

Preface

This book is about religious rivalries in the early Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity. The book is divided into three parts. The first part debates the degree to which the category of rivalry adequately names the issue(s) that must be addressed when comparing and contrasting the social success of different religious groups in Mediterranean antiquity. Some scholars insist on the need for additional registers; others consider it important not only to contemplate success but also failure and loss; yet others treat specific cases. The second part of the book provides a critical assessment of the modern category of mission to describe the inner dynamics of such a process. Discussed are the early Christian apostle Paul, who typically is supposed to have been a missionary; the early Jewish historian Josephus, who typically is not described in this way; and ancient Mithraism, whose spread and social reproduction has heretofore remained a mystery. Finally, part 3 of the book discusses “the rise of Christianity,” largely in response to the similarly titled work of the American sociologist of religion Rodney Stark. The book as a whole renders more complex and concrete the social histories of Christianity, Judaism, and paganism in the early Roman Empire. None of these groups succeeded merely by winning a given competition. It is not clear that any of them imagined its own success necessarily to entail the elimination of others. It does seem, however, that early Christianity had certain habits both of speech and of practice, which made it particularly apt to succeed (in) the Roman Empire.

The book is about rivalries in the plural, since there are many: sibling, imperial, professional, psychological, to name but a few. Each of these has

its own characteristics, conditions, complications. All, however, share the same constitutive antinomy, which therefore may function here as a basic definition. In rivalry, one needs the other, against whom we struggle, from whom I seek to differentiate myself, over whom you hope to prevail, in order to know oneself as oneself. Religious rivalries in the early Roman Empire are no exception. Christianity, Judaism, and so-called paganism existed only through such a relationship with one another (although rivalry was hardly the only condition of their existence). It is not possible to understand any of these traditions without considering how each of them used the other(s) to explain itself to itself and, sometimes, to persuade another to become (like) one of them.

Rivalries. Not competition. Not coexistence. Even though not everyone who writes in this book finally thinks that “rivalries” is the best name for the diverse patterns of relationship among Christians, Jews, and others in different urban settings of the early Roman Empire. Nonetheless, to define these groups as somehow rivals with one another has served to keep together in conversation with one another the volatile codependency that characterized these groups’ ongoing competition with each other; which is to say, the way(s) in which their undeniable coexistence included not infrequently and eventually the struggle for hegemony. By making rivalries the primary axis around which the various investigations of this book (and its companions) turn, it has become possible to give a better account of the particular social identity and concrete operational mode(s) of existence of each of these traditions in antiquity.

Religious rivalries...and the rise of Christianity: this book also discusses the different cultural destinies of Christianity, Judaism, and paganism in Mediterranean antiquity as a question of social rivalry. To which degree, and in which manner(s), did each of these traditions, in its variant forms, emerge, survive, and sometimes achieve social dominance by contending—competing, collaborating, coexisting—with its neighbours, specifically in urban contexts of the early Roman Empire? Under consideration here is the role of explicit social conflict and contest in the development of ancient religious identity and experience.

Part 1 of the book provides a number of different points of entry into the general topic of religious rivalries in the early Roman Empire. The first chapter is introductory. Written by Leif E. Vaage initially to suggest both a rationale and some further lines of inquiry for a seminar of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies (CSBS), the essay asks a series of leading questions, taking early Christianity as its primary example, and seeks to encourage the production of alternate histories, especially if and when these are

derived from more intimate knowledge of the fields of early Judaism and adjacent paganism. In the second and third chapters, Philip Harland and Stephen Wilson respectively begin such a revision, by qualifying what religious rivalry concretely meant. In the case of Harland, this is done by discussing the ongoing vitality of ancient civic life, in which the practices of rivalry between different social-religious associations were less a sign of significant social transformation and more a measure of continuing local health. In the case of Wilson, both why and how early Christians, Jews, and other pagan groups lost members through apostasy or defection is examined. In both cases, the precise social shape or contours of ancient religious rivalry is brought more clearly into focus through greater specification.

