
Cynthia Baker
Bates College

Follow this and additional works at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol45/iss1/10

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.
invalidated as merely elitist cultural and social posturing, while modern readings not dissimilar in content may be celebrated as “democratized” (145). The mechanism by which Seamus Heaney, for instance, adapts Odes 1.34 to commemorate the events of September 11, 2001 (150) does not differ markedly from that employed by many of the Victorian poets studied, except that the latter, products of an age and class thoroughly saturated with Horace, often employ allusion with more subtlety and sensitivity to the original text. Harrison’s careful and restrained argumentation in this chapter and elsewhere may in fact provoke some readers to ponder a complexity not entertained openly by the author: is it inappropriate, in an age where hatred and rational self-interest seem to be ascendent, to feel a twinge of nostalgia for the moderation and “leisured gentility” of Horatian moralism, even as this moralism was imperfectly embodied by elite Victorian white males?

In sum, this is a thorough and thought-provoking study, concise, well-argued, and full of avenues for further inquiry. Harrison has made another valuable contribution to the field of Horatian studies.


In *The Dawn of Christianity*, Robert Knapp proffers a simple thesis – namely, that the “experiences of supernatural power that ordinary people shared [monotheists and polytheists alike] are the key to understanding the dawn of Christianity” (xvi). Although differences between monotheists (here, Jews) and polytheists could be substantial, far more significant for an understanding of nascent Christianity’s appeal to both was a commonly felt need to manage relationships with invisible but ever-present powers that could help or harm, destroy or revive one’s life and
fortunes. Christianity capitalized on that need as a “monotheist-polytheist hybrid [that] promised a new relationship with the supernatural . . . [and] a new world in which individuals could expect in death the ease and comfort that were usually denied them in life” (8). Following Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem and the failed prophecy of Jesus’ imminent end-time return, “a Jewish-non-Jewish product emerged that amalgamated the Jewish roots of early Christianity with elite philosophical ‘way of life’ ideas of the non-Jewish classical world” (9).

The book comprises eleven chapters. The first of these, “The Journey,” renders in broad strokes a historical narrative running from Moses’ reception of divine commandments on Mount Sinai, through Jesus’s miraculous resurrection, to Constantine’s vision of a cross of light at the Milvian Bridge. This latter event is termed a “second miracle that resurrected Jesus a second time” and assured the imperial backing that resulted in Christianity’s triumph. The chapter ends with a short digest of ancient primary sources used in the writing of the book.

Chapter Two, “Polytheists, Jews, and the Supernatural,” invites the reader to imagine, through vivid examples, the supernatural-infused world in which the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East lived and died, managed uncertainties, and sustained close and extended communities. In this world, tradition dictated which rites and rituals, prayers and incantations were most efficacious in achieving desired ends. At the same time, individuals or groups might alter the particulars of such practices following an encounter with (or rumor of) a miracle worker whose miracles demonstrated a more intimate association with supernatural agents and powers.

Chapters Three through Six provide textbook histories of “Ordinary Jewish People” and of dominant Israelite theology (“The Justice of Yahweh”) as it developed into Jewish sectarianism, universalism, and other “Paths to Change.” Amid these, by way of continuing the paralleling approach, is inserted a chapter about ordinary “Polytheists in Their World.”

