

Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas, eds. *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011. viii + 368 pp. ISBN: 978-3-16-150644-4. Cloth €109. ISBN 978-3-16-151859-1. eBook PDF €109,00

The title of *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* leaves more to the imagination than one might suppose at first glance, given the vast and fascinating terrain it seeks to map. The book is a set of revised papers from a conference held at Princeton University in 2007, supplemented by additional solicited essays. The studies contained therein tackle the themes in question across a diversity of sources—ancient Jewish and Christian, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Rabbinic, apocalyptic, Zoroastrian, and Islamic—extending from roughly the last centuries BCE to the beginning of the second millennium CE. (The volume’s title is thus a bit misleading on this point, to its detriment, since the collection is a fine example in the virtues of taking a look not at “late antiquity”—usually construed as third–seventh centuries CE—but, roughly, the entire first millennium CE.)¹ The roster of contributors strikes a healthy balance between established, senior voices and a veritable “who’s-who” of younger scholars who trained at (and, in several cases, now serve on the faculties of) elite North American universities.

The essays are arranged in loose chronological order, beginning with the Enochic literature and Graeco-Roman and Christian sources of the second–fourth centuries, before proceeding to Rabbinic, Zoroastrian, and Islamic materials. The editors, Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas, open the volume with a useful *status quaestionis* on prophecy and revelation in late ancient religion—an essay itself worthy of examination and reference, unlike many introductions to *Sammelbände*—before declaring the volume’s goal to be examination of “the contrast between revelation and human artifact and the connection between revelation and historiography.” (13)

Anne Yoshiko Reed examines how “models from biblical prophecy may have shaped the depiction of revelation” throughout the various works which comprise *1 Enoch*, as well as the reception of these works and the figure of Enoch more widely in late ancient Jewish and Christian literature (27). While “the image of Enoch as prophet seems to have taken shape particularly in

¹ See e.g. Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

the second to third centuries C.E.” amongst Christians, (38) it is an image which would enjoy “vibrant afterlives in Manichaeism and Islam,” but not late antique Judaism, which saw him “not as a prophet, but rather—yet again—as a scribe.” (40) Christine Trevett surveys early Christian evidence pertaining to the economics surrounding prophetic activity, particularly as regards the New Prophecy, which made provisions for its itinerant prophets as well as its settled leaders (63). In doing so, “the New Prophets were reviving and developing a practice with which some Christians of earlier generations would have been familiar.” (58) Pavlos Avlamis examines the sociohistorical and literary dynamics informing the epiphany of Isis in the *Life of Aesop*, where the goddess appears “as the exotic force of adventure-time” as a challenge to elite, Hellenic institutions represented in the novel by Apollo, opening “possibilities of a double vision for Greek eyes, and for a narrative that reflects upon the everyday and the ubiquitous through the fantasy of the outsider.” (93, 101)

Meanwhile, John D. Turner looks at the use of revelatory language to describe the achievement of a state of “learned ignorance” in the Platonizing Sethian apocalypse *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3). Turner believes this language to reflect not only literary artifice, but “a genuine description of a psychological experience” on the part of the text’s author (114). Gregory Shaw tackles the “dual reference” of divine and profane “realized through revelatory experience... described by Platonists of late antiquity,” particularly Iamblichus of Chalcis in his famous exposition of theurgy, *On the Mysteries* (118). Iamblichus, Shaw finds, is not simply concerned with abstruse metaphysics or ritual theory, but the mechanics and experience of revelation, which, encountered in the realms of embodiment, “must begin with our wounds” and traumas, as explicated in Orphic myth (129; also 121–22). Daniel L. Schwartz shows how fourth-century Christian liturgical discourse, despite great “emphasis on secrecy and the revelation of secrets” suggests “that the ideal of secrecy was not rigorously maintained.” (132; similarly, 141) “Precisely because the *disciplina arcani* was in many ways an open secret, the emphasis could not be on the conveyance of information,” but a sense of community (151). Eduard Iricinschi analyzes the anti-Manichaean writings of Augustine of Hippo, who “draws the picture of two conflicting book cultures, one Manichaean and the other one Christian, articulated by two different cosmologies, yet whose points of contentions revolve around ways of reading and interpreting the Bible.” (175)

Moving into a ‘late’ Late Antiquity, Azzan Yadin-Israel takes up the Rabbinic hero Rabbi Aqiva, addressing “the dramatic difference in the way Rabbi Aquiva’s midrash is represented in tannaitic versus post-tannaitic sources... The familiar

portrait of Rabbi Aqiva as a brilliant interpreter of Scripture is only attested in the latter. Tannaitic sources, in contrast, represent Rabbi Aqiva as...committed to the priority of extra-scriptural traditions.” (178; also 207) Ironically, Yadin-Israel suggests, it is “precisely Rabbi Aqiva’s loose allegiance to Scripture in the tannaitic sources that (at least in part) paves the way” for his later reputation as a master of Scripture (215). Martha Himmelfarb shows how the early Medieval apocalypses *Sefer Zerubbabel* and *Sefer Eliyyahu* “take a significantly different approach to the process of revelation and to the eschatological scenario revealed” than one finds in earlier apocalyptic literature (220), outlining new prospects for research on both texts (235–36). Examining the famous motif of four-world ages—with the fourth characterized by mixture and iron (e.g. Dan 2:43)—Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina demonstrates that “in the Pahlavi texts this literary-historical schema is mobilized in characteristically Zoroastrian ways which, while sharing certain striking similarities with Hesiod and Daniel, are...best understood by examining their use of apocalyptic rhetoric”—i.e., reading the Pahlavi texts on their own terms and with reference to the struggles and concerns of their authors and intended audience (238, 267–68).

