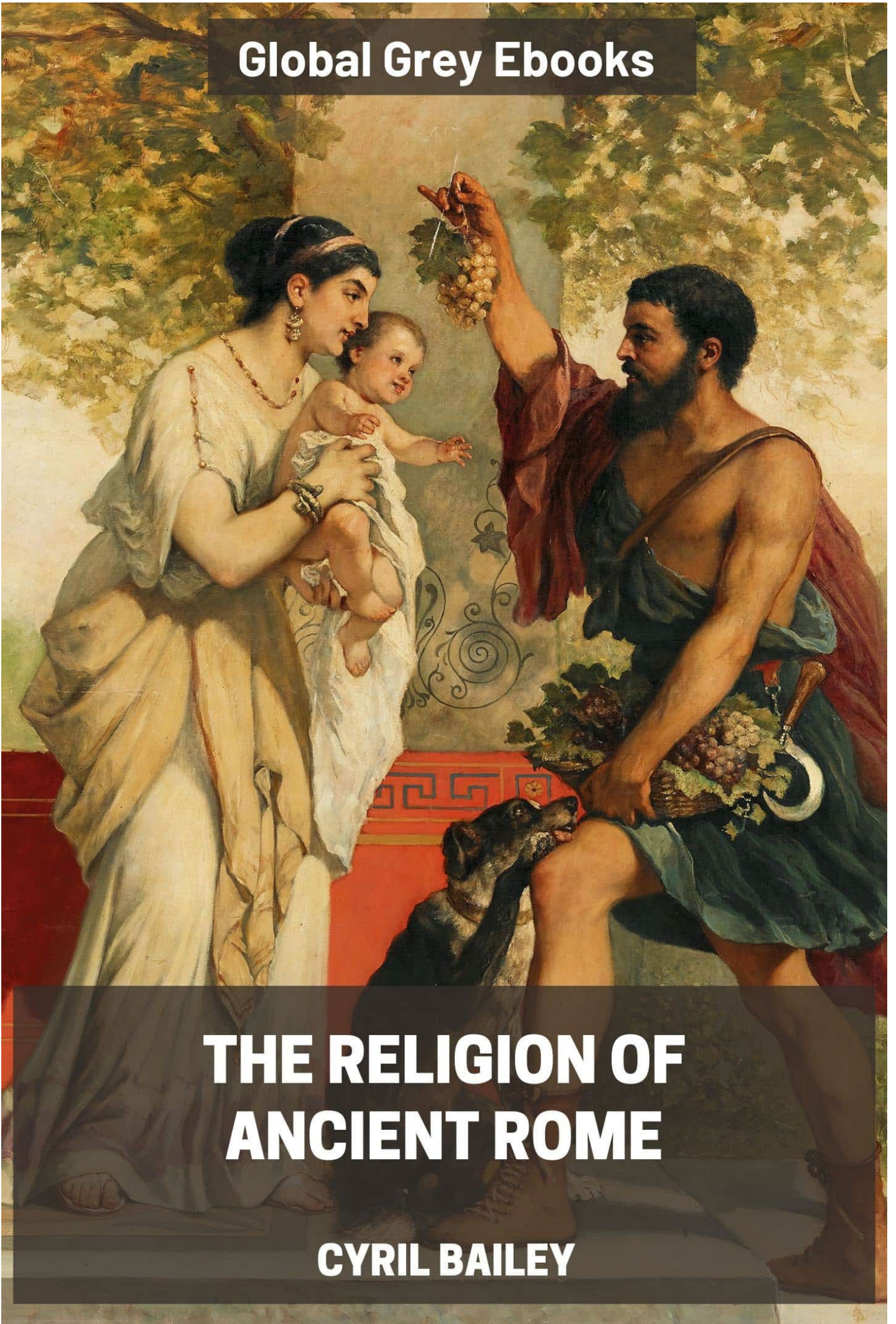


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**THE RELIGION OF
ANCIENT ROME**

CYRIL BAILEY

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The Religion of Ancient Rome by Cyril Bailey.

