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Introduction

IN THE fourth century CE, an anonymous woman in the Roman province of Pannonia (now southwestern Hungary) who suffered from elephantiasis went to an expert for help. This expert inscribed a twenty-five-line evocation to “Romulus, the mother Bona,” using Greek, Latin, and a series of symbols, on a small silver sheet. This silver sheet was rolled up and placed in a small leather box that the woman presumably carried with her, ultimately to her grave (see figure I.1)¹

Hundreds, if not thousands, of texts like this survive. They were commissioned by Jews, Christians, and the many others whose religious identity—if they even had one—is ambiguous or unrecoverable. Another example is this one in Coptic (an Egyptian language written in Greek and used by Christians) from the sixth or seventh century CE: “I adjure you with your power and the right hand of the father . . . the son and the authority of the holy spirit, and Gabriel [who] went to Joseph (and) caused him to take Mary for himself as [wife], that you neither delay nor hold back, until you bring to me N daughter of N., and I satisfy my desire with her.”² The spell, which involves also giving the woman a strong glass of wine to drink, is exactly what it appears to be: an invocation to the Christian Trinity and the archangel Gabriel to let a man lay with a woman he desires. Is it Christian, “pagan,” or Christian with “pagan” elements? Does it really matter?

Scholarship often treats texts like these as magical or examples of “popular” or “folk” religion. Combining the names of angels, deities, and all manner of supernatural beings, along with strings of

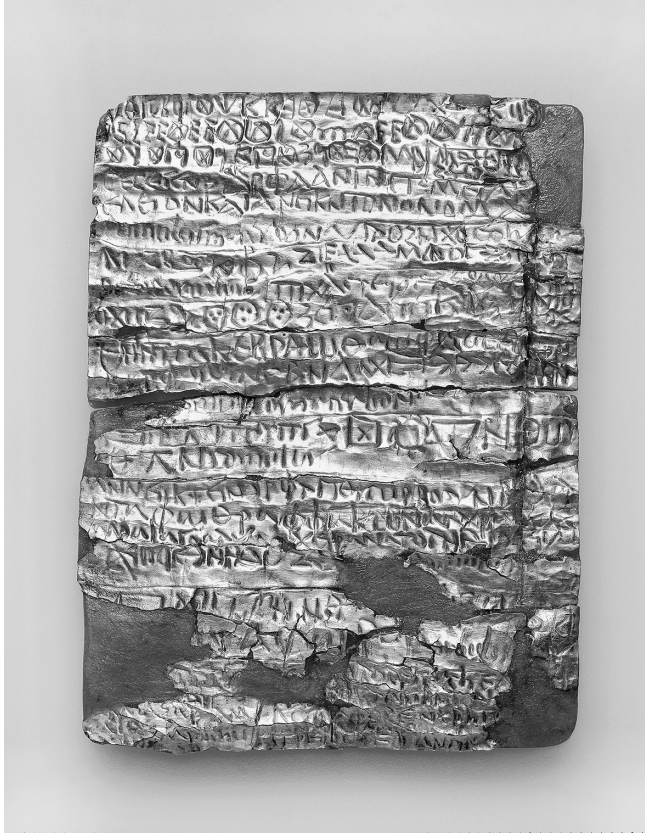


FIGURE I.1. Silver sheet with engraved inscription evoking “Romulus, the mother Bona,” found in Ságvár, Hungary. © Hungarian National Museum Public Collection Centre (inv. MNM-NRIRT-RO 9/1939.4), photo by András Dabasi and Judit Kardos. Used by permission.

incomprehensible (to us) symbols, they are seen as marginal to the “official” religion that took place in temples, synagogues, and churches. In this telling, the writings of intellectuals such as bishops and rabbis shape the primary lens through which we see religion. Their prescribed practices and beliefs, which emphasize behaviors that conform to a particular religious identity (e.g., Jewish or Christian), become central. Religion is about theological, legal, and ritual systems; institutions; and abstract notions, such as “asceticism.”

