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# Misusing Books: Material Texts and Lived Religion in the Roman Mediterranean

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### Abstract

Books are more than vehicles for textual content. They are objects of economic value and social significance, embedded in complex networks of production and use. Recent historical scholarship on lived religion in the Roman Mediterranean has expanded beyond traditional conversations about theological concepts and scriptural interpretations, but this critical turn sometimes neglects material texts as sacred and powerful objects. Addressing this lacuna in light of Roman book culture, the present article re-reads several ancient reports about the misuse of textual objects. Accounts of the burned books of Numa Pompilius, of the powerful codex of Elchasai, and of the writings destroyed because of Diocletian's edicts each reflect Roman discourses about material texts and appropriate religious practice. People in the Roman Mediterranean used these stories to think about material texts as objects of divine power and sacred significance.

## 1 Introduction

In the year 1832, a Canadian Methodist minister and Anishinaabe chief named Kahkewaquonaby, or Peter Jones, presented the king of England, William IV, with a translation of the Gospel according to John in Anishinaabemowin. The king could not read this Anishinaabemowin bible. Yet

the book was an iconic object, with a significance exceeding its textual content. As Roxanne Korpan observes in a recent study of Peter Jones's translation, bibles were objects of display and exchange, powerful symbols of religious identity and tangible tokens of diplomatic bonds in Jones's colonial Canadian context. The power of *this* book was expressed not only in its sacred text, but in the complex network of 'scriptural relations' in which the sacred object was embedded.[1] Bibles were used to 'build, imagine, and refuse' relationships.[2]

Recent scholarship on the 'history of the book' has emphasised that books are more than vehicles for textual content. They are objects of economic value and social significance, embedded in complex networks of production and use – not least in religious contexts. This is true not only for modern printed books, but also for books in other historical contexts, including Mediterranean antiquity. William Johnson has recently analysed how elite Romans used textual practices to contend for social status and intellectual prestige.[3] Others have observed how early Christians adopted specific media and textual practices as markers of identity.[4] Yet there is more work to be done. Scholarly accounts of 'book religions' *(Buchreligionen)* often obscure how scrolls, codices, amulets, and other textual objects participated in Roman religion.[5] I address this lacuna by analysing several discourses in the Roman Mediterranean that centre on books as sacred or powerful objects.

I build upon the framework of 'lived religion' developed by Robert Orsi.[6] 'Lived' or 'ordinary' religion attends to the wide range of ideas and practices that constitute religious experience. As summarised by Orsi, this mode of inquiry focuses on 'the work of social agents/actors themselves as narrators and interpreters of their own experiences and histories, recognizing that the stories we tell about others exist alongside the many and varied stories they tell of themselves'.[7] In other words, 'lived religion' examines *both* the actions

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1  This example is drawn from Korpan 2021. As Korpan writes, 'bibles appear to be potential sites for revealing some of the ways Indigenous people like Jones used bible translations to mediate their religious and colonial contexts' (Korpan 2021, 150).

2  Korpan 2021, 151.

3  Johnson 2010.

4  E.g., Grafton and Williams 2006; Hurtado 2006; Wallraff 2013; Keith 2020; Keith 2021.

5  The concept of 'religion' in Mediterranean antiquity is contested; see especially Nongbri 2013; Barton and Boyarin 2016; Frankfurter 2021. The arguments advanced in this article do not depend on the meta-category of religion, but instead analyse smaller-scale categories centred on material texts and their uses.

6  Orsi 2002.

7  Orsi 2002, xxxix. The quotation is from the preface of the second, revised edition of Orsi's monograph.

and experiences of varied human actors *and* how they conceptualise these actions and experiences. This article interrogates several such examples.

To analyse the religious practices and experiences that constitute lived religion in contemporary societies, scholars employ ethnographic methods. Historical distance means that scholarship on lived religion in antiquity must adopt other approaches.[8] Only indirectly can we observe ancient individuals going about their lives; archaeological and documentary evidence often do not answer the questions that we want to ask about 'religion'. Yet the extant texts in which ancient individuals discuss their own and others' religious practices and experiences tend to reflect limited perspectives – often those of elite male authors.[9] Material artefacts offer similarly limited and often ambiguous evidence. Scholars of lived religion must attend to details that might betray the overlooked ordinary, centring texts and artefacts that complicate grand narratives of theological uniformity, scriptural authority, or linear development.[10]

By refusing to conflate 'religion' with the ideas and practices of elite individuals, scholarship on lived ancient religion expands the scope of analysis to a wider range of practices, ideas, and experiences. Yet, as an unintended side-effect, this conversation has often neglected the practices and ideas that surround material texts. The tendency to reduce *books* to *texts* and to exclude material texts from 'lived religion' in the Roman Mediterranean reflects the unrecognised influence of older accounts of Judaism and Christianity as *Buchreligionen* ('book religions').[11] In this way, current scholarship on lived ancient religion invites critique and expansion.

