
Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions
edited by Raʿanan S. Boustán and Annette Yoshiko Reed

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Warm praise for the genesis of this volume. From the editors' preface [vii], it began in a 'collaborative effort aimed at bringing together relatively unseasoned scholars—that is, graduate students—and their more experienced counterparts in an environment conducive to interdisciplinary research'. More precisely [vii–viii], in a weekly seminar culminating in a public symposium in January 2001. As a (relatively) senior scholar himself, the reviewer has experienced the enormous stimulation of youthful enthusiasm and willingness to question accepted traditions, and likewise his own enthusiasm at imparting the breadth of the long experience of living with those traditions. Prospective readers can be assured of no obvious differentiation in quality, however measured, between the two groups; put differently, one could never distinguish between 'senior' and 'junior' if the essays were anonymous.

A caveat for readers and reviewers. The essays *in toto* range generously over Mediterranean antiquity. Few will possess all the languages and scholarship to attend equally to the details of all essays. That would require, at the least, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Syriac. A majority of the essays involve texts in Greek and Latin, but classicists should not be complacent—few of us could claim equal comfort levels with, say, the didactic poetry of Manilius, the Greek magical papyri, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and Gregory Nazianzus. Thankfully, the essays' generous quotations from the ancient texts appear with translations, enabling basic reading and comprehension for all. But those relying on the translations will consequently be unequipped to enter fully into critical dialogue with scholarship involving those languages. Since I am a classicist by training and occupation, my review

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will devolve principally on the languages and scholarship germane to that discipline.

Begin with the jacket blurb:

A poignant sense of the relevance of heavenly realms for earthly life can be found not only in Judaism and Christianity but also in Graeco-Roman religious, philosophical, scientific, and ‘magical’ traditions.

First there are the H-words (‘heaven’, ‘heavenly’) and Greco-Roman polytheism. It is not idle pedantry to insist that these H-words did not exist inside that latter system, because neither did the concept; in addition, all know that the Judaeo-Christian tradition took matters in a rather different direction. That is precisely the point: the H-words are explicitly Judaeo-Christianizing concepts with a significant contemporary semantic load and thus they can become misleading ‘background noise’ in the evaluation of the Greco-Roman traditions.¹

Fritz Graf in ‘The Bridge and the Ladder: Narrow Passages in Late Antique Visions’ [19–33] squarely confronts the H-word issue *via* his felicitously accurate and laudably non-judgmental phrase ‘the Beyond’. Indeed, even though his essay devolves on movement to the Beyond, its opening pages [19–21] merit everyone’s close re-reading; none should ever again conflate the Greco-Roman Beyond with the Judaeo-Christian Beyond. I would offer the friendly addition of Achilles’ famous reply to Odysseus in the underworld book of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Achilles is in the Elysian fields; Odysseus marvels that here, just as in life, Achilles is a king [*Od.* 11.484–486], to which the ever suave Achilles ripostes [11.488–491] that he would rather be the most miserably poor mortal on earth than a king in the underworld. Graf also provides a valuable differentiation of the ways one got to the Beyond. In the Greco-Roman tradition one ‘simply walked from here to there’ [27], although that often meant some unusual transportation circumstances such as a journey to the edge of the earth (Odysseus) or a Sibyl as companion (Aeneas). But in the Christian tradition one simply got there [27]: ‘our world and the

¹ For example, Liddell, Scott, and Jones 1968, *s.v.* οὐράνιος and οὐρανός, gives, respectively ‘heavenly, dwelling in heaven’ and ‘heaven: in Hom. and Hes.’ with ‘heaven, as the seat of the gods, outside or above this skyey vault, the portion of Zeus’. Thanks to my spouse, Linda Henry, for calling this to my attention.

