

Chapter Three

The Mission to the Jews: Why It Probably Succeeded

NOTHING seems more self-evident than the proposition that the rise of Christianity was accomplished despite the failure of the mission to the Jews. The New Testament says so, and so does the uncontested weight of historical and scholarly opinion. Granted, the received wisdom recognizes that Jews made up the bulk of very early converts, as phrases such as “Jewish Christianity” and “the Christian Synagogue” acknowledge. But it is generally assumed that this pattern ended abruptly in the wake of the revolt of 66-74, although some writers will accept a substantial role for Jewish conversion into the second century, regarding the Bar-Kokhba revolt as the “final straw” in Jewish-Christian sympathies.



This bas-relief depicts Roman troops carrying the menorah and other sacred loot from the temple in the year 70. The claims that the mission to the Jews ended at this time is sociologically improbable.

Perhaps only a sociologist would be foolish enough to suggest that, contrary to the received wisdom, Jewish Christianity played a central role until much later in the rise of Christianity—that not only was it the Jews of the diaspora who provided the initial basis for church growth during the first and early second centuries, but that Jews continued as a significant source of Christian converts until at least as late as the fourth century and that Jewish Christianity was still significant in the fifth century. In any event, that is the argument I shall make in this chapter.

Initially I will base my argument on a number of sociological principles and insights about how movements grow and how people have reacted to religious movements when faced with circumstances very like those faced by millions of Hellenized Jews. Indeed, part of my case will rest on how Jews have reacted when faced with similar conditions in recent times. From these materials I reconstruct what *should* have happened. I will then survey various recent archaeological and documentary findings which suggest that my sociological reconstruction represents what *actually* happened.

The reconstructive part of the chapter proceeds in three general steps. First, I sketch the evidential basis for the belief that the Jews did not convert in substantial numbers. Then, I examine a series of sociological propositions and research findings. Finally, I assess the situation of the Hellenized Jews of the diaspora in light of these considerations and try to show why the most plausible conclusion is that large numbers did convert.

How Do We Know That the Jews Rejected Christianity?

Everyone knows that the Jews rejected the Christian message. But how do we know this? The most compelling and solid evidence is that after the triumphant rise of Christianity there still existed a large and obdurate Jewish population. Moreover, the archaeological evidence shows that large synagogues continued to function in various parts of the diaspora during the critical time—the second through fifth centuries. Thus it appears to follow that, while Romans and Greeks flocked to the church, the Jews *must have* stood firm, because they survived to confront the church in later, more fully documented eras.

This leads to the second basis for knowledge that the Jews did not convert: hostile textual references from both sides. Beginning with parts of the New Testament we find the early church fathers depicting the Jews as stubborn and eventually as wicked. It is also known that at some point a curse against Christians (Nazarenes) was inserted into the Jewish Eighteen Benedictions—presumably as a method to prevent Jewish Christians from acting as presenters in the synagogue (Katz 1984; Horbury 1982). The date of this insertion is in doubt. But whenever the curse came into use, the assumption is that reciprocal condemnations reflect bitterness rooted in the failed mission to the Jews.

And that's all. That is the evidential base I now attempt to reappraise. To do so, I would like to introduce pertinent portions of recent work in the sociology of religion. I begin by examining some historical parallels and go on to introduce some theoretical propositions.

Pertinent Sociology

During the 1960s, sociologists radically revised the conventional wisdom about the assimilation of ethnic groups in American society. Among the leaders were Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (1963), who demonstrated that eastern and southern European ethnics had failed to assimilate into American society—that the melting pot was romantic nonsense. What was their proof? Look around, they said. Look at all the Little Italys and Little Polands. Solidly ethnic communities abound in American cities and hence confound the melting pot thesis.

Nevertheless, the revised view was invalid. When good data became available, it was discovered that the vast majority of these ethnic groups already had assimilated—most had married outside the ethnic group, for example (Alba 1976, 1985). The new myth was a product of the method. As Richard Alba pointed out, if one used Glazer and Moynihan's method, one would always find proof that Italians, for example, do not assimilate so long as *some* have not yet done so—until Little Italy stands empty. The lesson here is that it is possible for Little Italy to seem to thrive while at the same time massive assimilation goes on. The implication is, of course, that active synagogues need not be evidence that large numbers of Jews of the diaspora did not convert. The synagogues of the third and fourth centuries could be the equivalent of Little Italy in the twentieth century. Granted, of course, Little Italy may one day stand empty while some of the synagogues of the diaspora never did. But this does not alter the cautionary lesson.

Let us now examine a second historical parallel. Emancipation of the Jews in most European nations during the nineteenth century resulted in a religious crisis for those Jews who seized the opportunities of full citizenship. As Stephen Steinberg (1965) demonstrated so clearly, emancipated Jews discovered that Judaism was not simply a religion, but an ethnicity—the ghetto was not simply a Gentile imposition but a tribal precinct. To leave the ghetto, one had to abandon a tribal ethnicity. That is, to move freely in the greater society, Jews needed to shed the highly distinctive appearance of ghetto residents—side curls, shawls, and yarmulkes, for example. They also needed to relax dietary restrictions that prevented them from freely associating with Gentiles or entering their social circles. The emancipated Jews discovered, in fact, that one could not keep the Law outside the ghetto. Elsewhere there were no kosher butchers. How could one avoid violating the Sabbath by riding to the synagogue when one lived too far away to walk?

Emancipation caused hundreds of thousands of European Jews to become socially marginal—no longer accepted as Jews (often having been excommunicated from Judaism and shunned by family), and not truly assimilated Gentiles either. The concept of *marginality* has long-standing utility in sociology (Stonequist 1937; Stark and Bainbridge 1987). People are marginalized when

their membership in two groups poses a contradiction or cross pressure such that their status in each group is lowered by their membership in the other. The concept takes on power as it is embedded in a proposition: *People will attempt to escape or resolve a marginal position*. Some Jews in the nineteenth century tried to resolve their marginality by assimilation, including conversion to Christianity. Others attempted to resolve their marginality by becoming a new kind of Jew.

Reform Judaism was designed to provide a nontribal, non-ethnic religion rooted in the Old Testament (and the Enlightenment), one that focused on theology and ethics rather than on custom and practice (Blau 1964; Steinberg 1965). Samuel Holdheim, the first rabbi of the Reform congregation in Berlin, wrote in 1845 that divine law is given only for a particular time and place:

A law, even though divine, is potent only so long as the conditions and circumstances of life, to meet which it was enacted, continue; when these change, however, the law also must be abrogated, even though it have God for its author. For God himself has shown indubitably that with the change of the circumstances and conditions of life for which He once gave those laws, the laws themselves cease to be operative, that they *shall* be observed no longer because they *can* be observed no longer. (Quoted in Blau 1964:137)

The Pittsburgh Platform adopted by the Reform movement in its early days in the United States is forthright in its attempt to strip ethnicity from theology. Referring to Orthodox Judaism, the platform proclaimed:

Today we accept as binding only its moral laws and maintain only such ceremonials as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.

We hold that all such Mosaic and Rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state.

We recognize Judaism as a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason. (Quoted in Steinberg 1965:125)

Indeed, in this same document it was stated frankly, “We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community.” Later in this chapter I will attempt to show the great similarity between the circumstances of nineteenth-century emancipated Jews and those of Hellenized Jews in the Greco-Roman world. I shall show the ways in which Christianity offered many of the same things to Hellenized Jews that nineteenth-century Jews found in the Reform movement.

Against this background, let me now introduce several sociological propositions, in addition to the one on marginality. Recall from chapter 1 that *New religious movements mainly draw their converts from the ranks of the religiously inactive and discontented, and those affiliated with the most accommodated (worldly) religious communities*.

One aspect of this proposition is obvious. If people are firmly anchored into one religious institution, they don’t up and join another. However, it has also been widely assumed that people who have lost all apparent religious ties and interests (like Americans who answer “None” when asked their religious preference) also don’t up and join a new religious movement—that joiners are active seekers after a new faith. But that is not the case. New religious movements do best in places where there is the greatest amount of apparent secularization—for example, in places with low rates of church membership such as the west coasts of the United States and Canada, and northern Europe. Moreover, in these places the converts to new religious movements derive overwhelmingly from unaffiliated and irreligious backgrounds—the same people who would once have given their affiliation as “None” (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

Indeed, the very great secularity of North American and European Jews in recent times is reflected in the extraordinary rates at which their children have been joining new religious

movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). For example, more than a third of Americans who joined Hare Krishna are from nonpracticing Jewish families (Shinn 1983). Would people raised in Hellenized Jewish families have been prone to join something too?

