

I..... 1st	XI..... 11th	XXI..... 21st
II..... 2nd	XII..... 12th	XXII..... 22nd
III..... 3rd	XIII..... 13th	XXIII..... 23rd
IV..... 4th	XIV..... 14th	XXIV..... 24th
V..... 5th	XV..... 15th	XXV..... 25th
VI..... 6th	XVI..... 16th	XXVI..... 26th
VII..... 7th	XVII..... 17th	XXVII..... 27th
VIII..... 8th	XVIII..... 18th	XXVIII..... 28th
IX..... 9th	XIX..... 19th	XXIX..... 29th
X..... 10th	XX..... 20th	XXX..... 30th

(I = 1, V = 5, X = 10. If a "I" comes *after* a "V" or "X", it increases its value; so VII stands for 7, and XIII for 13. But if a "I" comes *before* a V or X, it lessens its value by 1; so IV stands for 4, and IX stands for 9.)

Chapter 1.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: ROME AND ISRAEL

We are familiar with the kind of world in which Christians today live their lives and seek to serve their Master. All we have to do is look around us, read a newspaper and watch the television. But what exactly was the world like when the Christian faith entered it for the first time, two thousand years ago? What sort of society acted as home to the very first followers of Christ – men and women who actually saw Him, who read the Gospels and Paul's letters as fresh productions which had only just been written? What kind of world did they live in?

To answer this question, we need to consider two basic factors: the Roman Empire and the history of Israel.

1. The Roman Empire.

At the time of Jesus in the 1st Century AD, the Roman Empire controlled the whole of Mediterranean Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. The Empire was made up of a vast variety of ethnic and religious groups, and three main forces held it together:

(a) **A common political loyalty.** One man ruled the Empire: the emperor, whose government was based in the capital city of Rome, in central Italy, from which the whole Empire had grown. The city of Rome was founded in the 8th Century BC – the year 753 BC, according to tradition. This was around the same time that the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Hosea lived. After two centuries of

being governed by kings, in 510 BC a political revolution transformed Rome into a "Republic", with aristocratic and democratic elements blended in its government, and a deep hostility to monarchy or rule by one man. Power now rested in the hands of the Senate, a sort of parliament dominated by the upper classes. From the 3rd Century BC onward, Rome's dominion grew steadily, through conflicts and diplomatic alliances, until it stretched across the whole of the Mediterranean world. And then disaster struck: a series of devastating civil wars in the 1st Century BC blew the Republic to fragments, as well as spreading bloodshed and destruction across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, making it necessary for a single strong ruler to restore order.

At first, it seemed that this ruler would be **Julius Caesar** (born 102 BC) – the most celebrated soldier and politician in Roman history. However, at the height of his military and political success, Julius was assassinated in 44 BC by a group of Senators who still believed in the Republic; the Republicans were led by Brutus and Cassius, probably the most famous conspirators and assassins of all time. But the death of Julius Caesar did not restore the Republic. It simply unleashed a fresh series of civil wars. Julius's young nephew and adopted son, Octavius Caesar, took up his murdered uncle's cause, and proved more than equal to the task. After defeating Brutus and Cassius and all other rivals, Octavius assumed supreme power over the Roman world in 31 BC, and in 27 BC the Senate gave him the title **Augustus**, which means "the exalted one". History refers to him by this title. (Our month of August is named after him.)

Augustus was the first and perhaps the greatest of all the Roman emperors; his 45 years of government restored peace, stability, justice and civilisation to a war-torn world. It is little wonder that grateful millions looked on him as a divine saviour sent from heaven (see the quotations at the end of the chapter). Augustus's personality, too, was quite as remarkable as his political achievement; starting out as a ruthless power-seeker who would murder his opponents without any qualms of conscience, he matured into a wise, moderate, generous ruler, certainly a far more decent and upright character than most of the emperors who came after him. His reign lasted from 31 BC to AD 14. This means that Augustus was emperor at the time of

Jesus's birth. **Luke 2:1** mentions him: "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." It was Augustus who ordered the census which took the Virgin Mary and Joseph on their fateful journey to Bethlehem, where their special Child was born.

Augustus was such a successful ruler that the principle of government by a single supreme figure, the emperor, became the established pattern for most of the rest of Rome's long history. The Roman Empire depended on the emperor and his armies for maintaining peace and security within the Empire, and also for defending the Empire against aggression from outside, especially from two great enemies: (i) the mighty Parthian (Persian) Empire in the East;¹ (ii) the Germanic tribes who lived across the Rhine and Danube rivers in the North. Rome represented the principle of order against the threat of chaos.

(b) A common economy. The sea-coast cities of the Mediterranean, especially the large ones such as Rome itself in the West and Alexandria in the East, depended on trade and commerce for the basic necessities of life. For example, grain from North Africa fed the population of Rome, and the wines of Italy were exported throughout the Mediterranean. So a great network of trade bound together the coastal cities of the Empire into a single shared economy.

(c) A common intellectual culture. The dominant culture in the Roman Empire was not Roman but Greek. At the end of the 4th Century BC, the language and values of Greek civilisation had spread out from Greece itself across the whole of the Eastern world – the Balkans, Asia Minor, Syria, Persia, Palestine and Egypt – through the amazing conquests of **Alexander the Great** (336-323 BC), king of the Greek state of Macedonia. Alexander's empire broke up after his death, but it left throughout the East an enduring legacy of **Hellenism** – the term historians use for Greek culture (from the word *Hellas*, which is Greek for "Greece"). When the Romans began to gain control of the Eastern world, they came into contact with

¹ Persia (present-day Iran) became known as the "Parthian" Empire in 247 BC, when the nomadic Parthian people took it over. In AD 224, the Sassanians overthrew Parthian rule, and Persia became known as the "Sassanid" Empire.

Hellenism, and found it immensely attractive. The armies of Rome vanquished the East, but Eastern culture vanquished Rome. By the 1st Century BC, the Greek language, Greek methods of education, Greek art and literature, and Greek philosophy and science had taken root across the entire Roman Empire. Everyone in the Eastern half of the Empire who lived in a city spoke Greek as his first language. In the Western half of the Empire, Latin was the first language, but most educated people would have spoken Greek as their second language.

