

of piety and devotion left traces in the records allowing Matis to present them to her audience. For the early period covered by her book she has made ample use of recent archaeological research to fill in gaps in the written record by revealing what the material culture tells us about the role of women in Christianity.

Where the book is perhaps less successful as an introduction is as a guide to Christianity for an audience that is not Christian. Dogmatic aspects, such as transubstantiation and the eucharist, the Trinity, the Immaculate Conception, or the resurrection are mentioned but are not explained. In our increasingly secularised modern society, which of course is also a multi-religious society, more effort could have been made to explain the Christian religion both in terms of dogma and in terms of pastoral practice.

Bearing this limitation in mind, altogether this is an useful well-written introductory text that will be helpful for students with knowledge of Christianity who venture into the late antique, early modern and medieval periods.

EMMANUEL COLLEGE,
CAMBRIDGE

ELIZABETH VAN HOUTS

Early classical authors on Jesus. By Margaret H. Williams. (The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries, 7.) Pp. xvi + 227. London–New York: T&T Clark, 2023. £90. 978 0 5676 8315 1

JEH (75) 2024; doi:10.1017/S0022046924001404

Although there is no shortage of scholarship on references to Jesus by the pagan authors Pliny, Tacitus, Lucian, Suetonius and Celsus, almost all of it focuses on the factual contents of these accounts – often with such high demands for historiographically trustworthy data that they are curtly cast aside. This is the impetus for Margaret H. Williams's new monograph, where she sets out to discuss these texts from a wider perspective including the language in which they are composed, the literary conventions they use and the context in which they were written.

There is no mystery in the fact that few pagan authors mention Jesus, Williams maintains, as they were almost exclusively concerned with Greco-Roman culture, wars and politics, and the vast majority of what they wrote is lost. To have a handful of authors mention a mere Judean carpenter who was executed before he could pose any threat to the rule of Rome is plenty in comparison to any other Roman subject of comparable social status, Williams declares.

Pliny the Younger, our first author, advanced from being an equestrian and a minor judicial functionary to being a senator, consul and the governor of a province. From his uncle, Pliny the Elder, he learned to keep mum on any subject that could draw criticism from the current ruler, Williams argues, and suggests that this is why Pliny gives the impression that the growing Christian movement was almost unknown to him. What little he states about Christ presents him as a human being whom his adherents venerated as a god in such uncontroversial practices as hymn-singing, communal meals and pledges not to commit crimes. By not dwelling on the Christians' reluctance to worship the pagan gods, he clearly intends to get Trajan to agree that the Christians did not presently pose a threat to the empire.

Tacitus was, like Pliny, the first in his family to become a senator and a provincial governor. In his *Annals* of Roman history under the Julio-Claudians, he briefly

mentions that the 'Christus' behind those the simple people call 'Chrestiani' suffered the death penalty under Tiberius' procurator Pontius Pilatus. Williams finds the note to fulfill all reasonable demands on ancient historiography, and to conform too well to Tacitus' Latin usage to be an interpolation. Far from a simple presentation of facts, Williams finds the passage carefully crafted to cast Christ in an extremely unfavourable light: active as recently as under Tiberius, handled by a mere *procurator*, executed as a simple criminal and even associated with the Jews, who were notable in his time for their recent revolt against Rome.

Suetonius, in Williams's view, does not refer to Christ. His curt remark that one 'Chrestus' instigated the Jews in Rome to make trouble in the time of Claudius gives another name than 'Christus', and places the instigator personally present in Rome a decade after the crucifixion. Biblical scholars regularly disregard these details as simple mistakes, but in Classical studies Suetonius is recognised as a meticulous author who makes remarkably few errors, and who takes particular interest in proper names. To have him so sloppily misname, misdate and misplace Christ would be simply inconceivable, Williams concludes.

Lucian of Samosata's satirical *On the death of Peregrinus* includes an episode where the protagonist establishes himself as a prophet and cult leader of a Christian community. He presents Christ as crucified in Palestine, but also claims that he persuaded his adherents to deny the Greek gods, regard each other as family and worship himself as a god. Lucian is aware that the Christians read and interpreted texts, provided financial and moral support to imprisoned members and held widows and orphans in especially high regard, and Williams finds him more well-informed about second-century Christianity than about Christ.