world beyond are much too different to share simple contiguity.’ Note in passing the radical contrast between Christian and non-Christian movement. Put baldly, for the former, good people go up; bad people go down. As for the latter, good people do not go up, with very rare exceptions such as Hercules; and note that even Homer seems unclear whether or not he ascended [*Od.* 11.601–604]. The new gods of the Roman imperial cult likewise seem not to have gone up: one will fruitlessly search for claims such as ‘the deceased Caesar, seated at the right hand of Jupiter’. The good, when their movement is discussed at all, descend, sometimes to the Elysian fields; but sometimes, as in the Greek hero cult, they seem to stay on earth or just under it (Oedipus at Colonus).² As for the pre-existing gods, all knew that Zeus inhabited Olympus; but Baucis and Philemon knew him as dinner company [Ovid, *Met.* 8.618–724], while Homer’s Poseidon can be missed at an assembly of the Olympians [*Od.* 1.19–27], and seems to spend far more time in the sea than on Olympus. Of course, the gods came to earth rather less frequently in historical Greco-Roman polytheism than in the ‘good old days’ of the mythic heroes [*Od.* 7.201–205; Vergil, *Ecl.* 4.15–16]. But come they did in recognizable physical form. By obvious contrast, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Divinity appears sporadically (Pentecost) and sometimes in rather non-anthropomorphic guise (Burning Bush).

Like all of Greco-Roman religious knowledge, the location and population of the Beyond is of a different order than Judaeo-Christian religious knowledge, although only Graf and Johnston [*infra*] seem especially cognizant of it. Likewise the vexed issue of the relation between religion and ‘magic’. Moderns, and their immediate predecessors, consider this a non-issue. Magic for them is bad science or bad religion or both. Or, slightly more charitably as it was put in the 19th century, magic is where ‘primitives’ with their allegedly muddled childlike thinking begin, from which they ought to evolve either to religion or science. And, on that view, the religion was Christianity, usually the Protestant version. Scholarship in recent decades, my own included, has challenged those views; but it remains passing strange

² There exists no clearer example than the hero cults of Attica [see Kearns 1989]. Likewise the many tombstone inscriptions which imply some manner of localized presence of, or concern by, the deceased.

that many who ought to know better still hold those views, albeit expressing them more diplomatically. The contrary view would observe that there never existed any general legal definition of magic in classical antiquity, that anything theological you did which I disliked I could then call magic and invoke appropriate secular and sacred sanctions. Magic thus constituted a term of practical polemic, a relative and judgmental term in a Greco-Roman polytheistic world where any number of cults and theologies existed, all without any obligation on anyone to participate. In short, fluidity and permeability.

Christianity, by contrast, set sharp boundaries as a strategy of self-definition, both from Judaism (the whole sad *adversus Judaeos* tradition) and also from polytheism: for Christians, the polytheists' divinities were either demons, that is, connected with magic, or delusions. And in a Judaeo-Christian scholarly tradition that view became, and sadly remains, normative. I mention these issues at length because, although they are mercifully absent from Christopher Faraone's 'The Collapse of Celestial and Chthonic Realms in a Late Antique "Apollonian Invocation" (*PGM* I 262–347)' [213–232], readers should be aware of them. Few know the evidence for ancient magic as well as Faraone, and none better. He powerfully shows the lack of boundaries inside Greco-Roman polytheism, using a text from the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* involving Apollo and necromancy. He examines the Olympian and the Chthonian, with special emphasis on the latter. Scholarship has tended either to throw up its collective hands in despair of ever plumbing the basic distinction, or else to take refuge in the facile equation of Chthonian with the underworld and magic. How could an Olympian divinity be involved in an underworld-based ritual? The explanation, briefly discussed *supra*, becomes 'Easily. Magic is bad religion.' Faraone provides valuable background to such considerations [214–224], while his discussion points out precisely that the necromantic ritual collapses the distinction. He invokes an excellent *adunaton* (impossibility) for the earlier Greek traditions, namely Helios' considering sinking into the underworld in shame [*Od.* 12.382–3], which becomes possible once necromantic ritual redefines the boundaries of the two realms and makes the theologically impossible the possible. I only regret that his superb essay, while diplomatically and modestly shunning scholarly polemic, does not give a hint as to how much stale conceptual baggage it rightly consigns to the garbage heap.

