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## Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity

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# *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 I 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 Bassler 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 Bassler'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.

# 1

## Ancient Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success

Christians, Jews, and Others  
in the Early Roman Empire

*Leif E. Vaage*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter was initially written in 1994 to suggest both a rationale and a few possible lines of inquiry for a seminar of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies (CSBS), which would focus on the question of religious rivalries in different urban settings of the early Roman Empire. The chapter is thus essentially a list of leading questions. It will also become apparent that my own particular interests and competencies lie in the field of earliest Christianities. This angle of vision is certainly not the only perspective, and conceivably not even the best one, from which to define such a conversation. Nonetheless, because a decidedly Christian, viz. Protestant view of things has shaped historical research in the area, it has still seemed useful to introduce the following studies with a critique of certain stock features of that traditional perspective.

### EDWARD GIBBON

The eventual success of Christianity in becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire is an historical phenomenon that has been variously celebrated and lamented but still remains inadequately understood. Typically, the fact of Christianity's emergence as the empire's dominant persuasion is construed *mutatis mutandis* either as the inevitable triumph of a compelling truth (albeit initially ignored and benightedly disparaged) or as due to the opportunistic chicanery of politically astute but otherwise quite conventional believers (a.k.a. the deceived and the deceivers). Edward Gib-

bon's well-known magnum opus, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788), specifically, the two chapters (15–16) in Volume One dedicated to “the progress and establishment of Christianity,” may well serve as a symbolic point of departure for an assessment of this modern scholarly tradition.

Understanding Gibbon himself is not my purpose here. Nonetheless, it is clear that an assessment of Gibbon's own social history would be relevant to any critical examination of his view of Mediterranean antiquity. In my opinion, for example, a notable contrast exists between Gibbon's general enthusiasm for life in the Roman republic and early Roman Empire (under the Antonines) and the rather fussy genteelness of Gibbon's own personal existence (beyond what Gibbon writes in his autobiography, see, e.g., Joyce 1953; de Beer 1968). Gibbon's own account of how he conceived the project that became his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is remarkably short and uninformative (see Bonnard 1966, 136f); though, on more than one occasion, Gibbon did revise this account for maximum symbolic effect (Bonnard 1966, 304f; the significance of these revisions has been dismissed by Ghosh 1997, 283).

Writing with evident irony—yet, in my judgment, very much within the reigning convictions that Gibbon affected no longer seriously to entertain—the renowned historian proposed:

A candid but rational inquiry into the progress and establishment of Christianity may be considered as a very essential part of the history of the Roman Empire.... Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned, that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself and to the ruling providence of its great Author. But as truth and reason seldom find so favourable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart and the general circumstances of mankind as instruments to execute its purpose, we may still be permitted (though with becoming submission) to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian church? It will, perhaps, appear that it was most effectually favoured and assisted by the five following causes: I. The inflexible and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians—derived, it is true, from the Jewish religion but purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses. II. The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which

could give weight and efficacy to that important truth. III. The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church. IV. The pure and austere morals of the Christians. V. The union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman Empire. (Saunders 1952, 260–62)

Each of the secondary causes that Gibbon ascribes to Christianity's eventual success can be debated. Certainly, for example, Gibbon's characterization of "the Jewish religion" as having a "narrow and unsocial spirit which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses," is completely unacceptable and has generally been reversed in modern scholarship. In his description of ancient Judaism, Gibbon appears merely to repeat traditional-contemporary European-Christian stereotypes. At the same time, Gibbon elsewhere observes with abiding perspicacity:

There is the strongest reason to believe that before the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine the faith of Christ had been preached in every province and in all the great cities of the empire; but the foundation of the several congregations, the numbers of the faithful who composed them, and their proportion to the unbelieving multitude are now buried in obscurity or disguised by fiction and declamation... The rich provinces that extend from the Euphrates to the Ionian Sea [i.e., Syria and Asia Minor] were the principal theatre on which the apostle of the Gentiles displayed his zeal and piety. The seeds of the Gospel, which he had scattered in a fertile soil, were diligently cultivated by his disciples; and it should seem that, during the first two centuries, the most considerable body of Christians was contained within those limits. (Saunders 1952, 309–10)

