

THE DAWN OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

The First Century of Christianity

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INTRODUCTION:

In this class we will attempt to cover the first 600 years of Church history. It is a fool-hearty attempt, for me; because I have spent the summer reading and now know far too much and have far too many resources. How to condense so much material into something interesting? Moreover, much may not be of interest to you. So what is there to do?

I think I will do two things. The first is practical: As there are 14 sessions, I will attempt to cover at least one century every two Sundays. That makes 12. This gives me the leisure, if you are following my mathematics to spend an additional two Sunday on subjects that seem important to me.

Some of what we will be covering I covered last January. However, I'm adding a lot of new material, and I think it's all worth studying twice.

The other thing to know is that I will cover those areas that interest me personally. This is not a seminary class in which it is expected that we come out with a fine knowledge of every aspect of early Church history. It is a class I'm doing for my own amusement and amazement and I'm hoping to take you along for the ride. This means we will take some side trips that may not figure largely in most textbooks: like the evangelization of some of the peoples in outlying regions and such figures, as Gregory the Wonderworker and Martin of Tours who had a profound effect on the areas they evangelized, but are not known for their theological treatises and are subsequently neglected. We'll also spend, probably a full week on the Gnostic Gospels—Gospels we hear about, but rarely study, and which are elevated, incorrectly, to the same status as our four Gospels by such fictional writers as Brown, in the DaVinci Code, and feminists like Elaine Pagels.

I'd also like to talk about the success of Christianity: Why it spread, how it differed from the prevailing culture, as well as some of its failures, particularly in the West in the early 5th century at the time of the coming of the Germanic peoples. Was the adoption of the Christian faith one of the reasons for the collapse of the Roman Empire as Gibbons claims? Or was it time to Christianize a continent rather than an Empire? Related to that: some of the trends that accumulated in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries that eventually became characteristic of medieval Christianity and were rejected at the time of the Reformation.

Along the way, we'll talk about people like **Anthony** who started a mass movement of hermits into the desert; **Pachomius**, and the beginning of monasteries: what they did there and why it was important. Can we find any point of contact with such individuals and such a movement today?

We never really got to the 5th **Century Council of Chalcedon** last January, so we'll probably spend a little more time there; it is important for understanding some of the different currents of Christianity still present in the world. I know virtually nothing about **Justinian and the Byzantine Empire of the 6th Century**. This class will give me an opportunity to research that glittering period of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. If we have time, we'll take a foray into Nestorian Christianity in Persia and China. And of course, even if I've spoken about it last January, I can't resist mentioning Patrick and the evangelization of Ireland.

So, we have a lot to cover, but thankfully, a lot more time than I was able to devote to it last January. I hope you'll be able to stay with me throughout. I look forward to seeing you week by week and the discussions, which, more time, will hopefully, permit.

What are we going to do today?

Today I'd like to talk about **context**, and if we have time later in the hour, move along to some of what we know about the history of the Church in this first century as well. We have two weeks. But let's begin with context because, if we're to understand why Christianity spread as it did: from being a tiny minority faith considered by the Roman authorities to be a Jewish sect, to being adopted by Constantine in 313...that is, in less than 300 years, an amazing development--then we need to understand something about the context in which our faith developed. If Christ and his teaching is the head, then the context, where the tiny seed of the church germinated and grew, can best be described as two hands, holding the budding Church, both equally important for understanding the faith: Judaism and the Greco-Roman world. (Please understand that I do not wish to take away from the power of the Gospel itself through the Holy Spirit to transform and win peoples to faith. That is what is primary. However, context is important to seeing how and why the church grew as it did, and what elements present in that culture may have benefited its growth. God Himself, we believe, prepared the terrain.

JUDAISM

Let's begin with the context of Judaism. What was it like, and how widespread was it in the world in which the Gospel was to be preached?

Many of us, when looking at maps of the Roman Empire—a political land mass that spread from southern Britain across Gaul and Eastern Europe below the Rhine and the Danube all the way to Armenia and the Tigris and eastern Syria, then south through Palestine and Egypt across northern Africa and up through Spain--look at tiny Israel and wonder what kind of impact such a small country could have in such a vast empire. And yet, statistics which can be deceptive in some cases, in this case, prove to be reliable guides.

Caesar Augustus who as you know from the birth account of Jesus in Luke, decreed a census at the time of the birth of Christ, has made our work easier. Because of him we know that in an empire of some 50 million souls, tiny Israel outweighed every other

minority religion and people in influence due to the uniqueness of its faith and its far-flung diaspora, that is, its communities which were located in every major city of the empire. Out of some 50 million inhabitants, there were some 7 million Jews living in the Roman Empire, with some Synagogues of such immense size that they measured several city blocks. Once again, that's 7 million souls out of 50 million, or 14% of the Empire, and that does not count the Jews who lived in Persian lands! Judaism was extremely significant and very visibly present.

Josephus quotes Strabo as saying: "This people has already made its way into every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received this nation and in which it has not made its power felt" (Frend, page 33).

It was a well educated nation in which most of its members knew how to read; with a large and prosperous middle class. It was also evangelistic.

When Jesus alluded to Pharisees who traveled over land and sea seeking converts, he was speaking about a very real phenomenon. At the time the Christian faith burst onto the scene, Judaism was self-confident and had pretensions as a universal religion. It was given a special status by Roman authorities: it was a licit, or legal religion with its own laws, and not required to burn incense to the emperor. Its' temple tax was collected quite separately from Roman taxes. **This caused great resentment in the empire, because no matter where they lived Jews saw Jerusalem as their capitol and so were considered disloyal. By and large Judaism was disliked, considered a sad and cheerless sect because of its pedantic fussiness concerning food laws and regulations concerning new moons and ceremonial law** (Frend, page 34).

