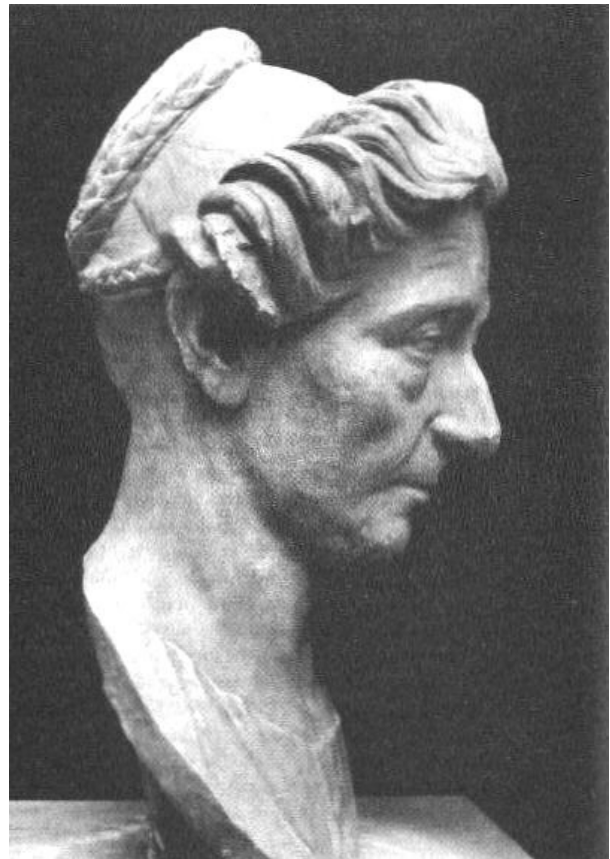


CHAPTER FIVE

The Role of Women in Christian Growth

AMIDST contemporary denunciations of Christianity as patriarchal and sexist, it is easily forgotten that the early church was so especially attractive to women that in 370 the emperor Valentinian issued a written order to Pope Damasus I requiring that Christian missionaries cease calling at the homes of pagan women. Although some classical writers claimed that women were easy prey for *any* “foreign superstition,” most recognized that Christianity was unusually appealing because within the Christian subculture women enjoyed far higher status than did women in the Greco-Roman world at large (Fox 1987; Chadwick 1967; Harnack 1908, vol. 2).

But if historians have long noted this fact, they have made no serious efforts to explain it. Why were women accorded higher status in Christian circles than elsewhere in the classical world? In what follows I shall attempt to link the increased power and privilege of Christian women to a very major shift in sex ratios. I demonstrate that an initial shift in sex ratios resulted from Christian doctrines prohibiting infanticide and abortion; I then show how the initial shift would have been amplified by a subsequent tendency to overrecruit women. Along the way I shall summarize evidence from ancient sources as well as from modern archaeology and historical demography concerning the status of women in the early church. I will also build a case for accepting that relatively high rates of intermarriage existed between Christian women and pagan men, and will suggest how these would have generated many “secondary” conversions to Christianity. Finally, I will demonstrate why Christian and pagan subcultures must have differed *greatly* in their fertility rates and how a superior birthrate also contributed to the success of the early church.



Because infanticide was outlawed, and because women were more likely than men to convert, among Christians there soon were far more women than men, while among pagans men far outnumbered women.

CHRISTIAN AND PAGAN SEX RATIOS

Men greatly outnumbered women in the Greco-Roman world. Dio Cassius, writing in about 200, attributed the declining population of the empire to the extreme shortage of females (*The Roman History*, 1987 ed.). In his classic work on ancient and medieval populations, J.C. Russell (1958) estimated that there were 131 males per 100 females in the city of Rome, and 140 per 100 females in Italy, Asia Minor, and North Africa. Russell noted in passing that sex ratios this extreme can occur only when there is “some tampering with human life” (1958:14). And tampering there was. Exposure of unwanted female infants and deformed male infants was legal,

morally accepted, and widely practiced by all social classes in the Greco-Roman world (Fox 1987; Gorman 1982; Pomeroy 1975; Russell 1958). Lindsay reported that even in large families “more than one daughter was practically never reared” (1968:168). A study of inscriptions at Delphi made it possible to reconstruct six hundred families. Of these, only six had raised more than one daughter (Lindsay 1968). The subject of female infanticide will be pursued at length later in the chapter. For now, consider a letter written by one Hilarion to his pregnant wife Allis, which has been reported by many authors because of the quite extraordinary contrast between his deep concern for his wife and his hoped-for son, and his utter callousness toward a possible daughter:

Know that I am still in Alexandria. And do not worry if they all come back and I remain in Alexandria. I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive payment I shall send it up to you. If you are delivered of a child [before I come home], if it is a boy keep it, if a girl discard it. You have sent me word, “Don’t forget me.” How can I forget you. I beg you not to worry. (Quoted in Lewis 1985:54)

This letter dates from the year 1 B.C.E., but these patterns persisted among pagans far into the Christian era. Given these practices, even in childhood, before the onset of the high female mortality associated with fertility in premodern times, females were substantially outnumbered among pagans in the Greco-Roman world. Moreover, it was not just the high mortality from childbirth that continued to increase the sex ratios among adults. As we shall see in detail later in the chapter, abortion was a major cause of death among women in this era.

However, things were different among Christians as their distinctive subculture began to emerge. There are few hard data on the sex composition of Christian communities. Harnack calculated that in his Epistle to the Romans Paul sent personal greetings to fifteen women and eighteen men (1908: 2:67). If, as Harnack implies, it seems likely that there were proportionately more men than women among those Christians of sufficient prominence to merit Paul’s special attention, then this 15/18 sex ratio would indicate that the congregation in Rome must already have been predominately female. A second basis for inference is an inventory of property removed from a Christian house-church in the North African town of Circa during a persecution in 303. Among the clothes the Christians had collected for distribution to the needy were sixteen men’s tunics and eighty-two women’s tunics, as well as forty-seven pairs of female slippers (Frend 1984; Fox 1987). Presumably this partly reflects the ratio of men to women among the donors. But even though better statistics are lacking, the predominance of women in the churches’ membership was, as Fox reported, “recognized to be so by Christians and pagans” (1987:308). Indeed, Harnack noted that the ancient sources simply swarm with tales of how women of all ranks were converted in Rome and in the provinces; although the details of these stories are untrustworthy, they express correctly enough the general truth that Christianity was laid hold of by women in particular, and also that the percentage of Christian women, especially among the upper classes, was larger than that of men. (1908: 2:73)

These conclusions about Christian sex ratios merit our confidence when we examine *why* sex ratios should have been so different among the Christians. First, by prohibiting all forms of infanticide and abortion, Christians removed major causes of the gender imbalance that existed among pagans. Even so, changes in mortality alone probably could not have resulted in Christian women’s coming to outnumber Christian men. However, there was a second factor influencing Christian sex ratios: women were more likely than men to become Christians. This, combined with the reduction in female mortality, *would* have caused a surplus of women in the Christian subcultures.

SEX BIAS IN CONVERSION

In his widely admired monograph on the early church, the British historian Henry Chadwick noted that “Christianity seems to have been especially successful among women. It was often through the wives that it penetrated the upper classes of society the first instance” (1967:56). Peter Brown noted that “women were prominent” among upper-class Christians and that “such women could influence their husbands to protect the church” (1988:151). Marcia, concubine of the emperor Commodus, managed to convince him to free Callistus, a future pope, from a sentence of hard labor in the mines of Sardina (Brown 1988). Although Marcia failed to secure the conversion of Commodus, other upper-class women often did bring husbands and admirers to faith.

It will be helpful here to distinguish between primary and secondary conversions. In *primary conversion* the convert takes an active role in his or her own conversion, becoming a committed adherent based on positive evaluations of the particular faith, albeit that attachments to members play a major role in the formation of a positive evaluation. *Secondary conversion* is more passive and involves somewhat reluctant acceptance of a faith on the basis of attachments to a primary convert. For example, after person A converted to a new faith, that person’s spouse agreed to “go along” with the choice, but was not eager to do so and very likely would not have done so otherwise. The latter is a secondary convert. In the example offered by Chadwick, upper-class wives were often primary converts and some of their husbands (often grudgingly) became secondary converts. Indeed, it frequently occurred that when the master of a large household became a Christian, all members of the household including the servants and slaves were expected to do so too.

The ancient sources and modern historians agree that primary conversion to Christianity was far more prevalent among females than among males. Moreover, this appears to be typical of new religious movements in recent times. By examining manuscript census returns for the latter half of the nineteenth century, Bainbridge (1982) found that approximately two-thirds of the Shakers were female. Data on religious movements included in the 1926 census of religious bodies show that 75 percent of Christian Scientists were women, as were more than 60 percent of Theosophists, Swedenborgians, and Spiritualists (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). The same is true of the immense wave of Protestant conversions taking place in Latin America. In fact, David Martin (1990) suggests that a substantial proportion of male Protestants in Latin America are secondary converts.[†]

There have been several interesting efforts to explain why women in many different times and places seem to be far more responsive than men to religion (Thompson 1991; Miller and Hoffman 1995). However, this is not an appropriate place to pursue the matter. Here it is sufficient to explore the impact of differential conversion rates on the sex ratios of the Christian subcultures in the Greco-Roman world.. Given several reasonable assumptions, simple arithmetic suffices to assess the magnitude of the changes differential conversion rates could have) produced.

Let us begin with a Christian population with equal numbers of men and women. Let us assume a growth rate from *conversion* of 30 percent per decade. That is, for the moment we will ignore any natural increase and assume that births equal deaths. Let us also suppose that the sex ratio among converts is two women for every man. As noted above, this is entirely in line with recent experience. Given these reasonable assumptions, we can easily calculate that it will take only fifty years for this Christian population to be 62 percent female. Or if we assume a growth rate of 40 percent per decade, the Christian population will be 64 percent female in fifty years.

If we were to factor in reasonable assumptions about natural increase and differential mortality, we would decrease this sex ratio to some extent. But even so, the Christian subcultures would have had a substantial surplus of women in a world accustomed to a vast surplus of men. Later in this chapter I shall consider how a surplus of women should have resulted in substantial secondary conversions via marriages to pagans. But for now I wish to focus on the simple conclusion that there are abundant reasons to accept that Christian women enjoyed a favorable sex ratio, and to show how that resulted in Christian women's enjoying superior status in comparison with their pagan Counterparts.

SEX RATIOS AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

One of the more significant and original contributions to social thought in recent years is the Guttentag and Secord (1983) theory linking cross-cultural variations in the status of women to cross-cultural variations in sex ratios. The theory involves a remarkably subtle linking of dyadic and social structural power and dependency. For the purposes of this chapter it is sufficient merely to note Guttentag and Secord's conclusion that to the extent that males outnumber females, women will be enclosed in repressive sex roles as men treat them as "scarce goods." Conversely, to the extent that females outnumber males, the Guttentag and Secord theory predicts that women will enjoy relatively greater power and freedom.

As they applied their theory to various societies in different eras, Guttentag and Secord noted that it illuminated the marked differences in the relative status and power of Athenian and Spartan women. That is, *within* the classical world, the status of women varied substantially in response to variations in sex ratios.

In Athens, women were in relatively short supply owing to female infanticide, practiced by all classes, and to additional deaths caused by abortion. The status of Athenian women was very low. Girls received little or no education. Typically, Athenian females were married at puberty and often before. Under Athenian law a woman was classified as a child, regardless of age, and therefore was the legal property of some man at all stages in her life. Males could divorce by simply ordering a wife out of the household. Moreover, if a woman was seduced or raped, her husband was legally compelled to divorce her. If a woman wanted a divorce, she had to have her father or some other man bring her case before a judge. Finally, Athenian women could own property, but control of the property was always vested in the male to whom she "belonged" (Guttentag and Secord 1983; Finley 1982; Pomeroy 1975).

Spartans also practiced infanticide, but without gender bias—only healthy, well-formed babies were allowed to live. Since males are more subject to birth defects and are more apt to be sickly infants, the result was a slight excess of females from infancy, a trend that accelerated with age because of male mortality from military life and warfare. Keep in mind that mortality rates in military encampments far surpassed civilian rates until into the twentieth century. At age seven all Spartan boys were left home for military boarding schools, and all were required to serve in the army until age thirty; they then passed into the active reserve, where they remained until age sixty. A subjugated peasantry known as helots supplied all of the males in the domestic labor force. Although men could marry at age twenty, they could not live with their wives until they left the active army age thirty.

