

## THE DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY

The Third Century – Part II

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### I. THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

I thought it would be good now take a look at the spread of Christianity and give some consideration as to why the church grew.

- Around 200 A.D or before the first Christian kingdom came into being. **It was the country of Osrhoene, often known as Edessa**, which was the name of its capitol city. Its king Abgar IX (179-186 AD) converted and made his kingdom Christian. It was a border kingdom to the Empire of Persia and Armenia, sometimes ruled by Rome, sometimes by Armenia, sometimes by the Persians. It occupied at the time the area of land between the Mediterranean on the West, the Black sea to the North, and the Caspian to the North East situated on the **Euphrates River**. The capitol, Edessa, was right at the northern tip of what is now Syria, the south eastern part of what is now Turkey. Its language was Syriac, or Syrian. It was Christian very early and produced many scholars, including Tatian, to whom we referred last week. **Osrhoene, or Edessa**, was later to play a role in the Crusades of the Middle Ages. The Diatessaron, or harmony of the four Gospels that Tatian made was the only Gospel used by the Syriac speaking church until the 5<sup>th</sup> century when the Diatessaron was condemned and the four original Gospels were re-instated. Another of its cities was **Nisibis**, further east, which became a place of scholarship and missionary enterprise for centuries.
- The Kingdom of **Adiabene**, to the East of Edessa, converted early as well. Its capitol was **Arbela**, near the **Tigris River, above Tekrit** in Iraq where Saddam Hussein was born, which also became a center of Christian scholarship and missionary activity sending missionaries to the north and east, and doing so for centuries. These were Assyrians. Though it was being evangelized already at the turn of the first century, by 200 it was almost entirely Christian.
- **Egypt**: We have already seen how Alexandria in Egypt was a major Christian center already in the second century. By the third it was a powerful minority. Already in the second century, our faith was spreading into the country areas, and its teaching was being translated into Coptic, the native Egyptian tongue.
- **Ethiopia** adopted Christianity in 325 A.D., but the church already had a strong presence in the mid-third.
- **Nubia**: which occupied that land on the upper Nile from Aswan down to present day Khartoum in Sudan, probably had a church solidly implanted by the third century, though it did not officially convert and become a Christian Kingdom until 540 A.D. That Christian Kingdom lasted nearly a thousand years.
- **Gaul**: We have already seen how, in the second century, around **178, A.D. Irenaeus**, bishop of Lyons, a city on the Rhone in what is now southeast France, was exercising influence throughout the Christian world by his writings. The church was strong enough to generate riots by its pagan opponents.
- In **Bythinia**, on the northern coast of what is now Turkey, pagans were neglecting the temples and vendors of sacrificial animals were finding few buyers. That was in the

year 111 when the governor Pliny wrote to Trajan.

- **Carthage** in North Africa had very strong church—we'll talk about this in a minute
- **Spain:** Both Tertullian and Irenaeus make reference to the church in Spain, and by the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century, we have evidence to suggest that Christianity was already a strong minority in that country.
- **Persia:** The presence of the church in Persia was huge. More about that in a minute.

So Christianity was spreading quickly. One of the theologians of Edessa, a teacher named Bardaisan, wrote around 196: *“What shall we say of the new race of Christians whom the Messiah has caused to arise in every place and in all climates by his coming? For look, wherever we may be, we are all called Christians after the one name of the Messiah. On one day, the first of the week, we assemble ourselves together.... Wherever they are, and in whatever place they are found, the local laws cannot force them to give up the law of their Christ.”* (*Dialogue on Fate*) (page 45, Moffett, volume I).

**So: How can we explain the rapid expansion of Christianity?** There are many factors, not least of which was the inner vitality of the message of the Gospel itself: forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, historical meaning from Adam to Christ, the teaching of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit. But today, I'd like to take a look at one or two chapters in Rodney Stark's the Rise of Christianity, to attempt to show the power of the Christian ethic itself, and what an shining light it was. We'll look first at the role of women; then at the role of Epidemics in the spread of Christianity. Finally, we'll have a look at a life that may not have been as uncommon as it appears, and the role that it played in bringing pagans to faith in Christ. The man I'll be referring to is named Gregory Thaumaturgus bishop of Pontis in what is now Northeast Turkey.