On the other hand, some admired it; especially those of the educated classes for its moral code and faith rooted in history; and yes, even for its monotheism. Plato and Socrates, remember, also taught the existence of a supreme, invisible, Perfect and eternal Being. And the teaching of the Stoic philosophers in the first century resembled much of what was moral in Judaism. Some of the best in philosophical and ethical Greco-Roman Culture found affinities with Jewish faith. Writing as a contemporary of Jesus, **Philo**, a Greek speaking and thoroughly Greek educated Jew living in **Alexandria, Egypt--which had, incidentally, a huge Jewish population: two of five of the districts of Alexandria had a majority Jewish population**, (Frend, page 34)--attempted to reconcile Greek and Jewish thought and argued that since Socrates and Plato taught that God was a supreme being, perfect and immutable, and that much of their moral wisdom was similar to that of the Jews, and that Hebrews had believed this long before the Greek philosophers, the Greek philosophers must have gotten their ideas from the Jews! Unlikable sections of the Torah like Leviticus and so forth, Philo simply allegorized. He taught, incidentally, that:

"God was the Creator, creating the universe out of Non-being, and stamping upon it the pattern of order and rationality, his own Reason or Logos. The Logos was interpreted in Platonic terms as 'the Idea of Ideas,' the first begotten Son of God, pattern and mediator of Creation and 'Second God.'"(Frend, page 35)

What does that make you think of?

Those Greeks and Romans who were attracted to Judaism **became “God-fearers”** who attended Synagogues but were required to spend years slowly adopting Jewish ceremonial and cultural habits of dress, diet, and Sabbath laws. Many simply chose to adopt Mosaic moral teaching, interpret dress codes, etc. allegorically like Philo, and retain their Greek and Roman dress and culture. A distinctly Jewish demeanor tended to be despised by the cultured classes. So they gave money and tried to obey the more moral, or ethical teachings of Judaism, which, among other things, forbade abortion and taught the importance of remembering the poor. When the Greco-Roman world looked at the way in which Jews cared for their own, they were impressed and sometimes, convicted in their consciences.

What we’re talking about here are pathways that led from Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching into the Greco-Roman world; an attempt to explain how it was that Christianity found so favorable a terrain to grow.

It becomes all the more easy then to understand why, when Paul came preaching that those who by faith joined themselves to Christ were in no obligation to keep the ceremonial law: those outward distinctions so distasteful to Greeks and Romans: dress, hairstyles, foods, observance of days, and all the ceremonial laws that Paul taught were fulfilled by Jesus’ life and death and hence no longer necessary, and taught this in the Synagogues with so many “god-fearers”, that is, gentile sympathizers of Judaism present, he found such a grateful and warm welcome among these gentiles. They sympathized with the monotheism, with the ethics and morality, with the notion of a real, personal God, but were unhappy with the ceremonial laws necessary to becoming Jews. It was among these “proselyte Greeks” that Paul’s mission found its most fruitful mission.

It’s also, of course, what got him stoned and left for dead on so many occasions.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that **when archeological remains of early churches have been unearthed, they have usually been found in the same neighborhoods, even across the streets, from Jewish synagogues.** And why the jealousy of the Jews toward Christians and the debates that went on between Jews and Christians were so fierce and long-lasting. **For the first 150 years—many historians believe--the principle converts to Christianity were from the Jewish (albeit Greco-Jewish) context.**

This then, apart from the power of the Holy Spirit Himself and the Good News inherent in the Gospel, is why Christianity found an immediate hearing in all the major cities of the Roman Empire in the first century. **Judaism had preceded it there.** God had planted his word in the midst of the cities of the Roman Empire, ready to take root when Christ was preached. Christianity was, for Paul and the rest of the Apostles, the logical fulfillment of what had come before. And they entered cities preaching, as Jesus had told them, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile, straight to the heart of Judaism in the Diaspora: the Jewish Synagogue.

The flip side of this, however, is that the Church during its first 100 years retained a very distinctive Jewish flavor. So much so that W.H.C. Frend, in his 1000 page tome called the Rise of Christianity, has one of his earliest chapters devoted to what he calls “The Christian Synagogue”, so like it, in its moral and ethical preoccupations, it was. It was also organized similarly: each Synagogue would have a Leader who would be advised by a council of elders who would take responsibility for any major decisions. The church developed in much the same way: a pastor, or bishop was advised and guided by elders or presbyters (the Greek word).

THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

But I said that there were two hands holding that young sprout of a plant that was the church. We’ve talked about the Jewish context, now let’s look at the Greco-Roman one. Why might the Church find a receptive hearing there?

QUESTION: What do you think?

PAX ROMANA

The first and most obvious reason was that the Roman Empire had united what had previously been city states, nations and diverse religious people groups into one political mosaic united by roads, trade, military protection, and some basic laws. Roads were safe to travel. Wars were infrequent. Trade crossed freely over what were previously national boundaries. People came and went in huge numbers traveling from city to city. One language basically united the entire whole: **Greek**. It was even spoken by the educated in Rome and was the first language of the Church there for many years. The Old Testament scriptures were in Greek: **the Septuagint**, which Paul and the Apostles used and quoted.

Religions were traded about and melded together in an odd syncretism in which new mystical forms were constantly popping up. Rome didn’t mind, as long as they did not trouble the peace, and as long as no one insisted that theirs was the only way. This was the thorn in the flesh of Judaism and would be inherited by the Church. It’s contention that Jesus is the only way created huge obstacles with regard to Roman authorities who sought to calm, not exacerbate social tensions. So, the Church had opportunities and obstacles.