“Charismatics and Messiahs” populate the seventh chapter, of which the first half is devoted to a who’s who of the better-known among these and the second half to Jesus of Nazareth. Knapp informs his readers that, at the time of Jesus, the Galilee was “a hotbed of eschatological fervour” (126), and that “Jesus’s eschatology was standard fare for his time” (127). Jesus nonetheless stood out, according to Knapp, for “his remarkable claim to direct relationship with Yahweh” (127). Despite acknowledging that similar Gospel-derived “evidence that Jesus called himself a messiah is mixed at best” (128), Knapp treats this particular assertion as reliable, appealing to it as determinative in subsequent chapters.
“Christianity in the Jewish and Polytheistic World” situates the movement within the Judaean, Jewish, and larger Roman political landscapes with their respective traditions of voluntary associations, philosophical debate, public and private acts of piety, basic morality, and concern with the supernatural. “Hostility to Christianity” follows up with a narrative of Jewish antagonism drawn largely and uncritically from New Testament polemics. Polytheist antipathy is then accounted for as a reaction to both early Christianity’s association with the “abnormal habits of Jewish people . . . [and] the clannishness of the Jews” (155) and to Christians’ own public condemning of polytheists, preaching of “atheism” (apart from adherence to their singular, crucified god), and yearning for global destruction as a precursor to their desired new age. Knapp also identifies socioeconomic self-interest of various parties as contributing to hostility. In addition to New Testament and patristic polemics, Knapp’s discussion features excerpts from Celsus, Lucian, Suetonius, and Tacitus, and concludes with the quotation and parsing of two letters from the second-century correspondence between Pliny the Younger and Emperor Trajan concerning the proper handling of accused Christians.

Chapter Ten, “Christianity’s Appeal: Magicians, Miracles, and Martyrs,” serves as the climax of Knapp’s argument and the culmination of his thesis. After a few pages outlining the more quotidian or philosophical paths to conversion, Knapp commences an extended dissertation on ancient magic, “a methodology to bring supernatural power to bear on a human problem” (182). The reader is here treated to comparative biblical, Jewish, polytheist, and Christian accounts of healing, exorcism, prognostication, snake handling, necromancy, prophecy, divination, fortune-telling, astrology, cursing, blessing, receiving or generating visions, and dream interpretation. Although “there is little difference between miracle and magic” as “both achieved the same result,” miracles, it seems, “tended to be more spectacular than magic” (197). Jesus and his followers, like notable others in polytheistic and Hebrew lore, were credited with great success at both magic and miracles, including multiplying food and drink; healing the blind, lame, and leprous; and resurrecting the dead.

Knapp estimates the list of miracles narrated in the Gospels as “perhaps numbering 200” (201), culminating in Jesus’s self-resurrection. The unaccountable strength of conviction that led Christians, like Jews, to embrace martyrdom as an act of worship and witness meant, moreover, that “martyrdoms were also seen as miracles” (203). In a world suffused by the supernatural, the resulting calculation was “simple: a greater power had come on the scene; the power was incontrovertibly proven by miracles and magic; the message was worth, if not believing, at least listening to – and then perhaps believing” (202). The promise that “your enemies will
get their comeuppance in a final judgment while you will be rewarded with eternal bliss” (207) only added to the attraction.

The book’s final chapter rehearses, in some detail, Christianity’s survival of the “twin shocks of Jerusalem’s destruction and the failure of Jesus’s End Times prophecy” (209-10) through the philosophizing and organizational takeover by cultural elites. Relying heavily on Ramsay MacMullen, Knapp offers sketches of the elite Christianity of the churches and the more common one of the cemeteries. The movement, he concludes, limped along for over a century on these two tracks, neither dying away nor flourishing, until the conclusive miracle of Constantine’s cross in the sky guaranteed its ultimate ascension.

The strength of this book lies in its smooth synthesis of primary source material in service to a compelling thesis. Knapp expertly crafts an encompassing master narrative of the pre- and early Christian world, in part by disregarding or dismissing many significant scholarly debates and flattening out complex sociocultural dynamics. The effect is furthered by appeal to ancient literary and polemical sources read as evidence in a rather straightforward and ingenuous fashion. Younger scholars will likely find the book’s tone and approach quaintly “old school,” while college professors may be put off by the stylistic choice to forgo all in-text attributions and instead list primary-source references by page number at the back of the book, where few undergraduates will ever see them. Nonetheless, all students of early Christianity should appreciate Knapp’s vision of an ancient world alive with supernatural powers, where monotheists and polytheists are not so different from one another as they are often made out to be.

*NECJ* 45.1

Cynthia Baker

Bates College