

With Gods on Our Side: Cicero's Religious Case against Catiline

The study of Roman religion underwent a shift thirty years ago. From immense evidence, scholarship has ceased presenting Roman religion as only used for political expediency by an atheist elite (Burris). Now, scholars largely interpret Roman religion as a set of ever-changing practices, (Beard, North and Price), where "belief" in the gods is less important than correct performance. Considering notions of the divine, many challenges have arisen to the monotheistic view that philosophical, civic, or poetic conceptions were incompatible, instead favoring a multi-faceted, needs-based model (Feeney; Bendlin). Altogether, there has been a reexamination of evidence, ranging from poetry to numismatics, to better understand Roman religion.

Still, oratory has received comparatively less attention. Even in the case of Cicero, when studied for religious developments, he is often framed by his philosophical treatises (Cole). While there have been studies on speeches more overtly concerned with religious rhetoric (Lennon), there have been far fewer studies on the speeches made in primarily legal or political contexts. Cicero's *Catilinarian* speeches, known for their political importance, historical value to the period, and rhetorical craft (Vasaly), receive less coverage for Cicero's often direct references to the Roman religious ideals.

There are three essential lines of argument Cicero makes, using religious language, throughout the *Catilinarians*. The first is to present Catiline as an existential threat to the republic, citing largely religious institutions. Cicero says that he will suffer if it means protecting the wives, children, and Vestal Virgins from violence, the temples, shrines, and fatherland from destruction (*In Cat.* IV.2). While the latter tricolon has clear religious and political overtones, the former bears more private and domestic resonances; the Vestal Virgins link the two together, representing Rome's unpenetrated walls, so to speak, hearth, wives and brides (Parker).

Throughout the speeches, Cicero pits Catiline against the religious institutions of Rome, but none more important than the temple of Vesta and her priestesses.

In order to combat these threats, Cicero suggests that he has divine support. There are several cases of prodigies or other divine signs, but perhaps the most important to his case, and the most fortuitous, is the erection of the statue of Jupiter on the Capitoline (*In Cat.* III.20). Cicero reminds his audience of the prophecy: when this statue was reestablished, after it had been struck by lightning, it would coincide with the revelation of a conspiracy to destroy the republic. This seemed proven true. The event was once thought emblematic of a cynical elite manipulating his lesser audience (Goar), but I will argue it is better seen as Cicero using a fortuitous situation to bolster his own case.

Likewise, not only does Cicero point to his evident divine support, he also expressly calls for it, ending three of the four *Catilinarian* speeches with a prayer or request that his audience pray (*In Cat.* II.29, III.29, IV.24). He ends the first speech by directly beseeching Jupiter Stator, whom he says was “truly” called “Stayer” (*In Cat.* I.33). There are two assumptions underlying this statement: that the audience will understand the references — Jupiter and his epithet — and that Jupiter will fulfill his namesake. If Jupiter fails to support the city, he would no longer be truly called the Stayer.

Thus, Cicero brought Jupiter especially, but the gods generally through less evocative prayers, onto his side. The prodigies, too, support his case against Catiline. Altogether, he forcefully combines these into a religious defense against Catiline’s threats to the Vestals and Roman shrines and temples. This suggests that the *Catilinarians* were not a purely political event, but wrapped equally in religious context. Likewise, that Roman religion at the end of the Republic was not in rapid decline, but a vital part of politics and public life more generally.

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