



# A Concise History of the Christian Church

From the Apostles to the  
Council of Nicea 325 A.D.

R.A. Baker

A Concise History of the Christian Church:  
From the Apostles to the Council of Nicea

By R.A. Baker

Copyright © 2005

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publishers, except by a reviewer or in an academic setting.

Cover photos were taken in St Andrews, Scotland and are the personal property of R.A. Baker. Photos from left to right: stained glass window in St Salvador's Chapel, Cathedral ruins and the entrance arch to St Mary's Divinity School, all in St Andrews.

ISBN: 978-0-615-61045-0

# Contents

Introduction	4
1 The Christian Church is Born	6
2 The Apostle Paul and the Gentile Outreach	11
3 A New Era Begins	20
4 The New Testament Canon	23
5 Roman Persecutions	39
6 The Apostolic Fathers	42
7 The Spirit of Martyrdom	48
8 The Issue of Second Repentance	50
9 Heresies and “Heretics”	53
10 The Apologists	59
11 The Persecution of Severus	66
12 The Alexandrians	67
13 Persecution, Baptism and Bishops	71
14 The Issue of the Trinity	74
15 The Empire Reorganized	81
16 Politics of the Roman Empire	83
17 Persecution under Diocletian	85
18 Constantine Comes to Power	88
19 The Church Divided	90
20 Constantine and Faith	95
21 The Council of Nicea - 325AD	98
22 Conclusion	106
Recommended Reading	109

# Introduction

Christianity begins with the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Christian Church history begins on the Day of Pentecost. These Jewish Christians adopt a messianic theology and continue to follow the Law of Moses. Hellenistic Jews from all over the Roman empire were among the initial converts - conflict soon surfaced between the Palestinian Jews and the Hellenistic Jews. This represented the beginning of the church's struggle to reach out beyond its original culture and race - the Great Commission.

The Hellenized Jews failed to take the gospel to the Gentiles in any appreciable way. It took a special man, Saul of Tarsus, a Hellenized Jew, to aggressively take the gospel to the Gentiles. Saul becomes "the apostle Paul" and is attacked on every side: the Jews attack him, the followers of James attack him, and the Romans arrest him.

In the early 60's, under Nero, the Roman government begins orchestrated persecution of Christians. By the 60's the Christian sect, especially under Paul, had separated from Judaism. In 62 both Peter and Paul are executed in Rome. Roman persecution will sporadically occur throughout the second, third, and the beginning of the fourth centuries.

In the late 60's Jewish Zealots in Jerusalem rise up in rebellion against the Romans. In 70 Titus, son of the

emperor Vespasian, commands more than 60,000 Roman troops to wipe out these Zealots. The Jewish Temple is burned to the ground. This event marks a critical point in the development of Christianity - the struggle of the Church against Judaism almost completely disappears. From 70 moving forward Christianity becomes mainly a Gentile dominated movement.

Early gospel accounts had already begun to be circulated by 70. Mark's gospel was probably written first, followed soon by the accounts of Matthew and Luke. Paul's various letters (written mainly from around 50-60) were also beginning to be circulated. Post apostolic writings that eventually do NOT become part of the New Testament canon attest to a growing negative attitude towards Judaism after 70. By the close of the first century all the documents which are now contained in the New Testament had been written.

The first century ended with the persecution under Emperor Domitian (81-96). This is the historical backdrop for John's *Revelation*. The writer is urging fellow believers to stand firm against "Babylon," the Roman empire.

# The Primitive Church 30-100 A.D.

## 1 The Christian Church is Born

### **The Initial “Jesus” Movement**

Immediately after the resurrection, on the day of Pentecost, a new Jewish sect is firmly established. According to Acts a supernatural event takes place that draws a crowd of Jews who have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the great festival. Something like “tongues of fire” appear on over 100 believers; Jews from all over the Roman empire hear the message of the gospel in their familiar language, then hear Peter preach, and a few thousand of them respond.

This early sect of Jews continued to observe the Sabbath, but also met together on the first day, Sunday, referring to it as “the Lord’s day.” These early Jesus followers were all Jews, many of them continued in strict observance of the Law of Moses. Even some from the sect of the Pharisees came to faith (Acts 15:5).

Even though Luke gives us a picture of harmony in this primitive Church, he also gives some hints that it was not trouble-free.

## **Early Conflict**

In Acts 6 we get the first sign of internal trouble. The Hebrew widows were being cared for while the Grecian widows were neglected. As we mentioned above, Jews from all over the empire had made pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the great festival of Pentecost and had witnessed the strange, yet supernatural events described by Luke. Many had trusted in Jesus as the promised Messiah and made the decision to stay in Judea rather than make the trek back home (it is possible that these early believers were waiting for the apocalyptic return of Jesus).

## **Hellenized Jews**

Large numbers of Jews lived outside Palestine in the first century. These are the Jews of the Diaspora, the “scattering,” or “exile” of the Jews throughout the Greek world - first in 722 B.C. when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, then in 588 B.C. the Chaldeans conquered the southern kingdom of Judah. The victors in both instances forced the Jews to be relocated, thus diluting their national and cultural strength. Over the next few centuries the Hebrew language was neglected and forgotten by these exiled Jews. Most diaspora Jews of the first century spoke Greek. In fact, sometime in the third century BC the Jewish scriptures (Old Testament, OT) were translated from Hebrew into Greek so that these Greek-speaking Jews could hear and understand the Law of Moses. This famous translation is known as the Septuagint (or LXX), a reference to the legendary story that 72 scribes translated the various texts in a 72 day period with a divinely inspired perfection of agreement.

The Jews of the diaspora were referred to as “Hellenized” (Greek influenced) by the politically important, Hebrew-speaking Jews of Palestine. Palestinian Jews despised these Hellenized Jews, believing they had compromised their religion. They could not speak Hebrew, God’s language, nor could they understand the Law of Moses when read in Hebrew. When Hellenized Jews came to Jerusalem they were urged to attend Greek speaking synagogues so they could hear and understand Moses being read. They were not wanted in the Temple. We know that the Jews hated Samaritans, and were not fond of Gentiles. Luke tells us this prejudice found its way into the primitive church - Hellenized widows were being neglected.

## **Stephen**

According to Luke, the apostles solve this problem by appointing seven men to new leadership positions. If you look closely you will find that these men are all Hellenized Jews. The apostles apparently realized that the minority class needed representation in the leadership of the church. In the next chapter we find Stephen (one of the seven deacons) preaching aggressively against the Jewish leadership and, more importantly, against Temple worship. Hellenized Jews living outside Judea were forced to find a more spiritualized way for obeying the Law of Moses since they did not have access to the Temple nor to the sacrificial system. This spiritualized Judaism is attested to in the writings of Philo of Alexandria and in the writings of the Qumran community (The Dead Sea Scrolls). In the next few chapters of Acts we see these Hellenized Jews taking the gospel to Samaritans, Ethiopians, and other non-Palestinian Jews. The Great Commission is being extended, but it should be noted that non-Jews continue to be

excluded by these Hellenized evangelists (Acts 11:19). It takes a special person to push the infant church outside the Jewish boundaries - Saul of Tarsus is that person.

## **“Palestine” in the Ancient World**

In the conflict between Palestinian and Hellenized Jews was recorded in Luke's New Testament *Acts*.

Some people have questioned the use of “Palestinian” Jew, suggesting that the term “Palestine” was not biblical. Here is an example of how this thought is articulated:

*It is clear that the Bible never uses the term “Palestine” to refer to the Holy Land as a whole, and Bible maps that refer to “Palestine” in the Old or New Testament are, at best, inaccurate, and, at worst, are a conscious denial of the biblical name of Israel....It appears that Bible-believing Christians have either knowingly or unwittingly followed the world, pagans and haters of Israel in calling Israel by the anti-Israel term “Palestine.”*

### **Palestine Used by Ancient Writers**

Several ancient Greek writers use the term “Palestine,” [Παλαιστίνη, Palaistine] referring to the broad region which included Judea. Aristotle, Herodotus, Philo the Jew, and Plutarch all use this term.

The citation from Aristotle is very interesting - he is describing what he has heard about what we call the Dead Sea,

*Again if, as is fabled, there is a lake in Palestine, such that if you bind a man or beast and throw it in it floats and does not sink, this would bear out what we have said. They say that this lake is so bitter and salt that no fish live in it and that if you soak clothes in it and shake them it cleans them.*

*Meteorology II.3*

This is a clear example of using the term in a broad sense that includes Israel.

Herodotus, speaking of circumcision, gives us an interesting text in *Euterpe* that includes Syria in Palestine,

*The Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine themselves confess that they learnt the custom of the Egyptians; and the Syrians...say that they have recently adopted it from the Colchians. Now these are the only nations who use circumcision, and it is plain that they all imitate herein the Egyptians.*  
*Euterpe* II.104

Philo is especially interesting since he was a contemporary of Jesus and a Jew. Speaking of the Essenes,

*Moreover Palestine and Syria too are not barren of exemplary wisdom and virtue, which countries no slight portion of that most populous nation of the Jews inhabits. There is a portion of those people called Essenes, in number something more than four thousand in my opinion, who derive their name from their piety...because they are above all men devoted to the service of God, not sacrificing living animals, but studying rather to preserve their own minds in a state of holiness and purity.*  
*Every Good Man Is Free* XII.75

Philo is also interesting because he represents the Hellenized Jews - Greek Jews scattered around the Roman Empire, unable to worship according to the Laws of Moses. Philo lived in Alexandria, Egypt with around 1 million Jews, the largest Jewish population outside of Jerusalem. Notice that he refers to “Palestine” as a region that includes the Jews.

The biblical writers *rarely* refer to the region as a whole. Moderns who want to refer to the region as “Judea” or “Israel” fail to appreciate that the other regions did NOT refer to their land as “Judea.” At the time of Jesus, this region included at least two other “nations,” or distinct people-groups (Syria and Samaria) that did NOT refer to their land as “Judea.”

For modern scholarship on this topic:

Cohen, Getzel M., “The Hellenistic Settlements in Syria, the Red Sea Basin, and North Africa,” p.35-37. Also Shahar, Yuval, “Josephus Geographicus: The Classical Context of Geography in Josephus.” Shahar shows that Strabo and Josephus describe Palestine in three regions: the Lake of Gennesar, the valley of Jericho, and the Dead Sea.

## 2 The Apostle Paul and the Gentile Outreach

### **Outreach to the Gentiles**

According to *Acts*, a young man named Saul was present (and may have had been in charge) when Stephen was stoned. *Acts* gives an account of this man as he travels through the region “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). Saul embodies the earliest opposition to the primitive church as a Jewish sect. The radical view that Jesus was the promised Messiah, coupled with the anti-Temple worship preached by the Hellenized Jewish believers, gave rise to a militant opposition. It appears that some of the existing Jewish leadership made an attempt to stamp out this new sect and Saul appears to have been a leader in this movement.

We know this man as the apostle Paul, author of 13 letters within the New Testament (NT). Saul, who later changes his name to Paul, is himself a Hellenized Jew. Paul reveals very little of his biography in his writings; it is the *Acts* account where we learn that he grew up in Tarsus (northeast of Syria) and was later brought to Jerusalem for his education. One important piece of evidence pointing to Paul being a Hellenized Jew comes from his quotations of the NT - his text is the LXX rather than the Hebrew version.

## **Conversion of Paul**

In his own words, Paul tells us “I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.” (Gal. 1:13) On his way to Damascus he was confronted by the risen Jesus in a heavenly vision. According to the three separate accounts in *Acts*, Saul found himself on the ground, blinded by the intensity of a heavenly light. The risen Jesus gave Saul a commission to “be a light to the Gentiles.” This Saul was to propel the infant church to fulfill the Great Commission by taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

According to Paul he immediately went to Arabia where the risen Jesus taught him “by revelation” for the next 2-3 years (Gal. 1:11-18). This appears to be a wilderness experience, following in the OT tradition of Moses and Elijah, where Paul receives and attempts to understand his calling. Paul says that the leadership in Jerusalem recognized this calling and gave him “the right hand of fellowship.” (Gal. 2:9)

In Acts 13:1,2 Luke recounts the missionary commission of Saul and Barnabas by the church in Antioch. In this account their initial missionary focus is primarily on the Jews. Only after repeated rejection do they announce that they will turn to the Gentiles. Once they make this decision the intensity of persecution increases. Where does their opposition come from? The Judaizers, a sect of early Jewish believers, wanted Gentiles to be circumcised and to follow the Law of Moses.

The first sign of this conflict within the primitive church appears immediately after Peter leads the first Gentiles to faith, the household of Cornelius:

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” Acts 11:1-3

### **The Apostle Paul: in danger from every side**

In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians the apostle describes the opposition he continually faced in order to fulfill his call:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning...in danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from **false brothers** and sisters...many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

2 Cor. 11:24-27 (emphasis added)

To understand Paul’s letters you must first understand that his entire ministry is forged in conflict. Luke gives us an overview in Acts that shows Paul and his companions being opposed in almost every city, many times being attacked and chased out. Who is opposing Paul?

We begin to get an idea of Paul’s opposition in Acts 15:1-2,5. There are Jews, some Pharisees who have believed, demanding that the Gentiles be circumcised and obey the Laws of Moses. Paul rejects this position and continues to reach Gentiles without pushing the Law on them. For the remainder of the *Acts* record he is chased, beaten, and slandered by Jews. Luke seems to describe these merely as Jews, which leads the casual reader to assume they are persecuting Paul in the same manner

as he himself had done as Saul of Tarsus. But when Paul's writings are carefully studied it seems that he describes his primary opponents as *pseudo* [Gk., "false"], or false brothers.

In *Galatians* Paul is on the attack against those who have led Gentiles to circumcise themselves and place themselves under the Law. In Galatians 2:11ff he relates an important story of when he confronted Peter over a similar issue. Peter had been sharing table fellowship with Gentiles until "certain men came from James." Paul is referring to James, the brother of Jesus. This is the same James who speaks out and seems to make the final decision at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

This group of early Jewish believers is often referred to as "Judaizers." Why is this important? Paul refers to this struggle he has with this group in at least five of his letters; thus, to properly read and understand Paul one must recognize the historical backdrop in each Pauline epistle. How prevalent is this issue? Here are the letters with the most important texts highlighted.

### ***Galatians***

The entire letter to the Galatian church is Paul's reaction to this issue. Some of these Judaizers had convinced some of the Gentile Galatians to get circumcised. In 2:4 he calls these Jews "false brothers" and:

Mark my words. I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

Paul's most animated words come in this letter in 5:12.

## ***Romans***

This is a unique letter for Paul in that he has not yet been among this congregation. He is writing this letter to make sure his ideas are clearly presented to the Romans rather than having his opponents misrepresent him. In 14:14-23 he gives his clear stance on unclean meat, one of the issues where he is not in agreement with the decision of the Jerusalem Council.

Other texts where Paul speaks about the Judaizers:

2 Corinthians 11:1-29

Philippians 3:2-6

1 Timothy 4:1-5

Paul was commissioned by Jesus to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Peter and James recognized that calling (Gal. 2:9), and Paul aggressively pursued his calling even though it cost him greatly. The *Acts* account seems to indicate that the primitive church was not effectively fulfilling the Great Commission until the apostle Paul came on the scene. By the middle of the second century the Christian Church was primarily Gentile.

## **The Jerusalem Council**

Next we find this same sentiment directed at Paul after he and Barnabas have had success reaching Gentiles:

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. Acts 15:1-2

This is what led to the Jerusalem Council, the first known formal gathering of the most strategic leaders in the Church. The primary issue was to define the expectations for the

growing Gentile church. According to Luke, Peter reminds the Council of how God had used him to bring the first Gentiles into the fold. Then Paul and Barnabas shared some of their stories. Next James speaks: other than some vague references in the gospels and one quick reference in Acts 12:17, this is the first mention of James, the brother of Jesus. Yet it seems that James is in charge rather than Peter, the “rock.” It is James who states the decision of the Council: Gentiles would be expected to avoid three types of unclean meat, and to avoid sexual immorality.

