

J.P. DAVIES, **Rome's Religious History: Livy, Tacitus and Ammianus on their Gods.** Pp. 352. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. ISBN 0-521-83482-1. STG £55.00 (Hb).

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The Romans' attitude to their own religion was complex and often rather unsentimental. Consider the remarkable story told by Livy about the battle of Pydna, fought in 168BC against Perseus of Macedon. Calculations suggested that an eclipse would occur – a frightening occurrence in antiquity, at least most of the time. On this occasion the military tribune, C. Sulpicius Gallus, set out to minimise its importance. Addressing his men, he predicted the exact time of the eclipse, and explained that it was a perfectly natural occurrence. Reassured, the men lost none of their courage and went on to win their battle. Rome was clearly the winner – but was Roman religion the loser?

Jason P. Davies wants in part to refocus attention on these 'practical' problems of Roman religion, on the fact that the Romans 'used it' and that it must at times have appeared to fail them (pp. 9-10); and he promises to read the references to religion in these historians 'on the premise that they built up an image of religious systems as a whole, not by describing a system *ex nihilo* for outsiders' (p. 1). This is awkwardly put, but it is certainly useful to be reminded that our sources were rarely writing for posterity, but rather for readers with whom they shared a vast body of unstated –

and perhaps strictly unstatable – assumptions about their own society and the place of religion in it.

D.'s main aim, it seems, is to rescue his three canonical Latin historians (Livy, Tacitus and Ammianus Marcellinus) from the charge of 'scepticism' by asserting their explicit and comprehensive engagement with Roman religion throughout their histories. To this end he focuses above all on close readings of the major texts, mostly in order to demonstrate that their apparent dissatisfaction with some aspects of Roman religion can be seen as 'highly specific assessments, included to *advise* the reader on religious practices and to demonstrate the historian's expertise' (p. 27). Like Gallus, they chose at times to discriminate between events in which the gods were significantly involved and others in which their intervention was absent or unimportant; but, as D. points out, this is not to say that such an act of interpretation 'does away with the gods or their interest in human affairs' (p. 99). Apparent scepticism on the part of our historians about certain acts or interpretations need not be taken – and surely was not taken at the time – as a frontal assault on the religious tradition of their society.

This approach pays real dividends when applied to Livy, and especially to his treatment of the prodigies which necessarily loom large in any annalistic history. D. is wholly convincing in his demonstration that Livy's use of the verb *nuntiare* in reporting the occurrence of prodigies should not be assimilated to *oratio obliqua*, as a means of distancing the historian from events, but was rather the natural term for anyone wishing 'to make the city of Rome the *locus* of these announcements' (p. 33). Livy goes on to reject some prodigies and accept others, and D. is surely right to see this as underlining the rational and considered element in a Roman religion which could make such fine distinctions. This, for Livy as for Cicero, is what distinguished it from *superstitio* – 'an excessive tendency to see the gods at work' (p. 83). Superstition was the chaos of unlicensed interpretation; real, considered religion was what the priests and the senate did.

Some elements of this attitude to religion and superstition can be seen to have survived into Tacitus and Ammianus, most notably a recognition of the importance of prodigies and of the competence of the traditional authorities to interpret them. In the light of this tradition, Ammianus' comment on the two-headed child born at

Daphne in 360 emerges quite clearly as a lament for the decline of a public religion which might have made sense of such a grotesque occurrence (p. 237). Yet I find it hard to agree with D. that to regret the passing of the traditional state religion is to set oneself up as a partisan arguing for its return, and that this is a sign that Ammianus a 'pagan apologist' (p. 228). The 'structural differences' (p. 242) between Ammianus' version of Roman religion and that of Livy go beyond a change in emphasis or a recognition of the changed political situation, but represent, as D. ultimately agrees, 'a range of responses to complex and varied situations' (p. 232, quoting John Matthews). The argument that all this complexity must have been bounded entirely by the domain of traditional paganism, and that it necessarily involved a commitment to undermining Christianity, depends on seeing Ammianus' references to Christianity as isolated and unimportant – the precise approach that D. rejects, and rightly, with regard to paganism elsewhere. Ultimately it threatens to replace the unsatisfactory dichotomy of belief and scepticism with the even older, and even less useful, one of paganism and Christianity.

A similar eagerness to define religion as 'central to Tacitus' explanations' (p. 222) finally mars that chapter too, as D. ends up committing the historian to things that are kept firmly at a distance by Tacitus' irony and ambiguity (as in the famous passage at *Histories* 1.3.2). The presence of irony is no proof of scepticism, and it is fair to say that Tacitus often sees value in traditional religion; but D. provides little evidence to change the conventional view that Tacitus is concerned above all with fate, and all the various ways in which his characters understand it and deal with it. Vespasian indeed emerges as a hero, and arguably as Tacitus' ideal gentleman; but the historian's approval is in large part based on the emperor's unwillingness to commit himself to any consistent practice. Arguably Tacitus is recommending an ironic attitude to the gods and fate; but how much irony there is in the recommendation itself is unclear, and any attempt to pin Tacitus down can only look unsophisticated in comparison.

It must be admitted that the unpleasant note of self-congratulation that keeps creeping into D.'s prose doesn't help: despite the impression given in his introduction, historians are not as unfamiliar either with his ideas about historiography (which go back

at least to Collingwood) or with his approach to religion (which can be found in Malinowski). Part of the problem is the nature of modern scholarly publishing, in which every idea must be a whole new theory, and every study must be simultaneously groundbreaking and long-awaited. (Sadly, D.'s announcement that his own argument is 'not overdue' (p. 2) – an outbreak of modesty rare in any recent introduction – looks to be one of the publisher's dismayingly common proofing errors.) I happen to agree with D.'s overall approach, but his own knowledge of the history of Roman religion is not so wide as to allow him to dismiss the efforts of his predecessors as lightly as he does. His close readings are always stimulating and often valuable; his scorn for other scholars is unpleasant and unnecessary.

Still, he is most definitely to be applauded not only for taking the long view and including Ammianus, but also for replacing the search for historical factoids concerning Roman religion with an emphasis on 'the dynamic creation of identity and systems of meaning within [Roman] society' (p. 9). If he sometimes fails in his attempts to impose a singular vision, that is down to the intractable complexity of the problem. There is always more going on in a religious text than we can adequately summarise – to a large extent, that is what makes it a religious text. As Gallus found at the battle of Pydna, his expertise as an interpreter of nature only made him seem in touch with the divine himself, the scientist as a new kind of priest. And – as D. notes – the punchline was still to come. An eclipse traditionally foretold the death of a king; the defeat of Perseus had after all been foretold by the heavens. The moral here is worth remembering: in religion, we can all be right.