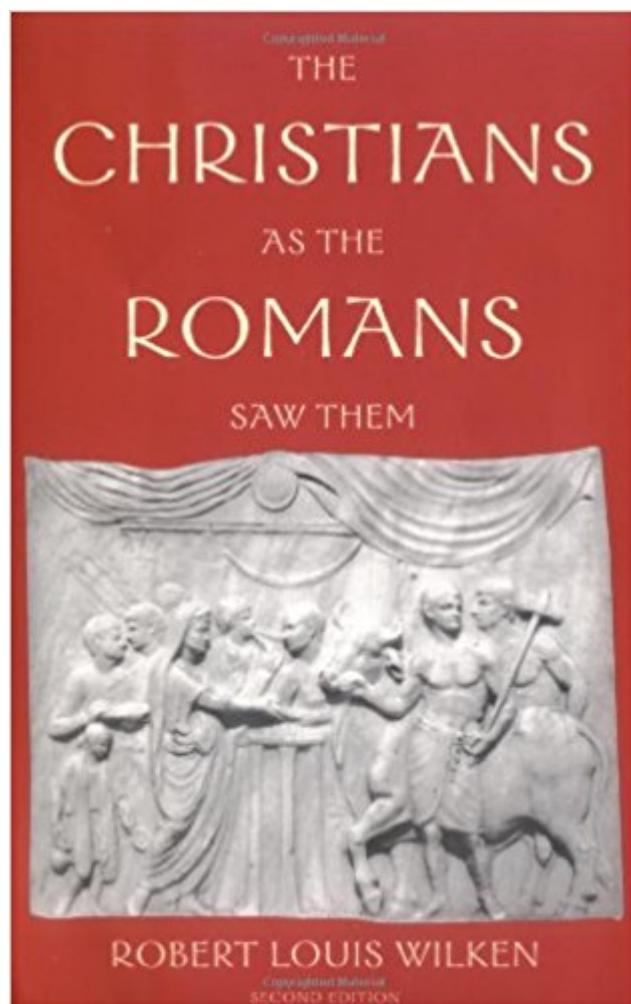


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The Christians As The Romans Saw Them



Synopsis

This book, which includes a new preface by the author, offers an engrossing portrayal of the early years of the Christian movement from the perspective of the Romans.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A stimulating book which will deservedly attract a wide readership." •John Creed, Times Higher Education Supplement "A fascinating . . . account of early Christian thought. . . . Readable and exciting." •Robert McAfee Brown, New York Times Book Review "Wilken draws on a variety of sources to present 'pagan criticism' of Christianity from the beginning of the early second century to the late fourth century. . . . A fascinating book." •Publishers Weekly "A unique contribution to the subject in English. It is written with understanding, humanity, and wit and should be useful to students of history and religion at both the graduate and undergraduate levels." •Caroline T. Marshall, History: Review of New Books "[This book] is the pioneering study in English of Roman impressions of Christians during the first four centuries a.d." •E. Glenn Hinson, Christian Century "This gracefully written study . . . draws upon well-known sources—both pagan and Christian—to provide the general reader with an illuminating account . . . [of how] Christianity appear[ed] to the Romans before it became the established religion of the empire." •Merle Rubin, Christian Science Monitor "This work of Wilken will be a source of much thought and discussion for patristic and theology scholars as well as classical historians. . . . An easy style, good scholarship and a respect for the reader makes this book both enjoyable and informative." •Robert A. Antczak, Classical World "Indispensable for anyone who wants a

richer sense of the world in which the Church first made its way." •Robert Royal, Crisis Magazine "Robert Wilken has given us the chance to see the emerging Christian faith as viewed by its contemporaries who did not welcome its appearance. . . . Clearly written and cogently presented, the book is a mine of information which any pastor or student of the Christian faith would do well to make the acquaintance of. The book is worth the reading." •Paul J. Achtemeier, Interpretation "This excellent and informative study adds a new dimension to the history of early Christianity, valuable for the Roman as well as the ecclesiastical historian." •Everett Ferguson, Religious Studies Reviews "The general reader will be well served by the clear and engaging exposition. . . . Useful as a classroom text." •Robert A. Kaster, Journal of Religion "Should fascinate any reader with an interest in the history of human thought." •Phoebe-Lou Adams, Atlantic Monthly "Wilken's account of Julian's assault on Christianity, though relatively brief, is arguably the best available in English. . . . His sympathetic understanding of the main competitors of Christianity, coupled with his attention to the social and cultural environment, his good judgement, and the clarity of his style provide an object lesson to all students of the historical progress of the early Church." •Peter Garnsey

Robert Louis Wilken is William R. Kenan Professor of the History of Christianity at the University of Virginia. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*, published by Yale University Press.