Spartan women enjoyed status and power unknown in the rest of the classical world. They not only controlled their own they controlled that of their male relatives when the latter were away with the army. It is estimated that women were the sole owners of at least 40 percent of all land and property in Sparta (Pomeroy 1975). The laws concerning divorce were the same for men and women. Women received as much education as men, and Spartan women received a substantial

amount of physical education and gymnastic training. Spartan women seldom married before age twenty, and, unlike their Athenian sisters who wore heavy, concealing gowns and were seldom seen by males outside their household, Spartan women wore short dresses and went where they pleased (Guttentag and Secord 1983; Finley 1982; Pomeroy 1975).

RELATIVE STATUS OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN

If Guttentag and Secord's theory is correct, then we would have predicted that the status of Christian women in the Greco-Roman world would more closely approximate that of Spartan women in Athens.

Although I began this chapter with the assertion that Christian women did indeed enjoy considerably greater status and power than did pagan women, this needs to be demonstrated at greater length. The discussion will focus on two primary aspects of female status: within the family and within the religious community.

Wives, Widows, and Brides

First of all, a major aspect of women's improved status in the Christian subculture is that Christians did not condone female infanticide. Granted, this was the result of the prohibition of *all* infanticide. But the more favorable Christian view of women is also demonstrated in their condemnation of divorce, incest, marital infidelity, and polygamy. As Fox put it, "fidelity, without divorce, was expected of every Christian" (1987:354). Moreover, although rules prohibiting divorce and remarriage evolved slowly, the earliest church councils ruled that "twice-married Christians" could not hold church office (Fox 1987). Like pagans, early Christians prized female chastity, but unlike pagans they rejected the double standard that gave pagan men so much sexual license (Sandison 1967). Christian men were urged to remain virgins until marriage (Fox 1987), and extramarital sex was condemned as adultery. Chadwick noted that Christianity "regarded unchastity in a husband as no less serious a breach of loyalty and trust than unfaithfulness in a wife" (1967:59). Even the great Greek physician Galen was prompted to remark on Christian "restraint in cohabitation" (quoted in Benko 1984:142).

Should they be widowed, Christian women also enjoyed very substantial advantages. Pagan widows faced great social pressure to remarry; Augustus even had widows fined if they failed to remarry within two years (Fox 1987). Of course, when a pagan widow did remarry, she lost all of her inheritance—it became the property of her new husband. In contrast, among Christians, widowhood was highly respected and remarriage was, if anything, mildly discouraged. Thus not only were well-to-do Christian widows enabled to keep their husband's estate, the church stood ready to sustain poor widows, allowing them a choice as to whether or not to remarry. Eusebius provides a letter from Cornelius, bishop of Rome, written in 251 to Bishop Fabius of Antioch, in which he reported that "more than fifteen hundred widows and distressed persons" were in the care of the local congregation, which may have included about 30,000 members at this time (*The History of the Church*, 1965 ed., and see editor's note to p. 282).

In all these ways the Christian woman enjoyed far greater marital security and equality than did her pagan neighbor. But there was another major marital aspect to the benefits women gained from being Christians. They were married at a substantially older age and had more choice about whom they married. Since, as we shall see, pagan women frequently were forced into prepubertal, consummated marriages, this was no small matter.

In a now-classic article, the historical demographer Keith Hopkins (1965a) surveyed a century of research on the age of marriage of Roman women—girls, actually, most of them. The evidence is both literary and quantitative. In addition to the standard classical histories, the literary evidence consists of writings by lawyers and physicians. The quantitative data are based

on inscriptions, most of them funerary, from which the age at marriage can be calculated (cf. Harkness 1896).

As to the histories, silence offers strong testimony that Roman girls married young, very often before puberty. It is possible to calculate that many famous Roman women married at a tender age: Octavia and Agrippina married at 11 and 12, Quintilian's wife bore him a son when she was 13, Tacitus wed a girl of 13, and so on. But in reviewing the writing about all of these aristocratic Romans, Hopkins (1965a) found only one case in which the ancient writer mentioned the bride's age—and this biographer was himself a Christian ascetic! Clearly, having been a child bride was not thought by ancient biographers to be worth mentioning. Beyond silence, however, the 'Greek historian Plutarch reported that Romans "gave their girls in marriage when they were twelve years old, or even younger" (quoted in Hopkins 1965a:314). Dio Cassius, also a Greek writing Roman history, agreed: "Girls are considered ... to have reached marriageable age on completion of their twelfth year (*The Roman History*, 1987 ed.).

Roman law set 12 as the minimum age at which girls could marry. But the law carried no penalties, and legal commentaries from the time include such advice as: "A girl who has married before 12 will be a legitimate wife, when she becomes 12." Another held that when girls under age 12 married, for legal purposes they should be considered engaged until they reached 12. Hopkins concluded: "We have no means of knowing whether lawyers represented advanced, typical or conservative opinions in these matters. What we do know is that in the fragments of their opinions that survive there is no sneer or censure against marriages before 12, and there are no teeth in the laws [against it]" (1965a:314). The quantitative data are based on several studies of Roman inscriptions, combined by Hopkins (1965a), from which age at marriage could be calculated. Hopkins was also able to separate these Roman women on the basis of religion. The results are presented in table 5.1. Pagans were three times as likely as Christians to have married before age 13 (10 percent were wed by age 11). Nearly half (44 percent) of the pagans had married by age 14, compared with 20 percent of the Christians. In contrast, nearly half (48 percent) of the Christian females had not wed before age 18, compared with a third (37 percent) of the pagans.

	<i>Pagans</i>	<i>Christians</i>
Under 13	20%	7%
13—14	24%	13%
15—17	19%	32%
18 or over	37%	48%
N=	145	180
<i>Note:</i> Calculated from Hopkins 1965a. Significance < .0001		

These differences are highly significant statistically. But they seem of even greater social significance when we discover that not only were a substantial proportion of pagan Roman girls married before the onset of puberty, to a man far older than themselves, but these marriages typically were consummated at once.

When the French historian Durry (1955) first reported his findings that Roman marriages involving child brides normally were consummated even if the bride had not yet achieved puberty, he acknowledged that this ran counter to deeply held ideas about the classical world. But there is ample literary evidence that consummation of these marriages was taken for granted. Hopkins (1965a) noted that one Roman law did deal with the marriage of girls under age 12 and intercourse, but it was concerned only with the question of her adultery. Several Roman physicians suggested that it might be wise to defer intercourse until menarche, but did not stress the matter (Hopkins 1965a).

Unfortunately, the literary sources offer little information about how prepubertal girls felt about these practices. Plutarch regarded it as a cruel custom and reported "the hatred and fear of

girls forced contrary to nature.” I suggest that, even in the absence of better evidence and even allowing for substantial cultural differences, it seems likely that many Roman girls responded as Plutarch claimed. Thus here too Christian girls enjoyed a substantial advantage.

Gender and Religious Roles

It is well known that the early church attracted an unusual number of high-status women (Fox 1987; Grant 1977; 1970; Harnack 1908, vol. 2). But the matter of interest here concerns the roles occupied by women *within* early Christian congregations. Let me emphasize that by “early Christianity” I mean the period approximately the first five centuries. After that, as Christianity became the dominant faith of the empire and as sex ratios responded to the decline in the differential conversion of women, the roles open to women became far more limited.

As to the status of women in the early church, there has been far too much reliance on 1 Cor. 14:34-36, where Paul appears to prohibit women even from speaking in church. Laurence Iannaccone (1982) has made a compelling case that these verses were the opposite of Paul’s position and were in fact a quotation of claims being made at Corinth that Paul then refuted. Certainly the statement is at variance with everything else Paul wrote about the proper role for women in the church. Moreover, Paul several times acknowledged women in leadership positions in various congregations.

In Rom. 16:1-2 Paul introduces and commends to the Roman congregation “our sister Phoebe” who is a “deaconess of the church at Cenchrea” who had been of great help to him. Deacons were of considerable importance in the early church. They assisted at liturgical functions and administered the benevolent and charitable activities of the church. Clearly, Paul regarded it as entirely proper for a woman to hold that position. Nor was this an isolated case. Clement of Alexandria wrote of “women deacons,” and in 451 the Council of Chalcedon specified that henceforth a deaconess must be at least forty and unmarried (Ferguson 1990). From the pagan side, in his famous letter to the emperor Trajan, Pliny the Younger reported that he had tortured two young Christian women “who were called deaconesses” (1943 ed.).

Not only did Paul commend Phoebe the deaconess to the Romans, he also sent his greetings to prominent women in the Roman congregation, including Prisca, whom he acknowledges for having “risked her neck” on his behalf. He asks that the recipients of his letter “greet Mary, who has worked so hard among you,” and sends his greetings to several other women (Rom. 16:1—15). Moreover, in 1 Tim. 3:11 Paul again mentions men in the role of deacons, noting that to qualify for such an appointment women must be “serious, no slanderers, but temperate and faithful in all things.”

That women often served as deacons in the early church was obscured because the translators of the King James Version chose to refer to Phoebe as merely a “servant” of the church, not as a deacon, and to transform Paul’s words in 1 Timothy into a comment directed toward the *wives* of deacons.² But this reflects the sexist norms of the seventeenth century, not the realities of early Christian communities. Indeed, early the third century the great Christian intellectual Origen wrote the following comment on Paul’s letter to the Romans:

This text teaches with the authority of the Apostle that... there are, as we have already said, women deacons in the Church, and that women, who have given assistance to so many people and who by their good works deserve to be praised by the Apostle, ought to be accepted in the diaconate. (Quoted in Gryson 1976:134)

All important modern translations of the Bible now restore the original language used by Paul in these two letters, but somehow the illusions fostered by the King James falsifications remain the common wisdom. Nevertheless, there is virtual consensus among historians of the early church as well as biblical scholars that women held positions of honor and authority within early

Christianity (Frend 1984; Gryson 1976; Cadoux 1925). Peter Brown noted that Christians differed not only from pagans in this respect, but from Jews: “The Christian clergy took a step that separated them from the rabbis of Palestine... [T]hey welcomed women as patrons and even offered women roles in which they could act as collaborators” 1988:144-145). And none of his colleagues would have regarded the following claim by the distinguished Wayne Meeks controversial: “Women... are Paul’s fellow workers as evangelists and teachers. Both in terms of their position in the larger society and in terms of their participation in the Christian communities, then, a number of women broke through the normal expectations of female roles” (1983:71).

Close examination of Roman persecutions also suggests that women held positions of power and status within the Christian churches. The actual number of Christians martyred by the Romans was quite small, and the majority of men who were executed were officials, including bishops (see chapter 8). That a very significant proportion of martyrs were women led Bonnie Bowman Thurston (1989) to suggest that they must also have been regarded by the Romans as holding some sort of official standing. This is consistent with the fact that the women tortured and then probably executed by Pliny were deaconesses.

Thus, just as the Guttentag and Secord theory predicts, the very favorable sex ratio enjoyed by Christian women was soon translated into substantially more status and power, both within the family and within the religious subculture, than was enjoyed by pagan women. Let me note that women in Rome and in Roman cities enjoyed greater freedom and power than women in the empire’s Greek cities (MacMullen 1984). However, it was in the Greek cities of Asia Minor and North Africa that Christianity made its greatest early headway, and it is these communities that are the focus of this analysis. Granted, even in this part of the empire, pagan women sometimes held important positions within various mystery cults and shrines. However, these religious groups and centers were themselves relatively peripheral to power within pagan society, for authority was vested primarily in secular roles. In contrast, the church was the primary social structure of the Christian subculture. Daily life revolved around the church, and power resided in church offices. To the extent that women held significant roles within the church, they enjoyed greater power and status than did pagan women. Indeed, participation in Mithraism, which has often been regarded as early Christianity’s major competitor, was limited to males (Ferguson 1990).

Now I would like to pursue an additional and equally remarkable consequence of the very different sex ratios prevailing among pagans and Christians. In the pagan world that surrounded the early Christians, an excess number of men caused to be in short supply. But within the Christian subculture it was husbands who were in short supply. Herein lay an excellent opportunity for gaining secondary converts.

Exogamous Marriage and Secondary Conversion

Peter and Paul sanctioned marriage between Christians and pagans. Peter advised women with Unconverted husbands to be submissive so that the men might be won to faith “when they see your reverent and chaste behavior” (1 Pet. 3:1—2). Paul gives similar advice, noting that “an unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife” (1 Cor. 7:13-14). Both passages are commonly interpreted as directed toward persons whose inversion postdated their marriage. In such circumstances, as Wayne Meeks explained, the Christian “divorce rule takes precedence over the preference for group endogamy” (1983:101). But I suggest that these passages may reflect a far greater tolerance for exogamous marriage than has been recognized. My reasons are several.

