From Idols to Icons: The Emergence of Christian Devotional Images in Late Antiquity by Robin Jensen (review)

Katherine Marsengill

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of Abba Moses the Ethiopian (184–85) to the reportedly lavish treatment of the Nubian king in Constantinople (174–75). Indeed, some of the concluding phrases in this chapter are particularly hard-hitting in light of the priorities I believe animate the study: "The image of the Ethiopian eunuch requires that we confront the fact that, despite having inherited a long history of racial invective, the Byzantines repeatedly turned racist stereotypes on their heads" or "The Byzantines were not white" (203).

While Chapters One, Two, and Four offer compelling and methodologically innovative readings of relatively well-known materials, the book's most lasting intervention will likely prove to be Chapters Three and Five. In my estimation, these two chapters are the most important contribution to the intersectional treatment of Roman transgender, nonbinary, and racialized identities so far penned by any scholar.

Luis Josué Salés, Scripps College

Robin Jensen
From Idols to Icons: The Emergence of Christian Devotional Images in Late Antiquity
Oakland: University of California Press, 2022
Pp. xv + 244. $65.00.

Robin M. Jensen's latest monograph on the emergence and development of Christian images over the first six centuries C.E is a clear and informative presentation on an important topic. Across eight chapters, Jensen describes the rise of Christian art within a culture filled with images of the gods and the tension in the endeavor of church authorities to deny or justify the use of images in their own religious environments.

Jensen begins with essential historiography, reasserting what scholars over the last few decades have come to understand: contrary to early historians like Edward Gibbon and biased churchmen of the Protestant Reformation who misinterpreted the earliest Christian writings, early Christians were not, in fact, categorically anti-art, nor aniconic; they did not adhere to nor cite Hebrew Bible/Old Testament law, nor follow a perceived Jewish precedent. Jensen goes through the early texts condemning idols, clarifying the nature of the *apologiae* on worshiping false gods. Early Christians objected to idolatry on the grounds that pagans worshiped non-existent deities and thus, by default, worshiped man-made objects fashioned out of stone, wood, and metal. Idols were images of beings who did not exist, or, if they had existed, were regular people, long-dead, and mistakenly elevated to divine status out of misguided fondness or grief. Although rife with hyperbole and simplifications of pagan practices, the *apologiae* were aimed at persuading Christians about the danger of engaging with paganism and its associated vices.

Arguments against worshiping images of the gods were not uniquely Christian, since non-Christian philosophers of the second and third centuries also recog-

nized the dilemma. Jensen's discussion of the matter provides larger context for a belief system that imagined a divide between the physical and spiritual worlds and the supremacy of an invisible and incomprehensible deity who could not be represented. Some early Christian writers did indeed shun images, believing that the physical world did not find parallels in the spiritual world and thus that representations of it had no use as substitutes for spiritual things. And yet, as Jensen reminds us, early Christians did have images. Surviving examples date to the early third century, while texts point to possibly earlier images. By the fourth century, Christian pictorial art was displayed in churches, shrines, baptistries, tombs, and private homes, despite some protestations. One justification can be found already in ancient Greek and Roman texts: images of the gods provided the means for the less sophisticated to worship their gods. Images were meant to honor them and to inspire worship but were not meant to be "portraits" of them. Defenses of Christian images well into the fifth and sixth centuries often have similar arguments, claiming that images are useful for instruction, especially for those who needed visualization to aid them in mental contemplation. However, as Christian authorities noted, from Eusebius to Iconoclasm-era writers, a confusion between the image and that which was represented was to be avoided.

Jensen then explains how Christians admitted into visual art the representation of the invisible divinity in the form of Christ. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament encounters with an otherwise invisible God could be understood in Christian terms and depicted in art if one recognized these appearances as the divine Logos and pre-Incarnate Word—Christ—whose Incarnation made the divinity visible to humans. This fundamental shift valued seeing with one's bodily eyes as a means of obtaining knowledge of God. Christian art transformed from symbols, to standardized figures placed in abbreviated biblical scenes, to portraits of Christ and the saints believed to be based on real appearances.

This brings the reader to the advent of two-dimensional Christian portraiture (icons) in the fourth century and the accompanying criticism by church authorities of congregants who may have been too adoring of such images. Jensen describes the various contexts in which such portraits would have been found—at tombs, at martyria, and in churches—and the possible ways in which they were perceived. She shows that, at least by the sixth century, there is evidence to suggest that images of Christ and the saints were being venerated as portraits capable of mediation between the viewer and the portrayed. Jensen elucidates the processes by which the perception of authenticity—or true likenesses—of portraits of Christ, the apostles, and Mary came about, even though there are no physical descriptions of them from the New Testament. A large part of the Christians' reasoning was historicity: these figures had existed, they had been seen, and were thus capable of being portrayed. Fulfilling viewers' expectations of what Christ and his saints looked like led to their codified appearances in icons. While these icons were venerable, still others, such as the *acheiropoieta*, worked miracles. These were not just passive vehicles for veneration; they were responsive and sometimes even animated.

A recurrent issue Jensen raises throughout her book is the fourth century's "material turn," a phrase that scholars use to explain how the earlier conception

that the spiritual and earthly realms were divided by an unbreachable distance shifted to the notion that spirituality could be seen and felt within the visible and sensible world. Jensen points out that the shift began in Neoplatonism of the third century, in its evaluation of matter as a necessary part of being and the basis for ascent to the higher, spiritual reality, and which positioned the mediating of divine presence in creation. Jensen sees the flowering of Christian materiality in the growth of pilgrimage to *loca sancta* and to martyrs' shrines and relics. The implications for Christian images were profound, as the pilgrims' need for tangible holiness promoted iconic images of Christ and the saints. Tying pilgrimage to the rise of icons leads to an important point: while asserting that relics and icons held equal footing in the Christians' perceptions about mediating presence, Jensen claims the advantage lies with the icon in its ability to reciprocate the viewer's gaze.

Jensen provides an altogether excellent resource, reviewing many primary sources, as well as deciphering the complex nature of the rise of Christian images and how church authorities differentiated them from pagan idols. Her explanation of the veneration of Christian icons stands in contrast to other scholars who do not recognize this important role of images in the early centuries of Christianity, and her expertise on the subject matter lends significant value to the discussion.

Katherine Marsengill, independent scholar, Brooklyn, NY

Victoria Leonard
In Defiance of History: Orosius and the Unimproved Past
New York: Routledge, 2022
Pp. xxii + 199. $136.00; £120.00.

Having worked on another of the less celebrated historians of late antiquity, Isidore of Seville, I have much sympathy with Victoria Leonard's approach to the *Seven Books of Histories against the Pagans*, written by the priest Orosius. Challenging what has until recently been the fairly widespread scholarly condemnation of the universal historian's abilities, Leonard deftly demonstrates that he was in fact an original author who deployed historical production to intervene actively in the religious changes of the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Of course, such shifts did not occur in a vacuum, and Orosius's intervention was at least in part intended to help members of his Christian audience make sense of their religion's place within the late Roman politico-military complex.

Rather than judging Orosius in terms of his failure to live up to the standard of classical historiography (or its late antique standard-bearers) or on the basis of Augustine's apparent unease with elements of the *Seven Books of Histories*, Leonard seeks to understand the author on his own terms. In this sense, the book builds on recent work by Peter van Nuffelen (*Orosius and the Rhetoric of History* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012]), which demonstrated how Orosius's "Christian" vision of history was grounded in a thoroughly ancient