Celsus is proudly Greek, solidly Platonic, expertly rhetorical, well-acquainted with Phoenicia, Palestine and Egypt and seems to have read more early Christian literature than most Christians, including works that are inaccessible to modern scholars. He seems to write in the late 170s, when the empire was under attack by barbarians, convinced that the growing Christian movement threatens to dislodge the continuous protection of Rome by the Greco-Roman gods, Williams argues. Intent on destroying the Christian cult in the eyes of his readers, he presents Christ as originating in a mere village, born of a simple artisan after an adulterous affair, and proficient in trivial Egyptian trickery rather than a worker of genuine miracles. Knowingly working from the Gospel passages most suitable for his purposes, he points out that the witnesses to the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism and to the empty tomb were an executed criminal, a hysterical woman and Jesus' own disciples – witnesses that his educated elite readers are predisposed to reject, Williams maintains.

Williams's classical authors mentioning Jesus fall into two distinct groups. Pliny and Tacitus are Roman politicians with good reason not to suggest that they have had any association with subversive groups such as the Christians, and who therefore purport to know very little about the movement. Lucian and Celsus, on the other hand, have no reason to bury their knowledge about the Christians, but take diametrically opposed stances toward the growing movement: Lucian as a ridiculous laughing matter, Celsus as a serious threat worth diligent study and refutation.

After Williams's meticulous analysis of the comparatively scarce material from Pliny, Tacitus and Lucian, more could have been done with Celsus' lengthy

polemic, and the surviving material from the anti-Christian polemics by Porphyry, Sossianus Hierocles and Julian would also be worth analysis. Nevertheless, Williams has accomplished an impressive and stimulatingly fresh reading of the material, where her background in Classical studies serves as a valuable corrective to the previous analyses by biblical scholars and church historians. Her book is well worth including in any discussion of Jesus' historicity or of pagan reception of early Christianity.

VÄLLINGBY,
SWEDEN

CARL JOHAN BERGLUND

An embodied reading of the Shepherd of Hermas. The book of visions and its role in moral formation. By Angela Kim Harkins. (Studies in Ancient Religion and Culture.) Pp. x + 228. Sheffield–Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2023. £26.95 (paper). 978 1 80050 328 1

JEH (75) 2024; doi:10.1017/S0022046924001143

Angela Kim Harkins has pioneered a fresh chapter in *Shepherd of Hermas* research, aligning herself with the recent revival of interest in Hermas studies. She steers away from the traditional historical critical preoccupations of *Shepherd* scholars (date, number of authors, genre, social and historical backdrop, etc.) to consider the work in a new way through a combination of literary theory and cognitive science. She pushes back against scholarly criticisms of the *Shepherd* as an overlong and boring writing filled with irrelevant and tedious details, even a failed apocalypse, to argue instead that such assessments fail to understand the way these aspects engaged ancient readers and listeners to make it one of the most widely read and popular works of the Early Church. Both length and detail played a crucial role in shaping reading and listening audiences by encouraging them to immerse themselves in the text's universe. Through the vivid experiences elicited by narrative details, they became actively engaged in constructing Hermas's visions, setting the stage for them to be educated and thereby shaped by the second section of the work, the Mandates – a set of ethical guidelines aimed at moulding Christian behaviour. The discussion centres on the first four visions of the work, which serve as an autobiography of visionary experiences by Hermas (whom Harkins sees as a purely literary construct). As the manuscript history indicates, this distinct section circulated widely and independently of the rest of the work. The cognitive science she deploys centres on an immersive or enactive reading of the text. Enactive reading 'understands cognition as an embodied process that dynamically constructs the narrative world' (p. 5). It attends to the ways in which 'an embodied reader's perceptions and environment ... have an active and constitutive role in creation of the narrated world' (p. 5). The embodied readers Harkins identifies are North African catechumens and elite audiences. The former she posits based on citations of the text by Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Didymus the Blind and Eusebius of Caesarea. The latter she adduces from the preservation of numerous papyrus fragments of the work's vision section found at Oxyrhynchus and elsewhere in Egypt.

The book comprises five chapters. Following an introduction which lays out the cognitive theories informing the investigation, Harkins turns to the popularity of