

SIMON GOLDHILL, *THE CHRISTIAN INVENTION OF TIME: TEMPORALITY AND THE LITERATURE OF LATE ANTIQUITY*, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE 2022 (GREEK CULTURE IN THE ROMAN WORLD SERIES), 500 PP., ISBN: 9781316512906.

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Simon Goldhill's *The Christian Invention of Time* is a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary work of scholarship written for a broad scholarly audience. While trained primarily in classics and literary theory, the author draws on a wide range of sociological, philosophical, and theological sources in order to advance an original and provocative claim about time in late antiquity. The central argument of the book is that Christianity transformed the way time was conceptualised, lived, and experienced in late antiquity, in a manner analogous to the transformation of time in modernity, especially in the nineteenth century. Rather than offering a history of abstract theories of time, the book aims to address « how theological arguments about time come to ground the experience of time in daily practice and the engagement of individuals in a temporal world » (p. 216). It therefore focuses largely on issues of normativity in the conceptualisation, measurement, structure, and experience of time (p. 219; cf. p. 14–15). The main claim of the book, to paraphrase somewhat, is that there is a specifically Christian ‘form’ of time – i.e. a normative way of understanding, ordering, and inhabiting time – which emerged in the theological controversies of late antiquity and transformed the way time was lived, narrated, and experienced.

The book is divided into two parts, explained in the introduction. In the first part, the author identifies ten « formative categories of temporality » (p. 219, cf. p. 14). These are the fundamental notions that give ‘form’ to time, shaping an understanding of what it means to live in time and how one is to inhabit the present. The first ten chapters provide a sketch of the Christian form of time by analysing how Christianity transformed each of these formative categories from an initial starting point in Greco-Roman

and/or Jewish literature and culture. While each chapter discusses a distinct formative category, according to Goldhill they are all interrelated in complex ways. As one reads, a « cross-cutting » argument thus emerges about the « Christian invention of time » (p. 13). The second half of the book then turns to specific texts and authors, arguing for a number of case studies in Nonnus's *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John* and *Dionysiaca* (ch. 11 and 12), selections from the poems and homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus (ch. 13), the hymns of Ambrose and Prudentius (ch. 14), and the historical writings of Sulpicius Severus and Paulus Orosius (ch. 15). The author's twofold aim here is « to explore how time is reinvented within the writing of late antiquity » and « extend [...] the canon of Western literature » (p. 219, cf. p. 14). Since the main argument of the book is provided in part one, however, I will focus primarily on chapters 1–10 for the remainder of the review.

Before proceeding, however, one thing that remains unclear from the introduction that is not clarified later in the book, so far as I can tell, is how the present study is situated in relation to previous scholarship on the notion of a Christian conception of time. While the author cites seminal studies from the twentieth century such as Oscar Cullmann's *Christus und die Zeit* (1946) and Jean Daniélou's *Sacramentum Futuri* (1950), there is no state of the art or explicit discussion regarding how his argument builds on previous literature. It would be helpful for the reader who is not an expert in the subject area(s) to provide an overview of the existing literature, clarifying the lines of debate as well as what is original to the present study.

The argument of the chapters 1–2 is that temporality is (re-)framed by eternity in late antiquity through the (1) conceptualisation of divine eternity and (2) Christian promise of eternal life. Chapter 1 contrasts the quasi-temporality of the gods in Homer and Hesiod, who are deathless and ageless but nevertheless « enjoy » the « opportunities » of time, to the timeless of God's eternity in Rabbinical literature, Augustine, and the Cappadocians (p. 43). Whereas in early Greek literature the fundamental contrast is between divine deathlessness and human mortality, for the latter it is between the extended (*diastema*) character of human life and the simplicity of divine eternity. The challenge is how to understand and express divine eternity within the temporal constraints of human language, as well as « the agency of a timeless God in the history of humans » (p. 43). Chapter 2 begins to spell out how this shift in understanding God's relation to time changes the conception of temporality (viz. what it means to be in