In this article, I use three examples to rethink physical books as sacred and powerful objects in the lived religion of the Roman Mediterranean. The burned books of Numa Pompilius, the saving codex of Elchasai, and the Egyptian, Manichaean, and Christian writings proscribed because of Diocletian's edicts each reflect wider discourses about material texts and

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  **8** On lived religion in Mediterranean antiquity, see Rüpke 2016 and the essays in *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5 (1) (2021).

  **9** In many cases, we are discussing *described* practices (cf. Bourdieu 1990). Access to 'lived ancient religion' is anecdotal; the extant evidence is frequently too thin to answer questions that scholars might ask in contemporary anthropological work or even in historical inquiries about more recent periods. This demands caution in arguments and conclusions.

**10** Compare recent work on material texts in the historical study of religion of other regions and periods, including the essays in *Material Religion* 17 (2) (2021) (on 'Religion and Material Texts in the Americas', edited by Sonia Hazard) and Hsu 2022.

**11** Max Müller's influential framework (Müller 1873, 102) has been reshaped at various points from the late nineteenth century onward, but exhibits surprising durability. For a recent reformulation, see Stroumsa 2016.

quotidian religious practice. In each case, Roman law emerges, explicitly or implicitly, as a framing construct. As I argue, contention about 'problematic' books offered a way for people in the Roman Mediterranean to think about material texts as objects of divine power and religious significance. These ancient conflicts extend beyond early Christianity and exceed the scholarly category of 'book religions'.[12]


## 2 The Books of Numa Pompilius

Numerous Greek and Latin texts, from the second century BCE into late antiquity, narrate the destruction (in 181 BCE) of sacred writings composed by the mythic Roman king and lawgiver Numa Pompilius.[13] Livy, Valerius Maximus, Pliny the Elder, Plutarch, Cassius Dio, Lactantius, and Augustine discuss these books and their destruction.[14] Fragments of yet other authors are cited by these writers.[15] Together, these narratives depict a bibliographic imaginary in which material actions with respect to sacred texts assume ritual or cultic significance. The profusion of ancient discussion demonstrates that Numa's books were *good to think with*.[16] From the Roman Republic until Augustine, they provided a way to imagine and re-imagine the uses and dangers of books.

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12  My argument, while focused on different modes of category-making, complements that of Duncan MacRae (2016) in arguing for the importance of books in Roman religion. As MacRae argues, Christians and Jews were not the only ones using books in 'ritual' or 'liturgy'. This invites us to reconceive early Christian reading events (and non-Christian reading events involving Christian books) within a larger landscape of reading events involving suprahuman knowledge or power.

13  Modern scholars continue to debate the nature of these books and the circumstances surrounding their purported discovery. Recent discussion includes MacRae 2016, 1–10; Howley 2017, 7; Beck 2018. The vibrant modern conversation corresponds to the plethora of differing ancient accounts. Complete historical clarity about the events of 181 BCE is both impossible and, for our purposes, unnecessary. The dating depends on Livy.

14  Livy 1.32; 40.29.3–14; Valerius Maximus 1.1.12; Pliny, *Hist. nat.* 13.84–88; Plutarch, *Numa* 22.2–5; Cassius Dio 7.34; Lactantius, *Inst.* 1.22.5; Augustine, *Civ.* 7.34–35; 8.5 (cf. *Civ.* 2.16).

15  Cassius Hemina (*FRHist* 6 frag. 35 = *FRH* 6 frag. 40); Piso (*FRHist* 9 frag. 14 = *FRH* 7 frag. 13); Sempronius Tuditanus (*FRHist* 10 frag. 3 = *FRH* 8 frag. 7); Valerius Antias (*FRHist* frag. 25; frag. 9a–b = *FRH* 15 frags. 9–10); Varro (*apud* Augustine, *Civ.* 7.34). Some of these authors wrote soon after the purported events; cf. Beck 2018, focusing on the role of the books in Roman public discourse of second and first centuries BCE.