The progress of Christianity was not confined to the Roman Empire; and, according to the primitive fathers, who interpret facts by prophecy, the new religion, within a century after the death of its Divine Author, had already visited every part of the globe.... But neither the belief nor the wishes of the fathers can alter the truth of history. It will remain an undoubted fact that the barbarians of Scythia and Germany, who afterwards subverted the Roman monarchy, were involved in the darkness of paganism, and that even the conversion of Iberia, of Armenia, or of Aethiopia was not attempted with any degree of success till the sceptre was in the hands of an orthodox emperor. Before that time the various accidents of war and commerce might indeed diffuse an imperfect knowledge of the Gospel among the tribes of Caledonia and among the borderers of the Rhine, the Danube, and the Euphrates. Beyond the last-mentioned river, Edessa was distinguished by a firm and early adherence to the faith. From Edessa the principles of Christianity were

easily introduced into the Greek and Syrian cities which obeyed the successors of Artaxerxes; but they do not appear to have made any deep impression on the minds of the Persians, whose religious system, by the labours of a well-disciplined order of priests, had been constructed with much more art and solidity than the uncertain mythology of Greece and Rome. (Saunders 1952, 316–17)

However foreign or distressingly familiar the cultural mindset may be within which Gibbon first penned these remarks, the transparency of his prose and the directness of his reasoning yet raise as effectively as any later historian's work a series of still unanswered questions. For example:

- What is the significance of the fact that, for at least two centuries (until approximately 180 CE) and effectively well into a third, there is no extant material (apart from literary) evidence of Christianity as a distinct socio-religious phenomenon, since the first two centuries of self-definition and growth remain “buried in obscurity or disguised by fiction and declamation”?
- Was Christianity during the first two centuries essentially, as Gibbon proposes, a religion of Asia Minor and (northern) Syria and, therefore, properly should be described in these terms, namely, as another—though by no means the most obvious or most vigorous—instance of the variable religious life of the diverse civic cultures of this region?
- If Gibbon is correct that until “the sceptre was in the hands of an orthodox emperor,” Christianity did not succeed in establishing itself beyond the bounds of the ancient civilized (non-barbarian, Roman) world—perhaps because no serious effort had been made to promote it elsewhere—what conclusions, if any, should be drawn from this fact vis-à-vis the reputed missionary character of early Christianity?
- Does Gibbon's statement about the introduction of Christianity among the barbarians also hold true for Christianizing the Roman Empire, namely, that it was simply “the various accidents of war and commerce” which first “diffuse[d] an imperfect knowledge of the Gospel” throughout the Mediterranean basin before Constantine?
- What made it possible, or even likely, that a city like Edessa should be “distinguished by a firm and early adherence to the faith” in the midst of an otherwise disinterested culture? Was Christianity's success within the Roman Empire (versus, say, among the Persians) ultimately due to “the uncertain mythology of Greece and Rome”; in the words of Arthur Darby Nock, the fact that there was “in these [pagan] rivals of Judaism and Christianity no possibility of anything which can be called conversion” (1933, 14)? Nock, however, goes on to observe: “In fact the only context

in which we find [conversion] in ancient paganism is that of philosophy, which held a clear concept of two types of life, a higher and a lower, and which exhorted men to turn from the one to the other" (1933, 14). Perhaps we should seek another reason.

#### ADOLF VON HARNACK

In the preface to his seminal work, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, Adolf von Harnack claimed: "No monograph has yet been devoted to the mission and spread of the Christian religion during the first three centuries of our era" (1908, vii). Before Harnack's work, it is said, there were only myths of origin: "The primitive history of the church's mission lies buried in legend; or rather, it has been replaced by a tendentious history of what is alleged to have happened in the course of a few decades throughout every country on the face of the earth....But the worthless character of this history is now recognised on all sides" (1908, vii, slightly modified; cf. MacMullen 1981, 206n. 16: "so far as I know [Harnack's work] is the last [devoted to this subject]—certainly still standard").

This claim is patently ridiculous, once we acknowledge that the nineteenth-century German liberal academic understanding of the past is every bit as much "a tendentious history" as are, for example, the narrative of Christian beginnings in the canonical Acts of the Apostles or the triumphal account of Christian origins by Eusebius of Caesarea. Nonetheless, Harnack's claim to originality underscores the relative recentness of the scholarly recognition that early Christianity's success within the Roman Empire was hardly as assured as Gibbon's earlier (however ironical) reference to "the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself and...the ruling providence of its great Author" plainly, if playfully, presupposed. Furthermore, Harnack's claim also makes clear why Gibbon's so-called "secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian church" have now become of primary interest.

