

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

***Jesus Among the Gods: Early Christology in the Greco-Roman World.* By Michael F. Bird. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022. xi + 480 pp. \$59.99 cloth.**

The title of this book may mislead readers about its contents and argument. While the book does study Christology within the context of Greco-Roman religions and divinities, it also places much emphasis on Judaism. In effect, Bird seeks to determine the relative contributions of the Greco-Roman world and Judaism to Christological developments in the early church. Bird's basic thesis is expressed concisely: "Jesus is a Jewish deity of the Greco-Roman world" (407).

The major interventions of the book are its focus on divine ontology and the comparisons it offers between Jesus and other figures within Judaism and the Greco-Roman world who functioned as intermediaries between humans and the divine. Chapter 1 explores the different senses in which Jesus was believed to be divine, with reference to Greco-Roman religions and Judaism. In Chapter 2, Bird seeks to show that ontological language about Jesus was already present in the first century, rather than a later development by Platonizing Christians of the second and third centuries.

The remaining three chapters approach Jesus alongside a range of other intermediary figures. Chapter 3 offers a brief review of past scholarship on early Christologies and intermediary figures. The mammoth fourth chapter, which extends for 265 pages, then compares Jesus with Jewish and Greco-Roman intermediary figures: the Demiurge, Logos, Wisdom, angels, exalted patriarchs (Adam, Enoch, Moses, and Elijah), and ancient rulers who were acclaimed and worshipped as gods. Chapter 5 sums up the book's argument by emphasizing the primacy of Jewish elements and influence in the development of early Christologies. The fifth chapter also includes a defense of Christian uniqueness and exceptionality, building from Bird's conclusion that early Christologies presented Jesus as a different type of divinity from the other intermediary figures.

The book is based on a mostly thoroughgoing attempt to incorporate a diverse range of ancient sources. The full Index of Ancient Sources conveys the breadth of materials discussed. Christian sources extend far beyond the canonical and orthodox, with significant discussion of the Nag Hammadi writings and the New Testament Apocrypha. The inclusiveness of this approach is welcome, though I was surprised to see that the ostensible heretics Arius and Tatian, together with the Ptolemy who wrote a letter to Flora, appear in the index under the category of Greco-Roman Authors, rather than Patristic Authors. (Oddly, Epiphanius of Salamis and Lactantius are also included as Greco-Roman rather than Patristic.)

The treatment of Greek and Roman sources aspires to be thorough, but some problems and blind spots are apparent. Much of the discussion of Greco-Roman material depends on past scholarship, with many citations of more obscure ancient sources openly acknowledged as coming at second hand. This leads to some errors and misunderstandings, such as the identification of Athenaeus's *The Sophists at Dinner* as a papyrus (348). More significantly, there is no mention of the theories of Euhemerus in the discussion of Greco-Roman views on the deification of mortals (44–45), which is a

major omission. The effort to cite a broader range of authors and secondary sources also disappears in Chapter 5, where the citations are limited almost exclusively to works by New Testament scholars, even with reference to topics like resistance to Hellenism in the Roman Near East.

The limited range of citations makes Chapter 5 the least successful in the book. Too little evidence is presented to demonstrate the chapter's claims about the relative insignificance of Greco-Roman influences on the development of early Christologies. Bird suggests that Greeks and Romans were much less interested in divine intermediary figures than were Jews and Christians. But the chapter's discussion ignores or glosses over many signs of Greco-Roman interest in intermediary figures. Daemons and daemonology are barely mentioned, even though the word "daemons" appears in the title of the chapter. I was also baffled to read the suggestion that there was little interest among Greeks and Romans in the practice of ritual incubation a few lines before mention of the healing sanctuaries of Asclepius (395). Chapter 5's claims about the limited influence of Greco-Roman ideas on the development of early Christologies require significant reconsideration.

The earlier chapters are more successful. Chapter 1's attempt to problematize Jesus's divinity is helpful and convincing, using an effective blend of Christian, Jewish, and Greco-Roman sources. The same pattern continues in the second through fourth chapters, which continue the dialogue between sources effectively. Special mention must be made of the taxonomies and lists in Chapter 4, which should provide a useful starting point for much future research on Christology with reference to intermediary figures.

I have questions about the intended audience of the book. Some discussions assume no prior knowledge from readers, with helpful definitions and examples provided, for instance, in the introduction of the concept of divine ontology. Greek and Hebrew words are always transliterated, which also suggests a desire to be accessible to nonspecialist readers. But untranslated phrases and sentences in German also appear with some frequency, sometimes even in the body text. And much is taken for granted about trends within New Testament scholarship. The ideal reader therefore seems to be someone who knows some German and little to no Greek and Hebrew, but who is also familiar with significant developments in scholarship on the New Testament.

The merits of the book are still real, particularly in the moments when it brings together Christian, Jewish, and Greco-Roman sources on the topic of divine ontology. Bird succeeds in demonstrating that the divinity of Jesus needs to be problematized, and that Christian interest in divine ontology was already present in the first century.

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doi:10.1017/S0009640723003402

***The Cambridge Companion to the Apostolic Fathers.*** Edited by Michael F. Bird and Scott D. Harrower. Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xiv + 372 pp. \$34.99 paper.

This "companion" to the "intriguing" and "enigmatic" "para-apostolic and post-apostolic" collection of writings known as the "Apostolic Fathers" (AF) is one of the