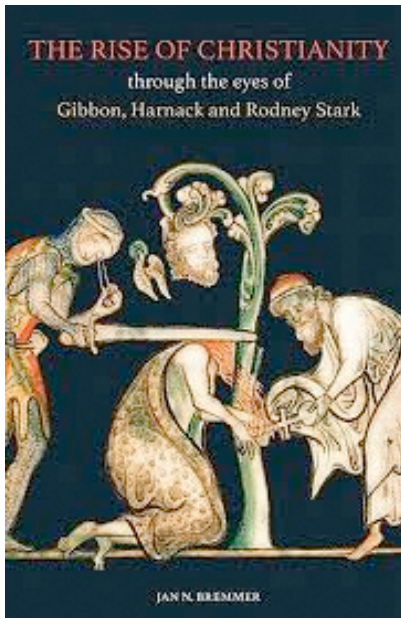


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Bremmer, Jan N.

The Rise of Christianity through the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack, and Rodney Stark

2nd edition

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Readers of *RBL* will want to be aware of this little gem by Jan Bremmer. The book is the text of Bremmer's valedictory lecture given at the University of Groningen in early 2010 (the volume under review is the second edition; the first edition was distributed at the lecture itself). In it Bremmer examines the work of three influential historians of early Christianity: Edward Gibbon, Adolf von Harnack, and Rodney Stark. Bremmer briefly summarizes the careers of each author, assesses their contributions to the cluster of questions surrounding the rise of Christianity, and in a short conclusion offers his own take on these historical puzzles.

Bremmer begins with Gibbon and focuses on the first volume of his monumental *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in 1776. Within this book, Bremmer's analysis centers on the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, in which Gibbon offered his thoughts on the growth of the early Christian movement and Roman policies toward Christians from Nero to Constantine. In general, Bremmer is more impressed by Gibbon's assessment of five causes for the success of Christianity (Christianity's inflexibility, its focus on a future life, its alleged miracles, its austere morals, and its organizational structures) than by Gibbon's account of martyrdom and persecution. In

general, Bremmer finds Gibbon's work to be characterized by impressively wide reading and shrewd insights but also by occasional "sloppiness regarding the sources" (21).

Bremmer then moves on to Adolf von Harnack's *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, first published in 1902 and translated into English as *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* in 1904–1905. The book was organized into four sections: internal and external condition for the spread of early Christianity, the attractions of early Christian preaching, the methods of missionaries, and the data for the expansion of early Christian congregations. While Bremmer is highly appreciative of Harnack's erudition throughout, he is critical of Harnack's discussion of "missionary" topics in the first three sections, noting especially the lack of named Christian missionaries in the written record (Bremmer hints that the important role of Christian missions in nineteenth-century European life may have affected Harnack's perspective). Bremmer appears to find the most enduring contribution in Harnack's final section on the expansion of Christianity, in which Harnack gathered the textual and archaeological evidence for Christian congregations throughout the Roman Empire. As Bremmer notes, "the survey is still valid in most cases" (45).

The final book analyzed is sociologist Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, published in 1996. Bremmer acknowledges that Stark's work is not of the same order as that of Gibbon or Harnack, but Bremmer finds Stark worthy of analysis because his work represents an attempt to "take a wholly fresh look at the problem" (64). For the most part, Bremmer finds Stark's thoroughgoing application of rational choice theory unhelpful for filling in the gaps of the written and archaeological record, and he is suspicious of models of Christian growth based on unreliable population statistics. Nevertheless, he judges Stark's comparisons of the early Christian evidence with the data for modern cult groups more illuminating, and he finds value in Stark's emphasis on the importance of social networks for the spread of early Christianity.

Bremmer summarizes his own thoughts on "the when, who, and why of the rise of Christianity" (64) in the concluding section. Bremmer here reiterates his point that numerical estimates of Christian population are built on quicksand and prefers to speak instead about "trends" of Christian growth.

Appended to the book is an update to the list of Bremmer's publications found in the recently published Festschrift for Bremmer, *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity: Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer* (ed. Jitse Dijkstra, Justin Kroesen, and Yme Kuiper; Leiden: Brill, 2010), xxxix–lvi.

In treating the arguments of Gibbon, Harnack, and Stark, Bremmer necessarily weighs in on a number of contentious issues in early Christian studies (the phenomena of martyrdom and persecution, the spread of the technology of the codex, relations between early Christians and Jews, along many other equally important topics). Bremmer's evaluations are characteristically cautious and sage, in addition to being remarkably well-documented. Indeed, perhaps the most attractive feature of the book is the collection of footnotes that accompany the text of the lecture. These up-to-date notes (items as recent as 2009 and 2010 are regularly cited) cover the full spread of research languages and constitute a thorough bibliography of recent work on the emergence and spread of Christianity. Here the interested student will also find relevant materials from periodicals that do not often feature on the to-read list of most biblical scholars (*Common Knowledge*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *Sociology of Religion*, to name just three). The text of the lecture itself maintains the liveliness of an oral performance, as Bremmer colors his narrative with a number of interesting and amusing facts about these scholars. I cannot resist reproducing this one: the enormously productive Harnack on balancing work and family life: "in meinem Hause wird nach 8 Uhr nicht mehr gearbeitet." As Bremmer notes, "Which modern scholar could say the same!" (30).

While Bremmer's own assessments of the ancient evidence are generally well-founded, readers who are suspicious of the rhetoric of the "uniqueness" of early Christianity will find some of Bremmer's conclusions frustrating. For instance, Bremmer concludes that the translocal connections among Christian groups and their habit of letter writing make Christianity unique: "there was nothing comparable in Greco-Roman religion" (69). An alternative reading of the data might, instead of declaring Christianity unique in relation to "Greco-Roman religion," suggest that the phenomena we are accustomed to labeling "ancient religions" might not be the best place to look for potential parallels for ancient Christian practices. Roman administrators in different geographic areas maintained connections by letter writing and other means. We might benefit from positing comparisons between Christian groups and imperial governmental social formations (is it only an accident that early Christians characterized their groups as an *ekklesia* and a *politeia*?). But such observations are only quibbles. On the whole, Bremmer's essay is a pleasure to read and a fine resource for those interested in the latest work of the growth and development of Christian movements in the first three centuries.