So for the ‘Heavenly Realms’ part of the book’s title. The ‘Earthly Realities’ part of the title gives pause. Earthly realities mean non-religious knowledge, the day-to-day secular knowledge which obviously plays an important role in constructing information about, and images of, the Beyond. We have already seen the role of travelers’ tales, but I focus here on the physically material. For example, today we call quantum physics a part of science; and yet the ancient figure associated strongly with atomism, Democritus, in his some sixty works wrote on topics as diverse as ‘Those in Hades’ and ‘Ethical Notes’. Compare the earliest known Greek philosopher, Thales, who reportedly had astronomical interests, apparently dabbled in practical mathematics [Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* 1.27] and remarked that ‘all things are full of gods’ [Aristotle, *De anima* 411a7–8]. Aristotle might be taken as the pre-eminent ancient scientist; and yet we must balance his preserved biological treatises against his important writings on philosophy, logic, aesthetics, and political science. That is, the boundaries between ancient science and religion ran rather differently than they do in the modern world and, indeed, it is arguable whether the ancients even recognized such boundaries. This very diversity provides the answer to why Democritus’ atomism never took hold the way quantum physics, say, has today [see Milton 2002]. Material knowledge was fragmented.

Those who investigated physical phenomena labored under what must seem today crushing burdens. First, their observations and theories could not be as widely propagated as they are now. Thus, for example, while there was something approaching agreement on the names and origins of the major winds, there existed a plethora of claims from various locations for individual local winds, claims examined by scholars as different as the philologist Callimachus and the scientist-philosopher Aristotle.³ Second, there existed only one broad explanatory strategy, which treated religion and science as a continuum rather than as two intellectual endeavors lacking interpenetration, as many today, with varying amounts of correctness and error, suppose. Third, there was a strong agonistic component, where disputes among physical theorists kept their eyes from any alternative explanatory strategy, the more so because their disputes

³ Phillips 2003 gives a selection of references.

lay with the particular rather than the general: one has only to consider the various medical schools and the understanding of the choice (*haireisis*) between them.⁴ That is, an almost obsessive attention to particular doctrinal differences often precluded concern to delineate the theoretical boundaries between science and other activities [see esp. Lloyd 1983, 1987]. Fourth, an underlying mathematical basis would be required to produce any sort of unified alternative way of explaining things; and the ancient mathematicians, though there were a few notable exceptions, tended to constitute a closed group that was not interested in the implications of their work for those investigating physical phenomena [cf. Netz 2002, 200–201, 215–216]. Fifth, observation from signs had its ultimate roots in divination; and in the absence of wholly physical, causal accounts of material processes, there would always be a religious component: for all their physical and theoretical observations, the Stoics and Epicureans remained in divinity's sway, albeit in some cases a distant and relatively marginalized divinity. Sixth, and finally, there is the issue of language; without a mathematical basis (fourth point, *supra*) investigators were inevitably mired in the inherent imprecision of ordinary speech, a point Gadamer has made both powerfully and evocatively:

Greek knowledge. . . was so much within language, so exposed to its seductions, that its fight against the *dunamis ton onomaton* ['power of words'] never led to the evolution of the ideal of a pure sign language, whose purpose would be to overcome entirely the power of language, as is the case with modern science and its orientation towards the domination of the existent. [Gadamer 1975, 413].

Let us consider some particular cases. The author of the pseudo-Aristotelian *De mundo* concludes with the assertion [400a] that the phenomena never reach the abode of divinity, buttressing this claim with a passage from Homer [*Od.* 6.42–45]. Further, compare *Od.* 4.561–569 with the aforementioned passage in the *Odyssey* about Achilles which locates the hero in the underworld and concerns a paradisaical place that will receive Menelaus after his death. Homer merely locates it at the ends of the earth, while Hesiod [*Op.* 171] makes the place into the Isles of the Blessed; but it is impossible to

⁴ See von Staden 1982: the Hippocratic works *On the Sacred Disease* and *Airs, Waters, Places* address the issue of choice explicitly.

determine why Achilles has gone to one place while Menelaus will go to a different place. Or consider Stoicism and Epicureanism. On the Stoic view, if various elements of traditional mythologies are reinterpreted cosmologically, then the concept of a divine abode (as humans understand ‘abode’) becomes conceptually liquidated. On some Epicurean views, the gods dwell in the empty spaces of the universe (*intermundia*: Cicero, *Nat. deor.* 1.18 with Obbink 1996, 8n1]; but while this sort of intermundial space preserves an abode for the gods, it does so on terms which do not admit physical demonstration, let alone conceptualization.