16  I adopt the language of 'good to think' from Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962, 132); cf. Culler 2013.

As Plutarch recounts, Numa was buried alongside 'the sacred books which he himself had written' (τὰς ἱερὰς βίβλους ἃς ἐγράψατο μὲν αὐτός).[17] Echoing a familiar philosophical *topos* about the dangers of writing, Plutarch says that Numa had taught the Roman priests what was written in these books, but chose to be buried with the physical volumes so that the contents would not circulate as 'lifeless writings' (ἐν ἀψύχοις γράμμασι), separate from the way of life (ἕξιν τε καὶ γνώμην) that Numa had taught.[18] After some four hundred years, an unusually heavy rainstorm dislodged the coffin with Numa's books. They ended up in the hands of the praetor Q. Petilius Spurinus, who read them and brought them before the Senate.[19] In Plutarch's narrative – as in a number of other versions – Petilius uses cultic language: It is not proper or pious for the writings to be disclosed more broadly (μὴ δοκεῖν αὐτῷ θεμιτὸν εἶναι λέγων μηδὲ ὅσιον ἔκπυστα πολλοῖς τὰ γεγραμμένα γενέσθαι).[20] By decree of the Senate, the books are burned to prevent the sacrilege of broader reading.[21] In contrast to Plutarch, Livy offers a narrative in which the content of the texts is explicitly problematic. The books endanger the current form of cult *(dissolvendarum religionum)* and must be destroyed. Even so, book destruction assumes a ritual or cultic valence; sacrificial experts *(victimarii)* are the ones who carry out the book-burning.[22] Augustine's re-narration of the story, written early in the fifth century CE, reconfigures the reason for destruction: Numa created books of daemonic knowledge but failed to destroy them. The sacred rites *(sacrorum)* described in the books were so unconscionable that the books were unfit not only to be read, but even to be preserved in darkness *(in tenebris)* – and

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**17**  Plutarch, *Numa* 22 (ed. LCL 46: 378). Plutarch specifies 'twelve hierophantic books and twelve other books of Hellenic philosophy' (δώδεκα μὲν εἶναι βίβλους ἱεροφαντικάς, δώδεκα δὲ ἄλλας Ἑλληνικὰς φιλοσόφους, LCL 46: 380). Livy 40.29 describes two bundles of seven scrolls each, one set containing philosophy *(disciplina sapientiae)* in Greek and the other containing sacred law *(iure pontificio)* in Latin.

**18**  Plutarch, *Numa* 22 (ed. LCL 46: 380).

**19**  Livy (40.29) imagines a larger number of readers before the books are destroyed.

**20**  Plutarch, *Numa* 22 (ed. LCL 46: 380–382). Varro emphasises *(apud* Augustine, *Civ.* 7.34) that the action is undertaken piously *(tamquam religiosi).*

**21**  Other familiar narratives of textual rediscovery – such as the rediscovery of a 'book of the law' (ספר התורה) in 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34 – might lead us to expect different outcomes: a revitalisation of cultic practices or a recovery of lost knowledge, potentially combined with the destruction of *other* now-problematic texts, cult-sites, or practices (cf. Feldt 2021). For medieval Jewish narratives of textual recovery, with broader implications for how such narratives can be put to work, compare Mroczek 2020. The narratives about Numa's writings correspond even more closely to a late ancient rabbinic imaginary in which the king Hezekiah functions as a censor, curating a corpus of Jewish sacred literature (Mroczek 2021).

**22**  Livy 40.29; cf. Howley 2017, 7 n. 40.

this is recognised in the Senate's decree of destruction.[23] Augustine thus describes the destruction of Numa's books as a condemnation of traditional Roman religion. In each of these narratives, book destruction is not misuse. Rather, the destruction of the sacred and powerful text is a pious cultic act, one that *prevents* impious use or bad ritual.

Livy also offers an example of the misuse that the Senate's later destruction of the books might prevent. Numa's successor Tullus discovers Numa's books, here described as *commentarii*, and learns the occult rituals. Yet Tullus enacts them improperly, to disastrous effect. Jupiter punishes Tullus by striking him with a thunderbolt, burning Tullus and the book (Livy 1.32).[24]

Rather than re-burying the books or preserving them, destruction is imagined as the only appropriate response to Numa's books. The homology between book and body is powerful here. In Plutarch's account (*Numa* 22), the body, buried in a separate coffin, is nowhere to be found. The burial of Numa in one coffin and the books in a second invites the reader to think of the books as the textual body *(corpus)* of the lawgiver. Similarly, Livy (40.29) recounts that Numa's body has entirely decomposed, but the books have escaped the ravages of time; they look 'brand new' *(recentissima)*. In both cases, the absence of Numa's fleshly body offers a warrant for the destruction of his textual body.

