The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries of the Common Era

Edited by

CLARE K. ROTHSCHILD
and JENS SCHRÖTER

Mohr Siebeck

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Acknowledgments

It is often difficult, in a project of a few years duration, to trace its foundational idea. This volume of essays is traced roughly back to the summer of 2009. Thanks to a fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, Clare K. Rothschild (Chicago) spent a few months at Humboldt University in Berlin, researching and writing a monograph on Acts under the auspice of Cilliers Breytenbach (Berlin). At that time, Jens Schröter (Berlin) had just accepted his invitation to join the faculty at Humboldt University in Berlin. One afternoon over coffee, it occurred to Jens and Clare that, with both Breytenbach and Schröter on the New Testament seminar at the Faculty of Theology, Humboldt University had positioned itself as an excellent place to pursue questions concerning early Christian history. It also occurred to us at this time that *this was nothing new*. Adolf von Harnack, whose chair is now held by Christoph Markschies, had established this very reputation for Humboldt University and the city of Berlin more generally roughly a century before by his research on the topic and his publication of the monumentally significant *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*.

Thanks to generous funding from the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Jens and Clare hosted a conference on the rise of Christianity in Summer 2010 to coincide with the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas meeting in Berlin that same year. The conference was entitled "The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries C.E." and took place at Humboldt University over a three-day period from July 23–26, 2010. The aim of the conference was to explore the longstanding conundrum of the political rise and rapid growth of Christianity, focusing on the first, second and third centuries of the Common Era. The conference brought together a highly select group of international scholars to address this question from a wide swath of intellectual perspectives – including theoretical, methodological, historical, rhetorical and socio-historical strategies. Topics begin chronologically with the mission of Paul (and its possible predecessors), continuing forward to encompass the canonical Jesus traditions, deutero-Pauline and non-canonical Jesus traditions (including canonical Acts) and other second century literary, inscriptional, and archaeological evidence. The outcome of the conference is this volume.

The manuscript was prepared at Humboldt University in Berlin by Jens Schröter and his assistants in the New Testament seminar at the Faculty of Theology. The editors wish to express their gratitude especially to Ines Luthe and Johann Konrad Schwarz who brought the essays into their final form and wrote the indexes. We also wish to thank Dr. Henning Ziebritzki at Mohr Siebeck for

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Of course, without the generous support of all participants, the conference would not have been successful and the book project would not have come to completion. We dedicate this book, therefore, to them and those like them – individuals (both professional and lay) who share our interest in the history of early Christianity and, in particular, its rapid rise and expansion in the first three centuries CE.

January 2013   Clare K. Rothschild and Jens Schröter

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The Rise and Expansion of Christianity
in the First Three Centuries of the Common Era

Clare K. Rothschild

I. Introduction

This collection of essays is the product of a symposium that took place at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin from July 23–25, 2010. The conference was coorganized by Jens Schröter (Berlin) and Clare K. Rothschild (Chicago). Cilliers Breytenbach (Berlin) also supported the congress from its inception. Breytenbach's longterm venture known as the "Topoi Project" treats a related theme and, therefore, provided a secondary impetus for the colloquium.

The aim of this conference was to explore the longstanding conundrum of the rapid growth and political rise of Christianity, focusing on the first, second, and third centuries C.E. American sociologist Rodney Stark expressed the question in this way:

> How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman Empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilization?[1]

This well-studied research topic, with a history of exploration beginning with the author of Luke-Acts and Eusebius, finds a special home in the city of Berlin as, in this city, Adolf von Harnack carried out arguably its most famous treatment at the beginning of the last century.[2] Harnack's treatment of the problem has a few prominent themes. In general, he views early Christian history as most classicists view every phase of history after classical antiquity, namely as a story of tragic decline. According to Harnack, early Christian history began in the missionary activity of contemporary Judaism. Jesus exemplified this activity by presenting a universalizing form of Judaism primarily to Jews. Paul, whose capacious Jewish universalism even spawned belief that the law was abolished in Christ, led a missionary extension of Jesus' work to (mainly) non-Jews,

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[1] R. STARK, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Harper San Francisco, 1997), 3.

[2] A. VON HARNACK, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* ([1]1902; 2 vols. Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, [2]1906, [3]1915, [4]1924); Engl. Transl. based on the second (1906) edition: *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (trans. James Moffatt; London: Williams and Norgate; New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, [[2]1908]).

complemented by (although perhaps not original to Paul) the assertion that Jesus was heavenly messiah. According to Harnack, key features of the early movement's cause were monotheism, hope, an ethic of self-control, and social welfare.[3] Persecution of these first leaders meant that suffering also became characteristic of some followers.[4] Most of these elements were common to Judaism and other contemporary "religious" and philosophical movements. What led to Christianity's rapid growth, according to Harnack, was its deliberate syncretism and, at the same time, simplicity. These two traits, packaged together, were able to spread quickly through the culturally and politically homogeneous Roman Empire.[5]