Unlike Gibbon's characterization of the Jewish religion as "narrow and unsocial," Harnack a century or so later begins his work by describing "the diffusion and limits" of Judaism as the crucial historical factor that both made possible and underwrote early Christianity's eventual success. The language of mission is used by Harnack as though it were a self-evident category for historical description:

To the Jewish mission which preceded it, the Christian mission was indebted, in the first place, for a field tilled all over the empire; in the second place, for religious communities already formed everywhere in the towns; thirdly, for what Axenfeld calls "the help of materials" fur-

nished by the preliminary knowledge of the Old Testament, in addition to catechetical and liturgical materials which could be employed without much alteration; fourthly, for the habit of regular worship and a control of private life; fifthly, for an impressive apologetic on behalf of monotheism, historical theology, and ethics; and finally, for the feeling that self-diffusion was a duty. The amount of this debt is so large, that one might venture to claim the Christian mission as a continuation of the Jewish propaganda. "Judaism," said Renan, "was robbed of its due reward by a generation of fanatics, and it was prevented from gathering in the harvest which it had prepared." (Harnack 1908, 15)

To nascent Christianity the synagogues in the Diaspora meant more than the *fontes persecutionum* of Tertullian's complaint; they also formed the most important presupposition for the rise and growth of Christian communities throughout the empire. The network of the synagogues furnished the Christian propaganda with centres and courses for its development, and in this way the mission of the new religion, which was undertaken in the name of the God of Abraham and Moses, found a sphere already prepared for itself. (Harnack 1908, 1)

It is surprising that a religion which raised so stout a wall of partition between itself and all other religions, and which in practice and prospects alike was bound up so closely with its nation [*Volkstum*], should have possessed [in the diaspora] a missionary impulse of such vigour and attained so large a measure of success. This is not ultimately to be explained by any craving for power or ambition; it is a proof that Judaism, as a religion, through external influence and internal transformation was already expanding, and becoming a cross [*Mittelding*] between a national religion [*Volksreligion*] and a world-religion (confession of faith and a church). (Harnack 1908, 9; modified)

The duty and the hopefulness of mission are brought out in the earliest Jewish Sibylline books. Almost the whole of the literature of Alexandrian Judaism has an apologetic and propagandistic tendency. (Harnack 1908, 9n. 3; slightly modified)

While all this was of the utmost importance for the Christian mission which came afterwards, at least equal moment attaches to one vital omission [*empfindliche Lücke*] in the Jewish missionary preaching: viz., that no Gentile, in the first generation at least, could become a real son of Abraham. His rank before God remained inferior. Thus it also remained very doubtful how far any proselyte—to say nothing of the "God-fearing"—had a share in the glorious promises of the future. The religion which repairs this omission [*diese Lücke ausfüllen*] will drive Judaism from the field [*aus dem Felde schlagen*]. (Harnack 1908, 12–13)

Again, Harnack's description of ancient Judaism is hardly sufficient. To suggest, for example, as Harnack does in the last citation, that Christianity succeeded where Judaism failed, is, to say the least, a lamentable lapse into the worst sort of traditional dogmatic Christian historiography. Also dubious is Harnack's assumption (though hardly his alone) that there actually was such a thing as a Jewish mission. Harnack presumes that the presence of Jewish communities throughout the ancient Mediterranean world as well as the fact that some Gentiles did become Jews, the possibility of proselytes, and the writing of apologetic literature, all support such a conclusion. None of this is self-evident, however, not to mention the Hegelian conception of history, which seems to lurk within Harnack's reference to early Judaism as "a cross [*Mittelding*] between a national religion [*Volksreligion*] and a world-religion (confession of faith and a church)."