### **James, the brother of Jesus**

For the remainder of the history given by Luke, James is barely mentioned again, and Peter is absent. In chapter 21 Paul makes another visit to Jerusalem to meet with the leadership and the only name mentioned is James. Other than the letter attributed to James, he is only mentioned three times in all of the NT. How did James become the leader of the Church in Jerusalem? The answer comes from an early church tradition recorded in Eusebius’ *Church History*. Eusebius quotes from some earlier writings that now only exist through his quotations:

But Clement in the sixth book of his *Hypotyposes* writes thus: “For they say that Peter and James and John after the ascension of our Saviour, as if also preferred by our Lord, strove not after honor, but chose James the Just bishop of Jerusalem.” But the same writer, in the seventh book of the same work, relates also the following things concerning him: “The Lord after his resurrection imparted knowledge to James the Just and to John and Peter, and they imparted it to the rest of the apostles, and the rest of the apostles to the seventy, of whom Barnabas was one.” EH II.1.3-5

But Hegesippus, who lived immediately after the apostles, gives the most accurate account in the fifth book of his *Memoirs*. He writes as follows: “James, the brother of the Lord, succeeded to the government of the Church in

conjunction with the apostles. He has been called the Just by all from the time of our Saviour to the present day....He was holy from his mother's womb; and he drank no wine nor strong drink, nor did he eat flesh. No razor came upon his head; he did not anoint himself with oil, and he did not use the bath. He alone was permitted to enter into the holy place; for he wore not woolen but linen garments. And he was in the habit of entering alone into the temple, and was frequently found upon his knees begging forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like those of a camel...

EH II.23.5-6

We cannot trust these traditions completely, but it is clear that such an early tradition did exist. This indicates the need of the second century fathers to understand and explain how James could have had such a leadership position since he certainly did not have a prominent role in the *Acts* account until chapter 15. Yet it is clear that James held a place of authority. Paul refers to James as a leader (Gal. 1:19; 2:9) and indicates that he had been the recipient of a post-resurrection vision:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. 1 Cor. 15:3-8

The reason for this discussion on James, Paul, and the Jerusalem Council is to understand the struggle of the early church with respect to the issue of the Gentile believers. The first Christians, and the initial leadership, was Jewish. By the late 50's Paul's evangelistic reach into the Gentile world had grown to such an extent that Christianity was becoming more Gentile

than Jewish. It was Paul's custom to appoint leadership in each church when he left for his next destination. As Paul's Gentile churches grew in number, the leadership base grew and the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem probably felt their influence diminishing.

### **Apollos of Alexandria**

In addition to the Pauline outreach there are indications that the gospel was spreading outside immediate apostolic influence. There is no clear record of an apostolic visit to Rome, yet Paul writes a letter to the Romans addressing what appears to be an already stable community with Jewish and Gentile believers. In Acts 18:24-25 a man named Apollos appears on the scene with "a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord." He needed some teaching concerning the Holy Spirit, but appears to have clearly understood the gospel of Jesus. Early tradition recorded in the fragments of Papias tell us that Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, had taken an early copy of his gospel to Egypt.

Another tradition says that Barnabas and Mark actually preached in the streets of Alexandria. These traditions may have been attempts at explaining the Apollos text, but are certainly not impossible. What is clear is that the missionary outreach of the church had taken hold.

### **The Beginning of Persecution**

In Acts 21 Paul visited Jerusalem again to present a financial offering from the Gentile church to the Jerusalem church. Paul meets with James, and in a strange turn of events is arrested (Acts 21:18-36). Paul learns of a plot to kill him and appeals to be handed over to the Romans. The remainder of the *Acts* record follows Paul on his way to Rome as a prisoner, ending with him in Rome under house arrest, waiting to appear before Caesar.

According to an early tradition found in the writings of Clement of Rome, Paul was apparently released from this imprisonment and made his way to “the extreme limit of the west” (1 *Clement* 5.15). This could be a reference to Paul’s stated desire to take the gospel to Spain (Rom. 15:28). It appears that Paul was released from his imprisonment in Rome, traveled west and was arrested again. It was during this second Roman arrest that Paul writes the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 *Timothy*, and *Titus*).

Early traditions recorded by Eusebius indicate that James was executed in Jerusalem by the Sanhedrin in 62. It is not clear what led to this execution, but it must have had something to do with his belief in, and teaching of the Messiah Jesus. A few years later Paul is executed in Rome by Nero. Eusebius reports that he was beheaded, and though the exact date is uncertain, it must have been between 64-67. It is also reported that Peter was executed around the same time, being crucified upside down. The traditions surrounding the persecution of Nero report that a huge fire erupted, burning nine days and destroying at least a quarter of the city. Tacitus reports that Nero blamed the Christians to divert attention away from himself. Blaming the Christians, and having the masses turn their rage on the Christians, was not difficult as this new religion was already being viewed with suspicion. Tacitus tells of the resulting brutal persecution:

Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired...      *Annals* XV.44

### 3 A New Era Begins

#### **The destruction of the Temple**

Only a few years after the persecution of Nero a radical Jewish fringe led a revolt against Roman control. Nero sent general Vespasian to crush the rebellion. Vespasian dispatched an army of approximately 60,000 soldiers that methodically went through northern Judea “restoring order” as they went. Some Jews in the insurrection surrendered and were executed by Zealot leaders. The Roman “invasion” came to a standstill at the capital city, Jerusalem. The Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, establishing an encampment completely encircling the city. Anyone caught trying to escape was executed, sometimes by crucifixion, and hung on the city wall for all to see.

Nero committed suicide in the midst of a Senate takeover and Vespasian was recalled to Rome where he was installed as Emperor. Titus, son of Vespasian, was left in charge of gaining victory in the Jewish revolt. Jerusalem was sacked and the Temple destroyed. Most of the Jews in Jerusalem were killed, committed suicide, or fled. These events were recorded in detail by the Jewish historian Josephus (*War of the Jews* V-VII).

#### **The Jewish Faith is Disabled**

The death of James led to a dispersing of Jewish believers from Jerusalem and a weakening of the Jewish Christian community. The destruction of the Temple, with the consequent end of the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system, brought a virtual close to the Jewish religion. There was a continuation of the religious observances, but it was a mere shadow of what had existed before.

Another apparent result of the demise of Judaism and their historic Temple was a growing rift between what was left of the

Jewish faith, including the early Jewish Christians, and the now dominant Gentile community of believers. This is most clearly seen in John's writings, especially in the *Gospel of John*, which includes confrontations of Jesus with the Jewish leadership not seen in the other gospels. John's writings also contain the clearest language and texts pointing to the deity of Jesus and his co-equality with God the Father.

In *1 John* we also find the language of separation:

Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Messiah. Such a person is the antichrist-denying the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. 1 John 2:22-23

...because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. 1 John 4:1-3

### **Post-Apostolic Writings of the Late First Century and the Early Second Century**

There is another set of early Christian writings that show us this continued movement away from first century Judaism. These writings are referred to as "The Apostolic Fathers." Although a slightly confusing designation, these are documents written by the first generation of Christian leadership **after** the apostles, thus the term "fathers." These documents give us a glimpse into how the church continued to develop after the account in *Acts*. For this present discussion a few examples from these texts will tell their own story; more details of these writings will appear in the discussion of the second century. For now, notice the negative attitude directed at the Jews.

## **The Epistle of Barnabas**

The writer of this document (Barnabas of the NT for now) adopts the basic theme of NT *Hebrews* - everything in the OT has been replaced by something better. *Barnabas*, however, has a consistent negative tone. Where *Hebrews* says the new covenant “is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises,” *Barnabas* says,

Tread no more My courts, not though ye bring with you fine flour. Incense is a vain abomination unto Me, and your new moons and sabbaths I cannot endure.” He has therefore abolished these things, that the new law of our Lord Jesus Christ [might exist]. Barnabas II

Other negative comments concerned circumcision, food laws, the Temple, and the Sabbath.

## **The Letters of Ignatius**

Ignatius brings the separation of the Gentile church from the Jerusalem/Jewish church to completion:

If any one celebrates the passover along with the Jews, or receives the emblems of their feast, he is a partaker with those that killed the Lord and His apostles. Philippians 14.1

Be not deceived with strange doctrines, nor with old fables, which are unprofitable. For if we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace.

Magnesians 8.1

Ignatius warns against a false teaching that portrays Jesus as not truly having a physical body, but that he only *appeared* to have a body. This is known as docetism (Greek - *dokeo*, “to appear”). It is unclear if these docetics were the Jews opposed by Ignatius, but it is possible.

## 4 The New Testament Canon

### Introduction

“How was the New Testament formed?” This is the most commonly asked question directed at me when I speak on university campuses. This is a critical question because the church has always believed the documents found in the New Testament (NT) are “inspired” writings and the most important source documents for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (and Christian doctrine).

I have always been told that the early church fathers used a set of criteria in their decisions regarding the formation of the NT canon. Something like this:

- the author must have either been an apostle or the close associate of an apostle
- the document cannot contradict other “inspired” writings with respect to doctrinal teaching
- the document must share the overall “feel” and “character” of other inspired writings, AND
- it must have been cited by early Christian writers and be accepted by the majority of churches

Although these criteria sound reasonable, one cannot find such a clearly described methodology like this in the patristic writings, nor in any council canon prior to the late fourth century. Many early writings were accepted as “inspired” by some church fathers, yet failed to meet one or more of these conditions. Some of the documents that made it into the NT fail in one or more of these guidelines – the *Revelation* of John

had very little support in the Eastern church even into the late fourth century.

I have also always heard that the NT canon was established at a church council. Although the exact list of NT documents was confirmed at the third Synod of Carthage in 397, this was a relatively small regional council and by this time the 27 NT documents had already been agreed upon by most of the church.

### **A Natural Delivery**

The New Testament was **NOT** dropped from heaven.

The New Testament was **NOT** delivered by an angel.

The New Testament was **NOT** found in a farmer's field.

The New Testament was **NOT** suddenly “discovered” in a clay jar with 27 “books” intact like the Dea Sea Scrolls or the Nag Hammadi texts.

The NT canon developed, or evolved, over the course of the first 250-300 years of Christian history. If the NT had been delivered by an angel, or unearthed as a complete unit it would not be as believable. Part of the historical validity of the NT comes from the fact that we can trace its development. The fact that this development is not as precise nor as clean as we might like makes it far more historically reliable.

### **Oral Tradition and the Words of Jesus**

The words of Jesus were recognized as inspired very soon after the resurrection, yet it was 2-3 decades before his words were circulated in written form. We have one clear example of oral tradition when Paul is addressing the Ephesian elders,

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ Acts 20:35

This citation is especially interesting since Luke, the author of *Acts*, does not record this saying in his own gospel. In fact, this *agrapha* (Greek, “unwritten”) does not appear in any of the four canonical gospels and is a witness to the sayings of Jesus being transmitted in an oral tradition.

Many Christian scholars disagree with the theory that the sayings of Jesus were initially transmitted in an oral tradition. The concern is that this would threaten the integrity of his message, and thus threaten the validity of the gospel tradition. But the task for the historian is to present the evidence as objectively as possible, always acknowledging that we are working with theories of events that happened 2,000 years ago for which we do not have ALL the evidence.

Probably as early as the late 40’s the oral traditions that carried the words of Jesus began to be put into writing. This was probably done to protect the integrity of his message. The Nag Hammadi texts seem to shed light on this phase of the gospel development. The Nag Hammadi Library is a collection of thirteen ancient books, containing over fifty texts, discovered in the Egyptian desert in 1945. These books were sealed in a large clay jar and found by some peasant farmers. The story of this discovery is very interesting – an account can be found in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* by James Robinson.

Within the Nag Hammadi texts is a *Gospel of Thomas* - this gospel is basically a collection of “sayings” and stories, not written with any recognizable chronological or thematic order. Some of the sayings closely parallel sayings found in the synoptic gospels (*Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*) - Saying 9, for example is the parable of the sower. Yet others are not only different, but bizarre. Just one example will serve to make the point:

Jesus said, “This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will pass away. The dead are not alive, and the living will not die. In the days when you consumed what is dead, you made it what is alive. When you come to dwell in the light, what will you do? On the day when you were one you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?”

Gospel of Thomas, Saying 11

It is likely that early Christian leaders began to hear odd sayings like this one attributed to Jesus and determined that an authoritative set of sayings needed to be recorded. Most scholars believe that Mark’s gospel was the first of the four NT gospels written, followed by *Matthew* and *Luke*. The dates given vary widely from the early 60’s (for *Mark*) into the 80’s (for *Luke*). The difficulty with dating comes from the fact that early writers, like Paul for example, do not quote any of the four gospels. Clear citations do not begin to appear until the early second century. Even more liberal scholars would not suggest a second century date for the synoptic gospels, thus the lack of quotations are attributed to a slow pace for copying and circulating these documents. Papyrus does not become widely and commonly used outside the Egyptian region until the second century.

Most of the earliest non-NT Christian documents cite the OT as “scripture” and only make allusion to what is now NT text. Ignatius of Antioch is full of allusions to, and paraphrases of, NT texts.

[A note is needed here: some will try to attribute quotations of the earliest fathers to NT writings when these are nothing more than *allusions*. When only two or three word phrases are referred to as quotations, it is misleading. Such a reference *might* be to an NT writing, but also could be a common phrase used within the Christian community of the day. For example, Ignatius states in *Magnesians*, “Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning...” This does remind one of *John 1:2*, but it cannot be called a quotation - it is an allusion.]

It is only when we come to the second century apologists that verified citations from what we now call NT texts begin to be common.

In the 140's Marcion (who was deemed a heretic) constructed his own canon which included most of Paul's letters in edited form, along with Luke's gospel. Marcion rejected the other gospels as having been tainted by the Jews. This list by Marcion is the first known listing of what is called a NT canon and helped to push the early church to develop an authoritative list of inspired writings.

Second century church father Justin Martyr does not cite any NT writing by name, but he designates his several NT citations with "it is recorded," or the "memoirs of the apostles." He does, however, refer to the "Gospels,"

For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, "This do ye in remembrance of Me..."

First Apology 66

Around 170-175AD Tatian, a disciple of Justin, created a harmony of the four orthodox gospels known as the *Diatessaron*. This text was accepted in some circles, even being used to replace the four gospels, but this success was short lived. What this harmony reveals, however, is that the church was beginning to recognize only four gospels.

The four gospels are confirmed by Irenaeus of Lyons in *Against the Heresies*,

From this it is clear that the Word, the artificer of all things, being manifested to men gave us the gospel, fourfold in form but held together by one Spirit. A.H. III,11.8

Irenaeus also quotes from, or alludes to, almost all the documents that become the orthodox NT. These citations are mostly from Pauline works:

(25+ occurrences from each of these: *Romans*, *1 Corinthians*, *Galatians* and *Ephesians*). His Pauline citations/allusions include all three “Pastoral” epistles (1 and 2 *Timothy* and *Titus*). The other general NT letters get scant recognition and a few are totally absent (*Philemon*, 2 *Peter*, 3 *John*, and *Jude*). He also refers to documents (*1 Clement*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*) as “inspired” that do not make it into the NT.

### **The NT in the Second and Third Centuries**

By the time we come to the end of the second century and look at the citations of Clement of Alexandria (writings cir. 195-202) and Tertullian (writings cir. 205-225) we find hundreds of references from almost every NT document. The NT writings that are excluded by these two men are very similar to that of Irenaeus, but Clement then includes many writings as “scripture” that did not get final acceptance. ***The citations from Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian can be used to reconstruct the entire NT excluding the 4 or 5 small epistles which they neglect.*** Indeed, this is a very important factor from this point forward - “Did Clement/Tertullian cite from it?” These are the first two prolific Christian writers. From this point forward we find an increasing number of writings with an increasing number of citations from what becomes the NT. These citations also become larger as the history moves into the third and fourth centuries.

### **The Muratorian Canon**

The Muratorian canon is a manuscript fragment that represents the oldest known orthodox list of the NT. The beginning and ending of the manuscript is missing. The document is dated by most scholars to have been written around 170-200. This

document was discovered in an Italian library by Ludovico Antonio Muratori, a famous historian of the time. This list includes the following:

- (We assume that *Matthew* and *Mark* were named in the beginning of the fragment which is missing – the writer mentions “four gospels”)
- *Luke* and *John*
- *Acts*
- all 13 Pauline letters (including the Pastoral epistles)
- 1 and 2 *John* is assumed since the writer only names two letters of John
- *Jude*
- the *Revelation* of John

This list omits *Hebrews*, 1 and 2 *Peter*, and 3 *John*. It also names a few documents that do NOT appear in the orthodox NT.

By the end of the second century most of the 27 documents in the orthodox NT canon had already gained widespread acceptance, especially the four gospels and the Pauline writings. It is critical to understand why only four gospels were accepted. These early fathers were very familiar with the other gospels that were floating around – Marcion’s gospel of Luke, the various gnostic gospels, and other “proto-orthodox” gospels that were not well accepted – they wanted to make it clear that these “other” gospels were NOT acceptable. There was, however, another very important reason – the Gnostics.