The second important proposition is that *People are more willing to adapt a new religion to the extent that it retains cultural continuity with conventional religion(s) with which they already are familiar.*

As Nock so aptly put it:

The receptivity of most people for that which is wholly new (if anything is) is small.... The originality of a prophet lies commonly in his ability to fuse into a white heat combustible material which is there, to express and appear to meet the half-formed prayers of some at least of his contemporaries. The teaching of Gotama the Buddha grows out of the eager and baffled asceticism and speculation of his time, and it is not easy even now to define exactly what was new in him except his attitude. The message of John the Baptist and of Jesus gave form and substance to the dreams of a kingdom which had haunted many of their compatriots for generations. (1933:9-10)

The principle of cultural continuity captures the human tendency to maximize—to get the most for the least cost. In the case of adopting a new religious outlook, cost can be measured in terms of how much of what one already knows and more or less accepts one must discard in order to make the shift. To the extent that potential converts can retain much of their original cultural heritage and merely add to it, cost is minimized (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). For example, when persons familiar with the culture of Christianity confront the option of becoming Mormons, they are not asked to discard the Old and New Testaments but to add a third testament to the set. Mormonism does not present itself as an alternative to Christianity, but as its fulfillment. Joseph Smith did not claim to bring revelations from a new source, but to bring more recent tidings from the same source. This principle also applies to Muhammad and to Jesus.

The third proposition is that *Social movements grow much faster when they spread through preexisting social networks.*

This is simply an application of the attachment proposition about conversion developed in chapter 1. For the fact is that typically people do not *seek* a faith; they *encounter* one through their ties to other people who already accept this faith. In the end, accepting a new religion is part of conforming to the expectations and examples of one's family and friends. This limits avenues by which movements can recruit.

Religious movements can grow because their members continue to form new relationships with outsiders. This is a frequent pattern observed in recruitment to religious movements in modern times, especially in large cities. Many new religions have become skilled in making attachments with newcomers and others deficient in interpersonal attachments (Lofland and Stark 1965; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Movements can also recruit by spreading through preexisting social networks, as converts bring in their families and friends. This pattern has the potential for much faster growth than the one-by-one conversion of social isolates (Stark and Roberts 1982). The best example of this is provided by the Mormons. Although they often get an isolated recruit on the basis of attachments built by missionaries, the primary source of Mormon converts is along network lines. The average convert was preceded into the church by many friends and relatives. It is network growth that so distinguishes the Mormon rate of growth—meanwhile, other contemporary religious movements will count their growth in thousands, not millions, for lack of a network pattern of growth.

The statistics on Christian growth developed in chapter 1 would seem to require that Christianity arose through preexisting networks. For that to have occurred requires converts to have come from communities united by attachments. These networks need not have been rooted

in highly stable communities. But the network assumption is not compatible with an image of proselytizers seeking out most converts along the streets and highways, or calling them forth from the crowds in the marketplaces. In addition, network growth requires that missionaries from a new faith *already have, or easily can form*, strong attachments to such networks.

The Situation of Hellenized Jews in the Diaspora

Now it is time to apply all of the above to the question of how, given their circumstances, Hellenized Jews in the diaspora were likely to have responded to Christianity as it appeared among them. I shall show that because there was extensive similarity between the situation of the Hellenized Jews of New Testament times and that of nineteenth-century emancipated Jews, we can expect something analogous to the Reform movement to have attracted the Hellenized Jews.

It is important to keep in mind how greatly the Hellenized Jews of the diaspora outnumbered the Jews living in Palestine. Johnson (1976) suggests that there were a million in Palestine and four million outside, while Meeks (1983) places the population of the diaspora at five to six million. It is also worth noting that the Hellenized Jews were primarily urban—as were the early Christians outside Palestine (Meeks 1983). Finally, the Hellenized Jews were not an impoverished minority; they had been drawn out from Palestine over the centuries because of economic opportunities. By the first century, the large Jewish sections in major centers such as Alexandria were known for their wealth. As they built up wealthy and populous urban communities within the major centers of the empire, Jews had adjusted to life in the diaspora in ways that made them very marginal vis-à-vis the Judaism of Jerusalem. As early as the third century B.C.E. their Hebrew had decayed to the point that the Torah had to be translated into Greek (Greenspoon 1989). In the process of translation not only Greek words, but Hellenic viewpoints, crept into the Septuagint. Thus Exod. 22:28 was rendered “You shall not revile *the gods*,” which Roetzel (1985) interprets as a gesture toward accommodation with pagans. In any event, the Jews outside Palestine read, wrote, spoke, thought, and worshiped in Greek. Of the inscriptions found in the Jewish catacombs in Rome, fewer than 2 percent were in Hebrew or Aramaic, while 74 percent were in Greek and the remainder in Latin (Finegan 1992:325—326). Many Jews in the diaspora had taken Greek names, and they had incorporated much of the Greek enlightenment into their cultural views, just as emancipated Jews responded to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Moreover, many Hellenized Jews had embraced some elements of pagan religious thought. In short, large numbers were no longer Jews in the ethnic sense and remained only partly so in the religious sense (Goldstein 1981; Frend 1984; Green 1985).

But neither were they Greeks, for Judaism could not easily be separated from an ethnicity intrinsic to the Law. The Law set Jews apart as fully in the first century as in the nineteenth and prevented them from full participation in civic life (Hengel 1975). In both eras the Jews were in the unstable and uncomfortable condition of social marginality. As Tcherikover put it, Hellenized Jews found it degrading to live among Greeks and embrace Greek culture and yet to remain “enclosed in a spiritual Ghetto and be reckoned among the ‘barbarians.’” He pointed to the urgent need for “a compromise, a synthesis, which would permit a Jew to remain a Jew” and still be able to claim full entry into “the elect society of the Greeks”(1958:81).

Perhaps the “God-Fearers” can help reveal the difficulty that the Hellenized Jews had with the ethnic impositions of Judaism. Judaism had long attracted Gentile “fellow travelers,” who found much intellectual satisfaction in the moral teachings and monotheism of the Jews, but who would not take the final step of fulfilling the Law. These people are referred to as God Fearers. For Hellenized Jews who had social and intellectual problems with the Law, the God-Fearers could easily have been a very tempting model of an alternative, fully Greek Judaism—a Judaism that

Rabbi Holdheim might have judged appropriate to the changed circumstances and conditions of life. But the God-Fearers were not a movement. The Christians were.

When the Apostolic Council decided not to require converts to observe the Law, they created a religion free of ethnicity. Tradition has it that the first fruit of this break with the Law was the rapid success of the mission to the Gentiles. But who would have been the first to hear of the break? Who would have had the greatest initial benefits from it? What group, in fact, best fulfills the sociological propositions outlined above?

Cultural Continuity

Christianity offered twice as much cultural continuity to the Hellenized Jews as to Gentiles. If we examine the marginality of the Hellenized Jews, torn between two cultures, we may note how Christianity offered to retain much of the religious content of *both* cultures and to resolve the contradictions between them. Indeed, Theissen described Pauline Christianity as “accommodated Judaism” (1982:124).

Little need be said of the extent to which Christianity maintained cultural continuity with Judaism. Indeed, much of the New Testament is devoted to displaying how Christianity extends and fulfills the Old. And for much of this century scholars have stressed the ways in which Christianity presented a remarkably familiar face to the non-Jewish, Greco-Roman culture as well (Harnack 1908; Nock 1933; Kee 1983; Wilken 1984~ MacMullen 1981, 1984; Frend 1984). But if we look at these two cultural faces” of early Christianity, it seems clear that its greatest appeal would have been for those to whom *each* face mattered: the Jews of the diaspora.

