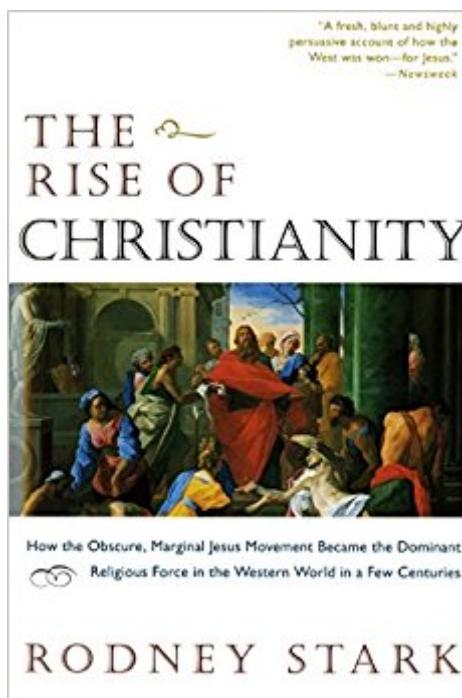


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# The Rise Of Christianity: How The Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became The Dominant Religious Force In The Western World In A Few Centuries



## **Synopsis**

This "fresh, blunt, and highly persuasive account of how the West was won" (Newsweek) is now available in paperback. Stark's provocative report challenges conventional wisdom and finds that Christianity's astounding dominance of the Western world arose from its offer of a better, more secure way of life. "Compelling reading" (Library Journal) that is sure to "generate spirited argument" (Publishers Weekly), this account of Christianity's remarkable growth within the Roman Empire is the subject of much fanfare. "Anyone who has puzzled over Christianity's rise to dominance...must read it." says Yale University's Wayne A. Meeks, for The Rise of Christianity makes a compelling case for startling conclusions. Combining his expertise in social science with historical evidence, and his insight into contemporary religion's appeal, Stark finds that early Christianity attracted the privileged rather than the poor, that most early converts were women or marginalized Jews—and ultimately "that Christianity was a success because it proved those who joined it with a more appealing, more assuring, happier, and perhaps longer life" (Andrew M. Greeley, University of Chicago).

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

"Stark finds that Christians prospered the old-fashioned way: by providing a better, happier and more secure way of life . . . In the end, Stark concludes, Christians 'revitalized' the Roman Empire."  
-- Kenneth Woodward, "Newsweek""Stark uses contemporary social-scientific data about why people join new religious movements and how religions recruit members to investigate the formative

history of Christianity . . . ["The Rise of Christianity" will] generate spirited argument." -- "Publishers Weekly""Compelling reading . . . highly recommended." -- "Library Journal""This book raises, simply and brilliantly, just the kinds of questions anyone concerned with early Christianity should ask." -- "The Christian Century""Anyone who has puzzled over Christianity's rise to dominance in the Roman Empire . . . must read [this book]. Here is theoretical brashness combined with disarming common sense, a capacious curiosity, and a most uncommon ability to tell a complicated story in simple prose." -- Wayne Meeks, Yale University"A provocative, insightful, challenging account of the rise of Christianity." -- Andrew M. Greeley, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago

"Compelling reading" (Library Journal) that is sure to "generate spirited argument" (Publishers Weekly) , this account of Christianity's remarkable growth within the Roman Empire is already the subject of much fanfare. "Anyone who has puzzled over Christianity's rise to dominance... must read it," says Yale University's Wayne A. Meeks, for The Rise of Christianity makes a compelling case for startling conclusions. Combining his expertise in social science with historical evidence and his insight into contemporary religion's appeal, Stark finds that early Christianity attracted the privileged rather than the poor, that most early converts were women or marginalized Jews -- and ultimately "that Christianity was a success because it proved those who joined it with a more appealing, more assuring, happier, and perhaps longer life" (Andrew M. Greely, University of Chicago).