Overall, the Greco-Roman mythological and philosophical systems offered knowledge both fluid and fragmented without any universally accepted empirical basis. Thus, Tartarus is as far below Hades as sky is from earth [Homer, *Il.* 8.13–17], a distance it took Hephaestus a day to cover in free fall [*Il.* 1.592–593], a year for a man [Hesiod, *Theog.* 740–743] but nine days for an anvil [*Theog.* 724–725]; whereas the heavenly city after the Last Judgment is 12,000 furlongs square [*Rev.* 21.16]. This information is either traditional or allegedly divinely revealed; in neither case is it empirical. Moreover, there existed no agreement on the precise denizens of Tartarus. For Hesiod, Tartarus contains the Titans and Hundred-Handers [*Theog.* 711–819]. Mere mortals guilty of hubris were not consigned to Tartarus; indeed, for Homer, Odysseus can glimpse Tityos, Tantalus, and Sisyphus [*Od.* 11.576–600]. But by the fifth century, Tartarus was conceived as a place for all the hybriatic, giants and mortals alike [Aeschylus, *Prometh.* 152–159; Plato, *Gorg.* 523b]; and thus Odysseus would not have been able to view Tityos and the others, as Hesiod and Homer would have it. Overall, then, there were neither the empirical means to calculate the location of the Beyond, nor was there agreement on who was where among the various parts of the Beyond.⁵ Looming over all of this was the notion that Divinity was connected with geographic locations as mortals conceived such locations—the Epicurean intermundial spaces received scant currency outside that group. Epicureanism, like Stoicism, was a philosophical preoccupation of the socio-economic elite; and given the limited literacy in

⁵ I note as a point of interest that the greatest concern in antiquity devolved precisely on punishments for wrongdoers; there exists far less detailed evidence about the locations for the posthumous rewards of the virtuous.

classical antiquity, its ideas propagated beyond the small circle of adepts unsystematically and only at the most general level. That is, the idea of a Beyond was fractioned among the conditions of literacy and the traditions of knowledge; and all represent parts of a single self-confirming system predicated on religious, that is anti-naturalistic, postulates. There existed no uniform tradition, and no hope of one. Thus, I would supplement Gadamer's observation in the previous paragraph with the remark that none of the ancient speculations could provide itself with empirical support qualitatively able to win converts to its view.

This is not to say that every essay should delve into ancient science even at the modest length I have just indicated. But I must complain that no essay seems obviously aware of it. Ancients could debate the location of the Beyond, how one got there, what entitled one to get there, but always from the perspective of religion. Closest to awareness is Katharina Volk's "Heavenly Steps": Manilius, *Astron.* 4.119–121 and Its Background' [34–46]. As an examination of the imagery, as a piece of textual analysis, the essay is excellent; thus she uses, rather than kowtows to, Houseman's famous edition. But in that Manilius employs astronomical information about the heavens, the passage cries out for consideration of the technical context, such as what Manilius could have known and what he appropriated from the possibilities. I would not single out an otherwise excellent essay but rather use it as example *pars pro toto*. Again, consider briefly a section in Susanna Elm's "O Paradoxical Fusion!": Gregory of Nazianzus on Baptism and Cosmology (*Orations* 38–40)' on Gregory's 'terminology of light' [296–315, at 305–306]. What is the relation between Gregory's ruminations on the relation of God and light to what could be known of light at the time? Certainly issues of light and optics had interested more than one ancient scientist—Euclid and Ptolemy come immediately to mind. Equally important, what was the status of Christian *paideia* at the time with regard to such work, and does Gregory agree with it? Finally, take the title's quotation 'O paradoxical fusion' [*Orat.* 38.13]. What does Gregory mean by 'paradoxical' (παράδοξος)? The ancient scientists never use παράδοξος in the modern sense, but rather in the same sense as non-technical authors, namely, as 'remarkable'. A superior athlete can be παράδοξος, and Apollonius of Perga uses it of geometric proofs in his *Conica* [Heiberg 1891–1893, 1.4.10], a usage that is clearly not in

the modern sense! Rather, when the logicians had to express what moderns would call ‘paradoxical’, they used ἀδύνατον (‘impossible’). Elm’s deftly close reading of her text becomes compromised by her apparent lack of attention to non-Christian Greek.

