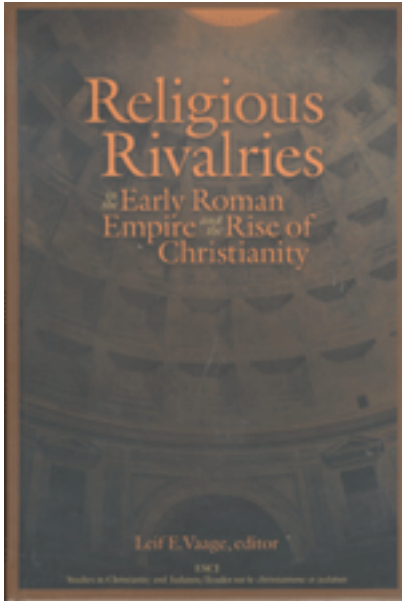


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Vaage, Leif E., ed.

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

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Under the overall title of “Religious Rivalries” this book brings together twelve essays that all deal with one or another aspect of the religious, and by extension the wider socioeconomic and political, context in which Christianity was shaped and first developed. The essays, some written already back in 1999, are divided into three parts: “Rivalries?”; “Mission?”; and “Rise?” The question mark in each title indicates that the authors are well aware that each of these concepts is in itself problematical or should be problematized in order to avoid misusing them.

Part 1 consists of five essays. By way of introduction to the volume, Leif E. Vaage (“Ancient Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success”) offers a critical reflection on the basic models that lie behind Edward Gibbon’s (“providential history” and the “inherent superiority of Christian teaching and doctrine”), Adolf von Harnack’s (“mission and expansion”), and Arthur Darby Nock’s (“conversion”) reconstructions of the earliest history of Christianity. Vaage has doubts about all three of these models and points out that the situation must have been far more complex than these scholars assumed it to be. He argues that for a very long time the kerygma remained unappealing to the larger and better part of society. “Mission” even appears to be a relatively recent category for describing Christianity’s earliest initiatives to reach out to the outer world. And

“conversion” may well be too fuzzy a category that, moreover, does not take into account the impact of social and political factors in the process.

The concept of “rivalry” itself is further nuanced, and complicated, in the other essays of this first part. Philip A. Harland (“The Declining *Polis*? Religious Rivalries in Ancient Civic Context”) draws attention to the very dynamic character of social and religious life in the “pagan” *polis* long after Christianity had begun to look for its place in the picture. Stephen G. Wilson (“Rivalry and Defection”) surveys a number of interesting cases of defection from each of the three religious traditions, thus offering some sort of prelude to his recent book on apostasy in the ancient world. Defection may have been caused by the missionary zeal of others, but the evidence shows that this conclusion cannot be generalized. “The reasons given for defection are quite varied, ranging through hostile pressure, career advancement, social attachments, prior religious experience, and intellectual doubt: a rich enough array to alert us to the manifold circumstances and motives that could prompt people to change their religious allegiance” (71). Reena Basser (“Is the Pagan Fair Fairly Dangerous? Jewish-Pagan Relations in Antiquity”) examines the concerns of and cautions formulated by the rabbis about participating or even becoming involved, however loosely, in pagan festivals. The threat of idolatry was of course a primary factor for this concern, but the evidence also shows that not infrequently it was balanced to some degree by economic necessity, as can be derived from some sections in the Tosefta qualifying or modifying the strictures of Mishnah in this respect. In a contribution of a more methodological character (“My Rival, My Fellow: Conceptual and Methodological Prolegomena to Mapping Inter-Religious Relations in 2nd- and 3rd-Century CE Levantine Society Using the Evidence of Early Rabbinic Texts”), Jack N. Lightstone deals with much the same sources and issues as Basser, wondering whether religious rivalry was always that strict and concluding that it can by no means constitute the whole picture but that there is also some evidence of a more cooperative or at least a more pragmatic attitude.

Part 2 contains three essays. Terence L. Donaldson (“‘The Field God Has Assigned’: Geography and Mission in Paul”) examines Paul’s missionary work and reaches the (negative) conclusion that the apostle had no sense of being on a missionary task. Consequently, Paul can be said to have been instrumental in spreading Christianity in the very first decades of its existence, but he did not in any way “found” a missionary movement. Once Christianity had been brought to the great cities of the Eastern Mediterranean, it would further develop in more informal and spontaneous ways and not through an “official” mission of the church (137). Steve Mason (“The *Contra Apionem* in Social and Literary Context: An Invitation to Judean Philosophy”) argues that Flavius Josephus, on the other hand, was well aware of his “missionary” or propagandistic task while in Rome. One might get the impression that the concepts of “mission” and

“missionary” are used in a somewhat too narrow sense in the first and in a somewhat too loose sense in the second of these two essays. Roger Beck (“On Becoming a Mithraist: New Evidence for the Propagation of the Mysteries”) adds a third “untypical” approach when examining how a largely nonmissionary movement as Mithraism nevertheless succeeded to survive and even to attract new members. Beck studies in particular the Virunum bronze plaque that was discovered and published in the early 1990s, a membership list of a Mithraic cult association that seems to have been supplemented over a number of years.

Part 3 centers on the concept of the “rise” of a movement, in particular of Christianity, as this has been analyzed by Rodney Stark in his monograph *The Rise of Christianity*. Adele Reinhartz (“Rodney Stark and ‘The Mission to the Jews’”) looks for evidence of Christian mission to the Jews on the terms of Stark’s model of an ongoing successful mission to the Diaspora Jews and finds this evidence lacking, at least for what the Fourth Gospel shows us. John’s community was not a uniformly Jewish one; there is no evidence that the Jewish part in it kept growing after a certain point in time; and it cannot be ascertained that it solely consisted of Diaspora Jews (211). Steven C. Muir (“‘Look How They Love One Another’: Early Christian and Pagan Care for the Sick and Other Charity”) takes issue with Stark’s fourth chapter about the impact of health care and other charity practices on the development of Christianity and notes that the Christian attitude in this respect may after all not have been so revolutionary and innovative. What distinguished Christian charity from pagan initiatives, however, was its well-organized and institutionalized character over against the more individual approach in pagan circles, where much depended on the goodwill of a private benefactor (231). The volume concludes with two more essays by Beck and Vaage. Beck (“The Religious Market of the Roman Empire: Rodney Stark and Christianity’s Pagan Competition”) modifies Stark’s presentation of Christianity’s triumph and success by also adding the pagan side. There were other traders on the market as well, and they used partly the same methods (the mystery cults) and partly developed methods of their own (often through the initiative or under the auspices of the emperor). Vaage (“Why Christianity Succeeded [in] the Roman Empire”) takes a different path. He does not question the fact that sociological factors did contribute to the spread of Christianity but argues that these factors have a role to play only in a “historical script” that is shaped by the continual resistance of Christianity to Roman rule. It was a battle between an earthly empire and a heavenly kingdom for a hegemony that is ruled and sanctioned by utterly different means. Rivalry thus becomes a far more complex entity than that of “market mechanisms,” more complex indeed to the degree that it was built in a major way by borrowing the language of (imperial) power from the opponent. Or, as Vaage, paraphrasing Richard Horsley, puts it: “My proposal is quite simple, if far-reaching: earliest Christianity was inherently an imperial religion,

which is to say, a social movement decisively shaped by the political culture of the Roman Empire under whose aegis it first came into being” (277).

This is a fine collection of essays that is daring in the choice of its topic and in its purpose and refreshingly innovating in some of its conclusions, but also moderately critical of approaches that tend to be too one-sidedly focused on sociological factors to explain the growth of a new religion.