### **The Effect of Gnosticism**

Gnosticism was at its zenith during the second century, especially in Egypt. The various Gnostic texts were rejected by the orthodox. Most of these Gnostic writings were rejected because they had too many bizarre passages and thus were not able to develop and keep a large audience. One important factor for any document to be affirmed as “orthodox” and “inspired”

was how much acceptance it received among the churches in the various regions. This acceptance is typically reflected by if, and how often, the church fathers cited the document.

The development of the NT in the second century necessitates some discussion of Gnostic texts. The proliferation of Gnostic texts forced church leaders to address these texts and to explain why the church rejected them. To illustrate, we will briefly focus on the bizarre nature of these Gnostic texts.

It is important to understand that many ancient texts have some strange passages, including the NT documents. One must be ready to admit this before launching an attack against strange gnostic texts. For our purpose two examples will be enough,

“I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left.”  
....”Where, Lord?” they asked. He replied, “Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.” Luke 17:34-37

AND

Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered. Matthew 21:18-19

I know there are many who have given explanation for these passages - I have recently read 2-3 explanations for both of these, and none satisfy me 100% - my point is simply that we must admit to some strange passages in our NT documents that cannot be easily explained. I could list many more. If you read the early fathers you will find many strange passages as well.

One can give some explanation for the strange gnostic passages, but even with the proper historical context many of these are just simply bizarre. This is the critical difference between the NT gospels and the Gnostic gospels - the gospel contained in the NT is powerful because it is profound - taking the complicated and making it exceedingly simple to understand. The message of these gnostic texts are just not easy to grasp.

The *Gospel of Thomas* is a good work to cite for this purpose – it does contain passages similar to the NT, and those who criticize early Christianity like to use *Thomas*. But there are also some strange passages:

Jesus said, “Blessed is the lion which the man shall eat, and the lion become man; and cursed is the man whom the lion shall eat, and the lion become man.” *Gos. Thom.* Saying 7

Simon Peter said to them: “Let Mary go forth from among us, for women are not worthy of the life.” Jesus said: “Behold, I shall lead her, that I may make her male, in order that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who makes herself male shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.” *Gos. Thom.* Saying 114

These two sayings clearly illustrate why Thomas is not accepted in the early church. This gospel has many such bizarre Gnostic-like sayings like these. Many scholars who attack the integrity of the NT find it easy to criticize the male-orientation and domination of the early church. These scholars will cite various passages from *Thomas*, yet typically they will avoid Saying 114!

The point here is that Gnostic writings contain many bizarre passages. The ratio of “normal” to “bizarre” is far different from the orthodox NT writings. In addition, the degree of bizarre is far more acute in these Gnostic writings.

## **The NT Canon in the Third and Fourth Centuries**

By the third century there is a noticeable increase in citations from the “inspired” writings that eventually become the NT, and far less citations from works that do not make it into the NT. The most prolific third century writers are Tertullian (already mentioned), Hippolytus of Rome, Origen of Alexandria and Cyprian of Carthage.

An explosion of Christian literature comes in the fourth century with Lactantius, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, and the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus), John Chrysostom, Jerome, Rufinus, and the great Augustine of Hippo (his *Confessions* was written in 396-97). All of these writers illustrate how the NT had become settled with thousands of citations from the 27 “inspired” writings and fewer citations outside that list.

## **The Official Canon**

Many think the NT writings were agreed upon at the Council of Nicea. There were 20 canons (church rules) voted on at Nicea – none dealt with sacred writings. The first historical reference listing the exact 27 writings in the orthodox NT is in the Easter Letter of Athanasius in 367. His reference states that these are the only recognized writings to be read in a church service. The first time a church council ruled on the list of “inspired” writings allowed to be read in church was at the Synod of Hippo in 393. No document survived – we only know of this decision because it was referenced at the third Synod of Carthage in 397. Even this reference from Carthage (Canon 24) does not “list” every document. For example, it reads, “the gospels, four books...” The only reason for this list is to confirm which writings are “sacred” and should be read in a church service.

## Conclusion

The NT developed, or evolved, over the course of the first 250-300 years of Christian history. No one particular person made the decision. The decision was not made at a church council. The particular writings that became those of the NT gradually came into focus and became the most trusted and beneficial of all the early Christian writings.

### **A Brief Introduction to Gnostic Texts**

*(This section is excerpted from my paper by the same name which can be found in entirety on [www.churchhistory101.com](http://www.churchhistory101.com))*

Any discussion on the development of the New Testament should contain something about the writings of the first several centuries that did NOT make it into the "orthodox" New Testament.

As I have pointed out in book reviews and other articles, critics of Christianity and the NT will oftentimes make the point that alternative texts (typically the Gnostic ones) were systematically discriminated against by the early church. Usually the attack has a foundational position that these gnostic groups were another expression of early Christianity and the orthodox leadership suppressed them in order to seize, or hold, political and ecclesiastical power. This position is forcefully expressed by Bart Ehrman, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. This quote is from *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*.

*Only twenty-seven of the early Christian books were finally included in the canon...Other books came to be rejected, scorned, maligned, attacked, burned, all but forgotten—lost.... This one form of Christianity decided what was the "correct" Christian perspective; it decided who could exercise authority over Christian belief and practice; and it determined what forms of Christianity would be marginalized...destroyed. It also decided which books to canonize into Scripture and which books to set aside as "heretical,"...this victorious party rewrote the history of the controversy, making it appear that there had not been much of a conflict at all, claiming that its own views had always been those of the majority of Christians at all times, back to the time of Jesus and his apostles, that its perspective, in effect, had always been "orthodox." p.4*

My intention here is to introduce some of these alternative texts of the first four centuries. This is a brief introduction meant to give you some idea of the content in these documents. This will enable you to engage with someone proposing the ideas represented by Professor Ehrman – I run into these people quite often (in person and online). They repeat his ideas, but unlike Ehrman, they have not read these documents and have very little idea what Gnostics and some of the alternative Gnostic-like Christian sects actually read and/or believed.

### **The Gospel of Mary**

This document was “found” by a German scholar in Cairo in 1896, but was not published until 1955. The Da Vinci Code book/movie brought this gospel back into the public eye recently. Most scholars believe this document was written in the second century, some arguing for an early second century date. The text we have is missing the first six pages and one other large section.

In the first part of the document Jesus is answering some questions being asked by some of his disciples. Jesus departs and the disciples are disheartened. Mary begins to encourage them, “turned their hearts to the Good, and they began to discuss the words of the Savior.” (Gos. Mary 5.4) Peter then says to Mary, “we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember which you know, but we do not, nor have we heard them.” (Gos. Mary 5.5-6) Mary begins to tell the disciples about a vision she had received, but after only a few lines the manuscript breaks and we have three pages missing. The MS apparently resumes in the middle of Mary’s answer with this:

*...And desire said, I did not see you descending, but now I see you ascending. Why do you lie since you belong to me? The soul answered and said, I saw you. You did not see me nor recognize me. I served you as a garment and you did not know me. When it said this, it (the soul) went away rejoicing greatly. Again it came to the third power, which is called ignorance. The power questioned the soul, saying, Where are you going? In wickedness are you bound. But you are bound; do not judge! And the soul said, Why do you judge me, although I have not judged?  
I was bound, though I have not bound. I was not recognized. But I have recognized that the All is being dissolved, both the earthly things and the heavenly.  
When the soul had overcome the third power, it went upwards and saw the fourth power, which took seven forms. The first*

*form is darkness, the second desire, the third ignorance, the fourth is the excitement of death, the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh, the sixth is the foolish wisdom of flesh, the seventh is the wrathful wisdom. These are the seven powers of wrath. They asked the soul, Whence do you come slayer of men, or where are you going, conqueror of space? The soul answered and said, What binds me has been slain, and what turns me about has been overcome, and my desire has been ended, and ignorance has died. In a aeon I was released from a world, and in a Type from a type, and from the fetter of oblivion which is transient. From this time on will I attain to the rest of the time, of the season, of the aeon, in silence. (Gos Mary 8.10-24d)*

This is basic Gnosticism – the soul is ascending through the heavenly realms, being stopped and quizzed along the way by the various spiritual guardians. The MS then continues with both Andrew and Peter questioning whether Mary could really speak for the Savior. Andrew echoes what many would have thought, “these teachings are strange ideas.” Then Peter echoes another thought that would have been common, “Did He [Jesus] really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us?”

These two comments accurately reflect objections made by the orthodox of the day. Ehrman wants us to think this “Gnostic understanding of the faith...came to be suppressed by Christian leaders of later centuries,” but these objections appear within the very document in question. This clearly indicates that these are contemporary objections – immediately seen as different, or as Andrew says, “strange.”

### **The Gospel of Philip**

This document is a bit more difficult to date. There are indications that it draws some content from orthodox catechisms in the second through the fourth century. This gospel is a collection of strange passages, but I will begin with one that is commonly quoted,

*Jesus took them all by stealth, for he did not appear as he was, but in the manner in which they would be able to see him. He appeared to them all. He appeared to the great as great. He appeared to the small as small. He appeared to the angels as an angel, and to men as a man. Because of this, his word hid itself from everyone. Some indeed saw him, thinking that they were seeing themselves, but when he appeared to his disciples in glory on the mount, he was not small. He became*

great, but he made the disciples great, that they might be able to see him in his greatness. 57,28 - 58,10

This next passage accurately reflects this gospel – do not be discouraged if you find this difficult to understand.

*"The Father" and "the Son" are single names; "the Holy Spirit" is a double name. For they are everywhere: they are above, they are below; they are in the concealed, they are in the revealed. The Holy Spirit is in the revealed: it is below. It is in the concealed: it is above. The saints are served by evil powers, for they are blinded by the Holy Spirit into thinking that they are serving an (ordinary) man whenever they do so for the saints. Because of this, a disciple asked the Lord one day for something of this world. He said to him, "Ask your mother, and she will give you of the things which are another's." 59,11-27*

### **Apocalypse of Peter**

This document is part of the Nag Hammadi texts and probably dates from the third century. This document clearly represents gnosticism with a docetic Christology, the emphasis on the divinity of Jesus which typically minimizes his humanity. In this passage Jesus is speaking to Peter; you will see a reflection of the belief that Jesus, as a divine being, could not suffer.

*When he had said those things, I saw him seemingly being seized by them. And I said "What do I see, O Lord? That it is you yourself whom they take, and that you are grasping me? Or who is this one, glad and laughing on the tree? And is it another one whose feet and hands they are striking?"*

*The Savior said to me, "He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness. But look at him and me."*

*But I, when I had looked, said "Lord, no one is looking at you. Let us flee this place."*

*And I saw someone about to approach us resembling him, even him who was laughing on the tree. And he was <filled> with a Holy Spirit, and he is the Savior....*

*But what they released was my incorporeal body. But I am the intellectual Spirit filled with radiant light. He whom you saw coming to me is our intellectual Pleroma, which unites the perfect light with my Holy Spirit."....When he (Jesus) had said these things, he (Peter) came to himself. VII.80,22-84,14*

In this passage you clearly see gnostic dualism – the Jesus hanging on the cross is “the fleshly part,” the physical. The living, speaking, and victorious Jesus is “the intellectual Spirit filled” one. Early Christianity believed that humans (and Jesus) have a physical body and a spirit, these two are not separate, but are connected. The Gnostics emphasized a separation of the two.

### **The Gospel of the Egyptians**

This is another document contained in the Nag Hammadi Library. I have saved the most bizarre for last. This is such a strange document that it is difficult to believe. While Clement of Alexandria quotes from an apparently “inspired” *Gospel to the Egyptians*, this does not seem to be the same document. The long stretches of vowels were meant to be sounded out while reading, probably like secret code. [Brackets indicate holes and degradations in the manuscript where the translators have postulated the contents.]

*[incorruptions. The] Father of the great light [who came] forth from the silence, he is [the great] Doxomedon-aeon in which [the thrice]-male child rests. And the throne of his [glory] was established [in it, this one] on which his unrevealable name [is inscribed], on the tablet [. . .] one is the word, the [Father of the light] of everything, he [who came] forth from the silence, while he rests in the silence, he whose name [is] in an [invisible] symbol. [A] hidden, [invisible] mystery came forth iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii[iii] eeeeeeeeeeee-eeeeeeeeee[ee o] oooooooooooooooooooooooooo uu[uuu] uuuuuuuuuuuuu-uuuuu eeeee eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee aaaaaaa[aaaa] aaaaaaaaaa oooooooooooooo[oo] oooooooooo. III.43,13-44,9*

*These will by no means taste death.*

*le ieus eo ou eo oua! Really truly, O Yessesus Mazareus Yessedekus, O living water, O child of the child, O glorious name, really truly, aion o on (or: O existing aeon), iii eeee eeee oooo uuuu oooo aaaa{a}, really truly, ei aaaa oooo, O existing one who sees the aeons! Really truly, aee eee iii uuuuuu ooooooooo, who is eternally eternal, really truly, iea aio...who exists....(Son) forever III.65,26-66,22*

## Conclusion

It is important to know that not all Gnostic texts are so bizarre. Many of these texts do contain passages that are more benign. Some texts, like the *Gospel of Truth*, contain much that is Christian. Some consider the *Gospel of Truth* to be a Christian document. Some second century Christian texts contain some gnostic passages. If we consider Clement of Alexandria, we realize that in some regions Gnosticism affected the presentation of the Christian message.

*Although Clement is clearly on the offensive against gnosticism, it is also clear that some of his views are not consistent with other early writers. This is something of a problem with Clement of Alexandria. He represents a time in the development of Egyptian Christianity when the church was recovering from what appears to have been a 50-60 year period when gnosticism was the dominant force.*

It is easy to see why these Gnostic texts, and the groups that used them, were not able to gain a large following. The orthodox church did reject these texts and these teachings, but the main force that stopped the spread of Gnosticism was the movement itself along with the Gnostic message. Like many of the thousands of “independent” Protestant churches of our day, many early Gnostic groups were not actively connected to any other group – their basic teaching made them secretive and distinctive. These organizational characteristics made it difficult for such Gnostic groups to survive. With the exception of Marcionism, Gnosticism and the “Gnostic gospel” did not have enough inherent power nor attraction as a movement and thus died out. The texts, and the Gnostic teachings, were just overly bizarre.

# The Persecuted Church

## 90 - 202 A.D.

### 5 Roman Persecutions

The defining moment in the life of the primitive church came after the first true Roman persecution under Nero that led to the execution of the apostles Peter and Paul in Rome (circa 62-64) followed shortly thereafter by the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. Would the small movement survive?

For the next 250 years the Christian church endured periods of persecution at the hands of the Roman empire. It is important to realize that Roman persecution of Christians came in waves, tended to be regional in nature, and typically did not last more than a couple of years. The Romans were not always the inhumane savages we sometimes picture, throwing people into the pit with hungry lions. The Romans were basically cultured and disciplined, however warfare was an important part of that culture, and in war they were brutal, but only if you resisted them. When the Roman armies came against a territory the defending nation could send a peace envoy - the Romans were content to annex your territory and collect taxes for the empire. You could keep your properties, continue to farm your lands, and live under the banner of Rome. If, however, you sent your armies to meet the Romans in battle you were very likely to suffer military defeat and then face the full brutality of the Roman legions. Punishment might include burning many of your buildings and homes to the ground, allowing the soldiers to plunder and rape their way through the countryside, and/or salt your fields, making them useless for 2-3 years.

To round up and imprison or kill citizens, as they did from time to time with the Christians, was not a popular act - many Romans were rightly disturbed when these pogroms were initiated - and some emperors refused to authorize such persecution [Vespasian (69-79) and Nerva (96-98) apparently released prisoners and recalled exiles]. Nonetheless, Roman persecution against Christians did happen. The various periods of intense persecution will be mentioned as we move through the next 200+ years.

### **Domitian**

The end of the first century included one of these times of persecution under Emperor Domitian (81-96). Although Domitian's father, Vespasian, did not take imperial divinity seriously, Domitian was over the top. Probably due to a combination of insecurity and an unstable personality, Domitian insisted on being worshipped and punished those who refused. The details of the Domitian Roman persecution (95-96) are somewhat unclear, but it appears to have been contained to Rome and Asia Minor. Many scholars believe that the Domitian persecution is the historical backdrop for John's *Revelation*, the closing document of the NT. The writer is urging the first century believers to remain faithful in the midst of this persecution. There are other first century writings with a similar theme.

### **Trajan**

We know about the Roman persecution during the reign of Trajan (98-117) because we can read Trajan's own writing contained in letters exchanged between the emperor and one of his governors, Pliny the Younger, 111-113. Pliny had written Trajan asking how to deal with the Christians. This is a portion of that request,

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I

interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Pliny the Younger, Letters 10.96

This is part of Trajan's reply:

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it - that is, by worshiping our gods...shall obtain pardon through repentance.

