Book Review. A New History of Early Christianity, by Charles Freeman. Theology

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A New History of Early Christianity, by Charles Freeman (Yale, 2009), 377 pp. £25.00 'hbk'.

The title of ancient historian Charles Freeman's new book betrays some of its unconventional contents. It is 'new', not so much in presenting recent scholarship on the subject, but in departing from traditional histories such as Henry Chadwick's The Early Church (1967). He does not present a picture of Christianity's progress from persecuted Jewish sect to triumphant international institution, but one of diverse competing communities that almost succeeded in eradicating classical culture and stifling independent thought. Moreover, his is a history of 'early Christianity', not of the early Church, which reflects the shift in academia from Ecclesiastical History to Early Christian Studies. He takes it for granted that there is no cohesive, unified entity that could be called 'the Church' in this period. Lastly, Freeman's history is only 'a' history and does not attempt to be 'the definitive history' of the subject.

A New History of Early Christianity is intended for a wide readership. It is beautifully produced, with colourful jacket design from an early Christian mosaic and glossy black and white plates inside, which illustrate the two brief sections on Christian art. Its text is not weighed down with footnotes, but is provided with some endnotes, suggestions for further reading, a glossary, timeline, and index. The narrative is divided into three sections covering the periods 4 BC-100 AD, 100-313, and 313-600. Only one of these dates provides a natural turning point in the narrative—the conversion of the emperor Constantine in 313. Thirty-two short chapters tell the story of individuals, such as Origen, Constantine and Augustine, of doctrinal disputes at the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, as well as the development of the canon, the idea of the church, and the rise of bishops.

Freeman is at his best when it comes to describing the context of Christianity within late antiquity: how the Roman authorities dealt with individuals and church communities, how Christian culture interacted with Greco-Roman culture, and how the conversion of Constantine profoundly affected both the Empire and the churches. Freeman is at his weakest, however, in truly understanding what Christianity is all about it, especially in terms of theology and practice. While
he grasps the main lines of theological debates, he completely fails to discern what was at stake in
them. Of the Christological debates surrounding Chalcedon, for example, he writes, 'the concept of
a single or a divided nature of Christ was a purely artificial one' (p. 301). But these were not simply
debates about words and the proper interpretation of scripture, or even political events manipulated
by power-hungry bishops; they were debates that had major consequences for the practice of
Christian faith. Freeman's polemical viewpoint is most obvious in the titles of some chapters, such
as 'The Stifling of Christian Diversity', 'The End of Optimism: Augustine and the Consequences of
Sin,' and 'An Obsession With the Flesh'. He is often openly hostile, if not scornful, of the Church
Fathers, reserving his admiration only for those most sympathetic to Greek philosophy. In contrast,
he is far more sympathetic in his treatment of gnostics and heretics, such as Valentinus, Arius, and
Pelagius. Freeman's history is essentially that of an outsider, written for non-Christians and as a
challenge to the classical Christian narrative.