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Jack T. SANDERS

Did Early Christianity Succeed Because of Jewish Conversions?

Responding to Rodney Stark's recent work on societal factors leading to the success of early Christianity, the author challenges Stark's finding of a majority Jewish component in early Christianity. First, Sanders argues that Hellenized Jews in the Roman period were not comparable to assimilationist Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries: most in reality remained firmly oriented to their religious culture. Second, he questions Stark's proposal that Christianity took root in those cities where there was already a sizable Jewish population, on the grounds that Jews were everywhere around the Mediterranean, so that prior Jewish presence loses all significance. An examination of the surviving evidence shows that, while a Jewish-Christian presence can be identified in some locations, in fact most people who became Christians in the early years were non-Jews.

L'auteur répond à l'ouvrage de Rodney Stark sur les facteurs sociaux de la réussite du christianisme primitif. Il considère que Stark surestime l'importance de la composante juive chez les premiers chrétiens. D'une part, Stark prend pour acquis que les juifs hellénisés du temps des Romains se comparent aux juifs assimilés des 19ème et 20ème siècles. En réalité, les premiers restent fermement attachés à leur culture religieuse. D'autre part, Stark suggère que le christianisme s'est implanté d'abord dans les villes de fortes colonisations juives. Or, l'argument est sans signification du fait que les juifs étaient répartis sur l'ensemble des côtes méditerranéennes. Des documents anciens attestent bien de la présence de juifs chrétiens en certains endroits; néanmoins, la plupart des individus qui se convertissaient aux premiers temps du christianisme n'étaient pas juifs.

Rodney Stark's recent work, *The Rise of Christianity* (1996), has focused renewed attention on the use of sociological method in the study of antiquity and of the New Testament in particular.¹ The purpose of this essay is to look again at one of the more interesting aspects of Stark's study, his analysis of the Jewish component in early Christianity as it grew and as it spread around the Mediterranean. We leave out of account the other very interesting perspectives and analyses that his book presents.

Stark makes the following points about the Jewish component in early Christianity:

1. Hellenized Jews—those who had adopted to some degree or other the predominant culture of Hellenism that was found all around the eastern

Mediterranean—were the main source of converts to Christianity until into the Byzantine period (after the Emperor Constantine’s endorsement of Christianity in 325) (Stark, 1996: 49–71).

2. There is a strong positive correlation between nearness to Jerusalem and the early establishment of Christianity in a city, and between prior Jewish presence in a place and the establishment of a Christian congregation there (pp. 129–145).

Let us now examine the evidence relating to these two assertions. Regarding the former, Stark begins with two modern analogies (pp. 51–57), that of ethnic enclaves in the United States today (his specific example is “Little Italy”) that do not assimilate, whereas the majority of US citizens of that ethnic background do assimilate, and that of 19th-century Jews in Europe who were emancipated and who then often either assimilated or joined the new Reform movement in Judaism, which “was designed to provide a nontribal, nonethnic religion rooted in the Old Testament (and the Enlightenment), one that focused on theology and ethics rather than on custom and practice” (p. 53). Stark then proceeds to “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” (p. 57; cf. 57–61); and he lists, as examples of Hellenization and thus of the similarity to the modern Reform movement, that there was widespread use of Greek among Diaspora Jews in the time of the early growth of Christianity, that many had taken Greek names, that “they had incorporated much of the Greek enlightenment into their cultural views”, and that many had even accepted much of Greco-Roman “religious thought”. Indeed, “large numbers were no longer Jews in the ethnic sense and remained only partly so in the religious sense” (p. 58). He then reasons that Christianity offered “cultural continuity” to these “marginalized” Jews, who were also, like Philo, “relatively worldly, accommodated, and secular” (p. 60).

