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Herodotus and Religion in the Persian Wars by Jon D. Mikalson

Review by: Rosaria Vignolo Munson

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JON D. MIKALSON. *Herodotus and Religion in the Persian Wars*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. xiv + 269 pp. 5 maps. Cloth, \$45.

One should pay attention to the title of this book. It is not primarily intended as a study of religion in Herodotus, like Lachenaud (1978), Harrison (2000), and others, to whom Mikalson gives due credit throughout, but rather as an exploration of Greek religious practices and attitudes in a specific historical context. Herodotus is, evidently, our main source and an especially illuminating one because, says Mikalson, his approach to religion is less bound to the conventions of a particular genre than that of epic poets, tragedians, or even, for different reasons, Thucydides, who tends to exclude religion from his account. At the same time, Herodotus' religious views are in great part not peculiar to him but probably shared by many of his contemporaries.

On this last point Mikalson agrees with Harrison, as he also does when he maintains that scholars have frequently underestimated the importance of religion in Herodotus' history. Religious causes and motivations represent, to be sure, only one level of explanation among several others that Herodotus uses. But they are important, and the supplementary sources on the topic (especially the later authors Plutarch, Pausanias, and Diodorus Siculus) uncover no evidence that Herodotus exaggerated general Greek notions about the role of the gods in the Persian Wars or the number and prominence of cultic acts connected with these events.

The book is composed of three chapters. Chapter 1 is entitled "A Religious account of the Persian Invasions." Chapter 2, "Greek Gods, Heroes and the Divine in the Persian Invasions," discusses the role of individual divine figures. With chapter 3, "Some Religious Beliefs and Attitudes of Herodotus," the focus shifts from Herodotus as a major source for Greek religion to Herodotus' own views about the gods and their cult. This approach continues in the Appendix, "Herodotus on the Origins of Greek Religion," which provides a welcome and lucid examination of the more scholarly side of Herodotus' religious thought.

There is a considerable degree of overlap among the three chapters, and more space is devoted to summary and compilation than to analysis. The first and longest chapter (ninety-five pages, almost half the text of the book) is a history from the fall of the Pisistratids in Athens to the aftermath of the battle of Mycale that foregrounds all attested religious actions and events as well as the character utterances and authorial comments that mention the gods or the divine. It follows for the most part a chronological order (or, sometimes, the order of Herodotus' narrative), with an abundance of direct quotations and frequent spacing between paragraphs. The overall effect is somewhat fragmentary, and there is very little discussion of individual items. We would like to hear more, for example, about the earthquake of Delos, with Herodotus' extraordinary interpretation (and Thucydides' conflicting report), or the role of the Aeacidæ, who were ineffectual allies of the Thebans against the Athenians in 506 but helped the Greek coalition at Salamis (22–23, 77, 129–30).

Neither does Mikalson impose a logical order on the string of events, although his occasional syntheses along the way touch upon a number of general points. Most importantly, he argues that Herodotus treats religion in two different ways: in popular/cultic terms or, less frequently, according to the literary conventions of epic or tragedy (45–47). The latter form of discourse includes words such as *atasthalos*, “rash” (which Herodotus notably uses in lieu of the popular term *anosios*, “impious,” to describe Xerxes’ whipping of the Hellespont), dreams and monstrous omens as signs of misfortunes (41–44), pious prayers that are normally answered (47–49), and oracles that always come true. Conversely, the rejection of the literary conventions of epic helps to account for the fact that in Herodotus and other prose authors, as in artistic representations of battles of the Persian wars, divine intervention may feature the occasional epiphany of individual heroes but not of divinities (31, 36). Mikalson also generalizes that Greek prayers before a battle tend to ask not for victory but for a “fair fight” (29–30), and that Greek dedications to the gods after a victory never explicitly credit the divinity to whom the dedication is made but are rather memorials of human achievement (20, 71). These observations, however, are rather brief and scattered. The most useful function of Mikalson’s survey is rather to impress upon the reader the frequency of religious references in Herodotus’ narrative of the Persian Wars. Almost nothing happens that does not involve one or more omens, oracles, dreams, sacrifices, prayers, dedications, violations of sanctuaries or other acts of sacrilege, divine interventions, or someone’s explanation of a historical outcome or human behavior in religious terms. Inscriptions and later sources, especially Pausanias and Plutarch, complete this picture with information about war offerings, sacrifices, or festivals instituted after the major battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, Artemisium, Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale. Mikalson frequently quotes the relevant passages at length and includes endnotes that direct the reader to specialized articles on particular sites, artifacts, and rituals.

The second chapter surveys individual deities, detailing the contribution each made to the war efforts and the offerings that he, or she, received. Separate subchapters are devoted to Apollo, Zeus, and Poseidon—the three Panhellenic gods who received a share of the spoils from the Greeks as an international group—and also to Athena, Demeter, Artemis, Hera, Aphrodite, and heroes. Here the topic overlap between chapters begins to be a problem, because a great number of facts and source quotations found in the historical summary now reappear under a different mode of organization, listed separately for each god rather than cumulatively before or after each battle. There is no more analysis or interpretation than before, only additional information on the divinity in question, such as we find in Herodotus outside of his narrative of the Persian Wars. So, for example, the section on Delphic Apollo (114–21) lists the offerings by various Greeks after Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis, and Plataea, which have already been discussed earlier. What follows is a list of Herodotean passages about early Phrygian, Lydian, and Greek dedications to Delphi. The section on oracles groups together the various Delphic responses that were covered chronologically in the