Today, if not wholly discredited, most scholars view Harnack's solution as unsatisfactory. While its "scientific" approach is still frequently endorsed, questions have been raised about a number of different issues. One important question concerns reliance on the New Testament as "witness" to the earliest phase of Christianity. Likewise, "syncretism" – a popular concept in late 19th-century New Testament Studies – is considered too general a concept for interpreting Christian texts today. Syncretism also mistakenly implies that Christians absorbed ideas indiscriminately for the purpose of expansion, when the sources tell a different story. Finally, Harnack's claim about the "simplicity" of the Christian message and movement is unveiled as a pious alternative (albeit *liberal* pious alternative) to the message and movement's rational dismissal by other contemporary German Liberals (traced to European Enlightenment intellectuals). Nevertheless, most would acknowledge that it remains important to return to Harnack today because he changed the discussion: making undeniable advances over older even more problematic models. The questions Harnack added to the discussion persist today.

In the past thirty years, scholars such as Ramsey MacMullen and Rodney Stark have taken up some of Harnack's questions, invigorating the pursuit of an explanation for Christianity's rapid expansion. MacMullen, an historian of the Roman Empire, working from outside the field of New Testament and Early Christian Studies, argues that early Christian growth was a response to mass conversions based on missionary appeals to the miraculous.[6] Likewise, Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion, argues from outside the field that Christianity prospered by promoting a more "secure" way of life (e.g., encouraging marriage and sexual

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[3] W. Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, Vol. 2 "From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann" (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 128.

[4] See J.A. Kelhoffer, *Persecution, Persuasion and Power: Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration of Legitimacy in the New Testament* (WUNT 270; Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

[5] Baird, *History* (see note 3), 2:128–29.

[6] R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100–400* (New Haven / London: Yale University, 1984).

norms while discouraging abortion, birth control, and homosexual sex).[7] Although both MacMullen and Stark offer innovative solutions to the questions, their answers are ultimately unpersuasive, in large part for the uncomfortable fit of New Testament 'data' in case study models from their other fields. Moreover, these approaches failed to move beyond Harnack's in their credulity about the historical trustworthiness of early Christian texts. MacMullen and Stark progress past syncretism and simplicity, by offering concrete explanations for the social phenomena observed. Yet crucially important theological and rhetorical aspects of New Testament writings are largely overlooked in these studies. This point is important because the theological and rhetorical traits of early Christian texts stymie – perhaps deliberately – attempts to systematically process their content historically, sociologically, or even philosophically.

The following three approaches exemplify helpful advances on these problematic textual traits. First, Jonathan Z. Smith's reference to "myth as a self-conscious category mistake" suggests that New Testament writers intentionally cast theological and/or mythic records as "history" – or conversely, history as myth – in order to obtain for early Christianity the type of narrative necessary to a successful, expanding "religious" movement.[8] Scholars working in this area explore hybridity of generic categories, ideas, and more, in their quest to understand the development of the early Christian movement. Second, close comparison of ancient and modern accounts of Christian origins on the points of sources, critical questions, basic assumptions, and perspectives – with close attention to rhetorical commonplaces (e.g., encomium, invective) – suggest that both represent "grand" or "master narratives" (Lyotard) spun according to a predetermined "rise and expansion" disposition or rubric, irrespective of realia. Scholars endorsing such assumptions argue that data subsequently culled from these texts as "sources" are rhetorical and thereby resist positivistic analyses. As such, the data are understood as a permanent impasse to progress on the "expansion" conundrum. At the same time, a third group of historians is not so quick to abandon history. They focus on archaeological evidence by employing the expertise of, as in the case of the Topoi project, scholars like Stephen Mitchell (Exeter) who aid in the correlation of ancient texts and ancient space.

To be sure, countless permutations of these and other new, innovative approaches exist today. If the most persuasive approaches share a theme, it is methodological rigor together with a shared conviction in the dearth and fragility of the evidence. Perhaps, also, scholars representing these approaches possess certainty that Christianity's rise and expansion was the result of no single phenomenon. Rather Christianity emerged from a unique blend of diverse

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[7] Stark, *Rise of Christianity* (see note 1), 95–128.

[8] J.Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993), 206.

characters and events, not least in importance, its literary output. Stark points out in the beginning of his book that the Edict of Milan was not Constantine's initiative but his "*response*" to a "major political force".[9] Over the course of our three-day congress in Berlin, the group of international experts, representing a wide variety of niches within the field of Early Christian Studies, attempted to hold together the following two central questions: what types of phenomena contributed to this force and what can be known about these phenomena given the challenging nature of the sources. We leave it up to our readers to judge the fruits of this labor.

II. Essays

The essays in the volume are collected under three major subheadings: "I. Cultural Milieu"; "II. First Century Developments from Galilee to Asia Minor"; and, "III. The Formation of Christian Identity according to 'Apocryphal Writings,' 'Gnosticism,' and Paganism." James Carleton Paget (Cambridge University) and William Horbury (Cambridge University) wrote the two essays in the first section ("I. Cultural Milieu"). Carleton Paget's piece treats the extent to which Christian missionary activity can be seen as the continuation of a practice evidenced amongst Jews, or whether such activity is to be regarded as unique in the history of ancient religion and culture, arising from specific and distinctive characteristics within Christianity. Carleton Paget carefully problematizes what "missionary activity" was, offering a nuanced definition, avoiding pitfalls of previous approaches. William C. Horbury succinctly reviews evidence for the origin of the Christian church in Africa, including possible Jewish origins.