With this peace called the Pax Romana and the trade that accompanied it, the early Church gained unparalleled access to the cities of the world, to preach, to travel, to evangelize. Compared to the early Middle Ages this was a remarkable time of freedom of travel and trade, and, as many Christian thinkers readily acknowledged in the early centuries of the Church, one which was a gift of God for the growth of the Church.

This is what’s most obvious. But there were other reasons, perhaps more subtle that the Church found a pathway opened up to it.

Here I'd like to follow a few ideas delineated by Rodney Stark in his The Rise of Christianity, who treats the question from a sociological point of view.

CITIES

Christianity, as we have seen, first burst on the scene in large cities of the Roman Empire where there were Jewish Synagogues. It was very nearly throughout its history until the time of the Desert Fathers in the 4th century, **an urban phenomenon**. But what were those cities like, and how might the genius of the early church, often reflective of its Jewish roots, find receptive ground in those places? Let's look at Antioch, according to Acts, the first place in which the followers of Jesus were called "Christians". What was it like to live there? And how did becoming a Christian solve some of the acute problems related to living there? I'm summarizing Stark. He has a number of other ideas that I'll mention in later classes, but we'll dwell on the question of cities for the present.

QUESTION: First, what are your thoughts: why might the cities be places where the Gospel might find a favorable terrain at this particular time in history?

Here are a few things we know:

1. Antioch had, very early on, a relatively large Christian community.
2. It was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire at the time.
3. It was also characterized by "extraordinary levels of urban disorder, social dislocation, filth, disease, misery, fear and cultural chaos" (Stark, page 149).
4. It was a walled city which was, at its most extensive, about 2 miles long and a mile wide.
5. Within this 2 square mile area lived a population of 150,000 people. That calculates to a population density of 117 people per acre. (cf. Manhattan which has 100 per acre and remember that Manhattan is spread out vertically, while these cities crammed their populations into buildings no higher than 5 stories). Ancient writers spoke of Rome, where the ears were constantly filled with the sound of buildings collapsing: because the poor lived at the top and constantly subdivided their dwellings. In Antioch where there were frequent earthquakes it can have been no different.
6. However, in any given Roman city about 40% of the land was devoted to public buildings, so that the real population density was more like about 195 people per acre. By way of comparison, the density of Mumbai or Bombay today is about 183 people per acre. Families lived crowded together in a single room with no fireplace, and only a brazier for cooking, so that the rooms were perpetually filled with smoke. As a consequence most of the people probably spent most of their time outdoors. Chamber pots, despite Roman law to the contrary, were often emptied out of the windows at night.
7. Because of this poor sanitation and over crowding, disease was a constant companion. Corpses were often pushed into the streets and abandoned. Epidemics were regular occurrences (we'll talk more about that in a later class). Examination of fecal remains by archeologists show a heavy presence of tapeworm and whipworm eggs, which rendered people anemic and susceptible to other diseases. Is it any wonder, that in later centuries, the poor took to the desert to become Christian hermits? It was actually a step up for many of them. Life expectancy in urban centers from birth for the poor was about 30

years—that is averaging in the many, many children who died within the first year or two. Stark: “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” (page 155). **Written contracts offered descriptive information about the parties and generally included their distinctive disfigurements, mostly scars” (155-6). Women were especially afflicted because of chronic infections resulting from forced abortions by their husbands using appalling methods.**

Is it any wonder that so many women were attracted to the Gospel and to the Church which, following Jewish custom, forbade abortions? (More of that in a later class).

Or that when the Gospel came, accompanied as it almost always was, by signs and wonders and healing in Jesus’ name, that so many believed? We see the same phenomenon today in India. Actually, all the way through the time of Augustine who died in 430 miracles of healing were regularly reported in churches.

But let’s examine life in Antioch a little further before drawing any more conclusions.

8. Because of the high mortality rate, there was a constant need of influx of new inhabitants, just to keep the population going. The result was that, “at any given moment a very considerable proportion of the population consisted of recent newcomers—Greco Roman cities were peopled by strangers.” **Crime, as a result, was high, as immigration, cutting us off from our natural moral anchors as it does, brings that phenomenon along with it. It was total folly for citizens of cities, the Roman lawyer Juvenal intoned, to go out to supper without having drawn up a will.**

9. So far as stability was concerned, Antioch was not a homogeneous population. It had 18 distinct ethnic people groups living each within their own distinct quarters. Antioch, as all Roman cities, was thus prone to rioting and urban conflict.

10. It was also prone to earthquakes, epidemics, famines, fires, and invasions from Parthians and Persians. For six centuries, every fifteen years on average, the city experienced some kind of natural or social catastrophe.

How do you live in a place like that? And how did Christianity strike a responsive chord? What did it do?

Well, the coming of the Christian faith revitalized urban centers. Stark: “*It provided new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems... Christianity offered charity as well as hope... It offered an immediate basis for attachments...It provided a new sense of family (following as it did the Jewish custom of providing for orphans and widows). It cut across ethnic lines to unite people in Christ. It provided hope when so many lived in despair. And as we shall see, it even provided nursing services, being well organized, mirroring as it did its Jewish roots.*” (Stark, page 161). Christianity provided love, belonging, and the power of the Holy Spirit giving hope to people whose lives were tenuous and often filled with despair.

DREAMS AND OMENS AND PAGANISM

QUESTION: We've talked about cities and the attractiveness of Christianity among its suffering populations. What else do we know about the Roman World that might help explain the attraction of Christianity?