Pliny the Younger, Letters 10.97

In his letter to Trajan, Pliny indicates that he is not exactly sure what to do with these Christians, but if citizens, he would transfer them to Rome, presumably for trial. This is significant because, according to Eusebius, it was during Trajan's reign that Ignatius of Antioch the bishop, is taken prisoner and transferred by armed guard to Rome where he is executed.

## 6 The Apostolic Fathers

This set of early Christian writings, referred to as “The Apostolic Fathers,” were written by the first generation of Christian leadership after the apostles, thus the term “fathers.” Some of these documents, written in the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century, were considered by second and third century fathers to be sacred and were quoted as inspired text. The early church took these writings very seriously as early witnesses of the faith.

### 1 Clement

This letter, written by Clement of Rome, named later as the bishop of Rome, is sent to the church in Corinth probably in the 90’s. Apparently the church in Corinth had moved to replace their acting leadership and Clement is writing to instruct them concerning apostolic succession. He uses the OT example of Moses, showing that God appoints leaders as He did with the priesthood and those leaders appoint the next generation “with the consent of the whole Church.” (1 Clement 44.2)

It is from *1 Clement* 5 that we learn the fate of Peter and Paul in Rome,

Through envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars [of the Church] have been persecuted and put to death. Let us set before our eyes the illustrious apostles. Peter...endured not one or two, but numerous labours, and when he had finally suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him....Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity...and stoned. After preaching both in the east and

west...having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the extreme limit of the west, and suffered martyrdom under the prefects.

Clement is familiar with Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, referring to it in chapter 47, yet no NT text is ever quoted - his biblical citations and illustrations all come from the OT. Although he also quotes from Paul's letter to the *Romans*, his view of faith is more in line with *James*, "being justified by our works, and not our words." (1 Clement 30.3)

*1 Clement* is counted in the NT canon for several regions and was included in the Alexandrian Codex. Clement of Alexandria (cir. 198-202) often quotes from *1 Clement* as scripture.

## 2 Clement

This appears to be the transcript of a sermon rather than a letter. It follows *1 Clement* in the early manuscripts and has always been connected to the first letter, but the Greek is decidedly less proficient which points to a different author. This author also clearly quotes from the NT (words of Jesus) more freely, this is also different from *1 Clement*.

Although this sermon contains some of the canonical sayings of Jesus, there are also some gnostic-like sayings, "For the Lord Himself, being asked by a certain person when his kingdom would come, said, 'When the two shall be one, and the outside as the inside, and the male with the female, neither male or female'." (2 Clem 12:2) This saying is very similar to Gospel of Thomas 22.

## Didache

This early document, also known as The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, could be dated prior to 70 and bears many marks of being an early Jewish-Christian document. It opens with what is called "The Two Ways" teaching, a derivative of

what is found in Qumran manuscripts and The Manual of Discipline. *Didache* also relies on *Matthew* and does not put any emphasis on the divinity of Jesus - these characteristics are consistent with the early Jewish movement referred to as Ebionites.

*Didache* is something of an early Minister's Manual. It gives very practical guidelines for baptism, fasting, prayer, the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist), and how to take care of traveling preachers and prophets.

This early document gives us an example of a lack of dogmatism:

...baptize this way: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living [running] water. But if you have no living 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. *Didache* 7

## **The Epistle of Barnabas**

The dating for Barnabas is highly disputed, ranging from 70 to 128. Some early fathers, like Clement of Alexandria, ascribed this document to the Barnabas named in *Acts* with the apostle Paul. In fact, Clement refers to Barnabas as an apostle and quotes from Barnabas as inspired text. Most scholars do not accept NT Barnabas as the author.

*Barnabas* has a very negative view of Judaism, believing that the Jews were being punished for crucifying Jesus. The author quotes extensively from the Greek OT and rarely from the NT. The same "Two Ways" teaching found in *Didache* is found at the end of *Barnabas*.

## The Letters of Ignatius

Early in the second century (probably during the reign of Trajan) Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch is arrested and is being taken to Rome for trial. Along the way he writes letters to various churches, urging them to remain faithful and to pay respect to their bishop. These letters give us any interesting insight into this period and the development of what is now called *monoepiscopacy*, the idea of a single bishop over a region.

We saw in the chapter on the first century that Ignatius writes against a group that holds to some kind of docetic view of Jesus, an emphasis that denies his humanity. Perhaps to combat this docetism, Ignatius expresses a strong christology, Johannine in nature, but even more pronounced. This represents a continued confirmation of the early church belief in the divinity of Jesus,

There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first possible and then impossible, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Ephesians 7

In the letter to the *Trallians* there is an interesting section that points to a very early witness of what becomes known as the Apostle's Creed:

Jesus Christ....descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly begotten of God and of the Virgin, but not after the same manner....He was crucified and died under Pontius Pilate....He descended, indeed, into Hades alone....He also rose again in three days, the Father raising Him up; and after spending forty days with the apostles, He was received up to the Father, and "sat down at His right hand, expecting till His enemies are placed under His feet... Trallians 9

## The Martyrdom of Polycarp

This document tells the story of Polycarp's arrest and martyrdom sometime in the middle of the second century. Polycarp had a larger-than-life reputation as the bishop of Smyrna - Irenaeus reports that Polycarp had been a disciple of John the Evangelist. The story related in this document is fantastic in nature and becomes part of a growing body of martyrdom accounts.

After being arrested and taken into a stadium to be executed as part of the brutal entertainment in the Roman Empire, the proconsul urged Polycarp,

Swear by the genius of Caesar; repent and say, "Away with the atheists." Then Polycarp with solemn countenance looked upon the whole multitude of lawless heathen that were in the stadium, and waved his hand to them; and groaning and looking up to heaven he said, "Away with the atheists."

Polycarp 9.2

Polycarp was 86 years old, yet is treated roughly, urged to renounce Christ, and is threatened with being burned at the stake. His retort to the officials in the face of certain death has inspired generations of believers,

"Thou threatenest that fire which burneth for a season and after a little while is quenched: for thou art ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why delayest thou?"

Polycarp 11.2

The attendants prepared the fire and as they moved to nail Polycarp to the stake he asked that he be allowed to have his hands free saying that the one who would give him the strength to endure the flames would also give him strength to remain in the fire.

This martyrdom account became immediately popular among Christians of that era and fueled an already growing martyrdom cult. This will be discussed more fully in the next section, but it is important to mention here that martyrs (literally, witnesses) were being given favored status. Their bones were collected and venerated - stories of healings and miracles happening through the use of prayer and these “relics” circulated. Martyrs in prison were seen as having such a high standing that believers consistently visited them, asking for their prayers - this led to some friction within the local church leadership.

### **The Shepherd of Hermas**

This interesting document was written in Rome sometime before the middle of the second century. The author is Hermas, brother of then bishop of Rome, Pius. This is an apocalyptic document, a series of visions and revelations given to Hermas through an angel, a shepherd.

This document seems to have been written as an encouragement to believers to endure persecution, but had a controversial aspect to it - a second chance for repentance. We will discuss this issue more fully in a later section, Second Repentance, but for now we can simply acknowledge that this caused *The Shepherd of Hermas* to be rejected by some early fathers.

## 7 The Spirit of Martyrdom

From the time when “godly men buried Stephen” after he was executed by the Jews, martyrs were treated with great respect. Martyrs, or “confessors,” were believed to have a greater degree of grace from God. There were reports (although some might be considered questionable) that miracles were performed through martyrs: bones (relics) could be used for healing, confessors sitting in prison were reported to have heavenly visions and personal audience with the risen Lord - these could offer prayers of special power, and could even grant confirmation of God’s forgiveness.

By the middle of the second century pockets of the Church had followers desiring martyrdom to the point of throwing themselves in the way of Roman officials, hoping to be selected for the “perfecting” of their faith, execution. This careless attitude had become commonplace enough that Clement of Alexandria urges believers not to offer themselves to their persecutors, but to flee.

Bishops of the second century found their authority being challenged by imprisoned confessors. People were flocking to imprisoned saints seeking empowered prayer and forgiveness for sins. During times of intense persecution many believers “lapsed” into various levels of their former sinful lives, then wanted to come back to the church. Each region had its own method of repentance, which typically depended on the local bishop. When lapsed believers started approaching, and gaining forgiveness through imprisoned confessors the authority of the bishop suffered.

The heresies of the second century will be discussed later, but it must be mentioned here how some of the groups labeled “heretical” were given to overly emotional views of martyrdom. The Montanists and the Donatists were known to clamor for martyrdom, seeing it as a quick and safe way to be saved, to make it to the heavenly home.

Because martyrs were seen as more spiritual, having a closer place to God, many wanted to be martyred. There are reports of these over-zealous Christians stopping Roman officials on the roads, begging to be martyred. Many Romans probably thought these people were lunatics, but some received their wish. Some were executed; others languished in prison for months on end.

The Church as a whole was never really comfortable with this kind of emotional longing for torture or death. There was always an uneasy feeling with lavishing such attention on these martyrs. When Christians began seeking prayer and wanting to receive the Eucharist not from their bishops, but from those suffering in prison, it just did not sit well. In the end, many of the “heretics” were less heretical and more schismatic in nature, unwilling to show respect and submission to church authority. In their opinion church leadership did not deserve respect, and this was true in some circumstances - yet without the observance of some structure it is doubtful that Christianity would have thrived as it did through Roman persecution, the perils of Gnosticism, and the trials of theological debate.

## 8 The Issue of Second Repentance

As was mentioned in the section on Roman persecution, there was an ebb and flow in the Roman persecution against Christians. It was not unusual for great numbers of believers to “lapse” during times of intense persecution. Some simply backed into the shadows for fear of being associated with the Christians. Others found it easy to go back to riotous living, the life of excessive drink and sexual indiscretions. Once the persecution lifted bishops would often find themselves faced with literally dozens, sometimes hundreds, of lapsed believers desiring to be readmitted to the fellowship of the saints.

Lapsing during a time of persecution was a serious offense, especially when there were others who stood the test and were tortured and/or killed. Lapsed believers were not allowed to celebrate the Eucharist or to enter into the main church meeting, but had to sit in an outside room, or even outside the building or house. They could listen, but could not take part. Some never tried to come back, feeling that they were beyond forgiveness, others decided they did not want to come back.

In North Africa, according to Tertullian (On Purity 13), lapsed believers would dress in rags to show their penance, lay prostrate in the outer foyer where the elders would enter, and beg for prayer and forgiveness. Following 1 John 5:16,17 the elders were not to speak to or even pray for such “penitents,” but were to let them continue in penance until the Lord somehow showed His mercy to them. Some of these lapsed believers would eventually give up, figuring they had lost their souls. Others would spend months, maybe years, in this condition, hoping that God would accept them when they died.

A point I now insist upon is this, that the penance which has been revealed to us by the grace of God, which is required of us and which brings us back to favor with the Lord, must never, once we have known and embraced it, be violated thereafter by a return to sin....Grant, Lord Christ, that Thy servants may...know nothing of repentance nor have any need of it [after baptism]. I am reluctant to make mention here of a **second hope**, one which is indeed the very last, for fear that in treating of a resource which yet remains in penitence, I may seem to indicate that there is still time left for sin. God grant that no one come to such a conclusion.

On Penitence 5-7 [emphasis added]

This “second hope” Tertullian refers to is the second repentance issue we mentioned earlier in the short discussion on *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Tertullian refers to *The Shepherd* in one of his later works, saying it is the only writing “which favours adulterers.” (Modesty 10.12)

In this discussion it is quite important to remember the historical context - Roman persecution. Some believers are seeking forgiveness for what Tertullian calls mortal sins, apostasy, adultery, and fornication, and as we have seen, *The Shepherd of Hermas* indicates that many were willing to grant such forgiveness. Callistus, bishop of Rome, produced a decree (cir. 217-222) which authorized bishops to allow absolution for penitent adulterers. This idea greatly angered Tertullian. His response was to write *On Purity* in which he was critical of the idea that an adulterer could receive the same absolution that might be withheld from the one...

whom savagery has overcome after he has struggled with torments in the agony of martyrdom. It would, in fact, be unworthy of God and of His mercy...that those who have fallen in the heat of lust should more easily reenter the Church than those who have fallen in the heat of battle.

On Purity 22

He paints the picture of a believer being tortured, with a glowing iron held close to his face, being told to deny Christ. He maintains that this believer should be given opportunity for forgiveness before the adulterer.

As with other major issues, the Church had to grapple not only with practical application of “truth” in the lives of believers, but also with obscure biblical texts. In the end, judgments had to be made and tradition was established, but getting to that place was not easy. In 251, under Cyprian of Carthage, the “second repentance” issue took on the added significance of who could offer penance and forgiveness to the “lapsed.” The authority of the bishop was again being questioned and Cyprian’s document, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, established the rule of the church followed from that time forward - authority rested with the bishops.

## 9 Heresies and “Heretics”

Typically when early church heresies are discussed it is in the second century. There is debate among scholars as to exactly when these early church heresies started; we do not have clear literary evidence until the second century. The various heresies pushed the early church to define and articulate more clearly what it believed. The biggest danger faced by the early church was not losing believers to these groups - the danger was that the heretical groups used many of the same “sacred” texts. This was part of the struggle the early church faced when it came to which texts were accepted - what becomes known as the NT “canon” (or rule) for which texts were “inspired.”

These are not the ONLY early heresies, but these are the main ones that demanded attention from the early Christian writers.

### **Docetism**

Beginning with the apostle Paul, the leaders of the early church had to address ideas that threatened the integrity of the gospel message. One of the first, *docetism*, was mentioned in our discussion of the first century. Docetic, which comes from the Greek word meaning “to appear.” Those who proposed this heresy maintained that Jesus really did not possess, or inhabit a physical body, but only “appeared” to have a body. The basis of docetism is that Jesus was truly a spiritual being, and as such, could not have had a true body.

There are aspects of the NT that suggest docetism was already a problem in the first century. Some scholars believe John’s gospel contains some anti-docetic texts, for example in chapter 21 where Jesus eats fish with the disciples. It seems that *1 John*

may have been written to combat this heresy, “...every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh belongs to God.”

1 John 4:2

As was mentioned in an earlier section, Ignatius of Antioch is clearly writing against docetics when he says, “He was then truly born, truly grew up, truly ate and drank, was truly crucified, and died, and rose again.” Philippians 3

### **Heretics in Early Christianity**

It is important to realize that most *heretics* in early Christianity had positions of influence within the Church prior to being labeled a “heretic.” As Christian theology developed, becoming more and more defined, heretics were increasingly isolated and named more quickly.

This is not meant to say that the following people/groups were improperly accused, but it is important to understand that some heretics of the past would not have been considered heretical earlier...or sometimes later in history. Montanus (mentioned below) would be accepted in many modern Christian Protestant sects without too much concern.

Why is this important? Again, we must be careful to avoid judging (“catholics” and “heretics”) the early Church by our modern standards and theology.

### **Marcion**

Around the year 85 Marcion was born, the son of a bishop. He traveled around the world as a merchant and moved to Rome around 135 where he became known in the church and began to teach.

Marcion observed the vast differences between the God represented in the OT and the God of Jesus in the NT. His answer was to reject the God of the OT, seeing him as the evil craftsman (Gk. *demiurge*) creator of an evil world. Marcion constructed a list that represents the first recorded listing of NT

texts, basically his personal canon - he excluded the entire OT, and included **only** the letters of Paul and *Luke*. He also edited parts of Paul's letters - any positive reference to the OT (Marcion claimed the Jews had tampered with Paul's letters) and references to hell and/or judgment (for example 2 Thess 1:6-8). It is this unorthodox canon that leads the church fathers to begin naming the "accepted" documents.

Marcion's influence was significant enough for his teaching to be argued against by several church fathers including Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tertullian. He worked hard as an evangelist and the Marcionite churches spread throughout the Roman world. Marcionite churches held strong until the beginning of the fourth century.

### **Montanus (the Montanists)**

Sometime in the 160's on the borders of Mysia (western Turkey) a believer named Montanus broke onto the scene. He testified that he had experienced an ecstatic visitation of the Paraclete (the Holy Spirit) and, along with two women (Maximilla and Priscilla), had the ability to deliver prophetic messages from God.