Essays in the volume's second section, "II. First Century Developments" are themselves distributed under the following three subheadings: (1) Jesus and the Gospels, (2) Paul, and (3) Other Trajectories. Thinking of specific locational developments, essays on "Jesus and the Gospels" commence with a piece by Jürgen Zangenberg (Universiteit Leiden). In this essay, Zangenberg reassesses what little evidence is left concerning early phases of Christianity in the city and region of Galilee. He argues that the history of traditions falls into four basic phases: Phase *1*, no information; Phase *2*, movement connected with Judaism (late first and early second century); Phase *3*, growing interest from outside and growing internal diversity (late second through early fourth century); and Phase *4,* consolidation of Christian communities through the Edict of Galerius and a subsequent period of transformation into the "Holy Land" (beginning with the Constantinian dynasty). Thomas Söding (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) who seeks to understand the relationship between the pre- and post-Easter missions in the

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[9] *Rise of Christianity,* 2, emphasis original.

Gospel of Mark. After Söding's essay a careful examination of the Gospel of Matthew by Matthias Konradt (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg) argues that Matthew presents a *universal church* that began with Abraham and establishes the only legitimate moral heritage of the theological traditions of Israel. As such, Konradt concludes, Matthew's primarily Jewish Christian community paves the way for expansion among Gentiles some time after 70 C.E.

The section on Paul begins with an essay by Wayne A. Meeks (Yale University). Seeking to understand the precise rhetorical force of Paul's geographical notes in Paul's Letter to the Romans, Meeks considers what mental map Paul might have imagined when writing and what mental map he might have wanted his audience to take away from their hearing of this letter. Next, James D.G. Dunn (Durham University) inquires into the expansion of Christianity beyond Judaism, asking how necessary or inevitable it was that Christianity should expand, becoming, within only a few generations, predominantly Gentile. Dunn also inquires as to whether expansion was the result of just a few dedicated and inspired individuals (such as Paul) *and* whether there was something in what became "Christianity" which could not find sufficient expression as long as believers-in-Jesus remained a sect of Second Temple Judaism. Following Dunn, Michael Wolter (Bonn) discusses the extent to which Paul's letters adopt prior 'Christian' ideas and reflect their ethos. Wolter's essay investigates theological continuity and discontinuity between traditions associated with Jesus and Paul, asking, for example, whether it is more likely that Paul deliberately intended to invent something different from his received traditions or whether he strove to build upon what he had inherited.

The final part of section two, "Other Trajectories" offers a wide range of essays on the rise and expansion of early Christianity. The section opens with an essay by Jörg Frey (Universität Zürich). Frey's study contributes to the current trend of studies pursuing the significance of Ephesus for the figures and legacies of John and Paul. Frey covers evidence of "churches" or church circles, as well as "separation processes" between church circles and local synagogues during the late first century in and around the contested city of Ephesus. Frey's essay is followed Clare K. Rothschild's examination of what names in the Acts of the Apostles suggest about the movement's early spread. Rothschild argues that etymological word plays on names in the Acts of the Apostles are more extensive than previously imagined, cumulatively suggesting that one purpose of Acts was to impart to Christianity a prosopography. The third essay in this subsection by Jan Dochhorn (Aarhus Universitet) has, like Zangenberg's essay (see above) a geographical focus. It considers, apart from the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2:1–3:22), what the Johannine Apocalypse really has to do with the province of Asia.

The volume's third and final section, "III. The Formation of Christian Identity according to 'Apocryphal Writings,' 'Gnosticism,' and Paganism" begins