This social and political setting into which Christianity was born was also a world where religion flourished – indeed, in the everyday lives of people throughout the Roman Empire, religion was a pervasive and powerful force. At the time of Jesus and the apostles, there were four main forms of religion in the Empire (apart from Judaism, which we will look at in section 2):

(a) Traditional pagan religion. This involved the worship of a family of gods headed by the chief god whose Greek name was Zeus (Jupiter or Jove in Latin). There were different gods for different aspects of life: Poseidon (or in Latin, Neptune) was the god of the sea, Ares (Mars) the god of war, Aphrodite (Venus) the goddess of love, and so on. People tried to obtain the blessing of the gods in all the affairs of life: in agriculture, business, marriage, politics, war. Pagan worship involved such things as animal sacrifices, prayer, and various ways of trying to find out the will of the gods (e.g. through divination, dreams and prophecy). This traditional pagan religion was the official faith of the Roman Empire, funded and upheld by the state, and regarded as essential to its survival and prosperity. The emperor himself was the high priest ("pontifex maximus") of traditional paganism. Family heads and elected city leaders were expected to carry out its ceremonies as part of their normal duties. Traditional pagan religion was also part of the wonderful literary and artistic culture of the Empire, because it formed the religious background of the two great epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These had been written several centuries before the birth of Christ and were usually ascribed to the Greek poet *Homer* (active around 750 BC). Another important poem was the *Aeneid*, written by the Roman poet *Virgil* (70-19 BC), which told the story of how the first Romans settled in Italy. The *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* were the

most admired works of literature in the Greek and Roman world, and often depicted the characters and activities of the traditional pagan gods.

(b) Emperor-worship. The amazing growth of Rome's dominion over the Mediterranean world encouraged the Romans to believe that there was a special divine power at work, creating the Empire, and that this power was especially connected with the emperor. Hellenism gave a powerful stimulus to this belief; Hellenistic culture already saw kings as divine figures, gods incarnate. When the ideals of Hellenism flowed into the Roman world, they gave rise to the practice of worshipping the emperor. In the Eastern half of the Empire, where Hellenistic values were more deeply rooted, people worshipped the emperor in his own lifetime as a living god. In the West, however, emperor-worship was less open and obvious: people normally worshipped, not the emperor himself, but the *genius* of the emperor (the divine power that stood behind him). The Senate raised some emperors, such as Augustus, to the ranks of the gods after they had died, and people then prayed to them throughout East and West.

(c) The Eastern mystery cults. These were forms of religion which had a more recent origin than traditional Roman paganism. The most popular cults at the time of Jesus were those of the goddess Cybele (which arose in Asia Minor), the goddess Isis and the god Serapis (originated in Egypt), and the god Mithras (originated in Persia). Mithraism became especially popular in the Roman armies, and in the 4th Century it was for a time the chief rival to Christianity. These cults had spread across the Empire from the East, and were much more intimate and emotional faiths than traditional paganism or emperor-worship. A mystery cult involved the worshipper in a close personal relationship with his god or goddess. The worship of the cult deities made an overpowering appeal to the physical senses and feelings of the worshipper, involving song, dance, musical instruments, public processions, religious feasting, ritualistic animal sacrifices, and (especially in the Isis cult) group acts of sexual immorality. Worshipers often fell into ecstatic states of trance and prophecy as they took part in the worship.

The cults were also much more like the Christian Church than the other types of religion were, in the sense that a worshipper had to join

a mystery cult by a personal decision of his own, and be initiated into membership by special ceremonies. The very name "mystery" comes from the Greek word *mystes*, which means "the initiated ones". The most common initiation rite was the *taurobolium*. The person being initiated into the cult climbed down into a pit and a wooden grating was placed across the top. Those above the pit then sacrificed a bull over the grating, cutting off the animal's genitals and placing them in a special vessel. The bull's blood poured down through the grating over the person in the pit, who turned his face upwards so that he could open his mouth and drink the blood, as it came streaming down over his head, shoulders and body. He had to make sure that the bull's blood soaked every part of him. The claim of the mystery cult was that this "blood-baptism" bestowed a new birth and the gift of immortality on the believer. All the cults promised eternal life after death to their followers; indeed, this was their greatest appeal – traditional paganism and emperor-worship offered no such consolations in the face of death.

(d) **Philosophy.** In the Roman Empire, philosophy was not just an academic subject taught in universities. It was a total way of life which promised peace and fulfilment to those who practised it. However, it was not a mass movement; philosophers came almost exclusively from the educated classes. At the time of Jesus, there were three chief types or "schools" of philosophy competing for people's allegiance, all originating from the Greek city of Athens, the birthplace of European thought:

- (i) **Platonism**, named after the great Athenian philosopher *Plato* (427-347 BC). As far as his historical influence is concerned, Plato was the greatest philosopher who ever lived; historians have often said that all European philosophy is just "a series of footnotes to Plato"! His outlook, Platonism, was the most religious of the philosophies that emerged from Greece. After a period of decline, it had undergone a revival in the 1st Century BC. This new revived Platonism was known as "Middle Platonism".² It combined Plato's fundamental

2 It was called "Middle" Platonism because it came between the old Platonism of Plato himself, and the new Platonism of Plotinus in the 3rd Century. See Chapter 6, section 2 for Plotinus.

teaching with some of the ideas of another outstanding Greek philosopher, *Aristotle* (384-322 BC).⁽²⁾

Middle Platonism had a profound belief in God as the Supreme Being, and taught that the eternal "ideas" in God's mind were the source of everything in the universe. Reality could be found only in the eternal realm of these divine ideas. In the world of space and time, Platonists said, everything is constantly changing; nothing stays exactly as it is, but is always in the process of becoming something else. Rather than simply *being*, everything in this world is *becoming*. By contrast, the eternal world of God's ideas is unchanging; it possesses true and permanent being. An individual human person might change in many ways; but the idea (or perfect form) of "humanity" in God's mind is fixed and eternal – and, therefore, more real than any individual man or woman on earth. The true destiny of human beings, Platonists taught, was to be found by rising above the changing and unreal world of time, and contemplating the eternal ideas in the mind of God, especially the idea of Goodness. The human soul, according to Platonists, was itself eternal in its essence (that is, the soul had existed from all eternity, and was by nature immortal and incapable of being destroyed), and therefore the soul had more in common with God than with the world. By contemplating God, the philosopher will become like God – and that is his ultimate goal.

Many of the early Church fathers³ were converts from Platonism, and its general religious outlook continued to exert a strong influence on them, especially in two areas: (i) The thinking of many early theologians was strongly coloured by Platonism's extreme emphasis on the sheer gulf between the changing realm of time and the eternal unchanging God. This made it difficult for some Christian thinkers to understand how an unchanging God could have entered the world of time by becoming a man in Jesus Christ; to solve the problem, they were tempted to say that Christ was something less than absolutely divine. It was not until the Arian controversy of the 4th Century that the Church finally purged this "temptation" out of its theology.⁴ (ii) Platonism's teaching on the superiority of the soul and the spiritual

3 For the title "early Church fathers", see Chapter 3, section 1.

4 For the Arian controversy, see Chapter 8.

life over the body and physical life held powerful attractions for many Christians. It produced a tendency in some of them to interpret the spiritual life as a war between body and soul. Taken to its logical conclusion, this resulted in the belief-system known as Gnosticism.⁵

