
This stimulating new work seeks to situate the post-resurrection transformations and/or unrecognizability of Jesus in early Christian texts against the background of Graeco-Roman literature and folklore. Exploring tales of metamorphosis and disguise amongst gods and men (chs. 2 & 3), Whitaker notes a broad distinction between stories about human heroes (classically Odysseus), whose eventual recognition (via tokens, physical features et sim.) constitutes an unexpected, often restorative reversal, and divine visitors (such as Athene), whose disguises primarily facilitate their efforts to assist or inform others (chs. 4 & 5). Finally (chs. 6 & 7), it is shown that Jesus stories display both patterns, depending on which of these two roles is to the fore, although in later post-canonical texts, the divine visitor model predominates.

Although metamorphosis occurs in the Hebrew Bible and influences some early Christian stories, attempting to situate the latter more broadly within Graeco-Roman tradition reflects other recent efforts to understand such material. The appeal to folklore avoids the need to press textual mediation too far, although Ovid and others do become important. It is nevertheless interesting that early Christians needed to adapt and sometimes strain traditional patterns to articulate their peculiar apologetic and Christological agendas. The short time that Jesus has been “away” makes his unrecognizability doubly enigmatic, implicating changed perception as much as form, revelation above mere recognition, and paving the way for the distinctive polymorphic appearances of the post-canonical texts. An important attempt to make sense of apparently disparate strands within Christian tradition and their subsequent development.

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