

JAMES R. HARRISON, *Reading Romans with Roman Eyes: Studies on the Social Perspective of Paul* (Paul in Critical Contexts; Lanham: Lexington/ Fortress, 2020). Pp. xiii + 433. Hardback. US\$140.00.

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James Harrison's *Reading Romans with Roman Eyes* is a fine addition to the Paul in Critical Contexts series. The work comprises nine chapters, four of which (Chaps. 4, 5, 7 and 9) are republications. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce a methodology, Chapter 3 the social constituency of the Roman churches, and Chapters 4–9 explore themes within the mythology of the Julio-Claudian world: barbarians; death; creation; social vision; Judaic identity; and glory. Chapter 10 draws conclusions from these studies and points to themes yet to be addressed.

Harrison's work addresses a set of questions which have frequently been overlooked, if even noticed, by studies which have focussed on the role of the letter in wider Christian theological discourse, and in Jewish settings, by asking how Roman members on the congregations might have understood Paul's words. To do this, he develops both a reconstruction of the constituency and location of the Roman churches. It includes Romans, Jews and other aliens. He reckons there to be members of the imperial and other prominent households within the churches, and is wary of claims which would locate them predominantly among the poorer *Transtiberim* areas of the city (Chap. 3). Harrison is most judicious in such analyses, recording the various options and indicating his preferences, without demanding definitive, and potentially unverifiable, conclusions. Thus, in a further example, he deftly negotiates the possible prison locations for the writing of Philippians within his reconstruction of the Roman church. His interpretations will withstand different conclusions on such points.

Central to Harrison's descriptions of Roman readings is the concept of "visual exegesis" (Chap. 2). This takes its shape from the imagery and, to a lesser extent, the literature which shaped the social and political landscape of Rome. He concentrates on the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and the way in which it proclaimed its honour and status through a variety of public works and spectacles. Thus, the myth of Augustus as the archetypal ruler, general, bringer of peace and statesman was given concrete form in architecture (e.g., Chap. 6), numismatics and mythic literature. The last embraces texts like the *Res Gestae* (the official record of Augustus' achievements—Chap. 7) as well as the panegyrics of Vergil and his ilk. Similar data for later emperors, specifically Nero, reveal their attempts to out-Augustus Augustus in the description of their legacy. Harrison concludes that the constancy of such sensory data would have shaped a default worldview which Paul challenges. Thus, Romans may be read as a political critique which undermines the core conceits of Julio-Claudian propaganda. Such a conclusion is persuasive, not least because of the detailed archaeological evidence which Harrison uses to build his depiction of Julio-Claudian claims. What is equally impressive is his modest recognition that his is only one of several potential readings, and subject to the limits of any such reconstruction.

The scope of material covered is impressive, and draws not just on immediate evidence from Rome, though this remains crucial, but the analysis of cities like Corinth, Philippi and Ephesus which, despite their locations in the Eastern Mediterranean, exhibited strong signs of Roman identity. If there is a weak area in the wealth of archaeological and literary material covered, it is in the treatment of philosophical themes. For example, Harrison reckons there is a Julio-Claudian myth of death (Chap. 5) and draws on Lucretius's descriptions to delineate attitudes to death in late Republican Rome which assist in its formation. Such attitudes, he will conclude, are challenged by Paul's views of Jesus and death. However, he does not ask the question of whether Lucretius' enthusiasm for Epicurean philosophy might provide an analogous critique, albeit with a different set of conclusions. Epicureanism's insistence that death was nothing, either as non-existence or insensibility, might equally provide a potential alternative to the consensus or the Julio-Claudian, given that school's persistence into the Imperial age. Further regime criticism comes, in the Neronian period, from Seneca's literary oeuvre (152–54, 192–94). Such remarks provide supporting evidence that intellectual traditions could be every bit as critical of the Julio-Claudian programme as the Christian, suggest that this was a known part of Roman discourse, and so confirm the possibility of such patterns within Christian practice as part of the contemporary environment. That these critiques occur within Stoicism and Epicureanism, whose spread was not confined to the elite, may further indicate a potential for such criticism across the different strata of society. Philosophical considerations also reveal one tiny, little oddity: the description of Philodemus, *On Death*, usually considered an Epicurean text, as Pythagorean (205 fn.5).

Harrison's work provides a useful addition to socio-cultural analyses of Romans, by setting the letter in the context in which it was read and inviting consideration of how Rome itself shaped the perspective of its readers. The attention to detail and the archaeological data, both small and large-scale, takes recognised honour/shame categories, which sometimes appear nebulous, and gives them a concrete (at times, literally) form.

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