with a piece by Enno Edzard Popkes (Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel) in which Popkes views the ancient Christian Apocrypha as a mirror for the early Christian identity formation process. Observations, particularly on canonical and extra canonical attitudes to the consumption of meat sacrificed to idols indicate to Popkes that Paul's attitude would not necessarily have facilitated intercultural exchange and, thereby, the movement's growth and development. Richard I. Pervo (Minneapolis) offers a discussion of itinerants and householders in the *Acts of Paul*, arguing that the text bestows a privileged status upon itinerants committing radically to the movement. As such, this text demonstrates that these values remained vital in Asia Minor in the middle of the second century. Janet Spittler (Texas Christian University) argues that the promise in Acts 1:8 that the apostles go to "the ends of the earth" is brought to narrative fruition in depictions of journeys to far-off locales in the *Acts of Thomas* and the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, whereas Trevor W. Thompson (Abilene Christian University) focuses on potential connections between John and Paul in the *Acts of John*, analyzing the intertextuality of Paul's undisputed letters and the *Acts* and postulating that results suggest as also Frey's essay above, a competition of Pauline and Johannine traditions in Ephesus. Candida R. Moss (University of Notre Dame) reconsiders models for spread of the specific ideology of Christian martyrdom with respect to a presumed privileged role of the Martyrdom of Polycarp. Moss examines evidence for the emergence of the concept of martyrdom, testing the assumption that *Mart. Pol.* started it all. Ismo Dunderberg (University of Helsinki) also undertakes a study of Christian martyrdom, concentrating, however, on so-called "Gnostic" martyrs. Dunderberg contests that martyrdom is one of the issues for which binary opposition between "gnosticism" and other varieties of Christianity is both unfruitful and historically misleading. Although evidence shows that "gnostics" also suffered persecution, Dunderberg argues that orthodoxy's relegation of them to the movement's periphery meant that, different from the persecuted orthodox, the "gnostic" persecuted did not garner a commensurate respect. Karen King (Harvard Divinity School) treats the theme of rise and expansion of early Christianity from the perspective of three second- and third-century texts that each acknowledge the necessity of gospel preaching: *The Epistle of Peter to Philip*, *The Apocryphon of James*, and *The Gospel of Mary*. From these texts, King demonstrates that the Christians who composed and read them held two fundamental beliefs: universal truth of their doctrines and the need to missionize. These works should not, therefore, be understood in contexts of intra-Christian controversies *against* orthodox texts, but on the side of orthodoxy in a battle against potential persecutors. The last essay by Jörg Ulrich (Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle-Wittenberg) surveys the encounter between Christians and pagans in the third century by which time Christian mission revolved around individual teachers and communities. The fact that, despite the persecutions of Decius and

Valerian, Christianity continued to spread during this time demonstrates, on Ulrich's argument, that certain prior choices proved sustainable. Ulrich makes the case, however, that ultimately it was Christianity's multilayered and complex encounter with paganism in the third century that guaranteed its rise and expansion was irreversible.

I. Cultural Milieu

Hellenistic and Early Roman Period Jewish Missionary Efforts in the Diaspora

James Carleton Paget

A volume on the expansion and spread of Christianity in the first three centuries appropriately begins with a discussion of Judaism. After all, Christianity emphatically began as a Jewish movement, and only gradually, through complex and disputed processes, manifested with varying consequences at different places and at different times, became something separate and distinct. Such processes are not the direct concern of this contribution, though it is taken up with a subject which, in a variety of ways, impinges upon what is often referred to, contentiously, as the parting of the ways.[1]

The extent to which Christian missionary activity can be seen as the continuation of a practice evidenced amongst Jews, or whether such activity is to be regarded as something *sui generis*, even a *novum* in the history of ancient religion and culture,[2] arising from specific and distinctive characteristics within Christianity, has elicited much debate and very different answers.[3] In part this arises from the nature of the evidence available, fragmentary, tendentious and often ambiguous; and in part from the question of how we define the terms "mission" and "missionary". Inevitably our answer to this latter question will be strongly determinative of the answer we give to the wider question of the origins of Christian ideas of mission. As we shall see, definitions have varied greatly.

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[1] For difficulties with this term and the type of model of separation it implies see J.M. Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek: Constructing Early Christianity* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 11–29; and A.D.H. Becker/A.Y. Reed, *The Ways That Never Parted* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), esp. 1–33.

[2] See, among others, J.L. North, "The development of religious pluralism," in *Jews among Pagans and Christians* (eds. J. Lieu, J.L. North, and T. Rajak; London: Routledge, 1992), 174–93, esp. 190; M. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and S. Schwartz, "Roman Historians and the Rise of Christianity: the School of Edward Gibbon," in *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries* (ed. W.V. Harris; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 145–60, esp. 160.

[3] For an account of the debate see R. Riesner, "A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission?," in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles* (ed. J. Adna and H. Kvalbein; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 211–50, esp. 212–20. In broad terms the assumption well into the twentieth century appears to have been, with some exceptions, that there was something called a Jewish mission, but since the early 1990s the pendulum has begun to swing in the opposite direction. See also J. Carleton Paget, "Jewish Proselytism at the time of Christian Origins: Chimera or Reality?," in *Jews, Christians and Jewish Christians in Antiquity* (ed. idem; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 149–84, esp. 149–50.

But why might our answer to this question be of any importance? Does it matter if we can determine that Christian missionary zeal was continuous with a phenomenon present amongst Jews or not? Would it not be better simply to agree that Christianity adopted a missionary stance, for whatever reason, and explore the ways in which it gave voice to such a position both theoretically and practically? At a number of levels, I would contend that it does matter. First, as we have implied in our opening paragraph, the earliest Christians were Jews, and Jews who, insofar as we can tell, wished to present their actions and opinions as a fulfillment of what they thought was God's revealed truth in the scriptures. The extent to which their activity as missionaries was or was not continuous with a known Jewish practice may well provide us with a partial explanation of why it was that those who were called Christians came to be seen as distinct and different from the Jewish *ethnos*.