Let me give you just one other example: a glimpse into the world of pagan religious attitudes. Every religion, whatever it is, attempts to make sense out of life: why we are here, and how to avoid disaster and death and make ones way safely into the life to come?

Well, whatever Roman and Greek aristocrats may have believed, for the average pagan believer with no real assurances about whether or not he or she pleased the gods or whether they would cross happily into the life to come, with gods to offend under every bush and and sickness and death so quick to surprise, life was extremely worrisome.

For the following I'm indebted to Frend, indeed most of what I say will be excerpts from his book, the Rise of Christianity.

“All peoples, said the pagan speaker Caecilius...were convinced firmly that there were immortal gods, however uncertain they were of their origin.’ The ancient world was alive with goblins and evil spirits. It was a bold man who failed to throw a grain or two of incense on a wayside shrine or incline briefly before its patron as he passed. Most people swore by a host of gods of equal power when annoyed. In some (north) African cities there would hardly be a street corner without some prophylactic symbol carved on a wall to protect the wayfarer from evil spirits. The mosaics that adorned the fine townhouses of Dougga or Thuburbo Maius, to take two instances, were not there merely for decoration, but the vine tendrils, mixing bowls, and representations of a human eye were chosen through their special potency to ward off the attentions of the evil eye, the bringer of strange disease and calamity. Humankind was helpless against germs and the disturbances of nature. Sudden death was an ever-present possibility. The making of horoscopes designed to foretell the exact hour when an individual’s life was destined to end was a common occupation. At Dura-Europos on the Euphrates frontier, the excavators of the town found that practically every household must have had its own horoscope. To appear to deny the power of the gods to act violently in human affairs was ‘atheism,’ and those guilty of such unnatural beliefs deserved death at the hands of authorities fully supported by public opinion.”

“One aspect of the unknown world of spirits in particular attracted the awesome attention of pagans...Dreams, believed to be a divine means of communication to worshipers of the work of evil spirits, became terrifying experiences, the subject of minute investigation. Aelius Aristides has left a vivid account of horrible anxiety dreams, in which he was a either being poisoned, chased by a wild bull, or attacked by barbarians. As a result, he spent a large part of his life at his sanctuary near Smyrna, in a unique and intense relationship with the god Asclepius.” (page 168).

Is it any wonder, that when men and women turned to Christ and were freed from this bondage to fear of spirits and death, their natural reaction after the joy of liberation, was revulsion to paganism? They were freed from their fears of death and of the demonic.

In Rome around the year 250, the church had on its staff, among others, 52 employees who helped free people from the spirits they'd collected in pagan worship. (page 405, Frend).

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN THE FIRST CENTURY

We still have some time to devote to the actual history of the Church in the First Century. If we place the end of the book of Acts somewhere in the early-sixties, what can we say with certainty about the Church in the remaining forty years? Is there anything we know for sure? Well, yes, there are a few things.

- We know the church suffered persecution. We'll say a few words about that.
- And we have relatively good information about some of the apostles and what became of them.
- We also have at least one non-apostolic document, the Didache, that instructs concerning worship in the Church and moral conduct—we'll take a look at that too.
- And we may have time to look at the Epistle of Clement, first or second bishop of Rome, who writes about the year 100.

So let's take a look.

We'll begin in the years immediately following the end of the book of Acts, and the persecution that fell upon the Church in the time of the emperor Nero. For those of you who took this class in January, what you are about to hear will not be new. Please sit tight and enjoy a review.

THE NERONIAN PERSECUTION

However, we really can't do justice to the history of the church make making sociological statements. It's time we actually studied it. Here is what we know about the first Century.

The history of the church at the end of the apostolic period was a baptism in fire.

The Roman State, relatively indifferent to its existence up to this point, confusing it with Judaism as it did, turned upon Christians, in the city of Rome at least, with ferocity and it did so by the hand of the Emperor Nero. It is believed that in that first imperial persecution both Peter and Paul lost their lives. That is the long-standing belief of the early Church and its earliest historians; indeed, the cemeteries where they were buried were from a very early date places of pilgrimage and named for them.

The persecution began in this way.

The Emperor Nero came to the throne in AD 54 at the death of Emperor Claudius, who was probably poisoned by Nero's mother Agrippina. Though there are mixed reports, both good and bad of his early reign, including a victory over the Parthians in Armenia and the defeat of Queen Boadicea in Britain, he had a reputation for being dissipated and bloodthirsty. It is probable that he was responsible for the death by poisoning of his own mother, his step-brother Britannica, and his wife Octavia. He may well have kicked his mistress to death; and he was responsible for the murder of many notable Romans who opposed him. On the bright side, he invested in many public works such as a Canal through the Isthmus of Corinth, but also in extravagant buildings to make a name for himself, thus emptying the state coffers and raising taxes. He became increasingly mad. He had a deep desire to be popular, and saw himself as a great poet, singer, and actor, performing before the Senate and the people, deeply embarrassing the aristocracy. In this way he collected more and more enemies among the ruling classes, so that, when Rome caught on fire in July of AD 64 and burned for five or six days destroying three of Rome's 14 districts and severely damaging 7 others, it was widely thought that he had started the fire in order to make way for his building projects, of which there were many in Rome, after the rubble was cleared away. Rumors in Rome after the fire circulated of soldiers preventing people from attempting to put out the flames. Nero became, as a result, very unpopular and made every effort to win back the hearts and minds of the people.