Yet such an approach misses something that was absolutely central to the lives of most people in Late Antiquity (ca. 200–600 CE), when

both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were in formation. Most people thought that the world was thick with supernatural beings, who were as real and had as much (if not more) agency as any person. To get by in the world required being on good terms with the right supernatural beings and able to ward off the bad ones. Being on good terms, in turn, required constant attention. It was unthinkable to go through an ordinary day without cultivating these relationships, whether in short prayers or invocations, the use of amulets, or offerings and sacrifices. This was an enchanted world, full of real if invisible beings. In this sense, “religion”—as a field of knowledge and practice that could be disembedded from the everyday practice of life—loses meaning. Interaction with the supernatural infused nearly every aspect of everyday life, and everyday life would grind to a halt without such interaction.

This book begins with the premise that the story of religion in Late Antiquity is best told not as a story of “Judaism” and “Christianity,” abstract systems being actively molded at the time, but as a story of how people thought about and interacted with the invisible world. This is an approach that scholars today refer to as “lived religion.” “Lived religion” differs from “popular religion.” “Popular religion” implies a relatively stark division between the elite, official, institutional, and correct practice of religion and the more superstitious, magical, incoherent, and thereby worse, practices of the masses. While a “lived religion” approach also focuses on what people are actually doing, it does so in a nonjudgmental and more capacious way. We are not interested here in separating proper from improper religious practice, or the “masses” from the elite, but in trying to assess how individuals of all types encountered the supernatural world. Most people cared more about effective results than religious boundaries. Religious boundaries meant little when it came to healing a sick child, warding off a plague, or seducing a love interest.³

When seen in this way, rather than as a story about traditions like “Judaism,” “Christianity,” and “paganism,” the religious history of Late Antiquity becomes not a linear story of triumph or continuity or doctrines and institutions but instead a lurching account of how humans sought to navigate a dangerous and uncertain world. While bishops, rabbis, and Roman priests were creating and enforcing identities and their boundaries, many historians today believe that they had very limited

reach and influence. Social relations between people of different ethnicities, or devotees of different deities, were certainly not always smooth in Late Antiquity. Yet neighbors who venerated different deities were for the most part united by basic human fears and a set of assumptions about supernatural beings and the way that they acted in the world.

Adopting this approach involves a significant conceptual shift in the way that most of us think about religion. Many of the words that we so often use to tell these stories—words that come precisely from the intellectuals in Late Antiquity seeking to create boundaries between distinctive traditions—obscure more than they elucidate. What does “religion” mean in a world where the existence of and need for relationships with supernatural beings were simply taken for granted? When we speak of “Judaism” or “Christianity,” to whose systems are we referring? “Paganism” is such a vague and inherently (intentionally) pejorative term that it is practically useless in understanding how people related to the supernatural world. For these reasons, I rarely use these terms in this book. Jews, Christians, Greeks, and Romans—actual human beings—appear frequently throughout this book, but the “systems” that label them do not.

Similarly, I find “magic” and “superstition” to be mostly unhelpful categories. Terms like this can be found in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, where they are used almost exclusively to denigrate targeted practices. There is little consistency in how such labeling was used, and it is clear that many of the practices that an elite group might label as magic were considered by most to be simply a part of the normal toolkit for communication with invisible beings. For example, we possess scores of texts that seek to raise the dead, yet many texts written by rabbis, bishops, and Roman elite recoil at the idea of necromancy and forbid it. Since one person’s magic is another’s religion, the term is best used sparingly and precisely.

What Is “Late Antiquity”?

This book concerns a period I have called “Late Antiquity.” Most scholars understand this period to span somewhere between the third and seventh centuries CE. In most common scholarly usage, however, it

denotes more than a specific time span. It also refers to a specific area (the Roman Empire, with some overlap to the Persian Empire as well) and even culture. Like many chronological labels, it has a history and an agenda. Briefly outlining both helps to situate this book in history and historiography.

Before “Late Antiquity,” in the world of Roman historians, there was simply the “Late Roman Empire,” the “Byzantine world,” or even the “early Middle Ages.” Each evokes a different historical narrative. The “Late Roman Empire,” for example, taps into a narrative of the decline of Rome, as reflected principally in its political structure. Rome’s political and literary “golden age,” in this narrative, occurred in the period of the Republic, which ended in 27 BCE, when Octavian (later Augustus) began to consolidate his power. By the mid-third century CE, the period of decline had begun. Economic instability, increasing reliance on mercenaries, and ossified bureaucracies marked the beginning of the Late Roman Empire. Spiritually, Romans entered, as E. R. Dodds called it, an “age of anxiety,” which set the scene for the spread of Christianity. Almost a century later, the Empire would split into a Western Empire, based in Rome, and an Eastern Empire, based in Constantinople. Some scholars thus use the term “the Byzantine period” to describe the Eastern Empire from the early fourth century CE. The Western Empire comes to an end with the successive sacks of Rome in 410 and 455. In the West, this is the end of antiquity, and the medieval period begins. Meanwhile, the Islamic invasions begin to eat away at Byzantium beginning in the seventh century. Constantinople would finally fall in 1453.⁴

