

**Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging.** Maia Kotrosits. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015. 208 pages. Paperback \$39.00 / ISBN: 9781451492651. E-Book \$39.00 / ISBN: 9781451494266.

*Rethinking Early Christian Identity* issues a startling challenge to the field. Maia Kotrosits argues that writings such as 1 Peter, the Book of Acts, the Gospel of Truth, and the Gospel of John are “not particularly invested in or reflective of any kind of distinct Christian self-understanding or sociality” (1). “Early Christian literature” is a misnomer. Defining “Christian identity,” Kotrosits observes, is our problem (i.e., scholars), not theirs (i.e., early Christians). One crucial factor is the relatively late appearance of the term “Christian,” a label devised by outsiders: “. . . and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’” (Acts 11:26 NRSV). Instead of “Christian identity,” Kotrosits proposes “Israelite diasporic culture,” which is glossed in this way: “If a text shows interest in the temple, priesthood, Sabbath, Israelite prophetic history, Judea, Genesis stories, or any number of other elements of Israelite tradition . . . that to me suggests a participation in Israelite diasporic culture” (14). For some readers, “Israelite diasporic culture,” as defined by Kotrosits, will prove no less problematic than “Christian identity.” For others, myself included, it offers an intriguing thought experiment. Is Marcion part of “Israelite diasporic culture”?

To the framework of diasporic culture, Kotrosits adds affect theory. She makes the case for her methodology in Chapter 1. “Affect theory” suggests that what we know is always inflected by what we feel and that what we feel is a kind of knowing. Affect theory, according to Kotrosits, restores messiness to interpretation. By contrast, the notion of “Christian identity” projects a clearly bounded and stable model of self-definition, even when it is employed in the service of illustrating diversity and variety in early Christianity. “Identity” implies sameness, while “affect theory” captures the fluid and contingent character of human experience.

What brings together the literature in question if not “Christian identity”? Kotrosits focuses on the haunting sense of national loss over the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE. This trauma is what lies at the heart of “Israelite diasporic culture” in the late first and second centuries CE, and it can be detected in a range of sources. In Chapter 2, for example, Kotrosits contends that references to diaspora and exile in 1 Peter gestures to “diaspora belonging” (65). Chapter 3 extends affect and diaspora theories to the interpretation of the book of Acts. Rather than a morale-boosting tale of the progress of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, the book of Acts, according to Kotrosits, relates “the incessant journeying from romance

to disillusionment that comprise imperial and colonial life” (107). Chapter 4 treats the *Secret Revelation of John* as a “totalizing vision borne out of Israelite diasporic grief and homelessness” (121). In Chapter 5, the quest for transcendence in the Letter to the Hebrews and the Gospel of John is shot through with a “perverse fleshiness” (169). In the Fourth Gospel, Kotrosits detects the haunting presence of the destroyed temple of the Samaritans, a ghostly double to the wrecked temple in Jerusalem. Chapter 6 contends that scholarship on the *Gospel of Truth* has placed too much stress on the book as “seductive, rebellious, provocative and open,” and not enough on images of violence (175). At the same time, the *Gospel of Truth*, “obscures the very traumas that underwrite it, and its concealments are a refusal to speak about what its audience feels to be true” (177). Chapter 7 returns to the issue of methodology, urging readers to recognize and accept “the oblique, circumlocutory, and inexact nature of our work” (225).

Readers will notice that I have included a number of direct quotes, more than is typical for a book review. I do so to show off the eloquence of the prose and to indicate the challenge that Kotrosits’s writing poses to the task of summarizing. Kotrosits at one point suggests that she wants to “open a conversation” between biblical scholars and non-specialists (20). But I am not sure that this book, with its extended forays into technical studies, achieves this goal. I do not say this to diminish the book’s importance. Scholars of Christian origins will find much to appreciate and think about. A strength of this work—and I wonder if it is a by-product of the commitment to affect theory—is its close attention to current research. Readers will encounter fair and detailed presentations of salient scholarship. Judith Lieu, Karen King, Virginia Burrus, Hal Taussig, and Daniel Boyarin are among the scholars whose work bulks largest. They are conversation partners, not opponents. Criticism of their work is forceful but not polemical. At points, I wished for more discussion. Kotrosits, for example, treats all too briefly the on-going debate over the usefulness of the term “Gnosticism” (144), a debate that might have served as a helpful analogy to her own efforts to critique the notion of “Christian identity.”

Readers of this journal will find most useful the way that Kotrosits approaches themes of violence and trauma, forgetting and healing. Her claim that Christ operated for early Christian writers as a lens through which Christ followers “organized and focused” their pain (68) opens up new ways of thinking about representations of violence in early Christian texts. I am less persuaded by the line taken against the notion of “Christian identity.” The charge that this model reifies what was a dynamic process is not without merit. But I think that scholarship by Burrus, Boyarin, and Lieu largely resists this temptation. So too one might call to the witness stand the work

of Judith Perkins, which is acutely sensitive to the contingent character of self-fashioning. For Perkins, the Christian self is always relational and always under formation.

I recommend this book for scholars of early Christianity and scholars of religious violence. The book's main questions, it seems to me, are very much worth thinking about. What happens to our interpretation of early Christian writings when we set aside the question of what counted as "Christian" in antiquity? What are the effects of violence, and how can historians measure these effects in their sources?

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