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Blood from the Sky: Miracles and Politics in the Early American Republic

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Review of:

Adam Jortner, *Blood from the Sky: Miracles and Politics in the Early American Republic*
(Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2017)

Early nineteenth-century Americans might not have lived in the “world of wonders” of their seventeenth-century forbears, argues Adam Jortner, Associate Professor of History at Auburn University, but they did inhabit a world where people still believed in the supernatural, where they discussed and debated those beliefs, and occasionally found themselves on the receiving end of persecution and violence as a result. In this valuable study, Jortner recovers the enduring presence of miracles, wonders, and other supernatural events in the decades following the American Revolution and challenges us to rethink how we interpret their place in the religious and political life of the new nation.

Rather than assuming that reports of miracles were false and seeking to explain why people chose to believe them anyways, Jortner adopts an antirealist approach, taking people at their word for what they said they believed and looking at the effects of those decisions. In doing so, he pushes back on previous scholars’ interpretations that privilege economic or social concerns as better explanations for the belief in miracles or that magic was only the domain of those outside of the mainstream. He argues the cessation, as opposed to the decline, of magic is a more valuable way to think about its transformation in the early republic. Intriguingly, as the miraculous became less common, it became even more important.

Jortner uses the first part of the book to establish how Americans understood the miraculous, the various forms it took, and how it became politicized by its critics. Diverging from their British cousins, Americans embraced the Scottish Common Sense reasoning of Thomas Reid who emphasized the importance of facts, sense evidence, and the testimony of eye witnesses in judging phenomena that violated natural laws. On a practical level, the First Amendment reduced the authority of established churches to adjudicate these claims and empowered believers to share their experiences through the press or by starting their own churches. The frequent printing of grimoires (books of charms, spells, conjurations, and instructions for the creation of magical

devices), the continuity of witchcraft allegations, and the popularity of fortune-tellers and treasure-diggers demonstrates the persistence of an enchanted world. The response to the miraculous, however, was played out in the political rather than the intellectual arena. In a new nation dependent on virtue and rationality for its survival, many believed the presence of the miraculous constituted a serious threat. Antisupernaturalist writers warned of the dangers of credulity and advocated public measures to eradicate the danger of chaos and disorder.

In the second part, a series of case studies of less familiar groups ultimately sets-up the one group still remembered for embracing the miraculous, the Mormons. The centrality of miracles to the Shakers – a group established on the claim that its founder held the Christ-spirit – demonstrates the persistence of the miraculous and reveals the extent to which critics employed the language of political threat to justify persecution. The rise of nativism among different Indian nations between 1750 and 1840 under such powerful leaders as Neolin, Handsome Lake, Tenskwatawa, and Kenekuk takes the possibility of persecution a step further to illustrate the deployment of repressive state action. By the time Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, the stage was effectively set for him to find a willing body of converts sympathetic to the supernatural but also to receive a violent political and military response from his critics. A final chapter suggests we've misunderstood the supernatural in this period because so many of its practitioners have disappeared – or been suppressed – from the historical record. Forgetting the William and Elizabeth Babcocks, Jemima Wilkinsons, and Jacob Cochrans of the early republic makes us prone to see longer-lasting groups, like the Mormons, as more anomalous than they actually were.

Particularly exciting is the way in which Jortner's work sets up a rethinking of what this landscape of wonders meant for Roman Catholics, a group the author acknowledges was synonymous with the miraculous but which is only mentioned in passing. How might this antisupernatural culture have shaped the decisions of American Catholics during the laity-led phase of the church in the early nineteenth-century? Furthermore, how did Americans respond to the heightened emphasis on the miraculous among mid-nineteenth century European Catholics – or the vogue for mesmerism, spirit rappings, and séances among American Protestants? These

questions, of course, go beyond Jortner's project, but speak to how his rich work will inspire future studies of an overlooked topic.