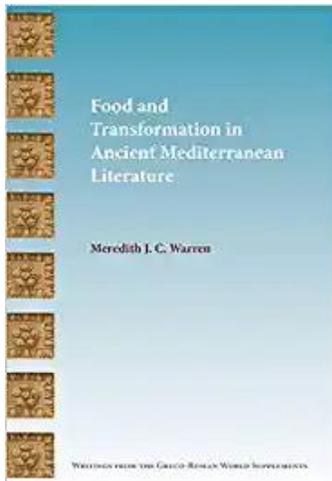




Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2019.11.10

Meredith J. C. Warren, *Food and Transformation in Ancient Mediterranean Literature*. Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series 14. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781628372380. Pp. xv + 189. \$29.95. Paperback.

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Intellectual discourse, of both the ancient and the modern varieties, prefers to conduct itself through the senses of seeing and hearing. Philo of Alexandria was expressing traditional virtues and preferences when he wrote, “Now of the five [senses], the three most animal and servile are taste, smell, and touch, which cause particular excitation in the cattle and wild beasts most given to gluttony and sexual passion. For all day and night they fill themselves with food insatiably or are at rut. The other two have a link with philosophy and hold the leading place—hearing and sight” (*Abr.* 149–50 [LCL]). Academics have always, it would seem, preferred cogitation over mastication.

In *Food and Transformation in Ancient Mediterranean Literature*, Meredith Warren explores literary portrayals in which the consumption of otherworldly food results in a transformation of the eater. She considers these portrayals as examples of a narrative category, a genre, which she calls

hierophagy. Her definition deserves quotation in full:

In its essence, hierophagy is a mechanism by which characters in narrative cross boundaries from one realm to another. In all cases, and as the term suggests, this is accomplished by the character consuming some otherworldly item. With specific contexts removed, a generic pattern emerges in which a mortal character interacts with another realm. The character ingests something from that realm, and the act of eating precipitates a change in the character such that the character is more closely related to the other realm. (2–3; see p. 67 for a similar but slightly different definition)

The narrative characters who consume their various otherworldly foods experience three consequences as a result of eating: they are bound to the food’s place of origin (Hades, heaven, etc.); they experience some kind of transformation (often, but not always, physical); and they receive knowledge (3; see also 152–53). While the details vary between stories, Warren describes hierophagy as exhibiting an identifiable set of “commonalities” that result from “shared cultural expectations” rather than from any kind of literary relationship or dependence (3). “These narratives use the consumption of otherworldly food to convey the

idea of transformation because of ancient assumptions about how food facilitates the transgression of boundaries” (4).

Warren offers a brief but significant discussion of genre as “fictional action” (4–9) that bridges the gap between authors and their social and cultural locations, on one hand, and textual description. For Warren, hierophagy reflects “a pervasive worldview that has crafted the genre governing the accessibility of other realms” (7), irrespective of the hierophagic account’s relation to any actual consumptive ritual. Her analysis of hierophagy, therefore, aims to illumine something not just about stories of eating otherworldly foods but also about the cultures that told (or tell) such stories. That something is, at root, “the importance of the porous-but-present boundary between worlds in the cultural expectation of the ancient Mediterranean cultures” and the role and efficacy of otherworldly food for transforming consumers in one realm in terms of another (9). She offers a succinct statement of her thesis toward the end of the Introduction: “[I]n hierophagic eating, the bond created is between the eater of the food and the otherworldly giver of the food, who in some cases also shares the meal. This type of bonding through eating participates in accepted ways of building relationships in antiquity but offers a different way of belonging for the privileged eater; he or she belongs to the community of the other realm” (16).

After the Introduction, Warren explores six texts or traditions in six chapters. The first, “Persephone Traditions,” analyzes the story of Persephone and the pomegranate seeds from the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (seventh–sixth century BCE) and its multiforms in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti* (first century CE). Persephone, the daughter of the Olympian goddess Demeter (and so also an Olympian goddess), is kidnapped by Hades and taken to the underworld as his bride. After Zeus sends Hermes to negotiate Persephone’s release, Hades “stealthily gave her a honey-sweet pomegranate seed to eat, looking around, so that she might not stay there [viz., Olympus] for all time with the venerable dark-robed Demeter” (Hom. Dem. 370; trans. Warren [22]). As a particularly intimate sense, taste affects the one who receives otherworldly food more than, say, a vision of or revelation from an otherworldly being: “tasting otherworldly foods brings about a bond between the eater and the realm to which the ingested food belongs” (30). Warren provides a brief excursus on the Genesis 3 story as a roughly contemporary parallel to the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (32–35).