Let us begin evaluating Stark’s argument by examining the analogy that he draws between Hellenized Diaspora Jews in antiquity and emancipated Jews in Europe and America in recent times. When, beginning in the late 18th century, Jews first in the United States and then in western Europe were granted the rights of full citizenship, this led many to assimilate to the societies of the national states where they lived. This assimilative tendency not only produced Reform Judaism, in which pipe organs were placed in synagogue buildings and in which many Jews thought of themselves as just like other Germans except that they went to “church” on Saturday rather than on Sunday, but it also produced true assimilation—that is, a situation in which many Jews thought of themselves primarily as Germans (or as Americans or some other western nationality) and as Jews only by ancestry. In this situation, Jewish soldiers fought in the German army during the First World War, and those who survived the war were often quite proud of their war record and considered themselves good and loyal Germans. One can see evidence of these people and of their attitude today in the displays at

Auschwitz (the great irony of the Holocaust), and I am personally acquainted with the daughter of one such soldier, who reports that her mother only with difficulty persuaded her father to get the family out of Munich in the late 1930s.

Following upon emancipation, further, at least a few well-known European Jews did convert to Christianity, thus in effect abandoning their Judaism and becoming totally identified with the dominant society. The best-known such is probably the composer Felix Mendelssohn; but several members of a prominent English family, the Montefiores, converted, and one became an Anglican bishop. There were other less prominent persons who did the same.²

In the Roman period there were doubtless a few Jews who went equally far in their assimilation. We have no idea how many there might have been because, of course, they disappear from any possible record that we have of Jews. We do, however, know of one famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) case, that of Tiberius Julius Alexander, the nephew of the famous Philo of Alexandria, to whom Stark mistakenly refers as a model of the tendency to accommodate (pp. 60–61). This Tiberius Julius was the Roman procurator of Judaea in 46–48 and the governor of Egypt in 66–69, during which time he had to suppress a Jewish revolt in Alexandria. He did so in typically brutal Roman fashion. At the end of his Egyptian governorship he became the second-in-command to the Roman general Titus, who was laying siege to Jerusalem at the time (Barclay, 1996: 75, 105–106). Were there other Jews who, if not so famous, nevertheless renounced their Jewish heritage and assimilated to an equal degree? Of course there were. Was such assimilation normal for Hellenistic Jews? Decidedly not; there is no evidence of such.³ But we should note that Jews who really wanted to assimilate did not become Christians. If they assimilated, they did so to the *dominant society*, as was the case with Tiberius Julius Alexander, Felix Mendelssohn, and all other such persons. To have become a Christian in the Roman Period would hardly have been a social advantage, since Christians were often held in ill repute. The opprobrium and separation from much of normal society that Christians suffered makes early Christianity an unlikely candidate to be an analog to modern Reform Judaism, which allows Jews to remain loyal Jews while cutting them loose from some of the more marked traditional differences between Jews and others. When an early 20th-century Jewish family embraced Reform Judaism, the family moved toward assimilation without ceasing to be Jewish. If an early 2nd-century Jewish family embraced Christianity, it moved from a secure place in society within the Jewish community (even if we for the moment grant Stark's characterization of "marginalization") into an outcast group.⁴

Stark's main example of a Jew in the Roman period who accommodated to the dominant society and who thus typifies the Jew to whom the Christian alternative would have appealed is the aforementioned Philo (Stark, 1996: 60–61). He has picked the wrong example. He writes, "Not only were the Hellenized Jews socially marginal, they were also relatively worldly, accommodated, and secular. The example of Philo is compelling" (p. 60). Nothing could be further from the truth. Philo, to be sure, was worldly. John Barclay

writes, “As an adult he swims in the mainstream of Alexandrian cultural life. He mingles with the crowd at sporting events of all kinds—boxing, wrestling and pancratist contests as well as chariot races . . . Similarly, he attends the theatre to watch plays, dances and puppet shows, and knows all about . . . elaborate private banquets” (Barclay, 1996: 161). This worldliness does not mean, however, that Philo was not Jewish or not religious. The Jewish religion did not then and does not now require some kind of monastic asceticism, and those “worldly” pursuits of Philo’s in no way separated him from the Jewish people or from his God, to whom—as we learn from almost every page of his voluminous writings—he was devoted with his whole being. This worldliness is not to be equated with secularity in the modern sense, a lifestyle that was hardly known in antiquity and that would have seemed abhorrent to Philo.