We know that there was a very substantial oversupply of marriageable Christian women and that this was acknowledged to a problem. Fox reported the concern among church leaders match an excess of Christian women to a deficiency of Christian men” (1987:309). Indeed, in about the year 200 Callistus, bishop of Rome, upset many of his fellow clerics when he ruled that Christian women could live in ‘just concubinage’ without entering into marriage (Brown 1988; Fox 1987; Latourette 1937). Although Hippolytus and other contemporaries decried the pope’s action as giving license to adultery, Harnack defended Callistus on the basis of the circumstances he faced: ‘These circumstances arose from the fact of Christian girls in the church outnumbering youths, the indulgence of Callistus itself proving unmistakably the female element in the church, so far as the better classes were concerned, was in the majority’ (1908: 2:83-84). In particular, Callistus was trying to deal with the problem facing upper-class women whose only marital options *within* the Christian community were to men of far inferior rank. Should they have entered into legal marriages with such men, highborn women would have lost many legal privileges and control of their wealth. If highborn Christian women found it so difficult to find grooms that the bishop of Rome permitted ‘just concubinage,’ how was he to condemn middle- and lower-class Christian women who wed pagans, especially if they did so within the church guidelines concerning the religious training of the children? The case of Pomponia Graecina, the aristocratic early convert mentioned in chapter 2, is pertinent here. It is uncertain whether her husband Plautius ever became a Christian, although he carefully shielded her from gossip, but there seems to be no doubt that her children were raised as Christians. According to Marta Sordi, ‘in the second century [her family] were practicing Christians (a member of the family is buried in the catacomb of St. Callistus)’ (1986:27). As we see later in the chapter, superior fertility played a significant role in the rise of Christianity. But had the oversupply of Christian women resulted in an oversupply of unwed, childless women, their potential fertility would have been denied to Christian growth. Summing up his long study of the sources, Harnack noted that many mixed marriages were reported and that in virtually all cases “the husband was a pagan, while the wife was a Christian” (1908: 2:79).

Finally, the frequency with which early church fathers condemned marriage to pagans *could* demonstrate that Christians “refused their sons and daughters in marriage to nonmembers” (MacMullen 1984:103). But it could also reflect the reverse, since people tend not to keep harping on matters that are not significant. Tertullian offers an interesting example. Writing in about the year 200 he violently condemned Christian women who married pagans, describing the latter as “slaves of the Devil” (quoted in Fox 1987:308). He also wrote two angry treatises condemning Christian women’s use of makeup, hair dye, fancy clothes, and jewelry (1959 ed.). I certainly would not conclude from the latter that most Christian women in Tertullian’s time dressed plainly and rejected cosmetics. Were that the case, Tertullian would have been an irrelevant fool—which he so obviously was not. I incline to a similar interpretation of his attack on Christian women for marrying pagans—Tertullian’s anger reflects the frequency of such marriages. In fact, Tertullian felt it necessary to acknowledge that one of his colleagues claimed that ‘while marriage to a pagan was certainly an offence, it was an extremely trivial offence’ (quoted in Harnack 1908: 2:82). Michael Walsh seems to agree that intermarriage was common. Commenting upon a proposal by Ignatius of Antioch that Christians should marry only with the permission of their local bishop, Walsh wrote:

Ignatius’ proposal may have been an attempt to encourage marriage between Christians, for inevitably marriages between Christians and pagans were common, especially in the early years.

The Church did not at first discourage this practice, which had its advantages: it might bring others into the fold. (1986:216)

This view is further supported by the lack of concern in early Christian sources about losing members via marriage to pagans. Peter and Paul hoped that Christians would bring their spouses into the church, but neither seemed to have the slightest worry that Christians would revert to, or convert to, paganism. Moreover, pagan sources agree. The composure of the Christian martyrs amazed and unsettled many pagans. Pliny noted the “stubbornness and unbending obstinacy” (“Letter,” 1943 ed.) of the Christians brought before him—under threat of death they would not recant. The emperor Marcus Aurelius also remarked on the obstinacy of Christian martyrs (*The Communings*, 1916 ed.). And Galen wrote of Christians that their contempt of death (and of its sequel) is patent to us every day” (quoted in Benko 1984:141). Galen’s reference was to the willingness of Christians to nurse the sick during the great plague that struck the empire at this time, killing millions, including Marcus Aurelius (see chapter 4). The high levels of commitment that the early church generated among its members should have made it safe for them to enter exogamous marriages.

That Christians seldom lost out via exogamous marriages is also in keeping with modern observations of high-tension religious movements. Female Jehovah’s Witnesses frequently marry outside the group (Heaton 1990). Seldom does this result in their defection, and it often results in the conversion of the spouse. Indeed, this phenomenon is so general that Andrew Greeley (1970) has proposed the rule that whenever a mixed marriage occurs, the less religious person will usually join the religion of the more religious member.

But how much intermarriage was there and how much did it matter in terms of producing secondary converts? What we do know is that secondary conversion was quite frequent among the Roman upper classes (Fox 1987; Chadwick 1967). This was partly because many married upper-class women became Christians and then managed to convert their spouses—this was especially common by the fourth century. But it also occurred because many upper-class Christian women did marry pagans, some of whom they subsequently were able to convert (Harnack 1908, vol. 2). Indeed, Peter Brown wrote of Christian women as a “gateway” into pagan families where “they were the wives, servants, and nurses of unbelievers” (1988:154).

In truth, there is no abundance of direct evidence that inter-marriages between Christian women and pagan men were widespread. But, in my judgment, a compelling case can be made by resort to reason. It is reasonable to assume that—given the great surplus of marriageable Christian women, existing in the midst of a world in which women were in short supply, and given that Christians seem not to have feared that intermarriage would result in their daughters’ abandoning their faith—such marriages ought to have been common. And from what we know about conversion mechanisms, these intermarriages ought to have resulted in a lot of secondary conversions.

As discussed in detail in chapter 1, conversion is a network phenomenon based on interpersonal attachments. People join movements to align their religious status with that of their friends and relatives who already belong. Hence, in order to offer plausible accounts of Christianity’s rise, we need to discover mechanisms by which Christians formed attachments with pagans. Put another way, we need to discover how Christians managed to remain an *open network*, able to keep building bonds with outsiders, rather than becoming a closed community of believers. A high rate of exogamous marriage is one such mechanism. And I think it was crucial to the rise of Christianity.

Indeed, exogamous marriage had another major consequence. It prevented the surplus of Christian women from resulting in an abundance of childless, single women. To the contrary, it seems likely that Christian fertility substantially exceeded that of pagans and that this too helped Christianize the Greco-Roman world.

THE FERTILITY FACTOR

In 59 B.C.E. Julius Caesar secured legislation that awarded land to fathers of three or more children, though he failed to act on Cicero's suggestion that celibacy be outlawed. Thirty years later, and again in the year 9, the emperor Augustus promulgated laws giving political preference to men who fathered three or more children and imposing political and financial sanctions upon childless couples, upon unmarried women over the age of twenty, and upon unmarried men over the age of twenty-five. These policies were continued by most emperors who followed Augustus, and many additional programs were instituted to promote fertility. Trajan, for example, provided substantial child subsidies (Rawson 1986).

But nothing worked. As Tacitus tells us, "childlessness prevailed" (*Annals* 3.25, 1989 ed.). As the distinguished Arthur E. R. Boak remarked, "[policies with] the aim of encouraging families to rear at least three children were pathetically impotent" (1955a:18). As a result, the population of the Roman Empire began to decline noticeably during the last years of the Republic, and serious population shortages had developed by the second century, *before* the onset of the first great plague (Boak 1955a).

Thus although plagues played a substantial role in the decline of the Roman population, of far greater importance was the low fertility rate of the free population in the Greco-Roman world (both rural and urban) and the extremely low fertility of the large slave population (Boak 1955a). By the start of the Christian era, Greco-Roman fertility had fallen below replacement levels, leading to centuries of natural *decrease* (Parkin 1992; Devine 1985; Boak 1955a). As a result, the devastating effects of the major plagues were never remedied, for even in good times the population was not replacing itself. By the third century, there is solid evidence of a decline in both the number and the size of Roman towns in the West, even in Britain (Collingwood and Myres 1937).

That the empire could continue as long as it did depended on a constant influx of "barbarian" settlers. As early as the second century, Marcus Aurelius had to draft slaves and gladiators and hire Germans and Scythians in order to fill the ranks of the army (Boak 1955a). After defeating the Marcomanni, Aurelius settled large numbers of them within the empire in return for their accepting obligations to supply soldiers. Boak commented that Aurelius "had no trouble finding vacant land on which to place them" (1955a:18).

Meanwhile, in keeping with the biblical injunction to "be fruitful and multiply," Christians maintained a substantial rate of natural *increase*. Their fertility rates were considerably higher than those of pagans, and their mortality rates were considerably lower.

To conclude this chapter I shall first establish the basis for the very low fertility rates of the Greco-Roman world. Next, I will examine factors that sustained high fertility among Jews and subsequently among Christians. Although it is impossible to know actual fertility rates in this period, these cultural contrasts are sufficient to strongly suggest that superior Christian fertility played a significant role in the rise of Christianity.

SOURCES OF LOW FERTILITY

A primary cause of low fertility in the Greco-Roman world was a male culture that held marriage in low esteem. In 131 B.C.E. the Roman censor Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonjcus proposed that the senate make marriage compulsory because so many men,

especially in the upper classes, preferred to stay sin-Acknowledging that “we cannot have a really harmonious life with our wives,” the censor pointed out that since “we cannot have any sort of life without them,” the long term welfare of the must be served. More than a century later Augustus quoted passage to the senate to justify his own legislation on behalf of marriage, and it was not greeted with any greater enthusiasm the second time around (Rawson 1986:11). For the fact was that men in the Greco-Roman world found it difficult to relate to women. As Beryl Rawson has reported, “one theme that recurs in Latin literature is that wives are difficult and therefore men not care much for marriage” (1986:11).

Although virginity was demanded of brides, and chastity of wives, men tended to be quite promiscuous and female prostitutes abounded in Greco-Roman cities—from the twopenny *diobolariae* who worked the streets to high-priced, well-bred courtesans (Pomeroy 1975). Greco-Roman cities also sustained substantial numbers of male prostitutes, as bisexuality and homosexuality were common (Sandison 1967).

Infanticide

However, even when Greco—Roman men did marry, they usually produced very small families—not even legal sanctions and inducements could achieve the goal of an average of three children per family. One reason for this was infanticide—far more babies were born than were allowed to live. Seneca regarded the drowning of children at birth as both reasonable and commonplace. Tacitus charged that the Jewish teaching that it is “a deadly sin to kill an unwanted child” was but another of their “sinister and revolting” practices (*The Histories* 5.5, 1984 ed.). It was common to expose an unwanted infant out-of-doors where it could, in principle, be taken up by someone who wished to rear it, but where it typically fell victim to the elements or to animals and birds. Not only was the exposure of infants a very common practice, it was justified by law and advocated by philosophers.

Both Plato and Aristotle recommended infanticide as legitimate state policy.³ The Twelve Tables—the earliest known Roman legal code, written about 450 B.C.E.—permitted a father to expose any female infant and any deformed or weak male infant (Gorman 1982:25). During recent excavations of a villa in the port city of Ashkelon, Lawrence E. Stager and his colleagues made

a gruesome discovery in the sewer that ran under the bathhouse.... The sewer had been clogged with refuse sometime in the sixth century A.D. When we excavated and dry-sieved the desiccated sewage, we found (the) bones., of nearly 100 little babies apparently murdered and thrown into the sewer. (1991:47)

Examination of the bones revealed them to be newborns, probably day-olds (Smith and Kahila 1991). As yet, physical anthropologists have not been able to determine the gender of these infants who apparently had just been dropped down the drain shortly after birth. But the assumption is that they were all, or nearly all, girls (Stager 1991). Girls or boys, these bones reveal a major cause of population decline.

Abortion

In addition to infanticide, fertility was greatly reduced in the Greco-Roman world by the very frequent recourse to abortion. The literature details an amazingly large number of abortion techniques—the more effective of which were exceedingly dangerous. Thus abortion not only prevented many births, it killed many women before they could make their contribution to fertility, and it resulted in a substantial incidence of infertility in women who survived abortions. A consideration of the primary methods used will enable us to more fully grasp the impact of abortion on Greco-Roman fertility and mortality.

A frequent approach involved ingesting slightly less than fatal doses of poison in an effort to cause a miscarriage. But, of course, poisons are somewhat unpredictable and tolerance levels vary greatly; hence in many cases both the mother and the fetus were killed. Another method introduced poisons of various sorts into the uterus to kill the fetus. Unfortunately, in many cases the woman failed to expel the dead fetus and died unless she was treated almost immediately by mechanical methods of removal. But these methods, which were often used as the initial mode of abortion as well, were also extremely dangerous, requiring great surgical skill as well as good luck in an age at was ignorant of bacteria.