#### FORGET "MISSION"

The simple and unchecked use of terms such as mission, missionary, and preaching for conversion does not account for the eventual spread and social advancement of early Christianity within the ancient Mediterranean world. In this section, I focus my critique on use of the category of mission. Equally dubious, however, are other correlate notions as well. The use of such terminology assumes that there was a special Christian message (*Botschaft*, gospel, *kerygma*) to be proclaimed. Again, this is hardly self-evident. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate why such assumptions are historically dubious. A number of other questions will then become pressing. For example:

- How would we tell the story of the prolonged—and, in many ways, never resolved—internecine struggles between Jews, Christians, and other religious groups during the first two centuries CE, if we were self-consciously to eliminate or bracket out of our narrative and explanatory vocabulary all references to a mission of any sort on the part not only of pagans and Jews but also of early Christians?
- In which ways would a social history of the diverse relations between Jews, Christians, and other religious groups, in different cities of the early Roman Empire, shorn of all teleological assurances, change our description of this formative phase?

One result of recent research into Jewish and Christian beginnings is a renewed awareness of so-called paganism's continuing appeal and ongoing vitality in late antiquity (e.g., Lane Fox 1986). The polemic of early Christian and Jewish writers against the ritual practices and social mores



of their cultural counterparts no longer appears to historians of the period to be especially representative of life on the ground for most persons—Christians, Jews, and others—in the ancient Mediterranean world. According to Ramsay MacMullen and Eugene N. Lane:

The emergence of Christianity from the tangled mass of older religious beliefs, eventually to a position of unchallenged superiority, is surely the most important single phenomenon that can be discerned in the closing centuries of the ancient world. In its impact on the way life was to be lived thereafter in the West, it outmatches even the decline of Rome itself....It must be said in criticism of [previous books on this subject], however, that they make little or no mention of the body in which Christianity grew—as if obstetrics were limited to passing references in a handbook on babies. How about the mother? Will she not help determine the manner in which the child enters the world and, to some extent, its shape and nature? (MacMullen and Lane 1992, vii)

Regarding Harnack's *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, MacMullen observes: "It is justly admired for its scholarship. Among its thousands of references to sources, however, I can find not one to a pagan source and hardly a line indicating the least attempt to find out what non-Christians thought and believed" (1981, 206n. 16). Already Nock in his seminal study, *Conversion*, had contended:

We cannot understand the success of Christianity outside Judaea without making an effort to determine the elements in the mind of the time to which it appealed....In the first place, there was in this world very little that corresponded to a return to the faith of one's fathers as we know it. Except in the last phase of paganism, when the success of Christianity had put it on the defensive and caused it to fight for its existence, there was no traditional religion which was an entity with a theology and an organization. Classical Greek has no word which covers religion as we use the term. *Eusebeia* approximates to it, but in essence it means no more than the regular performance of due worship in the proper spirit, while *hosiotēs* describes ritual purity in all its aspects. The place of faith was taken by myth and ritual. These things implied an attitude rather than a conviction [viz., conversion]. (Nock 1933, 10)

*Soteria* and kindred words carried no theological implications; they applied to deliverance from perils by sea and land and disease and darkness and false opinions [and war], all perils of which men were fully aware. (Nock 1933, 9)

These external circumstances [of conquest and invasion and contact between foreign groups] led not to any definite crossing of religious

frontiers, in which an old spiritual home was left for a new one and for all, but to men's having one foot on each side of a fence which was cultural and not creedal. They led to an acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes, and they did not involve the taking of a new way of life in place of the old. This we may call adhesion, in contradistinction to conversion. By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right. It is seen at its fullest in the positive response of a man to the choice set before me by the prophetic religions [i.e., Judaism and Christianity]. (Nock 1933, 6–7)

Nock immediately continues: "We know this best from the history of modern Christianity" (1933, 7). Then, at the beginning of the next paragraph, Nock refers to William James, whose theoretical framework in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) is certainly psychological, if not simply modern American Protestant. To his credit, nonetheless, Nock swiftly notes: "We must not, however, expect to find exact analogies for [James's description of the experience of conversion] beyond the range of countries with a long-standing Christian tradition" (1933, 8). In fact, a subsequent essay by Nock, "Conversion and Adolescence," demonstrates how the association "in modern times" between adolescence and "some sort of moral and religious crisis" (i.e., conversion) was not true for Greco-Roman antiquity (1986).

The correlation of conversion with adolescence is actually not explicitly a postulate of James but, rather, had been suggested earlier by Edwin Diller Starbuck (1915, 28–48) on the basis of data that are decidedly American Protestant (evangelical) in nature. Even so, Starbuck himself noted that inductions made on this basis "are not necessarily true for savages or statesmen or Catholics or persons living in a different historical epoch" (1915, 13).