Stark seems to think that Philo’s explaining the Jewish law in terms of Greek, largely Platonic philosophy and his allegorizing of many of the narratives in the Bible represent “a turn toward worldliness and away from otherworldliness” (Stark, 1996: 61), but that is not the case at all. Not only, as we have just noted, does the Jewish religion not require “otherworldliness”, but Philo’s Platonizing explanations are in fact often more otherworldly than the Biblical originals. One example will prove both points, i.e., that Philo is given to considerable otherworldliness and that his worldliness is not the same as secularism. In *On Abraham’s Migration* 89–93 Philo strongly criticizes those Alexandrian Jews who, because they share his allegorical interpretation of the Torah, have given up practice (Sabbath, dietary laws, and the like). Simply recognizing the real (allegorical) meaning of the laws, according to Philo, does not relieve one of the obligation to follow them in their literal sense, although the allegorical meaning is indeed the true meaning. Thus the Sabbath is meant to teach “the power of that which concerns ungenerated being and the inactivity of that which concerns generated being” (*Migr Abr* 91). He argues further (*Migr Abr* 93), “We should think of the literal observance as like the body and the allegorical meaning as the soul: just as we ought to take care of the body, since it is the home of the soul, so we ought to pay heed to the letter of the law.” Ungenerated being and soul should be otherworldly enough for anyone; yet Philo scores his acquaintances for their lack of observance.⁵

Stark proposes three separate appeals that Christianity may have held for Hellenized Jews. They are the appeal of a cult to disaffected but prosperous Jews (p. 54); the appeal of the situation of the “God-fearers”, those Gentiles (non-Jews) known from the book of Acts in the New Testament and hardly anywhere else who were attracted to Jewish religion and life but who demurred at giving up a centimeter of flesh and converting, but whose lifestyle nevertheless appealed to many Hellenized Jews; and the appeal of being both Jewish and Hellenic at the same time (p. 59).

The first appeal assumes that Hellenized Jews were “socially marginal” (pp. 52–53); yet, since Stark’s main example is Philo, we see that this categorization is incorrect. Philo was a pillar of his society and was picked to lead a delegation to the emperor after a pogrom in Alexandria (Barclay, 1996: 55–60). Stark’s modern analogy, disaffected Jews in the United States

today who join such movements as Hare Krishna (Stark, 1996: 54), actually argues against the second and third appeals, which require “cultural continuity” (p. 55).

The appeal of the situation of the God-fearers is puzzling. Stark writes (pp. 58–59): “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 . . . But the God-Fearers were not a movement. The Christians were.” Now, in the first place, Jews who had social and intellectual problems with the Torah simply had not to practice; they did not have to join anything, movement or otherwise. The non-observant Alexandrian Jews whom Philo scolds (above) are just such. There is no indication that they either were or considered themselves marginalized. In the second place, however, it is difficult to understand why the existence of the God-fearers (to the degree that they did exist) would have encouraged any Jews to give up Jewish practice. If I were finding that outsiders were manifesting interest, sometimes considerable, in my religion, would I not be more inclined to be *proud* of my religion? Why would a Hellenized Jew want to cease being a Jew and still frequent the synagogue on Saturdays and study Torah? Of course, if they became Christians they would not do those things, but then why would the example of the God-fearers have led them to become Christians?

The third presumed appeal, that Christianity offered Jews the opportunity to be both Jewish and Hellenic, is likewise illogical. To be sure, Christianity outside Palestine did rapidly become, in certain ways, both; but why would such a despised religion appeal to Hellenized Jews, who were already by definition what Stark thinks they wanted to become, both Jewish and Hellenic? Jews, not only in the dispersion but also in the Jewish homeland, could be just as Hellenized or not as they wished. Happy in their social situation, why would they want to convert to Christianity?

We have a failure here of two types. One is misunderstanding the evidence and the other is applying models that work in the United States in the 20th century to 1st–4th century Alexandria and elsewhere.⁶ Here the issue of commensurability arises. Sometimes models that work here and now can enlighten situations long ago and far, far away, and sometimes they are useless. What a good historical sociologist will do, of course, is first analyze the evidence carefully and then formulate new models that fit the evidence (e.g. Barclay, 1996), or perhaps apply existing models that seem to fit, even though they may need a little “tinkering” to fit exactly (e.g. Sanders, 1993). Stark has very little evidence here to support his position, and he has largely misunderstood the evidence that he has. By ascribing universal validity to his previously derived models, he has used them as lenses for viewing antiquity and has consequently seen antiquity in terms of the models. This is to put the cart before the horse.