Of course, ancient science constitutes a notoriously difficult subject for those classicists who have not specialized in it. But there exists another perspective, also absent, for which the excuse is less good, that of history. Graf’s aforementioned essay certainly considers it, and so do two others: Kirsti B. Copeland, ‘The Earthly Monastery and the Transformation of the Heavenly City in Late Antique Egypt’ [142–158] and Jan Bremmer, ‘Contextualizing Heaven in Third-Century North Africa’ [159–173]. Copeland’s subsection [152–158] on the connection between the monastery and heavenly Jerusalem raises the larger context of contemporary socio-historical events. She utilizes the *History of the Monks in Egypt* [152] aptly, but treats it as a disembodied document. Distortion ensues: it matters that the same work provides evidence of the monks’ destruction of the polytheists’ temples [*History* 5.2–4], part of a changing relation between Christianity and polytheism that was conditioned in no small part by historical circumstances; elsewhere there exists even more evidence for the monks’ destruction of polytheists’ temples. Bremmer’s use of unsubstantiated or wrong historical claims unfortunately undermines a well-conceived attempt to yoke the religious and the historical. He observes [160] that ‘Christian North Africa, compared with other areas of the Roman Empire, was unusually interested in visions. . . .’ Where is the evidence both for the claim and the comparison? To make such a claim is much like claiming that the fourth century AD was unusually prone to magic by citing the frequency of references to magic in Ammianus Marcellinus. Again, Bremmer rightly begins his essay with the unexceptionable and important assertion [159] that ‘heaven was no issue’ for the initial followers of Jesus. All expected the millennium in the very near future. But he then indicates that later in the first century matters became different. Jesus’ return and the millennium were delayed, ‘yet the persecutions required an elaboration of the afterlife’ [159] to compensate. It is true that heavenly visions appear in various martyr-acts, but that is after the fact. Put differently, there exists no evidence that visions such as Perpetua’s represented any sort of doctrine of heaven [169, quoting *Passio Perpet.* 8]; in any case, a far better example would have been

Saturus' vision [*Passio* 11] of a heavenly garden. But I must complain vigorously about the assertion that the persecutions caused this. There simply were not that many in the first century—Nero's persecution is provable and miniscule, Domitian's is bogus—and Christian numbers were too few.⁶ Finally, Sarah Johnston's otherwise superb 'Working Overtime in the Afterlife; or, No Rest for the Virtuous' [85–100] tells us [89] that Alexander the Great had been declared a god. It is true that there exist three circumstances which indicate some interest in godhood: the Oracle of Zeus-Ammon, the affair of Bactria-Sogdiana, and the alleged 'deification decree'. But even a cursory look at the voluminous Alexander scholarship reveals that the deification is far from proven, that many Alexander specialists indeed categorically reject it. That is, while I commend efforts to get outside of the text-based readings that many of these essays offer, those who do, more often than not, tend to rely on common misconceptions combined with inattention to detail. Only Graf and Faraone have done otherwise; would that their colleagues in this volume, junior and senior alike, had attended their example. For everyone except Graf and Faraone, Greco-Roman polytheism and Christianity are monoliths. For Christianity, there is no hint in any essay of the extraordinary variety of early Christian doctrines, the use of 'heresy' as a polemical term by the various competing groups, and the late and compromised arrival of the concept of orthodoxy. As for Greco-Roman polytheism, the impossibility of defining, say, Roman *religio* or Greek *deisidaimonia*, both usually and totally inadequately rendered in English as 'religion' and 'superstition', appears more honored in the breach than the observance.⁷ In both cases, unquestioningly conceptualizing ancient knowledge as monolithic wholes variously compromises the many fine specific points made in each essay.

This is not a bad book. Quite the contrary. It is good to have such a rich collection of uniformly strong essays so attentive to the texts of the diverse cultures and religions of classical antiquity. It is good, too, to promote intellectual interaction between junior and senior scholars. But it is not good to see widespread avoidance of ancient science, *pace* the jacket blurb, and the implications, or lack

⁶ See, respectively, Frend 1967, 156–162 and Hopkins 1998.

⁷ See, respectively, Latte 1960, 38–41 and Martin 2004.

thereof, of ancient science. It is right, of course, to attempt sympathetically to enter into the ancients' mindset. But *passim* I receive the distinct impression of belles-lettres, of relentless analysis of the texts (fine) absent concern for the physical realities (not so fine) and conceptions of those realities in the world from which those texts originated—in short, that the heavenly realms are in place and the earthly realities are left to take care of themselves. Put less charitably, after reading the current volume it is all too easy to ask 'So what?' 'Earthly Realities' will not be banished so easily.

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