Accommodated Judaism

Not only were the Hellenized Jews socially marginal, they were also relatively worldly, accommodated, and secular. The example of Philo is compelling. Much has been made of Philo’s “anticipations” of many Christian doctrines, and it has been suggested that he may have influenced as well as foreshadowed many of Paul’s teachings. This could have had the effect of preparing sophisticated opinion for the Christian message. But these matters are secondary to my argument. Whatever else Philo may represent, he offers dramatic proof of the extensive accommodation of Judaism in the diaspora (Collins 1983).

Early in the first century we find an esteemed leader of the Alexandrian Jewish community whose interpretations of the Torah amazingly resemble those of the early Reform rabbis: divine authority is subordinated to reason and to symbolic and allegorical interpretation; faith is accommodated to time and place. Like the Reform rabbis, Philo was stuck between two worlds. How could he be fully Hellenized but remain in some sense Jewish? To this end, he tried to offer “reasonable” explanations of the laws—God forbids eating of the flesh of birds of prey and of carnivorous mammals in order to elevate the virtue of peace. What he could not explain in this way, he recast as allegory. As Collins pointed out, “The allegorical interpretation of scripture by Philo and others is an evident method for reducing the dissonance between the Jewish scriptures and philosophical religion” (1983:9). Frend has made the same point, arguing that Philo attempted to interpret the Law “exclusively through the mirror of Greek philosophy” (1984:35). As a result, the self-evident religious and historical meaning of much of the Torah was “lost among the spiritual and moral sentiments whereby Philo sought to demonstrate the harmony and rationality of the universe” (Frend 1984:35).

A major aspect of accommodation is a turn toward worldliness and away from otherworldliness, with the result that the supernatural becomes ever more remote and inactive. Here too Philo’s writings are a model of the accommodation process. Granted, he had a real

penchant for mysticism and could write of his soul's being "on fire." But his commitment was to Platonic philosophy, and this was a lens through which the supernatural could be barely glimpsed through layers of abstraction, Reason, and Perfection. In Philo, the thundering and jealous Yahweh of the Old Testament is replaced by a remote, abstract Absolute Being. It has been said of many modern Christian theologians that their primary aim is to find ways to express disbelief as belief. It seems to me that the same could be said of Philo, *and of his peers*.

I suggest there are two primary reasons to believe that Philo expressed fashionable opinion and thus revealed the extensive accommodation of Hellenized Judaism. First, he made his views well known while retaining public esteem. Second, later in the century when the question of Christians and the Law arose, it was not Gentile converts to Christianity "who first detached themselves from the law, but Jewish Christians" (Conzelmann 1973:83). These Jewish Christians were not part of the church in Palestine but were Hellenized converts. One must suppose that their nonobservance predated their conversion, or, at the very least, that they had observed the Law only superficially. Again, the parallels with Reform Jews, and with the present-day affinity of Jews from nonpracticing homes for novel religious movements, seem compelling.

Networks

I now examine the implications of network growth for the mission to the Jews. Let us put ourselves in the position of the evangelists: here we are in Jerusalem in the year 50. The Apostolic Council has just met and decided that we should leave Palestine and go out and spread the glad tidings. Where should we go? Whom should we seek out when we get there? Put another way, who will welcome us? Who will listen? I suggest that the answer would have been obvious: we should go to the major communities of Hellenized Jews (Roberts 1979).

In all the major centers of the empire were substantial settlements of diasporan Jews *who were accustomed to receiving teachers from Jerusalem*. Moreover, the missionaries were likely to have family and friendship connections within at least some of the diasporan communities. Indeed, if Paul is a typical example, the missionaries were themselves Hellenized Jews.

In addition, the Hellenized Jews were the group best prepared to receive Christianity. We have already seen how Christianity appealed to both their Jewish and their Hellenic sides. It built a distinctly Hellenized component on Jewish foundations. But, unlike the Platonic conceptions of Philo, Christianity presented an exceedingly vigorous otherworldly faith, capable of generating strong commitment.

We also ought to note that diasporan Jews would be less dubious about a messiah come to Palestine—a part of the empire that many Gentiles would regard as a backwater. Nor would the Jews have been so easily put off by the facts of the Crucifixion. Indeed, the cross was a symbol used to signify the Messiah in Hebrew manuscripts prior to the Crucifixion (Finegan 1992:348). In contrast, many Gentiles apparently had trouble with the notion of deity executed as a common criminal. The socially marginal Jews of the diaspora knew that Roman justice was often opportunistic, and they could also understand the machinations of the high priests in Jerusalem.

Finally, it seems reasonable to suppose that the escalating conflict between Rome and various Jewish nationalist movements added to the burden of marginality experienced by Hellenized Jews. In the wake of the destruction of the Temple, with Jewish nationalists plotting new revolts, multitudes of Hellenized Jews who no longer felt strong ethnic ties to Palestine must have been very tempted to step aside (Grant 1972; Downey 1962).

These are the reasons that ought to have caused the first missionaries to concentrate on the Hellenized Jews. And virtually all New Testament historians agree that they *did so*, and *were successful*, but *only* in the beginning. These facts are agreed upon: (1) many of the converts

mentioned in the New Testament can be identified as Hellenized Jews; (2) much of the New Testament assumes an audience familiar with the Septuagint (Frend 1984); (3) Christian missionaries frequently did their public teaching in the synagogues of the diaspora—and may have continued to do so far into the second century (Grant 1972); (4) archaeological evidence shows that the early Christian churches outside Palestine were concentrated in the Jewish sections of cities—as Eric Meyers put it, “on opposite sides of the street, so to speak” (1988:76; see also Pearson 1986; White 1985, 1986).

The critical issue thus comes into view. What justifies the assumption that the powerful social forces that initially achieved such a favorable response in diasporan communities suddenly became inoperative? Frend asserts that between 145 and 170 there was a major shift in which Christianity abandoned its Jewish connections (1984:257). But he does not say how he knows, nor does he explain why such a shift should have occurred or did occur. There is nothing in the sociological propositions examined above to justify a sudden shift in recruitment patterns, nor is there an empirical example to cite. Granted, sociological “models” are fallible, but we ought not to dismiss them without due cause. Here, an adequate cause to prefer the received over the sociological wisdom would be persuasive historical evidence that Jewish conversion did peter out by the second century and that Jewish Christianity was absorbed in a sea of Gentile Converts.

I find no compelling case in the sources that the mission to the Jews ended in this way. To the contrary, the pertinent texts seem surprisingly (to me) supportive of my revisionist views (which are compatible with Georg Strecker’s [1971] interpretations as well). First of all, historians acknowledge that neither the “Jewish War” nor the Bar-Kokhba revolt had really serious direct impact on most Jewish communities in the diaspora. That is, these conflicts brought destruction and depopulation in Palestine, but their “significance for the diaspora communities was minimal” (Meeks and Wilken 1978:5). If this is so, then why must we assume that one or the other of these conflicts severed connections between the Christian and Jewish communities? Indeed, would the destruction of the Temple and of the center of “ethnic” Judaism not have added to the growing weakness of traditional Orthodoxy in the diaspora and thus have increased the potential appeal of Christianity? We must not mistake what could well have been a “remnant” Orthodox Judaism of the fifth and sixth centuries for the dominant Judaism of the Hellenized communities of the second through fourth centuries.

Moreover, I think examination of the Marcion affair reveals that a very Jewish Christianity still was overwhelmingly dominant in the mid-second century. The Marcion movement was very much what one would have expected Christianity to become *if* from very early on, the church in the West had been the Gentile-dominated movement, increasingly in conflict with the Jews of the diaspora, that it is alleged to have been.

Even today, after nearly two millennia of rationalization, the fit between the Old and the New Testaments often seems awkward. In the second century, with the canon still in flux, many must have perceived very serious “difficulties and internal contradictions,” as Gerhard May has put it (1987-1988:148). Paul Johnson described the situation rather more bluntly, asserting that compared with the New, the Old Testament seems to be talking of “a quite different God,” and that the clarity and integrity of post-Pauline Christian writings suffered from trying to reconcile the two traditions (1976:46).

In the face of these problems, what would be the most parsimonious and obvious solution for a religious movement consisting overwhelmingly of “Gentile” Christians? I think it would be the precise solution Marcion adopted: to strip the New Testament of all those parts concerned with justifying Christianity to the Jews, and then to drop the Old Testament from the Canon entirely.