The Montanist message, whether spoken or delivered in ecstatic utterance, consisted of the promise (or warning) of the immanent return of Jesus, the apocalyptic end of the world, a new outpouring of the Spirit announcing this message, and an encouragement to embrace persecution and martyrdom. The church had not discouraged these messages up to this point, and indeed, did not immediately disagree with Montanus. Unfortunately, other messages existed behind these to form a three-part subtext. First, two of the primary characters were women. There are some modern scholars who seize upon this as evidence for a patriarchal stronghold that would deny any leadership to women. There are some good arguments against

this position, but the early church **was** a male dominated movement and women certainly did not have equal access to leadership roles. Another subtext was the over-zealous approach to martyrdom. We have already covered the problems with what can be called “the cult of the martyrs.” It is highly likely that Montanists were among the martyrs in the famous persecution scene of Lyons in the year 177. Probably the most problematic aspect of the Montanists was the view that their prophecies carried the authority of the gospels, and of apostolic teaching. Montanus and his two prophetesses did not see themselves in need of the authority of the church. The leading bishops prevailed however, even after Tertullian defected from the church and joined the Montanists. Around 179 Maximilla complained of the treatment she had received, “I am driven as a wolf from the sheep. I am not a wolf. I am word, spirit and power.” (Eusebius, EH V.16.17)

In the end, Montanism was rejected more for being fanatical than for being heretical. With a sympathetic slant, David Wright concludes his study on Montanism by saying, “The reaction against Montanism brought upon the church impoverishment more detrimental than the upset caused by the unbalanced excesses of the New Prophecy.” (Wright, David, “Why Were the Montanists Condemned?”, *Themelios* 2:1, pp.15-22; also [www.earlychurch.org.uk/article\\_montanists\\_wright.html](http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/article_montanists_wright.html))

## **Gnosticism**

In the early second century a strange movement began to emerge, more strongly concentrated in Egypt, but with pockets of activity throughout the Roman world. Gnosticism was a curious synthesis of Jewish apocalypticism, Platonism, strains of pagan religions, and early Christianity. There are some indications of an early form of first century gnosticism in the NT, but nothing like what developed in the second century. Some scholars want to date various NT documents into the

second century based on the apparent references to gnosticism. (This is partly why I use a small “g” when speaking of aspects similar to what becomes full-blown Gnosticism with a capital “G.”)

To better understand Gnosticism, it is helpful to read the documents that represent the beliefs of Gnosticism. Our primary documents are found in a group of documents known as the Nag Hammadi Library (NH). The NH texts include *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel to the Egyptians* and many others. Some of these documents are actually more Christian than Gnostic, but others are decidedly Gnostic. To better understand Gnosticism in the ancient world, download the paper: “A Brief Introduction to Gnostic Writings,” on the Church History 101 Web site.

Similar to Marcion, basic Gnosticism consisted of an extreme dualism, drawing a distinction between the body and the spirit realm. The “demiurge” was the evil creator of the physical universe, humans were bound in their “evil” physical body, and could only be released from the confines of that body through the gaining of *gnosis*, or divine knowledge. The seven visible heavenly bodies (Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) gave rise to a belief in eight heavenly realms. Plato had written about the concept of pre-existent souls in a state of perfection prior to taking on a mortal body on the earth. When the soul is released from the prison of the body it ascends back to the heavenly realm where it is reunited with the realm of *ideas*. The soul in the Gnostic system must ascend through these heavenly realms in the quest to return to a state of perfection. Along the way the soul must pass guardians of each level; typically to pass into the next stage, or heavenly realm, the soul must recite some of the heavenly *gnosis* learned during the earthly trek. The eighth level is the place of perfection, the ultimate goal for every soul.

Gnosticism in the second century was not a unified movement. Each group tended to gravitate around a single enlightened leader, and most groups were exclusive, seeing their particular set of dogma to be unique and essential. This lack of cohesiveness between Gnostic sects makes it difficult to quickly summarize the Gnostic system beyond the above overview. To learn more, a good place to begin would be with the introductions to the various NH texts [Robinson, James, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York 1977)]; one could also look up explanations regarding some of the chief Gnostics of the second century: Carpocrates, Basilides and Valentinus.

## 10 The Apologists

The second century brought with it a steady growth of Gentile Christianity, but not without opponents. We have seen the rise of various heresies, opposition marked by a twisting of “apostolic teaching.” This led the early Christian leadership to further develop creeds and formulas as a way to solidify “orthodox” positions. One must remember that in the early second century the NT had not come fully into form; in addition, the writings of the apostolic successors were held in high esteem. The growth of the church into something of a “grassroots” movement also brought critics like Lucian (a writer), Galen (a physician) and Celsus (a philosopher). Celsus is the most well-known early critic of Christianity. His attack must have had some influence - we know his writing through Origin’s argument against him (*Contra Celsum*, “Against Celsus”) written nearly 100 years later. The following arguments, voiced by Celsus, were commonly used against Christianity:

- Jesus could not have been divine
- with secret teachings (Eucharist, the Holy Spirit, etc.), Christianity is suspicious
- how can God be “eternal” and be known?

It is important to understand that intellectual criticism of the Christian faith and doctrine was not uncommon in the second century. This is important for many reasons, but let us consider just two:

1. Christianity has always had critics. What we see and hear leveled against the faith in the modern age is not new –

believers before us had to find answers against critics and so does the contemporary church.

2. The answers we find to the objections clearly indicate that the primary doctrines of the faith were well established before the NT took its final form. Those who argue that the faith being taught in the 21st century is somehow different from what the earliest believers held is simply not true. The virgin birth, the physical resurrection, the divinity of Jesus – we find the same cardinal doctrines of faith in early second century Christianity.

This consistent criticism of the faith gave rise to another special group of Christian writers, the Apologists. These writers argued for the faith, and in the process allowed Christians for all ages to know what the second century church believed. The first two men (Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons) lived in the second century; the influence of the two other men (Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria) was mainly felt in the third century and beyond, but they are both considered apologists. These writers have already been briefly mentioned in other sections and will continue to come up (for example in the next section on the NT canon).

### **Justin Martyr (cir. 100-165)**

Justin was an ardent student of philosophy (mainly Stoicism and Platonism) and taught philosophy. In his early thirties he met an elderly man on a seashore who impressed upon him the trustworthiness of the gospel. Justin investigated the faith and became convinced. He continued to wear his philosopher's gown and teach philosophy, but now advocating the only true philosophy to be Christianity.

Justin is mainly known through his writings:

*The Apologies* – a set of discourses propounding the supremacy of the Christian faith. The first Apology is addressed to the

emperor Antoninus Pius (ruled 138-161) and his son, Marcus Aurelius (ruled 161-180), who viewed himself a philosopher. Justin appeals to these Emperors and their sense of decency, arguing against the persecution directed at Christians.

*Dialogue with Trypho* – a treatise again proposing the primacy of the Christian faith, but with more emphasis on how the followers of Jesus represent the “new” people of God. Trypho was an educated Jew and also a student of philosophy.

Justin is often criticized for leaning too heavily on his Greek philosophy, but he must have stood out as an intellectual giant among his peers and perhaps this dulled some of the sharp attacks coming from the critics of the faith.

Justin is also quite important for the role his writings play in the development of the NT canon. He quotes from, or alludes to, each of the four gospels and to many of Paul’s letters. Many early fathers cite Justin as an important early Christian voice. He was arrested and beheaded in Rome and thus receives his name as “Martyr.”

### **Irenaeus of Lyons (cir. 135-202)**

Irenaeus, a bishop in Gaul (modern France) sometime in the latter half of the second century is mainly known for his work *Against Heresies* circa 175-185. The title is actually “Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge, falsely so-called” - thus the shorter title. This work is a summary and brief history of all the heresies known by Irenaeus, focusing on Gnosticism. Indeed, Gnosticism was the dominant heresy of that time, even overshadowing the orthodox faith in the Egyptian region to some extent.

We learn from the author himself that he grew up in the faith and actually sat at the feet of Polycarp as a young boy (A.H.

III.3,4). Eusebius gives us more from a letter of Irenaeus which no longer survives:

For when I was a boy I saw you in lower Asia with Polycarp....I remember the events of that time more clearly than those of recent years. For what boys learn, growing with their mind, becomes joined with it; so that I am able to describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat as he discoursed, and his goings out and his comings in, and the manner of his life, and his physical appearance, and his discourses to the people, and the accounts which he gave of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord. And as he remembered their words, and what he heard from them concerning the Lord, and concerning his miracles and his teaching, having received them from eyewitnesses of the 'Word of life,' Polycarp related all things in harmony with the Scriptures...I listened to them attentively, noting them down, not on paper, but in my heart. And continually, through God's grace, I recall them faithfully.

(E.H. V.20,5-7)

What begins as a refutation of Gnostic groups becomes something of a history of the Christian church up until his day. In fact, Eusebius leans upon Irenaeus to a great degree in his church history volume written 200 years later. Irenaeus gives us many details about Christianity during this period that might have otherwise been lost. For example, he recounts the succession of bishops in Rome from Peter and Paul to his day. This is done to combat a claim being made by several heretical leaders that they were in the rightful lineage of the apostles. He cites passages from the four canonical gospels and from almost every other NT book, and gives us the basis for a creed recited during his day:

...carefully preserving the ancient tradition, believing in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and all things therein, by means of Christ Jesus, the Son of God; who, because of

His surpassing love towards His creation, condescended to be born of the virgin, He Himself uniting man through Himself to God, and having suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rising again, and having been received up in splendour, shall come in glory, the Saviour of those who are saved, and the Judge of those who are judged, and sending into eternal fire those who transform the truth, and despise His Father and His advent.

A.H. III.4,2

Many scholars during the early years of the 20th century attacked Irenaeus and his description of the Gnostic groups, accusing him of exaggeration in order to make the Gnostics look far worse. The discovery of Nag Hammadi in 1945 of several Gnostic writings dated from the second century (the Nag Hammadi Library) have proven that Irenaeus was, in fact, not making anything up, nor was he exaggerating.

Irenaeus served as the bishop of Lyons until 202 when it is thought he may have died during the persecution under Emperor Severus.

### **Tertullian (cir. 155–230)**

It is not known exactly when Tertullian was born, but he was born in Carthage, North Africa, the son of a Roman centurion. He was trained in law and apparently practiced law in Rome for a while. We do not know how he came to faith, but he does seem to indicate in some of his writings that he was not always in the faith.

Like many of the early fathers, he is known only by his writings, which are many. Tertullian was a prolific writer and is the first of the Latin Fathers – the first Christian writer to write in Latin. His biblical quotations come from a Latin text. He is a master of the written word and penned some works specifically for the general educated public in defense of Christian faith. Some were written as open letters to the authorities arguing (as did Justin)

against the Roman persecution of Christians. His writings are terse, direct, and always attacking – as he probably argued in courtrooms, his aim is always to win the battle of the argument.

Tertullian had a fiery temperament and that contributed to some very strong disagreements with others in church leadership. The most serious issue was “second repentance.” Basically the church believed that after an initial repentance, baptism, and entrance into the family of faith you could not be formally allowed reentry to the church (and the Eucharist) if you commit a “sin unto death.” Typically three sins were considered *mortal* sins: adultery, fornication, and apostasy (denouncing Christ, sacrificing on the Imperial altar, or offering sacred writings to be burned during persecution).

During some of the more heated persecutions of the second century the faith of many believers failed, or “lapsed.” After a severe period of persecution, bishops often found themselves with numbers of lapsed believers desiring forgiveness and admission to the church. This number could be in the hundreds in the major cities. As in any age, some bishops were more stern than others – some wanted to grant mercy to these penitent sinners. Others wanted the church to hold to a high standard and demanded that lapsed believers could not be easily forgiven. Tertullian falls into the rigorous camp, but the issue is not a simple one – he felt that to go too light on an adulterer and to then hold someone at arms length whose faith held failed under torture was wrong.

### **Clement of Alexandria (cir. 150-215)**

The final significant second century apologist is Clement of Alexandria. It is difficult to overestimate the influence of Clement. Although his writings are typically dated late in the second century (195-202), his influence continued far after his death and he certainly served as an apologist.

Clement's first major work is titled *Exhortation to the Greeks* and is basically a call to the educated Greco-Roman society to hear the gospel of Jesus. Many scholars say this is Clement's most graceful piece of writing. This "Exhortation" is filled with numerous citations from the most popular Greek writers, each citation being used to prove Clement's underlying arguments. The document reads like an anthology of Greek literature, and it is clear that Clement is not new to this literature. He is an educated man and his use of the Greek language is at a very high and polished level.

His other significant apologetic is *Miscellanies*, a strange work that covers a multitude of topics without any apparently clear outline. What is clear in this work is that Clement is attacking the various Gnostic leaders who had made an impact in second century Egypt, chiefly Basilides and Valentinus. He names these men throughout this work, citing texts from their writings and arguing against them. *Excerpts from Theodotus* is another work attributed to Clement. In this work Clement takes large portions of Theodotus, a teacher of Valentinian Gnosticism, and argues against this Gnostic teaching.

Although Clement is clearly on the offensive against Gnosticism, it is also clear that some of his views are not consistent with other early writers. In fact, in some places he sounds like a Gnostic. This is a problem with Clement of Alexandria - he represents a time in the development of Egyptian Christianity when the church was recovering from what appears to have been a 50-60 year period when Gnosticism was the dominant force.

Nonetheless, Clement certainly represents the development in early Christianity when highly educated Christian leaders presented a reasoned defense of the faith.

# The Expansion of the Church 202 - 303 A.D.

## 11 The Persecution of Severus

The third century began with a time of persecution under the emperor Septimius Severus (146-211 AD). Severus, who secured his rule with the defeat of Clodius Albinus in 197, was a professional soldier and cared very little for the politics of the day. With a short and strong build, his leadership was consistent with an aggressive and ruthless general.

Severus upheld the earlier rulings with regards to Christianity, thus it became illegal to convert to the new and expanding faith community. Although this has been disputed, it is certain that persecution erupted in Egypt under his rule. The strategy of the previous century was used - attack the leadership. Clement, the leader of the catechetical school in Alexandria, fled to avoid capture. He had discussed this line of thinking in his writing to oppose the emotional mentality of earlier martyrs who had freely offered themselves to the Romans to be imprisoned and executed.

We learn from Eusebius that one of those martyred was the father of a young man named Origen. Eusebius records that Origen's mother hid his clothing to prevent him from joining his father in death - many historians feel this is an exaggeration, but it is clear that Origen was a highly committed young man. He had been well-educated and soon after the persecution settled down he began holding classes for beginners in the faith, as well as philosophy classes.

## 12 The Alexandrians

### **Clement of Alexandria and the School of Alexandria**

Alexandria was an established learning center for several centuries in the ancient world, housing one of the greatest libraries of all time. Philo the Jew had taught a unique blend of Judaism and Platonism. His biblical text was the LXX, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. For Philo, Moses represented the voice of God speaking to the Jews. He held up a lens of Plato to understand and to explain the meaning of the ancient Mosaic laws to his modern world.

### **The Writings of Clement**

From his writings we learn that Titus Flavius Clemens came to faith after a personal search for philosophical truth that had led him on a good many travels. Clement led the catechetical school and many believe his writings were used in the training. It is clear that Clement followed in the philosophical mindset of Philo. He quotes or alludes to Philo and Plato hundreds of times. For Clement, Plato was the Moses of the Greek world, revealing the truth of God through his philosophical insights.

Several works of Clement survived, but he is most known for what some have called a trilogy, three major works (*Protrepticus*, *Paidagogus*, and *Stromateis* - or *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, *The Educator*, and *Miscellanies*) that fit together in something of a wholistic presentation. While many disagree with this description, there is sufficient evidence to believe Clement did exactly what he announced to be his plan,

Eagerly desiring, then, to perfect us by a gradation conducive to salvation, suited for efficacious discipline, a beautiful

arrangement is observed by the all-benignant Word, who first exhorts, then trains, and finally teaches. Paidagogus I.1.1-3

In summary, Clement uses his three works to point the way for the spiritual journey: he “exhorts” the hearer to embrace the gospel; he “tutors,” or “educates” the young believer in foundational principles - his second work deals with sacraments and spiritual ethics; finally, he lays out teaching for the mature believer in the final work, “Miscellanies.” In this final work he speaks of the mature believer who engages in a highly spiritual life, enjoying heavenly communion with God while living in this world. Clement’s writings in *Stromateis* laid the foundation for almost all spirituality writing to follow in the Christian Church, mainly through the monastic tradition. The spirituality focus is on prayer and what becomes known later in Christian history as *contemplative* prayer.

### **Origen of Alexandria**

In the vacuum of leadership following the persecution under Severus, Origen became the head of the Alexandrian school. Origen was highly educated and became one of the greatest writers of the early church. Frustrated by the growth of Gnostic writings, especially commentaries on biblical text, Origen began producing commentaries and other writings. During the first half of the third century Christianity grew in numbers, but also gained a measure of intellectual and philosophical respect, bolstered largely by the writings of Origen which were numerous, dense in thought, and HUGE in size. He would lecture in class, offering commentary on biblical text while stenographers jotted notes in shorthand to be written out later. It was said that several stenographers would work in shifts while Origen would go for hours every day.