By contrast, in the fourth chapter, Reena Basser explores ancient religious rivalry as a constitutive ambiguity. At least, this seems to be the best way to understand early rabbinical efforts to imagine a particular form of Jewish religious life in a social context that was both their own, economically, and yet perceived by them nonetheless to be inherently incompatible, ritually, with this way of life. Developing Basser's work further, Jack Lightstone then inquires, in the fifth and final chapter of this section, whether the explicit focus on rivalry, in fact, does not skew or obscure our understanding of ancient social life. This includes, of course, the practice of religion, which certainly had its tensions and turmoil but also, in Lightstone's view, other more co-operative or *laissez-faire* aspects. In fact, Lightstone inquires, why not consider these other more congenial aspects to be at least as important as rivalry in shaping daily life and the diverse forms of relationship among different religious groups in antiquity?

The first and final chapters by Vaage and Lightstone define a theme that recurs throughout the book, namely, the degree to which the category of rivalry adequately names the issue(s) that must be addressed when comparing and contrasting the social destiny of different religious groups in antiquity. Is the category of rivalry ultimately a telling one for research in this area? Or does such a category, more or less immediately, require qualification through other considerations? Since the editor of the book and the author of this preface also wrote the first chapter, my presentation of the question is hardly impartial or objective. Suffice it to say that I chose the term "rivalry" to name an issue I thought could be intriguing and productive for collective inquiry. This issue, in a word, was the role that social power—both its imaginary pursuit and concrete conquest—played in shaping the diverse destiny of various religious groups in the early Roman Empire. By the pursuit and conquest of social power, I meant the stratagems developed and deployed by a given religious group to attain and secure its

immediate social survival as well as, sometimes, an enduring political presence, if not eventual dominance. Of course, I also chose the term to provoke debate. Such debate quite properly includes an exploration of the limits of the category itself.

In part 2, the reader has before her three quite different chapters, each of which takes up the question of the category of mission as part of the standard vocabulary of scholarly discourse about Christian origins and the history of other religious groups in the early Roman Empire. In the first chapter of the book, it was proposed that the category of mission be abandoned altogether. Neither Terence Donaldson nor Steve Mason in their respective chapters on Paul and Josephus has been willing to do so. At the same time, both Donaldson and Mason take care to define clearly, viz. redefine what exactly they mean by mission.

In the case of Paul, to his own surprise, Donaldson admits that he did not discover the explicit missionary sensibility he thought that he would find in Paul; instead, Donaldson discerns a more modest or subdued list of apostolic things to do. If Paul had a mission, it was not apparently at the forefront of his consciousness, nor of the discourse Paul used about himself. Moreover, to describe the specific content of this understated mission and its scope is said to require more exegetical work. One might wonder why the apostolic robe has proven to be so threadbare on this point.

By contrast, Mason argues, quite directly, that Josephus *was* a missionary: for Judaism, in Rome. This puts Mason at odds with more than one scholarly stereotype or conventional opinion, for example, the belief that there were no Jewish missionaries in antiquity; that Josephus was a traitor to Judaism rather than an advocate for it; that a religious mission would properly be something other than what Josephus practised. The rhetorical advantage Mason derives from this use of “missionary” to characterize Josephus can hardly be denied: it cuts to the heart of any number of misconceptions and misrepresentations of the man. The question, however, whether “missionary” is finally the best term to describe who Josephus was and what he was doing in Rome, is not thereby resolved—at least, not automatically. Much depends, for Mason, on the specific purpose of Josephus’ late writing, *Contra Apionem*.

The third chapter in this second section of the book, by Roger Beck, does not use the category of mission to describe the way(s) in which ancient Mithraism maintained and reproduced itself socially. Indeed, the purpose of Beck’s essay is precisely to underscore how utterly “un-missionary” ancient Mithraism appears to have been. Nonetheless, Beck makes a significant contribution to the debate about mission in the early Roman

Empire, insofar as he makes plain that such activity was *not* necessary for at least one ancient and genuinely religious tradition to succeed in propagating itself over time. The fact that such social reproduction evidently occurred in the most ordinary of ancient ways is instructive.