If we are Christians, why should we worry about non-Christians or about pre-Christian doctrines? If Jewish texts do not jibe with the Pauline tradition, why not simply complete the break with Judaism? Whether Marcion himself came from a Jewish background, as is sometimes claimed, is irrelevant to the theological elegance of his solution. Indeed, the speed with which Marcion built a substantial movement suggests that his solution pleased many. But the crucial point is this: the traditional Christian faction seems to have easily ousted Marcion and successfully condemned *Antitheses* as heresy.

I do not believe that the traditionalists won out because of superior theology. Rather, the whole affair suggests to me that in the middle of the second century the church still was dominated by people with Jewish roots and strong current ties to the Jewish world. Notice that this was *after* the Bar-Kokhba revolt and at the very time Frend (1984) suggests that Jewish influences in the church rapidly waned. To me, the Marcion affair suggests that the mission to the Jews remained a very high priority far later than has been recognized.

Since “everyone” has known that Christian-Jewish connections were insignificant by the mid-second century, it is understandable that no one has drawn the obvious (to me) conclusions about the persistence well into the fifth century of “Judaizing” tendencies within Christianity. The facts are clear. In this period large numbers of Christians showed such an affinity for Jewish culture that it could be characterized as “a widespread Christian infatuation with Judaism” (Meeks and Wilken 1978:31). This is usually explained on the basis of lingering attractions of Judaism and renewed conversion to Judaism (Simon 1964; Wilken 1971, 1983). Perhaps so. But this is also exactly what one would expect to find in Christian communities containing many members of relatively recent Jewish ancestry, who retained ties of family and association with non-Christian Jews, and who therefore *still retained* a distinctly Jewish aspect to their Christianity. Indeed, it is quite uncertain just *when* it became unacceptable for Christians to observe the Law.

Put another way, what was at issue may not have been the *Judaizing* of Christianity, but that in many places a substantial Jewish Christianity *persisted*. And if this was the case, there is no reason to suppose that Jewish Christians had lost the ability to attract new converts from their networks of Hellenized families and friends. Hence, rather than seeing these affinities as signs of renewed conversion to Judaism, I suggest that a more plausible reading is to see them as signs that Jewish conversion to Christianity *continued*.

For the moment, assume that Jewish conversion to Christianity was still a major factor in the fourth and early fifth centuries—major in the sense that a substantial rate of defection from Judaism to Christianity continued, even though this would by then have become a minor source of converts to the now-huge Christian population. Such an assumption allows us to make better sense of the anti-Jewish polemics of Christian figures such as John Chrysostom. I think we can safely accept Chrysostom’s claims about widespread Christian involvement in Jewish circles, since his audience would have known the true state of affairs. But rather than dismiss Chrysostom as merely a raving bigot or as an unscrupulous manipulator of Jewish scapegoats, why not see him as an early leader in the movement to *separate* a church and synagogue that were still greatly intertwined?

Postulate a world in which there are a great many Christians with Jewish friends and relatives and who, therefore, turn up at Jewish festivals and even in the synagogues from time to time. Moreover, this has gone on for centuries. Now suppose you are a newly appointed bishop who has been told that it is time to get serious about making a Christian world. How can you convince that they ought to avoid even the appearance of dabbling in Judaism? By confronting them with the need to choose, not between Gentile and Jewish Christianity, but between Christianity and

traditional, Orthodox Judaism—a Judaism whose adherents could be attacked as “Christ-killers” who consorted with demons (as Jewish Christianity could not). In this fashion Chrysostom could stress that it was time for Jewish-Christians to become assimilated, unhyphenated Christians.

Seen this way, the increasingly emphatic attacks on Judaism in this later period reflect efforts to consolidate a diverse and splintered faith into a clearly defined catholic structure. I find this a more plausible interpretation than the thesis that the attacks were reactions against a new wave of conversion to Judaism. Why should the “ethnic” burden of Orthodoxy suddenly have ceased to matter to potential converts? And that takes us back to the “God-Fearers.”

It seems to me that MacLennan and Kraabel (1986) are correct to dismiss the role of the “God-Fearers” as go-betweens taking Christianity to the Jews of the diaspora. There were plenty of Jewish Christians, including Paul, filling that role. I think they are also correct that the extent of Jewish conversion to Christianity during the first two centuries was “higher than is usually assumed.” But I find difficulties with their conclusion that the God-Fearers may have been primarily mythical. Their evidence is, in my judgment, *too late*. A lack of mention of Gentile donors in synagogue inscriptions from the third and fourth centuries can be material *only* if we assume that the God-Fearers did not take the Christian option when it appeared, but continued to be marginal hangers-on of the synagogue. That is not consistent with good sociology. And it is inconsistent with the New Testament. Acts does not suggest that one would find the God-Fearers still lingering in the back of the synagogues, but that by early in the second century, at the latest, they would have long since moved into the churches.

What we ought to look for in the synagogues are signs of lingering connections with Christianity. MacLennan and Kraabel tell us that the archaeological evidence fails to show much Gentile presence around the synagogues in the Jewish settlements in the diaspora. But they also tells us that this is where the churches were! If they are correct that the people in these churches were not Gentiles, who could they have been other than Jewish Christians? And in fact, the weight of pertinent recent evidence seems to support this conclusion.

Recent Physical Evidence

There is recent physical evidence (or what insiders sometimes call *realia*) suggesting that the Christian and Jewish communities remained closely linked—intertwined, even—until far later than is consistent with claims about the early and absolute break between church and synagogue. The *realia* are both archaeological and documentary.

Eric Meyers (1983, 1988) reported that a wealth of archaeological findings in Italy (especially in Rome and Venosa) show that “Jewish and Christian burials reflect an interdependent and closely related community of Jews and Christians in which clear marks of demarcation were blurred until the third and fourth centuries C.E.” (1988:73-74). Shifting to data from Palestine, Meyers noted excavations in Capernaum (on the shores of the Sea of Galilee) that reveal “a Jewish synagogue and a Jewish-Christian house church on opposite sides of the street... Following the strata and the structures, both communities apparently lived in harmony until the seventh century C.E.” (1988:76). Finally, Meyers suggested that only when a triumphant Christianity began, late in the fourth century, to pour money into Palestine for church building and shrines was there any serious rupture with Jews.

Roger Bagnall reported a surviving papyrus (*Poxy. 44*) from the year 400 wherein a man “explicitly described as a Jew” leased a ground-floor room and a basement storage room in a house from two Christian sisters described as apotactic monastics:

The rent is in line with other lease payments for parts of the city known from the period, and the whole transaction is distinguished by its routineness. All the same, the sight of two Christian nuns letting out two

rooms in their house to a Jewish man has much to say about not only the flexibility of the monastic life but also the ordinariness of [Christian-Jewish] relationships (1993:277-278)

These data may strike social scientists as thin, but they seem far less ambiguous and far more reliable than the evidence with which students of antiquity must usually work.

Conclusion

In the nineteenth century, many newly emancipated Jews in western Europe responded to their marginal situation by turning to Reform Judaism—preserving some semblance of their religious heritage while jettisoning its heavy burdens of ethnicity. Had it not been for the preceding centuries of Christian hostility, they might very well have taken up Christianity instead, for it too would have been more compatible with the modern enlightenment and would have released them from the confines of the Law, the two concerns most urgently expressed in Reform writings. In the early centuries of the Christian era such a barrier had not yet been erected between Jews and Christians. In those days too, Jews were caught on the cleft of marginality, to which Christianity offered an appropriate resolution.

Keep in mind, too, that there were far more than enough Jews in the diaspora to have provided the numbers needed to fulfill plausible growth curves well into the Christian era. In chapter 1, I calculated a total of slightly more than a million Christians by the year 250. Only approximately *one* out of every *five* Jews in the diaspora need have converted to meet that total in the absence of any Gentile conversions—and I hardly mean to suggest that there were none of these before 250. Moreover, the diasporan Jews were in the right places to provide the needed supply of converts—in the cities, and especially in the cities of Asia Minor and North Africa. For it is here that we find not only the first churches, but, during the first four centuries, the most vigorous Christian communities.