(2) **Epicureanism**, named after **Epicurus** (342-270 BC), who founded a school of philosophy in Athens in about 307 BC. Epicurus taught that pleasure was the supremely desirable quality. However, he did not define pleasure in terms of physical self-indulgence. According to Epicurus, people could achieve true happiness only by a life of quietness, retirement, peace and self-control. Unlike Platonism, Epicureanism was an anti-religious philosophy: Epicurus said that fear of the gods and of what happened after death was one of the main causes of human anxiety. But in reality, the gods took no interest in humanity or human affairs, and there was no life after death. People must recognise this, Epicurus held, if they were to be free from fear and live happy and peaceful lives. Epicureans formed themselves into small communities where they practised their philosophy together, using various counselling techniques for guiding each other into the peaceful life.

from "Stoa" →

(3) **Stoicism**. This school of philosophy did not have a single founder. Its main thinkers were three Greek philosophers, **Zeno** (334-262 BC), **Cleanthes** (died 232 BC) and **Chrysippus** (280-207 BC). The name "Stoic" comes from the **Stoa**, a hall in Athens where Zeno taught. Stoics were materialists; they held that everything was ultimately made of matter. They defined the matter from which everything is made as a kind of fire. Even the soul, they said, is a very refined form of this fire. They also taught that the universe was controlled by a power to which they gave different names – God, Fate, Providence, Reason. According to Stoics, the human soul was a tiny portion or fragment of this divine Reason, and humanity could find true fulfilment only by living in harmony with Reason. This involved controlling, disciplining and suppressing the passions or emotions. Some of the best and most virtuous Romans were Stoics, e.g. Cato the Younger (95-46 BC) and the emperor Marcus Aurelius (reigned AD 161-80). The great Stoic philosophers of the 1st Century AD,

5 For Gnosticism, see Chapter 4, sections 1 and 2.

Seneca (4 BC-AD 65) and **Epictetus** (AD 55-135), often spoke in an almost Christian way in their writings about morality, and Christians read them with admiration. Stoicism was quite influential on early Christian thinking about ethical issues and ideas of divine providence.

Luke mentions Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in **Acts 17:18**; they argued with the apostle Paul when he preached in Athens.

1 point & Acts 17:18: Stoic & Epicurean

2. The Jewish background.

The Romans had first come in contact with the Jews in 161 BC, when Rome and Judaea made a military alliance against the Seleucid Empire, one of the smaller kingdoms into which Alexander the Great's empire had broken up (the Seleucid Empire controlled present-day Iran, Iraq and Syria). In 88 BC, Roman forces began a long war with king Mithridates IV in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Rome finally won the war in 66 BC under their leading general, **Pompey the Great** (106-48 BC). At the same time, a civil war had broken out in Judaea between two rival claimants to the Jewish throne, the brothers **Hyrcanus** and **Aristobulus**. Both sides appealed to Pompey for military assistance. **Pompey entered Jerusalem in 63 BC with the help of Hyrcanus and his party**, and the Romans confirmed Hyrcanus as high priest and political leader of Judaea, but would not let him take the title "king". They placed Judaea under the supervision of the Roman governor of Syria. However, in 57 BC Aristobulus's son Alexander raised a rebellion against Rome in Judaea. The rebellion was crushed and Rome reorganised the Judaeac structure of government, depriving Hyrcanus of all political power and leaving him only as high priest.

After further rebellions and wars, including the civil wars within the Roman Empire which eventually brought Augustus to power, the Romans placed **Herod Antipater** (37-4 BC) on the throne of Jerusalem, but with Judaea as a Roman province. This is the Herod of **Matthew chapter 2**, who tried to kill the infant Jesus. (The Herod

6 Seneca's brother Gallio is mentioned in **Acts 18:12-17**.

who executed John the Baptist, and before whom Jesus was brought after His arrest, was the son of Herod Antipater. He is known as Herod Antipas, and he ruled only Galilee and Peraea in the northern part of Judaea, until the emperor Caligula deposed and exiled him in AD 39.) Because of the friendly relations Rome had enjoyed with Judaea up till then, Jews gained all sorts of special privileges within the Empire. For instance, they were exempt from military service, and did not have to take part in any pagan rituals, not even emperor-worship.

In AD 6, there was a Jewish rebellion against Rome, led by Judas the Galilean (mentioned in Acts 5:37). Roman armies defeated the revolt. The emperor, Augustus, now placed Judaea under direct Roman rule. A Roman governor (a "procurator") was put in charge of Palestine; he was immediately responsible to the emperor. Pontius Pilate was, of course, the governor at the time of Jesus's public ministry (Pilate ruled from AD 26 to 36). The governor controlled three main aspects of Palestinian life:

- (a) Military affairs and public order. There was a Roman army stationed in Palestine at Caesarea (on the coast of Samaria, south of Mount Carmel).⁷
- (b) Taxation. By the time of Jesus, Rome taxed some 30-40% of people's income. There was also a highly unpopular poll tax (a tax not based on property or wealth - every person paid the same amount).
- (c) The administration of justice. The governor had very wide powers. He could sentence to death or pardon at will.

Even though Rome now exercised this direct control over Judaea, the Jews still had some degree of local independence. They had their own Jewish courts of justice outside of Palestine. Within Palestine, they had the Sanhedrin, often mentioned in the Gospels and Acts. This was the supreme governing council of the Jews; it had 70 members,

7 There were two Caesareas in the Roman Empire, one in Palestine, the other in the province of Cappadocia in Asia Minor. Cappadocian Caesarea was more important in early Church history.

drawn from among the priests, lawyers and elders of the Jewish aristocracy. The Sanhedrin possessed the power to try all kinds of legal cases, but not to inflict the death penalty. It had its own police force.

At the time of Jesus, the religious life of the Jews was divided among a number of groups or parties. There were four outstanding groups:

- (1) The Sadducees. They were a small party whose power-base was centred on Jerusalem and the temple. Sadducees were almost all priests and members of the Jewish aristocracy, and were the strongest group in the Sanhedrin. In religious matters, they accepted the authority of the Pentateuch alone (the first five books of the Old Testament). They rejected any notion of life after death, denied the existence of angels and spirits, and did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (see Matthew 22:23, Acts 23:8). No-one is sure how the name "Sadducees" originated or what it means.

- (2) The Pharisees. They were the largest group, emerging after Israel's exile in Babylon, and they exercised the greatest influence over ordinary Jewish people. They were also the main enemies of Jesus. The name "Pharisees" means "the separated ones" or "the pure ones". This refers to the high moral code of conduct the Pharisees observed. They were chiefly concerned with obedience to God's law in everyday life, personal holiness, rather than with temple worship. Pharisees believed that Israel's conquest by the Roman Empire was a punishment by God for Jewish disobedience. The proper Jewish response was repentance and a return to individual and national obedience to God's will. In matters of theology, Pharisees were deeply opposed to the Sadducees; they accepted the whole of the Old Testament, and believed in the reality of the spiritual world, life after death and the resurrection of the body.