If, from a Roman historian’s perspective, the late Empire pointed to a period of decline, in the eyes of Christian historians it was a time of triumph. For early Christians, the birth of Christ ended history. A new, timeless, era had begun. Except, of course, to all appearances it hadn’t. Christian writers struggled with this; whether and to what extent most other Christians did is an interesting but unanswerable question. For these Christian intellectuals, though, Constantine’s legalization of Christianity in 313 CE (the Edict of Milan) decisively demonstrated that Christianity does, in fact, have a history. The Edict of Milan, in their telling, ushered in an age of Christian triumph. Christians, who increasingly had power and developed legislation that promoted their goals

and agendas, had triumphed over the Jews and pagans, not because they were more powerful and luckier but because they were right and better.

Meanwhile, Jewish historians were telling an altogether different story. Prior to 70 CE, the Jewish polity was centered around the Temple in Jerusalem, the house of the Judean god YHWH. Judea had already lost their political independence to the Romans in 6 CE after the failure of the reign of the sons of King Herod but actively rebelled against Rome in 66 CE. In 70 CE, the Romans had put down the rebellion and torched the Temple. As if to punctuate their success, they brutally suppressed a second, smaller uprising that occurred between 132 and 135 CE, known as the Bar-Kokhba rebellion.

The destruction of the Temple meant different things to different historians. To the ancient Christian historians, it was a theological sign of God's rejection of the Jews. Josephus also saw it as a divine punishment for sins, albeit not a sign of rejection. Modern academic Jewish historians sometimes frame it as a watershed moment in Jewish history. The destruction of the Second Temple ended the Second Temple period (ca. 520 BCE–70 CE) and transformed Judaism from a sacrificial religion to one based on study of the Torah. With the sacrificial system in ruins, a new kind of spiritual authority, the rabbis, quickly rose. From the perspective of modern Jewish historians, this became the "rabbinic period" (ca. 70–620 CE).

The ancient rabbis, though, did not quite see history that way. Rabbinic texts begin to emerge in Roman Palestine (the new name of the province) in the early third century CE, although they are based on earlier sources. Rabbinic texts that date to the fourth to sixth centuries, from Palestine as well as Persia, often see the destruction of the Temple as tragic, but the Jewish story, they assert, is one of continuity. Jewish life was always focused on the Torah and the rabbis in the rabbinic imagination, not the Temple. Its destruction changed little.

It was the rise of the academic study of religion that led to a kind of historiographical reckoning. In the United States, academic departments devoted to the study of religion were increasingly founded beginning in the 1960s. Scholars of early, post–New Testament Christianity

were often said to be studying patristics, while those studying rabbinic literature were scholars of rabbinics. By the 1980s, neither group was very happy with how they were being categorized. The words “patristics” and “rabbinics” had a crusty, theological ring to them. Each group of scholars was concerned that the terms bore baggage that hindered their full integration into the secular university. Yet they also largely subscribed to a historical narrative that put them at odds with each other and especially with the Roman historians, who were well integrated into departments of classics and history.

In his influential book from 1978, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, the Roman historian Peter Brown helped to clear a new path. Brown did not invent the term “Late Antiquity,” but he was perhaps its most ardent and influential supporter. Rather than being a period of decline and fundamental change, Brown asserted, Late Antiquity was a time of continuity. And rather than “declining,” Roman society flourished. Christian thinkers emerged from creatively interacting with traditional Greek and Roman thinkers. Christians continued the classical tradition, albeit in a somewhat different form. “Late Antiquity” thus refers not only to a time (ca. 300–700 CE) and a place (the Roman Empire, with special attention to the Greek- and Syriac-speaking eastern provinces) but also to a narrative and cultural complex. For Brown, there was something distinctive about Late Antiquity that paved a gentler path to the Middle Ages.⁵

The concept of Late Antiquity has been intellectually productive and socially useful. This reconceptualization of the period sparked renewed scholarly interest and ignited a new research agenda. Many scholars of patristics relabeled themselves as scholars of Late Antiquity, which allowed for greater scholarly dialogue with Roman and Jewish historians. The narrative of Christian continuity with the classical tradition helped scholars to situate their work outside of theology and in history and classics.

