

Reviews

Illness, pain, and health care in early Christianity. By Helen Rhee. Pp. xvi + 351. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2022. \$49.99. 978 0 8028 7684 3
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Helen Rhee has written what is an essential resource for students, teachers and scholars on early Christian conceptions of medicine, health and healthcare. Her study is aetiological – intending to demonstrate the connections between Graeco-Roman and early Christian medicine and health care cultures – as well as focused on the development and diversity of early Christian identity. Because of these two aims, the organisation of the book oscillates between Graeco-Roman culture and early Christianity, first dealing with health, disease and illness before pivoting to pain and then finally to health care management.

Chapter i ('Health, disease, and illness in Greco-Roman culture') analyses constructions of health, disease and illness by highlighting the interconnected nature of ancient religion, medicine and philosophy. This chapter explores the social construction of health, disease and illness in conversation with the Hippocratic *corpus*, Galen, Plato, Aelius Aristides and other literature. There are even helpful sections that emphasise what such literature says about women's health and disease. In chapter ii ('Health, disease, and illness in the Bible and early Christianity'), Rhee's analysis covers the Hebrew Bible, 'Christian Bible' and early Christianity with a focus on the 'sin-illness' paradigm, where health and disease are divinely moderated. She explores the shift to demonic agents in the Hellenistic period, showing the influence of both this and the sin-illness paradigm on early Christian conceptions of illness. Chapter iii ('Pain in Greco-Roman culture and early Christianity') explores pain from ancient Greek and Roman texts (for example, in dialogue with the usual suspects like the Hippocratics, Celsus, Aretaeus of Cappadocia, Galen), as well as other literature and philosophy, with a focus on Aelius Aristides and the Stoics, especially Seneca. Rhee then turns to early Christian literature (martyrdom literature, ascetic texts, apocalypses, Nag Hammadi texts, Origen, etc.) as authors purvey an approach to pain that is a mimetic reproduction of Christ's own pain-filled experiences. Rhee emphasises the way pain was a way of valorising early Christians in sagacious, athletic or victorious ways, all while ultimately following the footsteps of Christ. Chapter iv ('Health care in the Greco-Roman world') examines modes of care in the Graeco-Roman world, moving from self-treatment to three primary categories of therapy (religious, rational and popular). She highlights the religious medicine of the Asclepius cult, the rational medicine of surgical practitioners treating patients in

concert with temple medicine, and the *ad hoc* nature of pop-up Roman hospitals serving enslaved and military personnel. She finishes with an analysis of medico-philosophical treatises as ‘therapies of the soul’. Finally, in chapter v (‘Health care in early Christianity’), Rhee’s analysis in some ways mirrors the previous chapter’s focus on the three categories of therapy and therapy for the soul. Rhee examines medicine, healing, care for the sick and hospitals in early Christianity, with sections on monastic and private contexts. She finishes with explorations of episcopal/monastic and heresiological (for example, Epiphanius) therapies of the soul. Rhee argues that early Christianity, drawing heavily on Graeco-Roman medical cultures, expanded and innovated upon them to construct its own distinct but not wholly unique health care identity.

Rhee’s book as a whole covers a vast range of medical and healthcare cultures in the ancient Mediterranean world. What is a tremendous strength of the work can sometimes also be simultaneously a weakness. The vast swathes of sources that Rhee has chosen to engage with in her book means that sometimes her analysis accepts at face value the depiction of healthcare practices in early Christianity. Scholars wanting to build on Rhee’s work might choose to bring her insights into comparative conversation with disability theory and disability studies more broadly, or even biblical studies scholarship especially the burgeoning work on disability in New Testament Studies (especially in conversation with Rhee’s insights in chapter ii). One aspect of Rhee’s study that gave pause to this reviewer was the notion of early Christian healthcare cultures as ‘systems’. Rhee’s study explores localised *ad hoc* health care measures (like centres of healing or hospitals) but does not (in my mind) show a kind of centralised or systematised health care structure in an analogous way to say modern health care systems like the NHS or Medicare. The question is whether the language of ‘system’ imposes too much of an organised structure onto our ancient sources than we have evidence for.

Rhee’s book extensively builds upon (and in many ways contrasts) key texts in the fields of early Christianity and medical anthropology (like the work of Hector Avalos and Gary Ferngren). It is both an essential sourcebook for researchers on the topic as well as a lucid synthesis of the material (with clear recapitulations, signposting and conclusions, despite its dense subject matter). It naturally serves as a teaching companion to Laura Zucconi’s *Ancient medicine* (Grand Rapids, MI 2019), and I have enthusiastically incorporated it into my own courses dealing with medicine and ancient disability.

CRANDALL UNIVERSITY,
NEW BRUNSWICK

ISAAC T. SOON

Spiritual direction as a medical art in early Christian monasticism. By Jonathan L. Zecher. (Early Christian Studies.) Pp. xxii + 371 incl. 16 figs and 5 tables. Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. £75. 978 0 19 885413 5

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John ‘Climacus’ (‘of *The Ladder*’), abbot of St Catherine’s Sinai, probably in the later sixth century, thought that the sick naturally rejoiced to see a physician even if they derived no benefit from the visit. He certainly admired physicians