- (3) The Zealots. The Zealots ("zealous ones") were a party of terrorists or freedom-fighters, perhaps founded by Judas the Galilean, who wanted to liberate Judaea from Roman rule by the use of violence. They thought it was sinful to pay taxes to the Roman emperor, because God alone was the true King of Israel. Zealots often acted as assassins, killing those whom they regarded as national enemies. One

of Jesus's twelve apostles, Simon the Canaanite, was (or had been) a Zealot (Luke 6:15).

The Essenes. These were Jews who broke away from ordinary life and lived together in small religious communities. The great Jewish theologian and historian Philo of Alexandria (20 BC - AD 45) estimated that there were about 4,000 Essenes altogether. Their community at Qumran, north-west of the Dead Sea, is the most well-known to us today, because of a large number of ancient writings discovered there in 1947 and the years following (these writings are called "the Dead Sea Scrolls"). Essenes had no private property, but shared everything in their communities. They practised celibacy, refused to swear oaths, underwent frequent ritual washings, and devoted much time to studying the Old Testament prophets. They expected God to intervene in world history through one or more Messiah figures. Some Essenes were also Zealots. The name Essenes may come from an Aramaic word meaning "healers".

Most Jews did not in fact live in Palestine. The great majority, some 6 million, were scattered throughout other parts of the Roman Empire and beyond. They are referred to as the diaspora (Greek for "dispersion" – those dispersed or scattered from Palestine). There was a huge Jewish community of 1 million in Alexandria, and other large communities in Antioch, Ephesus and Rome. The diaspora Jews tended to live together in special Jewish areas of a city, and there was little social contact between them and Gentiles. Jewish dietary laws made it almost impossible for Jews and Gentiles to eat together. This made Jews very unpopular with Gentiles, because they seemed anti-social. Some Jews, however, especially in Alexandria, tried to bring together and blend their Judaism with Hellenistic culture. The greatest of these was Philo, who in his writings endeavoured to reinterpret the Jewish faith in the light of Greek philosophy. This attempt led Philo to combine the Old Testament idea of "God's Word" with the Greek philosophical concept of Reason (both "Word" and "Reason" are logos in Greek). For many Greek philosophers, Reason was divine, yet distinct from God, and was God's agent in creating the universe.⁸ Philo's fusion of Reason with

⁸ For more about the philosophical concept of reason or logos, and how it influenced early Christian theology, see Chapter 3, section 4, under Justin Martyr.

God's Word produced a notion of the Word remarkably similar to the New Testament doctrine of Christ as God's eternal Son (see the quotation at the end of the Chapter). This fact prompted some early Christians to claim that Philo had been converted to the Christian faith. There is, however, no evidence for this, and Philo nowhere mentions Jesus of Nazareth.

Much more common than Hellenising Jews like Philo were Gentile converts to Judaism. They were called "God-fearers" (see Acts 10:2, 10:22, 13:43, 17:4, 17:17). A considerable number of Gentiles were attracted to Judaism because of its belief in one God and the purity of its moral code. However, they were put off by the ceremonial aspects of Judaism, especially circumcision. So they would attach themselves to the local synagogue but refuse to be circumcised. They were looked on as still being pagan by true circumcised Jews. The most obvious New Testament example of a God-fearer is the centurion Cornelius of Acts 10.

At the time of Jesus, relations between Rome and the Jews were getting progressively worse. The Parthian Empire in Persia, on Rome's Eastern frontier, was a constant threat to Roman power; and there was a large Jewish community in the Parthian city of Babylon, which made Rome suspicious of the political loyalty of Jews in Palestine. Jewish sympathies at this point did tend to be more favourable to Parthia than to Rome. The growing tensions between Rome and Judaea would finally explode into the great Jewish War of AD 66-73 (see next Chapter).

Important people:

Greeks and Romans

Political and military leaders:
Alexander the Great (336-323 BC)
Pompey the Great (106-48 BC)
Julius Caesar (born 102 BC, died 44 BC)
Emperor Augustus (31 BC - AD 14)
Pontius Pilate (governor of Judaea, AD 26-36)

Jews

Herod Antipater (37-4 BC)
Herod Antipas (deposed AD 39)
Philo of Alexandria (20 BC 45)

Poets:

Homer (active around 750 BC)
 Virgil (70-19 BC)

Philosophers:

Plato (427-347 BC)
 Aristotle (384-322 BC)
 Epicurus (342-270 BC)
 Zeno (334-262 BC)
 Cleanthes (died 232 BC)
 Chrysippus (280-207 BC)
 Seneca (4 BC - AD 65)
 Epictetus (AD 55-135)

Platonist religion: Plato

To discover the Maker and Father of the universe is a difficult task, and having found Him it would be impossible to tell everyone about Him. Let us go back to our question, and ask what model the Maker of the universe used in making it. Did He make the universe in the image of something eternal and unchanging, or in the image of something that has come into being? If the universe is beautiful, and if its Maker is good, clearly His gaze was fixed on something eternal when He made the universe. The alternative, that He made the universe in the image of something changeable, is blasphemous. Beyond doubt, then, God's eyes were gazing on the eternal; for the universe is the fairest of all things that have come into being, and God is the best of causes. [Plato means that the universe is so beautiful because it is a divinely created image of eternity; but it is *only* an image, so while eternity is unchanging, the universe is full of change]...

Let us then state the reason why the Builder of our changing universe built it in the first place. He is good; and goodness has no trace of jealousy in it. Therefore, being without jealousy, God wanted everything to be as like Himself as possible. This is the best principle we can discover from human wisdom concerning the origin of our changing universe, and we should accept it. So then, since God wanted everything to be good, and (as far as possible) perfect, and

since He found the visible universe in a state of unrest, full of chaotic and disorderly movement, He brought order into its disorder, because He judged that order was in every way better than disorder. The best can only ever produce the highest. So God considered that in the entire realm of visible nature, things that possess intelligence are always superior to things that lack it, and that intelligence can be found only in soul. Therefore, in fashioning the universe, He planted reason within soul, and soul within body, and thus made sure that His work should be highest and best in its nature. And so the most likely story we can tell is that by God's providence, this universe of ours came into existence as a living thing with soul and intelligence.

Plato, *Timaeus* 28-30

Stoic religion: Seneca

God is near you, with you, within you. Yes, Lucilius, there dwells within us a divine spirit, guarding us and watching us in everything we do, both our good and evil deeds. As we treat Him, so He will treat us. Indeed, no-one is good without God. Can anyone possibly rise above the chances and changes of life unless God helps him? It is God Who inspires us to noble and high-minded endeavours. In each and every good person, "A god dwells, though we are not sure who he is" (as Virgil says).

