

The Making of a Christian Aristocracy, by Michele Renee Salzman

reviewed by [Robert M. Grant](#) in the [September 11, 2002](#) issue

This fascinating and important book attempts to explain why the fourth-century Roman senatorial aristocracy turned "from paganism to Christianity." Michele Renee Salzman, a professor of history at the University of California in Riverside, defines this aristocracy, discusses the social origins and career paths of the aristocratic men-and the family involvements of the women-who converted to Christianity, and concludes by exploring "the emperor's influence on aristocratic conversion" and "the aristocrats' influence on Christianity." Four appendices deal with Salzman's data base and its implications. Her tables repay extended study.

At times Salzman seems to overemphasize fourth-century adjustments by viewing them apart from earlier times. Her chapter on paradox ends with these words: "Christian leaders would be concerned with status in the secular world, with achieving nobilitas." But this had been a concern since the second century. "Generosity to the poor was seen as a shrewd investment" during the fourth century, but so it had been in Jesus' own teaching ("Do not lay up treasure on earth"). Much of what Salzman finds distinctive in the fourth century had actually appeared in the New Testament.

Despite its many merits, Salzman's book may exaggerate the extent to which we know what Christianity itself was like in each period and how it changed or developed. She too frequently uses a sociological vocabulary, writing, for example, of the church becoming "institutionalized" in post-Constantinian elite society. Such a vocabulary fails to open up the pagan religion of people like Praetextatus and (especially) his wife, Paulina, both of them devout initiates into many different cults. A sympathetic Julian the Apostate appointed the husband a proconsul in Greece, "heartland" of the pagan revival, and in 364 Praetextatus persuaded the new emperor, Valentinian, supposedly Christian but also impartial, to permit pagan rites

at night. When Praetextatus became prefect of Rome, he stopped the turmoil that a Christian episcopal election had brought about. We last hear of him in 384 as a pretorian prefect.

Despite these flaws, Salzman's work is important not just for the study of the early church but for the study of the whole history of Christianity. The class distinctions which she so ably explores were significant not only for early Christians, but also for the medieval church and the Reformation church.