In part 3, under discussion is the evident “success” of early Christianity in becoming the dominant religion of the later Roman Empire. The four chapters that make up this section of the book are hardly the first writings to consider the topic; indeed, it appears to have become somewhat of a cottage industry among scholars of various stripes. Nonetheless, the topic obviously belongs to a discussion of religious rivalries in antiquity, and is addressed here for that reason. Each of the essays represents a response to one or more aspects of Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity* (which the second half of the title of this book is meant to echo). Stark’s work aims to provide a strictly sociological explanation for early Christianity’s emergence as, in the words of the subtitle of the paperback edition, “the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries.” Much could and has been written about Stark’s analysis, both as sociology of religion and as history. The four essays in Part Three are meant to be illustrative and telling, not exhaustive, in their treatment of the topic.

The first essay, by Adele Reinhartz, reviews Stark’s representation of the early Christian “mission to the Jews,” which is chapter 3 of *The Rise of Christianity*. (The depiction of Judaism before Christianity, as discussed in the first chapter of the book, is one of the more evident weaknesses in the pioneering work of both Gibbon and Harnack.) Reinhartz does not ask the categorical question, whether there ever was a mission to the Jews, but, rather, inquires about evidence; namely, the degree to which, if at all, there can be found in the historical record indicators of the kind of mission Stark postulates as necessary or most probable for sociological reasons. As case in point, Reinhartz examines the Gospel of John, since this text otherwise seems to reflect the very sort of situation Stark takes to be constitutive of the origins and subsequent rise of early Christianity. Not surprisingly, the Gospel of John, as Reinhartz describes it, does not confirm Stark’s straightforward scenario of multiple generations of Hellenized Diaspora Jews finding greater satisfaction in early Christianity.

The second essay, by Steven Muir, discusses health care and other practices of early Christian charity as a contributing factor to its social success. This topic was the theme of Stark’s fourth chapter in *The Rise of Christianity*. Muir is appreciative of the fact that such a “mundane” explanation is possible but, again, wants to test the proposal against the historical evidence. Moreover, it is not clear that Stark accurately represents the nature and state

of ancient health care before the advent of Christianity. In the end, it seems to Muir that the Christians did nothing especially new in this regard. At the same time, they did practise widely and with notable determination the kind of mutual aid and care for others, which ancient persons considered essential to religious satisfaction.

The third chapter in this section, by Roger Beck, also is appreciative of Stark's overall effort to account sociologically for the rise of Christianity in the religious marketplace of the Roman Empire. What bothers Beck is the way in which this account fails adequately to represent the pagan competition. Christianity's success becomes, in Stark's depiction of the ancient world, at best a triumph over a straw man and, at worst, a nonsensical set of assertions. Stark may well describe, even persuasively, various aspects of early Christianity through comparison with new religious movements in modern North America and Europe. But because Stark fails to grasp key aspects of especially public paganism in the Roman Empire, his explanation of Christianity's success in this realm is deemed not to be entirely successful.

The final essay, by Leif E. Vaage, does not discuss, in any detail, a specific aspect of Stark's work or its possible improvement. Rather, in explicit contrast to the sociological explanations favoured by Stark and his theoretical co-religionists, an essentially discursive reason for Christianity's success as the chosen faith of Roman rule is suggested. Without denying the role that sociological and other factors undoubtedly played in constructing the historical script of emerging Christian hegemony, these elements were able to contribute to such an outcome, it is proposed, only because such a script was already sufficiently composed and operative in the centuries before titular domain finally was achieved. The main purpose of this concluding chapter is to argue that it was especially how earliest Christianity *resisted* Roman rule, which made it such a probable successor to the eternal kingdom.