Nock is at his best, it seems to me, when he describes the specific cultural concerns and the open-ended or unorchestrated aspects of the different social and religious practices of ancient paganism. Nonetheless, Nock is quite untrustworthy, in my opinion, in his evaluation of the significance of the difference between these concerns and practices and those of "the prophetic religions" of Judaism and Christianity; if only because of the psychological theory of religion, which appears to inform Nock's critical assessment of ancient paganism's relative strengths and weaknesses, as well as the lingering Christian bias of Nock's use of the category of prophetic (cf. Nock 1933, 10, 15–16). According to Nock:

This contrast is clear. Judaism and Christianity demanded renunciation and a new start. They demanded not merely acceptance of a rite, but the adhesion of the will to a theology, in a word faith, a new life in a new people. It is wholly unhistorical to compare Christianity and Mithraism as Renan did, and to suggest that if Christianity had died Mithraism might have conquered the world. It might and would have won plenty of adherents, but it could not have founded a holy Mithraic church throughout the world. A man used Mithraism, but he did not belong to it body and soul; if he did, that was a matter of special attachment and not an inevitable concomitant prescribed by authority. (Nock 1933, 14)

In reply to Nock, we might agree that, indeed, it is wholly unhistorical to compare Christianity and Mithraism *as Renan did*. But, it seems to me, to observe that Mithraism before 325 CE “might and would have won plenty of adherents”; to compare the means and manner of this appeal to those of Christianity; and to analyze the reasons why one group (Christianity) finally came to garner imperial favour, while the other (Mithraism) did not, especially in light of the close link of the latter to the Roman military, is about as properly historical an investigation as one could imagine. Moreover, is the way in which “a man used Mithraism” finally so different from the way(s) in which most men and women in antiquity “used” Christianity or Judaism?

In this regard, the only significant difference between Mithraism and the so-called prophetic religions of Judaism and Christianity might be the fact that those in Judaism and Christianity, such as Paul or the rabbis, with a putatively special attachment to their faith, succeeded in having their specific claims to authority and their conviction of the need to “belong body and soul” to their particular persuasion preserved in writing through an enduring social institution. Conversely, the conceivably similar schemes and desires of other pagan priests and cultic leaders—that they, too, would continue to enjoy the active loyalty of their devotees; that these persons would participate regularly in the life of a given cult and contribute financially to its ongoing maintenance; that their group would obtain and retain wider social recognition ranging from a certain minimal respectability and local influence to a more generalized hegemony or monopoly—simply failed to leave a comparable trace.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Cf. *PLond.* 27101. 14, which forbids a member of the cult of Zeus Hypsistos “to leave the brotherhood of the president for another” (*meid’ ap[o]chôreise[in ek] tês tou hêg[ou]menou phratras eis heteran phratran*). See, further, Roberts, Skeat, and Nock (1936, 52) for discussion of the term *phratra* in this inscription.

To suggest that Judaism and Christianity were distinguished by “the adhesion of the will to a theology, in a word, faith, a new life in a new people,” utterly obscures the fact of active or, at least, interactive participation by members of both groups in the regular round of ancient urban life. Far from being an exceptional case or merely a problem of neophyte misunderstanding, the situation faced by Paul, for example, in 1 Corinthians 8–10 with the question of food-offered-to-idols eloquently testifies to the ongoing cultural ties that still existed between some early Christians and their non-Christian, non-Jewish neighbours in ancient Corinth. These ties, moreover, likely were less a function of the general ubiquity of so-called idols than of the enduring human desire, unabated under Roman imperial rule, to eat well whenever possible. Likewise, Paul’s letter to the Galatians attests a similar proximity between some early Christians in this region and the cultural traditions of early Judaism. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reveals his own lingering sense of identification with the same tradition.

On the other hand: “Of any organized or conscious evangelizing in paganism there are very few signs indeed, though it is often alleged; of any god whose cult required or had anything ordinarily to say about evangelizing there is no sign at all” (MacMullen 1981, 98–99). There is, perhaps, some evidence of debate with other perspectives, the effort to persuade, a certain self-promotion, even the advertisement of assorted wares for sale. But, again, none of this reveals more than ordinary human social life. One can hardly speak of a pagan mission in antiquity; unless, maximally, as Nock notes: “in the last phase of paganism, when the success of Christianity had put it on the defensive and caused it to fight for its existence” (1933, 10).

