

***We and They: Decolonizing Greco-Roman and Biblical Antiquities.*
Jonathan Cahana-Blum and Karmen MacKendrick (Eds), Aarhus
University Press, 2019.**

Nova Wood, University of Auckland

We and They: Decolonizing Greco-Roman and Biblical Antiquities is a recently published, peer-reviewed volume from Aarhus University Press. It is slim, running about 129 pages—eight chapters averaging approximately 20 pages plus a short introduction by the editors. The book consists of papers originating from a 2016 conference at Aarhus University aimed at addressing the problem of “the we/they nexus when studying antiquity” and how colonialism factors into this issue (9). The chapters span topics ranging from Aeschylus’ *Persians* to the Jewish-Christian war in Himyar centuries later. This makes it ideal for those looking for case studies that illustrate post-colonial and decolonizing approaches to Greco-Roman and biblical studies, but it is not a source for those looking for extensive discussions of methodology.

From an aesthetic view, *We and They* is designed nicely; it is easy to read and is well organized and well formatted. The text is in standard font with slightly more space between the lines than is usual, but this makes the chapters easier to read and gives the volume a clean appearance. It also might be more comfortable for some readers. Nevertheless, the font in the bibliography at the end of the book is small enough that it may be difficult for readers with visual or reading difficulties. There are occasionally spelling errors and inconsistencies, including the name of one of the editors which appears as both “Cahana” and “Cahana-Blum,” but these are few and far between.

The first chapter by Manuela Giordano (“Aeschylus’ *Persians*: Empathizing with the Enemy, or Orientalizing Them?”) is devoted primarily to analysing the we/they binary in modern discussions of Aeschylus’ *Persians*, particularly its place in Orientalism and orientalisng discourses. This chapter is definitely the strongest in the volume and provides the clearest response to the volume’s objective. Its only real drawback is that it perhaps needs some further discussion to better illustrate modern attempts to use the play as the origin of ‘the Orient’ in western culture. Despite this, though, the chapter functions well as it is. Giordano’s skillful analysis of the play itself takes up the majority of the entry and uses the original text alongside a translation.

The second chapter (“Revelation at the Limit: Mystery and Matter after the Valentinians”) is by the volume co-editor Karmen MacKendrick and covers the Gnostic idea of the Limit present in Valentinianism. The chapter is an interesting analysis of a less-studied aspect of Valentinianism, but there are a few odd decisions and, overall, it is not clear how MacKendrick’s study fits with the volume theme. The reasons for translating *Horos* as “limit” instead of “boundary” (the term used in the translation MacKendrick is using) is not explained. The tone shifts between being an introductory text to Valentinianism and

providing in-depth analyses of complicated Valentiniac ideas. There is nothing inherently wrong about this choice, but it might make assigning a target audience a little difficult. The chapter is perhaps better read as a study on the Limit in Valentinianism; as such, it is excellent.

Jonathan Cahana-Blum provides the third chapter (“Decolonizing Ancient Sexuality: Three Case Studies”), which addresses unintentional, underlying colonialism in three modern anglophone studies on ancient sexuality. Cahana-Blum discusses David Halperin’s *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (1990), *The Queer History of Galatians 3:28* (2006) by Dale Martin, and *Gender* (1998) by Daniel Boyarin. His analysis of the three modern studies are very short, roughly a page and half each. Cahana-Blum provides detailed, legitimate criticisms of his chosen cases studies, and the we/they of modern attempts to differentiate “modernity” from “ancient” are articulated clearly, particularly when discussing sex and politics. There is an especially interesting discussion of Hellenistic Christianity and Rabbinical Judaism and their approaches to sex, gender, and androgyny. However, the chapter is so short that the author does not quite have enough time or space to fully address the many ideas he introduces, and it is curious that the text of this entry is only seven pages (49-56).

The fourth chapter by Luca Pucci (“Myths as ‘Cultural Vectors’: Some Reflections on Ancient Greece and Modern Ethnographic Traditions”) discusses ethnological approaches to studying ancient Greek mythology. The author chooses to use Bronislaw Malinowski’s study of the Trobriand Islands for comparison, which may not be the most appropriate choice. Malinowski’s study is now a hundred years old, and is a study of a society contemporaneous with him, rather than an ancient one. There is a lack of analysis of the we/they binary and the colonialism evident in Malinowski’s work that affects how Pucci uses Malinowski as a comparison for his own study of Greek myth. Pucci does reference a number of more recent ethnographical works in the footnotes, so the extensive use of Malinowski is often unnecessary. For those interested in ethnography, however, these references are valuable, and Pucci integrates them exceedingly well into his discussion of ethnography and ancient Greek myths, particularly the myth of Orestes and purification rituals.

