

1

INTRODUCTION

1 Religious allegiance and the subordination of family ties

And though they take our life,
Goods, honour, children, wife,
Yet is their profit small;
These things shall vanish all,
The city of God remaineth.

These words from the final verse of Luther's famous hymn¹ are a rhetorically powerful reminder of an aspect of religious allegiance and devotion which has been characteristic of Christian belonging from the beginning: that loyalty to God and discipleship of Christ are commitments of a transcendent kind which take priority over the closest of mundane ties, even ties of natural kinship. The aim of this study is to demonstrate and explain the importance of this element in the teaching about discipleship of Jesus in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew.

2 The tensions illustrated against a wider historical background

That following Jesus or conversion to the Christian way commonly generated intra-familial tensions and competition for the allegiance of the believer cannot be doubted. A brief survey of evidence from the first two centuries of the Common Era will show both the pervasiveness and the persistence of supra-familial and (what could be seen as) even anti-familial tendencies in early Christianity.

¹ Martin Luther (1483–1546), 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott', based on Psalm 46 and written c. 1527–28; translated by Thomas Carlyle, extract from verse 4. The hymn was sung in the Chapel of King's College London at the service for the opening of the Easter Term, on Wednesday 28 April 1982.

2 Introduction

Significantly, it is a matter which attracted comment from both insiders and outsiders.

The response of outsiders

a. The hostile comment of the Roman historian Tacitus on proselytes to Judaism reflects quite accurately the fears of outsiders generally about the effect of religious conversion upon family ties.² Tacitus states: 'Those who come over to their religion . . . have this lesson first instilled into them, to despise all gods, to disown their country, and set at nought parents, children, and brethren.'³ Noticeable here is the assumption about the strength of the bond between cult, polity and household, leading to the inevitable conclusion that transfer of allegiance to the exclusive cult of the Jews places political and domestic ties under direct threat. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, in describing the persecution of the Christians in Rome by Nero at the time of the fire of 64 CE, Tacitus says that they were convicted, 'not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind (*odio humani generis*)'.⁴ This refers to the Christians' contumacious refusal to worship any god but their own, an exclusiveness described by the Greeks as 'atheism' and which was seen by the Romans as a direct threat to the *ordo pax deorum* and to their religious, civic and domestic institutions.

b. The report of Pliny the Younger to Trajan concerning the Christians he examined in the Asian province of Bithynia in the early second century reflects similar sentiments: 'I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition (*quam superstitionem pravam, immodicam*)'.⁵ Although Pliny makes no explicit comment about the effect of conversion on family ties, he does express a concern at the rapid spread of the cult among persons both young and old, both men and women, among persons of varying social status, and among the rural districts as well as in the city. Such categories have an obvious household dimension; and it is

² The focus of anxiety in pagan sources has to do often with the apparent attraction to women (and therefore, wives) of cults from the East. See on this, Balch, *Wives*, ch. V; also, MacDonald, 'Women'.

³ *History* V.5. All quotations from Tacitus are from Hadas, *Tacitus*.

⁴ *Annals* XV.44.

⁵ *Epistles* X.96.

Cambridge University Press

052101882X - Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew

Stephen C. Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The tensions against a wider background*

3

clear that Pliny sees himself as a guardian of traditional loyalties in the domestic as well as in the political and cultic sphere.

c. Shortly after witnessing the self-immolation of the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus at Olympia in 165 CE, the pagan essayist Lucian wrote a satirical account of his life and death, seeking to expose him as a fraud.⁶ According to Lucian, the early career of Peregrinus was spent as a Christian living among Christian circles in Palestine and being imprisoned as a result. Lucian gives, in passing, significant testimony to the life of the Palestinian Christians who provide Peregrinus with sustenance during his incarceration. Significant for our purpose is the fact that Lucian not only levels the common charge of ‘atheism’ against them, but he also links this with two observations about their common life which have a clear household dimension. First, he says that ‘their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another (ὡς ἀδελφοὶ πάντες εἶεν ἀλλήλων)’. Second, he says that they practise community of goods, some of which, of course, they share with Peregrinus.⁷ This practice of brotherhood and community of goods is something which Lucian quite evidently despises and scorns.

d. Another outsider sensitive to the social implications of conversion is Celsus, writing in either Rome or Alexandria around 177–80 CE.⁸ According to Celsus, the spread of Christian teaching and adherence to the new doctrine are subversive of patriarchal authority and household ties. What he is quoted as saying is worth repeating here at length:

In private houses also we see wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who would not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters. But whenever they get hold of children in private and some stupid women with them, they let out some astounding statements as, for example, that they must not pay any attention to their father and school-teachers, but must obey them; they say

⁶ I am using the Loeb translation of Lucian’s *The Passing of Peregrinus*. I owe the reference to Smith, *Magician*, 56.

