Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph, by Jas Elsner and *The Clash of Gods*, by Thomas F. Mathews

reviewed by Cliff Edwards in the August 25, 1999 issue

The rich and fascinating resources explore the first few centuries of Christian art in the context of the culture of Rome and its provinces, imperial religious ceremonies and competing cults. Jas Elsner, lecturer in the history of art at London's Courtauld Institute, provides maps, timeline, more than 150 plates, and a careful text detailing the role of the visual arts in the Roman Empire of the "Second Sophistic" and "Late Antiquity" periods.

Elsner's quotations from the literature of the day—from Virgil to Bishop Paulinus of Nola—demonstrate the power of imagery to shape social and personal identity and to carry complex political and theological meanings. A wealth of color plates support the thesis that both public and private images celebrated institutions and rituals that defined what it meant to be a citizen of the Roman Empire. Descriptions of the aggressive self-definition of mystery religions and of Christianity through both "competitive self-assertion" and a "process of syncretism" help fill out the picture.

Thomas Mathews, professor of art history at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, provides an exciting counterpoint to popular views of Christian art by questioning the thesis that an "Emperor Mystique" informed early images of Christ—that is, that artists used Roman imperial settings to proclaim Christ as the new King. Rather, Mathews sees Christ as an anti-King, clothed in the imagery of pagan gods, magicians and heroes. In creative essays bound to provoke thought and a more alert viewing of these images, he discusses such things as the "magic wand" regularly displayed with Christ the magician, and the long curls and smooth cheeks and chest of Christ the adolescent savior.

Mathews focuses upon the "variability of images of Christ" and considers this variety to be a creative exploration of the many facets of Christ's identity: "In successive flashes the same Lord appeared now as abstract sign, now as a human figure, now as a Child, now as a Man, now as a Woman." I recommend that one begin with Mathews's provocative essays on "The Chariot and the Donkey" and "Christ Chameleon." Such chapters challenge one to look hard at the plates in both works

and to reconsider one's ideas about the art of the Roman Empire.

These two volumes alone are a library of information on Imperial Rome and the nature and context of early Christian art. The two scholars sometimes harmonize, sometimes differ on the meaning and significance of the same art objects. Both convey the moods and meanings of Roman imagery, the visual power of the cults of the time, and the emergence of Christian life and thought.

For those of us who have studied Christian beginnings largely through the canon of words, these expert explorations of the canon of images provide new insights. We have for too long given images a minor place in our reconstruction of meaning in the world where Christianity developed. These books make clear that to slight the significance of these early images is to seriously limit our understanding of that formative period.