From the second century BCE until late antiquity, then, ancient authors demonstrate how Numa's books could be used to think about cultic change, about writing religious and philosophical knowledge, and about the significance of sacred texts. What can we conclude from this brief discussion of the destruction of cultic books in and around the city of Rome? First, thinking about sacred books extends beyond the texts and readers that modern scholars have often associated with book religions. Second, book destruction (real or imagined) is a way in which people negotiated the line between cult sacrilege and right ritual. The expansive reception of this narrative, retold again and again, shows how it continued to work as a space for imagining sacred texts as objects of power and knowledge.

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**23**  Augustine, *Civ.* 7.34.

**24**  Other writers allude to this story as well. Plutarch (*Marcellus* 8) mentions Numa's *commentarii* (said to provide cultic instruction) although not their misuse. Pliny (*Hist. Nat.* 2.54) mentions Tullus being struck by lightning when improperly performing a ritual. (Pliny attributes his knowledge of this to the first book of Piso's *Annales*.) When Pliny mentions the story in *Hist. Nat.* 28.4, he discusses the books.

## 3 The Book of Elchasai

We turn to the powerful book of Elchasai, described in a range of third- and fourth-century CE heresiological narratives.[25] This example offers a different window into the significance of textual objects in the Roman Mediterranean.[26] Here, the book is not only a vehicle of esoteric knowledge but a powerful and perhaps maleficent object.

The most expansive account of the book of Elchasai appears in the *Refutation of All Heresies* attributed to Hippolytus of Rome.[27] This text, written in the third century CE, describes a man named Alcibiades, who 'brought a certain book to Rome' (ἐπῆλθε τῇ Ῥώμῃ φέρων βίβλον τινά, *Haer.* 9.13.1). This Alcibiades asserted that 'a certain just man Elchasai had received [the book] from the Seres of Parthia' (φάσκων ταύτην ἀπὸ Σηρῶν τῆς Παρθίας παρειληφέναι τινὰ ἄνδρα δίκαιον Ἠλχασαΐ); Elchasai handed it on 'to someone called Sobiai' (τινι λεγομένῳ Σοβιαΐ) before it reached Alcibiades. This complicated chain of transmission underscores the significance of *this* book as an object.[28] Although the group are known as Elchasaïtes, Elchasai does not here appear as a figure with a biography. While early Christian heresiologists typically describe *heretics* as introducing ideas or doctrines, the invention of this heresy takes place with Alcibiades' introduction of a *book* at Rome (cf. *Haer.* 10.29.1–3).[29]

(Ps.-)Hippolytus does not describe the contents of the book in detail, focusing instead on how Alcibiades' practices reflect the central importance of reading events employing *this* book. Alcibiades' 'believers' are absolved from every criminal deed or impious action if they participate in the baptism

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25  On heresiology as a locus of the late ancient bibliographic imagination, see Coogan 2022.

26  Mimouni 2003; Nicklas 2017; Mimouni 2020. Modern scholarship has seldom discussed this book in the context of powerful and illicit books in the late Roman Empire.

27  Scholars debate the authorship of the text and its modern attribution to Hippolytus, but this disagreement is not central for our purposes. Regardless of its authorship, the text reflects the perspective of an author from third-century Rome. I focus on *Haer.* 9.13.1–9.17.4; cf. 9.4 and 10.29.1–3. The fourth-century heresiologists Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 6.38) and Epiphanius (*Pan.* 19.1.1–6.4; 53.1.1–9) also discuss Elchasai or Elchasaïtes. According to Eusebius, the Elchasaïte movement had died out by his day.

28  This intersects with a broader concern with ancient copies visible from the first century BCE onward, although it is unclear in (Ps.-)Hippolytus' description whether the physical object used by Alcibiades is imagined to be the *same* as the one first acquired by Elchasai or not.