Secondly, how we answer this question may to some degree influence the way we perceive the differences between Judaism and Christianity. So Martin Goodman has noted that if we declare that Christian missionary activity has a precedent amongst Jews, that there was something we could term a Jewish mission to the Gentile world, then questions are immediately raised about why it was that Christianity apparently succeeded where Judaism did not, encouraging a kind of comparative study which, by implication, Goodman deems invidious.[4] Goodman's concerns find some support in the history of the discussion of the subject. So, for instance, Adolf von Harnack, in the work after which this present volume is named, was clear that the presupposition of Christian missionary work lay not only in the presence of Jews throughout the Roman Empire but also in Jewish engagement with the outside world, not least seen in its tendency towards missionary activity.[5] Harnack was also clear, however, that Christianity succeeded where Judaism failed because of the latter's decision to cast aside the nationalist tendencies of Jewish missionary work, seen in part in the insistence by Jews that Gentiles entering the Jewish community should observe distinctive Jewish laws.[6] In such a narrative, then, Christians succeed where Jews fail because Christians

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[4] Goodman, *Mission* (see note 2), 8.

[5] See the English trans. of A. von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1908), 1:1 f. Note esp. 15 f. where Harnack lists the debts Christians owed Jews with regard to their missionary activity. He concludes by noting that "(t)he amount of the debt is so large, that one might venture to claim the Christian mission as a continuation of the Jewish propaganda." He saw this missionary zeal and striving towards a form of universalism as evidenced mainly in the Greek diaspora and as diminishing after 70 CE.

[6] Ibid., 13, where Harnack specifically mentions what he thinks is the Jewish failure to accord the proselyte equal status. He continues: "The religion which repairs this omission will drive Judaism from the field. When it proclaims this message in its fullness that the last will be first, that freedom from the law is the normal and higher life, and that the observance of the Law, even at its best, is a thing to be tolerated and no more, it will win thousands where the previous missionary preaching won but hundreds."

adopt a more universalist stance. Harnack's thesis, while reflecting a certain type of Christian prejudice about ancient Judaism, gives voice to an essentially militaristic model of religious competition in the ancient world which has come under sharp criticism in recent times.[7] And variants on this type of approach can be found in many other places, not least in the discussion of the so-called Jewish God-fearers and the explanation for their apparent (possibly assumed) attraction to Christianity over against Judaism.[8] Its adoption need not, of course, lead to the types of value judgments we find in works like that of Harnack[9] (indeed, as Goodman himself notes, the view that Judaism had no missionary zeal can lead to precisely the same judgments as can sometimes emerge from assuming a type of competition[10]), but it is important to realize that there may be consequences to answering this question in one way rather than another.

A third reason for regarding an answer to this question as important is that a denial that Jews engaged in anything called a mission will probably lead us, given that we deny the existence of such a thing among those who came to be called pagans, to argue that Christians introduced something new into the social and religious environment of the ancient world, and may lead to the view that it was precisely the intrusion of this previously unwitnessed idea of religious propaganda which accounts for Christianity's success. Again Goodman has taken precisely this view but so have others.[11]

Some may think that all I have written above inadvertently reveals a central problem in the discussion of this subject, namely that I have seen its importance almost completely in terms of the way it relates to the emergence of Christian mission. Answer the question in one way and we arrive at one set of judgments about Christianity; answer it in another and we arrive at a different set of obser-

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[7] For a critique of the competitive (or conflict) model of religious interaction in the ancient world, see J. Lieu / J. L. North / T. Rajak, eds., "Introduction" in *Jews among Pagans and Christians* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1–8. I shall return to the question of other models and their value later in the contribution.

[8] See Lieu, *Neither Jew* (see note 1), 31–48, for an account of the debate about God-fearers and their apparent attraction to Christianity.

[9] See, for instance, M. Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relationship between Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London: The Littman Library, 1986), who adopts a strongly competitive notion of Jewish and Christian interaction, but without making judgments about why Christianity appeared to be more successful than Judaism. Interestingly, in the context of the present discussion, Simon's book was an attempt to undermine Harnack's claim that relations between Jews and Christians from the second century onwards did not, with a few exceptions, exist.

[10] See Goodman, *Mission* (see note 2), 8–9, here criticizing what he takes to be Martin Hengel's apparent assumption, found in the English trans. of M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine in the Early Hellenistic Period* (2 vols.; London: SCM Press, 1974), 313, that Judaism's nationalist tendencies prevented it from being universalist and so proselytizing. This, according to Goodman, smacks of a blatantly Christianizing approach and assumes too easily that a universalizing religion necessarily missionizes.

[11] See North, "Development" (see note 2), 191–92.

vations about the same. This is, of course, to reveal a central difficulty in the way the subject has been discussed, normally as a kind of prelude to a discussion of Christian mission and this has had the effect of overshadowing the debate and in some senses Christianizing it.[12] The subject of Jewish missionary efforts or Jewish proselytizing or Jewish religious propaganda, or however we express it, should be discussed in terms of itself and not with some supposed *telos* in mind, namely Christian mission, however conceived.[13] In part I have sought to couch the questions of the subject's importance in the way I have because of the concerns of the volume in which it appears, namely the mission and expansion of the Christian church. I hope, however, that the way I approach the question of the existence or not of something called a Jewish mission will not be deemed distorting because too Christianizing in its orientation, whatever that might mean. The very real nature of such concerns mean that it is best to start with the vexed question of definition for it is often in relation to this question that the difficulty of the Christianization of the discussion has been located.

