

Warren S. SMITH, *Religion and Apuleius' Golden Ass. The Sacred Ass*, New York: Routledge, 2022, XIV + 197 pp., ISBN 978-1-032-19280-2, £120.00.

Warren S. SMITH's book consists of a Preface, ten chapters, appendix, bibliography, and index. In the Preface, SMITH (= S.) outlines the scope and structure of the book, beginning with pointing to the different ways in which the figure of the donkey was portrayed in Graeco-Roman as well as in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim literature. He claims that although it was suggested in 1998 by David KONSTAN that there is a need to examine the relationship between the New Testament and *The Golden Ass*, the subject has not been studied in any substantial way¹. An additional problem, S. writes, is the fact that scholars studying Apuleius are still divided in their opinions whether Book Eleven, describing the vision Lucius has of the goddess Isis and his subsequent conversion and initiation into her and Osiris' mysteries, is to be taken seriously (the traditional view²) or satirically (S. HARRISON³), or, perhaps, in whichever way the reader wants (J. WINKLER⁴).

S. attempted to compare some Jewish and Christian writings of the first and second centuries AD with *The Golden Ass*, on the assumption that Apuleius may have read them or may have been familiar with their content at least to a certain extent. In chapter one ("Asinine Thinking"), S. gives a very interesting account of the way the donkey was portrayed in Jewish Scriptures and, then, in the New Testament and Muslim writings. He juxtaposes this rather positive view of the animal with what he calls its "demonization" in the Greek and Roman literature, where donkey stood for ugliness, lust, and stupidity, which is reflected in the various examples of the *Eselroman* in the imperial period.

In chapters two to five, the author abandons this Abrahamic context and focuses on certain aspects of Apuleius' novel instead. First, he discusses the way Thessalian magic is presented in the first books of *The Golden Ass* (chapter two: "Magical Thinking. The Witchcraft Narrative"). He writes about the dark and dangerous description of sorcery by Apuleius, blended with strange or even sometimes grotesque allusions to the Platonic tradition and the figure of Socrates. Magic in *The Golden Ass* evokes both evil in the form of human malice and a sense of illusion and falsehood of perceived reality as something which cannot be trusted.

In chapter three ("Fortune Competes with Providence. The Meaning of Laughter"), as its title indicates, S. proposes to look at the interplay of two elements, *fortuna* and *providentia*, in the narrative of the novel, especially, in books three to ten, where Lucius is transformed into an ass. Here we have already some comparative references to the New Testament narratives, with their emphasis on the fact that it is providence, not fortune that rules human life. S. foreshadows his later discussions by suggesting that a similarity between Book Eleven of *The Golden Ass* and the New Testament is that fortune is overcome by divine providence.

In chapter four ("Robbers Think Like Heroes") S. analyses the robbers episode in the novel (Books Three to Six), in which, on the one hand, the robbers are presented as pitiful losers posing

¹ S. does not refer to I. RAMELLI, *Apuleius and Christianity: The Novelist-Philosopher in Front of a New Religion*, in: M.P.F. PINHEIRO, A. BIERL, R. BECK (eds.), *Echoes of Myth, Religion and Ritual in the Ancient Novel*, Berlin 2013, pp. 145–173.

² E.g. A. WLOSOK, *Zur Einheit der Metamorphosen des Apuleius*, *Philologus* CXIII 1969, pp. 68–84.

³ S.J. HARRISON, *Apuleius: A Latin Sophist*, Oxford 2000, pp. 238–252.

⁴ J.J. WINKLER, *Auctor and Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' Golden Ass*, Berkeley 1985.

as heroes, but which, on the other hand, establishes the theme of cruelty which seems to be linked by Apuleius with the reign of Fortune. Chapter five (“Cupid and Psyche. Thinking Like a Winged Creature”) deals with the famous inserted tale of Cupid and Psyche and S. draws here on his earlier work⁵, in which he demonstrated strong parallels between the narrative of Lucius and the adventures of Psyche, which are both saturated by the elements familiar from Euripidean tragedies and Plautine comedies (as Regine MAY argued⁶), so that they seem to constitute a peculiar genre: a divine comedy.