29  We might wish that (Ps.-)Hippolytus had offered a more detailed discussion of Alcibiades' book. Numerous scholars over the past two centuries have connected the book of Elchasai with Manichaean book practices; this is suggested already in late antiquity by Epiphanius, although the heresiological genealogy is suspect. Cf. recently Mimouni 2020.

ritual that uses this book (*Haer.* 9.13.4; cf. 9.15.1–5).[30] For (Ps.-)Hippolytus' rigorist understanding of sin, baptism, and forgiveness, the practices in which the book is entangled are thus morally problematic: the book provides cover for lawless and immoral activity. Moreover, on (Ps.-)Hippolytus' account, the 'seven witnesses' written in the book can be supplicated for therapeutic or apotropaic purposes (such as to heal the bite of a rabid dog, *Haer.* 9.15.4–5).[31] (Ps.-)Hippolytus describes these book-centred rituals – and the book itself – as 'incantations full of power' (ἐπαοιδῶν δυνάμεως μεμεστωμένων, *Haer.* 9.16.1). Reflecting Roman legal and political anxieties about texts used for charms and incantations, (Ps.-)Hippolytus aligns Alcibiades' textual practices with other illicit or antisocial forms of textuality. His language connects the book of Elchasai with Roman worries about maleficent ritual texts.[32] These associations are amplified by the connection that (Ps.-)Hippolytus draws between Alcibiades and other ritual experts (μαθηματικοί, ἀστρολογικοί, μαγικοί).[33] In short: the book of Elchasai is a hazardous text, its use sacrilegious or impious.

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**30** Writing at roughly the same time as (Ps.-)Hippolytus, Origen of Alexandria says that the Elchasaïtes 'circulate a book that they say has fallen from heaven and that he who hears it and believes will receive forgiveness of sins' (Origen, *Homily on Psalm 82*, *apud* Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.38). This is a striking theology of the book; notably, it exhibits parallels with how Origen thinks about the power of the Gospel text. The crucial point is that Origen is worried that *this* book practice will be confused with what he regards as proper Christian book practices.

**31** (Ps.-)Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.16 describes several similar uses. Early Christian texts offer numerous examples of practices centred on extracting apotropaic or therapeutic power from textual objects. *Inter alia*, John Chrysostom commends 'women [who] wear Gospels hung from their necks' as 'reminders' (*Hom. Matt.* 72.2), although he is critical of people who wear miniature Gospels as amulets (*Adv. Iud.* 8). According to Gregory of Tours, Maximus (a fourth-century disciple of Martin of Tours) hung a 'book of the Gospels' around his neck during his travels, along with the instruments of the sacrament (a small paten and chalice). The fifth-century CE historian Sozomen (*Hist. eccl.* 2.14) refers to Milēs, martyred under Shapur I in Persia, who carried a Gospel book in a bag (Μίλης δὲ μόνον πήραν ἐπιφερόμενος, ἐν ᾗ τὴν ἱερὰν βίβλον τῶν εὐαγγελίων εἶχεν, 2.14.3). This detail is also preserved in a Syriac *Martyrdom of Milēs*. One might also compare the fourth- or fifth-century *Acts of Euplus*, where the body and book merge. The Gospels are hung around Euplus' neck; book and martyr are burned together. These examples span genres, geography, and theological orientations within early Christianity. Cf. Bremmer 2015; Coogan 2018.

**32** For legal prescriptions against books as maleficent objects in the third century CE, see *Dig.* 10.2.4.1 (Ulpian); Paulus, *Sententiae* 5.21.4; 5.23.17–18; cf. Bremmer 2015, 259–260. For earlier examples, see Livy 25.1; 39.16; 40.29; Pliny, *Hist. nat.* 13.84; Suetonius, *Aug.* 31; cf. Sarefield 2006, 288–289; Howley 2017; Coogan 2018, esp. n. 43. I discuss further examples from the Tetrarchy below.

**33** (Ps.-)Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.14.2 (cf. 9.14.1–3) connects Alcibiades with μαθηματικοί, ἀστρο-λογικοί, and μαγικοί. The prefatory summary of contents for Book 9 likewise mentions

In (Ps.-)Hippolytus' account, the physical book is central to Alcibiades' claims of religious authority and to the ritual practices that he implements for his followers. It is not just that the knowledge found in the book matters, but that the reading event and concomitant baptismal ritual is a (or the) locus of divine power. In this reading event, the physical object plays a key role. Moreover, while (Ps.-)Hippolytus scorns the practices of Alcibiades and his circle, adherents find the book to be powerful. A sceptical reading might see (Ps.-)Hippolytus' account as fabricated; what Alcibiades' circle thought and did is otherwise inaccessible to historians today. Even so, the polemical characterisation of the bookish practices of Alcibiades and his circle makes sense only if the 'sting' of the accusation is believable, that is, if (Ps.-)Hippolytus' audience can imagine a powerful book as central to a set of ritual and communal practices. Using language from David Frankfurter, we might describe these described Elchasaïte book practices (real or imagined) as 'polluting, inverted, or monstrous'.[34] As an object of pernicious power, bad ritual, and untrustworthy genealogy, the Elchasaïte book provides implicit contrast with the appropriate use of books by (Ps.-)Hippolytus' Christians.[35] Through (Ps.-)Hippolytus' pen, the book of Elchasai offers an opportunity to think about material texts as sources of knowledge and objects of power.