⁷ *Peregrinus*, 13.

⁸ See Chadwick, *Origen*, xxviii–xxix. I have used Chadwick’s translation.

Cambridge University Press

052101882X - Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew

Stephen C. Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Introduction*

that these talk nonsense and have no understanding, and that in reality they neither know nor are able to do anything good, but are taken up with mere empty chatter. But they alone, they say, know the right way to live, and if the children would believe them, they would become happy and make their home happy as well. And if just as they are speaking they see one of the school-teachers coming, or some intelligent person, or even the father himself, the more cautious of them flee in all directions; but the more reckless urge the children on to rebel. They whisper to them that in the presence of their father and their schoolmasters they do not feel able to explain anything to the children, since they do not want to have anything to do with the silly and obtuse teachers who are totally corrupted and far gone in wickedness and inflict punishment on the children. But, if they like, they should leave father and their school-teachers, and go along with the women and little children who are their playfellows to the wooldresser's shop or to the cobbler's or the washerwoman's shop, that they may learn perfection. And by saying this they persuade them.⁹

The accuracy of Celsus' claim is difficult to assess, even allowing for the polemical stance of his work. But our concern is with perceptions as much as with raw facts; and it is clear that Celsus perceives adherence to Christ as a strong threat to the network of ties and obligations which constitute a household. As Harnack points out,¹⁰ Origen's reply does not deny that the new doctrine affects family ties: Origen claims instead that the children and women attracted to it are all the better for it.¹¹

The response of insiders

The conflict of loyalties to which the observers and critics of the early Christians drew attention was expressed also by the believers

⁹ *Contra Celsum* III.55.

¹⁰ Harnack, *Mission*, 396.

¹¹ See further, Wilken, *Christians*, esp. 117–25, where the author discusses Celsus' conservative concern about the seditious and revolutionary implications of Christian doctrine and proselytizing generally. On p. 125, Wilken concludes: 'It was, however, not simply that Christians subverted the cities by refusing to participate in civic life, but that they undermined the foundations of the societies in which they lived. By elevating the founder of their society to divine status, they set up a rival to the one high God who watched over the empire.'

Cambridge University Press

052101882X - Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew

Stephen C. Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The tensions against a wider background*

5

themselves. The implications of conversion for kinship ties, marital arrangements and household duties is a recurring theme in the Christian sources of the first two centuries. A number of texts, in particular, give evidence of tensions between marriage partners when one partner, often the woman, converted.

a. Perhaps the earliest literary evidence comes from the letters of Paul: in particular, 1 Corinthians 7. Here, Paul addresses matters raised explicitly by (some of) the Corinthians in correspondence with him: Περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε . . . (7.1a). From what Paul says – and without going into a detailed analysis¹² – we can make the following inferences. First, Paul himself prefers the single, celibate state (7.7a, 8, 28b, 32, 38);¹³ and the general upshot of what he says about marriage is that he deprecates it (7.25–31, 32–5, 36–8).¹⁴ This position is rooted in Paul's theological convictions concerning the imminence of the End-time¹⁵ and the transience of this-worldly orders of relationship, together with his strong sense of vocation to single-minded devotion to the Lord. Perhaps, too, he interpreted his celibacy as an aspect of his practice of the *imitatio Christi* (see 1 Cor. 11.1). Whatever the reasons, 1 Cor. 7 provides clear evidence of the eschatological relativization of marital and household ties in the thought and practice of Paul.