I was pleased with the amount of primary sources Stark included in this work, given there is not a wealth of material to build from. I found chapters 4 and 5 to be the most compelling, for sure. My main critique is that I believe the book would have been stronger had he left out some of his weaker arguments and kept the book shorter, with less guesswork and assumptions into matters where there is little to no data.

This was the first Rodney Stark book I read and I was really impressed. His insights into the conversion process are fantastic and really make perfect sense. The statistics that he gives about the spread of Christianity make the idea that the religion spread largely due to individual and family conversions as opposed to mass conversions seem plausible - at the very least it makes one reconsider assumptions on the topic. I do have two complaints about the book - 1) he sites himself a lot - doesn't really add the appearance of credibility (although I think Stark is very credible) and 2) he repeats himself a lot - the end of the book is largely a rehash of the first chapter. All-in-all a very

readable, thought provoking look at how Christianity spread. If you enjoyed this book I'd definitely recommend Stark's God's Battalions, as it is one of the finest books I've read.

The Rise of Christianity by Rodney Stark is revolutionary for those who study the history of Christianity. He gets at the question of how a new religious movement grew so big so fast. How did this obscure, marginal little Jesus movement become the dominant force in the World in just a few centuries? Stark writes from the vantage point of a sociologist, but his conclusions are based on historical research. In other words, even though his discipline is sociology, he is no slouch as a historian. His sociological approach follows the line of reasoning that we should look at how conversions happen and what is involved sociologically for someone changing from one religion to another. This kind of questioning and probing is interesting, but is at times speculative never the less, but when Stark projects anything, he does so conservatively. His estimates for the growth of Christianity are less than one who is reading the book of Acts might expect. This is not to deny the book of Acts, but his attempt is to communicate to the skeptic about how this thing might have happened. There is much that is interesting in this book, but let me point out a few of things that need to be pursued even further. There are more than these three items that could be brought up, but certainly not less. First, Stark, examines how Christians reacted during times of plague and how that these actions caused church growth. One thing that caused church growth was that Christians at least gave the appearance to the world that they did not fear death and they were willing to show love and compassion in the face of the deadly plague. This alone is remarkable and should call Christians back to this great conviction that the early Christians had. It is oddly curious how that modern day so called church growth experts never mention this. They tell us to be friendly, but nothing about not fearing death or losing our life in order to find it. The other way this fearless mentality plays out shows in that they were tortured for their faith and did not recant. This speaks volumes to non-believing spectators. Second, Stark shows that the early Christians saw themselves as the real or true Israel movement. This is not remarkable in itself, but how he argues his point is remarkable. He shows that Jews (biological descendants from Abraham) were being converted heavily to Christianity all the way up to at least 500 AD. This goes against what is normally accepted, especially by dispensationalists and modern day Christian Zionists. Christianity was never a Gentile movement, but very much a Jewish one that included the Gentiles into one family, the family of God or the Church. Third, Stark shows that Christians did not believe in abortion. The rest of the world outside of Israel and Christians practiced abortions and exposing unwanted babies to the elements. This pro-life stance of the Christians helped with Church growth because they had

bigger families than the pagan world around them. I strongly recommend this book for scholars, teachers of history, theologians, and anybody else who might be interested in the subject.

I would say one certainly does not have to be a Christian to get a lot of information out of this book, although I did read it as a seminary textbook. If you have ever found yourself asking how Christianity became a thing in light of intense persecution and the culture of philosophical wisdom that the Greco-Roman world was at the time, this book aims to answer exactly that question. It was a fantastic read.

This is one of my favorite books in the field of Christian sociology/theology. Stark's analysis is in-depth and eye-opening, exposing his reader to a unique sociological perspective that accounts for both faith-based and historical factors. His approach is logical and informative, yet also accessible for the average lay person - honestly, it is very fun to read. I recommend this book to anyone wanting to learn more about how Christianity developed into a religion based on faith, and influenced by societal/historical factors of the time.

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