

## BOOK REVIEW

*From Jupiter to Christ: On the History of Religion in the Roman Imperial Period.* By JÖRG RÜPKE. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. vii + 328. Hardcover, \$120.99. ISBN 978-0-19-870372-3.

This is the English version of *Von Jupiter zu Christus* (Darmstadt, 2011), from arguably the leading contemporary scholar in Roman religion, the author of several important books, director of an institute at Erfurt dedicated to Greek and Roman religion, and general editor of the new journal, *Religion in the Roman Empire*.<sup>1</sup> The book consists of fourteen individual studies connected somehow with “imperial religion” and the change from paganism to Christianity: globalization, the transformation of the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, religious specialists in the Roman cults, the rise of provincial religion, religious aspects of the *Lex Ursonensis* (from Spain), the export of the Roman calendar and festivals, book religions as imperial religions, polytheism and pluralism, Roman religion in Christian apologetic texts, religious centralization in the late Imperial period, visual religious imagery and religious boundaries, how an empire changes religion, and religion in the Empire. Rüpke is to be commended for in general working carefully from the evidence to his conclusions, sometimes tentative, rather than starting with broad general statements.

The guiding line is the development of “imperial religion,” the crucial factor in the transition from paganism to Christianity. He minimizes the usual reasons offered, such as organizational superiority, the need for redemption, growing individuality, and the like. He is not too clear, however, on what “imperial religion” is. In one place (155), he associates it very closely with the administration and the military, but elsewhere it seems to embrace the elite throughout the Empire. Major elements were the imperial cult, acceptance of the Roman calendar, the leveling of religious differences, religious interchange between the center and the periphery, and the gradual spread of monotheistic thinking (170–171).

<sup>1</sup> Among books: *Fasti Sacerdotum* (Oxford, 2008), *The Roman Calendar from Numa to Constantine* (Chichester, 2011), and *Religion in Republican Rome* (Philadelphia, 2012).

For instance, Rüpke emphasizes how Cicero's concept of *religio* differed from our "religion," a concept, he argues, which was lacking to both Greeks and Romans of the first century (but see *Acts of the Apostles* 25.18–20). He points to a democratization of religion at Rome, and how, even in Cicero's works, the state sometimes interfered in the private sphere, and to how religion in the household neither circumvented nor subverted the religious community (78). He also argues that Rome never exported religion as a policy, though the army was an important factor in its spread (12–13). (There must have been, however, many subtle pressures on the elite, such as to curry favor with the emperor through practice of the imperial cult.)

Rüpke includes some interesting points on freedmen advancing through religion (30–32), why bishops were chosen from only seven deacons at Rome (49), and on the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* being included in the Codex Sinaiticus (54). He underscores the extensive use of Roman culture in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, which, though in Greek, is a presumed response to Ovid (78). Rather startling is his comment that "from the standpoint of the history of communication, it [book religion] is of no help in establishing distinctions between different types of religion. . . ." (162). Also rather novel is the inclusion of inscriptions, especially signed inscriptions, and *defixiones* (curses) under book religion. On the Christian side, he gives great importance to the *Acts of the Martyrs* and other Christian writings, which were products of a vast, new, and successful communications network (159).

On religious change, besides minimizing the usual causes for the ascent of Christianity, Rüpke rejects the idea of a constant struggle between paganism and Christianity. For him, it is not who "triumphed" but why (170–171). Elaborating on Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman World* (Cambridge, 1995), he detects enormous changes taking place between 200 and 300 CE, such as the disintegration of the public religious realm through the emperor and his administration, the philosophical undermining of traditional polytheism, the connection between legitimation of power and the criteria for religions, and between monotheism and a competitive pluralism (175–181). In his view, the Christian subjection of religion to critical discourse was one of the great changes in the religious history of the Mediterranean world. He argues, however, that Christians had no thoroughgoing descriptive means of comprehending the religious condition of the Roman Empire (226). According to Rüpke, then, the triumph of Christianity was the triumph of Christian rhetoric, possibly influenced by contact with the Sophists, heavily involving the emotions,

and offering insights into social reality (228). The gradual accommodation of Christianity to the cultural ideals and communicative norms of the Hellenistic-Roman elite overcame their resistance (256). He argues at the end that religious practices did not create the Empire, but the Empire created “religion,” and that few intellectuals reflected on the Empire’s unity, but the Empire created so much space and complexity in this religion that it became an innovative factor for change (283).

One might quibble over Rüpke’s use of “globalization” or why he mentions Neoplatonism but not Middle Platonism. Some recent work, would support his conclusions.<sup>2</sup> At the end, one might still wonder why the Graeco-Roman elite accepted Christian doctrine, such as in the creed. This is, however, one of the most important recent books on Roman religion, well-argued, with fresh ideas, and extremely stimulating. It is impeccably translated and produced.

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<sup>2</sup> Esther Eidinow, “Ancient Greek Religion: ‘Embedded’ . . . and Embodied,” in Claire Taylor and Kostas Vlassopoulos, eds., *Communities and Networks in the Ancient Greek World* (Oxford, 2015) 54–79; Valentino Gasparini, “Les cultes isiaque et les pouvoirs locaux en Italie,” in Laurent Bricault and Miguel John Versluys, eds., *Power, Politics and the Cult of Isis (RGRW 180)* (Leiden, 2014) 260–299; Peter Van Nuffelen, *Rethinking the Gods: Philosophical Readings of Religion in the Post-Hellenistic Period* (Cambridge, 2011).