If you have ever come across a thick wood of ancient trees that have grown to a fantastic height, blocking out the sky with a mass of branches, then the height of the forest, the loneliness of the place, and your sense of wonder at finding such a deep and solid gloom in the outdoors, will convince you that a deity dwells there. A cave which has penetrated deep into the mountain that rests over it, creating a hollow of amazing extent – not by human labours, but by the process of nature – will strike into your soul some sense of the divine. We venerate the sources of important streams; we build altars at spots where a mighty river bursts forth suddenly from the earth; we worship hot springs; we consider holy the dark or bottomless waters of pools. And if you come across a human being who is never terrified by dangers, never influenced by cravings, happy in the midst of adversity, calm amid the storm, viewing the human race from a higher

standpoint and the gods from their own standpoint, do you not think that a feeling of veneration for this person will arise within you? Do you not think you will say to yourself, "Here is a mind so great, so awesome, that it cannot be placed on the same level as the feeble body it dwells in"? A divine power has descended into that body. A soul that is lifted up above the things of earth and is well-ordered, passing through any experience with a proper view of its littleness, simply smiling at all the things we fear or pray for – that soul is moved by a heavenly energy. A soul so uplifted cannot stand at such a height unless it is upheld by a deity.

Seneca, *Moral Epistles to Lucilius*, Epistle 41

The first emperor, Augustus, as divine Messiah

Behold the man – the promised one, of whom you know – Caesar Augustus, son of a god, predestined to rule And to restore the Golden Age to Latium, Where Saturn used to rule. His empire will extend Beyond the Garamants and Indians, over lands In the far north and south of the stars of the zodiac And the yearly path of the sun...

Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, lines 791-96

We live in the crowning era, long prophesied:
Born of time, a great new cycle of centuries
Begins. Justice returns to the earth! The Golden Age
Returns! Its First-born [probably a son of Augustus] descends from
heaven above!
Look kindly on this Infant's birth, O chaste Lucina [goddess of birth];
For with Him, hearts of iron will cease, and hearts of gold
Will inherit the earth. Yes, the reign of Apollo [god of light] has
begun!
And this glorious ages dawns, and the march of its great months
begins, during your time in office as consul, O Pollio:
With you at the forefront, humanity will be set free from its age-
long fear,
And all the stains of our past wickedness will be washed away.
This Child will enter into the life of the gods,

And will see them walking with the heroes of old,
And He will rule a world made peaceful by His father's virtuous
deeds.

O Child, Your first birthday-gifts will come from wild nature –
Small gifts! Earth will shower you with romping ivy, fox-gloves,
Bouquets of gipsy lilies, and sweetly-smiling acanthus.
Goats will walk home without anyone herding them,
Their udders full of milk. The ox will no longer fear the lion.
Blossom, soft as silk, will grow from your cradle to form a bed.
Snakes will die, along with all lovely but poisonous plants.
The fields everywhere will breathe spice and incense.

Virgil, *The Fourth Eclogue*

I am not sure whether we should observe the birthday of Augustus more for the joy of it or for the profit of it. It is a day which we might justly regard as equal to the beginning of all things – equal in the benefits it has brought, if not in reality. For he has restored everything that was ruined and had fallen into a miserable condition. He has given a fresh look to the universe, which was ready to perish if Caesar had not been born as a blessing to all mankind. Each individual may therefore look on Augustus's birthday as the beginning of his own life and physical being. Now that he has been born, we can no longer feel that life is a burden.

As proposed by the high priest Apollonius, son of Menophilus, of Azani, the Greeks of the province of Asia resolve: That because the providence which orders all human life has shown a special concern and zeal, and has conferred upon life its most perfect adornment by giving us Augustus, whom it equipped for his benevolent work among mankind by filling him with virtue, and sending him as a Saviour for us and our descendants, the one who causes wars to cease and sets all things in beautiful order; and because Caesar by appearing made the hopes of those who predicted a better future look poor compared with what he has actually done, for he not only surpassed all previous benefactors, but left no chance for future ones to go beyond him; and because the gospel which went forth into the world through him arose on the birthday of this god...

Part of a letter of the proconsul of Asia to the cities of Asia

Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducees: The view of a Jewish historian of the 1st Century AD

There are three schools of thought among the Jews, known as the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. The Essenes have the strictest way of life. Jews by birth, they have a strong sense of brotherhood with each other. They shun the seeking of pleasure as a vice, and praise self-control and the mastery of one's passions as virtue. They reject marriage, and choose the children of others while they are still young and teachable, training them to live as Essenes. They do not actually wish to do away with marriage as the method of increasing the human race, but they fear the sexual immorality of women, being convinced that no woman ever remains faithful to one man. They despise money, and are communists as far as property is concerned; no Essene has more than any other. When men join their sect, they have to give up all their property to the common ownership of the community, so that you will not see among the Essenes either degrading poverty or excessive wealth. Each man's possessions become part of the common fund, and like a group of brothers their entire property belongs equally to all...⁹

Of the other two schools of thought, people regard the Pharisees as the most authoritative interpreters of the Law. They are the leading Jewish sect. They teach that everything happens according to destiny, or the will of God; the actual decision to do good or evil rests chiefly with human beings, they say – but even so, in every human act, destiny takes a hand. They hold that every soul is immortal, but only the souls of good people receive new bodies, while the souls of evil people go to eternal punishment. The Sadducees, the other sect, deny the existence of destiny in any form, and teach that God can neither decree sin nor have any involvement with it. People are absolutely free, they say, to choose between good and evil; each individual must decide solely for himself. The Sadducees utterly deny the immortality of the soul, punishments in hell, and heavenly rewards. The Pharisees are bound together by a common spirit of friendship and seek to promote harmony with the common people. But the Sadducees are

⁹ This is similar to the early Church in Jerusalem – Acts 2:44-45.

disagreeable, even towards each other; they treat one another with the harshness that people usually reserve for foreigners.

Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Book 2, chapter 7

A Hellenising Jew: Philo of Alexandria on the Word of God

The Father of the universe has granted the office of Mediator to His supreme messenger and most ancient Word, who regulates matters between the Creator and His creatures. The Word is the intercessor on behalf of perishing mortals in relation to the Unchangeable Being; he is the ambassador of the Sovereign to His subjects. The Word glories in this gift, and declares, "I have stood between the Lord and you. For I am not unbegotten, as God is, nor am I begotten, as you are, but I stand in the middle of these extremes, pledging myself for both. I pledge to the Creator that the human race shall not prefer chaos to beauty and fall entirely into ruin and apostasy. And I pledge to creation that I will maintain the joyful hope that God in His mercy will not despise His own handiwork. For I announce to creation God's message of peace, that He can purge away hostilities and is the perpetual preserver of peace."