time). Here Goldhill argues that the promise of eternal life which accompanies this shift in Christianity transforms how the moment of death is understood, and therefore how one is « to inhabit time » (p. 63). In this chapter, he also discusses the distinction and relation between *chronos* and *kairos*: the « mundane time » of daily life and the critical moments of decision, turning points that tend to define a life, especially at the moment of death. In early Christian literature the promise of eternal life transforms both notions, according to Goldhill. In early narratives of martyrdom, the moment of death (*kairos*) becomes a transition from one life to the next; it defines the martyr's past life as well as the life to come, while martyr's suffering and public witness redirect the « immortal glory » of the Homeric heroes towards God (p. 58).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in the lives of St. Mary of Egypt and Simeon Stylites, repentance, understood as a kind of death and rebirth, is followed by a long period of undifferentiated time lived in intense solitude and penance, where the very refusal of the pursuit of glory in anticipation of the life to come gives glory to God, transforming the « mundane time » of *chronos* (p. 58). Goldhill concludes the chapter by arguing that the contrast between Greco-Roman and Christian temporality is found on vivid display in the juxtaposition of Books 7 and 8 of the *Palatine Anthology*. While Book 7 is a collection 748 Greco-Roman epitaphs spanning several hundred years, wherein one finds « no acknowledgement of an afterlife or that the values of a lived life may be directed towards a life after death », the latter is a collection of poems by Gregory of Nazianzus honouring his Christian family and friends (p. 59). Here death is understood as a transition into light, rather than darkness, and the ordinary time of daily life is re-evaluated in light of Christian hope for eternal life, rather than the pursuit of immortal (earthly) glory.

Chapter 3 offers a wide-ranging essay about the politics of temporal measurement, calendars, and « the narratives of time » (p. 69). There are many interesting passages dealing with the measurement of time in rabbinical literature, ancient Mesopotamia, and Greco-Roman politics, as well as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, the frequent shifting back and forth between different contexts and time periods makes the argument somewhat difficult to follow. Towards the end of the chapter, the author turns to the « unparalleled » regulation of time in late antiquity

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<sup>1</sup> Goldhill's focus is on Prudentius's *Peristephanon*, and he notes that poet's glory is also re-directed towards God as worship.

in the emergence of Christian monasticism, where « every hour counts and must be counted » (p. 83). According to Goldhill, the distinction between *chronos* and *kairos* disappears in a monastic context, where the stress is on repetitive observance, whereby « all time is regulated to direct humans towards the worship of God » (p. 83). Viewed in a positive light, one could argue that in the monastic tradition, turning towards God renders all of time significant (not just the moment of *kairos* with its promise of glory), precisely because it « re-orders how life is seen » (p. 83). However, Goldhill concludes with a provocative question: whether « this extreme religious ordering of time leaves any narrative that is not of transgression or temptation. Is not the best monk a man without a story? » (p. 83). He then immediately asks whether the inevitability of temptation after the Fall makes « such a story without conflict, without a hesitation, without a crisis [...] impossible to tell » (p. 84). Could one not say that the monk's story is a reflection of the Christian story of Creation and Fall, redemption and conversion, leading to ultimate fulfilment, as the author's later description of the « temporality of the monk's *regula* » as a « constant effort of conversion » (p. 191) would seem to imply?

In chapter 4, Goldhill turns to the theme of waiting. Here he argues that waiting for the future and the end of the present seems to be something distinctively human. But *what* one is waiting for significantly impacts how daily life is to be lived in the present. After a brief but interesting survey of delay and deferral in Greco-Roman epic, Goldhill turns to delay and fulfilment in early Christianity. He begins with Jewish apocalyptic literature, focusing on the book of Daniel and 1 Enoch, and then discusses the book of Revelation, St. Paul, and the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>2</sup> Here the argument is that while in epic literature, waiting is « a time of threat [viz.] that deferral will block the heroic action necessary for immortal glory », for Christians, living between the Resurrection of Christ and the Eschaton,

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<sup>2</sup> Though occurring in a relatively brief space (about 5 pages), his discussion here touches on a number of controversial issues, and this could perhaps be more explicit. Though he acknowledges that the dating of the Gospels is a highly contested issue, the contrast Goldhill draws between Luke and the other Synoptics, citing PAULA FREDRIKSEN, *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2018, has been a subject of debate since at least the twentieth century; cf. (e.g.) OSCAR CULLMANN, « Introductory Chapter to the Third Edition », in *Christ and Time: the Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (trans. Floyd V. Filson), Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1964, p. 1–16; JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two: Holy Week. From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2011, p. 24–52 (esp. 41–43).