He never mentions Clement, but follows in his tradition to some degree. Origen does not openly embrace Plato as Clement had done, but his theological system is clearly marked by

Platonism. It is Origen who truly develops the Alexandrian model of allegorical interpretation. Philo had done this with the OT; now Origen applies the same methodology to Christian texts. For Origen each text had three meanings: a literal one, an ethical one, and finally a spiritual meaning. This system was developed to help explain what certain texts might mean when the immediately clear meaning could not be correct (in the mind of Origen). The God of Israel could not have really decreed that His people kill every woman and child in some of the OT battle scenes. Origen would find a “spiritual” way to explain this. For Origen the spiritual meaning of the text was most important, thus sometimes he would minimize the literal meaning.

Origen could be seen as a prototype and a primary influence on the men who would commit themselves to celibacy in the monastic tradition. He never married, but gave himself completely to the service of Christ and His church. Eusebius reported that Origen castrated himself as a young man (this practice certainly happened in the Egyptian church), but this tradition is not completely reliable. It is certain, however that Origen embraced a very spartan lifestyle, including all the Christian disciplines that would later become codified in monasticism.

The importance of Origen on the future of Christianity is difficult to overestimate. His writings were used by his contemporaries, but held in higher regard by the next few generations. Later generations would take sides regarding some of his controversial positions and come into serious disagreement. Referred to by historians as “The Origenist Controversy,” future leaders would part ways over the teachings of the second century writer.

## On First Principles

Origen's major controversial work was *De Principiis* in Latin ("day-prin-CHEE-pay" - or *On First Principles*). In the prologue of this work Origen warns the reader that this work is NOT for just any believer, but is designed to be read only by those who are solidly grounded in their faith and in philosophical training. He continues by saying that he will be speculating about things that are beyond human knowledge, but beneficial to be discussed. Various topics are addressed that would suggest Clement's emphasis: creation and how all things first began, the origin of evil, angelology, among many other topics. One topic that seems to emerge from time to time in church history is universalism. Origen speculates on how "all things" might eventually come under submission to God and in this context he states that even those,

who are called the devil and his angels....after having undergone heavier and severer punishments...improved by this stern method of training, and [are] restored...and thus advancing through each stage to a better condition, reach even to that which is invisible and eternal... *De Prin.* I.6.3

This kind of statement obviously caused concern, but it must be remembered that this appears in the one document Origen warns is NOT to be taken as orthodox theology. He does, however, defend his speculations publicly which shows that he takes his view seriously. Also important is how Origen gets himself into this situation - by trying to reconcile every verse of scripture that does not seem to agree and force some kind of literal interpretation.

The reader should also keep in mind that Origen is writing before formal orthodoxy had been completely established. Whatever the case, Origen's writings were at times condemned, and sometimes embraced. Interestingly, the "Origenist controversy" also had some influence in the divide between the Eastern and Western churches. Historically the Eastern fathers and churches have always embraced Origen and the West has been much less sympathetic.

# 13 Persecution, Baptism and Bishops

## **The Decian Persecution**

In 247-248 Rome celebrated 1,000 years of existence with a three day, nonstop party. The church had grown immensely during this first half of the third century, had begun to reach into every strata of society, and had experienced a relative respite from persecutions for around 30 years.

248 - The troops of Decius proclaim him as emperor

249 - Decius takes control of the government

250 - Decius participates in the annual sacrifice to Jupiter and then orders that this be followed throughout the empire.

It appears that resentments or prejudice had built up against the Christians - the order of Decius was quickly carried all around the empire, which was somewhat unusual. It was a brutal time for around 18 months. The bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Jerusalem were executed. When the wave of persecution had passed bishops came out from hiding to find thousands of lapsed believers wishing to be readmitted to fellowship. Second repentance had once again become an issue and the man who addressed it was bishop Cyprian of Carthage.

## **Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage**

Cyprian had gone into exile during the persecution, encouraging the believers through private correspondence. He returned to find that the “confessors,” believers who had been imprisoned, had been given authority by the lay people to pray for, and grant forgiveness to the lapsed. Cyprian issued *On the Lapsed* which

spoke definitively on the subject of how to deal with lapsed believers - this document was roundly accepted.

In addition to the issue of what to do with lapsed believers, a rival group in the church of Carthage selected a bishop to represent them in opposition to Cyprian. Meanwhile, there was something of a competition for the bishopric of Rome, and two rival bishops (Cornelius and Novatian) were elected. Bishops in the surrounding areas, led by Cyprian, confirmed Cornelius with a majority vote. Novatian received only a minority vote and soon thereafter he defected from the church in Rome taking many followers with him. Cyprian responded with another tract, *On the Unity of the Church* where he speaks of Petrine authority resting in Rome. He also emphasizes the unity of having one bishop, stating that one “cannot have God for his Father who has not the Church as his mother.” This statement was obviously directed at Novatian for his defection.

In 254 a new bishop was elected in Rome named Stephen. Almost immediately Cyprian was at odds with Stephen over the issue of baptism for the Novatian believers who wanted to come back to the “true” church. Cyprian had made it clear that these defectors could not be recognized - their Novatian baptism could not be accepted as legitimate or reversed by an orthodox rebaptism. Stephen held a conciliatory position. We have copies of at least two letters written by Cyprian to Stephen, both fairly aggressive in his disagreement. Unfortunately we do not have copies of Stephen’s responses which, according to Eusebius, were every bit as stubborn. Cyprian admitted that the Novatianists used the trinitarian formula, but were not in “the” Church. Stephen insisted on the primacy of the Roman bishopric, calling Cyprian the “AntiChrist” for resisting him.

## **The Council of Carthage**

Cyprian's response was to call a major council of 86 bishops (including Cyprian), the first Council of Carthage in 256. Cyprian opened the council with a speech criticizing those who would attempt to hold "tyrannical" power over the college of bishops, a clear reference to Stephen's attack on him. The attending 86 bishops, all from the North African region, expressed their support of Cyprian one by one, some even referring to the Novatians as "heretics."

Stephen began to threaten bishops in the eastern provinces with excommunication if they sided with Cyprian. The situation was quickly escalating into a major problem when, in August of 257, Stephen's unexpected death brought instant relief. The new bishop (Sixtus II) was far less strident and far more cooperative.

## **Bishops and the Pope**

What becomes clear from the letters and writings of Cyprian is that the regional college of bishops was normative. The bishop of Rome was an important position, holding the seat of Peter, but it appears that Cyprian only used this expression as a tactic against his theological opponents. When he disagreed with Rome, there was **no** primacy. The Roman bishop had already been referred to as "papa," the "father" of the Italian bishops, but the 86 African bishops at Carthage made it clear that the concept of a "Pope" holding supreme leadership had not yet been settled.

We saw the emergence of monoepiscopacy (a single bishop residing over a large city/area) with Ignatius circa 112-120. Now, in the 250's, we see that bishops worked together in a "college" format, meeting in regional councils to discuss, debate, and give verdict on important issues. From these letters of Cyprian, and from other documents, it seems that these regional colleges of bishops tended to stick together.

## 14 The Issue of the Trinity

The belief in what would ultimately be called “the trinity” begins in the middle of the first century, first with the Apostle Paul and most clearly articulated by John in his gospel and in the *Revelation* at the end of the first century.

Until the first part of the third century and Origen of Alexandria, there really had not been any significant theological writing on this issue. Until Origen there was simply an acknowledgment of NT references, mainly John 1:1. By “simply” what is meant is a simple belief of what was written without trying to figure it out and explain it. What takes place, from this point forward, is church councils and various writers try to define a theological point that almost all adherents admitted was a “mystery.”

### **Selections from the New Testament**

There are numerous examples from the NT - for our purpose we will look at only a few. Paul’s creedal formula in 1 Cor. 8:6 is interesting - Paul uses the same Greek construction in this text to describe God and Christ. In English,

“...there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord (kurios) Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

Larry Hurtado deals extensively with the early usage of *kurios* in his comprehensive work, *LORD JESUS CHRIST, Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. Hurtado gives a good account of how Paul uses “Lord” as a designation for Jesus to clearly identify

him with YHWH in the OT (see pages 108-118 where he specifically deals with this text and the Philippians 2 text mentioned below). Hurtado reminds us that in the Greek OT (LXX) YHWH is translated as *kurios*,

In this astonishingly bold association of Jesus with God, Paul adapts wording from the traditional Jewish confession of God's uniqueness, known as the Shema, from Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (Kyrios heis estin [LXX], translating Heb. Yahweh 'echad). p.114

Then the Philippians 2 text:

"...Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus..."

While there are doubts that most of the NT writers knew the Hebrew text, Paul probably did, yet he makes no effort to guard the sacred Name of Yahweh (YHWH). Here he refers to Yahweh with the traditional Greek *ho theos* (the God). He uses Hebrew terms at other times (as do other NT writers) but nowhere does he make reference to the sacred name - except that for Paul *kurios* is a reference for YHWH.

In this Philippians 2 text, "every knee will bow and every tongue confess" Paul is citing Isaiah 45:23, a clear OT "one God" text. Yet Paul is using it in reference to Jesus. He does this in Romans 14:11 as well. Paul has just said that God has "exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above every name." Paul intentionally says every name. Being a first century Jew, would he think Jesus would be above YHWH? Paul seems to be saying Jesus IS YHWH.

## **The Gospel of John**

John's gospel is the most deity-oriented of the gospels and it is dated late in the first century. John is the only NT writer to clearly refer to Jesus as the "word," or logos. While there are

similarities to Philo's logos here, *John* certainly kicks open the door with respect to the divinity of Jesus, and the centrality of that message:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God. *John* 1:1

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" *John* 8:58

The famous "I AM" text of Exodus is rendered *ego eimi* in the LXX. It is important to remember that Jesus almost certainly did not speak these words in Greek, but rather in Aramaic. This, of course, would put more emphasis on the declaration than even *ego eimi* can convey. The fact that John records this pericope with *ego eimi* in Greek indicates his intention of showing the claim of Jesus (or at the very least the view the church had of Jesus at the end of the first century).

It should also be pointed out that the construction of the *John* 8:58 text is unusual. Either the statement ends as most translations render it, "I am," or it must read "I am before Abraham was born." Either reading is unusual and points to the intentionality of John to make a point of showing a claim of Jesus to divine equality.

### **Early Christianity**

Ignatius (circa 112-114) affirms Jesus as God in the flesh, using the Logos theology of John's gospel, the Word – and to keep anyone from misunderstanding that he might be speaking of Jesus in a docetic or ebionitic way, "both made and not made." While it is true that we have two versions of Ignatius (a short and a longer, more "orthodox" version), one can see a strong pre-existence Christology even in the shorter version below.

There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first possible and then impossible, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Ephesians 7 (short)

...our Physician is the only true God, the unbegotten and unapproachable, the Lord of all, the Father and Begetter of the only-begotten Son. We have also as a Physician the Lord our God, Jesus the Christ, the only-begotten Son and Word, before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the virgin. For "the Word was made flesh."

Ephesians 7 (long version)

Irenaeus of Lyons (cir. 175) wrote against Gnostics and is fairly consistent with Ignatius, but also further elaborates the divinity of Jesus,

The Church, though dispersed through our the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father "to gather all things in one," and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father...

A.H. 10.1

Through the second century most of the discussion that relates to the concept of trinity focused on the nature of Jesus. First the church battled against ebionitic christology, insisting on the divinity of Jesus. Then some of the fathers battled against

docetic christology that existed in many gnostic groups. There is very little discussion on the Holy Spirit. You can see that Irenaeus affirms the Holy Spirit, but there is no divinity language. There is evidence in the Alexandrians (both Clement and Origen) that teaching on the Holy Spirit was reserved for teaching catechumens (young believers preparing for baptism) and was guarded in a kind of secrecy.

### **Sabellius (circa 220)**

Up to this point the discussion tended to focus on “logos theology,” trying to explain John 1:1. With Sabellius *hypostasis* was introduced, the idea of “substance” or “personality.” Sabellius rejected the idea of three personalities, wanting to hold tightly to a monotheistic position. Sabellius promoted a type of modalism, that each part of the trinity was revealed through *energies* but did not have a separate personality.

In the late 250’s this theological discussion was taken up in a strange set of circumstances. Dionysius, the bishop of Rome and the bishop of Alexandria engaged in a dispute through letters regarding the nature of Jesus and the Father. The Alexandrian bishop, who happened to be a student of Origen, was also named Dionysius. To make things more confusing these two church leaders were not fluent with each other’s language which caused what Frend calls “a comedy of errors.”

Dionysius of Rome, whose first language was Latin, understood the Greek word *hypostasis* to mean “substance” when the bishop in Alexandria was actually talking about “personality.” This linguistic struggle only made a delicate and technical discussion more difficult. In addition, the Greek word *homoousias* (“same substance”) was also introduced in the discussion to reference whether the Father and the Son were of the “same substance.” Although both bishops basically understood the term to mean the same thing, the Alexandrian Dionysius did not use the term

because it was not a biblical term. This lack of usage led to Dionysius being criticized for not believing the concept.

In the end this discussion showed the willingness of regional bishops to work together for a common faith, but it also opened the door for the future problems that would follow. The concept of *homoousias* would resurface and the bishops at Nicea would act in a definitive fashion.

### **Paul of Samosata**

In around 260 Paul of Samosata became the bishop of Antioch. Paul was a charismatic man - described by Eusebius as “loud-mouthed” and “brash.” He had a lofty bishop’s throne built for himself; he shouted and waved his hands while preaching; he smacked his thighs and stomped his feet to bring emphasis in his sermons; he called for people to wave handkerchiefs when he said anything that demanded a rowdy response. All of these things only made his theological aberrations stand out.

With Paul of Samosata the difference between Antioch and Alexandria clearly comes to the surface. A strong Jewish influence had continued in the church of Antioch and is manifested in the theology of Samosata with an ebionitic slant, a focus on the humanity of Jesus. Paul of Samosata, who held a very dim view of Origen, believed that Jesus had not been eternally united with the Logos, but had been infused with Logos at his baptism. Although he used the term *homoousias*, he did not use the term as Origen had done - he disagreed with Origen’s views on this important matter.

In 264/265 Dionysius of Alexandria launched a frontal attack on bishop Paul’s theology, calling a council - there were actually 2-3 different councils, each being used to sway enough leadership to act against Paul. At one of these councils (cir. 265) the Alexandrian bishops won the day and pronounced that in

order to be in the catholic church one must affirm the preexistence of Christ. In 268 another council called for Paul to recant. He refused and was condemned, but his political connections kept him safe from being excommunicated.

### **The Coming Controversy**

These third century struggles merely foreshadow the coming controversy of the fourth century. What is now known as the Arian controversy will ignite some of the worst strife to date within the Christian Church; the issue was whether or not Jesus was eternal. This controversy will, in part, lead to the first major Church Council, the famous Council of Nicea in 325. This council is famous partly because the bishops were summoned by the Roman Emperor. Emperor Constantine had hoped this council would be the crowning achievement of the age of peace in the Roman Empire.

# 15 The Empire Reorganized

In 257/258 Emperor Valerian issued edicts against the Christians. This series of persecutions was not a general attack as had come from Decius. This was targeted at the bishops and the upper class Christians.

In the 260's the borders of the empire were being breached by barbarian tribes. The peace and security of the Roman Empire were threatened on every side. Emperor Gallienus sought to keep things in order - he could not protect the outer regions, so regional legions did their best. Territory was lost around the edges, but the empire was held intact.

In 261 Valerian was taken prisoner by the Persians and Gallienus became the sole emperor. Weary of the violence against Christians, Gallienus issued an edict of toleration which basically stated that Christians should be free to assemble without fear and their properties should be returned to them and protected from confiscation.

In 284 Diocletian became the emperor, and to push back the encroachments of the barbarians, Diocletian brings Maximian into his confidence. The two men rule the empire as a team, Diocletian ruling in the east and Maximian in the west. In addition, both men took on a prince so that, in effect, there were now 4 emperors, each waging war against the barbarian hordes in a different region of the empire. The important fact to know here is that Maximian selected Constantius to be his prince. Constantius ruled over Gaul and Britain and would have a famous son, known as Constantine the Great.

After the borders of the empire were basically restored, Diocletian went about rebuilding the financial status of the empire. Standard coinage and regulated pricing was established; taxes were increased which brought in record revenues, but the military also had grown, needing more of this new funding. To secure his legacy, Diocletian started several building programs.