Here is what Tacitus, a Roman historian who was nine years old at the time of the fire, had to write about the event. It is the first we hear of Christians in secular, that is non-Biblical literature:

“But all the endeavors of men, all the emperor's largesse and the propitiations of the gods, did not suffice to allay the scandal or banish the belief that the fire had been ordered. And so, to get rid of this rumor, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians. Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. Checked for the moment, this pernicious superstition again broke out, and not only in Judea, the source of the evil, but even in Rome, that receptacle for everything that is sordid and degrading from every quarter of the globe, which there finds a following. Accordingly, arrest was first made for those who confessed to being Christians; then, on their evidence, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as because of hatred of the human race. Besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display, and was putting on a show in the circus, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot. All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even towards men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment; for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public

good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual” (Documents of the Christian Church, page 2).

Was it at this time that Peter and Paul were martyred? Probably. Eusebius writes the following in his Ecclesiastical History, writing sometime after 324 A.D.

“It is recorded that in Nero’s reign Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified, and the record is confirmed by the fact that the cemeteries there are still called by the names of Peter and Paul...”

Eusebius later (page 65) goes on to state that Peter requested that he be crucified upside down, unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord.

What is interesting about this is that Christians were important enough in the city of Rome, a city at the time of some 650,000 souls (Stark, page 131), that Nero should even take note of them at all. Remember, Tacitus had referred to there being “an immense multitude” that was rounded up. This from an unbeliever. Moreover, we know that already in the year 51 AD, Christians were causing a stir. There is a reference made to the expulsion of Jews from Rome in Acts 18:2. What was that rioting about? Another Roman historian, Suetonius (75-160 AD), a near contemporary of Tacitus, tells us: referring to this expulsion of the Jews under the Emperor Claudius and the riots that caused it, he said that said riots were “because of Chrestus”. Which most historians conclude was a reference to Christ.

So Christians very early on, only two decades after Christ’s death and resurrection, were making their presence felt, and by the time of Nero, were noted officially and used as a scapegoat.

Terullian, a Christian theologian of whom we’ll hear more in a few weeks, wrote about AD 200 these words concerning Nero:

“Study your records: there you will find that Nero was the first to persecute this teaching when, after subjugating the entire East, in Rome especially he treated everyone with savagery. That such a man was author of our chastisement fills us with pride. For anyone who knows him can understand that anything not supremely good would never have been condemned by Nero” (Eusebius, page 62).

What happened to Nero? In A.D. 68 Nero was deposed by an insurrection led by the Roman senate and he killed himself.

DOMITIAN

The next great persecution occurred as a direct result of the First Jewish/Roman War or the Great Revolt of the Jews against Rome, a war chronicled by Josephus that began just two years after the Neronian persecution in Rome. In A.D. 66 the Jews revolted and began a war that lasted eight years, ending with the destruction of Masada: a desert

fortress redoubt in the Judean wilderness. Mid-way through the revolt Jerusalem was surrounded by Roman armies and a siege began that ended with the total destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. During the siege somewhere between 650,000 and 1,100,000 Jews died at the hands of Titus. Anyone caught coming out of the city was crucified. In this way they crucified some 500 a day.

Where was the Church in Jerusalem during this time? Jesus spared it, by an oracle in Matthew 24 when he made reference to Daniel 9 where it speaks of armies surrounding Jerusalem and the abomination of desolation in the Temple and warns his followers to flee to the mountains. The church, in effect, did flee Jerusalem as the war progressed, going to settle in Perea east of the Jordan, to a town called Pella and let the war pass them by. They know that Jerusalem is no longer their spiritual home; that their temple is the Lord Jesus himself (cf. John 4.21). *“Believe me when I say to you: there is coming a time when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem...A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.”*

But the consequences of the war did affect the Christian community as well. Remember, up to this point they were still assimilated by Roman authorities with the Jewish community, considered by them as a Jewish sect. Now the Jews had paid, up to this time, a temple tax, which had been collected in the Synagogues of the Roman Empire and sent to Jerusalem. But after A.D. 70, with the temple destroyed, as a form of retribution for the Revolt, and a way of building back up the imperial coffers, Caesar Vespasian (69-79) decreed that this money should be collected and sent to Rome instead. This was called the “Fiscus Judaicus”. It was brutally enforced by Vespasian’s successor Domitian (emperor from A.D. 81-96). Some of the Jews complied but others refused. Some insisted that though they were paying the tax to Rome, Rome had not taken the place of Jerusalem as the center of their loyalty. The result was even stricter laws against Jews, and Rome, in enforcing them, did not differentiate between Jews and Christians. We do not have records of the persecution during this time, but many historians believe that the terrifying nature of it is reflected in the Book of Revelation which may have been composed about this time, though the number 666 has been numerologically read as the name for Nero, so the book may have been composed earlier.

JUDE’S GRANDCHILDREN

It is during this brutal enforcement of the Temple Tax, the Fiscus Judaicus, the persecution under Domitian that a little incident occurs that sheds light on Jesus’ family. Remember how in Mark 6.3, as a way of cynical reproach, the Pharisees refer to Jesus as being the son of Mary, rather than of Joseph—an allusion to what they felt was an illegitimate birth, and his position as a carpenter, someone who worked with his hands, also something disdained, not only among the Jews but especially among the Greek educated classes. They said: “Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?”

Well, Jude, who refers to himself simply as the brother of James, himself the physical brother of Jesus and son of Joseph and Mary writes a short epistle we find at the end of the New Testament: Jude. We might wonder what happened to Jude and to his family, as well as Jesus' other brothers and sisters and their children, after Jesus ascended into heaven.

We know that James the Just, the brother of Jesus, who wrote the Epistle of James, became a pillar of the church in Jerusalem. That is clear already in Acts 15. We also know from the writings of Hegisippus, quoted by Eusebius, that he was thrown from the parapet at Jerusalem in A.D. 69 and then clubbed to death because he would not tell the people to deny that Jesus was the "gate" to God and the Son of God. Another tradition suggests that he died by stoning by order of the Sanhedrin in A.D. 62.