Let's begin with the place and the protection of women in the Church

## II. THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Women were one of the primary agents of evangelization in the church. For reasons that will soon become apparent, the Christian faith was hugely attractive to women. Why so? Let's dig into the Greco-Roman world of the time and try to catch something of what life was like for women and how the ethic of the Church changed things for them.

Some facts:

1. In the Roman and Greek world, men far, far outnumbered women. Dio Cassius, writing about the year 200 attributed the declining population of the empire to the extreme shortage of females. It is estimated that, in Asia Minor, North Africa, and Italy there were some 140 males for every 100 females. Why is that? Females were so often killed at birth. This was not only legal, but considered morally accepted by all social classes. Both Plato and Aristotle recommended infanticide as legitimate state policy; and the Roman Senate agreed. For that reason, more than one daughter per family was rarely reared. In any one hundred families, only one would raise more than one daughter. Here is a letter written by a man named Hilarion to his pregnant wife Alis:

*“Know that I am still in Alexandria...I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive payment I shall send it up to you. If you are delivered of a child [before I come home,] if it is a boy keep it, if a girl discard it. You have sent me word, 'don't forget me.' How can I forget you? I beg you not to worry.”* (Stark, pages 97-98).

*“During recent excavations of a villa in the port city of Ashkelon, (archaeologists) made a gruesome discovery in the sewer that ran under the bathhouse....The sewer had been clogged with refuse sometime in the sixth century A.D. When we excavated and dry-sieved the desiccated sewage, we found the bones ... of nearly 100 little babies apparently murdered and thrown into the sewer.”* (Stark, 118).

**In the church, however, infanticide was strictly forbidden. It was considered murder.**

2. But infanticide was not the only reason women were far less numerous. Another was the female mortality rate due to infections related to forced abortions. Any husband could command his wife to abort her child, and so women were forced to use slightly less than lethal doses of poison, taken orally or introduced into the uterus, or horrendous contraptions to hold the uterus open, with blades, and so forth. This not only caused infertility, but was a major cause of death of women due to miscalculations as to the dosage of poison consumed, and infections related to surgical removal. Men, you see, were not eager to be burdened down with children, let alone wives. Caesar Augustus had to pass laws forcing men to marry because so many men, especially in the upper classes preferred to stay single acknowledging that they could not have a really harmonious life with wives. It was much easier to go to prostitutes who could be had for two pennies in the marketplace. (Stark, 117). So if they did marry, one child was probably enough. Was a wife pregnant with another? Command them to abort! And if the wife died, you could always go in to a prostitute or purchase a mistress.

**In the Church, however, abortions were forbidden.** And husbands were commanded to *“love their wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself”* (Ephesians 5.25-28). And joining oneself to a prostitute was allowing evil to enter God's holy temple, one's body, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

3. In Greco-Roman society, the law classified a woman as a child, regardless of her age, and therefore the legal property of some man at all stages in her life. Males could divorce their wives by simply ordering a wife out of the household. Moreover, if a woman was seduced or raped, her husband was legally compelled to divorce her.

**In the Church, however, “fidelity, without divorce, was expected of every Christian.** Moreover, the earliest church councils ruled that twice-married Christians could not hold church office...The Church also rejected the double standard that gave men sexual license, but required women to be chaste. *Christian men, not just women,* were urged to remain virgins until marriage, and extramarital sex was condemned as adultery” (Stark, 104).

4. In Greco-Roman society, women had no legal status relating to property she might inherit from her parents. “Should they be widowed, Pagan women faced great social pressure to remarry; Augustus even had widows fined if they failed to remarry within two years. Of course, when a pagan widow did remarry, she lost all of her inheritance—it became the property of her new husband.”