One might ask: What, then, made the social-religious practices of paganism and, specifically, participation in and identification with the group-life of different voluntary religious associations, so appealing to their members? One obvious answer is *philotimia* (cf. 1Thess. 4:11; Rom. 15:20), i.e., the opportunity these groups and their diverse habits gave to acquire honour to persons who apparently did not or could not hope to succeed so otherwise. Other possible motivations include the ubiquitous desire for “salvation” or bodily health and healing as well as personal improvement, including vengeance, justice, the avoidance of natural and other disasters, increased social power, even consolation in the face of death. In addition, there were sometimes explicit economic benefits: a guaranteed loan, if needed, and burial, when needed (though not likely in excess of actual financial contributions). To be a priest in a given cult was evidently profitable. At least, the purchase and resale of these activities were routinely reg-

ulated, suggesting some sort of marketable commodity. Finally, it has been suggested: “The reasons why people found associations attractive were doubtless many, but we should never underestimate the basic and instinctive desire of most people to socialize with those with whom they share things in common—devotion to a deity, a trade or skill, a similar background, or even just a love of eating and drinking in good company” (Wilson 1996, 14).

After the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the subsequent failure of the Bar Kochba rebellion, both early Judaism and early Christianity stood at the beginning of a protracted struggle to define, defend, and reproduce themselves in the face of other cultures, within which the adherents of these religions were obliged to live. Although the process was certainly marked by growing Christian claims to constitute the new “true Israel,” including how properly to read the sacred scriptures shared between these two traditions, there is also evidence in rabbinic literature of another ongoing debate between the emergent arbiters of Jewish identity and the surrounding pagan culture(s) as well. The following questions suggest themselves:

- What do the repeated polemical references in rabbinic literature to “Epicureans,” or the multiple Greek and Latin loan words in Talmudic Hebrew, suggest about the types of cultural conversations in which developing Judaism was engaged at the time (see, e.g., Fischel 1969; Luz 1989)?
- Is there a Jewish apologetic literature written after 132 CE with only a pagan audience—i.e., no Christians—in view? If not, why not? If so, how does Jewish apologetic literature compare with parallel Christian efforts to persuade Jews and pagans, viz. other early Christians of the truth and righteousness of (orthodox) Christianity?
- Is there any evidence of a desire on the part of early Judaism to increase the number of persons identified as Jews by attracting adherents from “all the nations” in which communities of Jews could then be found? If not, why not?

Martin Goodman’s seminal article, “Jewish Proselytizing in the First Century” (1992; cf. Goodman 1994), argues: “On examination...the evidence for an active mission by first-century Jews to win proselytes is very weak. I think that it is possible to go further and to suggest that there are positive reasons to deny the existence of such a mission” (Goodman 1992, 70). According to Goodman, this is to be contrasted:

with developments within Judaism later in antiquity. At some time in the second or third century [not unlike paganism on the defensive, as

Nock described it] some Jews seem to have begun looking for converts in just the way they were apparently not doing in the first century...The missionary hero in search of converts for Judaism is a phenomenon first attested well after the start of the Christian mission, not before it. There is no good reason to suppose that any Jew would have seen value in seeking proselytes in the first century with an enthusiasm like that of the Christian apostles. The origins of the missionary impulse within the Church should be sought elsewhere. (Goodman 1992, 74–77)

Whether or not Goodman is correct in his statements about “the Christian mission”—Goodman’s conventional claims in this regard merely serve as a foil for his more competent and balanced description of early Judaism—he does make a compelling case against the earlier assumption by Harnack and others that:

the idea of a mission to convert was inherited by the early Jesus movement from contemporary Judaism. I should make it clear that I do not doubt either that Jews firmly believed in their role as religious mentors of the Gentile world or that Jews expected that in the last days the Gentiles would in fact come to recognize the glory of God and divine rule on earth. But the desire to encourage admiration of the Jewish way of life or respect for the Jewish God, or to inculcate general ethical behaviour in other peoples, or such pious hope for the future, should be clearly distinguished from an impulse to draw non-Jews into Judaism....It is likely enough, then, that Jews welcomed sincere proselytes in the first century. But passive acceptance is quite different from active mission. (Goodman 1992, 53–55)

