

## BOOK REVIEW

*A Century of Miracles: Christians, Pagans, Jews, and the Supernatural, 312–410.* By H. A. DRAKE. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xvi + 312. Hardback, \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-936741-2.

The fourth century remains integral for understanding early Christianity's social, epistemological and political development. Scholars traditionally credit this century with the beginnings of Christian "historiography," monasticism and its associated hagiography, a politically powerful bishopric, Christian "hospitals," Christian monumental architecture, the Christian biblical canon and even Christianity *qua* religious identity vis-à-vis Judaism (see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines* 2004). At the same time, this century contained what Ed Watts called *The Final Pagan Generation* (2015), within which classical culture flourished in figures like the sophist Libanius, the soldier-historian Ammianus Marcellinus and the Emperor Julian. Drake's work operates at the confluence of these worlds, narrating fourth-century Christianity as being "at its most basic level, a story of a change in the meaning of what it meant to be a Roman" (3). As scholars of the period have come to expect, Drake's treatment is a humorous, learned and delightful romp that provides for long-embattled questions within the field answers that are intelligible, coherent and enjoyable to engage.

The novelty of Drake's approach is immediately evident in its structure. He begins with a chapter on the battlefield miracle Ambrose imputed to Theodosius I in his funeral oration for him in 395. He then goes back to the "beginning" Constantine's famous battlefield conversion, and proceeds to follow the century through to its end, where he began. The logic of both legends—"military victory proves that the Christian God is *God*"—embodies this 4<sup>th</sup> century, in which Christians appropriated this Roman maxim of "might proves right." The question Drake's book poses is the following: how was Christianity able, given this outlook, to "survive" ideologically the barbarian sack of Rome in 410? Such an event should have shown the Christian God not to be almighty after all. But it did

not, and Christianity's overcoming of this contradiction constitutes for Drake "the great unanswered question of the age" (2).

Drake begins his answer with a framing chapter. His insight here is that the 4<sup>th</sup> century has been reoriented by 20th-century Cold War thinking, which insisted upon black and white, good and evil dichotomies. This modern mode of thought "defined out of existence a period when religious identity was much more fluid than it became" (22). Thus, when Drake begins his analysis with Ambrose's 395 funeral oration (Chapter 2), he aims to examine what changed in the century preceding it. It turns out that Ambrose embodies a shift in which Christian bishops (and emperors) had come to view/use religion in ways "grounded in ancient thought" (46) by portraying deity as attendant upon pious rulers. The "miracles" Drake signals in his title are thus the miracles interpreted by Christianly in the upper echelons of the Christian body politic. Subsequent chapters deal with what are arguably the major permutations of this phenomenon through the 4<sup>th</sup> century: Constantine's obscure vision at the Milvian Bridge (Chapter 3), the narration of miracles by Lactantius and Eusebius (Chapter 4), the legend of the finding of the true cross in the Holy Land (Chapter 5), "Jewish" miracle stories found in authors like Epiphanius (Chapter 6), miracles in a monastic context, e.g. the *Life of Antony* (Chapter 7), the use of miracles in discourse by and about the Emperor Julian (Chapter 8), miracle-ensconced reinterpretations of failure, like Galerius' death or Julian's attempt to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple (Chapter 9), and Augustine's reconfiguration of the Christian worldview in *City of God*. An epilogue makes the point that the miracles of this century, before or after Augustine's move away from emphasizing the material realm, share with earlier eras that "power is the goal" (227).

Drake's treatment of these issues exudes erudition and clarity. For example, his treatment of Constantine's vision and questionable "conversion" recognizes the processual nature of conversion, and identifies Constantine as a figure in which "classical education and Christianity were [fundamentally] compatible" (71). His treatment of the different versions of Constantine's vision also provides a clear discussion of a fraught question. Some conclusions to which Drake comes may be surprising: in Chapter 6 ("Jews in Miracles") he reads some 4th-century miracle stories as indicating a cultural impulse that imagined a joining of Christianity and Judaism, even amidst a developing heresiology that attempted the opposite. In sum, this book is a repository of expert treatments of major 4th-century topics. These appear seamlessly woven into Drake's narrative of a century in which "miracle discourse" operated as a discourse of power for Christians, which

Augustine transformed following Alaric's sack from political to the realm of platonic forms. The book is written in Drake's characteristic good humor, and reminds the reader often of his influential *Constantine and the Bishops* (2000). It is a valuable read for any student of 4th-century Christianity and a requisite one for any scholars working on the issues Drake covers.

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