The second chapter, “4 Ezra,” is the first to examine the intersection of the hierophagic and apocalyptic genres, an intersection that Warren suggests is typical of Jewish and Christian examples of hierophagy (8). Warren sets out to demonstrate the traditional nature not just of 4 Ezra’s use of apocalyptic themes but also of its use of broader “ancient Mediterranean expectations about what interaction with divine beings and their food might entail” (38). *In nuce*, Ezra’s consumption of the fiery cup in 4 Ezra 14 transforms Ezra: his understanding and his relationship with both the earthly and heavenly realms (40). The bulk of this chapter offers a climactic—and slightly problematic—reading of Ezra’s seven revelatory experiences in terms of the human sensorium. Warren points out that, as a result of consuming the heavenly cup, Ezra receives new knowledge and new abilities and is transferred to the heavenly realm (57).

In “Revelation,” Warren examines John’s consumption of the scroll in Rev 10:9–10. Similar themes appear in this as in previous chapters (especially the intimacy of taste vis-à-vis sight and hearing, the transmission of divine knowledge, etc.), though the present discussion addresses especially “the specific ramifications of ingesting sweet- and bitter-tasting substances” (59). This latter point is particularly interesting: Warren argues, first, that “sweet” is a ubiquitous description of heavenly food but, second, that “bitter” is a sign of “the efficacy of God’s message [as medicine] in John’s mouth” (72).

Warren then turns, in chapter 4, to the honeycomb episode in Joseph and Aseneth. In this scene, Aseneth receives an otherworldly visitor who mysteriously produces an otherworldly honeycomb in her pantry. This scene has received considerable discussion as a conversion narrative. Warren resists that reading in favor of Aseneth’s “transformation” (*passim*), though these do not seem to be mutually exclusive interpretive

options. Honey and bees are already associated with the heavenly realm, and its description in Joseph and Aseneth only heightens this connection. Warren, however, goes further: “the description of the honey links its origins not just with heaven but more specifically with the garden of Eden” (91). The heavenly, even Edenic, source of the honeycomb provides the context within which Aseneth’s transformation becomes intelligible: not that she becomes a Jew and/or Christian but that she experiences the inverse of Eve and Adam’s relocation out of paradise.

Chapter 5, “Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*,” is a companion discussion to the previous chapter; it pointedly continues Warren’s critique of “conversion” as an analytical category. The primary novum of this chapter is an emphasis on a particular element common to other instances of hierophagy: “namely, that the food is given from one of higher ontological status to a recipient of lesser ontological status” (101). The *Metamorphoses* simultaneously takes advantage of common knowledge of and assumptions about hierophagy as a literary phenomenon and subverts that knowledge and those assumptions, especially in Lucius’s silence after being transformed back from an ass to a human being (*Metam.* 11.14). “Lucius as character and narrator does not [understand]; he continues to play the dupe throughout his subsequent initiations” as a devotee of Isis (125). While Lucius’s (narrative) transformation is perhaps the most dramatic of those discussed in this book, Warren does not seem concerned that his is a *restoration* of a previous form rather than the assumption of a new/higher form. Her discussion also conflates Isis’s instructions for Lucius to eat mundane roses (grown, presumably, on earth and already a part of the goddess’s procession) with the idea that the roses are, in some way, “otherworldly food.” Perhaps divine instructions to eat quotidian items transforms those items into otherworldly food, but that transformation has not yet been established in Warren’s discussion.

Warren’s final chapter focuses on the cheese-eating scene in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas. The usual themes are present (the offer of otherworldly food, the transformation of the eater, the receipt of divine or special knowledge, the crossing of boundaries, and the association with another realm). Warren surveys interpretive options for Perpetua’s consumption of cheese and the coincidental (but not unimportant) condition of her postpartal body, especially arguments that the *caseus* (“cheese”) offered to her by the tall, aged shepherd-figure conveys postbaptismal or—even less likely—Eucharistic connotations (141–46). Perhaps the most significant accomplishment of this chapter is Warren’s proposal of hierophagy as the actual mechanism of Perpetua’s transformation that readers have perceived but not explained in the Passion (149).

