

## Book Review

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**BOOK REVIEWED:** PAULINE ALLEN AND BRONWEN NEIL, *CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN LATE ANTIQUITY (410-590 CE): A SURVEY OF THE EVIDENCE FROM EPISCOPAL LETTERS, VIGILIAE CHRISTIANAE, SUPPLEMENTS, 121* (LEIDEN: BRILL, 2013), XIV + 286 PP. ISBN: 978-9004185777

*Crisis Management in Late Antiquity* is co-authored by Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil, who have worked together on many articles and books such as *Maximus the Confessor and his Companions: Documents from Exile* (2003), *Preaching Poverty in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Reality* (2009) and the more recent *The Letters of Gelasius I (492-496): Micro-Manager and Pastor of the Church of Rome* (2014) among others. The present book is the outcome of a research project funded by the Australian Research Council, which investigated 'Crisis Management in Episcopal Letters' between the years 410 and 590.

Albeit the idea of 'crisis management' is very much modern, the authors underline that 'the crises faced by bishops in Late Antiquity have much in common with those faced by leaders today' (p. 193) and they try to apply the same concept to the study of episcopal letters. The scope of the book is very ambitious as the authors use a broad definition of crisis, which includes population displacement, natural disasters, religious disputes, violent conflicts, social abuses, and the breakdown of structures of dependence. They also assert that all these crises 'were of a regional nature; they were relatively common, and they personally affected the bishop or else he did not write about them' (p. 37).

The first two chapters consist of introductory remarks, which establish the methodological approach the authors have followed, the types of crises they wanted to study, and also give an overview of the latest bibliography and the sources. This overview is very thorough as the book deals not only with

late antique crises and the role that bishops played during that time but also with the processes of writing, collecting and transmitting letters in Late Antiquity, the nature and functions of letters as well as their terminology, and of course the problems with which historians usually deal when studying these sources.

As the authors' goal is to study 'crisis management', or the bishop's management of crises, the selection of sources seems appropriate. It also seems original because, as Allen and Neil point out, 'crisis in the fifth and sixth centuries is reported much more frequently in works of history, rhetoric, apologetics and philosophy than in letters' (p. 193). This idea was first expressed by Géza Alföldy when dealing with the third-century crisis (p. 87), and as the authors later add, 'this is not a surprising fact given the disparate and sometimes *ad hoc* ways in which their letters were transmitted' (p. 193). We should remark that the letters chosen were taken from among those of Greek and Latin bishops, and that the time frame avoids both John Chrysostom and Gregory the Great.

The organisation of the book is quite straightforward. After the two introductory chapters, Chapters 3 to 7 deal with different types of crises. After every analysis, each chapter presents a brief conclusion and some case studies, which one might call commentaries on the sources.

Chapter 3 focuses on population displacement, and the way bishops dealt with three types of displaced persons: prisoners of war (with a strong focus on the ransom of captives), exiles (particularly bishops that were exiled from their sees), and asylum-seekers and refugees. The last type also includes non-Christian refugees, especially Manicheans, who were not only rejected as refugees, but could also be persecuted. The case studies in this chapter are four exiled bishops (Nestorius, Fulgentius of Ruspe, Pope Vigilius and Severus of Antioch), and Theodoret of Cyrrhus, whose letters contain various examples of the assistance provided to asylum-seekers and refugees.

Chapter 4 adopts perhaps the most original angle of the book as it focuses on natural disasters. These crises might have had natural or human causes, and the authors take into account earthquakes, extreme heat or cold, famine, fire, pests, floods and plagues, among other things. Despite this, the authors find a disappointing general silence in the sources, and conclude that perhaps 'the epistolographical genre did not lend itself to recording such events' (p. 90). The two case studies that are briefly commented on this chapter are Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret of Cyrrhus.

Chapter 5 deals with a more traditional topic of late antique studies: religious controversies and violence. The authors 'attempt to show both the success with which a bishop could use letters to influence the course of a doctrinal controversy, the use of letters in council *acta* and the practical constraints imposed by the epistolary medium' (p. 98). They take into account the exchange of letters between Cyril and Nestorius, the Council of Ephesus II, the Tome of Leo, the Council of Chalcedon, the Acacian schism, and the more regional problems related to Arianism, Donatism, Pelagianism, and Manichaeism. As one can see, both these sources and these problems have already been analysed many times in the past, and the use of 'crisis management' as a concept to deal with them seems to be

the only original aspect of their analysis which is nevertheless succinct and correct. More interesting are the two case studies of this chapter: the *Codex Encyclius* and the *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas* published by J.-B. Chabot. In using these compilations, the authors are able to study ‘the rationale of collecting and deploying episcopal letters in situations of crisis’ (p. 131, n. 153).

Chapters 6 and 7 are related to social problems: social abuses and the breakdown of the structures of dependence. The heterogeneous enumeration of social abuses includes usury, extortionate taxation, human trafficking, indentured child labour, alienation of church property and corruption. Chapter 6 consists of short descriptions, which is most likely due to the very varied list of problems it examines. The two case studies are a conflict between Synesius of Cyrene and a civil governor of Pentapolis, and some letters by Pope Gelasius, which concentrate mainly on problems within the Church. In chapter 7, after a brief historiographical discussion, the authors claim that from the second half of the fifth and through the sixth centuries the old structures were breaking down, and that from this point, ‘the evidence for episcopal involvement in the provision of buildings, churches, housing; ransoming of prisoners; emergency food supplies; and diplomatic exchanges with potential invaders, grows significantly’ (p. 173). The bishops assumed a more important role in civil affairs, becoming, in Claudia Rapp’s words, a ‘new urban functionary’ (p. 203). At the same time, the episcopate was becoming more aristocratic, and ‘wealth, nobility and connections seem to have played an important part in the success of individual petitions for aid’ (p. 172). In the same way, the civil legal system was overloaded with litigation, and bishops were allowed to have their own court. The conclusion of the authors is that ‘the *audientia episcopalis*, while it offered a better chance of justice for the ordinary person without connections, and was the only avenue open to clergy and penitents, was over-taxed and open to corruption’ (p. 180). The two case studies in this chapter are Augustine of Hippo and Pelagius I.

The book ends with an overall conclusion, and includes a deeply interesting appendix that contains profiles of episcopal authors. At this point Allen and Neil provide a great help to future researches by listing and commenting on the sources they have used to research and write their book. In this way, the book also becomes a work of reference on this extremely important – and sometimes neglected – corpus of sources.