Thus, pagans, according to MacMullen, did not evangelize, and, according to Goodman, there is no history of a Jewish mission. Nonetheless, it remains self-evident to these and other scholars that early Christians somehow did evangelize and had such a mission. For example, MacMullen nonchalantly writes: “With Gnosticism, however, we approach the Judaeo-Christian tradition, in which despatch of emissaries from a central organization, and other formal aspects of missionary activity, were perfectly at home” (1981, 98). And Goodman begins his essay with the confident assertion: “Other religions spread either because worshippers moved or because non-adherents happened to find them attractive. Christianity spread primarily because many Christians believed that it was positively desirable for non-Christians to join their faith and accrete to their congregations. It is my belief that no parallel to the early Christian mission was to be found in the ancient world in the first century” (1992, 53; cf. Goodman 1994, 91–108).

Is this, in fact, true? Not whether there is any parallel in the ancient world to “the early Christian mission” but, rather, whether there ever was such a thing as “early Christian mission.” It is clear that, virtually from the beginning, early Christianity did find adherents across the customary ancient divides of social class or status and ethnicity. Within a generation, early Christianity appears to have included, among its diverse constituencies, persons of disparate origin. The concrete reasons for this state of affairs, however, remain to be determined.

I have tried to formulate the preceding paragraph as precisely as possible. For it is not at all obvious, at least to me, however zealous later Christians may have been about the ultimate truth and authority of their particular view of things, that this persuasion, for the first century or two of its existence, programmatically sought or even thought about seeking to convert the known world or a significant percentage of it “to Christ.” While Christianity plainly emerged, developed, and spread throughout the Mediterranean basin, that it did so, within the confines of the Roman Empire, intentionally or self-consciously as a particular social (political; philosophical) project, with the recruitment of new members as a founding feature of its official purpose, is anything but clear. Again, I say this because it is precisely this sort of unargued assumption that, in turn, tends to make self-evident the highly questionable historical judgments about early Christianity’s predictable, inevitable, understandable, probable, reasonable subsequent success.

This would be true, in my opinion, also for Paul, who otherwise describes himself, albeit only in Galatians and Romans, as Christ’s emissary to the Gentiles. Unfortunately, I cannot develop here the argument that will be required to dismantle the prevailing view of the apostle Paul as early Christianity’s first great missionary. At the same time, the issue is obviously important—indeed, crucial—to the usual scholarly imagination of the different ways in which Jews, Christians, and others in the early Roman Empire related to one another and to the larger social world(s) surrounding them. For this reason, in my judgment, we ought to find extremely interesting and cause for further reflection what John T. Townsend reports in his article, “Missionary Journeys in Acts and European Missionary Societies” (1985). According to Townsend, there is no evidence, before the preface to Acts in the first edition of J.A. Bengel’s *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (1742), that any previous Christian reader or commentator on the narratives of Paul’s travels in Acts ever thought to observe, in the sequence of Paul’s various encounters and diverse experiences, a series of intentional missionary journeys:

What is true of ancient writers is also true of those belonging to a later age. Neither Erasmus (c. 1466–1536) nor John Calvin (1509–64) nor Theodore Beze (1519–1605) nor Cornelius à Lapide (1567–1637) nor Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) interpreted Acts in terms of the traditional [three-fold] missionary journeys. In fact, the earliest reference that I can find to these journeys is in the first edition of J.A. Bengel's *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*....In the years following the first edition of *Gnomon* most writers on Acts adopted a missionary-journey pattern. It found its way into the major commentaries, including those of J.H. Heinrichs, H.A.W. Meyer, and H. Alford. Thus, by the middle of the century the three-missionary journey system had become firmly established in the exegetical tradition of Acts. Why should a missionary-journey pattern have been imposed on Acts at this time? A likely answer is that commentators were reading their own presuppositions back into apostolic times. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw an escalation of Western missionary activity. It was an era for founding missionary societies....Since it was standard missionary practice for evangelists to operate out of a home base, one should not be surprised at the exegetical assumption that Paul, the great missionary of the New Testament, had done the same. (Townsend 1985, 436–37)

Whatever the actual relations were between Christians, Jews, and others in the different cities of the early Roman Empire; however these groups and persons must have engaged in diverse and reciprocal struggles for social and religious success; it seems unlikely that any of them, including early Christianity, did so with any sort of mission in mind. What, then, each of these persuasions did imagine it was doing locally, and how each of them would have understood its defining activities vis-à-vis the parallel presence and similar endeavours of contiguous groups in a given urban environment, is one of the principal topics to be addressed in the investigations to follow.