1. The Problem of Definition

It has been one of the virtues of some recent work concerned with discussing evidence for Jewish mission to engage closely with the question of definition. Scot McKnight, for instance, asserts that a missionary religion is one …

"… that self-consciously defines itself as a religion, one aspect of whose 'self-definition' is a mission to the rest of the world, or at least a large portion of that world. This religion at the same time practices its mission through behaviour that intends to evangelize nonmembers so that these nonmembers will convert to that religion."[14]

Martin Goodman's definition is similarly strong, emphasizing the universal character of the mission, the fact that members of the missionary religion are members of a defined group, that they should approve of those within their number who seek to encourage outsiders not only to change their way of life, but also to

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[12] In this respect note the title of M. FRIEDLÄNDER, *Geschichte der jüdischen Apologetik als Vorgeschichte des Christentums: Philo und Josephus als Apologeten des Judentums* (Zurich: Schmidt, 1903); and F.M. DERWACTER, *Preparing the Way for Paul: The Proselytic Movement in Later Judaism* (New York: Macmillan, 1930).

[13] T.L. DONALDSON, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 5–6, for a recent discussion of this matter. He notes not only how the view that Christianity as a missionary religion *par excellence* has unduly influenced the debate, but also how differing cultural assumptions about mission have had their affect on the debate as well, here picking up on a point made by E. WILL/C. ORRIEUX, *Prosélytisme juif?: Histoire d'une erreur* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1992).

[14] S. MCKNIGHT, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 4–5.

be incorporated within their group.[15] But Goodman also brings to the table a distinction between what he terms "proselytic mission" (that is, the form of mission defined in the previous sentence), and three other types of mission, termed by him informative (marked by a desire to inform people of a general message without necessarily wanting to change their behaviour), educational (marked by a desire to change the moral behaviour of individuals without seeking to make them a member of a particular group), and apologetic (marked by a desire to impress upon its audience the power of a particular deity without causing people to worship that deity).[16] Goodman's laudable attempt to distinguish between different types of mission has come under attack from those who would wish to understand what Goodman deems a proselytic mission somewhat less strongly. So, for instance, the present author has argued that Goodman too easily distinguishes between the types of mission he has described and has argued that there is a more complex relationship between these categories than Goodman will allow. Taking up a suggestion of John Barclay, he has contended that social reality is better represented by a sliding-scale:

"Jews wanted Gentiles to understand their practices; that required that Gentiles learn to appreciate, respect and tolerate them; and if Jews portrayed their practices and beliefs as simply the best, it was inevitable, and not unwelcome that Gentiles slipped from the worse to the better."[17]

While it is true that there was variation in how consciously and intentionally Jews moved to the proselytizing end of the scale, one should not represent that as a wholly different mind-set from other elements on this scale.[18] Out of this the present author has sought to construct a less strong definition in which a 'missionary religion' is one which by a "variety of ways makes it clear that conversion to that religion is a desirable thing." Such a definition has in turn been criticized for being too vague. Rainer Riesner, for instance, has insisted that intentionality and activity must be a part of any definition and comes to an alto-

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[15] Goodman, *Mission* (see note 2), 3–5.

[16] Ibid., 4.

[17] Carleton Paget, "Jewish Proselytism" (see note 3), 159; and J.M. Barclay, *Flavius Josephus. Translation and Commentary X: Against Apion. Commentary and Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 147.

[18] See Carleton Paget, "Jewish Proselytism" (see note 3), 159. For further comments on this see J.M. Barclay, "Apologetics in the Jewish Diaspora," in *Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Cities* (ed. J.R. Bartlett; London/New York: Routledge, 1993), 129–48, esp. 147–48, and Donaldson, *Judaism* (see note 13), 483, who notes that conversion was often the endpoint of a process, though he does not discuss this issue in the context of a definition of the term. Relevant to this matter might be the relationship between so-called God-fearers (on which see below) and proselytes. To some the distinction might have been clear, but to others converts might have simply shown a more complete commitment to Judaism than others. Hence the comment about the Roman soldier, Metilius, at Jos., *B.J.* 2.454, that he was going to Judaize as far as circumcision. On this see Barclay, "Apologetics" (see note 18), 146–47.

gether more negative view about Judaism's proselytic character.[19] Responding to Riesner, Dickson, while applauding the former's insistence upon intentionality, has emphasized that this should not lead one to think that the term 'missionary' can only be applied if conversion is the directly intended result. "We must", he argues, "allow for a continuum of mission wherein some activities are merely *oriented* towards conversion."[20] For him mission ought to be defined as the range of activities by which members of a religious community desirous of the conversion of outsiders seek to promote their religion to non-adherents,[21] once again broadening the term's potential meaning.