The commonly used mechanical methods all involved long needles, hooks, and knives. Tertullian, writing in about 203, described an abortion kit used by Hippocrates:

a flexible frame for opening the uterus first of all, and keeping it open; it is further furnished with an annular blade, by means of which the limbs within the womb are dissected with anxious but unfaltering care; its last appendage being a blunted or covered hook, wherewith the entire fetus is extracted by a violent delivery. There is also a copper needle or spike by which the actual death is managed. (*A Treatise on the Soul* 25, 1989 ed.)

The famous Roman medical writer Aulus Cornelius Celsus offered extensive instructions on using similar equipment in his *De medicina*, written in the first century. Celsus warned surgeons that an abortion “requires extreme caution and neatness, and entails very great risk.” He advised that “after the death of the foetus” the surgeon should slowly force his “greased hand” up the vagina and into the uterus (keep in mind that soap had yet to be invented). If the fetus was in a headfirst position, the surgeon should then insert a smooth hook and fix it “into an eye or ear or the mouth, even at times into the forehead, then this is pulled upon and extracts the foetus.” If the fetus was positioned crosswise or backwards, then Celsus advised that a blade be used to cut up the fetus so it could be taken out in pieces. Afterwards, Celsus instructed surgeons to tie the woman’s thighs together and to cover her pubic area with “greasy wool, dipped in vinegar and rose oil” (*De medicina* 7.29, 1935—1938 ed.).

Given the methods involved, it is not surprising that abortion was a major cause of death among women in the Greco-Roman world (Gorman 1982). Since abortion was so dangerous to women in this era, it might be asked why it was so widely practiced. The sources mention a variety of reasons, but concealment of illicit sexual activity receives the greatest emphasis—unmarried women and women who became pregnant while their husbands were absent often sought abortions (Gorman 1982). Economic reasons are also cited frequently. Poor women sought abortions to avoid a child they could ill afford and rich women sought them in order to avoid splitting up the family estate among many heirs.

However, the very high rates of abortion in the Greco-Roman world can only be fully understood if we recognize that in perhaps the majority of instances it was men, rather than women, who made the decision to abort. Roman law accorded the male head of family the literal power of life and death over his household, including the right to order a female in the household to abort. The Roman Twelve Tables mentioned earlier did suggest censure for husbands who ordered their wives to abort without good reason, but no fines or penalties were specified. Moreover, the weight of Greek philosophy fully supported these woman views. In his *Republic* Plato made abortions mandatory for all women who conceived after age forty, on the grounds of limiting the population (5.9, 1941 ed.), and Aristotle followed suit in his *Politics*: “There must be a limit fixed to the procreation of offspring, and if any people have a child as a result of intercourse in contravention of these regulations, abortion must be practiced” (7.14.10, 1986 ed.). It is hardly surprising at a world which gave husbands the right to order the exposure of their

infant daughters would give them the right to order their wives and mistresses to abort. Thus the emperor Domitian, having impregnated his niece Julia, ordered her to have an abortion—from which she died (Gorman 1982).

Birth Control

The Romans had an adequate understanding of the biology of reproduction and developed a substantial inventory of preventive measures. Medical historians now are convinced that various plants such as Queen Anne's lace, chewed by women in antiquity, were somewhat effective in reducing fertility (Riddle, Estes, and Russell 1994). In addition, a number of contraceptive devices and medicines were inserted into the vagina to kill sperm or block the path of semen to the uterus. Various ointments, honey, and pads of soft wool were used for the latter purpose (Noonan 1965; Clark 1993). Unborn lamb stomachs and goat bladders served as condoms; these, however, were too expensive for anyone but the very rich (Pomeroy 1975). Even more popular (and effective) were sexual variations that keep sperm out of the vagina. One frequently used method was withdrawal. Another substituted mutual masturbation for intercourse. Surviving Roman and Greek art frequently depicts anal intercourse, and a number of classical writers mention women playing the boy," a reference to anal sex (Sandison 1967:744). Pomeroy attributes the preference of Greco-Roman males for 'women with large buttocks "to the practice of anal intercourse (1975:49). Having reported a wealth of literary references, Lindsay claims that heterosexual anal intercourse was "very common" and "was used as the simplest, most convenient, and most effective form of contraception" (1968:250-251). Oral sex seems to have been much less common than anal sex (understandably so, given the lack of cleanliness), but it is depicted in a number of erotic Greek paintings, especially on vases (Sandison 1967). Finally, given their attitudes about marriage and their distant relationships with their wives, many Greco-Roman men seem to have depended on the most reliable of all means of birth control, avoiding sex with their wives.

Too Few Women

In the final analysis, a population's capacity to reproduce is a function of the proportion of that population consisting of women in their childbearing years, and the Greco-Roman world had an acute shortage of women. Moreover, many pagan women still in their childbearing years had been rendered infertile by damage to their reproductive systems from abortions or from contraceptive devices and medicines. In this manner was the decline of the Roman Empire's population ensured.

CHRISTIAN FERTILITY

The differential fertility of Christians and pagans is not something I have deduced from the known natural decrease of the Greco-Roman population and from Christian rejection of the attitudes and practices that caused pagans to have low fertility. This differential fertility was taken as fact by the ancients. Thus, at the end of the second century, Minucius Felix wrote a debate between a pagan and a Christian in which Octavius, the Christian spokesman, noted "that day by day the number of us is increased," which he attributed to "[our] fair mode of life" (*Octavius* 31, 1989 ed.). It could hardly have been otherwise, because Christians pursued a lifestyle that could only result in comparatively higher fertility—a point fully appreciated by Tertullian, who noted: "To the servant of God, forsooth, offspring necessary! For our own salvation we are secure enough, so we have leisure for children! Burdens must be sought by us by ourselves which are avoided by the majority of the Gentiles, who are compelled by laws [to have children], who are decimated by abortions" (To *His Wife* 1.5, 1989 ed.).

If a major factor in lower fertility among pagans was a male-oriented culture that held marriage in low esteem, a major factor in higher fertility of Christians was a culture that sanctified the marital bond. As noted, Christians condemned promiscuity men as well as in women and stressed the obligations of husbands toward wives as well as those of wives toward husbands. Writing to the church in Corinth, after having allowed that celibacy was probably to be preferred, Paul quickly went on to define proper marital relations among Christians:

But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control. I say this by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. (1 Cor. 7:2—7)

The symmetry of the relationship Paul described was at total variance, not only with pagan culture, but with Jewish culture as well—just as allowing women to hold positions of religious importance was at variance with Jewish practice. And if Paul expressed a more conventionally patriarchal view of the marriage relationship in Eph. 5:22—“Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church”—he devoted the next ten verses to admonishing men to love their wives.

Apart from the question of female roles, in most other respects the views of family and fertility sustained by Christians revealed the Jewish origins of the movement. These views can best be described as very family-oriented and pro-natal. Indeed, as time passed, Christians began to stress that the primary purpose of sex was procreation and therefore that it was a marital duty to have children. In addition to these pronounced differences in attitudes, there were dramatic behavioral differences that distinguished Christians from pagans in their treatment of pregnant women and infants.

Abortion and Infanticide

From the start, Christian doctrine absolutely prohibited abortion and infanticide, classifying both as murder. These Christian prohibitions reflected the Jewish origins of the movement. Among Jews, according to Josephus: “The law, moreover, enjoins us to bring up our offspring, and forbids women to cause abortion of what is begotten, or to destroy it afterward; and if any woman appears to have done so, she will be a murderer of her child” (1960 ed.). In similar fashion, the Alexandrian Jewish writing known as the *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* advised: “A woman should not destroy the unborn babe in her belly; nor after its birth throw it before dogs and vultures as prey” (quoted in Gorman 1982:37).

These views are repeated in the earliest Christian writing on the subject. Thus, in the second chapter of the *Didache*, a manual of church teachings probably written in the first century (Robinson 1976), we find the injunction “Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill them when born.” Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology*, written toward the middle of the second century, noted, “We have been taught that it is wicked to expose even newly-born children... [for] we would then be murderers” (27—29, 1948 ed.). In the second century, Athenagoras wrote in chapter 35 of his *Plea* to the emperor Marcus Aurelius,

We say that women who use drugs to bring on an abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion... [for we] regard the very foetus in the Womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God’s care. . . and [we do not] expose an infant, because those who expose them are chargeable with child-murder. (1989 ed.)

By the end of the second century, Christians not only were proclaiming their rejection of abortion and infanticide, but had begun direct attacks on pagans, and especially pagan religions, for sustaining such “crimes.” In his *Octavius*, Minucius Felix charged:

And I see that you at one time expose your begotten children to wild beasts and to birds; at another, that you crush when strangled with a miserable kind of death. There are some women [among you] who, by drinking medical preparations, extinguish the source of the future man in their very bowels, and thus commit a parricide before they bring forth. And these things assuredly come down from your gods. For Saturn did not expose his children, but devoured them. With reason were infants sacrificed to him in some parts of Africa. (33, 1989 ed.)

Birth Control

Initially, Christian teaching about the use of contraceptive devices and substances may have been somewhat ambiguous (Noonan 1965). However, since it is not clear the extent to which the contraceptive methods used by the ancients actually worked (and many, such as amulets worn around the ankle, clearly did not), it may not have mattered whether they were permitted or condemned. Of far greater importance to Christian fertility were religious objections to the most effective means of birth control—objections mostly taken over from Judaism. That is, Jews and Christians were opposed to sexual practices that diverted sperm from the vagina. As the biblical story of Onan makes clear, withdrawal and mutual masturbation were sins in that the seed was spilled upon the ground. Thus Clement of Alexandria wrote, “Because of its divine institution for the propagation of man, the seed is not to be vainly ejaculated, nor is it to be damaged, nor is it to be wasted” (quoted in Noonan 1965:93). Both Jews and Christians condemned anal intercourse. In Rom. 1:26 Paul wrote: “For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature. As for oral sex, Barnabas wrote: “Thou shalt not ... become such as those men of whom we hear as working iniquity with their mouth for uncleanness, neither shalt thou cleave unto impure women who work iniquity with their mouths” (*The Epistle* 10, 1988 ed.). In all these ways did Christians reject the cultural patterns that were causing the Greco-Roman pagan population to decline.

An Abundance of Fertile Women

A final factor in favor of high Christian fertility was an abundance of women who were far less likely to be infertile. Since only women can have babies, the sex composition of a population is (other things being equal) a crucial factor in its level of fertility. That the Christian community may well have been 60 percent female offered the Christian subculture a tremendous potential level of fertility. Of course, given the moral restrictions of the group, Christian women also needed to be married in order to have children. But, as I tried to establish earlier, there is no reason to suppose that they did not have high marriage rates, given the abundance of eligible males in the surrounding populace. Moreover, there is every reason to suppose the overwhelming majority of children from these “mixed marriages” were raised within the church.

Christian Fertility

A number of sophisticated scholars have tried to estimate the fertility rate of the Roman Empire (Parkin 1992; Durand 1960; Russell 1958), but the fact remains that we will never have firm knowledge. What can be established is that mortality was thus a high fertility rate was necessary to prevent a population decline. It also seems very likely that fertility was substantially lower than needed for replacement, and, as noted above, there is substantial evidence that the Greco-Roman population did become smaller during the Christian era. Beyond these generalities, it is doubtful that we shall obtain more precise information.

As for the fertility of the Christian population, the literature is empty. It was for this reason that I devoted much attention to establishing that the primary causes of a population decline in the Greco-Roman world did not apply to the Christian subculture. It thus seems entirely proper to assume that Christian population patterns would have resembled the patterns that normally apply in societies having an equivalent level of economic and cultural development. So long as they do not come up against limits imposed by available subsistence, such populations are normally quite expansive. Lack of subsistence was not factor in this time and place, as the frequent settlement of barbarians to make up population shortages makes clear. We can therefore assume that during the rise of Christianity the Christian population grew not only via conversion, but via fertility. The question is, how much of their growth was due to fertility alone?

Unfortunately, we simply do not have good enough data to attempt a quantitative answer to this question—not even a sufficient basis for hypothetical figures. All that can be claimed is that a nontrivial portion of Christian growth probably was due to superior fertility.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have attempted to establish four things. First, Christian subcultures in the ancient world rapidly developed a very substantial surplus of females, while in the pagan world around them males greatly outnumbered females. This shift was the result of Christian prohibitions against infanticide and abortion and of substantial sex bias in conversion. Second, fully in accord with Guttentag and Secord's theory linking the status of women to sex ratios, Christian women enjoyed substantially higher status within the Christian subcultures than pagan women did in the world at large. This was especially marked vis-à-vis gender relations within the family, but women also filled leadership positions within the church. Third, given a surplus of Christian women and a surplus of pagan men, a substantial amount of exogamous marriage took place, thus providing the early church with a steady flow of secondary converts. Finally, I have argued that the abundance of Christian women resulted in higher birthrates—that superior fertility contributed to the rise of Christianity.