Second, some Corinthian converts are interpreting the doctrine of the new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5.17) in an explicitly ascetic direction, in accord with the slogan which Paul quotes, καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἄπτεσθαι (1 Cor. 7.1b). Paul's concern that the consequent practice of sexual renunciation might subvert marital ties is apparent in his carefully balanced response in favour of sexual reciprocity between marriage partners. Neither the

¹² The literature is enormous. Chadwick's essay of 1954, "'All Things'", is seminal. I discussed this material also in my BA Hons. dissertation of 1975: Barton, 'Accommodation', 38–46. Most recently, see Yarbrough, *Gentiles*, ch. 4, and the works cited there.

¹³ See Paul's claim in 1 Cor. 9.5 to travel unaccompanied by 'a sister as wife', unlike Cephas and the brothers of the Lord.

¹⁴ Yarbrough, *Gentiles*, 101, 107, puts it succinctly: 'Four times in vv 8–40 Paul addresses the question of believers' marrying and in each instance he argues against it . . . It is striking that the only reason Paul gives in favor of marriage is the danger of sexual immorality.' On the close Stoic analogies, see Balch, 'Debates'.

¹⁵ For traditional apocalyptic warnings against marriage and child-birth in the Last Days, cf. 4 Ezra 5.8; 6.12; 1 Enoch 99.5; and Mark 13.17, cited in Yarbrough, *Gentiles*, 103.

Cambridge University Press

052101882X - Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew

Stephen C. Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction

husband nor the wife is to withdraw from sexual relations, except by mutual consent and then only for a limited time and for a specifically religious purpose (7.2–5). Furthermore, divorce between Christian partners is ruled out, by an exceptional appeal to a command of the Lord (7.10–11).

Third, it is evidently the case that conversion in Corinth has not taken place always by household. Sometimes a husband only has converted, sometimes only a wife. Once more, the threat to social – and, in particular, domestic – stability becomes an issue, and Paul advises the converted partner not to initiate divorce (7.12–16). If the unbelieving partner seeks a divorce, the preservation of the marriage is not to be sought at any cost; but ‘God has called you to peace’ (7.15c), the implication being that remaining with the pagan partner may lead to his/her salvation (7.16).¹⁶

In general, Paul urges that his addressees ‘remain in whatever state each was called’ (7.24). This socially conservative advice clearly reflects a concern on Paul’s part about the dangers of social innovation, particularly in the sphere of marital and household ties. The behaviour of certain converts in Corinth must have given grounds for Paul’s concern. But this behaviour may itself have been a response to Paul’s eschatological doctrine of new creation and of freedom in the Spirit.¹⁷

b. The New Testament *Haustafeln* should be mentioned next as evidence of a concern about the detrimental effects of conversion to Christianity upon household ties. 1 Peter is a good case in point. David Balch has argued persuasively that the domestic code in 1 Pet. 2.18–3.7 has a primarily apologetic function and is intended to counter the slanderous accusations of outsiders that Christianity is socially subversive because of the threat conversion poses to household solidarity.¹⁸

Greco-Roman society suspected and criticized foreign religions. Many of the Christians addressed by the author had rejected traditional religion (1.18b), and the author exhorted Christians to the kind of behaviour that would silence the negative reactions which such conversions

¹⁶ So too, Yarbrough, *Gentiles*, 112.

¹⁷ See Meeks, ‘Androgyne’.

¹⁸ Balch, *Wives*; see also his summary of recent scholarly interpretation of the *Haustafeln*, in his ‘Codes’, 25–50. For a different understanding of the function of the household code in 1 Peter, see Elliott, *Home*.

generated (2.11–12, 15). The stress on ‘harmony’ in the conclusion of the code (3.8) reveals that the author was especially concerned about divided households: many masters and husbands were still pagans while some slaves and wives had converted to Christianity. In these divided houses, the harmony demanded by the Hellenistic moralists had been disturbed, which was judged to be a negative reflection on the new religion. The author exhorts his readers to make a ‘defense’ (3.15) by reassuring the masters and husbands, perhaps even the governor, that they are obedient slaves and wives, just as the culture expected them to be.¹⁹

c. Moving beyond the evidence of the New Testament, Justin begins his *Second Apology* by recounting a case of marital breakdown resulting from the conversion of one of the partners and trying to defend the action of the woman in seeking to divorce her husband: ‘But he, continuing in the same excesses, alienated his wife from him by his actions. For she, considering it wicked to live any longer as a wife with a husband who sought in every way means of indulging in pleasure contrary to the laws of nature, and in violation of what is right, wished to be divorced from him.’²⁰