I have tried to show what *should have happened*, why the mission to the Jews of the diaspora should have been a considerable *long-run* success. Although I reconfirm my respect for the gap between “should” and “did,” I cautiously suggest that a very substantial conversion of the Jews actually did take place. Indeed, Ephraim Isaac recently reported that according to Ethiopian tradition, when Christianity first appeared there, “half of the population was Jewish and . . . most of them converted to Christianity” (1993:60).

Afterword

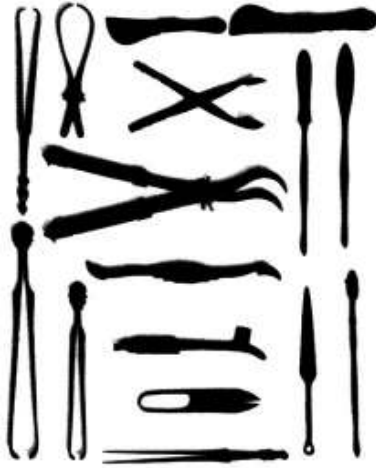
Long after the initial version of this chapter had been published and as this book neared completion, I finally read the classic two-volume work by Johannes Weiss ([1914] 1959). Midway in the second volume I discovered that Weiss also rejected the traditional view positing the failure of the mission to the Jews. Noting that portions of the New Testament suggest that “the mission to the Jews has been abandoned as completely hopeless,” Weiss then devoted many pages of textual analysis to rejecting this claim (2:666-703). He asserted that the church “did not abandon its mission to the Jews,” and suggested that serious dialogue and interaction continued well into the third century and probably later. He noted, for example, that Origen mentioned having taken part in a theological debate with Jews before “umpires” sometime during the first half of the third century (2:670).

This discovery encouraged me to feel that I was on the right track, and discouraged me from imagining that I could ever finally master this enormous literature.

Note. A preliminary version of this chapter appeared as “Jewish Conversion and the Rise of Christianity: Rethinking the Received Wisdom,” in *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, ed. Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 314–329.

Chapter Four

Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion



As these surgical instruments found in Pompeii reveal, the Romans understood human anatomy. But because they did not know germs even existed, they could not treat communicable diseases.

IN 165, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Some medical historians suspect that it was the first appearance of smallpox in the West (Zinsser (1934) 1960). But whatever the actual disease, it was lethal. During the fifteen-year duration of the epidemic, from a quarter to a third of the empire's population died from it, including Marcus Aurelius himself, in 180 in Vienna (Boak 1947; Russell 1958; Gilliam 1961; McNeill 1976). Then in 251 a new and equally devastating epidemic again swept the empire, hitting the rural areas as hard as the cities (Boak 1955a, 1955b, Russell 1958; McNeill 1976). This time it may have been measles. Both smallpox and measles can produce massive mortality rates when they strike a previously unexposed population (Neel et al. 1970).

Although, as we shall see, these demographic disasters were reported by contemporary writers, the role they likely played in the decline of Rome was ignored by historians until modern times (Zinsser [1934] 1960; Boak 1947). Now however, historians recognize that acute depopulation was responsible for policies once attributed to moral degeneration. For example, massive resettlement of "barbarians" as landholders within the empire and their induction into the legions did not reflect Roman decadence but were rational policies implemented by a state with an abundance of vacant estates and lacking manpower (Boak 1955a). In his now classic and pioneering work on the impact of epidemics on history, Hans Zinsser pointed out that

again and again, the forward march of Roman power and world organization was interrupted by the only force against which political genius and military valor were utterly helpless—epidemic disease. . . and when it came, as though carried by storm clouds, all other things gave way, and men crouched in terror, abandoning all their quarrels, undertakings, and ambitions, until the tempest had blown over. ([1934] 1960:99)

But while historians of Rome have been busy making good the oversights of earlier generations, the same cannot be said of historians of the early Christian era. The words "epidemic," "plague," and "disease" do not even appear in the index of the most respected recent works on the rise of Christianity (Frend 1984; MacMullen 1984). This is no small omission. Indeed, Cyprian, Dionysius, Eusebius, and other church fathers thought the epidemics made major contributions to the Christian cause. I think so too. In this chapter I suggest that had classical society not been disrupted and demoralized by these catastrophes, Christianity might never have become so dominant a faith. To this end, I shall develop three theses.

The first of these can be found in the writings of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage. The epidemics swamped the explanatory and comforting capacities of paganism and of Hellenic philosophies. In contrast, Christianity offered a much more satisfactory account of why these terrible times had fallen upon humanity, and it projected a hopeful, even enthusiastic, portrait of the future.

The second is to be found in an Easter letter by Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria. Christian values of love and charity had, from the beginning, been translated into norms of social service

and community solidarity. When disasters struck, the Christians were better able to cope, and this resulted in *substantially higher rates of survival*. This meant that in the aftermath of each epidemic, Christians made up a larger percentage of the population even without new converts. Moreover, their noticeably better survival rate would have seemed a “miracle” to Christians and pagans alike, and this ought to have influenced conversion.

Let me acknowledge that, as I consulted sources on the historical impact of epidemics, I discovered these two points discussed briefly in William H. McNeill’s superb *Plagues and Peoples* (1976:108-109). I could not recall having read them before. I must have done so, but at a time when I was more interested in the fall of Rome than in the rise of Christianity. In any event, both points have a substantial social scientific pedigree as elements in the analysis of “revitalization movements”—the rise of new religions as a response to social crises (Wallace 1956, 1966; Thornton 1981; Champagne 1983; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987).

My third thesis is an application of control theories of conformity (Hirschi 1969; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987). When an epidemic destroys a substantial proportion of a population, it leaves large numbers of people without the interpersonal attachments that had previously bound them to the conventional moral order. As mortality mounted during each of these epidemics, large numbers of people, especially pagans, would have *lost the bonds* that once might have restrained them from becoming Christians. Meanwhile, the superior rates of survival of Christian social networks would have provided pagans with a much greater probability of replacing their lost attachments with new ones to Christians. In this way, very substantial numbers of pagans would have been shifted from mainly pagan to mainly Christian social networks. In any era, such a shifting of social networks will result in religious conversions, as was outlined in chapter 1.

In what follows I will expand each of these arguments and offer evidence that it applies. But first, I must sketch the extent of these two epidemics and their demographic impact.

The Epidemics

The great epidemic of the second century, which is sometimes referred to as the “Plague of Galen,” first struck the army of Verus during its campaigns in the East in 165 and from there spread across the empire. The mortality was so high in many cities that Marcus Aurelius spoke of caravans of carts and wagons hauling the dead from cities. Hans Zinsser noted that

so many people died that cities and villages in Italy and in the provinces were abandoned and fell into ruin. Distress and disorganization was so severe that a campaign against the Marcommani was postponed. When, in 169, the war was finally resumed, Haeser records that many of the Germanic warriors—men and women—were found dead on the field without wounds, having died from the epidemic. ([1934] 1960:100)

We cannot know the actual mortality rate with any certainty, although there is no doubt that it was high. Seeck’s 1910 estimate that over half the empire’s population perished now seems too high (see Littman and Littman 1973). Conversely, Gilliam’s conclusion that only 1 percent died is incompatible even with his own assertion that “a great and destructive epidemic took place under Marcus Aurelius” (1961:249).

The Littmans (1973) propose a rate of 7 to 10 percent, but they arrive at it by selecting smallpox epidemics in Minneapolis during 1924-1925 and in western Prussia in 1874 as the relevant comparisons, and ignoring the far higher fatalities for smallpox epidemics in less modern societies with populations lacking substantial prior exposure. I am most persuaded by McNeill’s (1976) estimate that from a quarter to a third of the population perished during this epidemic. Such high mortality is consistent with modern knowledge of epidemiology. It is also consistent with analyses of subsequent manpower shortages (Boak 1955a).

Almost a century later a second terrible epidemic struck the Roman world. At its height, five thousand people a day were reported to have died in the city of Rome alone (McNeill 1976). And for this epidemic we have many contemporary reports, especially from Christian sources. Thus Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, wrote in 251 that “many of us are dying” from “this plaque and pestilence” (*Mortality*, 1958 ed.). Several years later Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote in an Easter message at “out of the blue came this disease, a thing ... more frightful than any disaster whatever” (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 1965 ed.).