In chapters six to ten, S. focuses on Jewish and Christian writings contemporary to *The Golden Ass*. In chapter six (“Thinking Like a Christian Apologist”) he advances his main thesis that *The Golden Ass* may be a deliberate reaction to the rise of Christianity in the second century AD. Apuleius was largely ignorant about Christianity (like Lucian of Samosata or Pliny the Younger), but he seemed to have known something about it and decided to do two things. First, he borrowed some ideas from Christian (and Jewish) writings; second, he used them to attack and mock the new religion. S. comments on the episodes such as the wicked woman who worshipped *unicum deum* (*Met.* IX 14) or the satirical reference to Lucius as the ass preaching philosophy, to show that in Apuleius we can find motifs familiar from contemporary criticism of Christianity.

In chapter seven (“Is the Golden Ass a God?”), S. deals with the subject of onolatry of which Christians and Jews were accused at the time, as illustrated not only by the Alexamenos graffito (around 100 AD), but by late antique amulets, mocking a crucified figure with the head of a donkey. S. shows that the way young girl Charite, whom Lucius helped to escape from the robbers, describes him as golden and divine, may be an allusion to the supposed Christian onolatry. Moreover, the plans of the robbers to kill Charite by crucifying her, burning alive or sowing her into the inside of the ass (*Met.* VI 29–32), seem to be references to the persecutions of Christians.

In chapter eight (“Thinking Like a Christian”), S. compares the description of Lucius’ conversion in Book Eleven to the account of Paul’s conversion in the Acts, suggesting that here Apuleius enters into a competition with Christianity rather than merely depicting it as something grotesque. Chapter nine (“Christian and Jewish Apocalyptic Writings”) is a fascinating discussion of the similarities between *The Golden Ass* and the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature of the late first and early second century AD. S. points out the main themes, such as separation from God, repentance, salvation, study of the word of God, divine visions etc., in various writings (Ezekiel, Daniel, 2 Esdras, Revelation, 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, Shepherd of Hermas). He offers eight structural similarities between Book Eleven and Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature.

In chapter ten (“Balancing Judaism and Christianity”), S. concludes that the parallels discussed in the previous chapter suggest “a complex relationship between Apuleius and the Jewish-Christian faith”, which he seems to have regarded as either two very similar or even identical religions. This would not be surprising given the fact that certain Christian apologists, as S. points out, did not sharply distinguish their own religion from that of the Jews.

The book ends with an appendix, in which S. discusses the famous ‘intrusion’ of Apuleius as the author into his own narrative, by means of which he seems to replace Lucius, the fictional character, as the narrator. In *Met.* XI 27 we read that not Lucius, but a certain man from Madaura is to be initiated into the mysteries. In S.’s interpretation, that can be seen as a kind of confirmation of the authenticity of the conversion experience that had been described; it is a literary strategy similar to those which we find in the Acts in the case of Paul or Peter.

S.’s book is the fruit of a life-long study of *The Golden Ass* and it is an excellent read. Moreover, it offers a new perspective not only on the relationship between Apuleius and early Christianity, but also on how the pagan elite was perceiving the new religion and reacting to it.

⁵ W.S. SMITH, *Cupid and Psyche Tale: Mirror of the Novel*, in: M. ZIMMERMANN *et al.* (eds.), *Aspects of Apuleius’ Golden Ass*, vol. II: *Cupid and Psyche*, Groningen 1998, pp. 69–82.

⁶ R. MAY, *Apuleius and Drama: The Ass on Stage*, Oxford 2006.

Apuleius was a representative of the educated, bilingual Graeco-Roman elite that witnessed the rise of Christianity and, S. argues, his response was not so much a philosophical polemic (which he could have done of course, as a Platonist philosopher and a skillful orator) as a brilliantly written novel, combining satirical, grotesque and playful elements with a serious religious message. S.'s Apuleius appears as a pagan intellectual deeply contemptuous of Christianity and content with a very superficial knowledge of its sacred scriptures. Apuleius wanted not only to mock Christianity, but to claim the superiority of his own religious experience and of another saviour, the goddess Isis, not through theological argument, but through literary allusion and satire.

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