The notoriety of this case is due, no doubt, to the social location of the couple concerned. They are members of the Roman aristocracy, with access to the emperor, a large household, leisure and finances to undertake travel, and means to patronize wandering philosophers like Ptolemaeus the Christian, by whose teaching and example the woman is won over. Here, then, is something of a *cause célèbre* which leads to the intervention of the city prefect Urbicus and comes to the attention of the senate. Clearly, the marital breakdown precipitated by the woman’s conversion is perceived as having wider social and political repercussions, a perception based on the fundamental assumption of the time that the household is the state in microcosm.²¹

¹⁹ Balch, *Wives*, 109.

²⁰ *Apology* II.2 (translation from A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, 188). I owe this reference to Yarbrough, *Gentiles*, 1.

²¹ A classic expression of this assumption comes in Cicero’s *De Beneficiis* I.53–5 (written c. 46 BCE). At I.54, Cicero states: ‘Since it is a natural feature of all living beings that they have the desire to propagate, the first association is that of marriage itself; the next is that with one’s children; then the household unit within which everything is shared; that is the element from which a city is made, so to speak the seed-bed of the state.’ The text and translation come from

Cambridge University Press

052101882X - Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew

Stephen C. Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Introduction

d. The apocryphal Acts, generally attributed to the late second/early third centuries CE, but containing individual legends from a considerably earlier period,²² confirm Justin's witness to the intra-familial tensions created by conversion. They also confirm the attractiveness of conversion to women in particular,²³ an emphasis not nearly so marked in the earlier canonical Acts, where the conversion of prominent men is the focus of attention.²⁴ The apocryphal Acts show too that, in the eastern provinces of the empire especially, it was to a particularly ascetic form of Christianity that women were attracted.

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (c. 185–95 CE) is characteristic. Paul enters the house of Onesiphorus and shares 'the word of God concerning continence and the resurrection'.²⁵ As the story has it, Thecla, a young virgin betrothed to Thamyris, is entranced by this emphatically ascetic version of Christianity and completely won over to a sexually continent way of life. The effect of her new stance on her family and household is portrayed graphically: 'And those who were in the house wept bitterly, Thamyris for the loss of a wife, Theocleia for the loss of a daughter, the maidservants for that of a mistress. So there was a great confusion of mourning in the house. And while this was going on (all around her) Thecla did not turn away, but gave her whole attention to Paul's word.'²⁶

The imagery of death is not coincidental. Thecla has died to her family, her betrothed, her bodily desires and to material ties generally. The repeated attempts subsequently to violate and kill her – part of the common motif of the testing of the holy one – express the mortal enmity and conflict resulting from her commitment. She has become anomic, a social outsider, and must be done away with. Her

Gardner and Wiedemann, *Household*, 2. See further the texts quoted and discussed in Balch, *Wives*, 21–62.

²² See the discussion of Schneemelcher and Schäferdiek, in Hennecke/Schneemelcher, *NT Apocrypha*, vol. II, 167ff.

²³ See MacDonald, 'Women', for further exploration of this aspect.

²⁴ For conversion stories in Acts of prominent men, who are often household heads also, see 4.36–7 (Barnabas); 8.9–24 (Simon); 8.26–40 (the Ethiopian official); 9.1–19 (Saul – also, 22.4–16; 26.9–18); 10.1–48 (Cornelius); 13.6–12 (Sergius Paulus); 16.25–34 (the Philippian jailer). Of women, we hear of the conversion of the widow (?) and household head, Lydia (16.12–15) and of Damaris (17.34). At 17.12, the author comments generally that at Beroea, 'not a few Greek women as well as men' were converted. Noticeable is the fact that, rather than the motif (common in the apocryphal Acts) of division within families as a result of conversion, the canonical Acts emphasizes conversion by household.