Philo on Exodus 14:19

for example, Acts 2:33-6, 4:10-12, 13:30-39, 17:30-32, and Romans 1:3-4). So whichever period of Church history we are studying, it is always worth pausing and reminding ourselves of this: the entire history of the Christian Church is rooted in one central reality – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. If Jesus of Nazareth had not risen, there would be no Church history. The rest of the story told in these pages flows out of the resurrection.

The early Church, then, started its life as a purely Jewish movement, a sect within Judaism. Yet by the end of the 1st Century, events had transplanted the Church from its original Jewish soil into the Gentile world, where it became an almost exclusively Gentile movement. How did this astonishing change take place? We find some clues in Acts.

The process of transition began when tensions arose within the early Christian community in Jerusalem between Palestinian Jews, and Jews from a more Hellenistic background ("Hellenism" means Greek culture – see previous Chapter, section 1, under A common intellectual culture). We find this tension described in Acts 6, where Luke refers to the two parties as, literally, "the Hebrews" and "the Hellenists". Many Jews, as we saw in Chapter 1, lived outside Palestine in lands where Hellenistic culture was dominant, such as Egypt and Asia Minor. So the "Hellenists" of Acts 6 were Jews who had been born in a Hellenistic country and grown up in a Hellenistic culture, speaking Greek as their first language. They had then either moved into Palestine and settled there, or (perhaps) were there as pilgrims for the passover feast. The chief language spoken in Palestine was Aramaic, not Greek, and Hellenistic Jews would have known little or no Aramaic. The "Hebrews", by contrast, were the Jews native to Palestine. They knew some Greek, but Aramaic was their first language, and they had little or no contact with Hellenistic culture, which in any case they despised as pagan.

This cultural divide between Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews would already have produced friction between them before any of them became Christians. The problem was that the Palestinians thought of themselves as the true Jews, born and brought up in the Jewish homeland which God had given to their ancestors, and they looked on

We must leave to our New Testament studies an account of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. What we will be looking at here is the impact which that life and ministry had on men and women in the 1st Century AD – the beginnings of Church history. Our primary source is, of course, the book of Acts.

Early Christianity and the early Church were what we could call a Jesus movement. In its first years, this was a religious movement which blossomed exclusively within the confines of Judaism, and revolved around Jerusalem as its spiritual home. The original followers of Jesus were all Jews, and they had no intention of being anything other than faithful and pious Jews. They continued to worship in the Jerusalem temple, to obey the law of Moses, and to have a negative attitude towards Gentiles. The living heart of their faith was not so much the death as the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus was executed, despair had engulfed His followers: they seemed to have a dead leader and a lost cause. It was Jesus's resurrection from the dead that transformed these broken and despairing people into the fiery apostles and martyrs of a new faith – a faith which, within three centuries, and despite vigorous persecution, would conquer the whole Roman Empire. In the thought and preaching of the early Church, the resurrection was seen as God's mighty vindication of all Jesus's claims: He really was the long-promised Messiah of Israel, the Son of God, the Saviour of sinners, the source of God's gift of the Holy Spirit to all who obeyed Him (see,

Chapter 2.

THE JESUS MOVEMENT

1. Jews and Gentiles in the early Church.

Bruce
Paul Barnett
- his story

Rodney Stark

Hellenistic Jews as partly foreign, perhaps corrupted by contact with pagan society. On the other hand, Hellenistic Jews tended to think of themselves as being more cultured and civilised than their Palestinian cousins. They regarded Palestinian Jews as rather narrow-minded, too traditional, not aware enough of the outside world. (This description of Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews applies only in a general way to what most of them tended to be like. There were exceptions. The most notable exception was the apostle Paul, who was brought up in the Hellenistic city of Tarsus in Asia Minor, but surpassed even the Palestinian Jews in his intolerant zeal for traditional Judaism, before his Damascus road experience convinced him that Jesus was the Messiah.)

These existing problems between Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews carried over into the Jesus movement. Jesus of Nazareth had followers from both the Hellenistic and Palestinian sections of the Jewish people, and the friction between them continued, despite their common faith in the risen Messiah. Acts 2:44-5 relates how the early Christian community in Jerusalem cared for its poorer members; the provision of food for Christian widows was part of that system of care, since widows were unable to support themselves economically and depended on others. However, the Hellenists felt (rightly or wrongly) that the widows from their section of the community were not getting a fair deal. Luke records in Acts 6 how the Hellenists complained that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food. This particular problem was resolved by the appointment of seven deacons whose names are all Greek – an indication that they were elected from the Hellenistic group within the Jesus movement. But the underlying tensions between Palestinian and Hellenistic believers remained.

The non-traditional attitudes and outlook of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians surfaced in a dangerous way when they began to take a more openly negative, critical stance towards the history and traditions of Israel. It seems that they started to view these things afresh in the light of their new faith in Jesus, and to show less respect for the temple and the law of Moses than was customary. Their spokesman was the Hellenistic deacon Stephen, and his lengthy speech recorded in Acts 7 shows us the sort of criticisms that

Hellenistic believers could make of Jewish history and tradition. This provoked and outraged the Jewish authorities, and led to the first great persecution of the Church. Stephen was stoned to death, and many believers were forced to flee from Jerusalem. This persecution, however, seems mainly to have affected the Hellenistic section of the Church. The more traditionally-minded Palestinian believers, represented by the apostles, were mostly left alone by the Jewish authorities; Luke makes it clear in Acts 8:1 that the apostles were not affected by the persecution. Ordinary Palestinian believers who were scattered from Jerusalem would have dispersed into other parts of Palestine, and then reassembled in Jerusalem after the trouble had died down, as Acts 11:1 indicates. Hellenistic believers, however, appear to have left Palestine entirely.

From this point onwards the Christian community in Jerusalem was purified of its Hellenistic elements, and became entirely Hebrew and Palestinian in character. It was led by James, known as "the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19, 2:9), who remained so faithful to Jewish tradition that even unbelieving Jews admired him. Much debate has centred on the identity of James. Some think he was the same person as James the apostle, son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3, Acts 1:13). If so, his title "the Lord's brother" must mean "the Lord's kinsman" or "cousin", otherwise the apostle James would be called "son of Joseph" rather than "son of Alphaeus". (The word "brother" can be used in the Bible in this more general sense of "kinsman", rather than strictly "brother".) Whether or not James the Lord's brother was the same person as James the apostle, he clearly played a dominant role in the Jerusalem church – see Acts 15. Also known as James the Righteous, he was martyred in AD 62 by the Pharisees. According to early Church tradition, James was appointed by the apostles as the first bishop of the church in Jerusalem (see next Chapter, section 2 for bishops in the early Church, and the end of this Chapter for the story of James's martyrdom).

