on “Continuity and Discontinuity” by provocatively asking if there is a New Testament perspective on the second century. He suggests, contrary to some, that those in the second century saw themselves as reflecting on “epoch-making events” and treated those events and texts in a way that was normative, even if there was not consensus (104). Lewis Ayres suggests more continuity than many others, which we will discuss below in more detail. Karen King devotes her chapter to the so-called “Gnostic Myth,” noting that the sources from the second century need complex mappings (in the plural; 136). Those who wish to make clearly defined Christian and Gnostic camps will miss the complexities of “identity formation” in the second century (128). Mark Edwards also has a chapter on the so-called “Gnostic Myth,” in which he argues that when the Gnostic penchant for allegory is considered, we see a difference in theological style more than theological dissonance (137). Winrich Löhr contributes a chapter on Christian *philosophia*, noting the frequency with which Christians considered theirs as the “only true and truly transformative *philosophia*” (168). He frames it this way because “there existed in the second century no intellectual discipline equivalent to the modern academic discipline of ‘theology’” (152).

Section three concerns “Interpreting Texts and Engaging in Practice,” with a lead essay on Galen and the Christians by Rebecca Flemming, who examines how Galen used Christians as a foil to fit into his strategies of legitimation and persuasion (171). Joseph Verheyden takes up the issue of authoritative texts in his chapter, concluding that there is no single path to establishing authority. Through the lens of Plutarch, Teresa Morgan holds in tension right ritual and right belief, demonstrating that right belief mattered more in Graeco-Roman religiosity than has generally been assumed. Laura Salah Nasrallah looks at lot oracles and the concept of fate in the second century, suggesting that Christians continued the practice of cleromancy alongside philosophical-theological reflection (230-31).