These disasters were not limited to the cities. McNeill (1976) suggests that the death toll may have been even higher in rural areas. Boak (1955b) has calculated that the small town of Karanis, in Egypt, may have lost more than a third of its population during the first epidemic. Calculations based on Dionysius’s account suggest that two-thirds of Alexandria’s population may have perished (Boak 1947). Such death rates have been documented in many other times and places when a serious infectious disease has struck a population not recently exposed to it. For example, in 1707 smallpox killed more than 30 percent of the population of Iceland (Hopkins 1983). In any event, my concern here is not epidemiological. It is, rather, with the human experience of such crisis and calamity.

Crisis and Faith

Frequently in human history, crises produced by natural or social disasters have been translated into crises of faith. Typically this occurs because the disaster places demands upon the prevailing religion that it appears unable to meet. This inability can occur at two levels. First, the religion may fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of *why* the disaster occurred. Second, religion may seem to be *unavailing* against the disaster, which becomes truly critical when all nonreligious means also prove inadequate—when the supernatural remains the only plausible source of help. In response to these “failures” of their traditional faiths, societies frequently have evolved or adopted new faiths. The classic instance is the series of messianic movements that periodically swept through the Indians of North America in response to their failures to withstand encroachments by European settlers (Mooney 1896). The prevalence of new religious movements in societies undergoing rapid modernization also illustrates the point. Bryan Wilson (1975) has surveyed many such episodes from around the world.

In a now-famous essay, Anthony F. C. Wallace (1956) argued that *all* religions arise in response to crises. That seems a needlessly extreme view, but there is abundant evidence that faith seldom is “blind,” in the sense that religions frequently *are discarded* and new ones accepted in troubled times, and surely periods of raging epidemics meet the requirements outlined by Wallace.

In this chapter I will contrast Christianity’s ability to explain the epidemics with that of its competitors in the Greco-Roman world. I also will examine the many ways in which Christianity not only seemed to be, but actually was, *efficacious*. This too is typical. Indeed, this is why the term “revitalization movement” is applied to new religions that arise during times of crisis—the name indicates the positive contributions such movements often make by “revitalizing” the capacity of a culture to deal with its problems.

How do religions “revitalize?” Primarily by effectively mobilizing people to attempt collective actions. Thus the new religious movements among the North American Indians during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries initially revitalized these societies by greatly reducing drunkenness and despair, and then provided an effective framework for joining fragmented bands into an organized political unit capable of concerted action. That these proved unable to withstand white encroachments in the long run must not obscure the obvious early benefits and

how these “proved” the new faith’s validity. In this way new ideas or theologies often generate new social arrangements that are better suited to the new circumstances.

Social scientists typically are trained to be suspicious of “theological” or “ideological” explanations and often suppose that these are epiphenomena easily reduced to the “real” causes, which are material in nature. This is true even of some social scientists who specialize in studies of early Christianity. However, I shall demonstrate in this chapter, and many times throughout the book, that ideas often are critical factors in determining not only individual behavior but, indeed, the path of history. To be more specific, for people in the Greco-Roman world, to be a Christian or a pagan was not simply a matter of denominational preference.” Rather, the *contents* of Christian pagan beliefs were *different* in ways that greatly determined only their explanatory capacities but also their relative capacities to mobilize human resources.

To assess these differences between pagans and Christians, let us imagine ourselves in their places, faced with one of these terrible epidemics.

Here we are in a city stinking of death. All around us, our family and friends are dropping. We can never be sure if or when we will fall sick too. In the midst of such appalling circumstances, humans are driven to ask *Why?* Why is this happening? Why them and not me? Will we all die? Why does the world exist, anyway? What is going to happen next? What can we do?

If we are pagans, we probably already know that our priests profess ignorance. They do not know why the gods have sent misery—or if, in fact, the gods are involved or even care (Harnack 1908, vol. 2). Worse yet, many of our priests have fled the city, as have the highest civil authorities and the wealthiest families which adds to the disorder and suffering.

Suppose that instead of being pagans we are philosophers. Even if we reject the gods and profess one or another school of Greek philosophy, we still have no answers. Natural law is no help in saying why suffering abounds, at least not if we seek to find *meaning* in the reasons. To say that survival is a matter of luck makes the life of the individual seem trivial. Cicero expressed the incapacity of classical as well as modern humanism to provide meaning (or perhaps I should say “meaningfulness”), when he explained that “it depends on fortune or (as we should say) ‘conditions’ whether we are to experience prosperity or adversity. Certain events are, indeed, due to natural causes beyond human control” (quoted in Cochrane [1940] 1957:100).

Moreover, for a science that knows nothing of bacteria (let alone viruses) the phrase “natural causes” in connection with these great epidemics is simply how philosophers say, “Who knows?” I am not here disputing that survival was in fact substantially random or that the epidemics had natural causes. But I do claim that people will prefer explanations which assert that such events reflect underlying historical intentions, that the larger contours of life are coherent and explicable. Not only were the philosophers of the time unable to provide such meanings, but from the point of view of classical science and philosophy these events were indeed beyond human control, for no useful medical courses of action could be suggested. Indeed, the philosophers of the period could think of nothing more insightful than to anthropomorphize society and blame senility. As Cochrane put it, “while a deadly plague was ravaging the empire ... the sophists prattled vaguely about the exhaustion of virtue in a world growing old” ([1940] 1957:155).

But if we are Christians, our faith does claim to have answers. McNeill summed them up this way:

Another advantage Christians enjoyed over pagans was that the teaching of their faith made life meaningful even amid sudden and surprising death.... [E]ven a shattered remnant of survivors who had somehow made it through war or pestilence or both could find warm, immediate and healing consolation in the vision of a

heavenly existence for those missing relatives and friends.... Christianity was, therefore, a system of thought and feeling thoroughly adapted to a time of troubles in which hardship, disease, and violent death commonly prevailed. (1976:108)

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, seems almost to have welcomed the great epidemic of his time. Writing in 251 he claimed that only non-Christians had anything to fear from the plague. Moreover, he noted that although

the just are dying with the unjust, it is not for you to think that the destruction is a common one for both the evil and the good. The just are called to refreshment, the unjust are carried off to torture; protection is more quickly given to the faithful; punishment to the faithless. . . . How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the minds of the human race; whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsmen as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted... . Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death. These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown.... [O]ur brethren who have been freed from the world by the summons of the Lord should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before; that in departing they lead the way; that as travelers, as voyagers are wont to be, they should be longed for, not lamented ... and that no occasion should be given to pagans to censure us deservedly and justly, on the ground that we grieve for those who we say are living. (*Mortality* 15-20, 1958 ed.)

His fellow bishop Dionysius addressed his Alexandrian members in similar tones. “Other people would not think this a time for festival,” he wrote, but “far from being a time of distress, it is a time of unimaginable joy” (*Festival Letters*, quoted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.22, 1965 ed.). Acknowledging the huge death rate, Dionysius noted that though this terrified the pagans, Christians greeted the epidemic as merely “schooling and testing.” Thus, at a time when all other faiths were called to question, Christianity offered explanation and comfort. Even more important, Christian doctrine provided a *prescription for action*. That is, the Christian way appeared to work.

Survival Rates and the Golden Rule

At the height of the second great epidemic, around 260, in the Easter letter already quoted above, Dionysius wrote a lengthy tribute to the heroic nursing efforts of local Christians, many of whom lost their lives while caring for others.

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.... The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.

Dionysius emphasized the heavy mortality of the epidemic by asserting how much happier survivors would be had they merely, like the Egyptians in the time of Moses, lost the firstborn from each house. For “there is not a house in which there is not one dead—how I wish it had been only one.” But while the epidemic had not passed over the Christians, he suggests that pagans fared much worse: “Its full impact fell on the heathen.”

Dionysius also offered an explanation of this mortality differential. Having noted at length how the Christian community nursed the sick and dying and even spared nothing in preparing the dead for proper burial, he wrote:

The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.

But should we believe him? If we are to assess Dionysius's claims, it must be demonstrated that the Christians actually did minister to the sick while the pagans mostly did not. It also must be shown that these different patterns of responses would result in substantial differences in mortality.