It is always the fate of productive scholarship, of course, to be surpassed by yet another contribution; and yet it is particularly unfortunate that Stark could not have known the recent work of John Barclay of Glasgow University (1996), which has the cart in the right place. Barclay provides extensive analysis of the evidence of Diaspora Judaism in antiquity and

creates a model to go with the evidence. He proposes that one must consider three paradigms side by side—that of assimilation (social integration), that of acculturation (language/education), and that of accommodation (use of acculturation; Barclay, 1996: 92–98). These paradigms reveal spectra, the first running from “social life confined to the Jewish community” to “abandonment of key Jewish social distinctives” and the second from “no facility in Greek” to “scholarly expertise”. Thus it would be possible to be highly acculturated—speaking excellent Greek and knowing Homer and the playwrights well—without being assimilated in the least. In other words, such a highly educated (in the Greek sense) Jew *could* remain immersed in Jewish social life and have no contact with any Gentiles. Philo, by and large, was such a person, although his participation in civic life shows that we should not locate him at the non-assimilationist end of the spectrum. On the other hand, one could be highly assimilated—say, by marriage or because of experience in the military—and yet have little acculturation, e.g. no knowledge of Greek literature and culture.

Barclay’s paradigm of accommodation is his most interesting. Here the spectrum runs from antagonism to Greco-Roman culture to submersion of Jewish cultural uniqueness. Of course, someone who employed Hellenic culture to accommodate at the high end of the spectrum would also rank high on the assimilation paradigm, but what comes as rather a surprise is that the low end of the spectrum *also* involves a form of accommodation, but an oppositional rather than an integrative form. Barclay offers several literary works as examples of oppositional accommodation in Egypt alone (1996: 181–228), from among which we may note only the most readily known, the Wisdom of Solomon, one of those Jewish texts to be found in Catholic Old Testaments but in the Apocrypha for Jews and Protestants. Written in Alexandria around the turn of the millennium in very good Greek, this work is capable of appropriating Hellenic philosophical motifs. Thus we find for the first time in Judaic literature *athanasia*, immortality, in Wisd. 3:4; and we find the Wisdom of God described in Middle-Platonic terms as “a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty . . . for she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (Wisd. 7:25–26). Yet the accommodation here, the use of Greek culture, is strictly oppositional, as witness the long tirade against idolatry in 13:1–15:7.⁷ Barclay is able to locate different literary works and other pieces of evidence at different places along these three paradigms. His is now by far the best model of Jewish life in the Roman-period Diaspora that we have, and he has developed it on the basis of the evidence.

One of Stark’s proposals is that Christianity grew through networks rather than by public sermons and demonstrations—surely correct—and that the most likely networks were other Jews (Stark, 1996: 61–62). The idea seems reasonable as long as one ignores the evidence. Thus Michael White, one of the most competent researchers bringing sociological awareness to the study of early Christianity, writes (1985/1986: 119), “Such networks may or may not have included Jews within a given locale or house church.” Networks can run along occupational or other social lines; they do not have

to be ethnic or familial. Family networks, of course, could have been Gentile as well as Jewish, once Gentiles began coming into Christianity.