This is probably the most insightful book I've yet read on Ante-Nicene Christian thought and its relation with the broader Greco-Roman world. Wilken takes us inside the minds of early critics of Christianity and shows exactly how and why they found Christianity to be both intellectually unsustainable and a threat to the civic order of the world. The latter is more difficult for modern people to grasp. Most in the Western world are accustomed to thinking of a sharp distinction between religion and government, where each institution operates independently of the other. This is anachronistic thinking, and it simply does not hold up in terms of Roman society and culture. Sacrifice and public worship was an integral part of civic life. The sacrifices observed as part of the civic calendar were what marked out the city as uniquely Roman. It drew together the people of the city into a single culture whose patrons were the traditional gods. Wilken shows that some critics were more than happy to incorporate Jesus into the pantheon. Porphyry, for example, declared that Jesus was like unto the heroes of old, who had been exalted to quasi-divine status because of the virtuous life that he lived. Others, however, disagreed. Celsus held that Jesus had learned sorcery

in Egypt and that his miracles were not the result of divine power, but of magical incantations. What I found particularly interesting was the way in which the debates between Christians and pagans in the first three centuries paralleled debates between Christians and modernists today. Many of us have heard that the early Christians were unconcerned with the historical reality of the biblical story, or at least that they didn't care about the authenticity of the biblical history in its details. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, many pagan critics made the historical authenticity of the Bible a focal point of their critique, leading Augustine to write a *Harmony of the Gospels* wherein he intended to prove that the Gospels were in complete harmony, without so much as a single contradiction. Porphyry anticipated modernist theories about the origin of the Book of Daniel, suggesting that it was a forgery meant to spur Jewish hope during the Maccabean crisis. Wilken also elaborates on the relationship between Christianity, paganism, and Judaism at this period. Jews constituted as much as 10% of the Roman Empire, and were very often a visible part of civic life. They, like the Christians, did not offer sacrifice or worship the traditional gods. Most of the time, however, the Roman government left them alone because of the antiquity of their religion. The Jews constituted a nation with a traditional faith in a way the Christians did not. And the pagans believed they had discovered a weak point in Christian theology when it came to the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. If Christians worshiped the God of Abraham, then why did they not keep the laws given to Moses? Celsus asked whether God had changed His mind. Julian referred to Christians as apostates from Judaism. Christians laid such emphasis on the end of the old covenant in the fall of the Temple that Julian the Apostate believed that he could definitively refute Christianity if he oversaw the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. This is a remarkable book, and it is to be praised for its extended and insightful interaction with the primary sources. I very highly recommend it.

This book isn't quite Christians as the Romans saw them, but more so Christians as five different Roman critics (or anti-Christians) saw them. Four of the five individuals mentioned had written arguments against Christianity and forced the earliest of apologetics. This book definitely changed my view of the religious environment of the early Romans. One of the interesting things to me is that by the 3rd and 4th century Romans mostly were Henotheist (meaning there is one supreme god, Jupiter/Zeus and the other deities are lesser ones), and one of the big complaints is that Christians were worshiping a man Jesus and even elevating him to the same position as the one supreme God. Often times the Christians were called Atheists since they would no longer participate in any religious events. To me its interesting how many complaints from back there are still somewhat

being discussed today. For example why did God wait until the 1st century to send his son to save mankind, what happens to the multitude of people before then. The fact that Christianity claimed to be a continuation of Judaism yet no longer practiced their customs. One person mentioned the gullibility of Christians and one now days only needs to turn on TBN to see the same thing is still taking place. One of the saddest things to me though, is the fact that this book had to be compiled from surviving Christian documents which quoted the critics because the original documents were likely burned. For someone like me who loves history, its sad to know that so many early critics and non canonical writings were burned when Christianity took over for the Roman empire.

"The Christians as the Romans Saw Them" illuminates a subject often misunderstood. Why did the Romans persecute Christians? Robert Wilken tells the story from the viewpoint of the Romans. He articulates the arguments made against Christianity by Roman writers including Galen, Celsus, Porphyry, and Julian the Apostate. This helps explain the arguments made in response by church fathers such as Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine. Wilken views these pro and con arguments as a dialogue that helped Christians articulate their own viewpoint more accurately and forcefully. Wilken begins with Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia in the Black Sea area about 110 A.D. Pliny wrote a series of letters to the Roman Emperor Trajan discussing many issues, one of which was how to handle the Christian sect. Pliny is judicious and doesn't accept gossip or rumors, but also governs with a stern hand. The Romans were suspicious of any organization that might become political. If Christians caused trouble and didn't accept the ancestral gods, then they were executed. Period. The Romans really did take their religion seriously. Their religion honored the ancestral gods of Rome and demanded piety. It was a civic religion in which each city had its own gods within the polytheistic pantheon. As a person moved from one city to another, that person adopted the gods of the new city. The failure to honor the Roman gods was viewed as civic disloyalty, the equivalent of treason. The noted physician Galen from the last half of the second century A.D. looked upon Christianity as a philosophical school that advocated a particular way of life. He criticized it for demanding faith in nonsensical concepts such as the divinity of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. Celsus at about the same time wrote the first book to directly attack Christianity. He viewed Jesus as a magician and criticized the ideas of resurrection of the dead and creation out of nothing. The Romans believed in a steady-state universe. After this criticism, creation out of nothing was quickly adopted as Christian doctrine. Porphyry, in the last half of the third century A.D., was perhaps the most learned critic of Christianity. He criticized the Christians who claimed the Jewish

scriptures as their own but then refused to follow them (on circumcision and kosher). He ridiculed the prophecies of Daniel written after the *future prophecies* had already come true. He made fun of discrepancies between the Gospels. Finally, the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate (361 – 363 A.D.) was a successor of Constantine who tried to restore paganism. He wrote a book attacking Christianity and planned to rebuild the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem as an anti-Christian move, but his death in 363 ended these attempts. Seeing early Christian history from the standpoint of its Roman critics is helpful. Wilken even points out interesting similarities between the ideas of Porphyry and the Arian heresy which began shortly after Porphyry's death in 304 A.D. Well worth reading for a different viewpoint on the relationship between the Romans and the early church.

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