« waiting and watching have become the human condition of the faithful » (p. 99). According to Goldhill, this sense of the present is reflected in Augustine's account of time as *distentio animi* in *Confessions* XI. Just as Christians in the present *time* look back towards the Resurrection and forwards towards the Second Coming, so too at the level of the present moment consciousness is distended into the past by memory and the future by anticipation.

Chapter 5 discusses Christian typological readings of scripture, considered against the background of the classical use of *exempla* in the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition. The chapter begins with an introductory discussion of classicism as a turn to Greek and Roman exemplars. According to Goldhill, classicism always involves four things: (1) idealisation of the (Greco-Roman) past; (2) a « genealogical link » between the past and the present; and (3) a sense of « untimeliness », i.e. of a rift between the past and the present (p. 103). Arguing that the use of exemplars in classical rhetoric always involves a combination of idealisation, genealogy, untimeliness, and self-positioning in time, Goldhill then adds a fourth: « self-positioning in time » (p. 104–106). The contrast he draws in this chapter is between the « layered and complex » historicity of classical exemplars and the temporality of Christian typology, wherein persons, things, and events from the Hebrew Scriptures are interpreted as signs pre-figuring New Testament fulfilments (p. 111–112). The temporality of typology is 'non-linear' in the sense that past and present are taken as models of one another: Christ is the new Adam, Adam a type of Christ. According to Goldhill, this way of reading scripture is rooted in divine eternity: « The timelessness of God, the co-eternity of Son and Father, finds here in typology its strategy of reading, where any sense of past and present becomes rather a revelation of the always already » (p. 111). He also argues, however, that it is bound up with « supersessionist violence against the Jews » (p. 110). Goldhill provides at least one clear example of this in chapter 5 (Melito of Sardis), but his other examples are much less clear-cut (Origen and Jerome). Does this apply to *all* Christian typological readings of Scripture, or only to some? By chapter 15, it becomes clear that according to Goldhill there is a « violent [supersessionist] logic » inherent in Christian typology as such (p. 359). This is a strong and provocative claim, but it is also ambiguous. The terms « violent », « aggressive », and « supersessionist » recur frequently throughout the book, in connection with significantly different authors and ideas, texts and contexts. But they

are never defined or distinguished, and their sense is not always entirely clear. What precisely constitutes an « aggressive » re-writing of a text, as Goldhill describes the echoes of Genesis in the Gospel of John, the echoes of John in Augustine (implicitly), Nonnus's *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John*, and Ambrose's use of the psalms? Are all forms of supersessionism (equally) violent? It is not entirely clear, when the author remarks at the end of the study that it « has uncovered its fair share of extreme ideologues », who precisely is to be included in the list (p. 421).

Chapter 6, « Making Time Visible », focuses on the various forms of cultural memory in late antiquity. The author discusses the roles of architecture, sculpture, ritual, and public speeches in Athenian and Roman politics and memory, before transitioning to Christian pilgrimage literature via the travel literature of Pausanias and Lucian. Here the main point of contrast is between the different « normative expectations » of Christian literary responses to memorial sites of the martyrs and Greco-Roman antecedents. This contrast is « embodie[d] », for Goldhill, in the « weeping, praying, humbled, prostrate Christian » exemplified by Prudentius's account of his visit to the tomb of Saint Cassian at Imola (p. 126). Weaving together passages from Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Jerome, he argues that the Christian on pilgrimage « inhabit[s] another time's present », looking through sacred memorial sites to the events themselves, in the eyes of faith, and responding by *pathos* expressed in song, weeping, and prayer and striving to imitate the martyrs, who in turn imitated Christ (p. 122–126). As Goldhill notes, this vision « turn[s] the layerings of history [...] into as close as is possible to get to a form of typology, where each life is an *imitatio Christi* » (p. 126). The chapter then concludes with a discussion of Augustine's account of memory, where the accent is on the fragility of memory and its role in Augustine's quest for God, self-knowledge, and morality (p. 127–131). This links to Goldhill's discussion of conversion literature in chapter 9, but first there is a cross-cut to the problem of simultaneity.

