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Bremmer's "Maidens, magic and martyrs in early Christianity" (book review)

Cynthia Hammell

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Book Reviews



Bremmer, J. (2017). *Maidens, magic and martyrs in early Christianity*. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck. 501pp. \$175.00. ISBN 9783161544507

This book of scholarly essays on non-canonical Early Christian writings, by Jan Bremmer, “Emeritus Professor of Religious studies at the University of Groningen (Germany),” encompasses some of his research on the *Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, the *Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thelca (a woman)*, *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* and others. He compares their narrative styles of these “Acts” and their views of life in the first centuries of Christianity, with other classical and historical texts. At that time, they did not always call themselves Christians, according to Bremmer, “other names, such as ‘the Way,’ ‘the believers,’ ‘the saints,’ or ‘God’s people,’ were more popular in the first two centuries” (p. 7). He notes that the Christian community included people of different social ranks, and a great number of women. According to Bremmer, “Membership of the Christian community...seems to have enabled rich women to be heard and to participate in meaningful intellectual discussions” (p. 37). There was also charity offered to widows and orphans. The scriptural epistles of Paul also gave freedom for people to remain single, though that was not an option for everyone.

The author also discusses the differences in the narratives, between miracles and “magic.” The most notorious magician named is “Simon Magus.”

Bremmer also studies texts about martyrs from this period. An example of this literature is the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitas*, which documents the martyrdom of Perpetua and “Felicity,” two young woman converts from North Africa. Bremmer looks at the motivation of the martyrs, their love for Jesus, their support from fellow Christians, and the promise of eternal life.

To determine what these early Christians believed about the afterlife, Bremmer also examines a type of literature called the “Apocalypses,” some of which are also attributed to Peter and Paul, along with similar writings. The sins named that those in hell are being punished for, differ somewhat. The visions of heaven are similar, showing an Eden-like place, full of light, verdant and fragrant, having pure sources of water.

This book is a difficult read for a lay person. I would recommend it most to institutions with a large church history or classics department.

Reviewer

Cynthia Hammell