The scattering of the Hellenistic believers from Palestine was the event which first took the Jesus movement into the non-Jewish world. First, the Hellenistic Christians broke through the age-old divide between Jews and Samaritans, as Luke narrates in Acts 8. Philip, one of the Hellenistic deacons, was responsible for this bold venture. The

Samaritans were of mixed Jewish and Gentile descent, existing on the borders between Judaism and the Gentile world. **Acts 10** then relates how the centurion Cornelius and his kinsmen became the first Gentile converts in Palestine; but Cornelius had already embraced most of the teachings of Judaism – he was a “God-fearer”.

The first largely Gentile church from a pagan background was founded outside of Palestine in the Roman province of Syria, in the great Eastern city of Antioch. Although Antioch had a big Jewish community, it was basically a vast, throbbing centre of Gentile Hellenistic civilisation. Some of the Hellenistic Christian refugees from Jerusalem made their way to Antioch and began preaching the Gospel, not only to Jews, but to pagan Gentiles as well. Luke records the momentous event in **Acts 11:20-21**: “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, preaching the word to no-one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.” In this way the first mainly Gentile church, made up of converts from paganism, was established in Antioch through the preaching of the scattered Hellenistic believers of Jerusalem.

The term *Christian* was also first used in Antioch: “And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (**Acts 11:26**). This makes sense, because in a Gentile city like Antioch, where the followers of Jesus were mostly pagan converts, they would have seemed to the Gentile population to be something other than a Jewish sect. The label *Christians* (in Greek, *Christianoi*) may have been formed by a process derived from the Latin language. In Latin, a plural word ending in *-iani* could describe the troops of a particular general. For example, *Galbani* would mean “Galba’s troops”, “Galba’s men”. So *Christiani*, or in Greek *Christianoi*, may have meant “Christ’s men”, “followers of Christ”. By the AD 60’s the word was widely accepted by all believers in Jesus as a suitable name for themselves; **1 Peter 4:16** uses the term. Prior to this, Christians called themselves by labels such as “followers of the Way” (**Acts 9:2, 22:4**); their Jewish enemies called them “the sect of the Nazarenes” (**Acts 24:5**).

It was from the Gentile church in Antioch that the first organised Christian mission went out, headed by the apostle **Paul (Acts 13)**. From this point onwards, Paul dominates the story of the Jesus movement: From fanatical Jewish opponent and foremost persecutor of Jesus’s followers, he became through his encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road (**Acts 9**) Jesus’s most ardent convert and apostle. It was through Paul’s missionary activities that the Jesus movement went West into Europe, rather than staying in Palestine and the Middle East. As more and more Gentiles became Christians, it was Paul who insisted against the more traditional Jewish believers of Palestine that Gentile converts did not have to accept the law of Moses or be circumcised in order to be true followers of Jesus. More than any other individual, the apostle Paul was the man who made it possible for the Jesus movement to turn from being a purely Jewish sect into a largely Gentile body.

Paul was also the supreme thinker and theologian of the early Church. His letters form the largest single ingredient of the New Testament, and throughout the history of the Church they have provided a unique source of spiritual and doctrinal renewal for theologians and preachers. Many great movements of reform or revival in the Church can be traced to a fresh appreciation of Paul’s writings. Next after Jesus Himself, Paul has had the greatest historical impact on the life and thought of the Christian Church over the past 2,000 years.

2. The persecution under Nero.

In the days of the apostles, the authorities of the Roman Empire were generally friendly or at least neutral towards the Jesus movement. Opposition and persecution came mainly from unbelieving Jews, and sometimes from ordinary pagan Gentiles (**Acts 19:21-41**), but not usually from government officials. The apostle Paul certainly gives a very positive view of the Roman government in **Romans 13**.

However, this was not always to be the case. In AD 64, the emperor **Nero (AD 54-68)** launched the first great official persecution of Christians by the Roman government. In that year, the worst fire that Rome had ever known swept through the city and destroyed 10 of its

14 districts. Many people suspected that Nero himself had started the fire so that he could rebuild Rome in a grander style. In order to divert popular anger away from himself, Nero decided to blame the fire on the Christian community in Rome. The Roman historian Tacitus (AD 55-117), who was alive at the time, tells us what happened:

"To kill the rumours [that he had started the fire] Nero charged and tortured some people hated for their evil practices – the group popularly known as Christians. The founder of this sect, Christ, had been put to death by the governor of Judaea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was emperor. Their deadly superstition had been suppressed temporarily, but was beginning to spring up again – not now just in Judaea, but even in Rome itself, where all kinds of sordid and shameful activities are attracted and catch on. First, the authorities arrested those who confessed to being Christians. Then, on information obtained from them, the courts convicted hundreds more, not so much for starting the fire as for their anti-social beliefs. In their deaths they were made a mockery. [They were covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs, crucified, or set on fire – so that when darkness fell they burned like torches in the night.] Nero opened up his own gardens for this spectacle and gave a show in the arena, where he mixed with the crowd, or stood dressed as a charioteer on a chariot. As a result, although they were guilty of being Christians and deserved to die, people began to feel sorry for them. [For they realised that they were being killed, not for the public good, but to satisfy one man's madness.]"

Nero's persecution shows that by the AD 60's the Roman authorities recognised Christians as a distinct group, separate from the Jews. Christians were obviously unpopular with the ordinary inhabitants of Rome; people looked on Christians as being rather strange and suspicious folk who did not mix with non-Christians. The authorities may have regarded them as a secret illegal society. [Tacitus's reference to Christ being crucified under Pontius Pilate is the first known evidence we possess of a pagan writer testifying to the events recorded in the New Testament.] (Tacitus wrote in the opening years

of the 2nd Century AD.) The great Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (born AD 37, died after 100) also mentions these events in his Antiquities of the Jews, written in AD 93-94 (see the end of the Chapter for a quotation).

The persecution was limited in scope to the city of Rome. It did not extend throughout the Empire. However, it claimed two great victims. The apostles Peter and Paul were probably both in Rome during Nero's persecution, and it seems likely that they were both executed at this time. Tradition says that imperial soldiers beheaded Paul and crucified Peter upside-down. As a Roman citizen, Paul could not be subjected to the humiliation of death by crucifixion. According to tradition, Peter thought he was unworthy to die in the same way as his Lord, and so to honour his scruples the authorities agreed to crucify him head-downwards.¹

Nero was the first Roman emperor to persecute Christians. Others were to follow in his footsteps. In the 1st Century, the emperor Domitian (AD 81-96) also unleashed his fury on the Church in the final year of his reign, AD 96; it was Domitian who banished the apostle John (by then an old man and the last surviving apostle) to the island of Patmos, just off the west coast of Asia Minor (see the end of the Chapter).