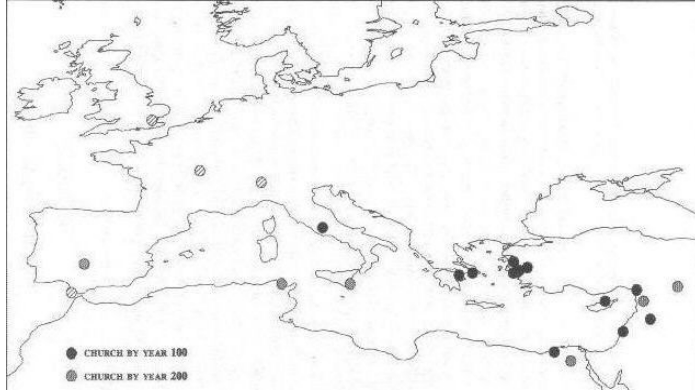
Note. An earlier version of this chapter was given as the Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture, 1994.

1. It should be noted that while secondary converts are often rather lukewarm about joining in the first place, once immersed in the group they often become very ardent.
2. I am indebted to Laurence R. Iannaccone for pointing out this feature of the King James Version.
3. See: Plato, *Republic* 5 (1941 ed.); Aristotle, *Politics* 2,7(1986 ed.).

CHAPTER SIX

Christianizing the Urban Empire: A Quantitative Approach

In his brilliant study of the early church, Wayne Meeks (1983) uses the title of his book to



Christianity was an urban movement and, like many new faiths before it, it arose in the east and spread westward, as can be seen in this map showing the twenty-two largest cities of the Roman Empire (ca. 100).

emphasize that Christianity was first and foremost an *urban* movement. Or, as he put it early in the first chapter, “within a decade of the crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine had been left far behind, and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement” (1983:11). In the remainder of the book Meeks offers many insights about the spread of Christianity; his primary emphasis, however, is not on cities, but on urbanites. His aim is to help us recognize *who* embraced the new move and why.

My concern in this chapter is not so much with who or why as with *where*. What characteristics of cities were conducive to Christianization? To this end I will apply some standard tools used by urban sociologists and conduct a quantitative analysis using a data set consisting of the twenty-two largest cities of the Greco-Roman world circa 100. I will develop and test some hypotheses about why Christianity arose more rapidly in some places than in others. However, rather than present the hypotheses first and then move to the statistical analysis, I shall develop and test each seriatim. The reason for this format is that each variable must be discussed at some length as it enters the analysis, and each variable reflects a hypothesis.

SELECTING CITIES BY SIZE

Despite libraries stuffed with books on many Greco-Roman cities, the sad fact is that, as Lewis Mumford has pointed out, “the city itself remains a shadow” (1974:vii). Indeed, it has required Herculean efforts even to estimate such an elementary and essential fact as the population of these cities. Fortunately, Tertius Chandler made it his life’s work to try to discover the populations of ancient cities. Assisted by Gerald Fox (with Kingsley Davis performing the vital role of midwife), he was finally able to publish his extraordinary work (Chandler and Fox 1974). In *Three Thousand Years of Urban Growth*, Chandler and Fox offer a plausible and well-documented basis for estimating the populations of the world’s largest cities in 100. Among these are twenty Greco-Roman cities. However, because Chandler and Fox chose to list only those cities having a population of 40,000 or more, they provided no population estimates for Athens or

Here are the twenty-two cities and their estimated populations:	
Rome	650,000
Alexandria	400,000
Ephesus	200,000
Antioch	150,000
Apamea	125,000
Pergamum	120,000
Sardis	100,000
Corinth	100,000
Gadir (Cadiz)	100,000
Memphis	90,000
Carthage	90,000
Edessa	80,000
Syracuse	80,000
Smyrna	75,000
Caesarea Maritima	45,000
Damascus	45,000
Cordova	45,000
Mediolanum (Milan)	40,000
Augustodunum(Autun)	40,000
London	40,000
Salamis	35,000
Athens	30,000

Salamis, although these are usually included in lists of important Greco-Roman cities. I added these two cities, bringing the total to twenty-two. I was unable to muster any Chandler-like scholarship to determine their populations at this time. But, after a good deal of poking around, I settled on 35,000 for Salamis and 30,000 for Athens.¹ If these prove faulty, be assured that removing them from the analysis has no effect on the results I report below.

CHRISTIANIZATION

How can we measure the receptivity of cities to Christianity, that is, their relative degree of Christianization at various times? My method is neither original nor (I would hope) particularly controversial. I have simply followed Adolf Harnack (1908, vol. 2) in using the notion of the *expansion* of Christianity—for in order to rise, a movement must spread. In his masterwork, Harnack identified those communities in the empire that possessed local Christian churches by the year 180. Later scholars

have added much to Harnack's original reconstruction, drawing on the many important archaeological finds of recent decades. However, owing to the lack of quantitative inclination among scholars in this area, it is only in the numerous historical atlases that this literature has been pulled together. Through study of many an atlas, I found four that seemed to reflect solid scholarship on this particular topic, and these are shown in table 6.1, along with Harnack's original findings (Blaklock 1972; Aharoni and Avi-Yonah 1977; Frank 1988; Chadwick and Evans 1987; Harnack 1908).

I have quantified the expansion of Christianity in terms of three thresholds. The cities most receptive to Christianity are those known to have had a church by 100. They receive a score of two. The next most receptive are those cities known to have had a church by 200. They receive a score of one. The

	Source 1 ^a	Source 2 ^b	Source 3 ^c	Source 4 ^d	Source 5 ^e	Code ^f
Caesarea	2	2	2	2/1	2	2
Maritima	2	2	2	2/1	0	2
Damascus	2	2	2	2/1	0	2
Antioch	2	2	2	2/1	2	2
Alexandria	2	2	2	2/1	2	2
Pergamum	2	2	2	2/1	2	2
Salamis	2	2	2	2/1	2	2
Sardis	2	2	2	2/1	2	2
Smyrna	2	2	2	2/1	0	2
Athens	2	2	2	2/1	2	2
Corinth	2	2	2	2/1	2	2
Ephesus	2	2	2	2/1	2	2
Rome	2	2	2	2/1	2	2
Apamea	1	1/0	1	0	2	1
Cordoca	1	1/0	1	0	1	1
Edessa	1	1/0	1	2/1	1	1
Syracuse	1	1/0	1	2/1	1	1
Carthage	1	1/0	1	2/1	1	1
Memphis	2	1/0	1	2/1	1	1
Mediolanum (Milan)	0	1/0	0	0	0	0
Augustodunum (Autun)	0	1/0	0	0	0	0
Gadir (Cadiz)	0	1/0	0	0	0	0
London	0	1/0	-	0	0	0

^aAharoni and Avi-Yonah 1977 (map of cities with churches by end of first century and map with churches by end of the second century).

^bChadwick and Evans 1987 (map of cities known to have had churches by the end of the first century).

^cFrank 1988 (map of cities known to have had a church by the end of the first century and by 180 C.E.).

^dHarnack 1908 (map of cities known to have had a church by 180 C.E.).

^eBlaklock 1972 (map shaded to show cities known to have had a church by end of first century and by end of second century).

^fIn the codes used when the chapter appeared as an essay in *Sociological Analysis*, Memphis was scored 2 rather than 1 and Cordova was scored 0 rather than 1. Upon further research I decided to make these corrections. However, they did not alter the statistical results in any important way.

least receptive cities are those still lacking a church by 200. Their score is zero. The result is a three-value, ordinal measure of Christianization.

Cities scored two are: Caesarea Maritima, Damascus, Antioch, Alexandria, Pergamum, Salamis, Sardis, Smyrna, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome.

Cities scored one are: Apamea, Carthage, Cordova, Edessa, Memphis, and Syracuse.

Cities scored zero are: Augustodunum (Autun), Gadir (Cadiz), London, and Mediolanum (Milan).

Let us pause here for our first hypothesis. Is there any reason to suppose that *city size* would have influenced Christianization? Harnack thought so: “The larger the town or city, the larger (even relatively, it is probable) was the number of Christians” (1908: 2:327). Moreover, there is a solid theoretical basis for such a hypothesis in the sociological literature. In his well-known subcultural theory of urbanism, Claude S. Fischer offered this proposition: “The more urban the place, the higher the rates of unconventionality” (1975:1328). Fischer’s thesis is that the larger the population, in absolute numbers, the easier it is to assemble a “critical mass” needed to form a deviant subculture. Here he specifically includes deviant religious movements. During the period in question Christianity obviously qualifies as a deviant religious movement in that it clearly was at variance with prevailing religious norms. Therefore, Fischer’s theory of urbanism predicts that Christians would have assembled the critical mass needed to form a church sooner, the larger the city.

As can be seen in table 6.2 below, there is a positive correlation in support of Fischer’s thesis. Although this correlation falls slightly short of significance at the .05 level, it is not at all clear that significance is an appropriate standard here, since data are not based on a random sample. Indeed, it was with great reservations that I included significance levels in the table.

LOCATION

One thing we know with certainty about these cities is *where* they were. And that means we can measure travel distances from one to another. Therefore, I have determined the distance of each of these twenty-two cities from Jerusalem.

We know where Christianity began. If we want to discover how it spread, we ought to take into account how far it had to go to get to various cities. The issue here is not simply that missionaries had to go farther to get from Jerusalem to Mediolanum than to Sardis. Indeed, anyone could cross the empire from end to the other in a summer, and travel was common. Meeks (1983:17) reports a merchant’s grave inscription found in Phrygia that attests to his having traveled to Rome seventy-two times, a distance of well over a thousand miles, and Ronald Hock (1980) estimates that Paul covered nearly ten thousand miles on his missions. As Meeks put it, “the people of the Roman Empire traveled more extensively and more easily than anyone before them did or would again until the nineteenth Century” (1983:17).

My interest is in the primary consequences of all this travel and trade: communication, cultural contact, and networks of interpersonal relationships based on kinship, friendship, or commerce. As I will discuss below, these were vital factors in preparing the way for the Christian missionaries—in determining what kind of reception awaited them. I propose to use distance from Jerusalem as a gradient of these factors.

Given this interest, simple distance as the crow flies is inadequate. Instead, in making the actual measurements I have attempted to trace known travel routes. Moreover, the bulk of trade and of long-distance travel was by boat—Paul traveled as much or more by sea as by land. Therefore, I have assumed sea travel whenever it was feasible and measured distances along the commonly used routes. First, I sketched the route from Jerusalem to a given city on a map. Then,

I used a map meter to measure the distance—this makes it easy to follow curves and turn corners. Each measurement was made several times. And the final measurement was then converted to miles on the basis of the map’s legend. The routes themselves may be subject to modest errors, but I would not expect errors in excess of plus or minus 10 percent. In order to see the potential impact of errors of that magnitude, I created an additional mileage measure by flipping a coin and adding or subtracting 10 percent depending on whether the coin came up heads or tails. The distorted measure in fact correlated .99 with the original, and each yields identical results with other variables.

In addition to seeking to use travel distances to estimate the degree to which the way was prepared for Christians by the prior ties to Jerusalem and to Jewish culture, we can also use distance as a way to measure the degree of Romanization and the tightness of Roman control. Using the same tactics described above, I therefore measured the travel distance to each city from Rome. Finally, I created a ratio of the two sets of distances to summarize the relative weights of Roman and Jewish influence. The actual distances in miles follow. (The distance given between Athens and Rome is calculated on the assumption that the traveler’s boat did not take the portage at Corinth.)

	<i>From Jerusalem</i>	<i>From Rome</i>
Alexandria	350	1,400
Antioch	250	1,650
Apamea	280	1,600
Athens	780	1,000
Augustodunum (Autun)	1,920	525
Caesarea Maritima	60	1,575
Carthage	1,575	425
Cordova	2,440	1,225
Corinth	830	800
Damascus	130	1,600
Edessa	550	1,775
Ephesus	640	1,185
Gadir (Cadiz)	2,520	1,200
London	2,565	1,190
Mediolanum (Milan)	1,900	260
Memphis	360	1,500
Pergamum	840	1,200
Rome	1,480	0
Salamis	270	1,450
Sardis	700	1,300
Smyrna	820	1,150
Syracuse	1,100	375

In chapter 3, I stressed the importance of cultural continuity in the success of new religious movements. Specifically, people are more willing to adopt a new religion to the extent that it retains cultural continuity with conventional religion(s) with which they are already familiar. In the instance at hand, the way was paved for Christianity to the extent that people were already familiar with Jewish culture—the “God-Fearers” being an apt example. Here were people familiar with Jewish theology, who accepted the idea of monotheism, but who were unwilling to become ethnic Jews in order to fully participate in the Jewish religion. Presumably, the principle of cultural continuity as a facilitating factor in the spread of Christianity can, to some extent, be estimated by distance from Jerusalem. And table 6.2 shows an immense negative correlation between distance from Jerusalem and Christianization (-.74), which is highly statistically significant.

