Over 130 years ago, Adolf von Harnack proclaimed that “Christianity is a medical religion.”[1] Despite the intervening century of scholarship, historians have struggled to reach consensus on whether this claim is true and how exactly the relationship between early Christianity and ancient medicine should be understood. The result has been a confusing body of literature that, by turns, deploys a variety of methodological and theoretical frameworks toward different conclusions yet often invokes vexed analytical categories with differing degrees of precision and helpfulness. Even a broad, introductory approach to early Christianity and medicine necessarily requires the historian to grapple with contested subjects, including the putative boundary between magic and medicine in antiquity, the rupture or continuity between Christianity and its broader cultural environment, the extent of the exposure of nonexperts in antiquity to technical medical knowledge, and the consequences of privileging literary or material evidence in the history of ancient medicine to answer any of these questions. Three books from the past forty years—each attempting to introduce the subject to a broader audience—reveal the perils faced by any historian attempting such a project.

As the title indicates, Howard Clark Kee’s *Medicine, Miracle, and Magic in New Testament Times* (1986) posits a stark distinction between three categories of healing identified in the ancient Mediterranean world. Christianity, Kee asserted, oriented itself as a miracle religion. Yet scholars of antiquity now largely agree that such boundaries impute modern biases into ancient practices. Hector Avalos’s *Health Care and the Rise of Christianity* (1999) sought a more nuanced framing in which to interpret the role of medicine in Christianity’s growth. Indeed, Avalos argued that health care was at the “core of [Christianity’s] mission and strategy for gaining converts” in the first four centuries and that it did so by simplifying the systems of ritual healing, removing temporal restrictions for when healing could occur, and eliminating onerous fees.[2] If Kee used outdated models of analysis drawn from a bygone era...
of anthropology, Avalos offered an account of Christianity's demographic success that hinged on more recent methods from medical sociology. The flourishing of Christianity, for Avalos, is unintelligible outside of its innovations in health-care practice that attracted newcomers to the fold. Bucking this trend, Gary B. Ferngren's *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (2009) rejects interpretive methods drawn from medical anthropology and post-structuralism, favoring instead an attempt to adopt “the point of view of those to whom the [ancient] texts were addressed.” This literalist approach to early Christianity—with its restrictive emphasis on texts and its rejection of both comparative analysis and modern theory—leads Ferngren to the opposite conclusion of Avalos: “the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that Christianity did not promise healing.”[3]

The question of whether medicine was a significant force in the development of Christianity has been more or less settled by an international team of scholars within the Religion, Medicine, Disability, and Health in Late Antiquity working group (ReMeDHe). Through workshops, symposia, publications, and advocacy, the ReMeDHe team has advanced an ambitious new frontier in research on early Christianity's fundamental entanglement with the healing cultures of the ancient Mediterranean. The time has been ripe for a thoroughgoing reappraisal and an updated primer on the subject that takes this “whether” as a given and outlines the state of the question about “how” for a broader audience. Meticulously researched and even-handed, Helen Rhee’s *Illness, Pain, and Health Care in Early Christianity* provides a new foundational introduction to the key questions and texts animating the topic. As Rhee asserts on the first page, “Greco-Roman medicine and health care were instrumental in shaping how Christians defined themselves.” In the brief introduction, Rhee draws on the widely influential work of medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman to frame early Christian attitudes toward health and healing within a more robust framework that takes seriously distinctions between disease/illness and curing/healing that have become the standard in contemporary anthropology. By framing her approach in this manner, Rhee aims to spotlight the “complementarity of mind and body” in ancient healing practices while also observing the spaces of overlap within the diversity of such practices that are often superficially distinguished as “rational,” “folk,” “magical,” “supernatural,” “popular,” or otherwise (pp. 8-9).

