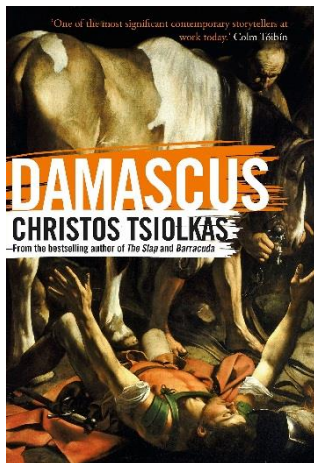


Book Review VII



Christos Tsiolkas Damascus.

I saw this book reviewed in *The Observer* and it piqued my interest. Having then bought and read it, I found the story utterly compelling, beautifully told, creating a convincing reality. And yet it was also viscerally unsettling. Due to some of the 'adult themes' I thought I might avoid bringing it to people's attention but then I saw it reviewed in *The Church Times* and so decided it can't have been too offensive.

It is ostensibly about the life of the Early Church (35-87AD) seen through a number of recognizable New Testament characters including Paul, Timothy, Lydia, the fictional Vrasas (Paul's Roman jailer) and the enigmatic Thomas, here depicted as Jesus' twin brother – complete with tantalizing physical descriptions. Tsiolkas imagines the pagan world in grim and oppressive detail and the struggles of those who try to set out an alternative set of relationships free from the constraints and expectations of marriage, religion or hierarchy.

The mood is one of desperation in the aftermath of the crucifixion and in the continued delay of any triumphal return. The early 'responsory': "The Saviour's coming/ truly he is returning" brings diminishing comfort as these early followers of Jesus battle courageously in the face of hopeless odds.

The book of Acts is written very much as a retrospective. (Ask an older person what life was like in the 50's - and that's Acts. You can almost count the money left on the kitchen table for the milkman). Tsiolkas presents a far more nuanced and chaotic picture of the period where big ideas are still being discovered and worked through and where disagreements are combustible and costly. Hey, it's 'only' fiction. But we are drawn into a realistic world of depth and understanding and we come away scarred but enriched for the experience and perhaps with a deeper sympathy for poor old Paul.