THE DIASPORA

In chapter 3, I argued that, in fact, the mission to the Jews was quite successful and that a steady and significant flow of Hellenized Jewish converts to Christianity probably continued into the late fourth or early fifth century. To recapitulate, my case rests on several sociological propositions. The first is cultural continuity. Not only was Christianity highly continuous with the Jewish heritage of diasporan Jews, it was also highly congruent with their Hellenic cultural elements. The second proposition is that *social movements recruit primarily on the basis of interpersonal attachments that exist, or form, between the convert and members of the group*. And who were the friends and relatives of the early Christian missionaries setting out from Jerusalem to spread their faith? The Jews of the diaspora, of course. In fact, many of the missionaries were, like Paul himself, diasporan Jews.

Even if I am wrong about how late Jewish conversion continued, everyone is agreed that Jews were the primary sources of converts until well into the second century. As Harnack put it:

The synagogues of the Diaspora... formed the most important presupposition for the rise and growth of Christian communities throughout the empire. The network of the synagogues furnished the Christian propaganda with centres and courses for its development, and in this way the mission of the new religion, which was undertaken in the name of the God of Abraham and Moses, found a sphere already prepared for itself. (1908: 1:1)

So, in addition to using distance to measure Jewish cultural influences, we ought to seek a measure of Jewish presence in cities. There simply is no good way to calculate the probable size of the Jewish population in these cities. The best substitute I could obtain is information on which of these cities are known to have had a synagogue in about 100. The data come from many of the atlases noted above and others, and from MacLennan and Kraabel (1986). The result is a dichotomous variable scoring cities with a synagogue as one, and the others as zero. The following cities received a score of one: Caesarea Maritima, Damascus, Antioch, Alexandria, Sardis, Athens, Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus. Table 6.2 shows that there is a powerful, positive correlation between synagogues and Christianization (.69). Clearly, then, Christianity took root sooner where there were Jewish communities.

	<i>Pop. 100 C.E.</i>	<i>From Jerusalem</i>	<i>Synagogues</i>	<i>From Rome</i>	<i>Romanized</i>	<i>Gnostics</i>
Christianization	.32	-.74 ^a	.69 ^a	.42 ^b	-.71 ^a	.59 ^a
Population		-.06	.41 ^b	.21	-.29	.48 ^a
Miles from Jerusalem			-.46 ^b	-.54 ^a	.68 ^a	-.49
Synagogues				.28	-.44 ^b	.41 ^b
Miles from Rome					-.84 ^a	.37
Romanized						-.43 ^b

^a Significance level: <.01.; ^b Significance level: <.05.

Now what about Roman culture and power? In the beginning Christianity did best in Greek cities and soon incurred considerable official Roman antagonism. It seems realistic to treat Roman power as a function of distance—the farther from Rome, the less the local impact of Roman policy. Once again we may simply trace the trade routes to each city from Rome and measure the distances. However, since our interest really centers on the interaction of Roman and Eastern culture and influence, we can divide the distance to Jerusalem by the distance to Rome. The higher the ratio, the greater the relative weight of Roman influence; hence this variable is identified as Romanization (Rome, of course, is excluded from this analysis). Table 6.2 shows that distance from Rome is negatively correlated (-.42) with Christianization, but the really potent effect is from Romanization (-.71). The more Roman and the less Eastern (Greek and Jewish) influence on a city's culture, the later its first church—Rome itself being the obvious exception.

Table 6.3 shows the result of entering Christianization, synagogues, and Romanization into a regression equation. Each of the independent variables displays a robust effect, and together they explain an amazing 67 percent of the variance in Christianization.

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Unstandardized Betas</i>	<i>Standardized Betas</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>T</i>
Synagogues	0.731	0.466	0.236	3.099 ^a
Romanized	-0.220	-0.499	0.077	-3.317 ^a

Multiple R-Square = 0.672; Y-Intercept = 1.374; ^a Significant beyond .001.

GNOSTICS

Not only were there many new religious movements active in the urban empire in this era, there were many Christianities. Almost from the start, factions espousing rather different views of Christ and of Scripture arose, each seeking to be *the* Christianity. Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, there has been immense interest in the groups known as the Gnostics or the Christian Gnostics (Layton 1987; Williams 1985). A map published by Layton (1987:6-7) makes it possible to create a measure of Gnostic presence similar to the measure Christianization. Cities known to have had active Gnosti groups prior to the year 200 were scored two. Those having Gnostic groups prior to the year 400 were scored one. Cities not known to have had Gnostic groups by 400 were scored zero. Those scored two were Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea Marina, Carthage, Ephesus, Pergamum, Rome, Sardis, and Smyrna. Those scored one were Apamea, Damascus, Edessa, and Memphis. The others were scored zero.

Table 6.2 shows a substantial positive correlation between Gnostics and Christianization (.59). Moreover, Gnostic presence is significantly correlated with population size, in agreement with Fischer's theory. The table also shows a significant correlation between Gnostic presence and synagogues. These findings are worth pursuing at greater length.

For the past century there has been a serious debate about the connections between Gnosticism, on the one hand, and Christianity and Judaism, on the other. Late in the nineteenth century, Harnack (1894) was content to classify the Gnostics as a Christian heresy, as an acutely Hellenized brand of Christianity. Soon thereafter, however, many scholars (e.g., Friedlander 1898) began to trace the origins of the Gnostics to Jewish roots, and to regard Christianity and Gnosticism as *parallel offshoots* of first-century Judaism. Despite the Christian content of most of the manuscripts discovered at Nag Hammadi, the debate continues, and the view that the two movements were parallel probably has more support these days than does the view that the Gnostics were primarily a competing stream within Christianity. Birger Pearson, echoing Friedlander, puts this position most forcefully: "Gnosticism is not, in its origins, a 'Christian' heresy, but . . . it is, in fact, a 'Jewish' heresy" (1973:35).

Table 6.4 Regression: Dependent Variable is Gnosticism

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Unstandardized Betas</i>	<i>Standardized Betas</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>T</i>
Christianization	0.678	0.578	0.299	2.262a
Synagogues	-0.022	-0.012	0.470	-.047
Multiple R-Square = 0.344; V-Intercept = 0.067; ^a Significant beyond .05				

If we bear that in mind, table 6.4 is of more than passing interest. Here regression analysis is used to assess the net effects of Christianization and Jewish presence on the rise of Gnosticism. The results are very conclusive—at least from the statistical point of view. When the effects of Christianization are held constant, no direct Jewish effects remain. Whereas Jewish presence has a very substantial impact on the spread of Christianity (see table 6.3), only Christianity seems to have any impact on the rise of Gnosticism. This suggests a causal order fully in keeping with Harnack's original position: that Christianity began as a Jewish heresy and its initial appeal was to Jews, but that Gnosticism began subsequently as a Christian heresy, appealing mainly to Christians (from whom it adopted its very stridently anti-Jewish content).

Such statistical evidence is not, of course, conclusive proof that Gnosticism was a Christian heresy. But it seems worth noting here that participants in this debate may well be talking past one another. As I understand the proponents of the Jewish origins of Gnosticism, their concern has been to trace the origins of some of the central mystical notions of the Gnostics to prior Jewish writers. But as sociologists understand these matters, heresy per se has little to do with the pedigree of ideas and consists primarily of the embodiment of "deviant" ideas in a *social*

movement. Put another way, writings can be heretical, but only human beings can be heretics. Moreover, the origins of ideas and of movements need not, and often are not, the same. Consider the many modern groups with spurious claims to unbroken descent from ancient pagan cults. Judged by their doctrines, their claims to be of ancient origin are true. But an examination of their “human history” reveals them to be of contemporary origins. Thus Gnostic writers could have been profoundly influenced by the writings of earlier Jewish mystics, without representing a social movement coexisting with Christianity and deriving from pre-Christian origins among Jews. Although the data in table 6.4 have no implications for the origins of Gnostic ideas, they do encourage the conclusion that Gnostic as a social movement was a Christian heresy.

CONCLUSION

Whatever the impact of table 6.4 on historical interpretations of Gnosticism, it is obvious that the other findings reported in this chapter are not going to greatly revise social histories of the rise of Christianity. Even without quantification, every competent historian has known that the Christian movement arose most rapidly in the Greco-Roman cities of Asia Minor, sustained by the very large communities of the Jewish diaspora. Indeed, the findings of greatest substantive interest are probably those lending support to Fischer’s propositions about city size and subcultural deviance.

In my judgment, the real surprises are statistical, not substantive. The magnitudes and stability of the statistical outcomes are amazing and strongly testify that a data set based on these twenty-two cities can be of great scholarly value—to the extent that we are able to identify and secure interesting variables.

It strikes me that many additional variables could be created by scholars with the proper training. It would be very interesting to build rates for these cities (and perhaps other aggregate units) based on the immense collections of inscriptions. For example, since historians are agreed that Christianity was one of many new religions to come out of the East, can we use inscriptions to estimate when and where these “Oriental cults” gained followings? In chapter 9 we will examine a variable based on when and whether the Isis cult had a temple in these cities, but many more could be coded.

Initially, I had hoped to create measures of social disorganization of these cities, especially factors that disrupt integration by reducing the strength of interpersonal attachments. It is axiomatic that conformity to the norms is the result of attachments—to the extent that we value our relationships with others, we will conform in order to retain their esteem. When people lack attachments, they have much greater freedom to deviate from the norms. In modern studies, unconventional behavior is strongly correlated with various measures of population turnover and instability. For example, where larger proportions of the U.S. and Canadian populations are newcomers or have recently moved from one residence to another, rates of participation in unconventional religious activities are high (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

I began by examining data on when and how a city was founded, or refounded, and the ethnic heterogeneity of its population. I was fascinated that both Corinth and Carthage had stood empty when Caesar decided to refound them in order to transport large numbers of Rome’s “undesirable” population. To this he added a bunch of retired legionnaires who, in turn, drew numbers of women to the city from nearby villages. Talk about Dodge City, or some other wild and wooly place. As I proceeded, however, I began to realize that *all* the cities of the empire were incredibly disorganized, even compared with rapidly growing and industrializing cities of the nineteenth century, the ones that caused early sociologists to express endless gloom and doom. What Rome had achieved was political unity at the expense of cultural chaos. No one has

captured this fact more lucidly than Ramsay MacMullen in the opening sentences of his remarkable work on paganism:

It was a proper melting pot. If we imagined the British Empire of a hundred years ago all in one piece, all of its parts touching each other, so one could travel. . . from Rangoon to Belfast without the interposition of any ocean, and if we could thus sense as one whole an almost limitless diversity of tongues, cults, traditions, and levels of education, then the true nature of the Mediterranean world in [the Roman era] ... would strike our minds. (1981:xi)

For these reasons I ceased my efforts to compare cities in terms of disorganization and shall, instead, devote the next Chapter to tracing how the acute disorganization of Greco-Roman cities in general eased the rise of Christianity.

Note. A preliminary version of this chapter appeared as “Christianizing the Urban Empire,” in *Sociological Analysis* 52 (1991): 77—88.

1. I began from the fact that both cities had been judged by Chandler and Fox as having fewer than 40,000 residents, else they would have been listed with the others. However, since each city often appears in lists of major cities for this period (cf. Grant 1970), it seems reasonable to suppose that they were not much smaller than 40,000. I found the population of Athens estimated to be 28,000 in the second century by J. C. Russell (1958) in his classic work. Because Athens was in a period of slow decline, it seemed reasonable to guess its population as a bit larger in 100. Hence my figure of 30,000. Since Salamis had an economic boom during the first century (Smith 1857), it seemed safe to estimate it as a bit larger than Athens, which is the basis of my figure of 35,000.

