

BOOK REVIEW

Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World. By TIM WHITMARSH. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015. Pp. x + 292. Hardcover, \$27.95. ISBN 978-0-307-95832-7.

The main aim of Whitmarsh's book is to uncover the history of atheism from Homer until the rise of Christianity in the 4th century CE. His reader has a learned guide in full command of all the material relevant to the subject. As a result, this book will now stand as the most accessible English-language source book for the varieties of disbelief in antiquity.

Whitmarsh covers an expansive array of texts from over a millennium, organizing his analysis diachronically. Beginning in archaic Greece (chs. 1–4), Whitmarsh emphasizes the atheist implications of many traditional myths. For example, he argues that Prometheus' prophecy about Zeus' son shows us that a world without gods could be imagined, while Homeric theomachy inscribes a kind of atheism into myth: "to confront the gods was to deny their potency, what made them gods" (48). Whitmarsh also calls into question the apparent theism of Presocratic thinkers like Anaximander, Anaximenes, Xenophanes, and Anaxagoras, by suggesting that when they use the word "god" to describe their substances they indicate that god is no more than a property of the material world, basically equivalent to nature. From the Classical period (chapters, 5–9), Whitmarsh adduces the Sophists, especially Protagoras, the tragedians, Thucydides and Herodotus, concluding with the banning of *asebeia* and the trial of Socrates.

This is all well done, succinct and, at times—for instance his argument that Diagoras of Melos "was the first person in history to self-identify in a positive way as an atheist" (124)—ingenious and novel. In the Hellenistic era (chapters 10–12), Whitmarsh focuses on the prominence of divine kingship and the rise especially of the Skeptics from the Academy and Epicurus. Particularly effective here is his suggestion that atheism presented itself as a quite reasonable response during this period when humans were reckoned as gods. His argument reaches its climax with evidence from the Roman period (chapters 13–16); here, Whitmarsh argues that we should infer a complex network of atheists, as evidenced especially by the atheist doxographies found in the inscription of Diogenes of Oenoanda,

Sextus Empiricus, and Aëtius. Such a flourishing atheist movement was ultimately silenced in the historical record, however, once Catholic Christianity established that the only dichotomy that mattered was the paradigm of true versus false religion. Even if there (undoubtedly) were disbelievers after the political institution of Catholicism, no trace of them has been left. According to Whitmarsh, it is this historical silence that has distorted our perceptions about the history of atheism in the ancient world.

Such broad coverage of the ancient evidence for disbelief will undoubtedly fulfill a *desideratum* for lay atheists and scholars of ancient atheism alike. Whitmarsh's study is predicated on a capacious definition of "atheism" encompassing perspectives more diverse than the modern definition of the term, i.e. as one who categorically rejects the existence of divinity. He often assimilates agnosticism and religious skepticism to "atheism," a procedure on display in the preface—"In this book I seek to tell the story of Greek *atheism* over a thousand-year period ... this book thus represents a kind of archaeology of *religious skepticism*. It is in part an attempt to excavate *ancient atheism* from underneath the rubble heaped on it" (11, italics mine)—and one that recurs throughout the book, e.g. "agnosticism is, philosophically speaking, the same thing as atheism" (210; cf. 273 note 7). Whitmarsh is well aware of the evidentiary uncertainty that makes many of the figures he handles in this book controversial – to some, thinkers such as Prodicus and Palaephatus may appear to be religious skeptics or agnostics more than proper atheists (at least by the standard definition used today). To my mind, of the figures Whitmarsh discusses, Hippo of Samos (63–64), Protagoras (87–91), Persaeus (154–155), and Clitomachus (164–167, 211–213), approximate most closely to "atheists" in the modern sense of the term. Confronted with such lacunose or uncertain evidence, however, Whitmarsh is always judicious in the conclusions he draws, which he regularly qualifies as plausible, rather than definite.

Despite these objections, Whitmarsh deserves credit for the accomplishment of joining together all of the evidence for disbelief in antiquity in such an accessible, invigorating narrative. His book provides a timely reminder, in an era when fundamentalisms of all stripes abound, that the history of dissent is as old as orthodoxy.

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