The volume concludes with two particularly strong essays concerning the arrival in the Near East of the new revelation of Islam. Michael Pregill offers a “prolegomena” to a “comparative prophetology” across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in late antiquity (272, 313) by way of reviewing the exegeses of 1 Kings 22 concocted by Araham Ibn Ezra (d. 1164) and Bar Penkâyē (late 7th cent. CE). What he finds is that Islamic discourse about prophecy—and Jewish and Christian responses to it—have “authentically pre-Islamic roots,” and therefore “Jewish and Christian interest in prophecy” following the rise of Islam “should not be considered an exclusively post-Islamic phenomenon,” but a part of the expansion of Torah to “a widespread, almost ubiquitous, touchstone of religious identity and communal organization.” (298–99, 273) Patricia Crone[†] seeks “to identify what the so-called polytheists (*musbrikūn*) in the Qur’an took a messenger from God to be.” (316) By way of incisive exegesis with attention to Jewish and Christian biblical and parabiblical traditions, Crone demonstrates that the polytheists “were, or at least included followers of Moses” who believed (as did the author of the Moses Apocryphon [4Q377] and some Rabbinic writers) that God Himself had appeared to Moses and the Israelites at Sinai, and that revelatory knowledge was acquired via ascent, rather than transmitted downwards, despite Muhammad’s claim to the latter (327–28, 331–33). Rather than simply identifying the polytheists as “Jewish” or “Christian,” Crone closes the article (and volume) appropriately by calling for

historians to “map the theological landscape of the Near East at the time of the rise of Islam” with reference to more “diverse possibilities with reference to the pre-Qur’anic literature.” (336)

The essays are for the most part well-written and incisive; editorial quality is high, with typos mostly confined to two essays. The contributions’ overall strength and coherence as a group lend *Revelation, Literature, and Community* a value exceeding the sum of its parts, particularly for specialists in the religions of the late ancient/first-millennium Mediterranean. The present reviewer was especially struck by essays that successfully juggled Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources alike in mapping out trajectories of revelatory literature and claims (e.g. Reed, Pregill, Crone), and the continued relevance (despite criticisms and re-tooling) of Max Weber’s old model of charismatic and rationalized leadership in religious communities (highlighted by Trevett, 52). There is little to quibble with in terms of presentation, although it is worth noting that several of the essays will be nigh-impenetrable to non-specialists (e.g. Yadin-Israel); nonetheless, most take pains to achieve readability beyond the confines of their field (Shaw, Turner, and Vevaina, writing with relative distance from Biblical Studies, excel here).

Readers of *Correspondences* might ask if the papers are relevant to the study of esotericism. They are—although they do not engage with scholarship on ‘Western esotericism’—insofar as their explorations of revelation necessarily entail the study of secrecy and concealment (as recognized by Schwartz, 132). Therefore the volume (however inadvertently) may join other useful collections of studies of secrecy, revelation, and esotericism in the *History of Religions*.² The significance of this literature for students of esotericism is difficult to miss. Indeed, the very fact that a set of papers on revelation in the first millennium CE necessarily veers into the realms of apocalyptic, visionary, Gnostic, and Neoplatonic literature—*without at all having set out to look at ‘mysticism’ or ‘esotericism’*—should indicate the central importance that the dynamic of secrecy and revelation holds for any construal of ‘esotericism’

² E.g., Hans Kippenberg and Guy G. Stoumsa, eds., *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, eds., *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Syracuse: SUNY Press, 1997); Christian H. Bull, Liv Ingeborg Lied and John D. Turner, eds., *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices. Studies for Einar Thomassen at Sixty* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); April D. DeConick and Grant Adamson, eds., *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions* (Durham/Bristol: Acumen, 2013); Caroline Vander Stichele and Susanne Scholz, eds., *Hidden Truths from Eden: Esoteric Readings of Genesis 1–3* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

as a second-order term. Conversely, the volume's wealth of meditation upon the interface of revelatory phenomena with the delineation of new religious communities should prove useful for those interested in the sorts of problems raised by claims made with reference to otherworldly authority. The greater confluence of revelatory claims and the various currents scholars have attempted to understand by recourse to the construct of 'esotericism' awaits thorough exploration, but the present volume offers many hints as to where such an investigation should begin. *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* thus proves to be an excellent body of studies that will interest scholars of Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam in the first millennium CE, and proves relevant and insightful reading for students of Gnosticism, mysticism, and esotericism, however these terms may be defined.

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