
Robert Parker. *Athenian Religion: A History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996

Book Review

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Throughout the world, cultures have a belief in a supernatural power or powers. This belief system, otherwise known as religion, in part characterizes how a society interacts with events they do not understand. Understanding religions in ancient times requires an understanding of the history, the culture, and the society that one is studying. Over the years, many authors have written several books about Greek religion and mythology. These books range from a broad overview of specific rituals to specific city religions. In *Athenian Religion: A History*, Robert Parker chose to focus on the latter.

Many historians consolidate the religions of the separate city-states into one general Greek religion. Parker has chosen to focus specifically on the city of Athens. Parker states that his book is a “study of Athenian religious practices and attitudes.”¹ The focus of the book is on the social and political aspects of Athenian religion rather than the ethical or ritual aspects. Focusing on the social and political aspect allows Parker to provide an insight into how much or how little religion played a part in the day-to-day life in Athens.²

Parker relies on architectural and archaeological evidence as well as iconography but pays attention to literary references to the myths surrounding religions in ancient Greece.³ Parker uses this evidence to enhance his discussion of how religion affected social and political interactions. The first six chapters detail the eighth through the sixth century of Athens. Parker discusses the changes in architecture and vase painting in regards to the changing effects of religion on life. Parker stresses that one can follow the progression of religion as the architecture changed, in particular iconography on buildings. The history and progression of vase painting and sculpture is used to provide examples as to the role religion played in society.

Chapters seven and eight deal with how changes in government and

politics affected religion. Parker opens chapter seven with the statement, “Attic religion in its familiar shape is a creation of Clisthenes no less than is the democracy.”⁴ Parker discusses the changes that Clisthenes brought about in politics as well as in how the cults conducted their religious practices. Clisthenes maintained the religious substructure of the ten tribes even as he reshuffled “the Athenian population into the ten tribes.”⁵ Parker opens chapter eight by asserting that “the history of religion overlaps . . . with the history of events.”⁶ Here, Parker talks about the literary evidence that has survived from the fifth century. Several of these documents deal with religion and dictate that the governing council must discuss religious matters before anything else. During the fifth century, Parker explains how the religious center of the city shifted to the democratic council. The fact that officers were appointed by the council to help in the running of the temples is evidence of this shift. The final four chapters discuss how innovations and the incorporation of new gods affected Athenian religion.

Overall, the book is full of details and, sometimes, an overabundance of information. Parker provides several ideas throughout the text but rarely states something to be concrete. Instead, he provides the reader with all the evidence and the question but stops short of drawing a conclusion. This allows the reader to formulate an opinion based on the provided evidence. Knowledge of Greek history is a requirement in order to understand parts of the information Parker provides. Otherwise, *Athenian Religion* is an excellent source of evidence for religious organization in Athens. Parker explains in his introduction that this work was to be an overview rather than a detailed observation; however, once he began writing, the book quickly became “a commentary on the evidence” of Athenian religion.⁷

Anyone who does not have more than a basic knowledge of Greek religion will do well to stay away from this book. With all the information that Parker has provided, the reading does become tedious at times. While the footnotes are numerous and detailed, they can overwhelm the actual text of the book. Since this work is a detailed discussion on religious practices, Parker could have included a brief description or even simply a list of the major gods and goddesses. As it stands, the reader may get lost in the footnotes and, without a cross reference available, may spend unnecessary time flipping through looking for a related footnote.⁸ Parker also dismisses any discussion of the myths as well as the involvement of women in religion. As Sarah Johnston states, “Most striking, perhaps, is Parker’s decision not to discuss various ‘personal’ or ‘optional’

religious practices in any depth.”⁹ Johnston feels that these optional practices should have been included because they challenge Parker’s assumptions.

Other than two maps at the beginning of the book, there is a lack of illustrations or any other visual aid. Throughout the book, Parker refers to geographical structures, architecture, decorations, and other media to support his arguments. However, the reader struggles to make a connection between these items since there are no visual references included. Had even a few illustrations been contained within the informative pages, the reader would have had an easier time visualizing the vases or the buildings that Parker described.

Interestingly, Parker’s information on pottery and the changes in its structure and decorations is reminiscent of Jane Ellen Harrison’s seminal work, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. While Harrison set the standard for using archaeological evidence of vase paintings to understand religions in ancient Greece, Parker took a step beyond her ideas and incorporated architecture and architectural changes in his study of Athenian religion. Parker’s use of buildings and their uses help the reader understand how religion affected social and political life in Athens.

Robert Parker’s *Athenian Religion* has set the bar high in regards to the amount of information provided in a book. Between the text, the footnotes, and the appendices, Parker provides the reader with a treasure trove of sources and ideas to research further. Leaving the path open to further research, Parker found a way to engage readers and allow them to expand on his ideas. Virtually unheard of in the world of historical research, Parker may have introduced a new trend in providing his theories and the evidence he used to formulate those theories, yet leaving the discussion open for further research and innovations.

With the availability of current and past books on religion in ancient Greece, Parker’s book is a valuable resource despite its weaknesses. While numerous authors write about the religions of this era, the majority of them only give an overview of the subject matter. A limited number write about specific areas of ancient religions and less limit their writing to such specificity as Robert Parker’s *Athenian Religion*. Therefore, Parker managed to find a niche that elevates his book to a necessity in the field.

Notes

1. Robert Parker, *Athenian Religion: A History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 9.
2. Jon D. Mikalson, review of *Athenian Religion: A History*, by Robert Parker, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 5 (May 1997):1, accessed July 27, 2014, <http://www.bmc.brynmawr.edu/1997/97.05.01.html>.
3. Frank J. Frost, review of *Athenian Religion: A History*, by Robert Parker, *The Journal for Hellenic Studies* 117 (1997): 223-224, accessed August 25, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/632574>; Sarah Iles Johnston, review of *Athenian Religion: A History*, by Robert Parker, *The Journal of Religion* 78, no.1 (January 1998): 161-162, accessed August 25, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1205870>.
4. Parker, *Athenian Religion*, 102.
5. *Ibid.*, 112.
6. *Ibid.*, 123.
7. Hugh Bowden, review of *Athenian Religion: A History*, by Robert Parker, *The Classical Review* 47, no. 2 (1997): 324-326, accessed August 25, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/710522>.
8. Susan Guettel Cole, review of *Athenian Religion: A History*, by Robert Parker, *The American Journal of Philology* 119, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 293-295, accessed August 25, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1562088>.
9. Johnston, review of *Athenian Religion*, 162.

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