But what about the others? Any other news of Jesus' family? Well, interestingly enough, we have a reference to Jude's family in Eusebius' History of the Church, and it occurred under this persecution by Domitian. Here is what we read:

"[Domitian] ordered the execution of all who were of David's line, and there is an old and firm tradition that a group of heretics accused the descendants of Jude—the brother, humanly speaking, of the Savior—on the ground that they were of David's line and related to Christ Himself. This is stated by Hegisippus in so many words:

"And there still survived of the Lord's family the grandsons of Jude—who was said to be His brother, humanly speaking. These were informed against as being of David's line, and brought by the evocatus before Domitian Caesar, who was as afraid of the advent of Christ as Herod had been. Domitian asked them whether they were descended from David, and they admitted it. Then he asked them what property they owned and what funds they had at their disposal. They replied that they had only 9,000 denarii between them, half belonging to each; this they said, was not available in cash, but was the estimated value of only 39 plethra of land, from which they raised the money to pay their taxes and the wherewithal to support themselves by their own toil.'

"Then" Eusebius continues, summarizing Hegisippus, "they showed him their hands, putting forward as proof of their toil the hardness of their bodies and the calluses impressed on their hands by incessant labor. When asked about Christ and His Kingdom—what it was like and where and when it would appear, they explained that it was not of this world or anywhere on earth but angelic and in heaven, and would be established at the end of the world, when He would come in glory to judge the quick and the dead and give every man payment according to his conduct. On hearing this, Domitian found no fault with them, but despising them as beneath his notice let them go free and issued orders terminating the persecution of the Church. On their release they became leaders of the churches, both because they had borne testimony and because they were of the Lord's family; and thanks to the establishment of peace they lived on into Trajan's time. (Eusebius, pages 81-82).

What this is telling us, and what Samuel Moffatt makes clear in his *History of the Church in Asia, Volume I*, is that Jesus' family seems to have moved northward into that region most linguistically similar to their own, and that was the Syriac speaking region, using the language of Syria the language most similar to that spoken by our Lord, Aramaean. We are most familiar with the Latin and Greek Churches. But this Syriac speaking church became a major branch in its own right and kept many of its more Asian/Aramaean/Syriac characteristics. It still exists today, as news of the flight of Syriac and Assyrian Christians from Iraq in recent days has brought to our attention. (Before the war, some one and a half million Christians still lived in Iraq; but since persecution by Muslim fanatics there during the violence of recent years, half have fled the country (written December 2011). Persecution has a long history in Mesopotamia. The very word Holocaust was coined to describe the destruction of Christian communities in the mountainous regions of Iraq earlier in the 20th century, not to be confused with the Armenian holocaust in Turkey and Kurdistan.

ST JAMES AND ST THOMAS

Any other news of other apostles? Much is shrouded in legend, as various large bishoprics in later years tried to increase their importance by claiming to have been founded by various Apostles. For example, Alexandria later claimed to be founded by St. Mark, to add with to its competition with Antioch and Rome; the city and bishopric of Constantinople, though founded 300 years after the time of the apostles, claimed that Philip had preached there early on. Then, in the fifth century a legend appeared that emissaries of Peter had arrived in Spain and evangelized it already in the first century. More importantly for later history, in the 8th century a legend appeared that claimed that St. James had proclaimed the Gospel in Galicia and Saragossa, in Spain. That he hadn't had much success, but that the Virgin had appeared to him standing on a pillar and gave him words of encouragement, which is the origin of the "Virgin of the Pillar" still venerated by many in the Spanish tradition today, and that, upon returning to Jerusalem where he was killed, his disciples took his body back to Compostella in Spain, where he was supposedly buried. That legend became very important in Spanish history. James was adopted as the patron Saint of Spain—Santiago being Spanish for Saint James. And pilgrimages to Compostella in Spain were among the most important in the Middle Ages. Where we lived in Pau, France, there were many signs marking ancient medieval trails of pilgrims to Compostella in Spain; as well as ruins of ancient hospitals that were built to care for sick pilgrims along the way, and as well as forts to defend them; and of course, there are still large Catholic gatherings in Compostella to this day.

But some church tradition has a bit more plausibility. So it is with the evangelistic work of the Apostle Thomas.

According to tradition, the Apostle Thomas made his way north through Syria and east through Mesopotamia, into what is now Pakistan and down into India and founded what is still known today as the Mar Thoma church on the Southwestern edge of India, on the Malabar Coast. He went working his way as an Evangelist. This is recorded in the Acts of Thomas, a later Gnostic work, and as such, not terribly trustworthy. But sometimes

documents of this kind do record details which have some historic fact. And so it may well be with the Acts of Thomas. In it, it is claimed that Thomas visited India at the request of a certain king named Gondophares who needed an architect to build a palace, and “that Thomas, who was no architect, offered himself for the job. When the king found that Thomas was giving to the poor the money allotted for the construction of the palace, he had the apostle put in prison. But then Gondophares’ brother Gad died and came back from the dead. Upon his return he told his brother of the magnificent heavenly palace that he had seen which was being built through Thomas’ gifts to the poor. The king and his brother were then converted and baptized, and Thomas moved on to other parts of India where he died as a martyr” (The Story of Christianity, Gonzales, page 30).