**In the Church, however, widowhood was highly respected and remarriage was, if anything, mildly discouraged.** Thus not only were **well-to-do Christian widows enabled to keep their husband's estate**, the church stood ready to sustain poor widows, allowing them a choice as to whether or not to remarry. So, for example, in **251 A.D.**, Cornelius, the Bishop of Rome, sent a letter to Bishop Fabius of Antioch, in which he reported that more than **fifteen hundred widows and distressed persons** were in the care of the local congregation, which may have numbered about 30,000 (Stark, 104). **And women had status**, as Paul's letters mentioning **female deacons and even apostles attests.**

5. In Greco-Roman society, girls married young, often before puberty. Plutarch reported that Romans gave their girls in marriage when they were twelve years old, or even younger. Dio Cassius wrote that girls were considered to have reached marriageable age on completion of their twelfth year and Roman law set 12 as the minimum age at which girls could marry, but we know that at least 10% were married at age 11 (Stark, 105-6). Did girls like this? Plutarch thought it a cruel custom and reported the hatred and fear of girls forced contrary to nature.”

6. **In the Church, however,** (and we know this from statistical studies of Roman inscriptions), **some 32% of Christian girls married between 15 and 17, and another 48% waited until 18 or over. That's 80%.** (Stark, 106-107). The Church, apparently, cared about the girls themselves and their own desires.

Is it any surprise that women found the church an attractive place? And the teaching of the N.T. a gift of unexpected joy? As often happens in such conditions, women brought their husbands along with them into the Church. Without abortions and infanticide, the fertility rate among women increased. With the Christian exhortation to “multiply and fill the earth”, whereas the population of the Empire was in constant decline, the church grew constantly in number.

### III. EPIDEMICS

Any other clues as to the reasons for the growth of the Church? Well, here's one that is not widely known. It involves the Christian response to epidemics in the Empire.

Many of us have heard of the **black plague** that swept Christian Europe beginning about **1348**, killing anywhere from a 30 to 60% of the population. Something like 100 million people in the world died from it.

But few of us know that epidemics were already a recurring problem at the time of the Romans and probably account, better than decadence, for its fall. Already in the year **165 A.D** during the reign of **Marcus Aurelius**, a pandemic swept the Empire, quite possibly **smallpox**, killing from **a quarter to a third** of the population. Marcus Aurelius himself died from it in Vienna in

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the year 180 A.D. Contemporary chroniclers spoke of carts of the dead being brought out from cities and villages. Then again in the year **251 A.D.**, another epidemic, believed to be **measles**, chewed through the population, this time striking farmers and country people as well as city dwellers. Some 5,000 a day were dying in Rome alone. Interestingly, such Church fathers as Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (more on him in a minute, if we have time), Eusebius, the father of Church History, and Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, all believed that these pandemics contributed heavily to the growth of the church. Why might that be? Now we don't have time today to go into detail on the reasons, but I will outline briefly, three reasons that Rodney Stark gives in his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, in his chapter, *Epidemics, Networks, Conversion*. They are the following:

1. The epidemics overwhelmed the abilities of traditional Greco-Roman religions and philosophy to provide answers and give meaning to what was happening—the questions of “why?” and “what next?”, whereas Christianity was able to provide a framework of meaning and hope that was eminently satisfactory.
2. The Christian values preached and lived out by the Church of love, charity, and community solidarity shone like the sun in the midst of all this darkness. And not only did this allow them to cope better, but they *survived better*—one would say, almost miraculously in the eyes of the surrounding world, so that, by the time an epidemic had passed through, they made up a significantly higher proportion of the population.
3. Lastly, epidemics loosened the social bonds that tied individuals to existing religious networks, allowing them, without fear of rejection from their families, to adopt new social networks. This last is an important point, because many Christian sociologists today believe that what prevents Muslims from converting to Christianity today is the fear of ostracism from existing social networks within their communities. But what if those networks are all but destroyed? Then people are free to create new bonds and commitments; to join new networks. And what better than those which provide better meaning, and greater virtue and love? In other words, the Church?