²⁵ *Paul and Thecla* 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Cambridge University Press

052101882X - Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew

Stephen C. Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The tensions against a wider background*

9

own mother cries out: 'Burn the lawless one! Burn her that is no bride in the midst of the theatre, that all the women that have been taught by this man may be afraid!'²⁷ Thecla's own behaviour confirms this perception. She has refused the roles of lover, wife, mother, dutiful daughter and respected matron. Instead, she leaves her home and city and follows after Paul, adopting a male fashion in clothing,²⁸ and intending to have her hair cut short (again, the male fashion).²⁹

Ross Kraemer has shown that all of the conversion stories in the apocryphal Acts follow a standard literary pattern of the kind outlined above for Thecla.³⁰ Conversion, in response to the teaching of a male apostle, finds expression in ascetic renunciation. This precipitates violence towards both the woman and her apostle. In the cases of Thomas, Andrew and Peter, martyrdom is attributable directly to hostile action on the part of the aggrieved husband. The conversion of the father/husband along with his daughter/wife is exceptional.³¹ The basic assumptions underlying these conversion stories come to the fore in the prayer of *Acts of Thomas* 61:

Look upon us, because for thy sake we have left our homes and our fathers' goods, and for thy sake have gladly and willingly become strangers . . . we have left our own possessions for thy sake, that we may obtain thee . . . we have left those who belong to us by race, that we may be united with thy kindred. Look upon us, Lord, who have left our mothers and fathers and fosterers, that we may behold thy Father . . . for thy sake we have left our bodily consorts and our earthly fruits, that we may share in that abiding and true fellowship and bring forth true fruits, whose nature is from above.

Kraemer advances an interesting sociological explanation of this phenomenon, indebted primarily to a deprivation–compensation theory of religious adherence: 'Ascetic Christianity, in fact, offered women a new measure of worth which involved a rejection of their

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40; cf. *Acts of Philip* 44.²⁹ *Paul and Thecla* 25; cf. *Acts of Thomas* 114.³⁰ Kraemer, 'Conversion'.³¹ Charitine's father converts (*Acts of Philip* 44), as does Drusiana's husband Andronicus (*Acts of John* 63) and Tertia's husband Misdaeus (*Acts of Thomas* 170).

Cambridge University Press

052101882X - Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew

Stephen C. Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Introduction

traditional socio-sexual roles.³² He notes the extent to which a woman's role was both prescribed by her subordination to a dominant male (father or husband) and circumscribed by essentially private, domestic social boundaries.³³ He points out also that the majority of women who convert in the apocryphal Acts are women in a state of social flux or marginality: Thecla is a virgin soon to marry, for example. Their marginality makes them especially vulnerable to alternative ideas, attachments and sources of identity.³⁴ Abandonment of natural kin and domestic ties provides opportunities for new roles, for endeavour in the public domain, and for belonging to an alternative, voluntary society in which spiritual ties displace physical³⁵ and the values of the transcendent, heavenly realm supersede those of the world.

In so far as such an explanation draws our attention to the sociological and psycho-social dimensions of the supra- or anti-familial tendencies reflected in these sources, it is to be welcomed. It is unlikely to be the whole story, however. First, the women who convert do not express concern about personal or social deprivation. There is, for example, no evident degree of controversy over sex roles for which conversion becomes a solution.³⁶ Such controversy occurs only after conversion and is consequent upon the convert's adherence to a radically different (i.e. ascetic) lifestyle. So Kraemer is in danger of making a consequence into a cause. Second, the texts themselves draw our attention more to ideological persuasion than to social grievances as the reason for the women's conversions: 'Thecla . . . sat at a nearby window and listened night and day to the word of the virgin life as it was spoken by Paul.'³⁷ The women may indeed have been attracted by new role prospects. But the fact that martyrdom is shown to be one of their strongest 'role prospects' puts a question-mark against Kraemer's appeal to a theory of compensation. Rather, acceptance of martyrdom presupposes a profound commitment at the ideological level. The women

³² Kraemer, 'Conversion', 301.

³³ A classic expression of this 'genderization' of social space comes in Philo, *Spec. Leg.* III.169ff.; see further, Barton, 'Place', esp. 229–34, and n. 32.

³⁴ Kraemer, 'Conversion', 304–5.

³⁵ The notion of divine marriage and spiritual kinship is emphasized in *Acts of Thomas* 4ff. Kraemer ('Conversion', 303–4) points to the element of erotic substitution in all the conversion stories, where devotion to father/husband is replaced by devotion to the heavenly Lord or to his apostle.

³⁶ See Cameron, 'Male', 64–6.

³⁷ *Paul and Thecla* 7.