#### WHAT IF...

No social group or movement succeeds in persisting without a certain critical mass of committed participants or adherents. In order to survive, all social groups and movements must attract and retain a certain number of persons willing and able to be identified, on a given occasion, as part of group x versus group y or z. If only for this reason, the demographic fact of an always limited number of potential and desirable participants (however great this number might be) in the life of a specific social group, together with the need to claim a minimum number of such persons as one's own in order to assure the group's continuing social reproduction, and the likely possibility that a greater number of members will mean heightened



prestige and social power for the group, already account for a certain level of constant struggle and agonistic competition with other groups at the heart of every ancient (religious) group's social existence.

To acknowledge the presence of multiple persuasions in a given cultural context necessarily includes the affirmation of some constitutive conflict between them. What remains to be determined—this is, perhaps, the most important consideration ethically and historically—is exactly how the predictable clashes of desire and asserted propriety are concretely negotiated.

There is no such thing as a totally open social group without boundaries or some sense of who its others are; which is to say, the excluded, alienated, disinterested, despite whom and/or versus whom the group in question has been constituted as such. At the same time, it is obviously a matter of great consequence exactly how, in a given cultural setting, different social groups or subgroups choose to coexist or compete with one another. More specifically, to what degree is the ongoing existence of one group imagined to require or to benefit rather than to suffer harm from the restriction or defeat or even the extinction of the others? How much unresolved or explicit difference between groups is perceived to be socially sustainable or desirable in a given place?

One way in which to address this topic—the generic problem of alternate social (religious) identities—has been to discuss it as a question of religious propaganda (see, e.g., Wendland 1972, 75–96; Schüssler Fiorenza 1976). To the extent that use of the category of propaganda effectively means mission, all further discussion along these lines necessarily reverts to the analysis of the previous section. The topic of propaganda could be understood, however, as a question of self-representation: both how a given group imagined that it ought to be seen by others (apologetics) as well as how others are habitually represented by it, which is to say, how the group imagines that those not itself ought to be viewed (polemics).

Regarding apologetic literature, I find it quite unlikely that such writing ever actually has as part of its original readership many persons beyond the group whose specific interests it so obviously articulates and defends. Apologetic literature customarily is written, of course, with an inquiring or hostile outsider as its ideal interlocutor, whose questions ostensibly set the agenda of the discussion. But the logic of the reasoning and the adequacy of the answers given in these texts are generally compelling only to those already committed in some fashion to the truth of the apologetic position. Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, for example, hardly appealed to Jews, let alone persuaded them to practice Christianity. In this regard, religious propaganda is essentially a means of self-definition; and its social success,

a function of efficacy, by doing the job best which people want done in this or that way. Thus we might ask: What made Christianity or Judaism or any other ancient religious group the more satisfying option, in a given moment, for their committed practitioners?

In this vein, yet another way in which to address the issue of shifting social success by Christians, Jews, and others in the early Roman Empire has been to focus on how change in allegiance or taste occurred, sometimes described (unhelpfully, in my opinion) as conversion. Why did a particular group or person, at a given moment in their social life, choose identification, more or less exclusively, with a new religious practice instead of merely trying it out and/or assimilating it to a prior pattern of behaviour? According to Nock:

The success of Christianity is the success of an institution which united the sacramentalism and the philosophy of the time. It satisfied the inquiring turn of mind, the desire for escape from Fate, the desire for security in the hereafter; like Stoicism, it gave a way of life and made man at home in the universe, but unlike Stoicism it did this for the ignorant as well as for the lettered. It satisfied also social needs and it secured men against loneliness. Its way was not easy; it made uncompromising demands on those who would enter and would continue to live in the brotherhood, but to those who did not fail it offered an equally uncompromising assurance. (Nock 1933, 210–11)

Personally, I find this explanation of Christianity's success to beg more questions than it answers. Some of these, nonetheless, warrant pursuit. For example:

- Why, in a given city, did more than a few persons, namely, diehard pagans and faithful Jews, not only remain not attracted to Christianity but become self-consciously opposed to it?
- What made paganism or Judaism continue to be the better option for their adherents, even when Christianity was politically triumphant?
- Did one group's success inevitably imply the failure of everyone else?