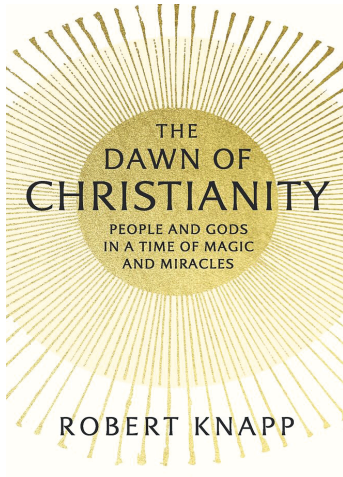


THE DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY



KNAPP, ROBERT (2018).
*The Dawn of Christianity.
 People and Gods in a Time of
 Magic and Miracles.* London:
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KNAPP IS EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF CLASSICS in the University of California and the author of a number of books on the ancient Roman world. The book under review here was originally published in hardback in 2017, but this paperback edition will make it more readily accessible to the general readership for which it is obviously intended. Knapp's basic question (the perennial one among historians of early Christianity) is why Christianity continued to grow in numbers in the early centuries. His basic answer to this question is now a rather familiar one: Early Christianity combined some elements of the wider "polytheistic" Roman context with what proved an impressive display of supernatural power manifested in acts of magic and miracle. This emphasis on "magic and miracle" owes much to Ramsay MacMullen (who is cited a number of times).

The first six chapters give a basically accurate summary of features of the ancient Jewish and pagan cultural settings. In chapter seven, Knapp at last turns more directly toward his question with a review of various "Charismatics and Messiahs," drawing upon references in Flavius Josephus, the Qumran scrolls, and the New Testament. This

chapter includes an introduction to Jesus of Nazareth. Although complaining about the difficulties of using the New Testament Gospels as historical sources, Knapp goes on to paint a picture of core themes in Jesus' ministry with a surprising confidence. Jesus was particularly known, Knapp insists, for his miracles and his eschatological message, which resulted in "great popularity." This in turn generated some anxiety among "the authorities" about the possible "unruly or even insurrectionary crowds" that could form around "charismatics." This is what led to Jesus' execution.

Chapter eight is given to "Christianity in the Jewish and Polytheistic World." Here in particular Knapp claims that early Christianity echoed a basic morality (family, honesty, loyalty) that resonated with the wider public, although he grants that among that wider public these virtues may well have been more lauded than observed in practice. He also claims a shared attitude toward "supernatural powers" and the importance of worship, dietary restrictions and sacred days. But on close inspection, these alleged similarities are rather vague, and seem to me valid only at a somewhat high level of abstraction. In historical work, it is the distinguishing particularities of an individual or movement that make things interesting (Cf. Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*).

Knapp generally shows an up to date knowledge of relevant scholarship, particularly on the classical world, but his grasp of some matters of early Christianity seems less sure. For example, he characterizes the early Christian message (rarely otherwise dealt with in the book) as "the baptism of the Holy Spirit" (134); however this phrase is not used by the Apostle Paul or in other early Christian texts as a label for their message. Knapp also claims that Paul abandoned physical circumcision (138). But Knapp seems not to understand that Paul only opposed the imposition of circumcision upon his pagan converts. Paul continued to see himself as a Jew and seems to have approved Jewish believers in Jesus continuing to circumcise their sons as an expression of Jewish ethnicity. Paul's references to Torah and circumcision must be seen in the context of his Gentile mission, not the rejection of Torah outright.

In chapter nine, Knapp discusses the hostility that early Christians experienced. Here, too, Knapp puts his foot wrong on a few matters. He takes Jesus as claiming to share God's "essence" in referring to God as Father and himself as Son. But this is to read third/fourth-century categories into the first-century texts such as the Gospels. "Son of God" was in fact a messianic title, and in the Jewish setting of Jesus connoted primarily divine favour and authorization, not some ontological status. Oddly, Knapp seems to prefer accounts in the Gospel of John for developing his picture of Jesus, even though it should be recognized that this account is explicitly written to convey the christological revelations given by "the Paraclete" in the aftermath of Jesus' resurrection.

Knapp's survey of Jewish opposition to the Jesus-moment emphasizes that it was seen as proclaiming a blasphemous message. In some instances this may be so. But scholars have proposed other factors too, including the inclusion of pagan converts as full members of the family of Abraham. Knapp rightly notes that, so far as pagans were concerned, the most objectionable aspect of early Christians was their refusal to honour the gods. On account of this, pagan critics accused Christians of "atheism" and labelled them as socially disruptive. Knapp concludes this chapter with the text of the exchange of letters between Pliny and Trajan about how Roman authorities should treat those denounced to them as Christians.

In chapter ten, Knapp finally gets around to proposing "Christianity's appeal." But here he simply elaborates his pet notion that this consisted primarily in early Christian miracle-working, and in the impressions made by Christian martyrs. Again, neither is really a new idea. More importantly, neither seems adequate to explain why individuals were willing to become Christians in the first three centuries. Knapp refers to pagans as sufficiently impressed with Christian miracle-working to give Christianity "a try". But this fails utterly to take account of the serious social and political consequences of a genuine conversion to the young Christian movement. Indeed, Knapp's discussion almost trivializes the matter, as if it were a case of taking up a new hobby. But the requirement to abandon the gods would have cut through all aspects of family, social, and political life, and so we really must rise above the sort of somewhat banal claims that Knapp advocates. I have emphasized this in a small book: Larry W. Hurtado, *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* Marquette Lectures in Theology, 47 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2016).

One of the valuable features of Knapp's book are the many quotations of various texts and inscriptions. But the reader must discover on his own that information on the sources of these quotations is given in page-keyed notes toward the end of the book. There are also a number of maps, illustrations, and photographic plates that will be helpful, as well as a glossary of terms and individuals, brief suggestions for further reading, and a general index.

All in all, Knapp gives to general readers a serviceable introduction to the world of the first Christians; but his grappling with the key issues, in particular why Christianity continued to grow across the earliest centuries, is neither innovative nor adequate.