## 4 *Traditio* and Diocletian's Edicts

In the third century, (Ps.-)Hippolytus disparages Alcibiades' book by associating it with suspect practices like incantations, divination, and astrology. Similar invectives and anxieties about illicit textual power emerge in numerous late Roman sources. The late third- and early fourth-century CE edicts of

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Elchasai as a figure who appears to be devoted to the 'law', but is in fact devoted to ideas of 'gnostics', astrologers, and sorcerers (*Haer.* 9.4). The bivalence of 'law' as meaning *either* scripture (especially the Pentateuch, with associations of 'Jewishness') *or* the legal framework of Roman society advances (Ps.-)Hippolytus' invective. Yet (Ps.-)Hippolytus' rejection of the incantatory represents only part of the bibliographic world of early Christianity. Amulets using texts from Christian Gospels and from Jewish scriptures, as well as those using related texts like the *Letter of Abgar*, are well attested from the third century CE onward. Such practices were of course contested. On therapeutic or apotropaic uses of early Christian textual objects, see Coogan 2018; cf. de Bruyn and Dijkstra 2011; Jones 2016; Calhoun 2019.

**34**  Frankfurter 2021, 189.

**35**  (Ps.-)Hippolytus does not provide a positive account of how sacred texts *should* be used; his depiction of Alcibiades' book offers only a cloudy mirror in which to observe (Ps.-)Hippolytus' own scriptural practices. Yet his anxiety about Alcibiades' textual practices is perhaps heightened by their similarities to other forms of early Christian book culture.

Diocletian and his co-emperors against Egyptian, Manichaean, and Christian books illuminate the misuse of books as an avenue for developing ideas about sacred and powerful textual objects. Here we observe conflicting ideas of textual power and the hazardous Other.[36]

Historians of late antiquity are familiar with the imperial edicts that were promulgated against Christian individuals and property – specifically including Christian books – under the emperor Diocletian in the first decade of the fourth century. This legal strategy was novel.[37] As Joseph Howley demonstrates, book destruction was ineffective as a measure to prevent the circulation of literary works in the Roman Mediterranean.[38] It was a symbolic act, analogous to burning an author in effigy, not a practical mechanism of censorship.[39] The widespread destruction of books has no direct analogue in earlier Roman legal practice. But there is a partial exception: burning (and

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**36** These reading communities and textual corpora overlap. As Epiphanius notes, for example, adherents of Mani purchased Christian scriptures in Jerusalem (*Pan.* 66.5.1–7).

**37** Following violence in Constantinople that apparently started the previous day, Diocletian issued the first edict on 24 February 303 CE, specifying that church buildings should be destroyed and that Christian scriptures should be burned. The exact language of the decree is not preserved. Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 8.2.1, 4–5; 8.5; Lactantius, *Mort. pers.* 13. In his oration at Tyre, Eusebius mentions imperial efforts to destroy church buildings and scriptures: Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 10.4.14–16; 10.4.28–32; 10.4.46–55. A wide range of sources, especially from North Africa (cf. Coogan 2018), offer evidence for book destruction as part of the persecution. An attempt at book destruction described in the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* is depicted as being thwarted by rain and hail that quench the flames, offering further evidence for destruction by fire.

**38** Howley 2017. Arguing for the limited effectiveness of Diocletian's edicts, see Bruce 1980, 127 who concludes that 'no systematic destruction' resulted. Contrast Rudich 2006, arguing for the effectiveness of Roman censorship measures.