Do we have any proof that this is actually what was happening? Yes we do.

With regard to the question of meaning and hope (1), Christians (Bishops Cyprian of Carthage and Dionysius of Alexandria), in the midst of all the dying spoke of the immense joy awaiting those who died in Christ, and of how this life was merely a testing ground for the next., so that, whereas, they noted, pagan populations around them were filled with terror, Christians found consolation and were filled with hope.

Even better, with reference to point two and Christian virtue in the midst of all this darkness, whereas such famous physicians as **Galen** fled to the countrysides to escape the evil, Christians stayed put, and not only ministered to their own, thus saving many, many lives, but ministered to the pagan populations around them. And when they died as a result of contracting the diseases, they counted it martyrdom and a glorious death. Listen to what **Bishop Dionysus of Alexandria** writes at the height of the second pandemic around 260 A.D.

*“Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves*

*and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.... The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.” (Stark, page 82).*

A century later, in the mid fourth century, the apostate **Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate**, who tried to bring the Empire back to paganism from Christianity, wrote to pagan priests, encouraging them to do as well as Christians in caring for the poor and sick. He wrote: “The impious Galileans (i.e. Christians) support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us” and complained that the pagans needed to equal the virtues of Christians, for Christian growth was caused by their “moral character and their benevolence toward strangers (83-4).”

Pagan and Christian writers were unanimous in saying this. **Tertullian** wrote in his Apology (defense of the faith), “*It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Only look,' they say, 'look how they love one another!'*” (87).

**Why did Christians act in this way?** Well, imagine being a convert to Christianity, and hearing Jesus' words in Matthew 25 for the first time, and taking them literally:

*“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me...Truly, I say to you , as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”*

And then remember what pagan religion was like. It wasn't as though Greeks and Romans knew nothing about charity; but their *gods*, their **gods imposed no ethical standards**. All the *gods* cared about was *getting the rituals right*: having the proper sacrifices and prayers addressed to them at the proper times. Ethics had nothing to do with the practice of their religion as the treatment of women, children, the sick and the practice of sexual mores attests. **Is it any wonder, that pagan people, whose lives and social networks were disrupted by epidemics, turned to the one shining light in the midst of them, whose founder and leader had given his life for them?**

#### IV. GREGORY THAUMATURGUS

Lest I leave you with the impression that ethical and sociological reasons were solely responsible for the spread of Christianity, it would be good to tell you about the Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus, one of the students of Origen while he taught at Caesarea. It can only be assumed that his life mirrors that of other bishops, though he was obviously an exemplar of particular giftedness as his name suggests. His name, Thaumaturgus is a Greek Latinized word

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meaning “wonder-worker” for the many miracles that God performed through him over the course of his ministry. And he left an enduring reputation in all of Asia-Minor.

Gregory was born at Neo-Caesarea (the capital and major city of Pontus in Asia-Minor) around 213 A.D. Pontus was a province on the northeastern border of what we now know as Turkey, that is, the southeastern shore of the Black Sea.

Gregory was born into a pagan family and was introduced to the Christian religion only at the age of fourteen, after the death of his father. He had a brother Athenodorus, and on the advice of one of their tutors, the young men went to study law at the law-school of Berytus (Beirut), then one of the four or five most famous schools in the Greek speaking world. About this time, their sister's husband was appointed legal counsel to the Roman Governor of Palestine, so the two brothers had an occasion to act as an escort to their sister as far as Caesarea in Palestine. ON arrival in that town they learned that the celebrated scholar Origen resided there. Curiosity led them to hear and converse with Origen, and his irresistible charm did the rest. Soon both the boys forgot all about Beirut and Roman law, and gave themselves up to the great Christian teacher who gradually won them over to the Christian faith. He became enamored of Christian philosophy.