Christian and Pagan Responses

It seems highly unlikely that a bishop would write a pastoral letter full of false claims about things that his parishioners would know from direct observation. So if he claims that many leading members of the diocese have perished while nursing the sick, it is reasonable to believe that this happened. Moreover, there is compelling evidence from pagan sources that this was characteristic Christian behavior. Thus, a century later, the emperor Julian launched a campaign to institute pagan charities in an effort to match the Christians. Julian complained in a letter to the high priest of Galatia in 362 that the pagans needed to equal the virtues of Christians, for recent Christian growth was caused by their "moral character, even if pretended," and by their "benevolence toward strangers and care for the graves of the dead." In a letter to another priest, Julian wrote, "I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence." And he also wrote, "The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us" (quoted in Johnson 1976:75; Ayerst and Fisher 1971:179-181).

Clearly, Julian loathed "the Galileans." He even suspected that their benevolence had ulterior motives. But he recognized that his charities and that of organized paganism paled in comparison with Christian efforts that had created "a miniature welfare state in an empire which for the most part lacked social services" (Johnson 1976:75). By Julian's day in the fourth century it was too late to overtake this colossal result, the seeds for which had been planted in such teachings as "I am my brother's keeper," "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Grant 1977).

Julian's testimony also supported the claim that pagan communities did not match Christian levels of benevolence during the epidemics, since they did not do so even in normal times when the risks entailed by benevolence were much lower. But there is other evidence.

Some of the most detailed reporting on epidemics in the classical world is to be found in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (2.47—55). Thucydides was himself a survivor of a deadly plague that struck Athens in 431 B.C.E, having contracted the disease in the first days of the epidemic. Modern medical writers praise Thucydides' careful and detailed account of symptoms (Marks and Beatty 1976). At least as much can be said for his account of public responses.

Thucydides began by noting the ineffectiveness of both science and religion:

The doctors were quite incapable of treating the disease because of their ignorance of the right methods.... Equally useless were prayers made in the temples, consultation of the oracles, and so forth; indeed, in the end people were so overcome by their sufferings that they paid no further attention to such things. (49, 1954 ed.)

Then he reported that once the contagious nature of the disease was recognized, people "were afraid to visit one another." As a result,

they died with no one to look after them; indeed there were many houses in which all the inhabitants perished

through lack of any attention.... The bodies of the dying were heaped one on top of the other, and half-dead creatures could be seen staggering about in the streets or flocking around the fountains in their desire for water. The temples in which they took up their quarters were full of the dead bodies of people who had died inside them. For the catastrophe was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them, became indifferent to every rule of religion or of law.... No fear of god or law of man had a restraining influence. As for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshipped them or not, when one saw the good and the bad dying indiscriminately. (51—53, 1954 ed.)

Although separated from it by nearly seven centuries, this description of how pagan Athens reacted to a killing epidemic is strikingly similar to Dionysius's account of pagan responses to the epidemic in Alexandria. Thucydides acknowledged that some, who like himself had recovered from the disease and thus were immune, did try to nurse the sick, but their numbers seem to have been few. Moreover, Thucydides accepted that it was only sensible to flee epidemics and to shun contact with the sick.

It is also worth noting that the famous classical physician Galen lived through the first epidemic during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. What did he do? He got out of Rome quickly, retiring to a country estate in Asia Minor until the danger receded. In fact, modern medical historians have noted that Galen's description of the disease "is uncharacteristically incomplete," and suggest that this may have been due to his hasty departure (Hopkins 1983). Granted, this is but one man's response, albeit that of a man much admired by later generations as the greatest physician of the age. But although at least one modern medical historian has felt the need to write an exculpatory essay on Galen's flight (Walsh 1931), it was not seen as unusual or discreditable at the time. It was what any prudent person would have done, had they the means—unless, of course, they were "Galileans."

Here issues of doctrine must be addressed. For something distinctive did come into the world with the development of Judeo-Christian thought: the linking of a highly *social* ethical code with religion. There was nothing new in the idea that the supernatural makes behavioral demands upon humans—the gods have always wanted sacrifices and worship. Nor was there anything new in the notion that the supernatural will respond to offerings—that the gods can be induced to exchange services for sacrifices. What was new was the notion that more than self-interested exchange relations were possible between humans and the supernatural. The Christian teaching that God loves those who love him was alien to pagan beliefs. MacMullen has noted that from the pagan perspective "what mattered was ... the service that the deity could provide, since a god (as Aristotle had long taught) could feel no love in response to that offered" (1981:53). Equally alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they *love one another*. Indeed, as God demonstrates his love through sacrifice, humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of *one another*. Moreover, such responsibilities were to be extended beyond the bonds of family and tribe, indeed to "all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2). These were revolutionary ideas.

Pagan and Christian writers are unanimous not only that Christian Scripture stressed love and charity as the central duties of faith, but that these were sustained in everyday behavior.

I suggest reading the following passage from Matthew (25:35-40) as if for the very first time, in order to gain insight into the power of this new morality when it was *new*, not centuries later in more cynical and worldly times:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. . . . Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.

When the New Testament was *new*, these were the norms of the Christian communities. Tertullian claimed: “It is our care of helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look how they love one another!’” (*Apology* 39, 1989 ed.).

Harnack quoted the duties of deacons as outlined in the *Apostolic Constitutions* to show that they were set apart for the support of the sick, infirm, poor, and disabled: “They are to be doers of good works, exercising a general supervision day and night, neither scorning the poor nor respecting the person of rich; they must ascertain who are in distress and not exclude them from a share in church funds, compelling also the well-to-do to put money aside for good works” (1908: 1:161).

Or let us read what Pontianus reports in his biography of Cyprian about how the bishop instructed his Carthaginian flock:

The people being assembled together, he first of all urges on them the benefits of mercy... Then he proceeds to add that there is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attentions of love, but that one might become perfect who should *do something more than heathen men or publicans*, one who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing a merciful kindness like that of God, should love his enemies as well....Thus the good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith. (Quoted in Harnack 1908: 1:172-173)

And, as we have seen, that is precisely what most concerned Julian as he worked to reverse the rise of Christianity and restore paganism. But for all that he urged pagan priests to match these Christian practices, there was little or no response because *there were no doctrinal bases or traditional practices* for them to build upon. It was not that Romans knew nothing of charity, but that it was not based on service to the gods. Pagan gods did not punish ethical violations because they imposed no ethical demands—humans offended the gods only through neglect or by violation of ritual standards (MacMullen 1981:58). Since pagan gods required only propitiation and beyond that left human affairs in human hands, a pagan priest could not preach that those lacking in the spirit of charity risked their salvation. Indeed, the pagan gods offered no salvation. They might be bribed to perform various services, but the gods did not provide an escape from mortality. We must keep that in sight as we compare the reactions of Christians and pagans to the shadow of sudden death. Galen lacked belief in life beyond death. The Christians were certain that this life was but prelude. For Galen to have remained in Rome to treat the afflicted would have required bravery far beyond that needed by Christians to do likewise.

Differential Mortality

But how much could it have mattered? Not even the best of Greco-Roman science knew anything to do to *treat* these epidemics other than to avoid all contact with those who had the disease. So even if the Christians did obey the injunction to minister to the sick, what could they do to help? At the risk of their own lives they could, in fact, save an immense number of lives. McNeill pointed out: “When all normal services break down, quite elementary nursing will greatly reduce mortality. Simple provision of food and water, for instance, will allow persons who are temporarily too weak to cope for themselves to recover instead of perishing miserably” (1976:108).

Some hypothetical numbers may help us grasp just how much impact Christian nursing could have had on mortality rates in these epidemics. Let us begin with a city having 10,000 inhabitants in 160, just before the first epidemic. In chapter 1, I calculated that Christians made up about 0.4 percent of the empire’s population at this time, so let us suppose that 40 of this city’s inhabitants are Christians, while 9,960 are pagans—a ratio of 1 Christian to 249 pagans.

Now, let us assume an epidemic generating mortality rates of 30 percent over its course is a population left without nursing. Modern medical experts believe that conscientious nursing *without any medications* could cut the mortality rate by two-thirds or even more. So let us assume a Christian mortality rate of 10 percent. Imposing these mortality rates results in 36 Christian and 6,972 pagan survivors in 170, after the epidemic. Now the ratio of Christians to pagans is 1 to 197, a substantial shift.