**39** For burning a copy of a book as a stand-in for killing its author, a *locus classicus* is Lucian, *Alex.* 47. Compare Seneca, *Suas.* 7 (ed. Winterbottom, LCL), titled 'Anthony promises to spare Cicero's life if he burns his writings: Cicero deliberates whether to do so' *(deliberat Cicero an scripta suo conburat, promittente Antonio incolumitatem si fecisset)*; Seneca depicts Cicero choosing death instead of the destruction of his *oeuvre*. Cf. Gunderson 2003, 81–89. Ovid (*Trist.* 1.7.35–40) similarly describes his decision to burn his own works before his exile as a suicide by self-immolation; compare Krevans 2010, 206–208. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid boasts that his work would be secure against both fire and the wrath of Jove (Ovid, *Metam.* 15.871–879; cf. Horace, *Carm.* 3.30). Ovid may have in view not only the final conflagration but also the more proximate possibility that his books might be burned. On the symbolic aspects of book destruction, see Sarefield 2006; Sarefield 2007, 163–164; Rohmann 2016, 90–91; Howley 2017; Coogan 2018. On the trope of bookburning in Roman literary culture from the late Republic to the High Empire, see further Berti 2022. On censorship as a way of shaping religious and disciplinary knowledge, see Marcus 2020.

other modes of destruction) was used to eradicate books deemed powerful and hazardous, especially books of divination, astrology, or incantations.[40]

Christian books were not the only ones subject to such imperial decrees. Early in his reign, Diocletian issued an edict that 'Egyptian' ritual and alchemical texts should be burned.[41] Diocletian's anti-Manichaean legislation (first issued on 31 March 302 CE) parallels his later edicts against Christians (from 303 CE onward) even more closely.[42] The legal measures directed against Manichaean and Christian books demonstrate not only that the significance of books to Manichaean and Christian practices was visible to non-adherents, but also that outside observers located these books and bookish practices in an existing set of categories: of powerful books used for illicit ends.[43] While these legal measures aim at suppressing particular social movements, they deploy broader categories for maleficent textual objects. We can thus 'extrapolate' from this set of legal responses to the broader (if rough) contours of an ancient Mediterranean 'ethnogeneralization' of powerful sacred texts.[44]

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**40** Compare the sources in n. 32 above. Similarly, Acts 19:19 describes 'those who dealt with the paranormal' (τῶν τὰ περίεργα πραξάντων) publicly burning their books (βίβλους) after becoming Christ-followers; this fits into a larger pattern where burning was a standard way to destroy ritual or powerful books. Each of these texts was held to be a *unicum*, with each individual exemplar as a powerful object. As Howley discusses (2017), the logic is shared with the destruction of documents. Here we recall again the burning of Numa's books. On the translation of Acts 19:19, I am grateful to David DeVore for his insights.

**41** As Bruce (1980, 128) notes, the central concern of the edict was to protect the stability of imperial coinage by legislating against ritual and alchemical books involved in the manipulation or production of silver and gold. The evidence for Diocletian's edict is preserved by the historian John of Antioch (*FHG* frag. 165, ed. Müller 4.601). Rather than proscribing alchemical practices broadly, the edict focuses on books. Cf. Bremmer 2015, 260; Rohmann 2016, 28.

**42** The text of Diocletian's edict that ordered the burning of the books of Manichaeans is preserved in *Collatio Mosaicarum* 15.3, ed. and trans. Hyamson 1913, 130–132; revised translation by Lieu in Gardner and Lieu 2004, 116–118. On the edict, see Volterra 1966; Bruce 1980, 127–128; Rohmann 2016, 28. Diocletian's edict is directed to Julianus, Proconsul of Africa. Using the language of *superstitio*, it legislates that Manichaean books and clerics should be burned. It is worth noting that the place where the measures against Christian books were apparently most aggressive is the place (Roman Africa) where these mechanisms of book destruction had already been practiced in the destruction of Manichaean books.

On the bookishness of Manichaeans, for whom sacred texts were objects only to be handled by the elect, see Clark 2007, 133; cf. Gulácsi 2018; Han 2021, 355–356. Several texts collected by Gardner and Lieu (2004) reflect the significance of Manichaean sacred books as objects of veneration and power.

**43** For Roman administrative perspectives on these events, see P.Oxy. 2673 with Bruce 1980; Luijendijk 2008; Choat and Yuen-Collingridge 2009.

**44** I paraphrase Frankfurter 2021, 189.

This reading is confirmed by other evidence. The widespread Christian outrage against *traditores* – particularly visible in North Africa, but attested throughout the Roman Mediterranean – demonstrates that handing over Christian scriptural books was seen not simply as cowardly but as sacrilegious. The imperial efforts at book destruction were read as 'daemonic'. The textual object itself was a physical manifestation of divine presence and power.[45] While Christian thinkers continued to elaborate theologies of the sacred book throughout late antiquity, the centrality of the destroyed books in the fourth-century Christian controversies reveals that Diocletian's edicts had correctly understood the significance of Christian sacred books as objects. Both the imperial edicts and the responses to them offer evidence for widespread ideas of dangerous books and sacrilege – and illuminate a more expansive concept of powerful and sacred texts.