For scholars of Jewish history, the reception of this term was more complicated. In theory, Late Antiquity is capacious, an ecumenical category that encompasses all ethnicities and religions in a single (if complex) culture, making it attractive to these scholars for the same reasons

that it was attractive to scholars of formative Christianity. On the other hand, though, the actual narratives produced under the rubric of Late Antiquity tend to marginalize the Jews. In a narrative of Christian continuity with the Roman classical tradition, Jews tend to be pushed to the side.

My own conception of Late Antiquity emerges from my background as a historian of Jews and Judaism. It thus covers the years 70–620 CE, with special attention to the third through sixth centuries (the rabbinic period). There has been much scholarly discussion, due to its relevance to the question of Christian origins, about whether there was a “common Judaism” when the Jerusalem Temple stood. Less attention has been paid to the time after the Temple’s destruction. Jews, I argue, are part of the cultural, social, and religious fabric of Late Antiquity, neither central nor marginal. The evidence they left can thus be seen as reflecting this wider culture, not as the parochial writings of an isolated community. What emerges is a picture of a shared spiritual landscape. Whatever fault lines ran through Late Antiquity—and there were many and they were deep—there were also common understandings of the relationship between humans and divine agents. This is the story of Late Antiquity that I seek to tell.

Sources

Most studies of lived religion today rely heavily on survey and ethnographic data. Neither are perfect—people do not always report the truth or even know what they really think, and the observations of the ethnographer are fragmentary, often biased, and filtered through the limited understanding of a single individual. To supplement these sources, or when they are lacking, scholars often use historical archives. Inquisition records from the Catholic Church have provided a particularly rich source for reconstructing the beliefs of those that the church put on trial.

For antiquity, we have none of this. Mostly, we have the literature of the intellectuals, the very people who are often trying to suppress and refigure the more common beliefs and practices we are seeking. Sometimes, when we are lucky, we find explicit descriptions in this literature,

usually related for purposes of condemnation. The rabbis, for example, explicitly condemn Jewish practices that they find repellent, and the Christian bishop John Chrysostom inveighs against the Christians in Antioch who prefer to make their oaths in synagogues, because they apparently find them at least as holy as churches. As valuable as these nuggets are, they are relatively few and give little indication of the prevalence of the practices. More often, these texts have to be read “against the grain,” or with what scholars call a hermeneutic of suspicion. What is an author attempting to hide or change? For example, both Jewish and Christian literature promote giving money to their respective institutions; this appears to be an attempt to transform a more common, shared notion that alms directly given to the poor bring divine blessings. The problem with this approach, of course, is that the determination of that which remains unstated is never objective and that this form of reading is necessarily somewhat speculative. At the same time, we can be relatively sure that these authors were not hermetically sealed from others and that on some deeper level they share and express more common understandings.⁶

Fortunately, we are not entirely dependent on this literature. Letters and historical documents from antiquity survive, although in small numbers and mostly from Egypt (the Dead Sea Scrolls all predate the period covered in this book). “Spells” (forms of prayer in my telling) written on metal or ceramics survive in decent number. Inscriptions and coins provide different kinds of texts, but both (especially the former) provide data ignored in the literature. Archaeology gives us another window, if often opaque, into everyday life.

While I want to emphasize the fragility of our knowledge and our dependence on (informed) speculation for recovering lived ancient religion, it is also worth emphasizing that almost all ancient history is done in a similar way. Many of us have preconceived narratives of meaning when we encounter some topics, particularly when it comes to religion. One of my goals in this book is to begin to question those preconceptions. Why do you believe what you do? What evidence are you drawing on in constructing your own beliefs? I have always found that one of the rewards of doing ancient history is being constantly

challenged with new ways of seeing the world and reconciling what I think I know with actual evidence.

