



The Sleeper's Dream: Asclepius Ritual and Early Christian Discourse

Jeffrey Pettis

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An understanding of Greek and Roman culture cannot occur without paying attention to its various forms of religious experience. The early Christian community experienced and perceived Jesus as a saviour who heals and overcomes death through resurrection. Likewise, the Asclepius Cult attests to Asclepius as one who saves through healing and overcomes death through resurrection. The similarities between early Christian cults and the Asclepius cult and the emphasis on salvation/healing, a saviour deity, and patronage by large Mediterranean populations offer a valuable comparison for readings of early Christian sources. What does salvation mean for Asclepius cult dreamers and for early Christian dreamers? Are there points of intersection between early Christian groups and Asclepius, and too, where are there differences? The author of the Gospel of John makes it clear that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and whoever believes in him will not die but live always. He tells Martha this as a prelude to bringing Lazarus back from the dead (John 11:25-26). Ovid tells how Asclepius also raised a human from the dead and for this act was struck down by the thunderbolt of Zeus. Then Asclepius himself is resurrected and brought back to life (Metamorphoses II.640-48). There is a strong thematic undercurrent connecting the cult of Asclepius and the cults of the Jesus movement. Each speaks of and exists in response to concept(s) of "healing" and "salvation" in relation to dreams. The Sleeper's Dream probes into the nature and use of bodily healing and dreams in antiquity, examining literary and archaeological evidence in order to gain a sense of how the Greco-Roman world understood each through the Asclepius cult, and to understand references to bodily healings and dreams by early Christian cults and groups.

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