CHAPTER SEVEN

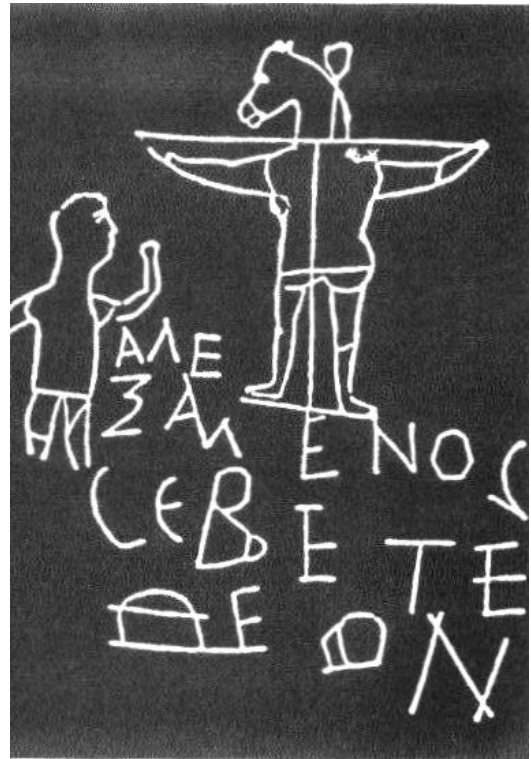
Urban Chaos and Crisis: The Case of Antioch

CHRISTIANITY was an urban movement, and the New Testament was set down by urbanites. Indeed, many scholars believe that the Gospel of Matthew was composed in Antioch—the fourth largest city of the Roman Empire at the time.

If we want to understand how the rise of Christianity was shaped by the sociocultural environment of those who first put into written words, we must comprehend the physical and social structures of the Greco-Roman city. Moreover, if we want to understand the immense popular appeal of the early church, must understand how the message of the New Testament the social relations it sustained solved acute problems afflicting Greco-Roman cities. Here too Antioch is of special interest because it was unusually receptive to the Christian movement, sustaining a relatively large and affluent Christian community quite early on (Longenecker 1985).

For these reasons, in this chapter I shall assemble some basic facts about Greco-Roman cities—with special emphasis on Antioch—in order to illuminate the physical realities of everyday life. What was it like to live there? Frankly, I was amazed to discover how difficult it is to find any answers. Even when books have titles indicating that they are about cities of the Greco Roman era, there is usually next to nothing in them about the physical environment of the city. For example, Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges's classic work *The Ancient City*, published in 1864 (and suggested to me as an exception to this claim) discusses nothing but the culture and customs of Greco-Roman times, and his title simply means that the setting was urban. The city per se could as well have been a figment of imagination, for there is not a word about streets, sewers, plumbing, water supplies, buildings, industry, markets, ethnic enclaves, crime, garbage, beggars, or any of the realities of urban life. In fact, the word "house" appears only in several passing references, and no houses are described.

Or consider a modern work with nearly the same title, *The City in the Ancient World*, by Mason Hammond (1972), published as part of the Harvard Studies in Urban History. This volume has an excellent index. Under "Roman citizenship," the index lists twenty-four page references. Entries also appear for Romulus, Trojan war, Borneo, and even Pleistocene period. But not one of the following words occurs in this index: aqueduct, bath(s), bathing, build, building, crime, death, disease, environment, epidemic, ethnic, feces, food, fuel, garbage, homes, house, housing, manure, pipes, plague, plumbing, privy, sewer, smoke, street, urine, washing, waste, or water. The omission of these index listings reflects the fact that this book too is about culture, and about political and military history, and is not about cities at all. Let me hasten to



Greco-Roman cities were covered with graffiti—this anti-Christian example (ca. 200) was found in Rome. It shows an ass-headed figure on the cross and reads, "Alexamenos worships his god".

acknowledge that John E. Stambaugh's *The Ancient Roman City* (1988) is a fine exception to this rule. Indeed, it guided me to many valuable sources from which I could document points I initially had been forced to infer on the basis of what is known to be true of premodern cities in general. Moreover, some time after I had published the essay on which this chapter is based, I came upon Jerome Carcopino's *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, the expanded English translation of which first appeared in 1940. The work is, of course, a classic. But, having no formal training in either early church or Roman history (or in any kind of history, for that matter), I have had to discover even the classics in a somewhat haphazard fashion. In any event, in Carcopino I discovered a kindred spirit who used his mastery of the ancient sources and of modern archaeology to explore even the grimy aspects of daily life.

Guided by Stambaugh and by Carcopino, and drawing on the wealth of historical demography on premodern cities in other eras, I am able to reconstruct essential features of cities within which Christianity arose—the extraordinary levels of urban disorder, social dislocation, filth, disease, misery, fear, and cultural chaos that existed. In this chapter I shall depict these cities, paying special attention to Antioch, in order to set the stage for theses to be developed in the concluding chapters—that these conditions gave Christianity the opportunity to exploit fully its immense competitive advantages vis-a-vis paganism and other religious movements of the day as a *solution* to these problems.

PHYSICAL SOURCES OF CHRONIC URBAN MISERY

The first important fact about Greco-Roman cities is that they were small, in terms of both area and population. When Antioch was founded in about 300 B.C.E., its walls enclosed slightly than one square mile, laid out along a southwest-to-northeast axis. Eventually Antioch grew to be about two miles long and about one mile wide (Finley 1977). Like many Greco-Roman cities, Antioch was small in area because it was initially walled as a fortress (Levick 1967). Once the walls were up, it was very expensive to expand.

Within so small an area, it is astonishing that the city's population was as large as it was: at the end of the first century Antioch had a total population of about 150,000 (Chandler and Fox 1974.) This population total applies to inhabitants of the city proper—those living within, or perhaps immediately against, walls. It does not apply to those living on the nearby rural states or in the various satellite communities such as Daphne (Levick 1967). Given this population and the area of the city, it is easily calculated that the population density of Antioch was roughly 75,000 inhabitants per square mile or 117 per acre. As comparison, in Chicago today there are 21 inhabitants per acre; San Francisco has 23, and New York City overall has 37. Even Manhattan Island has only 100 inhabitants per acre—and keep in mind that Manhattanites are very spread out vertically, while ancient cities crammed their populations into structures that seldom rose above five stories. In Rome, it was illegal to construct private buildings higher than 20 meters (65.6 feet). Despite these height limits, buildings in Greco-Roman cities frequently collapsed. Carcopino reported that Rome 'was constantly filled with the noise of buildings collapsing or being torn down to prevent it; and the tenants of an *insula* lived in constant expectation of its coming down on their heads' (1940:31—32). The tenements collapsed because they were too lightly built and because the less desirable upper floors housed the poor, who so subdivided them that the upper floors became heavier than the floors below, and heavier than the beams and foundations could carry. Given the frequent earthquakes in Antioch, it is unlikely that any of the tenements there were more than several stories tall; hence Antioch was probably functionally more crowded than Rome. Keep in mind too that modern New Yorkers do not share their space with livestock, nor are their streets fouled by horse and oxen traffic.

These density comparisons, striking as they are, still sharply underestimate the population crush because large areas of Greco-Roman cities were occupied by public buildings, monuments, and temples. In Pompeii this area amounted to 35 percent of the city's area (Jashemski 1979), in Ostia 43 percent was taken up in this way (Meiggs 1974), and in Rome the public-monumental sector occupied half of the city (Stambaugh 1988). If we assume that Antioch was average in this regard, we must subtract 40 percent of its area in order to calculate density. The new figure is 195 persons per acre. This is less dense than Stambaugh's (1988) estimate of 302 per acre in Rome, but it is very close to MacMullen's (1974) estimate of Rome's density as 200 inhabitants per acre. Both cities seem to have been somewhat denser than Corinth—I calculate the latter to have had about 137 persons per acre. As a comparison, the density in modern Bombay is 183 per acre, and it is 122 in Calcutta.

But even these figures fail to convey fully the crowded conditions of everyday life in these cities. As Michael White (1987) noted, many writers seem to assume that everyone lived in huge atrium houses like the ones built by MGM for *Ben-Hur* (f. Koester 1987:73); in fact, though, most people lived in tiny cubicles in multistoried tenements. Carcopino has calculated that in Rome there was "only one private house for every 26 blocks of apartments" (1940:23), and suggests that this ratio was typical of Greco-Roman cities. Within these tenements, the crowding was extreme—the tenants rarely had more than one room in which "entire families were herded together" (Carcopino 1940:44). Thus, as Stambaugh tells us, privacy was "a hard thing to find" (1988:178). Not only were people terribly crowded within these buildings, the streets were so narrow that if people leaned out their window they could chat with someone living across the Street without having to raise their voices. The famous roads leading out of Rome, such as the Via Appia or the Via Latina, were from 4.8 to 6.5 meters (or 15.7 to 21.3 feet) wide! Roman law required that the actual streets of Rome be at least 2.9 meters (9.5 feet) wide (Carcopino 1940:45-46), but many parts of the city contained only footpaths. As for Antioch, consider that its main thoroughfare, admired throughout the Greco-Roman world, was only 30 feet wide (Finley 1977).

To make matters worse, Greco-Roman tenements lacked both furnaces and fireplaces. Cooking was done over wood or charcoal braziers, which were also the only source of heat; since tenements lacked chimneys, the rooms were always smoky in winter. Because windows could be "closed" only by "hanging cloths or skins blown by rain" (Carcopino 1940:36), the tenements were sufficiently drafty to prevent frequent asphyxiation. But the drafts increased the danger of rapidly spreading fires, and "dread of fire was an obsession among rich and poor alike" (Carcopino 1940:33).

Packer (1967) doubted that people could actually spend much time in quarters so cramped and squalid. Thus he concluded that the typical residents of Greco-Roman cities spent their lives mainly in public places and that the average "domicile must have served only as a place to sleep and store possessions" (Packer 1967:87).

One thing is certain when human density is high: urgent problems of sanitation arise. However, until I discovered Carcopino's volume, I found very few activities more frustrating than attempting to discover details about such matters as sewers, plumbing, garbage disposal, or even the water supply in Greco-Roman cities. One can spend an afternoon checking the indexes of scores of histories of Greece and Rome without finding any of these words listed. The aqueducts are, of course, often mentioned, as are the public baths and the public latrines often constructed next to the baths. It is all well and good to admire the Romans for their aqueducts and their public baths, but we must not fail to see the obvious fact that the human and animal

density of ancient cities would place an incredible burden even on modern sewerage, garbage disposal, and water systems. Keep in mind too that there *was no soap*. Hence it is self-evident that, given the technological capacities of the time, the Greco-Roman city and its inhabitants must have been extremely filthy.

Consider the water supply. Aqueducts brought water to many Greco-Roman cities, but once there it was poorly kept and quite maldistributed. In most cities the water was piped to fountains and public buildings such as the baths. Some was also piped to the homes of the very rich. But for the rest of the residents, water had to be carried home in jugs. This necessarily greatly limited the use of water. There could have been very little for scrubbing floors or washing clothes. Nor could there have been much for bathing, and I very much doubt that the public baths truly served the public in the inclusive sense. Worse yet, the water often was very contaminated. In his exceptional study of Greek and Roman technology, K. D. White (1984) pointed out that whether their water came via aqueducts or from springs or wells, all of the larger Greco-Roman cities had to store water in cisterns. He also noted that “untreated water[,] ... when left stagnant, encourages the growth of algae and other organisms, rendering the water malodorous, unpalatable, and after a time, undrinkable” (1984:168). No wonder Pliny advised that “all water is the better for being boiled” (quoted in White 1984:168).

Upon closer examination, the notion that Greco-Roman cities enjoyed efficient sewers and sanitation also turns out to be largely an illusion. Granted, an underground sewer carried water from the baths of Rome through the public latrines next or and on out of the city. But what about the rest of the city? Indeed, just as it is obviously silly to suppose that the wretched issues of Rome soaked nightly in the Roman baths, hobnobbing with senators and equestrians (the capacity of the baths reveals this to be a physical as well as social absurdity), it is equally silly to think that everyone jogged off to the public latrines each time that nature called. Rome, like all cities until modern times, was dependent on chamber pots and pit latrines. Indeed, Stambaugh (1988) suggests that most tenements depended entirely on pots. As for sewers, they were, for the most part, open ditches into which slops and chamber pots were dumped. Moreover, these pots were frequently emptied out the window at night from several stories up (de Camp 1966). As Carcopino described it:

There were other poor devils who found their stairs too steep and the road to these dung pits too long, and to save themselves further trouble would empty the contents of their chamber pots from their heights into the streets. So much the worse for the passer-by who happened to intercept the unwelcome gift! Fouled and sometimes even injured, as in Juvenal’s satire, he had no redress save to lodge a complaint against the unknown assailant; many passages in the *Digest* indicate that Roman jurists did not disdain to take cognisance of this offense. (1940:42)

Given limited water and means of sanitation, and the incredible density of humans and animals, most people in Greco-Roman cities must have lived in filth beyond our imagining. Tenement cubicles were smoky, dark, often damp, and always dirty. The smell of sweat, urine, feces, and decay permeated everything; “dust, rubbish, and filth accumulated; and finally bugs ran riot” (Carcopino 1940:44). Outside, on the street, it was little better. Mud, open sewers, manure, and crowds. In fact, human corpses—adult as well as infant—were sometimes just pushed into the street and abandoned (Stambaugh 1988). And even if the wealthiest households could provide ample space and cleanliness, they could not prevent many aspects of the filth and decay surrounding them from penetrating their homes. The stench of these cities must have been overpowering for many miles—especially in warm weather—and even the richest Romans must have suffered. No wonder they were so fond of incense. Moreover, Greco-Roman cities must

have been smothered in flies, mosquitoes, and other insects that flourish where there is much stagnant water and exposed filth. And, like bad odors, insects are very democratic.