The paragraph above, then, gives a sense of the contested nature of the debate. For some stronger definitions need to be used, and clear distinctions made between different categories of mission; for others it is thought that a more nuanced definition, in which apparently crude distinctions between different types of missions is discarded and a greater sense of the varieties of ways in which a supposed missionary consciousness can be expressed entertained. There is often a direct correlation between the nuanced character of the definition and the degree to which Judaism is conceived as having a missionary character. That is not to say that those who adopt a less strong definition would deny that the evidence adduced in favour of a mission in the stronger sense of Goodman, for instance, is discounted. Rather, in making their case they wish to include evidence of a more general kind, evidence, which, using Dickson's term, implies "mission commitment".

How, then, ought we to proceed? I think that we should begin by accepting the idea that mission is a term which can incorporate a range of meanings and that while distinguishing between different types of mission can be helpful in making one aware of the complexity of the term, such a procedure can be simplistic in the type of distinctions it seeks to impose. But while such a set of observations questions the validity of the distinction that Goodman and others would draw between, let us say, apologetic and proselytic mission, it also cuts the other way in that it makes clear how difficult it is to move to an assertion about mission intent, or put another way, of showing that a concern with gaining Gentile support or even in interesting Gentiles in Judaism is part of a process with its intended end

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[19] Riesner, "Jewish Mission" (see note 3), 222–223. His definition reads: "a missionary religion intends to win converts, and this is accomplished actively by at least some of its members." Intention is also a part of Bird's definition in which he speaks of "a diverse array of activities that consciously attempts to draw, recruit, or persuade persons into conversion consisting of ideological, axiological and social transformation" (M.F. Bird, *Crossing over Sea and Land: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010]), 43.

[20] J.P. Dickson, *Mission Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2003), 10. Dickson goes on, in his discussion of Paul, to distinguish between those for whom missionizing is a designated duty / undertaking, and others whose general behaviour helps promote the good name, and so the missionary profile, of the movement.

[21] Ibid., 10.

as conversion, a concept, which as we will show, may have been perceived differently by different Jews. Even a term like "mission commitment" still assumes that we are in a position to discern intention in relation to activities or texts whose intention is not all that easy to discern, and will, more often than not, be bound up with the kind of conclusions an individual interpreter or exegete is trying to arrive at.

Related to this point is the role of conjecture. So, for instance, different scholars will interpret different texts or even phenomena which have been seen as significant for the discussion of mission in contradictory ways. So, for Goodman, for instance, the fact of the existence of God-fearers as a possible category of sympathetic Gentile is proof that Judaism is not a proselytic religion for if Jews encouraged individuals to sympathize, they were obviously less than keen on the idea of full conversion.[22] Others, however, can argue on the basis of the same evidence that the presence of God-fearers is precisely a manifestation of Jewish openness, the creation of a staging post on the way to full conversion.[23] Another example might be the existence of texts which point to the redemption or salvation of Gentiles at the endtime. For one group of scholars the fact that such an event is only predicted in the future and as one initiated by the actions of God is proof that the hope for such redemption or changes is firmly in the god-dictated eschatological future, and so therefore cannot be taken as evidence of a proselytic mindset;[24] but for another group the very fact of the existence of such a hope or aspiration is proof of an overarching concern for Gentile conversion.[25] And one could go on.

Emerging out of this might then be said to be the problematic issue of the role of intentionality, or perhaps degrees of intentionality, in any definition of mission. If we accept, as I think we should, the argument that we cannot make cast-iron distinctions between different types of mission and should in fact see matters along a continuum with conversion as its endpoint, we still need to be able to get closer to discerning when it is that we are witness to a process with its *intended* endpoint as conversion. And yet that might be deemed very difficult. The argument about continua complicates matters, correctly, but brings us no closer to a workable definition. The acceptance, for instance, of a definition like that of Dickson which describes mission "as the range of activities by which members of a religious community desirous of the conversion of outsiders seek to promote their religion to non-adherents",[26] might be said to set a condition

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[22] Goodman, *Mission* (see note 2), 88.

[23] Carleton Paget, "Jewish Proselytism" (see note 3), 172–73. See our comments on this matter below.

[24] See P. Fredriksen, "What 'Parting of the Ways'? Jews, Gentiles, and the Ancient Mediterranean City," in *Ways* (eds. Becker / Reed [see note 1], 2003), 35–64, esp. 54–5.

[25] See Dickson, *Mission Commitment* (see note 20), 15–24.

[26] Ibid., 10.

that is difficult to fulfill, for the phrase "community desirous of the conversion of others" and the word "promote", raise questions about the discernment of intentionality.[27] And yet intentionality may be thought to be the quality for which we are searching, however elusive.

One further point needs to be made. Too often we have a view of mission influenced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century models, of an official, organized, trans-focal mission carried out by persons chosen for the task. And yet when we look, for instance at the evidence for early Christianity we struggle to find much evidence of such a thing, even in the work of St. Paul. This point, developed at the end of this contribution,[28] means that we have to take seriously the probability that mission did not manifest itself in the ways we tend to expect, that it operated often below ground, through networks of associates, families, and even chance meetings. Any definition of mission has to accommodate this point.

