
 BOOK REVIEWS

***At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire.* Written by Heidi Wendt. Oxford: University Press, 2016. x+262pp. ISBN: 9780190267148. \$81.50 CDN.**

At the Temple Gates is an ambitious reimagining of the social worlds of the first and second centuries, and the conditions that allowed the growth and expansion of what became known as Christianity. Wendt joins a growing body of scholarship arguing against the old (but still alive and well) hypothesis that Jews and Christians were unique with respect to the historical circumstances in which they were situated. Wendt's greatest contribution is her construction of a class of freelance experts, and subsequent situation of various Judean and Christian practices and figures within the domain of these experts. Wendt's conclusions force us to reexamine a number of assumptions currently prevalent in the study of early Christianities, including the ways in which Paul interacted with his *ekklesia*, and the reasons that Christianity survived and thrived in the first and second centuries. *At the Temple Gates* is required reading for anyone working in the field of early Christianities, and especially for those working on Paul.

In a lengthy introduction Wendt constructs her category of freelance experts, and the subcategory of freelance experts in religion. Freelance experts in religion were those whose recognition and legitimacy came from their demonstrations of skills and learning, and those who "directly enlisted in their practices gods and similar beings" (11). The introduction builds toward the payoff of the book: understanding Paul as an intellectualizing expert in religion (28). Much of the introduction address the identity of freelance experts in religion directly, as well as

the ways in which her category of freelance experts in "religion" fits into the larger debates over the category of religion generally.

Chapter one expands on the category of freelance expert constructed in the introduction, and argues that the number of freelance experts expanded under the Roman Empire. A number of historical factors led to this expansion, including the shifting of control over "religious knowledge" away from the aristocratic classes (64), significant demographic shifts brought on by mass migration and high rates of slave manumission (70), and the infusion of foreign religious experts who brought with them new cults, gods, rituals, and so on. All of these factors led to the emergence of a distinct class of professionals in religion. Chapter two examines ethnically coded experts with a particular focus on experts in "Judean Religion". In demonstrating the interest non-Judeans had in Judean religion and practices, Wendt points to a broader phenomenon of non-Judeans taking up Judean practices in ways not directly tied to religious conversion. Chapter three seeks to reframe ancient magic, religion, and philosophy as varieties of intellectual discourses. This chapter returns to a number of the specialists presented in chapters one and two in order to demonstrate that experts in magic, religion, and philosophy did not exist on a sliding scale of legitimacy, but were often varieties of intellectual experts. Wendt argues that the discourses associated with magic ran the gamut from divination and spells, to more intellectual forms of religion present in contemporary philosophical discourses, as well as early Christian practice.

Having established the religions of freelance experts, chapter four turns to the figure of Paul, arguing both that he was a participant in the religion of freelance experts, and that his letters serve as an important witness to this class of people in antiquity. Wendt argues that success of Paul is rooted in his self-presentation as an expert in Judean

writings (148-161), and as one participating in recognizable intellectualizing discourses (161-168). Identifying Paul as an intellectualizing religious expert helps Wendt explain a number of features of Paul's letters such as his competition with other teachers, his pride in his hardships he has faced and the punishments he has received, his emphasis on Judean traditions (especially Moses), and his philosophizing of those traditions. Chapter five moves into the late first- and second- century and examines Christian rivalries within the framework of freelance experts. Wendt seeks to move the conversation around second century Christian diversity away from the notion that heresy emerged from a unified church, and instead imagines individuals such as Justin Martyr, Marcion, Valentinus, Ptolemy, and Irenaeus as "individuals actively engaged in promoting their own authority within an explicitly 'Christian' idiom" (214-215). Wendt's conclusion is a short but pointed critique of the "religious marketplace" model for the expansion of Christianity, particularly as employed by Rodney Stark.

At the Temple Gates is a remarkable contribution to the study of religion in the Roman Empire generally, and early Christianity specifically. Wendt's construction of the category of freelance experts is careful, comprehensive, and convincing. Wendt's use of ancient literary, legal, and documentary sources paints a clear picture of the world of freelance experts, and her use of this world to situate Paul is impressive. Pauline scholarship remains largely trapped by the idea that Paul and Christianity represented a radical break from Graeco-Roman religion; Wendt demonstrates that the exact opposite is the case: Paul found traction because he participated in the already-established discourses of intellectualizing ethnic and religious experts. While I am convinced by Wendt's construction of the category of freelance experts in antiquity, in places those experts are presented as more disconnected

from social and political structures than seems possible. Chapter one does an excellent job of situating freelance experts within the larger social and political structures of the Roman Empire, but there are places in chapters four and five where the relationship between the individual agent and the possibilities offered by the socio-political structures around them are not clear. I am in agreement that we should be wary in positing "communities" around people or texts, but on occasion the focus on the individual self promotion of Paul, or Marcion, or Valentinus swings the pendulum too far the other way.

These minor criticisms aside, *At the Temple Gates* is a very impressive book. Wendt's conclusions fundamentally change the ways in which we understand Paul and the growth and development of Jesus traditions in the first two centuries. She drives yet another nail in the coffin of the idea that Paul (and Christianity) was somehow distinct from the world in which he lived (it emerged), and convincingly presents Paul as one of many freelance experts in religion.

Ian Phillip Brown
University of Toronto