An oddity is that Stark's immediately following chapter explains the appeal of Christianity to pagans as if the chapter on the Jews did not exist. In "Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion" (1996: 73–94), Stark advances three principles. The first is that Christianity offered a better explanation of the terrible plagues that ravaged the Roman world in the 2nd and 3rd centuries than did pagan religions; the second is that Christians, because of their theologically driven care for one another at these times, had a higher survival rate than did pagans; and the third is that, because of Christian care for their *pagan* neighbors, whose other friends and neighbors may have perished or fled the city, "very substantial numbers of pagans [i.e. among the survivors] would have been shifted from mainly pagan to mainly Christian social networks" (p. 75). The first point is correct at least to a degree, and Stark cites the best sources, e.g. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (p. 81). Also, that Christians cared for the sick when other healthy people left town if they could, and that this gave Christianity more prestige, are in the one case certain and in the other likely, and this same point was made a number of years ago by Peter Brown (1971: 60). That pagans who survived the epidemics were drawn into the Christian orbit is, further, a reasonable inference. This chapter seems to be right on target, but it is difficult to reconcile it with the preceding chapter on the Jewish component in early Christianity that we have discussed at some length, and Stark makes no such attempt. Also, his chapter on "Urban Chaos and Crisis: The Case of Antioch" (pp. 147–162) seeks to show that Christianity will have been especially appealing because of its message of otherworldly salvation in a constant context of urban decay, disruption, and despair; but that appeal (if it is correct), also, will have worked primarily (at least) with pagans. Thus, when Stark discusses the appeals of early Christianity to non-Jews, he strangely seems to have forgotten that he has otherwise maintained that most early Christians were Jews.

In fact there is little evidence of Jewish conversion to Christianity after the formation of the first Christian congregations in the Jewish homeland, whereas there is quite a lot of evidence that early Christian congregations elsewhere were at least predominantly Gentile (White, 1990: 104). To mention only two examples: Galatians, in the New Testament, concerns the attempt of some unnamed persons to convert the new Galatian Christians to Judaism; obviously those Christians were not Jews before they became Christians. And about 50 years later Pliny, the governor of Bithynia and Pontus, writes to the emperor that since he had begun persecuting Christians, "the temples, which have been almost deserted, are beginning to be frequented once more" (*Epistles* 10 [to Trajan] 96.10). It was not Jewish conversions that had taken people away from the local temples; the governor's backhanded evidence is that Christianity had swept through the native population of the area.

In at least one place Stark has read one of his modern sources incorrectly. He states (1996: 68) that MacLennan and Kraabel (1986) "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 tell us that this is where the churches were!" Unfortunately the only church mentioned in the article to which he refers is the one built on the site of a destroyed synagogue in Stobi in the 5th century. In the earlier version of this chapter, Stark wrote the same thing (1986) but referred to Kraabel (1981). The earlier article by Kraabel includes the same information about Stobi. MacLennan and Kraabel state: "Diaspora synagogue contact with Christians was rare" (1992 [= 1986]: 136).

The physical evidence that Stark cites as support for his position (1996: 68–69) shows only contact, from which we might conclude many things. Churches, when church buildings began to be built, were more likely to be built on the sites of abandoned or destroyed Mithraea, the most notable examples being St Peter's Basilica and the church of San Clemente, both in Rome (White, 1990: 8). Michael White's monumental study of the architectural development of meeting places of non-traditional religions in the Roman world, a work that Stark knows and cites elsewhere, emphasizes the situation in the Mesopotamian city of Dura-Europos, where a synagogue, a church, a Mithraeum, and a "private sanctuary to an unnamed god" were all close to one another (White, 1990: 8, 44, 144). Surely the only thing that one can infer about conversions to Christianity in the light of such evidence is that early Christians had varied religious backgrounds. Some were Jews, most were not. In noting this fact we should, of course, avoid concluding that early Christianity *inherited* little from Judaism. Originally a Jewish movement, Christianity has always based itself on the Jewish scriptures, even after it became entirely Gentile.

Let us now consider Stark's second main point, that the growth of Christianity is related to Jewish presence.⁸

Since Christianity spread from Jerusalem out, Stark's findings about distance (early churches were closer to Jerusalem, farther from Rome) are not surprising; and Rome as an exception is not surprising either, since people migrated from all over the empire to the great city of Rome itself. Because, however, we are remarkably uninformed about the spread of Christianity east into eastern Syria and Mesopotamia, the point about distance from Rome probably has little significance. Stark mistakenly thinks that the farther a city was from Rome "the less [would have been] the local impact of Roman policy" (1996: 139)—that is, the farther from Rome the less "Romanization" (p. 140). It thus appears to him that Christianity found a foothold in less Romanized cities early. The more distant (from Rome) cities of Jerusalem and Antioch, however, were just as much under Roman control as were the nearer Ephesus and Sardis, so that distance from Jerusalem remains the only finding of relevance here, which, as we just noted, is to be expected.⁹