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soldier, when the fully developed state came into collision with its neighbours. If so, we may well have in these recurring festivals of Mars the sense, as Mr. Warde Fowler has put it, of 'some great *numen* at work, quickening vegetation, and calling into life the powers of reproduction in man and the animals.' Possibly another agricultural note is struck in the Liberalia of the 17th: though the cult of Liber was almost entirely overlaid by his subsequent identification with Dionysus, it seems right to recognise in him and his female counterpart, Libera, a general spirit of creativeness.

The character of April is much more clearly marked: the month is filled with a series of festivals—all of a clearly agricultural nature—prayers for the crops now in the earth, and the purification of the men and animals on the farm. The series opens with the Fordicidia on the 15th, when pregnant cows were sacrificed: their unborn calves were torn from them and burnt, the ashes being kept by the Vestal Virgin in Vesta's storehouse (*penus Vestæ*) for use at the Parilia. The general symbolism of fertility is very clear; the goddess associated with the festival is Tellus, the earth herself, and the local origin of these festivals is shown in the fact that not only was the sacrifice made for the whole people on the Capitol, but separately in each one of the *curiae*. The Fordicidia is closely followed by the Cerealia on the 19th—the festival of another earth-goddess (*Ceres, creare*)—more especially connected with the growth of corn. A very curious feature of the ritual was the fastening of fire-brands to the tails of foxes, which were then let loose in what was afterwards the Circus Maximus: a symbol possibly, as Wissowa thinks, of sunlight, possibly of the vegetation-spirit. But the most important of the April ceremonies is undoubtedly the Parilia of the 21st, the festival of the very ancient rustic *numen*, Pales. Ovid's⁹ description of the celebration is so interesting and so full of the characteristic colour of the Roman rustic festivals that I may perhaps be pardoned for reproducing it at greater length. 'Shepherd,' he says, addressing the rustic worshipper, 'at the first streak of dawn purify thy well-fed flocks: let water first besprinkle them, and a branch sweep clean the ground. Let the folds be adorned with leaves and branches fastened to them, while a trailing wreath covers the gay-decked gates. Let blue flames rise from the living sulphur and the sheep bleat loud as she feels the touch of the smoking sulphur. Burn the male olive-branch and the pine twig and juniper, and let the blazing laurel crackle amid the hearth. A basket full of millet must go with the millet cakes: this is the food wherein the country goddess finds pleasure most of all. Give her too her own share of the feast and her pail of milk, and when her share has been set aside, then with milk warm from the cow make prayer to Pales, guardian of the woods.' The poet then recites a long prayer, in which the farmer first begs forgiveness for any unwitting sins he may have committed against the rustic deities, such as trespassing on their groves or sheltering his flocks beneath their altar, and then prays for the aversion of disease and the prosperity of crops, flocks, and herds. 'Thus must the goddess be won, this prayer say four times turning to the sunrise, and wash thy hands in the running stream. Then set the rustic bowl upon the table in place of the wine-bowl, and drink the snowy milk and dark must, and soon through the heaps of crackling straw leap in swift course with eager limbs.' All the worshippers then set to leaping through the blazing fires, even the flocks and herds were driven through, and general hilarity reigned. Many points of detail might be noticed, such as that in the urban counterpart of the festival, which Ovid carefully distinguishes from the country celebrations, the fire was sprinkled with the ashes from the calves of the Fordicidia and the blood of Mars' October horse—another link between Mars and agriculture. But it is most interesting to note the double character of the ceremony—as a purification of man and beast on the one hand, and on the other a prayer for the prosperity of the season to come. Three special festivals remain in April. At the Vinalia (*priora*) of the 23rd, the wine-skins of the previous year were

⁹ Ov., *Fast.*, iv. 735.

