

BOOK REVIEW

On Greek Religion. By ROBERT PARKER. Cornell Studies in Classical Philology. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011. Pp. xiii + 309. Hardcover, \$78.95/£48.95. ISBN 978-0-8014-4948-2. Paperback, \$29.95/£18.50, ISBN 978-0-8014-7735-5.

On Greek Religion contains the seven Townsend Lectures Robert Parker delivered at Cornell in 2008, enriched with extensive notes, bibliography, index, and five appendices. It has all the virtues we have come to appreciate in his writings: a fruitful blend of the factual and theoretical; a simultaneous inclination towards and distrust of categories, schemes, and generalities; scrupulous attention to detail; an awareness of what we do and do not and cannot know about Greek religion; precise and generous but not uncritical discussions of others' views; the integration of literary and epigraphical sources; common sense; and a lively style with touches of whimsy. Here the range in topics, time, locales, and sources will be familiar to those who know his articles, less so to those who know only his books.

Beginning from the fact that Greek religion did not have a sacred, "revealed," book, Parker, in Chapter 1 ("Why Believe without Revelation?"), gives a number of "evidences" that led Greeks to believe the gods exist, the foremost being that pseudo-empirically they concluded that for their ancestors, and hence for them, "piety worked," "pious behavior was rewarded." And, through oracles, they did in fact have significant revelation, especially concerning cultic behaviors. And, of course, they had texts describing the gods, first Homer and Hesiod, and Parker describes how these and others did effect their religious conceptions. Here, somewhat surprisingly, he makes the claim that everything a Greek heard or saw and remembered about gods and heroes was part of his conception of the gods. The discussion of texts then segues into a fairly long (ca. one-half of the chapter) and sophisticated discussion of myth/religion and of ritual/belief.

Chapter 2 ("Religion without a Church") is devoted to ascertaining the authority the *polis* and its institutions and magistrates held over religion, and is in many ways an elaboration and defense of the claims of the late Sourvinou-Inwood (to whom the book is dedicated) in her 1990 article "What is Polis Reli-

gion?,” an article strongly asserting the authority of the polis, an article Parker terms “probably the most influential single item in the study of Greek religion since the early studies of Burkert and Vernant.” Much of Parker’s discussion here focusses on the role and authority of priests vis-à-vis other components of the polis.

In Chapter 3 (“Analyzing Greek Gods”) Parker shows the possibilities and difficulties of the various schemes of classifying deities, through epithets, by type (natural forces, abstractions, human, etc.), and as chthonic vs. Olympian. He offers an excellent discussion of the usually futile attempts to find a single concept that unites the various manifestations and *timai* of each Olympian deity. Here he introduces seven propositions of the structuralist approach and, in a very Parkeresque way, describes both the contributions and limitations of each proposition. Most interesting is what he labels the “snowball” theory, one which he seems himself to favor, i.e., “the idea that as a god rolls down through history it picks up new functions and powers that need not cohere with its original nature or with one another.”

Chapter 4 (“The Power and Nature of Heroes”) explores the various natures and functions of heroes, encapsulated in the type of incisive statements and metaphors one happily finds often in Parker, “biographically dead mortals, functionally minor gods”; “The variations in cult are oscillations on the line between dead mortal and minor god”; and “The particularity of heroes made them an ideal focus for group loyalty, the rennet around which social groups coagulated.” Here Parker persistently questions the popular ascription of political purposes to *all* hero cults, not rejecting it completely but limiting it severely. He opens this critique with the sly “It would doubtless be crude to use the pious ancient understanding as a stick with which to chastise the unimaginatively secular assumptions of modern scholarship. ... But it is certainly worth beginning from the evidence of Herodotus ...” And so, rightly, he does.

The title (“Killing, Dining, Communicating”) of Chapter 5 nicely captures Parker’s major emphases on the topic of sacrifice. He features the “alimentary” sacrifice, that which is followed by a banquet and which contains elements of gift-giving to the god, communication with the deity, and the sharing of the victim between the deity and the human, all fully explored. Other forms of sacrifice (holocausts and moirocausts) he sees as variants on the alimentary (less food to the humans) and separates out only ritual killings, as in oath and purificatory offerings. He offers detailed criticisms of Vernant’s theory that the sacrifice and banquet marked the distinction between god and humans (for Parker they

formed, rather, a bridge between them) and of the Meuli/Burkert theory of hunter-based ritual killing and comedy of innocence, of the “violence” of sacrifice. The varieties of sacrifice do not coalesce around one concept except for the killing of an animal, and for Parker there is no indication that the act of killing itself had major significance in the dominant and normative alimentary sacrifice.

After his usual caveats about what we do not know, Parker in Chapter 6 (“The Experience of Festivals”) attempts, in his own words, “to sketch some broad outlines, trace common characteristics, identify possibilities.” He begins with Greek associations with festivals—the pleasures of eating and drinking, refreshment, well-being, and such—and then takes up modern concepts of the “plots” of festivals, particularly those involving a god’s arrival, departure, search for, or even death. He severely limits or rejects old favorite “plots” of sacred marriage, new years’, and fertility festivals. Here and in the conclusion of the chapter he offers valuable insights on ancient aetiologies of festivals, some tied to the heroic age, some to historical events, some to both. He treats city festivals extensively, stressing that they were both an “honoring of a god” and a celebration of the city, with no contradiction between the two or between piety and spectacle. He concludes with those festivals, distinct from the above, that had weird modes of sacrifice, foul and abusive language, “dirty dancing,” social reversal, or mock battles. Every category is richly documented (as is, of course, everything), with, e.g., twelve festivals described in the three pages on festivals of social reversal. One complaint here: it is surprising that Parker, who is always so precise with religious terminology, is content with the unGreek term “festival” to cover this huge variety of rituals. He might, to begin, have separated out *heortai* as a category.

This whole lecture series is about variety in Greek religion, seeking patterns and categories into which to place the various elements and recognizing their exceptions, limitations, and overlaps. The last chapter (“The Varieties of Greek Religious Experience”) focusses on the variations by locale (different gods fulfilling different roles in different cities, with some truly unusual cases—Persephone at Locri Epizephyrii, Hermes and Aphrodite at Kato Symi), social position (noteworthy lack of class distinction in cults, usual exclusion of slaves and metics but with exceptions), and gender (role of women, men and women with different gods for different roles). Then the individual emerges more clearly, choosing among the state cults, joining private societies of orgiastic or other deities, initiation in, especially, Eleusinian and Samothracian Mysteries, participating in, or most usually not, a cult promising a special afterlife, and using “magic” or

course tablets. The final section, “What You Will,” emphasizes the amount of latitude open to an individual in his/her religious choices, and this last lecture closes with a “modest statement” of Greek religion’s virtues, the first and last of which offer (for me, at least) a telling contrast to our currently polarized religious world: “Greek religion provided a strong framework of social cohesion; it met a human need by opening channels of communication with that unseen world most humans believe to exist: but it did these things without insisting on any particular set of speculations about the character of that unseen world.”

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