Stark's finding about the prior establishment of Judaism in a city is misleading for two reasons. First, Jews were simply everywhere; second, we have abundant evidence of non-Jewish Christian congregations from the first generation on. About the time that Christianity began Philo wrote (*Allegories of the Law* 281–282) that there were Jews in Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria, Pamphilia, Cilicia, most of (the Roman province of) Asia "as far as

Bithynia” and the “remote corners of Pontus”, Europe, Thessaly, Boeotia, Macedonia, Aetolia, Attica, Argos, Corinth, “the best parts of the Peloponnese”, Euboea, Cyprus, and Crete. Smallwood (1976: 120–122) gives a much more extensive list based on information from Josephus, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and other ancient sources. In short, there was hardly any place in the eastern Roman Empire where Christianity could expand where there were not Jews already. Therefore, the relevance of prior presence of Jews for the expansion of Christianity loses any statistical significance.

Early Christian literature, furthermore, is filled with evidence of Gentile Christianity (see the example of Galatia above, in the discussion of whether Jews made up the bulk of early converts).¹⁰ Originally, of course, all Christians were Jews; but as Christianity spread, while there were Jewish conversions, Christianity rapidly became predominantly Gentile. (Paul’s letter to the Romans gives evidence of both Jewish and Gentile Christianity in Rome, and the letter known as *I Clement* further attests Jewish-Christian influence, at the least. It may also be that Christianity in Alexandria was primarily a Jewish movement until the annihilation of the Jewish community there in 115–117, following uprisings.¹¹) When in the mid-2nd century, however, Justin wrote his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, Jews were clearly other, albeit still persons with whom one might have a cordial argument over the meaning of scripture. The *Dialogue*, modeled after Platonic dialogues, represents Justin as arguing at great length with Trypho over the meaning of the Jewish scripture. In addition to the fact that Justin knows of Jewish objections to Christian interpretations of scripture (esp. *Dial.* 67), he also reports that Jews cursed Christians (*Dial.* 16), that there had been itinerant Jewish teachers opposing Christianity (*Dial.* 17), and that the Jewish leadership had legislated against any contact with Christians (*Dial.* 38). Justin refers further to two types of Jewish Christians, those who did not seek to persuade Gentile Christians to follow Jewish religious observance, and those who sought to compel Gentile Christians so to do (*Dial.* 47); he also knows of Jews who believed that Jesus was Messiah but did not consider him divine, and of those who had been Christians but had returned to Judaism (*Dial.* 48). Justin had been reared in Flavia Neapolis (in Samaria, modern Nablus) and had lived in Ephesus before moving to Rome. Thus the way in which he portrays Jewish-Christian dialogue most likely represents a general situation, not merely that in Rome itself. *The Dialogue with Trypho* alone is probably sufficient evidence that early Christianity around the Mediterranean did not thrive primarily within a Jewish context.

As a matter of fact, Stark unwittingly disproves his theories about the Jewish element in early Christianity when he brings in the Isis religion as a comparator (1996: 199). After looking briefly at the evidence for the spread of the religion of Isis, he writes, “I can report a highly significant correlation of .67 between the expansion of Isis and the expansion of Christianity. Where Isis went, Christianity followed.” In view of Stark’s earlier contention that Christianity went where there were Jews and that most early Christians were Jews, his correlation between the presence of the Isis religion and the establishment of Christianity is astounding, for it is very nearly identical with the correlation that he found between synagogues and

the establishment of Christianity (.69, 1996: 139). If we for the moment assume the relative validity of both correlations, we must then ask two questions: Were most devotees of the Isis religion Jews? Were most converts to Christianity worshippers of Isis and not Jews? The answer to both questions is likely to be no. What we see with the Isis correlation is that both Christianity and the Isis religion found most of their converts in urban areas, where many people were attracted to new religions—for a great variety of reasons, some of which Stark has confirmed or discovered. Like Christianity, of course, the Isis religion offered—at least to those who were initiated into the mysteries, which did not include all worshipers of Isis—hope for a better existence after death. Isis was also, like Christ, a very benevolent and caring deity.