The constant companion of filth, insects, and crowding is disease. This is especially so when societies lack antibiotics or indeed, have no knowledge of germs. Here too one pages uselessly through nearly all of the books on Roman and Greek society or on the rise of Christianity, for words such as “epidemic,” “plague,” and even “disease” almost never appear. This seems incredible, for not only was the Greco-Roman world periodically struck by deadly epidemics, but illness and physical affliction were probably the dominant features of daily life in this era (Patrick 1967). For example, a recent analysis of decayed human fecal remains from a cesspit in Jerusalem found an abundance of tapeworm and whipworm eggs, which indicate the ingestion of fecally contaminated foods or... unsanitary living arrangements in which people came into contact with human excrement” (Cahill et al. 1991:69). Although being infected with either or both of these intestinal parasites is not fatal, both can cause anemia and thus make victims more vulnerable to other illness. Moreover, where such parasitic infection was nearly universal, most people also undoubtedly suffered from “other fecal-borne bacteria and protozoal diseases.

The Greco-Roman city was a pesthole of infectious disease— because it was always thus in cities. Indeed, it was not until the century that urban mortality was sufficiently reduced that the cities of western Europe and North America could sustain their populations without additional in-migration from areas (Wrigley 1969). If this was true of relatively modern cities, think what must have been the case in places like Rome and Antioch. Boak noted that the cities of the Roman Empire needed such a substantial amount of in-migration in order to offset mortality that, as the rural population declined, Roman cities must have begun to shrink (1955a:14).

In chapter 5 the high mortality rates of the empire were mentioned. Historical demographers agree that “the average lifetime of the ancients was short” (Durand 1960:365). And although there have been some disagreements among those who have attempted to estimate life expectancies from Roman tomb inscriptions (Burn 1953; Russell 1958; Durand 1960; Hopkins 1966), none challenges that life expectancy at birth was less than thirty years—and probably substantially less (Boak 1955a).

It is important to realize that where mortality rates are very high, the health of those still living is very poor. The majority of those living in Greco-Roman cities must have suffered from chronic health conditions that caused them pain and some degree of disability, and of which many would soon die. Stambaugh pointed out that, compared with modern cities, sickness was highly visible on the streets of Greco-Roman cities: “Swollen, skin rashes, and lost limbs are mentioned over and over gain in the sources as part of the urban scene” (1988:137). As Bagnall reported, in a time before photography or fingerprinting, written contracts offered descriptive information about the parties and “generally include their distinctive disfigurements, mostly scars” (1993:187). Bagnall then cited a papyrus (*P.Abinn.* 65v) that lists a number of persons owing debts, *all of* whom were scarred. Bagnall also pointed out that

ancient letter writers are obsessed with wishes for health, reports on the sender’s health, and inquiries after the health of the recipient. A modern reader might be tempted to dismiss [this] as so much polite formula... But that would be quite wrong. There are many very strong statements reproaching correspondents for not writing about their health, like “I am astonished that so far you have not written me about your health.”(1993:185)

Moreover, as we have seen, women in Greco-Roman times were especially afflicted because of chronic infections resulting from childbirth and abortion. Little wonder that healing was such a central aspect of both paganism and early Christianity (MacMullen 1981; Kee 1983, 1986).

SOCIAL CHAOS AND CHRONIC URBAN MISERY

Historians have tended to present a portrait of the Greco-Roman city as one in which most people—rich and poor alike—were descended from many generations of residents. But nothing could be further from the truth, especially during the first several centuries of the Christian era. As noted, Greco-Roman cities required a constant and substantial stream of newcomers simply to maintain their populations. As a result, at any given moment a very considerable proportion of the population consisted of *recent* newcomers—Greco-Roman cities were peopled by strangers.

It is well known that the crime rates of modern cities are highly correlated with rates of population turnover. Crime and delinquency are higher to the extent that neighborhoods or cities are filled with newcomers (Crutchfield, Geerken, and Gove 1983; Stark et al. 1983). This is because where there are large numbers of newcomers, people will be deficient in interpersonal attachments, and it is attachments that bind us to the moral order (see chapter 1). This proposition would predict that Greco-Roman cities would have been filled with crime and disorder, especially at night. And they were. As Carcopino described the situation:

Night fell over the city like the shadow of a great danger, diffused, sinister, and menacing. Everyone fled to his home, shut himself in, and barricaded the entrance. The shops fell silent, safety chains were drawn behind the leaves of the doors.... If the rich had to sally forth, they were accompanied by slaves who carried torches to light and protect them on their way... . Juvenal sighs that to go out to supper without having made your will was to expose yourself to reproach of carelessness... [W]e need only turn to the leaves of the Digest [to discover the extent to which criminals] abounded in the city. (1940:47)

Moreover, given the immense cultural diversity of the empire, the waves of newcomers to Greco-Roman cities were of very diverse origins and therefore fractured the local culture into numerous ethnic fragments. Again, Antioch offers an instructive example.

When founded by Seleucus I, the city was laid out in two primary sections—one for Syrians and one for Greeks—and, taking a realistic view of ethnic relations, the king had the two sections walled off from one another (Stambaugh and Balch 1986). According to Downey (1963), the ethnic origins of the original settlement consisted of retired soldiers from Seleucus's Macedonian army, Cretans, Cypriotes, Argives, and Herakleidae (who had previously been settled on Mount Silipius), Athenians from Atigonia, Jews from nearby Palestine (some of whom had served as mercenaries in Seleucus's army), native Syrians, and a number of slaves of diverse origins. As the city grew, its Jewish population seems to have increased markedly (Meeks and Wilken 1978). And, of course, a substantial number of Romans were added to this mixture when the city was seized by the empire in 64 B.C.E. During the days of Roman rule, the city drew an influx of Gauls, Germans, and other "barbarians," some brought as slaves, others as legionnaires. Smith estimates that the "citizens were divided into 18 tribes, distributed locally" (1857:143). I take him to mean that there were eighteen identifiable ethnic quarters within Antioch.

Ramsay MacMullen describes the Roman world in this period as "a proper melting pot" (1981:xi). But it is not clear how much melting actually went on. What does seem clear is that the social integration of Greco-Roman cities was severely disrupted by the durability of internal ethnic divisions, which typically took the form of distinctive ethnic precincts. Ethnic diversity and a constant influx of newcomers will tend to undercut social integration, thus exposing residents to a variety of harmful consequences, including high rates of deviance and disorder. Indeed, this is a major reason why Greco-Roman cities were so prone to riots.

NATURAL AND SOCIAL DISASTERS

When we examine the magnificent ruins of classical cities, we have a tendency to see them as extraordinarily durable and permanent—after all, they were built of stone and have endured the

centuries. But this is mostly an illusion. What we are usually looking at are simply the *last* ruins of a city that was turned to ruins repeatedly. And if the physical structures of Greco-Roman cities were transitory, so too were their populations; cities often were almost entirely depopulated and then repopulated, and their ethnic composition often was radically changed in the process. The renowned medical historian A. Castiglioni (1947) noted that “there were terrible epidemics which destroyed entire cities, sometimes accompanied by inundations and earthquakes, which were frequent in Italy in the first centuries of our era” (quoted in Patrick 1967:245).

These catastrophes were not limited to Italy. The cities of Asia Minor seem to have been even more afflicted by natural disasters, to say nothing of the ravages of conquest and riot. The following summary of natural and social disasters that struck Antioch is instructive and rather typical. I have not attempted a careful survey of the sources to assemble my list but depended primarily on Downey (1963). The totals are probably incomplete. Moreover, I skipped the many serious floods because they did not cause substantial loss of life. Still, the summary shows how extremely vulnerable Greco-Roman cities were to attacks, fires, earthquakes, famines, epidemics, and devastating riots. Indeed, this litany of disasters is so stag-ringing that it is difficult to grasp its human meaning.

During the course of about six hundred years of intermittent man rule, Antioch was taken by unfriendly forces eleven times and was plundered and sacked on five of these occasions. The city was also put to siege, but did not fall, two other times. In addition, Antioch burned entirely or in large part four times, three times by accident and once when the Persians carefully burned the city to the ground after picking it clean of valuables and taking the surviving population into captivity. Because the temples and many public buildings were built of stone, it is easy to forget that Greco-Roman cities consisted primarily of woodframe buildings, plastered over, that were highly flammable and tightly packed together. Severe fires were frequent, and there was no pumping equipment with which to fight them. Besides the four huge conflagrations noted above, there were many large fires set during several of the six major periods of rioting that racked the city. By a major riot I mean one resulting in substantial damage and death, as distinct from the city’s frequent riots in which only a few were killed.

Antioch probably suffered from literally hundreds of significant earthquakes during these six centuries, but eight were so severe that nearly everything was destroyed and huge numbers died. Two other quakes may have been nearly as serious. At least three killer epidemics struck the city—with mortality rates probably running above 25 percent in each. Finally, there were at least five really serious famines. That comes to forty-one natural and social catastrophes, or an average of one every fifteen years.

Why in the world did people keep going back and rebuilding? One would suppose that the earthquakes alone might have caused Antioch to be abandoned. The answer is simple. Antioch was of immense strategic importance as the key stronghold for defending the border with Persia. M. I. Finley explained:

[The] location [is] admirably suited to control the Syrian Near East. The site is at the southwest corner of the fertile Amik plain, at a point where the Orontes river (modern Nahr el ‘Asi) cuts through the mountains to the sea. Antioch stands at the focal point for communications with Palestine to the south by way of the Orontes and Jordan rivers and with the Euphrates to the east by way of Aleppo. (1977:222)

Indeed, Antioch was a fortress *controlling* the Orontes—seven bridges crossed the river, and the primary site of public buildings, including the palace and the circus, was an island surrounded by two channels of the river. As Barbara Levick explained, “the Romans thought it dangerous to leave such a site unsupervised and settled veterans there as soon as they could”

(1967:46). And wherever Rome planted such colonies, there was always a rush of civilian settlers in pursuit of economic opportunity. Thus Antioch continued to change hands and to be rebuilt and resettled again and again. Indeed, it lived on to be retaken from Islam several times by Byzantine forces and then by Crusaders.

Any accurate portrait of Antioch in New Testament times must depict a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair, and hatred. A city where the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half of the children died at birth or during infancy, and where most of the children who lived lost at least one parent before reaching maturity. A city filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms and exacerbated by a constant stream of strangers. A city so lacking in stable networks of attachments that petty incidents would prompt mob violence. A city where crime flourished and streets were dangerous at night. And, perhaps above all, a city repeatedly smashed by cataclysmic catastrophes: where a resident could expect literally to be homeless from time to time, providing that he or she was among the survivors.

People living in such circumstances must often have despaired. Surely it would not be strange for them to have concluded that the end of days drew near. And surely too they must often have longed for relief, for hope, indeed for salvation.

CONCLUSION

In this book's closing chapters I will examine how Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world. In anticipation of those discussions, let me merely suggest here that Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity (cf. Pelikan 1987:21). And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.

It must be recognized, of course, that earthquakes, fires, plagues, riots, and invasions did not first appear at the start of the Christian era. People had been enduring catastrophes for centuries without the aid of Christian theology or Christian social structures. Hence I am by no means suggesting that the misery of the ancient world caused the advent of Christianity. What I am going to argue is that once Christianity did appear, its superior capacity for meeting these chronic problems soon became evident and played a major role in its ultimate triumph.

Since Antioch suffered acutely from all of these urban problems, it was in acute need of solutions. No wonder the early Christian missionaries were so warmly received in this city. For what they brought was not simply an urban movement, but a *new culture* capable of making life in Greco-Roman cities more tolerable.

Notes A preliminary version of this chapter appeared as "Antioch as the Social Situation for Matthew's Gospel" in *Social History of the Matthean Community*, ed. David L. Balch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 189—210.

1. Max Weber thought it "highly improbable" that Christianity "could have developed as it did outside of an urban" setting (1961:1140).