This all sounds like legend. However, there are several things that give pause for thought. First of all, several decades ago, archaeologists discovered coins in northwest India with the name of Gondophares on them, an name until then, unknown to historians. In addition, it was discovered that this king had a brother named Gad. Furthermore, we now know that trade between India and the Middle East had been going on since the time of Solomon. We find traces of Jewish tradesmen in India dating to that time. They took to the sea. But walking was not a problem either. It was a shorter walk from Palestine to the Indus than from Palestine to Ireland. These were well traveled roads. Lastly, there is the tenacious testimony of the Mar Thoma Church itself, which has always claimed to have been founded by Thomas and can even point to the area where he was martyred. The liturgy of the Mar Thoma Church is still in Syriac today, a cognate of the language Thomas spoke. And for centuries they claim to have possessed a copy of the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew, which corresponds to Eusebius’ teaching that the first Gospel was a originally penned in Hebrew. Moreover, one of the great early teachers of the Church in Alexandria, the founder of a catechetical school (175 AD) there named Pantaenus traveled himself to the Mar Thoma church in about 180 and sent back word that he had found a Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew there.

This is further corroborated by a quote from Papias. Papias wrote in the first half of the second century. He was bishop of Hieropolis and, once again, Eusebius who collected historical documents of all kinds and published them in his History in 324, quotes him. Papias apparently knew the Apostle John or an Elder named John of Ephesus—we don’t know whether this was the same individual--, anyway, Papias knew this esteemed John was very old and venerable, and when he, Papias was a young man. This John said, according to Papias, that: “*Matthew collected the oracles (ta logia) in the Hebrew language and each interpreted them as best he could.*” And Eusebius added:

“Matthew had begun by preaching to Hebrews; and when he made up his mind to go to others too, he committed his own gospel to writing in his native tongue, so that for those with whom he was no longer present the gap left by his departure was filled by what he wrote. And when Mark and Luke had published their gospels, John, who hitherto had relied entirely on the spoken word, finally took to writing for the following reason. The three gospels already written were in general circulation and copies had come into John’s hands. He welcomed them and confirmed their accuracy, but remarked that the

narrative lacked the story of what Christ had done, first of all, at the beginning of His mission” (page 86-7).

THE GOSPELS

So let’s talk about the writing of the Gospels. This is, after all, a class about Church history and we’re in the First Century today. Papias, whom Eusebius quotes again, had this to say about the Gospel of Mark:

“The Elder used to say this also: Mark, became the interpreter of Peter and he wrote down accurately, but not in order, as much as he remembered of the sayings and doings of Christ, for he was not a hearer or follower of the Lord, but afterwards, as I said, of Peter, who adapted his teachings to the needs of the moment and did not make an ordered exposition of the sayings of the Lord. And so Mark made no mistake when he thus wrote down some things as he remembered them; for he made it his especial care to omit nothing of what he heard, and to make no false statement therein.” (Early Documents, page 27).

Peter, Eusebius informs us, would travel, accompanied by his wife. He would teach the men, and she the women.

One final word about the apostles: Eusebius claims that another disciple, Bartholomew (cf Matthew 10:3), usually identified as the man elsewhere known as Nathanael, carried the Gospel of Matthew around with him.

Incidentally, both the apostles Jude and Bartholomew were credited to have traveled to Armenia as missionaries where they are patron saints. Bartholomew was said to have been flayed alive and then crucified. You’ll find paintings of him by Michaelangelo holding his flayed skin at the last judgment. But we are getting into the stuff of legend here.

The point is, as we see in Thomas, Peter, Bartholomew—or Nathanael, John in Ephesus, and as we see in Philip in the book of Acts, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was already and rapidly traveling throughout the world. It was brought purposefully around the Roman world by the apostles, was taken from city to country villages by evangelists (as we shall see in the Didache); was making its way into the Synagogues of the entire world, in Asia Minor, in Mesopotamia, into India, and into Egypt where there was a huge Jewish community. It was quickly present in Ethiopia. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when so many languages and tongues were present assured that the news would quickly travel around the known world to synagogues everywhere. Christians were, as Michael Green says in his *Evangelism in the Early Church*, everywhere “gossiping the Gospel” in market places and among merchants on the road, speaking of the resurrection of Jesus and his death for our sins.

WHAT WAS THE CHURCH LIKE?

What do we actually know about the Church of the late first and early second century? Are there any writings independent of the New Testament that refer to the church at this time which might give us a clue? Actually, we have several: An Epistle from Clement, bishop of Rome to the Church in Corinth. Clement you may recall is mentioned at the end of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (4.3)—this is probably a late first century document. We also have letters from Ignatius, pastor of the Church in Antioch, written on the way to his death, around 107-108—we'll talk about him next century; but we have another, which appears to be even earlier, called the Didache which scholars believe was written anywhere from 70 AD to early in the 2nd century. It seemed to have been widely known both early on, and in later centuries—Eusebius and Athanasius, both of the 4th century, both make reference to it, but it was lost from sight, only to be rediscovered in Constantinople in 1875 and re-published in 1883. It either depended upon the gospel of Matthew for much of its teaching, or grew out of the same oral tradition of the Judeo-Christian community in Syria or Palestine, i.e., the church in Jerusalem. It is definitely a Semitic document.

THE DIDACHE

Didache is a word in Greek that means "Teaching". This treatise also went under the name, "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles".

The text, parts of which may have constituted the first written catechism, has two main sections dealing with 1. Christian moral instruction, probably for baptismal candidates, and 2. Church Order, including rituals, notably baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as instructions relating to prophets, bishops, deacons and evangelists.