Identities

Recent research in Late Antiquity has tended to focus on religious difference and identity. Those who saw themselves as religious leaders (whether others saw them as such) sought ways of developing stronger group boundaries and identities. An ordinary “Christian,” for example, might evoke traditional Roman gods and take oaths in a synagogue without any sense that she was doing anything wrong. The local bishop would most likely disagree. In the fluid world of Late Antiquity such fluidity was the rule rather than the exception, and the strong and consistent attempts by both rabbis and bishops to define Jewish and Christian identities testify to the difficulty of doing so. Recent scholarship has emphasized with great sophistication the strategies by which intellectuals and officials sought to create distinctive religious boundaries.⁷

This approach has shaped modern scholarly narratives of the past. We tell stories about how Christianity did or did not fully separate from Judaism and paganism, or how rabbinic Judaism rose from the ashes of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Our stories deal with abstractions, and they are linear, often stories of the rise or decline of this or that tradition. This is hardly surprising, given the energy and time invested by the intellectual elite who would win the day by creating a massive literature that would tell precisely the story of the uniqueness and truth of their own systems. Many modern accounts cleave closely to the ancient ones, even if they sometimes arrive at different answers. The religious literature of Late Antiquity, written by the intellectuals, constitutes our major source for recovering much of Late Antiquity, and it is hard to break free of the narratives that we have inherited.

The traditional stories that emphasize difference are not only incomplete; they have also proved to be dangerous. They constantly remind us of difference and division and encourage us to separate ourselves from the often evil “other.” The history of religious institutions is largely a story of conflict and violence. Yet it is not “religion” that is to blame but the way that we tell its story.

This book tells a different story. I seek to recover and make alive a lost world that crackled with the energy of the supernatural. It is a story that foregrounds that which we share rather than those things that divide us. In some ways, it is a universal story of our most profound human fears and aspirations and how we seek to respond to them. In other ways, it is deeply particularistic, set in the world of the Late Antique Mediterranean and Near East. In both cases, though, it focuses on actual people, be they aristocrats, intellectuals, peasants, children, or slaves. Although accounts of the lives of ordinary (nonelite) women, not to mention their own writings, are sparse, they too cannot simply be ignored. They all believed that supernatural beings existed, that they were agents who could and frequently did act in the world, and that having good relationships with them was vital to success in the world. People called on a wide range of different beings but ultimately recognized that they all lived in the same world, sometimes drawing on the resources of their neighbors in particularly sticky situations.

This story can only be seen by means of comparison. Jews, Christians, Greeks, and Romans lived in a shared world. In many cities in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), for example, churches, synagogues, and traditional temples were within a stone's throw of each other. The magnificent synagogue in Sardis was right in the city center. We have abundant evidence of social interaction between people of different identities and ethnicities and the ritual specialists who serviced them all. They lived in the same spiritual landscape. Jews are frequently marginalized in scholarly narratives that either pit Christianity against paganism or show how little Christians moved from their pagan roots. Yet there were many Jews scattered throughout the Mediterranean basin and the Near East, and they left a rich literature that testifies to common beliefs and practices.

Outline

The book opens with an overview of Late Antiquity in chapter 1, which provides the history and context. Chapter 2 discusses religious identities in Late Antiquity, arguing that they tended to be fluid, subjective, and perspectival. This leads us into the shared understanding of the divine realm and invisible beings discussed in chapter 3. Different ethnic

groups had different divinities, but nearly all had a similar understanding of how supernatural agents worked. In chapter 4 I discuss the literate elite, specifically those, like rabbis and Church Fathers, who sought to systematize religious identities and whose writings form the bulk of our sources. They had far less power and influence than they would have liked. Chapter 5 shows the ways in which individuals sought to cultivate relationships with supernatural agents. These relationships were seen as crucial to dealing with a dangerous and uncertain world. Many of these relationships did not need to be mediated, but as chapter 6 shows, there were many specialists or ritual experts who could help with activities such as dream interpretation and amulet writing. Chapters 7 and 8 address the related topics of sacred place and sacred time. Here we look at common understandings and practices relating to places (e.g., temples, synagogues) and times (e.g., holidays, birthdays).

The story that this book tells is urgently needed in a world full of hostile divisions. Mistrust and hostility often taint the relationships between secular and religious people, to say nothing of those of different faiths. Violence on behalf of religion has a long pedigree, and it is not likely to go away soon. But what if we were able to reframe what we meant by “religion” to include more room for tolerance and, above all, empathy? What if we were able, simply as individuals, to capture a bit more of the enchantment felt by our ancestors? Could it help us to see our way to a new relationship with the world and those around us?

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