### **The Church Prospers**

By the year 300, according to Eusebius, there were 40 churches in Rome. The third Christian century was coming to a good conclusion - the church was growing, church buildings were getting larger, and the Church was financially prosperous. The peace of Rome was good and the Christian Church was enjoying being a legitimate part of that peace.

For the 40 years after Gallienus issued his edict of toleration the church prospered. Christians were to be found at every level of society and serving in every level of government, even serving in the military with many becoming officers. With a wink and a nod Christians serving as governmental officials and military leaders were allowed to avoid making the normal loyalty sacrifices to Rome.

If the third century ended well, the fourth century would begin with equal trauma. Possibly one of the worst of the Roman persecutions was coming and it was completely unexpected.

# The Church Established 303 - 325 A.D.

## 16 Politics of the Roman Empire

In the last quarter of the third century the Roman Empire went through several changes of leadership and the mood of the empire was for positive change. In 284 Diocles gained power and was declared Emperor Diocletian. He was seen as a conservative reformer, one wishing to take the empire back to it's historic roots.

### **Historical Sources**

A note needs to be made here regarding our sources for Diocletian, the persecution which marked the end of his rule, and the ascension of Constantine to the throne.

Our two main historical voices for most of our knowledge of this period are Lactantius and Eusebius, both of whom were considered very friendly to Constantine and thus not seen as fully objective in their reporting. Having said this, much of what is reported can be verified in other various data found in other writers and documents. Unless there is good evidence to the contrary, historians will typically take the written record as credible history.

Diocletian cloaked himself with distinctions of imperial importance. Those who sought his audience had to bow three times in their approach; Dominus, or "Lord," became the proper way to address the emperor. Christians had become far more integrated within Roman life and culture, even serving in the military and government. Just these two small demands

made by Diocletian, if true, gave some indication of what was coming for the Church.

### **The Church Continues to Grow**

Throughout the second half of the third century Christianity grew in most sectors of the Roman Empire. We have records (letters and notes from regional councils) of increasing numbers of regional bishops which speak of numerical growth; there are also a few non-antagonistic references to Christians in Roman governmental letters which speak to growing influence. Christians were serving in the military and in local government.

While it is true that Christianity was growing, it was not spreading as rapidly as some Church leaders (or Roman critics) wanted to think. It is true that Christianity had some presence in Britany and in Gaul, but there was very little gospel penetration into what is now central and northern Europe. We also know very few details of the Church in the last 30 years of the third century - we have few writings of substance which seems to indicate that there were few great leaders as have been seen during other previous periods.

We know from Lactantius that Diocletian had Christians in his service just before he began his worst persecution. Ironically, Christians serving close to the emperor directly led to the great persecution. Some fortune tellers were trying to “divine” the future for the emperor when some Christian attendants made the sign of the cross (probably to protect themselves from the influence of “witchcraft”). This apparently bothered the soothsayers and kept them from “seeing” what the emperor wanted to know. Diocletian demanded that these Christians be whipped. He also sent orders to his commanders that all Christians serving in the military be made to offer sacrifices or be dismissed from service. (Lactantius, *Of The Manner in Which the Persecutors Died* 10.6)

## 17 Persecution under Diocletian

Under Diocletian another round of intense persecution was carried out against the Church - this would be the last time Christians would be imprisoned and executed by the Roman Empire.

On February 23, 303 the cathedral in Nicomedia was torn down. The next day an imperial edict was issued ordering all Christian church buildings to be destroyed, all sacred writings were to be surrendered to authorities to be burned, all sacred items used in Christian meetings were to be confiscated, and worship meetings were outlawed. Just a few months later another edict was issued ordering the arrest of all clergy - so many were arrested that they had to halt arrests due to the overflowing of the prisons. In early 304 all Christians were required to make sacrifice to the empire on the pain of death. Later that year Diocletian retired and was succeeded by Galerius. The persecution under Galerius intensified until his death in 311.

**\*\* IMPORTANT \*\***

As has been pointed out in other sections covering Roman persecution, it is important to realize that persecution was never empire-wide. This particular round of persecution was really just carried out in the eastern part of the empire.

Bishops were rounded up, imprisoned, and some were executed. Many were forced to surrender copies of the scriptures to be burned: some presented old Greek medical texts which were accepted; some officials, not happy to carry out the emperors orders knowingly accepted non-sacred

documents to burn in the open as if scripture. Some believers in North Africa first learned of the outbreak against them when they saw their church buildings being lit on fire by the authorities.

Eusebius graphically describes some of these heinous tortures - this excerpt is an attempt to give some of the flavor of Eusebius' report:

Such was the conflict of those Egyptians who contended nobly for religion in Tyre. But we must admire those also who suffered martyrdom in their native land; where thousands of men, women, and children, despising the present life for the sake of the teaching of our Saviour, endured various deaths...numberless other kinds of tortures, terrible even to hear of, were committed to the flames; some were drowned in the sea; some offered their heads bravely to those who cut them off; some died under their tortures, and others perished with hunger. And yet others were crucified; some according to the method commonly employed for malefactors; others yet more cruelly, being nailed to the cross with their heads downward, and being kept alive until they perished on the cross with hunger.

It would be impossible to describe the outrages and tortures which the martyrs in Thebais endured....Others being bound to the branches and trunks of trees perished. For they drew the stoutest branches together with machines, and bound the limbs of the martyrs to them; and then, allowing the branches to assume their natural position, they tore asunder instantly the limbs of those for whom they contrived this.

All these things were done, not for a few days or a short time, but for a long series of years. Sometimes more than ten, at other times above twenty were put to death...and yet again a hundred men with young children and women, were slain in one day, being condemned to various and diverse torments.

We, also being on the spot ourselves, have observed large crowds in one day; some suffering decapitation, others torture by fire; so that the murderous sword was blunted, and becoming weak, was broken, and the very executioners grew weary and relieved each other. HE VIII.8-9

After giving some further descriptions of torture, Eusebius then goes on to say that even some of the Romans were put off by the hideous nature of the torments, and thus

Therefore it was commanded that our eyes should be put out, and that we should be maimed in one of our limbs. For such things were humane in their sight, and the lightest of punishments for us. So that now on account of this kindly treatment accorded us by the impious, it was impossible to tell the incalculable number of those whose right eyes had first been cut out with the sword, and then had been cauterized with fire; or who had been disabled in the left foot by burning the joints, and afterward condemned to the provincial copper mines, not so much for service as for distress and hardship. Besides all these, others encountered other trials, which it is impossible to recount; for their manly endurance surpasses all description.

In these conflicts the noble martyrs of Christ shone illustrious over the entire world...and the evidences of the truly divine and unspeakable power of our Saviour were made manifest through them. To mention each by name would be a long task, if not indeed impossible. HE VIII.12.10-11

This last report, that the authorities decided to satisfy their need for punishment simply with poking out an eye of a martyr, will resurface later when we hear about Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicea.

This persecution was terrible, but when it came to a halt a new era would begin.

## 18 Constantine Comes to Power

While the persecution was being carried out in the East where the numbers of Christians were much greater, the Western Christians experienced very little pressure. Under Constantius (the father of Constantine) some church buildings were destroyed in Britany, Gaul, and Spain - that was the extent of persecution - there is no evidence that any Christian was executed. In addition to this lack of brutality, Constantine's half sister was named Anastasia (*anastasis* - Gk: "resurrection"). This indicates a Christian influence in the household of Constantius.

The details of the imperial transitions that followed are far more complicated, so only a simple overview will be given here. The empire was organized with an "Augustus" ruler and a "Caesar" under him in the East and in the West. There were several military struggles for control.

When Constantius died in 306 his military proclaimed his son Constantine to be the new emperor in the West.

306 - Constantius died, his son Constantine replaces him

310 - Maximian rebels against Constantine and fails

311 - Galerius died, Maximin Daia replaces him in the East

311 - Maximin and Licinius fight for control in the East

311 - Constantine and Licinius form alliance

In 312 Constantine engaged Maxentius (son of Maximian) for sole rulership in the West at the famous "Battle of the Milvian Bridge." According to Lactantius (the date given later by Eusebius indicates an earlier battle) Constantine had a vision of a cross in the sky and heard a voice saying something like, "Go, and in this symbol, conquer." In the battle Maxentius drowns in

the Tiber river attempting to retreat. Though the details are sketchy and not easy to fully reconcile, it appears that Constantine knew enough of Christianity to believe that his vision was of the God of the Christians, that he was chosen (or destined) by this God to rule the empire, and it was the beginning of his embrace of Christian faith.

This battle leaves Constantine as the sole leader of the empire in the West. In 313 Constantine and Licinius sign the Treaty of Milan. This treaty marks an historic moment for the Christian faith. It is decreed that all Roman citizens would have religious freedom - the ability to worship however they wanted without interference from the empire. This did NOT represent Constantine making Christianity the official religion, but it does effectively put an end to the persecution of Christians.

Constantine and Licinius also entered something of a truce, putting an end to the leadership strife that had existed for the previous 20-25 years. This truce lasted until 324 when Constantine became the sole ruler of the Roman empire.

## 19 The Church Divided

As with prior times of persecution, schisms developed in the church during the Diocletian persecution. The issue was the same as in prior persecutions: how to deal with those who had “lapsed” in their faith during the persecution. In the East, where the persecution had been most severe, there tended to be a more lenient treatment of those who had failed in some way. In the West, especially in North Africa, a more strident view held the day (following in the tradition of Tertullian). While some bishops had been able to satisfy the authorities with copies of Gnostic works to be burned, in some parts of North Africa handing over any document to be burned (one bishop “surrendered” a medical book, the Romans thinking it was sacred writing) was considered apostasy - even the appearance of cooperating was seen as a denial of the faith.

### **Donatus and Donatism**

In around 311 a dispute arose in Carthage (N.Africa) over who would be the rightful bishop. A group refused to submit to Caecilian because he had been ordained by Festus, who had been a traditor. The man who stepped to the front of the dispute was Donatus. He had traveled around the countryside rebaptizing and ordaining bishops, though he himself had not been officially ordained. Apparently a charismatic man, and due to the fact that these “new” leaders now owed their positions to him, Donatus gained a strong following.

The details of the entire story are somewhat complicated, thus only the basic outline of events will be given here.

## **Roman Synod of 313**

Caecilian offered to be ordained again, but this did not satisfy the Donatist party and the Church was basically divided into two camps. This came to the attention of Constantine in 312 - he directed Miltiades, the bishop of Rome to investigate. Miltiades selected several regional bishops to come to Rome; Caecilian also traveled to Rome with both supporting and opposing bishops. This hearing (or synod) convened during September of 313. Caecilian was found innocent on several charges (mainly of being illegitimately ordained) and Donatus was excommunicated. Some efforts were made to allow ALL the pastors/bishops on both sides to continue in public ministry, but the Donatist camp refused to abide by the ruling.

## **The Council in Carthage**

The dispute in N. Africa only grew worse and the Donatists demanded another council that would be held locally in Carthage. Witnesses for the Donatists were not produced due to the fear of violence. This council also decided in favor of Caecilian and the Donatists then appealed directly to Constantine.

We know from letters written by Constantine that he was very unhappy with the whole situation. He had wanted the matter resolved by the church leadership. His letters indicate the desire to see everyone come together in unity - the somewhat naive desires of the newly “Christian” Emperor. Constantine called for another council to be held in Arles in 314, what becomes the first true Church Council in the West.

## **The Council of Arles**

The decisions of the council are expressed in twenty-one canons that survived, dealing mostly with administrative rules for bishops. They did, however, set rules for the celebration of Easter...and they condemned Donatus. In addition, they ruled

that false witnesses against a bishop would be excommunicated and could receive the death penalty!

Again the Donatists denounced the verdict and appealed to Constantine. Donatist lawyers presented more legal complaints against Caecilian in Carthage forcing Constantine to order yet another trial. It was discovered that some accusations in the Donatist legal briefs were not true and their witness statement had been forged - now the parties were again called to Rome to make an account. Constantine again ruled in favor of Caecilian.

After ruling in favor of Caecilian, Constantine received news that extremists were stirring up anti-Caecilian riots in Numidia. As early as 313 Constantine had been briefed about the situation in N.Africa and had warned the Roman bishop, that rioting would not be permitted, thus he wanted something done quickly to bring peace.

One of Constantine's favored advisors suggested a compromise plan to the two groups: a commission of bishops would be sent to Africa to appoint a new bishop of Carthage. The proposal was accepted, but when the delegation arrived in Africa it was met with hostility. The Donatists boycotted and riots broke out in the streets of Carthage. After 40 days the Roman prelates left Carthage with no resolution.

### **Imperial Edict Against the Donatists**

In 317 Constantine issued a severe edict against the Donatists: the death penalty would be imposed on anyone who disturbs the peace. A later decree orders the confiscation of Donatist churches. Donatus refused to surrender church properties in Carthage into the hands of Caecilian. Caecilian then appealed to the local Roman authorities.

There is a lack of documentary evidence about what happens next, but it appears that extremists in the Donatist camps took to the streets in violent protests. On March 12, 317 armed forces moved in to take Donatist church buildings by force; attacks were made on churches with Donatists defending them. Donatist writings claimed many were killed and there is other evidence that lend some credibility to these reports. The violence only happened in Carthage - in the surrounding regions Donatist bishops were allowed to keep their buildings and their positions.

By 321 Constantine decided he would not be able to bring about the peace in N.Africa that he desired, thus he granted toleration to the Donatists. In an open letter Constantine asked the catholic bishops to show moderation and patience to the Donatists.

### **Arius and the Arian Controversy**

The story of Arius, like that of Donatus, begins in the fire of Roman persecution and how to treat the lapsed. During the Diocletian persecution bishops in Egypt were divided on how strictly lapsed believers were to be treated during recovery. The beginning of this story illustrates how conflicted the believers were in Northern Africa. In an Alexandrian prison Peter, the bishop of Alexandria and the rival bishop Meletius, from Upper Egypt, were in sharp disagreement over this issue. Their dispute was so great that they hung a curtain within the prison cell to disassociate themselves from one another. Bishop Meletius, who represented monks from the Egyptian desert, held to a fairly strict regime - Peter was seen by the Meletian group as lax.

When the intense persecution ended these men were released from prison, but their dispute continued and developed into a significant church problem. A well-educated and charismatic man named Arius rose up in the Meletian ranks, even being

excommunicated by at least two councils for his support of Meletius. In a strange turn of events, Peter was again arrested and martyred. In the aftermath Arius began to argue in favor of the “catholic” side and was eventually ordained to be a presbyter by Peter’s successor. The Meletians considered him a traditor (a “betrayor”) and wanted to defeat his influence - Arius had begun to build a good reputation.

We have only touched on the controversy that revolved around some of the writings of the great Alexandrian father, Origen. The conflict with Arius brings Origen back into the picture - this conflict is the first major theological struggle over the definition of the trinity and is the main reason Emperor Constantine called the first “catholic” council of church leaders, the Council of Nicea in 325.

After Origen’s death, church leaders and thinkers continued to struggle with the concepts of how the Father and Son fit together. Following the transcendence of Clement and Origen, Arius held that the only “unbegotten” being was the Father, thus no other creature was like Him. Jesus, the Son, was begotten, so Arius maintained that the Son was created. If he was created, then “there was a time when he was not,” there was a time when the Son did not exist. THIS was his undoing. The Meletians demanded that Arius be disciplined - a council was called in 318 - one hundred bishops attended and condemned Arius to be exiled. By the time we get to the Nicene Council a true struggle for power was taking place in Alexandria. The Arians had established their own churches and their own leaders - two separate churches (denominations) had already started to develop in Egypt. This was a situation that Emperor Constantine would not accept.

## 20 Constantine and Faith

It is important to realize that Constantine always pushed for peace and unity in the church. He was not as concerned with the theological or doctrinal issues as he was to see unity. We will see later in the discussion on the Council of Nicea that Constantine's goal was unity in the church.

### **Constantine, Faith and the Sun**

Many critics of Constantine maintain that his actions towards the Church were motivated by his political aspirations. It is commonly asserted that his Christian profession was not genuine, and that he continued to worship the Sun. The records actually show that Constantine seemed to act in genuine Christian charity while at the same time continuing to embrace various aspects of Sun worship. But it must also be remembered that prior to Constantine early Christians had also co-opted aspects of Sun worship.

Clement of Alexandria portrays Christ, like the Sun-god, racing his chariot across the sky. Many pagans accused the Christians of Sun worship because they met on Sunday mornings - the early Christians did this to celebrate "the Lord's Day" as opposed to the Jewish Sabbath. Early in the fourth century the birthday of the Sun-god was co-opted as the day to celebrate the nativity of Jesus - there is no clear record of who started this tradition.