You might wonder, with such an early origin and referred to as it was as coming from the Apostles, why it was not accepted into the Church as inspired Scripture. The reason is that, though it was widely used, the attribution to the apostles was dismissed early on as spurious by the Church. It was considered more a manual of preparation for baptism. It should be noted however, that a work based on it, called the Didascalia is accepted by the Ethiopian church to this day as part of their canon of Scripture.

So what does it teach, and what can we learn about the early church from it, that is, the church at the end of the first century?

TEXT—hand out full text.

Notes on the text:

1. Note the strong moral teaching of the first section and that much of it comes from Matthew, Exodus and the ten commandments.
2. Chapter 2: This is a direct challenge to the Greco-Roman practices of the day: "*You shall not practice magic; you shall not practice witchcraft; you shall not murder a child*

by abortion nor kill that which is born.” This teaching was reviled by the Greeks and Romans.

3. Chapter 3: Further warnings concerning Greco-Roman religious practices: *“My child, be not an observer of omens (the flight of birds), since it leads to idolatry. Be neither an enchanter, nor an astrologer (practice astrological calculations), nor a (magical) purifier, nor be willing to look at these things...”*

Now for character: *“Be neither self-willed nor evil-minded, for out of all these blasphemies are engendered. Rather be meek, since the meek shall inherit the earth. Be long-suffering and pitiful and guileless and gentle and good and always trembling at the words which you have heard.”*

4. Chapter...?: the Poor: *“Do not turn away from him who is in want; rather share all things with your brother, and do not say that they are your own. For it you are partakers in that which is immortal, how much more in things which are mortal?”*

5. Chapter 7. Baptism: *“Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if you have no living (or running) water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whoever else can; but you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.”* So, a variety of means of baptism was used, but running water was preferred where possible. Note that Jesus and John the Baptist used the Jordan River.

6. Chapter 8: The Lord’s Prayer. It is almost exactly, word for word, as it is found in the Gospel of Matthew, along with the ending doxology that Protestants use today: *“for thine is the power and the glory for ever and ever.”*

7. Chapter 9: The Lord’s Supper. Instructions were given as to how to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, with the prayers to be used along with these instructions: *“Let no one drink of your Eucharist unless they have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, ‘Give not that which is holy to the dogs’”* (again, the Gospel of Matthew.)

8. Chapter 10. This is a beautiful prayer, following Communion: *“We thank you, Holy Father, for your name which You caused to tabernacle in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which You made known to us through Jesus your Servant; to You be the glory for ever. You, Master Almighty, did create all things for Your name’s sake; You gave food and drink to men for enjoyment that they might give thanks to You; but to us You did freely give spiritual food and drink and life eternal through Your Servant. Before all things we thank You that you are mighty. To you be the glory for ever. Remember, Lord, your Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in your love, and gather it from the four winds, sanctified for your kingdom which you have prepared for it; for to you belongs the power and the glory for ever. Let grace come; and let this world pass away. Hosanna to god the Son of David! If any one is*

Holy, let him come; if any one is not so, let him repent. Maranatha! Amen” (compare the book of Revelation).

9. Chapter 11: Note that there were at this time, itinerant evangelists, prophets and missionaries (apostles) who came through the Christian communities evangelizing and teaching. The Church was ordered to receive them. But some were spurious, coming to live off the community or try to throw their own weight around. How was the Church to know which were authentic and which were not? What were they to do? Here is what was written:

“Let every apostle who comes to you be received as the Lord. But he shall not remain more than a day; or tow days, if there’s a need. But if he remains three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle goes away, let him take nothing but bread until he leaves. If he asks for money he is a false prophet...and every prophet who teaches the truth, but does not do what he teaches, is a false prophet...But whoever says in the Spirit, ‘Give me money, or something else,’ you shall not listen to him. But if he tells you to give for others’ sake who are in need, let no one judge him.”

10. Chapter 14: Sunday Worship: *“But every Lord’s Day gather yourselves together and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions that our sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who is at odds with his fellow come together with you, until they are reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned.”*

11. The last short section deals with the Lord’s coming again and is a warning about the anti-Christ or *“world deceiver as Son of God, who shall do signs and wonders, and the earth shall be delivered into his hands, and he shall do iniquitous things...but those who endure in their faith shall be saved...”*

CLEMENT OF ROME

A final word about Clement of Rome whom we visited very briefly a moment ago. Clement, as I mentioned, was first or second bishop of the Church in Rome, and is mentioned in Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians. He writes a long letter to the Church at Corinth which is still experiencing problems, as in Paul’s day. When I say long, it is long. My French edition is 50 pages long. Clement quotes extensively from the Psalms, makes frequent reference to Genesis, Exodus, Job, Proverbs, Malachi, as well as Isaiah, at one point quoting the whole of Isaiah 53 in reference to Jesus, all of which is to say that the Scriptures at this time were still largely those of the Old Testament though he does also quote from Luke and Matthew.

In reference to Jesus he makes such statements as these, which sound, I think you’ll find, both like the Epistle to the Hebrews and Pauline teaching:

“Let us fix our eyes on the blood of Christ and learn how precious it is in the eyes of God his Father, poured out for our salvation, he has offered to the entire world the grace of repentance (page 43).

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“And we who have been called in Christ Jesus by this same good will, it is not by ourselves that we have been justified, nor by wisdom, neither by our intelligence, or by our piety, nor by our works and holiness of heart, but by faith; because it is by faith that all men have been justified since the beginning, by Almighty God, to whom be glory for ever and ever, amen!” (page 61).

He ended his epistle in this way: “May the grace of our Lord Jesus be with you and with all the elect whom God has called in every place by Him, to whom be the honor, the glory, the power, the majesty, the eternal throne, from the beginning to the end of the age. Amen.” (page 89).

Roman Circus