The next chapter (“Liberating Levi: A Cultural-Evolutionary Approach to Aramaic and Greek Levi Beyond Denominational Essentialism”) is by Jessica Van ‘t Westinde who writes about cultural-evolutionary approaches to Levi. One of the longer chapters in the volume, it is certainly worth the read. Beginning with an anecdote about listening to a modern Rabbi discuss their refusal to fast on Tisha B’Av, Van ‘t Westinde weaves this easily into their extensive discussion of denominationalism, especially attempts to build definitive categories of “Judaism” and “Christianity” as well as “Jewish” and “Christian.” The primary text discussed is *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, focusing heavily on *The Testament of Levi* and medieval and modern attempts to categorise it as Christian or Jewish. This chapter would be especially useful to those interested in the development of Jewish identities, particularly self-identities, and the priesthood after the destruction of the Second Temple. These developments and adaptations are compared with the *Aramaic Levi Document*, which does not quite receive the same amount of attention but Van ‘t Westinde makes excellent observations about the evolution of ideas on authority, Torah, and rites, among other topics.

Pieter W. Van der Horst’s chapter (“Religion and Politics in the Jewish-Christian War in Sixth-Century Hymyar”) is a welcome study on the perhaps lesser known kingdom of

Himyar. There is enough discussion on the four sources for the war (which took place between 523 and 525 CE) to provide a solid introduction for those unfamiliar with the event. Quite a bit of time is spent discussing King Joseph of Himyar's political and religious motivations for the persecution of Christians, and the possible reasons why the war and, indeed, the entire kingdom of Himyar are never mentioned in Jewish sources. Van der Horst mentions more briefly the identity politics of the Christian authors when discussing King Joseph, the Christian Axumite kingdom, the Byzantines, and the interesting place of Nestorian Christians in the war. This particular focus invites the reader to consider the possibility that Joseph used his religious beliefs as part of his justification for aggressive action against the colonising attempts of Himyar by the Axumite kingdom.

Makiko Sato's entry on the rape of Lucretia in Augustine's *De civitate Dei* ("The Rape of Lucretia: Sanctity of Body and Soul in Augustine") is short but, like Giordano's chapter, focuses heavily on the use of language. Sato considers Augustine's utilization of *sanctitas* (purity, sanctity) and *puicitia* (modesty, chastity) to identify Christian women ("we") who need only chastity in God's eyes, while pagan women ("they") require chastity in the eyes of their peers. (111). Sato provides a detailed analysis of the ambiguity and nuance Augustine gives these two words, particularly in how he differentiates between "we" and "they," which is very well done. The author does not spend quite enough time explaining their decision to discuss Augustine's hierarchy of mind and body and his definition of lust, and these topics do not quite fit in with the prior discussion so the last few pages before the conclusion are left a bit dangling. This is a fairly minor issue, though, and the chapter overall is insightful and would be of interest to both beginners and those more familiar with Augustine's writings.

The last chapter is by Anna Usacheva on Origen's methodology and textual criticism, specifically towards canonisation ("A Fluidity of Canon and Textual Criticism in the Works of Origen"). Usacheva critiques modern historians' tendency to view the canonisation process of the New Testament as a process of rigidity; instead, she demonstrates that early Christians had a more fluid understanding of "canon." Usacheva notes, rightly, that our modern understanding of "canon" is shaped within the context of more easily controlled printing presses, which is not the same understanding or transmission technology of the canonisation process that historians are trying to study. Usacheva does provide translations and the original text for most of the excerpts they cite from Origen, and these samples are used effectively to demonstrate Origen's methodology and how this methodology compares to Alexandrian and Homeric methods of textual criticism. However, these discussions are not entirely connected to the process of de-canonisation that Usacheva refers to at the beginning. This may perhaps be a matter of time and space, as Usacheva does very briefly discuss the need to incorporate this fluidity into modern discourse in their conclusions.

Overall, *We and They: Decolonizing Greco-Roman and Biblical Antiquities* is a fascinating volume that would work best for those looking for an introduction to decolonisation. I found each entry interesting and helpful, but several were frustratingly short.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License.