historical survey. One misses, at least at this point, a more analytical assessment of the position of Delphi in the Persian Wars and of the attitude to Delphi on the part of contemporary Greeks. The problem oracles pose is less clear-cut than that of a choice between a “hasty” and a “thoughtful” interpretation of the divine word (56). Several passages in Herodotus, including his narrative about the oracles to the Athenians at Salamis and his own profession of faith in the veracity of oracles in general, arguably bear signs of external polemics. As Herodotus collects oracles throughout his *Histories*, he is also trying to come to terms with ambiguous oracles and to understand divine prescriptions along with their moral underpinnings. Mikalson does not problematize these issues. His emphasis is rather on the central and largely positive role of Delphi. As the evidence he cites shows, the Greeks regarded this sanctuary as a “focal point” of the resistance, from their oath before Xerxes’ invasion to their dedication to Apollo of a share of the spoils of victory at the end of the war.

Chapter 2 closes with a review of those passages in Herodotus’ narrative of the Persian Wars that mention “the divine,” “the god,” or “the gods.” This generalized terminology, besides indicating that no specific divinity appears clearly responsible for a given occurrence, also expresses the notion, discussed by Linforth (1928) in a fine passage that Mikalson quotes, of the essential solidarity of the “divine race.” This solidarity manifested itself during the Persian Wars in the alignment of all the gods and heroes on the Greek side. According to Mikalson, however, it does not seem to involve a unified concern for human justice in the broad sense. The gods’ primary motivation was rather “protecting their own sanctuaries and punishing the Persians for the violation of these. . . . Only the Greek gods already Panhellenic in cult, Zeus of Olympia, Poseidon of the Isthmus, and Apollo of Delphi, had concerns beyond their own sanctuary and property” (134–35).

Without belittling the importance of the burning of sanctuaries (“the dominant religious theme in Herodotus’ Persian Wars”), Mikalson’s exploration of the notion of “the divine” in the *Histories* seems a bit reductive, and one would like to know what are the other concerns he attributes at least to the Panhellenic gods. The answer comes in the third chapter, which purports to discuss Herodotus’ “personal religion”: how he views individual gods and the extent to which he believes in miracles, omens, oracles, and dreams—and, more broadly, in the intervention of the divine in human affairs. This chapter identifies a limited number of institutions, besides sanctuaries and other divine property, that Herodotus clearly thinks are under divine protection. These are the rights of asylum, oaths, *xenia*, and respect for the dead (142–43). Here Mikalson departs from Harrison who had argued (rightly, in the opinion of this reader) that Herodotus’ gods punish a broad range of unjust acts: the gods punish impiety, which is also a form of injustice, and not injustice *per se*.

This part of Mikalson’s discussion seems unconvincing because the relation between injustice and impiety in Herodotus is truly complex. The acts of sacrilege that trigger divine punishment (e.g., Miltiades’ violation of the sanctu-

ary of Demeter in Paros) tend to occur in the context of behavior (Miltiades' military aggression against Paros) that is immoral in a broader sense and that marks the individual, sooner or later, for destruction. Herodotus himself mentions ἀδικήματα as the inevitable cause of divine punishment for men (2.120.5). In an important interpretive passage (1.34.1), he even suggests that piety, in the most technical sense that Mikalson seems to give to the word, had nothing to do with the causes of the “*nemesis* from the gods” that caught up with Croesus. Mikalson does not discuss this second passage, but one guesses he may consider it as a not very important exception. As he says in this chapter (151), the word *nemesis*, like *atasthalia*, the notion of reversal of fortune, divine *phthonos*, or notions related to *hubris*, are elements of Herodotus' religious thought that derive from the poetic/literary tradition, according to the distinction established in chapter 1 (47). In Herodotus' narrative of later events, these literary motifs are secondary to the cultic side of religion (165).

This conclusion may not find everyone in agreement, but it reflects the emphasis of the study as a whole. In both chapter 3 and in the Appendix, Mikalson makes some illuminating remarks about Herodotus' broad and cosmopolitan attitude towards the divine. But his book focuses on cult, not on theodicy or theology, poetic or otherwise. For scholars who want to review the religious practices of the Greeks at the time of the Persian Wars, it will provide a useful resource.

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JOHN DILLON. *The Heirs of Plato: A Study of the Old Academy (347–274 B.C.)*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003. x + 252 pp. Cloth, \$65.

It may seem surprising that *The Heirs of Plato* can claim to be the “first book exclusively devoted to an in-depth study of the various directions taken by Plato's followers in the first seventy years or so following his death” (as, on the dust jacket, it does). But the explanation for this may lie in the fact that the ground was already to some extent covered in the first chapter of Dillon's *The Middle Platonists* (Duckworth 1977) and that Dillon himself was the obvious person to write the development of that material. The task is not as easy as it might seem. The evidence we have for Plato's immediate successors in the so-called “Old Academy” is rosy and second hand: to make something of it requires a knowledge not just of Plato, from whose work the developments of the Old Academy grew, and not just of Aristotle, who is the prime witness to its work (albeit at times a “wickedly misleading” one, 51); it also requires an understanding of Stoicism and the “New” Academy as schools born in full consciousness of Old Academic thought, and of the later Platonist revival as a movement which in