However, there is no reason to suppose that the conversion of pagans to Christianity would have slowed during the epidemic—indeed, as we shall see, the rate might well have risen at this time. In keeping with the projected Christian conversion rate of 40 percent a decade, we must add 16 converts to the Christian total and subtract these 16 from the pagan total. This yields a ratio of 11 Christian per 134 pagans.

To keep things simple, let us suppose that the population of this city was static over the next 90 years, until hit by the second epidemic, and that the conversion rate of 40 percent a decade remained in effect. Let us also assume that the mortality rates of 10 and 30 percent apply again. After this epidemic was over, in 260, there would be 997 Christians and 4,062 pagans in this city. And this is a ratio of 1 Christian to 4 pagans. Had the two epidemics not occurred, and had conversion been the only factor determining the relative sizes of the Christian and pagan populations, then in 260 there would have been 1,157 Christians and 8,843 pagans, or a ratio of 1 Christian to 8 pagans. In fact, of course, the population would not have been static for this period. In the days before modern medicine epidemics were always especially hard on the young and on pregnant woman and those suffering from childbirth-related infections (Russell 1958). Hence in the aftermath of serious epidemics the birthrate declined. With a much lower mortality rate, the Christian birthrate would have been much less influenced, and this too would have increased the ratio of Christians to pagans.

Thus an immense Christian gain would have occurred without their having made a single convert during the period. But, as noted, these same trends ought to have resulted in many converts. For one thing, if, during the crisis, Christians fulfilled their ideal of ministering to *everyone*, there would be many pagan survivors who owed their lives to their Christian neighbors. For another, no one could help but notice that Christians not only found the capacity to risk death but were much less likely to die.

As Kee (1983) has so powerfully reminded us, miracle was intrinsic to religious credibility in the Greco-Roman world. Modern scholars have too long been content to dismiss reports of miracles in the New Testament and in other similar sources as purely literary, not as things that happened. Yet we remain aware that in tabernacles all over modern America, healings are taking place. One need not propose that God is the active agent in these “cures” to recognize their reality both as events and as perceptions. Why then should we not accept that “miracles” were being done in New Testament times too, and that people expected them as proof of religious authenticity? Indeed, MacMullen regards it as self-evident that a great deal of conversion was based on a “visible show of divinity at work” (1981:126). He suggests that martyrdom would have been perceived as a miracle, for example.

Against this background, consider that a much superior Christian survival rate hardly could seem other than miraculous. Moreover, superior survival rates would have produced a much larger proportion of Christians who were *immune*, and who could, therefore, pass among the afflicted with seeming invulnerability. In fact, those Christians most active in nursing the sick were likely to have contracted the disease very early and to have survived it as they, in turn, were cared for. In this way created a whole force of miracle workers to heal the “dying.” And who was

to say that it was the soup they so patiently spooned to the helpless that healed them, rather than the prayers the Christians offered on their behalf?

Morality, Flight, and Attachments

I have stressed the importance of social networks in the conversion process. It is useful therefore to engage in some comparative analysis of epidemics' impact on the social networks of Christians and pagans, and how this would have changed their relative patterns of attachments. In general, I will demonstrate that an epidemic would have caused chaos in pagan social relations, leaving large numbers with but few attachments to other pagans meanwhile greatly increasing the relative probabilities of strong bonds between pagans and Christians.

Let us return to our hypothetical city and focus our attention on three varieties of interpersonal attachments: (1) Christian-Christian; (2) Christian-pagan; and (3) pagan-pagan. If we apply the differential mortality rates used above (10 percent for Christians, 30 percent for pagans), we can calculate the *survival odds* for each variety of *attachment*. That is, our interest here is not in the survival of individuals but in that of an attachment; hence our measure is the odds that both persons survive the epidemic. The survival rate for Christian-Christian bonds is 0.81 (or 81 percent). The survival rate for Christian-pagan bonds is 0.63. The survival rate for pagan-pagan bonds is 0.49. Thus not only are attachments among pagans almost twice as likely to perish as attachments among Christians, pagan bonds to Christians are also much more likely to survive than those uniting pagans to one another.

These attachment survival rates take only differential mortality into account. But attachments are also severed if one person leaves. Since we know that substantial numbers of pagans fled epidemics (while Christians stayed), this too must be considered. Let us suppose that 20 percent of the pagan population fled. Now the survival rate of pagan-pagan attachments is 0.25 and that of Christian-pagan attachments is 0.45, while the Christian-Christian rate remains 0.81.

These rates assume, of course, that Christian victims of an epidemic received nursing care, while pagans did not. In fact, however, our sources testify that *some pagans* were nursed by Christians. Given the relative sizes of the Christian and pagan populations at the onset of the epidemic, Christians would not have had the resources to nurse all or even most sick pagans. Presumably, proximity and attachments would have determined which pagans would be cared for by Christians. That is, pagans who lived near Christians and/or who had close Christian friends (even relatives) would have been most likely to be nursed. Let us assume that Christian nursing was as conducive to survival for pagans as it was for Christians. That means that pagans nursed by Christians had noticeably higher survival rates than other pagans. But it also means that we should recalculate the Christian-pagan attachment survival rate. If we assume that pagans in these relationships had as good a chance of living as did the Christians, then the survival rate for these attachments is 0.81—more than three times the survival rate of pagan-pagan attachments.

Another way to look at this is to put oneself in the place of a pagan who, before the epidemic, had five very close attachments, four with pagans and one with a Christian. We could express this as a Christian-to-pagan attachment ratio of 1 to 4. Let us assume that this pagan remains in the city and survives. Subtracting mortality and flight results in a Christian-pagan attachment ratio of 0.8 to 1. What has happened is that where once there were four pagans to one Christian in this pagan's intimate circle, now there is, in effect, one of each—a dramatic equalization.

Not only would a much higher proportion of pagan survivors' attachments be to Christians simply because of the greater survival rate of those relationships: further during and after the epidemic the formation of new relationships would be increasingly biased in favor of Christians.

One reason is that the nursing function is itself a major opportunity to form new bonds. Another is that it is easier to attach to a social network that is more rather than less intact. To see this, let us once again focus on the pagan who, after the epidemic, has one close Christian and one close pagan attachment. Suppose that he or she wishes to replace lost attachments—perhaps to remarry. The Christian friend still has many other attachments to extend to this pagan. The pagan friend, however, is very deficient in attachments. For the Christian, there is an 80 percent probability that any one of his or her Christian friends and relatives survived the epidemic and remained in the city. For the pagan, these odds are only 50 percent.

The consequence of all this is that pagan survivors faced greatly increased odds of conversion because of their increased attachments to Christians.

Conclusion

Several modern writers have warned against analyzing the rise of Christianity as though it were inevitable, as earlier generations of Christian historians tended to do. That is, since we know that indeed the tiny and obscure Jesus Movement managed, over the course of several centuries, to dominate Western civilization, our historical perceptions suffer from overconfidence. As a result, scholars more often recount, rather than try to account for, the Christianization of the West, and in doing so seem to take “the end of paganism for granted,” as Peter Brown (1964:109) has noted.

In fact, of course, the rise of Christianity was long and perilous. There were many crisis points when different outcomes could easily have followed. Moreover, in this chapter I have argued that had some crises *not occurred*, the Christians would have been deprived of major, possibly crucial opportunities.

MacMullen has warned us that this “enormous thing called paganism, then, did not one day just topple over dead” (1981:134). Paganism, after all, was an active, vital part of the rise of Hellenic and Roman empires and therefore *must* have had the capacity to fulfill basic religious impulses—at least for centuries. But the fact remains that paganism did pass into history. And if some truly devastating blows were required to bring down this “enormous thing,” the terrifying crises produced by two disastrous epidemics may have been among the more damaging. If I am right, then in a sense paganism did indeed “topple over dead” or at least acquire its fatal illness during these epidemics, falling victim to its relative inability to confront these crises socially or spiritually—an inability suddenly revealed by the example of its upstart challenger. I shall return to these themes in the final two chapters.

Note. An earlier version of this chapter appeared as “Epidemics, Networks, and the Rise of Christianity,” in *Semeia* 56 (1992): 159-175 (L. Michael White guest editor).