Chapter 7 addresses the problem of competing temporal frameworks though the problem of simultaneity: what does it mean to say that two events happened at the same time? The author discusses three examples from the ancient epigraphic tradition – the Pantheon, Lindos Chronicle, and Parian Marble – in order to establish that these temporal markers, like historiography, serve « to locate the self in time », within a specific

temporal framework (p. 136).<sup>3</sup> The framework in question can be more or less local and specific, but in Polybius, with the rise of Rome, local history is subsumed under something that approaches universal history through a geographically spread co-ordination of events within a single frame (p. 137–138). Yet according to Goldhill, competing timeframes still persisted and remained a « source of contention » in the Roman empire (p. 140). The author then turns back to Greek sources (Herodotus, Thucydides, and Demosthenes) in order to argue for a porous boundary between mythic and historical time, before turning to Eusebius of Caesarea, the Christian author discussed in this chapter.

Eusebius, he argues, collapses the distinction between mythic and historical time into a single, historical narrative, tabulating chronologies so that « by comparing individual histories [...] the reader could see the hand of providence at work ».<sup>4</sup> Drawing on recent work by James Corke-Webster,<sup>5</sup> Goldhill presents Eusebius as a Christian author, well-versed in the Greco-Roman literary, philosophical, and historiographical traditions, who wrote for an elite audience at a critical moment in Roman imperial history in order to « synchronise » the Roman and Christian worlds (p. 149–155). In short, he presents Christian exemplars of both Roman and Christian values in order to argue that « the Christian [can] live a Christian and a Roman or Greek life *at the same time* » (p. 155). At the end of the chapter, Goldhill associates the « hope of a single narrative » in Eusebius with the « single theological normativity » of typological hermeneutics (chapter 5), asserting that there is a « violence », « encode[d] » in both (p. 155).

Chapter 8 cuts back to the theme of waiting from chapter 4, although here the question is how does waiting for eternal life impact a Christian's sense of the historical present. The chapter begins with a contrastive discussion of various senses of the present found in D.H. Lawrence, Walter Pater, Thomas De Quincey, Heidegger, modern anthropology, and, finally, Homer and Herodotus. As in previous chapters, the author stresses that the 'present' is « an ideologically fraught moment of self-positioning » (p. 165). He argues that « Christian thinkers, looking back to Plato, strive to create a

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<sup>3</sup> Here he cites REINHART KOSELLECK, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (trans. Keith Tribe), Columbia University Press, New York 2004.

<sup>4</sup> DAVID ROSENBERG, ANTHONY GRAFTON, *Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2010, p. 15, quoted in GOLDHILL, *The Christian Invention of Time*, p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> JAMES CORKE-WEBSTER, *Eusebius and Empire: Constructing Church and Rome in the Ecclesiastical History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019.

different sense of the present » – from the preceding authors – one that is « turned towards a timeless ideal » (p. 165). Then follows a brief exposition of time and eternity in Plato's *Timaeus* and its (critical) reception in Cicero and Lucretius, and a in third section on the politics of « imperial time » in the Seleucid and Roman empires. This leads into the final section on the « historical now » in Augustine's *City of God*. Here the author notes Augustine's reliance on « the repeated paradox of St John's Gospel, [that] 'the hour is coming and now is here' (4:23, 5:25) », arguing that for Augustine, « the now is always and necessarily marked by what is to come » (p. 177). In Augustine's typological theology of universal history (linking back to chapters 5 and 7) according to the seven days of creation in Genesis, the present is situated in the sixth age, between the Resurrection and the Second Coming. It thus looks forward towards a timeless future of eternal rest on the seventh day, the end of narrative. The problem, for Goldhill, is « how to conceive of the now of the earthly city [viz. Christian Rome] in relation to the final timelessness of the heavenly city » (p. 179). For Augustine, as he notes, there is no equation between the two: « a Christian empire can only ever be a precarious regime, a time before the end » (p. 179).