When Gregory returned to Pontus however, it was with the intention of practicing law. His plan, however, was again laid aside, for he was soon consecrated bishop of his native Neo-Caesarea by the Metropolitan of Pontus. This fact illustrates in an interesting way the growth of the hierarchy in the primitive Church; the Christian community at Caesarea was very small, being only seventeen souls, and yet it was given a bishop. Ancient canonical documents indicate that it was possible for a community of even ten Christians to have their own bishop. When Gregory was consecrated he was forty years old, and he ruled his diocese for thirteen years.

Gregory was an extremely effective evangelist, because Gregory of Nyssa, writing two generations later, records that Thaumaturgus began with only seventeen Christians in his little flock, but at his death there remained only seventeen pagans in the whole city of Neo-Caesarea. One can only assume that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon him, and the many miracles which won for him the title of wonder-worker were a major reason. We also know that to attract people to festivals in honour of Christian martyrs, Gregory organized amusements that might appeal to pagans, who were accustomed to religious ceremonies that combined solemnity with pleasure and games. (see article on Gregory in Wikipedia).

Gregory of Nyssa is our principle source for the life of Thaumaturgus, though we do have three others. Nyssa's grandmother was converted by Thaumaturgus, and so we can assume what he says is reliable. Here is one miracle that he records in his Panegyric on the Life of Gregory the Wonder-worker. It is interesting because this particular kind of miracle is typical of what missiologists today call “Power Encounters”.

*“Upon arriving in the city at evening, a violent rainstorm forced Gregory into a pagan temple. The temple was renowned because one of the demons revered there was accustomed to show himself to the temple's pagan priests, and a certain prophet among them was empowered to*

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*utter oracles by that spirit. Gregory entered the temple with several companions and they purified the ari by making the sign of the cross. He remained there during the night and spent the entire night in prayer and the singing of hymns. He resumed these prayers at daybreak, but when the temple's custodian arrived and began to perform his rites to the demons, he could not even approach the temple claiming that Gregory was somehow blocking the way. The pagan priest then attempted to invite demons into the temple using sacrifices of purification and sacred rituals. However, his efforts were ineffectual cause the demons were unable to respond.*

*Overcome with rage, the priest seized Gregory and threatened to bring him to the civic leaders. He wanted to reveal what Thaumaturgus had done to the king because a Christian who was hostile to the gods had entered the temple. He forbade him to enter pagan temples and shrines. The priest's anger and threats only encouraged Gregory who responded that he had the privilege of entering these places anytime he wished as well as being able to prove Christ's power over these spirits. The temple keeper was so struck by Gregory's assurance and calm that the priest again invoked the demons to enter the temple. They did not respond. With that, Gregory snatched a piece of the priest's little book, wrote some words on it, and angrily commanded the demons to enter. The words he wrote were these: **Gregory to Satan: Enter.***

*The priest placed his little book on the altar as was his custom, offered burnt sacrifices and various types of rites, only to see once again what he had seen before: the demons could not remain in the temple. At this, he realized that Gregory was endowed with a power stronger than that of the demons. So he plead with Gregory to teach him more about his power and about God. Gregory told him that what he had done was possible, not through reason but by faith in Christ. With that the priest begged to see a miracle which would strengthen him in faith. So on the spot, Gregory performed one. When the temple guardian pointed out a huge stone which was unmovable by human means, Gregory charged the stone to move to a place designated by the temple's keeper. Once accomplished, the priest forsook his priesthood and attached himself to Gregory and the Christian faith.” (From **Panegyric on the Life of Gregory the Wonder-worker.**)*

There was a time when this kind of thing would have been accounted legend, and we might so consider it today were it not for the fact that there are innumerable acounts today of similar miracles occurring throughout India, Africa, South American and Indonesia, in areas where Christian preaching is encountering animism and pagan religious systems. We've heard first hand accounts of this in Mali. And from Indian evangelists in the Perspectives course here at West side. They seem to occur when the Gospel is moving into new areas.

QUESTION: So what do you think of this? Believable? Do you know of any such stories?