

*POWER, POLITICS AND GOD:
Religion in the Roman Empire*

HUMANS CAN PROSPER ONLY IF HEAVEN IS HAPPY

Divine/human relations configured as “family”: *syngeneia*, “kinship” bound people together with pantheons. True of pagans (often as biological lineage) and of Jews (“sons” of their god).

Gods attach both to peoples and to places (Deut 32.8-9)

“Religion” not a question of personal individual beliefs but of community commitments, honoring inherited protocols for showing respect for the god (faithfulness; piety). Gods supervise the wellbeing of their peoples and their cities. Jews fit into diaspora cities.

“God”, like “ethnicity” was a category spanning heaven and earth. Human gods (emperor), humans who became gods (Heracles), lower gods (*daimonia*), high gods (stars and planets; Olympians), highest god (*theos hypsistos*).

300-200 BCE: Jewish scriptural traditions available in Greek: “the Septuagint”

Maccabean revolt (160s BCE) refusal to combine cult of Jews’ highest god in Jerusalem with that of Zeus—an effort that Caligula will replay in 39/40 CE. BUT, diplomatic relations established between Jerusalem and Sparta thanks to Heracles and his Jewish girlfriend, a granddaughter of Abraham’s.

31 BCE: Rome becomes Empire, Augustus a god the son of god. Herod the Great builds temples to Augustus as well as the one in Jerusalem, where sacrifices offered *for* the emperor, not *to* him.

30 CE: Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth; some of his followers experience him as raised, empowered by his spirit, able to prophesy and exorcise demons: validation of his message “Kingdom of God at hand.” Kingdom related to convictions about resurrection, final judgement; “salvation” of those who have spirit of Christ who will return as fighting Davidic warrior to defeat pagan gods.

THIS JEWISH MESSAGE BEGINS TO SPREAD OUT VIA DIASPORA SYNAGOGUES TO NON-JEWISH POPULATIONS IN WESTERN DIASPORA CITIES, with demand that pagans stop worshiping their own gods, commit to exclusive commitment to God of Israel, the father of Christ. This message disrupts traditional relations between heaven and earth.

100-200 CE: Vast variety of different Christian groups, arguing about how to understand Jewish scriptures and, thus, Christian message.

212: Constitutio Antoniana: all free people of empire now citizens of Rome.

250: Decius orders universal supplication to gods for wellbeing of empire. *Libelli*.

280s: Aurelian endorses solar monotheism. Settles internal disputes within Christian community at Antioch.

284: Diocletian becomes Emperor. Huge basilica across from palace in Nicomedia.

303: “Great Persecution:” Christian prelates ordered to turn Christian scriptures over to Roman authorities for destruction.

312: Constantine wins victory against another Roman contender, vows loyalty to god who assisted him, becomes patron of Christian church. But *which* church?

324: Council of Nicea to decide on date of Easter, metaphysical construction of Christ relative to God the Father. A century of Christian theological convulsions erupts.

MORE CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED BY ROMAN STATE AFTER THE CONVERSION OF CONSTANTINE THAN BEFORE. They are persecuted as “heretics.” Hyper-development of Christian martyr stories.

Next in line: traditional Mediterranean religions (“Pagans”). Legal disabilities, financial curtailments, popular violence. Third in line: Jews. Theological principles, pragmatic benefits (seizure of property, exile).

410 “Fall” of Rome. Augustine writes *City of God*. Western Roman Empire falls to various Christian “barbarians.”