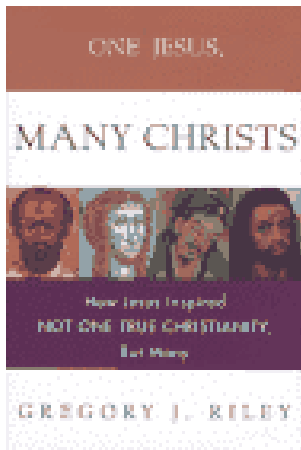


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Riley, Gregory J.

One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity, But Many: The Truth about Christian Origins

San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997. Pp. viii + 228, Cloth, \$22.00, ISBN 0060667990.

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Given the numerous, diverse, and even contradictory portraits of Jesus offered by the early Christians, how can one explain Christianity's success in winning over the Roman world? This fundamental question is the starting point of Riley's analysis, and within the book he seeks to elucidate both the diversity and unity of early Christianity. This is an admirable project in light of recent tendencies to ignore, downplay, or marginalize either early Christian diversity or any unity to the early Christian movement(s). The source of early Christianity's diversity lies in the diverse thought worlds and cultural backgrounds of the earliest Christians themselves and in the even more diverse set of cultures to which their message was brought. But the core of Christianity—what inspired ultimate loyalty on the part of Jesus' followers—was not doctrinal consistency, Riley asserts. Rather, he argues, the center that held Christians together lies in the forgotten ancient category of the hero: "We no longer recognize the essential aspect of the story of Jesus that caught the imaginations of those who first heard about him . . . the story of Jesus, even with its Jewish and Eastern content, fulfilled the most important cultural ideals in antiquity, those of the hero, from Achilles on down" (pp. 16-18). The ancient hero possessed remarkable talents and his destiny was intertwined with the fate of many others; the hero had antagonistic relationships with both a god and with human rulers; in these conflicts the character of the hero was tested, and the character of those who encountered him was simultaneously put to the test; the hero usually suffered an agonizing death at a young age, but gained the prize of immortality and the role of protector of and example to the living (chapter 3). The earliest stories of Jesus, we are told, were based on just such a pattern of life (chapter 4). The diversity of Christian affirmations about Jesus, however, stems from early Christians' differing concepts of the nature of God and thus of the

relationship of the hero Jesus to divinity (chapter 5). Christianity's innovative contribution to the concept of the hero is what Riley calls the democratizing effect of Jesus' relationship with God (p. 79): All Christians (e.g., Paul in chapter 6, the martyrs in chapter 7) can become heroes as well.

The sensationalist title aside, in *One Jesus, Many Christs* Riley presents the reader with a panoramic survey of the religious thought world of the early Christians, tracing its origins from Homer and Hesiod in the West, to Persian dualism and Israelite thought in the East. Throughout Riley demonstrates his comprehensive knowledge and facility with classical as well as Christian sources. There is much to be applauded in Riley's calling our attention to the ancient hero and its relevance for understanding early Christian reactions to Jesus; as he well shows, early Christian stories about Jesus reflect heroic characteristics and even writers such as Justin acknowledged the similarities (p. 71). Moreover, Riley's analysis illumines the origin of the christological controversies that plagued the fourth and fifth centuries: they were, in part, the result of the melding of two distinct categories of being—God and hero—in ways that the latter category was just not intended to handle (p. 138).

This well-written and engaging book will appeal to introductory and master's level students (Riley has a knack for making difficult concepts quite accessible) and will provide them with an excellent background to explore further the origins of Christianity. The frustrating aspect of Riley's book, from the scholar's viewpoint, is the lack of footnotes or bibliography; once Riley points to "all but a few scholars" (p. 17) who have not overlooked the importance of the hero, but Riley does not explain in what way he is contributing new insights to this discussion, building upon the work of others, or challenging his predecessors. Perhaps, just as the category of the hero was unable to stand up to the tensions placed upon it when melded with the category of god, so also a new reading of Christian origins may be incompatible with a book directed to a popular or introductory audience.

One question concerns Riley's typology of the hero. While many of the characteristics Riley enumerates are well chosen and illuminating, others are more debatably standard heroic characteristics and still others are not given adequate emphasis. The claim that the ancients understood heroes as behavioral models or moral exemplars (pp. 59-60) warrants much greater discussion; the heroes sound just a bit too Christian and a bit less terrifying and morally ambiguous than they were to the ancients (see, e.g., Achilles's vicious dismemberment of a Trojan maiden in Philostratus's *Heroicus* §215). Perhaps a more diachronic analysis would better illumine the place of virtue in the heroic ideal. A significant characteristic that could have received greater emphasis is the centrality of the hero's reception of cultic honors in addition to his celebration in story and song. Analysis of cultic rituals (whether Chthonic or Olympian) is an important tool for understanding the hero, and while stories of the heroes were passed on through the educational and cultural channels discussed by Riley, stories were also conveyed in connection with cultic

performance. Without cult as a criterion for defining a hero, the category may lose its specificity and heuristic value, and degenerate into a broad category capable of accommodating any figures who represent cultural ideals. Finally, some discussion of the influence of Greek heroes upon the Jewish martyrological traditions and their relationship to Christian narratives of Jesus (especially the passion narratives) would have further helped illumine the paths through which the Greek ideal of the hero so thoroughly colored Christian reactions to Jesus.