The book proceeds in five chapters that each investigate categories signaled in the title. The first (“Health, Disease, and Illness in Greco-Roman Culture”) outlines the dominant trends in Greco-Roman literature that “set the stage for subsequent ideas about health, disease, and illness in the Western world (at least through the Renaissance)” (p. 13). Moving chronologically, though somewhat recursively, the chapter emphasizes Hippocratic and Galenic ideals about health as a balance of mixtures (*krasis*, in Greek) and disease as imbalance. Along the way, Rhee explores case studies in the examples of Plutarch, women's health, Aelius Aristides, and Marcus Aurelius. Chapter 2 (“Health, Disease, and Illness in the Bible and Early Christianity”) begins with the depiction of health and illness in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament before focusing primarily on Christian literature of the fourth century CE. Rhee demonstrates how Christian authors “shared with Greco-Roman writers natural or medical etiologies but also constructed their own comprehensive illness narratives with their own supernatural etiologies” (p. 125). Rhee presents this kind of health pluralism, in which illness acquires a positive and community-building function, as a hallmark of early Christianity's appropriation of ancient attitudes toward health and illness. Chapter 3 (“Pain in Greco-Roman Culture and Early Christianity”) condenses into one chapter an examination of technical medical literature on pain, Greek and Roman philosophical texts on pain, and the role of pain in New Testament and a range of early Christian texts. Here, Rhee indicates that Christians ad-
opted Roman traditions of pain narratives and the pedagogical value of personal suffering while intensifying its meaning through identification with a suffering savior. The final two chapters follow the format of the first two, exploring the topic of health care with dedicated examination of the Greco-Roman context (chapter 4) and then more specifically that of early Christianity (chapter 5). Rhee addresses such topics as temple medicine, amulets, the emergence of hospitals, and philosophy's therapy of the soul in turn. She once again presents Christianity clearly and succinctly as participating in and adapting aspects of Greco-Roman health-care practice—retooling them within a new conceptual and theological idiom. A brief conclusion summarizes the stakes of the book.

This is a sprawling, encyclopedic study of how early Christian literature interacted with ancient traditions of health and medicine from the outset and, with increasing intensity, into the fifth century CE. Rhee marshals literary evidence spanning a thousand years and helpfully traces the areas of continuity and areas of innovation that marked Christian attitudes toward illness and healing. The book should replace previous studies as the entry point for advanced undergraduates, seminarians, and doctoral students hoping to develop a solid understanding of the key texts, figures, and questions. Generalist readers may find the expansive coverage of sources and depth of scholarly engagement from page to page difficult to follow. The challenge of a study such as this is in striking a balance between comprehensiveness and accessibility. While it is of course impossible to include everything on a given subject, *Illness, Pain, and Health Care in Early Christianity* leans into a maximal approach in its survey of literature. The knowledgeable reader will benefit immensely from the careful and critical reading that Rhee has provided here.

But even attempting a wide-ranging survey such as this results in curious gaps. There are three important consequences of the book's comprehensive approach to the literature. First, Rhee's voice and specific scholarly interventions occasionally fall behind a dense thicket of primary and secondary sources. To better understand the stakes of the present volume, I would have liked to see a clearer articulation of how Rhee's analysis and interpretation breaks rank from previous scholarly efforts. I wondered, for example, whether Rhee's mostly positive use of Ferngren in later chapters was undermined by the two authors' opposing starting premises about whether physical healing mattered at all in the shaping of Christianity. Second, the emphasis on ancient literary evidence, to the exclusion of so much important material evidence related to ancient medicine and health, limits the scope of the story being told about early Christian attitudes toward healing. Rhee rightly notes at the outset that literary sources must be used with caution in reconstructing the history of ancient health, "juxtaposed with and contextualized by other forms of evidence" (p. 3). Yet, aside from a consideration of several miracle inscriptions at Epidaurus, there is a lack of attention to material culture that would counterbalance the book's robust analysis of texts. And third, with urgent new interventions from disability studies reshaping methodological approaches to ancient medicine, it seemed to me a missed opportunity to situate more concretely how a disability studies approach influences our narrative of health and illness in late antiquity. As one small example, I was surprised to find Aelius Aristides labeled a “hypochondriac” on page 73—a description of sophists popularized by G. W. Bowersock that has been abandoned by more recent studies. This was especially confusing given Rhee's clear rejection (on the preceding pages) of how modern historians have uncharitably dismissed Aristides as a neurotic. At the precise moment that Rhee exposes the fallacy of diagnosing ancient sufferers as hypochondriacs, the book sustains the diagnosis itself as a viable category of analysis. I wondered whether this might have been avoided by a more explicit consideration of recent inter-
ventions from disability studies into the analysis of ancient illness—especially as Rhee turns to authors whose chronic illnesses have too often been the subject of armchair diagnoses by scholars.

But these are small, critical considerations and not at all fundamental flaws in the present volume. They reveal important avenues for further scholarly work that this book has so helpfully mapped. Rhee's achievement here is praiseworthy given the magnitude of the task undertaken. *Illness, Pain, and Health Care in Early Christianity* provides sorely needed and robust grounding in the methodological issues as well as the predominant texts and authors essential to the study of medicine in ancient Christian literature. This book will surely become the new introductory foundation on which future investigations will be built.

Notes


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