Food and Transformation ends with a brief Conclusion (151–57), a Bibliography, and indices of Ancient Texts, Modern Authors, and Terms.

Warren’s discussion of the half-dozen examples of hierophagy (as well as references to additional potential instances or relevant comparanda) is fascinating, well-written, and engaging. She intentionally brings together literary phenomena that transcend ideological/religious boundaries (Jew, Christian, Graeco-Roman) in order to situate her proposal within a broader ancient Mediterranean worldview. With references to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and the Wachowski Brothers’s *The Matrix*, among others, she also proposes hierophagy as a significant research agenda across time as well as space. In every instance, her analyses are stimulating and suggestive for other narrative and textual moments.

Despite the strength of Warren’s *discussion*, the success of her *thesis* is less certain. She is clear and definite: her aim is not simply to analyze a half-dozen disparate narrative moments but rather to identify a genre of ancient (and other) literature. The availability and taken-for-grantedness of hierophagy for the authors (and their readers) discussed here is repeatedly invoked. For example,

It is only through the experience of tasting the cheese in the garden that Perpetua gains the foreknowledge of her martyrdom, a knowledge that takes for granted that eating food from another

world binds the eater to that world, as we also saw with Persephone. The text and its characters accept this aspect of hierophagy as understood, implying that the mechanisms of this transformation needed no explanation for readers. (149)

At the end of the volume, the reader may be excused for continuing to wonder if Warren has established hierophagy *as an ancient genre*. Did literary theorists (Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian, or other) reflect on and/or discuss the features of hierophagy as a literary trope, or debate the boundaries of this from similar-but-not-identical genres or scene-types (wedding banquets, funeral banquets, hospitality scenes, etc.)? Did ancient writers ever examine the perils of partaking in otherworldly foods, whether of angels eating mundane foods (as, e.g., in T. Ab. 4) or humans eating heavenly foods and other items? Warren's thesis might survive negative answers to these and related questions, but positive answers would certainly strengthen her case.

There are also questions arising from Warren's analytical discussions. Do mundane foods (e.g., the roses Lucius eats) offered by (a priest of) a goddess count as otherworldly the way, say, Hades's pomegranate seeds or Ezra's heavenly fiery cup or John's open scroll do? Likewise, is John's transformation—viz., that he can now “prophesy again,” which presumably he could not do prior to ingesting the scroll (though he did successfully prophesy a “first time” without the aid of heavenly nosh)—really functionally equivalent or similar to Aseneth's physical transformation or the binding of Persephone to Hades? Is Lucius's *restoration* to a previous form an appropriate analog of Aseneth's *transformation* into a higher form? The answers Warren assumes to questions like these are reasonable and suggestive, but assuming other answers would result in different analyses. As I read her examples, I find myself regularly wondering if we should make more of the *differences* between these texts even as we appreciate—with Warren—their similarities.

One more critique. Warren's descriptions of narrative phenomena can become unmoored from the details of the texts, often in service of proposing broader, cross-cultural parallels between texts. For example: “Tasting food from another world allows the eater to cross the semi-permeable boundary between heaven and earth, or in the case of Persephone, between the Chthonic and Olympian realms” (35). This, of course, is not quite what happens; Persephone is not *granted access* to Hades by tasting its pomegranate seeds but rather is *bound* to Hades (contrast Ezra's translocation to heaven, in 4 Ezra 14.50, *after* drinking the fiery cup in 14.39–40; p. 56). Warren acknowledges this dynamic later on the same page (“When Persephone consumes the pomegranate seeds, she is bound to Hades”). The rest of the sentence, however, introduces another inaccuracy: “likewise Adam and Eve are also expelled from paradise lest they become divine like God” (35). Given the Persephone tradition as comparandum for the Adam and Eve story, the terms “likewise” and “also expelled” are strikingly problematic.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Warren has held up six diverse literary representations of eating/consuming otherworldly items and exposed some underlying cultural associations that have hitherto gone unnoticed. Moreover, her analyses suggest that other narrative moments would benefit from being brought alongside these consumptive stories. And, despite her consistent refusal to address ritual or other actual (= non-narrative) meal situations, her work raises interesting questions about the kinds of stories ancient Jews, Christians, and others told themselves as they participated in non-quotidian meals. To the extent that we can understand or even perceive these moments as ancient phenomena, we will have Meredith Warren to thank for bringing them into focus.