Considering these facts, perhaps it is less striking that Constantine continued to use the Sun on his coins and other imperial emblems. It was very clear, however, from his various letters that he considered himself a Christian and the imperial

leader of the Church. It is true that Constantine was not baptized until he lay on his death bed, but this was not uncommon due to the issues of second repentance. Because he sentenced people to death, Constantine did not want to be baptized until the end of his life. The record on Constantine, like that of all Christian history, is mixed.

Many of the leaders of Christianity during his day did not question his conversion. There may have been some who questioned it, but some (like those who held a strict view of baptism, rebaptism, and lapsing during persecution) questioned the faith of many Christians. There are examples of bishops who excommunicate each other, or at least push for this to be done. Lactantius, a fairly strict Christian leader and historian of the period, had a high view of Constantine as both a Christian and a leader. Some try to argue that these bishops were afraid of challenging the faith of the Emperor. Wait, the men who had endured the severe persecution of Diocletian are now afraid? This is not a good argument.

Christians of his day appeared to believe that Constantine was legitimately saved.

They considered:

- his father generally did not persecute Christians,
- his mother apparently was a believer,
- he credited the Christian God for his military victory and ascension to the throne,
- he passed a law to forbid all Romans from being persecuted for their religious faith,
- and a law restricting businesses on Sunday, giving freedom for worship attendance,
- he returned buildings/properties to churches which had been confiscated,
- he gave money to rebuild churches which had been burned during persecution,

- he wrote letters calling bishops to prayer/unity in the name of the blessed Savior,
- he showed tender mercy to maimed bishops of persecution at the Council of Nicea,
- he called for Christian baptism on his death bed

Secondly, the usage of the Sun on coins and other emblems was so common - very much like the American eagle to represent freedom. The Sun represented a form of monotheism in the Greco-Roman world. Having the Sun on a coin would have been similar to having "In God We Trust" on coins/dollars of the U.S.A. There are probably some who would argue that using U.S. money is idolatry.

## 21 The Council of Nicea-325AD

There are many erroneous things said and written about the famous Council of Nicea. For example, it was not:

- the beginning of the “Catholic Church”
- when Christianity decided Jesus was divine
- when the New Testament was made official

There was not exactly a vote on the trinity. No vote on the official biblical text. No vote on Gnostic gospels. Christianity was not made the official religion. The goal here is to report what the sources tell us about this historic council.

### **+++ Historical Sources +++**

Our historical sources for our knowledge of this council are Eusebius of Caesarea, Sozomen, Rufinus and Theodoret of the fifth century, each of whom lean heavily on Eusebius. Eusebius was seen as a friend of Constantine and thus not seen as fully objective in his reporting. Sozomen, Rufinus and Theodoret are writing many years after the event - there is likely to be some exaggeration, but unless there is good evidence to the contrary, these writers should basically be trusted.

In 324 the truce between Licinius and Constantine came to an end. Constantine defeated Licinius in battle and became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. Constantine began receiving reports that the bishops and churches in Egypt were in disarray, even resulting in occasional violence in the streets of Northern Africa. He had been told about the conflict between Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, and Arius, a presbyter.

Constantine had begun to see himself as something like Plato's Philosopher-King, the Emperor who was also a philosophical and spiritual leader. He had tried (and miserably failed) to help solve the Donatist crisis and now he was distressed with the Arian crisis in Egypt. He dispatched Hosius, a bishop from Spain, to try to reconcile Alexander and Arius. In addition, Constantine determined to call a "worldwide" council to bring peace to the Church.

Messengers were sent all around the empire, inviting (or directing) bishops to come to a monumental council. The council was held at Constantine's summer retreat in Nicea. Around 220 bishops attended, mostly from the eastern churches; it was quite a distance from the western side of the empire. Only around eight officials came from western churches with Rome sending only two presbyters.

The council began with a solemn ceremony in the great hall. The bishops were all seated in rows of chairs lined along the walls. There was a throne at one end of the hall, obviously for the Emperor, and a small fire pit, like an altar, sitting in the middle of the hall. An attendant entered, then another, then a third - there were no regular soldiers, probably a comfort to the gathered bishops. One of the attendants gave a sign and all of the bishops stood. Emperor Constantine entered the hall clothed in purple, a very tall man with a huge head, Constantine moved with the ease of an athlete-warrior. He walked with his gaze slightly downcast to the ground which seemed to indicate an imperial air combined with a kind of humility. Once Constantine reached his seat he looked around wanting the bishops to be seated. The bishops motioned for the Emperor to sit first, a show of respect. Finally, Constantine seated himself with the bishops following his lead.

A statement was read (perhaps written by Constantine) welcoming the bishops and rejoicing that the empire had come to peace. Now it was his intention that the Church of the Lord be filled with peace. Rufinus records that Constantine had an attendant bring in an armful of scrolls and letters sent to him from all over the empire. It was announced that these communications were letters of accusations and complaints sent by bishops against other bishops (probably from the Egyptian region and the Arian crisis). Constantine then let the bishops know that he had not read any of them and instructed his attendant to burn them on the altar, saying that he wanted all grievances settled during their council.

As the council progressed it became obvious to the bishops that Constantine understood Greek. He nodded as bishops spoke and even interjected comments into the air from time to time. According to Socrates, Constantine chided bishop Acesius for his rigid stance (related to “lapsed” believers), saying “Place a ladder, Acesius, and climb alone into heaven.” It impressed the bishops to see that the emperor was engaged and appeared to follow the various theological and doctrinal discussions.

### **Theological Debate**

It is clear in retrospect that Constantine was more concerned with attaining peace and unity in the Church than he was with theology or doctrine. Three men who had been excommunicated in a previous smaller council, including Eusebius of Caesarea, were readmitted with little debate. These men had been disciplined for their views on the relationship of Jesus to the Father - the same issue which had driven Constantine to call the Council of Nicea to decide what to do with the views of Arius. Eusebius was allowed to read a simple baptismal formula for his defense which Constantine urged the bishops to accept without debate.

Despite the urging of the Emperor for peace, accusations were thrown about and Arius was called upon to present his views and defend himself. As Arius explained his position on the nature of Jesus some of the bishops actually plugged their ears, unwilling to listen, as if even to hear his statements might contaminate them. For many of the Egyptian bishops (rigorists and literalists) the statement of Jesus that “there was a time when he was not,” was too much to hear. Using intellectual arguments to say that Jesus was **not** the *same substance* of the Father was outright heresy to these bishops.

In the end a vote was taken to decide if Arius was to be allowed to remain in his position - it was a unanimous vote against Arius with two bishops abstaining. The views of Arius were condemned. It is important to realize that this vote was not a vote on the divinity of Jesus, or the trinity, but specifically on the views of Arius and whether or not he would be allowed to stay in his position. The “catholic” church had always accepted the simple statements of faith that Jesus and the Father were held together in unity - Jesus, as Ignatius of Antioch stated, was “both made and not made.”

Constantine insisted that the term *homoousias* be used in a creedal formula from the council that would definitively state the universal position of the Church. Some have stated that Constantine pushed for this term being influenced by the pro-Origenists. It must be remembered that *homoousias* had been used some 70 years prior by Dionysius of Alexandria in his trinitarian debate against Dionysius of Rome. It was NOT a new term. The use of the term had been marginalized because it was not found in the NT scriptures. Lietzmann calls this “amateurish theology” on the part of the emperor, but admits that the term had previously been employed not only by Dionysius, but by Paul of Samosata as well.

Here is the important thing to remember: the Church was attempting to bring clarity to the issue of exactly how the nature of Jesus was related to the nature of the Father. This had always been simply stated as in John's gospel, "In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God and the Word was God" - Logos theology. The problem was always in the explanation. We have seen at various points how writers of the first few centuries had affirmed these concepts more simply: see the section on Ignatius of Antioch for a good example. When men like Paul of Samosata or Arius espoused anything that did not seem to fit the established understanding, others would argue against them and definitions were pushed further. One might wish that everything could be simple, but in the end the great thinkers of the Church were trying to understand and explain what has always been considered a mystery. How could God take on the form of a man...and die? For some it seems to go against logic.

In the end the teaching of Arius was condemned, a creed was drafted (with perhaps too much attention on the views of Arius), and some 20 canons were passed. Among the more important canons were an agreement of when to celebrate Easter and more regulations on how bishoprics were to operate.

### **The Date of Easter**

When to celebrate Easter, the resurrection day of Jesus, had always been somewhat controversial. Eastern churches had always followed the Jewish calendar, celebrating on the Sunday following Passover. The Western churches followed the Roman calendar which could never be matched exactly with the Jewish calendar which added a lunar month every four years or so determined by the Sanhedrin. Thus, the Easter celebration for the Western church followed a different cycle with fixed dates set by regional leadership. The canon from Nicea made it forbidden to "celebrate with the Jews," pointing to the

undercurrent of anti-Jewish sentiment we have seen in earlier centuries.

Canons regarding bishoprics had already been given a good deal of attention. This issue had received attention at the Council of Arles (314 AD) and at almost every early council we have on record. Nicea continued this tradition. Indeed, with Meletius and Donatus appointing their own bishops and other contentious and dubious appointments, the “orthodox” bishops saw this as an important part of governing the growing church. Here is a sample of the Canons from the Council of Nicea:

Canon 4 - a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops of that province...at least three bishops should meet to make this decision.

Canon 5 - provinces should honor excommunications pronounced by other bishops in other provinces

Canon 6 - gives the bishop of Alexandria authority over bishops in Libya and other local provinces

Canon 10 - no lapsed believer should be ordained

Canon 15 - ordained leaders shall not move from city to city on their own accord

### **The Nicean Council Closes**

On July 25, 325 AD Constantine called for a fairly festive banquet to close the council. Constantine had already gifted several bishops with funds and buildings prior to Nicea, but now he showed more generosity, bestowing funds on many bishops in the great hall. Constantine went around the hall greeting bishops, kissing many on the very wounds that had been caused by Roman persecutions under Diocletian. He gently kissed stubbed fingers that had been hacked off; he kissed empty eye sockets where eyes had been gouged out. He asked for bishops to remember him in prayer. He urged the

bishops to retain and hold firmly to the peace that had been attained at their great council.

Though the emperor was filled with great optimism, many bishops were not as thrilled. A novice in the faith had pushed for a creed that had contained a key non-scriptural term and had not been thoroughly considered. It was also clear that the Church now was under a certain amount of governmental control. Where bishops had been excommunicated, the emperor maneuvered to reverse those decisions, as with Eusebius. And now an excommunicated bishop could be exiled by the government. Mostly, however, bishops were thankful that their time of deadly persecution had come to an end. The theological issues addressed at Nicea were not over. In fact, even the situation with Arius would continue for another 60 years.

### **The Nicean Creed**

One of the most important things accomplished at the Council of Nicea was the adoption of a credal form that would guide the Church regarding theology, Christology, and the trinity. As has been mentioned, there was great debate about the use of the term *homoousias*. The creed did not have 100% approval even when it was drafted. Within a short amount of time the creed came under attack, and eventually was rewritten at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.

Here is the text of the original version of the creed:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of

very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth];

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;

He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

[But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.]

The text above was added at the end of the original creed, obviously aimed at Arius.

## 22 Conclusion

Christian history from the Day of Pentecost and the time of the apostles through the Council of Nicea represents what many people see as the beginning stages of Christianity.

Some refer to the first two centuries as a time of innocence for the Church. As bishops and leaders attempted to keep the growing church unified, four distinct challenges faced them:

1. Persecution under the Roman Empire
2. Lapsing Christians during persecution
3. Unorthodoxy, heretics, and false doctrines
4. Struggles with doctrine and theology

Christianity was spreading under the thumb of the Roman Empire. Persecution regularly occurred although it was not a constant threat. Although stronger believers stood tall, many “lapsed” and terms had to be worked out for their readmission to the fellowship of the Church. The issue of “Second Repentance” was a significant issue during the second and third centuries.

In addition to the problems of dealing with “lapsed” believers, bishops also had to figure out how to deal with those imprisoned for their faith - the “martyrs.” This was another issue that challenged the growing authority of the bishop.

Beginning with Marcion, real threats against orthodoxy surfaced. With each new hetero-orthodox leader came a new challenge to the *paradosis*, the “traditions” that had been handed down by the apostles. These threats were most challenging because new ideas were oftentimes *not* clearly addressed by the “traditions.” These struggles pushed the bishops and leaders of

early Christianity to more clearly define the *dogma*, or doctrine of the Church.

Modern critics decry the movement from a fairly simple belief system to an ever-complicated attempt to define everything. It must be remembered that these leaders of a fairly new and developing movement were concerned to protect the sacred and established doctrines.

As the Church continued to grow and spread out across the Roman Empire another issue surfaced: differences of opinion between the leadership of the churches in the east and those in the west. From when to celebrate Easter and how to treat baptism (or perhaps re-baptism), to which documents should be considered “inspired,” real differences began to emerge.

In the middle of the third century Origen of Alexandria publicly taught and authored a voluminous amount of writings. One of these writings, *On First Principles*, would later become another piece of a complicated puzzle that helped to divide the Church.

Almost all of these issues mentioned above came together in perhaps the most difficult test in the early Church - the Arian controversy. Philosophy and theology converged in the issue of the trinity. Accusations were exchanged and the situation grew tense when suddenly a shift in the political landscape changed everything.

Through a series of maneuvers and battles, Constantine became the Emperor, claiming that he had converted to Christianity. In an unprecedented move, Constantine calls for a “universal” church council in an attempt to resolve the Arian conflict and to establish unity and peace in the Christian Church.

Prior to the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, Constantine had issued a decree to prohibit persecution of any Roman citizen for the observance of their religious beliefs. This did not make Christianity the official religion (as some claim), but it did bring to a conclusion the persecution of Christians by the Roman government.

Although the new “Christian” Emperor did not force his faith upon the empire, the historic Council did bring a partnership of Church and State that would complicate matters for the Church moving forward. Some say Constantine was motivated by his politics rather than genuine faith. Several Christian leaders of his day seemed convinced that his faith was genuine. This issue remains debated to this day.

The Council of Nicea did not bring the peace desired by the Emperor, but it did produce The Nicene Creed which continues to be recited around the world to the present day.

The earliest Church had survived and even thrived during the first three centuries. More challenges and more growth lay ahead.

# Recommended Reading

For general history these two works should be consulted:

Freud, W.H.C., *The Rise of Christianity* (London 1984).

Lietzmann, Hans, *A History of the Early Church*. Vols. I-IV, ET  
by Bertram Woolf (London 1960).

## Chapter 1

Bruce, F.F., *Men and Movements in the Primitive Church*, BCL  
(Carlisle, UK 1979).

Hurtado, Larry W., *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan 2005)

## Chapter 2

Bruce, F.F., *Men and Movements in the Primitive Church*, BCL  
(Carlisle, UK 1979).

Stendahl, Krister, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia 1976).

## Chapter 3

Lightfoot, J.B., *The Apostolic Fathers* (London 1889).

## Chapter 4

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, translation by John Keble, LIBRARY OF  
THE FATHERS series (London, 1872).

Robinson, James M., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*  
(New York 1977).

## Chapter 6

Lightfoot, J.B., *The Apostolic Fathers* (London 1889).

## Chapter 8

R.A. Baker, “Second Repentance in the Early Church: The  
Influence of The Shepherd of Hermas” (1998). This paper  
can be found in PDF on [www.churchhistory101.com](http://www.churchhistory101.com).

## Chapter 9

Wright, David, "Why Were the Montanists Condemned?"

Themelios 2:1, pp.15-22; also online:

[www.earlychurch.org.uk/article\\_montanists\\_wright.html](http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/article_montanists_wright.html).

Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. by Lawlor and Oulton, Vol. I & II (London 1954).

Robinson, James M., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York 1977).

R.A. Baker, "A Brief Introduction to Gnostic Writings" (2007).

This paper can be found on [www.churchhistory101.com](http://www.churchhistory101.com).

## Chapter 12

Bigg, Charles, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria* (Oxford 1886).

Daniélou, J., *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, A History of Early Christian Doctrine, Vol. II, (ET) by John A. Baker (London 1973).

## Chapter 14

Hurtado, Larry W., *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan 2005).

## Chapters 16-18

Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. by Lawlor and Oulton, Vol. I & II (London 1954).

Lactantius, *Divine institutes*, trans. by Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey (Liverpool University Press, 2003).

## Chapter 19

Freud, W.H.C., *The Rise of Christianity* (London 1984).

Freud, W.H.C., *The Donatist Church; A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (1952 Oxford).

Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, trans. by Mark Edwards (Liverpool University Press 1997).