In sum, Rodney Stark has unfortunately gone astray in trying to show that Christianity succeeded in the early decades in large part because of numerous conversions of Jews to the new religion. In fact, most converts outside Palestine were Gentiles, as the evidence demonstrates. Stark makes a major mistake in seeing Hellenized Jews as somehow comparable to emancipated Jews in 19th-century Europe, and he quite misconstrues his main example, Philo, who would have been aghast at the comparison. Furthermore, Stark's attempt to give statistical support to this theory, by showing the correlation between nearness to Jerusalem and presence of Jews in a city to establishment of Christianity there appears to succeed only because much necessary evidence is lacking and because he ignores most of the relevant evidence (early Christian writings).

Was Stark's effort therefore wasted? Not at all! On the one hand, his other analyses of early Christianity, which we have barely mentioned and have not discussed here at all, either offer considerable helpful insight (as is the case with his opening chapter that shows that Christianity could have grown into a majority religion by Constantine's time simply by following the same growth curve as that of the Mormon church in the United States in this century; thus requiring no miraculous growth) or confirm the opinions that some scholars have already advanced, namely that Christian growth was abetted by such things as more favored treatment of women and the family, avoidance of infanticide, care for the sick, and the willingness to die for the faith. On the other hand, his attempt to show that Jews made up the bulk of Christians in the early decades, although it turns out to be a failed attempt, nevertheless has focused attention on an important question and has allowed us to pursue an answer more in keeping with the evidence.

What principles result from this study? First and foremost, we should not attempt statistical analyses on evidence provided by chance survivals of records and artifacts that remain from a variety of places from 20 centuries past. With this material we can pull no random samples and we can perform no surveys. Even population estimates of antiquity, which do exist and of which Stark does make use, are notoriously open to question.

Second, we must be extremely cautious in using models derived from the study of modern groups to explain ancient ones, and we must always carry out thorough analyses of the evidence first. When we do that, then we may discover that some model or other based on current evidence seems to work

for antiquity, but as often as not we shall probably find that we are forced to form new models (Barclay's work [1996] is indeed a model of how we should do this), or at least to modify the current models in light of the actual situations that our analyses of the evidence have clarified.

Finally, let us hope that social scientists interested in early Christianity—and, indeed, in any historical period or movement—will continue to apply their expertise to historical questions, and that historians (and in this case especially Biblical scholars) will read more widely in the social sciences in the effort to understand the evidence that they describe. We need always to remember Arthur Stinchcombe's (1978: 14) criticism of much historical writing, that it gives "the impression that the narrative is a causal theory because the tone of the language of narrative is causal".

NOTES

¹. At least one other sociologist, Anthony J. Blasi, has also analyzed aspects of the New Testament from a sociological perspective. See most recently Blasi (1997).

². Others, of course, like the parents of Secretary of State Albright (*New York Times* and Associated Press, 4 February 1997) converted for apparently other reasons.

³. Cf. the knowledgeable remark by Cohen (1987: 42): "The number of apostates in Jewish antiquity, if we exclude the Jewish Christians and the Christian Jews, was never very large."

⁴. On the opprobrium attached to being Christian see Colwell (1939) and Oborn (1939).

⁵. See also Mendelson (1988).

⁶. Maier (1988: 332) observes that Stark is not "able convincingly to support his thesis that Jews continued to be a major source of converts after the first century. Indeed, even his picture of the first century is problematic."

⁷. Oppositional accommodation has also been noted by Davidman (1990) for an Orthodox synagogue in New York.

⁸. For a fuller discussion of this point see Sanders (1992).

⁹. For a good discussion of what Romanization was, see White (1995: 30–33). Romanization involved, among other things, "Roman law and administrative organization, imperial building programs, and the use of Roman names and dress" (p. 31), all of which, if not completely in Jerusalem, were fully present in other cities in the region like Caesarea, Tiberias, and Antioch.

¹⁰. See the emphatic statement by Maier on this point (1988: 332).

¹¹. Birger Pearson (1986, 1997) has presented evidence linking early Alexandrian Christianity with Judaism, and such a connection seems entirely possible, although between the evidence and Pearson's conclusion one must make a number of inferences.

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