Chapter 9 continues this discussion of what it means to live « between the already and the not yet », by turning towards conversion narratives as the « paradigmatic story of a Christian life-time » (p. 181, 183). Augustine's *Confessions*, as one might expect, plays a key role in this chapter, though the author also discusses a number of conversion narratives, including the conversion of St. Paul in Acts, the « Acts of Paul and Thecla », the « Passion of Perpetua and Felicity », the « Life of Mary of Egypt » and Simeon Stylites (again), the Cappadocians, and Jerome. Contrasting these narratives with earlier Greco-Roman biographies and narratives of change (e.g. Apuleius and Ovid), he argues that conversion « changes the temporality of the narrative of a life-time », because it « organises [it] around a pivot of the fundamental alteration of self-understanding and perspective on how to live this life, here and now » (p. 183). The chapter then focuses on two aspects of conversion narratives: (1) the tension between conversion as a process and as a « blinding flash », and (2) how « life after conversion » is narrated (p. 203). In earlier narratives (e.g. the « Acts of Paul and Thecla »), conversion appears often as a sudden shift, whereafter the convert faces intense opposition and bears witness « to the point of death » (p. 188). In Augustine, by contrast, there is a profound tension between continuity and



rupture, process and the « blinding flash » of grace and conversion, while in the monastic tradition there is a stress on conversion as a continuous process (p. 191). In some later narratives (e.g. Simeon Stylites and the « Life of Mary of Egypt »), life after conversion is characterised by increasing penance and renunciation, found in an earlier and more moderated form in the Cappadocians, Jerome, and Augustine (p. 203). Noting, lastly, that « life-writing projects models to live by », the author concludes with a brief but interesting comparison with Jewish biographical literature in late antiquity, which focuses less on « the representation of such internal or social change » than the « precarious and porous boundaries of community and how they are to be policed » (p. 205).

Rather than discussing in detail the transformation of another specific aspect or « formative category » of temporality, chapter 10 concludes part one with a more general argument about temporal violence and the relation between time and narrative. The chapter begins with a passage from a poem in honour of Anicia Juliana, the Christian noblewoman who rebuilt the church of St. Polyeuctos in Constantinople. In the poem, she is said to have « forced » or « raped [*ebiēsato*] time / And surpassed the celebrated wisdom of Solomon », suggesting on Goldhill's analysis that « her building project must be seen as an intervention in history » (p. 207). The chapter then moves into a general discussion of the notion of suddenness, which helps clarify the connection between time and narrative, according to Goldhill, because it « depends on an intervention in the normal or expected timing of events and their telling » (p. 210). When something appears to be sudden it disrupts our expectations regarding the timing and sequence of events. Drawing on the work of Fredric Jameson, Goldhill characterises this as a kind of « violence to timing », which may be linked to various forms of political violence (e.g. revolutionary politics), and « reveal[s] » the way « narrative [...] forces [time] into the ideology of form » (p. 212–213, emphasis original). This appears, however, to be inescapable for Goldhill, since « any discussion [...] forces time into a form », including his own (p. 217). In short, then, time is constantly and inescapably 'forced' into a form both by the demands of « social process » and more theoretical discussions, which « makes doing violence to time the threat and promise of a potentate like Juliana, a philosopher like Parmenides, or a writer like Augustine » (p. 215).

What remains unclear in chapter 10, however, and throughout the book (so far as I can tell) is how to distinguish different forms of temporal

violence. Does one do violence to time by ‘forcing’ it into a form? The language of ‘force’ would seem to suggest so, but then one would do violence to time merely by discussing it. How does one distinguish such ‘violence’ from the ‘violence’ that according to Goldhill is inherent in Christian typology or the hope for a ‘single narrative’ of universal history? How does one distinguish between cases of ‘threat’ and ‘promise’ when it comes to temporal violence, especially if there is «no ‘view from nowhere’ » (p. 10) when it comes to religion in late antiquity?

In *The Christian Invention of Time*, Simon Goldhill has provided a detailed, well-researched, and remarkably wide-ranging study of a complex and multifaceted topic. While the cross-cutting structure of the argument can at times be confusing, the book’s attentiveness to connections between the conceptualisation and lived experience of time allows it to cover many diverse aspects of the problem, from epigraphs and monastic *regulae* to historiography, life narratives, and Christian typology. Many of the connections Goldhill draws will likely remain subject to debate, but there is much in the book to interest a wide scholarly audience, including classicists, philosophers, and theologians working on time and history in Christianity and late antiquity. For my own research on time perception and history in medieval Latin philosophy and theology, the book provides a helpful introduction to the shifts and debates about temporality in late antiquity and the patristic period. The many thought-provoking connections and subtopics dealt with in the book – including, for example, the conception and perception of time and the present, life-times, typology, and universal history – also suggest various possible lines of inquiry regarding later developments in the Middle Ages.