## 5 Conclusion

The examples in this article illuminate an ancient conversation about the relationship between material texts and appropriate religious practice. Long before Peter Jones's bible, people used material texts to negotiate both human and divine relationships. By attending to varied ancient discussions of the misuse of books, I undermine divisions between 'lived' and 'bookish' religion in the Roman Mediterranean. Books were imagined and used *as objects* in various contexts. It is true that books are often read to access textual knowledge, but that is not the only way they were (or are) used.[46] They can be carried in liturgy, used for healing, imposed on the head in ordination ceremonies, burned in acts of representative homicide, reconfigured as tokens of veneration, given as objects of value, and 'read' as part of displays of erudition or social status. Material texts and these varied practices are part of the history of lived religion in the Roman Mediterranean.

The argument that I have offered in this article resonates with a framework offered by David Frankfurter.[47] Responding to ongoing debates about the usefulness of 'religion' as a category of analysis for Mediterranean antiq-

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45  Analysing evidence from Roman North Africa, see Coogan 2018, which argues that 'the physical book in [fourth-century] North Africa … functions as a metonym for Christian confession, an avatar of divine presence, and an object of divine power' (Coogan 2018, 378). Cf. Bruce 1980. Compare the late Roman bibliographic imaginary that makes the physical book a locus of legal authority: Humfress 2007.

46  Cf. Watson 2007.

47  Frankfurter 2021.

uity, Frankfurter describes 'religion' as a second-order 'ethnogeneralization'. To do this, he uses ancient ideas of cult-atrocity to schematise the categories that ancient actors employed. As he observes, people use discourses of sacrilege and ritual failure to demarcate membership and group identity, to identify acceptable practices, and to theorise those practices and identities. Frankfurter proposes that instead of focalising 'religion' as a category, 'focusing on local generalizations about ritual (rather than beliefs, identity, or abstract structures of meaning) allows us to direct our attention to practical, gestural, and material features of culture and their organization as subjects of internal discourse.'[48] Frankfurter thus analyses examples that 'depict the cultural Other in monstrous (if often perversely alluring) ways' such that 'notions of religion can be *extrapolated from representations of cultic or ritual alterity*.'[49]

In this article, similarly, I have analysed how people in the Roman Mediterranean used narratives about the misuse and destruction of books to define sacred texts and to delimit reading communities centred on those texts. This extrapolation takes place at a more granular level than we see in Frankfurter's article; I focus on sacred books rather than on a larger construct of 'religion'. Yet, at this level too, narratives about the misuse of sacred books 'suggest convictions about what is pure or ideal'.[50] Ethnogeneralisations about sacred books – even as a category of 'scripture' or 'sacred text' – become visible in these ancient discourses about the uses and abuses of textual objects. These discourses extend beyond the boundaries of ancient book religions – Christianity, Judaism, Manichaeanism – and illuminate broader patterns of Roman thinking about sacred books.

Ancient discourses about the misuse of books illuminate broader ideas of sacred texts as powerful objects. The destroyed books of Numa Pompilius, the powerful book of Elchasai, and the books handed over because of Diocletian's edicts each reflect ancient conversation about the relationship between material texts and religious practice. We could look to further examples, from the burned books of the Tiburtine Sibyl to rabbinic worries about texts that defile the hands.[51] These conversations extend beyond 'book religions' (as typically understood) and beyond ideas and practices usually

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**48**  Frankfurter 2021, 189.

**49**  Frankfurter 2021, 189. Emphasis original.

**50**  Frankfurter 2021, 189. Books are not explicitly in view for Frankfurter.

**51**  An expansive literature – ancient and modern – discusses both topics. On Sibylline books, see Livy, *Augustus* 31; cf. Howley 2017, 7; Beck 2018, 96–97. On books that defile the hands, see m. Yad. 3:4–5; for a recent interpretation with a survey of scholarly debate, see Baumgarten 2016.

understood as 'religion'. By attending to varied ancient discourses about the uses and misuses of books, we observe a wide range of ancient perspectives about books as religious objects – one that can be mapped as an interwoven set of related, if heterogeneous, categories that reflect a concept of 'scripture' in the lived religion of the Roman Mediterranean.

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