

**ORY AMITAY, *From Alexander to Jesus*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010. Pp. xii, 246. ISBN 978-0-520-26636-0. \$US49.95/ £34.95.**

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Ori Amitay (A) suggests ‘a possible link connecting the life, career and posthumous reputation of Alexander the Great with that of Jesus Christ’ (2), which is close to proposing a theory of everything. But on the second term of his equation, A disappoints. He writes that ‘I know precious little for certain about the historical Jesus’ (3)—a topic in which huge effort in research has been invested for more than a century. A reference to Geza Vermes (208 n.8) is almost the only place where that iceberg breaks the surface of A’s text. On the matter of divine sonship, A speculates that because of the place Alexander the Great had in Jewish thought, as representing the last stage in history (cf. 104-22), it may have been easier than otherwise it would have been for some Jews to ‘warm up to the idea of a Messiah who was also a Son of God’ (128).

If that sounds like drawing a long bow, A goes even further on the age of Jesus when he died. A reading of John 8.57 ‘You are not yet fifty years old’ (124) as meaning that Jesus died in his late forties is a surprising mast for A to nail his colours to, or almost—even granted that the idea has a pedigree (Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 2.22.6). Yes, ‘death at thirty-three is a meme’ (125), of a sort, though it’s no 27 club—but still, one can die at any age. A coincidence may be a coincidence. A writes of ‘multiple memetic meeting points between Alexander and Jesus’, and other readers may be persuaded if they like. I find, Not proven.

On Alexander, A is much better, and his book as judged by quantity of discussion and depth of research is a book about Alexander, with an afterthought linking him to Jesus. A aspires to put Alexander the war criminal in the background and ‘continue the line of thought initiated by Droysen and Tarn’ (2), linking that line of thought avowedly with ‘Alexander *mythicus*’, and not with the less palatable parts of the historical narrative. The second chapter (27-38) raises the relationship between the Herakles and Alexander memplexes, arguing that ‘the gargantuan scale of their conquests had completely shaken [Alexander’s men’s] geographical perception (28)’ so that the Hindu Kush was identified as the Caucasus, where the vulture tormented Prometheus: ‘Herakles had passed through these mountains before; once again they were in familiar territory’ (30).

This, A argues (50), was ‘the first sign of influence exerted by Alexander’s self-creating myth on that of Herakles.’ There was recent as well as ancestral resonance in Herakles’ name and achievements, as shown by a discussion of Nikostratos of Argos, the general who wore a lionskin and went into battle armed with a club; not because he was nuts, but because he had been cured of

a dangerous disease by Menekrates of Syracuse, a doctor who called himself 'Zeus' and caused his patients to agree in advance to become his slaves if they were cured. As well as a Herakles, Menekrates' 'Olympus' had a Hermes, an Apollo and an Asklepios (69).

The discussion of myth-making is the book's best feature: suggestive and for the most part well judged. It seems, however, to be generically obligatory for *auctor mythicus* to have a go from time to time at 'the truth behind the myth', and A does not disappoint. In the chapter on the Amazon Queen (78-86), he remembers Queen Tomyris, who led the Massagetai in battle against Cyrus. 'If Alexander and his men met such female warriors,' A says, '... they must have called them Amazons' (81). That's where a certain kind of reasoning can get you, and A seems to me not to give enough weight to the fact (which he reports, 78) that Aristoboulos, Chares and Ptolemy said the story of the Amazon Queen was pure invention. Elsewhere, in connection with 'the Jewish fondness for Alexander', A declines to speculate on a historical kernel at the heart of the applicable myths. 'Luckily, that discussion lies outside the scope of this book' (127). But if A were the kind of writer to be unfailingly strict with himself, he could not have have written this interesting and worthwhile book.