So what to conclude? I would still adhere to my previous view that a missionary religion is one that makes it clear in a variety of ways that conversion to it is a desirable thing. I would agree, however, with those critics who found such a definition too vague because it failed to take sufficient account of an intention to convert. But in accepting the importance of intention as a feature of any definition, I would want to make clear the difficulty of discerning such a quality in the evidence available to us, a proviso which need not be taken to indicate an *a priori* skepticism about its presence, simply difficulty in detecting it, a point made clearer by the fact that mission did not always operate in the way moderns expect it to.

2. The Existence of Proselytes

Of the existence of proselytes within Judaism, there need be no doubt. References to such individuals occur in a range of evidence, both Jewish, pagan and Christian and from a range of periods,[29] in literary texts as well as inscriptions.[30] The term proselyte as a technical term for convert, as opposed to a translation of the Hebrew *ger*, a term which in the Pentateuch is best understood as resident alien,

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[27] For a similar criticism of Dickson, see Bird, *Crossing over* (see note 19), 20, who argues that such a definition does not distinguish sufficiently between different types of activity ranging from inducing positive sympathy to urging God-fearers to go the final yard and become proselytes. See also ibid., 120–21.

[28] See pp. 46 f. below.

[29] Much of the relevant evidence is discussed below.

[30] For a selection of such inscriptions from the city of Rome see D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe II: The City of Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), insc. nos. 62, 216, 224, 491, 577. All relevant inscriptions referring to the proselytic identity of individuals are gathered together in Donaldson, *Judaism* (see note 13), 436 f. with bibliography and commentary.

and not as convert,[31] occurs relatively infrequently in ancient texts,[32] and it is unclear when the term began to be used as a *terminus technicus* for a convert to Judaism.[33] Philo prefers the term *epēlus*, Josephus never uses the term at all, and there are other words used to describe the process of conversion, many of which pick up on the idea of being added to the community.[34] When the term proselyte is used, it is normally without explanation, implying that its use required no comment.

Before considering the wider question of how it was that proselytes came to convert, it is necessary to consider their status. First, it is clear that some Jews welcomed their presence. So Philo in a number of striking passages urges that proselytes should be treated well as they had given up almost all aspects of their previous life to become members of the Jewish community.[35] Josephus similarly implies that they should be welcomed (Jos., *C. Ap.* 2.209–10), as does the Thirteenth Benediction of the *Amidah* where the righteous proselyte is blessed; and Tacitus, in a harshly polemical account of the Jews, also implies that proselytes are welcomed into the community (Tac., *Hist.* 5.5.2).[36] On the other hand, inscriptions and other evidence could be taken to indicate that a proselyte was always or often identified as such and this has been taken by some, in combination with other evidence, to indicate that proselytes did not enjoy a status similar

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[31] See S.J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness. Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1999), 120–23, who argues that the biblical texts dealing with *gerim* do not justify the idea that they were full members of the Jewish community in the way one might conceive a proselyte of being, though some have wanted to argue that the 77 times the term does translate *ger*, the latter term usually carries some religious implication (see P.F. Stuehrenberg, "Proselyte," *ABD* 5 (1991): 503–05, esp. 503). For further discussion see Donaldson, *Judaism* (see note 13), 484–86. *Ger* does appear at Qumran and in inscriptions (see CIJ II.1390 found on the Mount of Olives and the reference to "Judah the proselyte" at the tombs of Akaldema; see A.G. Avni / Z. Greenhut, eds., *The Akeldama Tombs: Three Burial Caves in the Kidron Valley, Jerusalem* (IAAR 1; Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 1996), 66), to refer to proselyte, that is, convert.

[32] The term appears twice in the Apocrypha (Tob 1:8; Sir 10:22), six times in Philo, and four times in the New Testament (Matt 23:15; and Acts 2:11; 6:5; 13:43) and a number of times in inscriptions. See Donaldson, *Judaism* (see note 13), 486.

[33] A recently published inscription (P Duke. Inv. 727. For the text see C.J. Butera / D.M. Moffitt, "P.Duk. inv. 727: A Dispute with 'Proselytes' in Egypt," *ZPE* 177 (2011): 201–206), dated between the middle and late third century BC, uses the word *proselytos* (the only extant papyrus so to do) to mean an immigrant or newcomer with no religious connotation at all. It is our earliest example of the use of the word outside the Septuagint and one roughly contemporaneous with the origins of the translation. It certainly calls into question the idea that the term began life as a *terminus technicus* for a convert to Judaism. When the term became a technical term is unclear but we should wary of assuming it is such unless that is clear.

[34] See Donaldson, *Judaism* (see note 13), 487, citing a variety of texts including Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.51; *Jos. Asen.* 16:14; and Jdt 14:10. For other descriptions see also "taking refuge under God's wings," found in Ruth 2:12, in 2 Bar 41:4, and in a number of Rabbinic passages.

[35] Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.51–2; 4.309; Philo, *Virt.* 103.

[36] See also 2 Macc 9:17.