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Historians continue to explore the ever-pressing and deeply fascinating question of how a Jewish peasant came to be viewed as a god. Miller’s book presents one coherent answer to this question. Simply put, he argues that early Christians adapted the semiotic and literary tropes and conventions of deification that were ubiquitous in Mediterranean literature.

Miller’s work is significant because it offers a real theoretical advance in comparative studies. Models of simplistic borrowing are jettisoned in favor of a complex theory of literary mimesis. Such mimesis included both imitation and emulation. Christians adapted mainstream Hellenic and Roman imperial discourses in an attempt to secure their own legitimacy and cultural imperium. In short, both classical and Christian authors swam in a common ocean of cultural discourse, an ocean full of paradigmatic narratives and common ideals.

Miller has many ways of talking about this common ocean: it is a “shared conventional system” (16), an “underlying semiotic grammar or langue,” (32), “the dominant codes and structures of the Hellenistic world” (92), or “the common codes and conventions of the thought world of Hellenistic Roman culture” (100). In short, Miller offers a richly descriptive comparison in which two phenomena (Christian and Hellenic translation
fables) are compared in terms of one overarching middle term (the semiotic system of ancient Mediterranean literary culture). In making his comparisons, Miller expertly blends insights from postcolonial theory, structuralism, and poststructuralism into a “methodological repertoire” that he calls “linguistic and semiotic critical theory” (181). What follows is a brief overview of the book’s chapters.

Chapter 1 (“Justin’s Confession”) takes its cue from Justin Martyr’s 1 Apol. 21, wherein Justin treats the story of the dying and rising Christ as on par with—and, in fact, bringing nothing new to—traditional Greek and Roman myths. Miller observes that Justin does not appeal to historical proofs of Jesus’s resurrection and ascension, since (in Miller’s view) Justin did not view Jesus’s story in a historical mode (8). This story, for Justin and other early Christian apologists, functioned as a fable—just like other Greek and Roman tales of divine sons exalted beyond their mortal station. This sort of Hellenic, cultured reading makes sense, Miller proposes, since early Christianity was at home in urban, predominantly Greek cultural environments. Before the Christian movement, diasporic Jewish communities had already mimicked “Greek and Roman forms as a matter of sophisticated acculturation” (9). In other words, the hellenization of Jewish thought was antecedent to Christian movements (8–13).

“Translation Fables in Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity” (ch. 2) redescribes Christian tales of resurrection as translation fables, thus creating a fitting category for comparison (16). Translation refers to the disappearance and subsequent transformation of a hero’s body into a divine, immortal body (such bodies are described on 29–30). “Fable” refers broadly to a culturally cherished, even sacred narrative (17). The great diversity of translation fable types (outlined on 35) in part makes possible the great diversity of how early Christians understood Jesus’s postmortem transformation. Miller’s “Gallery” of seventy-seven translated persons (39–66) is an invaluable mini-encyclopedia useful for further research. Complementing the Gallery is a section on the conventions of Roman imperial deification (66–76). Miller ends the chapter with a discussion of how the ancients would have understood translation myths (76–82). In short, although the translation of some figures was believed, to some extent, by interested parties, the “believers” still relegated the translation to the mental domain of legend.

In chapter 3, “Critical Method and the Gospels,” Miller discusses how the canonical gospels, as systems of signs, connote a hidden transcript of assimilation and resistance. The gospel writers were not interested in encoding a (or “the”) historical Jesus. Rather, they encoded their own cultural icon (the divine Jesus), who was depicted with superior power and cultural capital in comparison with other deified persons in Mediterranean culture. Literary mimesis of Hellenistic ideal types was well-known in the Roman period (the imitatio Alexandri of Greek and Roman politicians serves as Miller’s primary basis of
comparison, 107–22). Christian writers practiced the same form of mimesis with an eye toward Hellenic demigods (who are catalogued on 108–9). Miller examines such mimesis in the Gospel of Matthew’s divine birth myth and reveals compelling analogies to the birth of Alexander the Great (122–29). In general, the subtext of the gospels make overtures to Roman power: the real rebels are the Jews; Christians offer only “an ascetic critique of mundane civilization” (137). In short, Christian literary mimicry, although it engages in practices of one-upmanship, is still not “a menacing mode of resistance to domination” (138).

Finally, in chapter 4, “Translation Fables and the Gospels,” Miller comes to the main subject of his comparison. He opens by discussing corporate, eschatological resurrection as an intellectual inheritance from Persia (154–56). Miller then distinguishes Jesus’s translation from mere resuscitation (a common miracle performed by Hellenistic “divine men,” 158–59), after which he discusses three signals of the translation fable in the gospels. The first he calls “the conclusion of plot.” As in many translation fables, the tragic fate of the hero (in this case, Jesus) is reversed by a dramatic exaltation to power (161–64). The second signal is “the body of a god.” The hero, in other words, returns with a transformed, deified body (164–67). The final signal is the “implied institution of cultus.” In other words, those who see the deified individual worship him or her as a god (167). Miller then turns to each of the four canonical gospels, discussed in chronological order, so as to flesh out the peculiar forms of literary mimesis in each text (167–77). The clearest evidence of mimesis is manifested when Miller compares the translation of Romulus and Jesus (with key “mimetic signals” charted on 175–76).

The conclusion to chapter 4 serves as an overall conclusion for the book. Miller believes that early Christians themselves classed the triumphal end of Jesus’s story as a translation fable (179). These Christians believed not in the historical Jesus but in “the metonym that the literary figure [of Jesus] came to embody and represent as the icon of a new paradigm, a new metaphor of classical order” (180).

Especially important are the humanistic implications that Miller’s study offers. The stories of the gospels, he says, “are humankind’s stories, not merely the sacrosanct possession of a major religious tradition” (183). In the modern world, one should study these stories, not to verify or reject the deification of an ancient person, but to “know human nature,” and to know this nature, “one must become a student of the sacred” (184).

A major and controversial claim of Miller’s study is that the gospel narratives were not intended to be read as history. They were written as and meant to be read as fables. Miller argues for this thesis in a sophisticated way. The canonical gospels (including Luke), he
points out, lack the major narrative cues of Greek historiography. There is “no visible weighing of the sources, no apology for the all-too-common occurrence of the supernatural, no endeavor to distinguish such accounts and conventions from analogous fictive narratives in classical literature … no transparent sense of authorship (or even readership) or origin” (133).

Throughout his book, Miller is wont to use some daring vocabulary. Some interesting examples include: “semiosis” (6), “definement” (9), “inculpatory” (13), “epichoric,” “epilogical,” “fabulation” (36), and “obscurant” (100). In his study, Miller seems conscious of writing in a higher, scholarly register—a register that both connotes and corresponds to the significance of his book. Overall, Miller’s prose flows smoothly and, on many occasions, gently swells into trenchant eloquence. In sum, Miller’s study is a model of how a humanistic scholar should approach a highly charged topic with patient research, a balanced position, and professional poise.