3. The Jewish War.

The Jewish War (or Jewish Revolt) had a far greater effect on the future of the Jesus movement than Nero's persecution in Rome did. The War came about through the final triumph of Zealot opinion in Israel; the Zealots led a mighty nationalist uprising against the Roman Empire, lasting from AD 66 to 73. After the most appalling bloodshed, Rome's armies totally crushed the revolt, almost completely destroyed Jerusalem, and reduced the temple to a pile of

¹ Another tradition says that Peter and Paul survived Nero's persecution and were executed a few years later in about AD 67. If this is correct, Nero was still persecuting Christians even after the affair of the great fire in Rome in AD 64.

smouldering ruins. The loss of Jewish life was horrific; the Jewish historian Josephus, who was alive at the time and wrote a history of the Jewish War, estimated that 1,100,000 Jews were killed in the fighting, and 97,000 taken captive and then sold into slavery or put to death for sport in the Roman arenas.² The Jewish Palestinian Christians, however, took no part in the War; in obedience to the prophetic words of Jesus in Luke 21:20-24, they left Judaea before the serious fighting started, and took refuge in the Gentile town of Pella, in northern Peraea, east of the Jordan (near the brook Cherith - 1 Kings 17:3-5).

The Jewish War had a number of far-reaching consequences:

(i) The fall of Jerusalem meant that both Judaism and the Jesus movement lost their spiritual home. Jerusalem, once the "mother church" of apostolic Christianity, ceased to have any importance in the life of the early Church for the next 300 years. This geographical separation of the Jesus movement from its Palestinian roots quickened the Church's drift away from a Jewish to a Gentile membership.

(ii) The refusal of Jewish Palestinian Christians to help their fellow Jews in the revolt against Rome meant that they were regarded as traitors in Jewish eyes. This helped to widen the gap between the Christian faith and the Jewish people.

(iii) The crushing of the Jewish Revolt by Rome meant that the Pharisees became the controlling force within Judaism. The failure of the great Zealot rebellion destroyed the influence of the Zealots as a national party. The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple removed the power-base of the priestly, aristocratic Sadducees. The War also wiped out the Essenes, because they too had joined in the revolt against Rome; their community at Qumran (the one we know most about) was destroyed by the Romans in AD 68. So only the Pharisees were left to offer spiritual leadership to the

2 An arena was a sort of sports stadium. Roman sports were quite violent, e.g. fighters known as "gladiators" who fought each other to the death for the amusement of the crowd.

Jewish people and guide their future; and the Pharisees had always been the most determined Jewish enemies of Jesus and His followers. Gathering together after the War in the city of Jamnia (or in Hebrew, Jabneh) on the southern coast of Palestine, the Pharisees re-established the Sanhedrin, and rallied the shattered forces of Judaism around their own strict interpretation of the Old Testament and the Mosaic law. They placed a curse on all Christians ("the Nazarenes") in the Jewish liturgy (the prayer-book used in worship); this made it impossible for Jewish Christians to worship any longer in the synagogue.

The ultimate effect of the Jewish War was to cut Christianity off almost completely from its Jewish origins. From now on, the future of the Jesus movement rested in the Gentile world.

Important people:

The Church

James the Lord's brother (died AD 62)
 Peter (died AD 64 or 67)
 Paul (died AD 64 or 67)
 John (died end of 1st Century)

Political and military

Emperor Nero (AD 54-68)
 Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96)

Others

Flavius Josephus (born AD 37, died after 100)
 Tacitus (AD 55-117)

Josephus's testimony to John the Baptist and Jesus

Some Jews thought that the destruction of king Herod's army [in AD 36 by an Arabian king] was a righteous punishment from God, on account of the way Herod had treated John who was called the Baptist. For Herod killed him, and John had been a good man who had exhorted the Jews to train themselves in virtue, to be fair towards each other and holy towards God, and to come together for baptism. God would accept their baptism, John said, on condition that they received

it, not to escape the punishment their sins deserved, but to purify the body, as the soul had already been purified by righteousness. When crowds gathered around John, aroused by his words, Herod became afraid that John's amazing power over the people would lead to a rebellion, since the people seemed ready to do anything John said. So Herod decided to prevent any movement towards revolution which John might inspire, by getting rid of John, rather than waiting for a revolt to happen and then blame himself when it was too late. So because of Herod's suspicions, he sent John in chains to the fortress of Machaerus and had him executed there...

At this time Jesus appeared, a highly gifted man, if we can call him a mere man; for he was a miracle-worker, a teacher of those who loved to hear the truth, and he gained many followers from among the Jews and even the Gentiles too. He was the Messiah. The most important men in Israel prompted Pontius Pilate to condemn him to death on a cross; but those who loved him from the beginning did not stop loving him, for on the third day he appeared to them alive again. The inspired prophets foretold this and many other wonderful things about him. Even today the group of people named after him, the "Christians", have still not died out.³

Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, chapter 2

The martyrdom of James the Lord's brother

Guidance of the Church passed to the apostles, together with the Lord's brother James. From the Lord's time until our own, everyone has called him "James the Righteous". There were many people called James, but this one was holy from his birth; he drank no wine or intoxicating liquor, and ate no animal food; no razor came near his

3 Some scholars have disputed whether Josephus, a non-Christian Jew, could have written such a "Christian" testimony about Jesus; they suggest that this part of Josephus's *Antiquities* was inserted into the book by Christians. However, every single copy of the *Antiquities* which we possess contains this passage, and modern scholars have defended its reliability. And perhaps Josephus's positive statements about Jesus are not his own opinion but his record of what Christians believed. "He was the Messiah" — that is, He claimed to be, and His followers believed Him to be, the Messiah.

head; he did not smear himself with oil and he took no baths. He alone was allowed to enter the Holy Place, for his garments were not made of wool, but of linen. He used to go into the sanctuary alone, and was often found there on his knees, beseeching forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel's from his continually bending them before God in worship and praying for forgiveness for the people. Because of his righteousness which no-one surpassed, he was called "James the Righteous" and *Oblivious* (in our own language, "Bulwark of the people, and Righteousness"), fulfilling the prophecies which had been made about him...

Since many even of the ruling classes believed in Jesus, the Jews and scribes and Pharisees were greatly agitated; they said there was a danger that the whole people would expect Jesus to return as the Messiah. So they gathered together and said to James: "Be good enough to restrain the people, for they have gone astray after Jesus, believing that He is the Messiah. Please make the facts about Jesus plain to all who come for the passover day. We all accept what you say; we can confirm, and so can all the people, that you are a righteous man and do not judge according to appearances. So make it clear to the crowd that they must not go astray concerning Jesus; everyone, including us, accepts your judgment. So take your stand on the parapet of the temple, so that from that height you may be seen easily, and your words be heard by everyone. Because of the passover, all the tribes of Israel have gathered here, and the Gentiles too."

So the scribes and Pharisees made James stand on the sanctuary parapet and shouted to him: "Righteous one, you whose words we are all bound to accept, the people are going astray after Jesus Who was crucified. So tell us, what is meant by 'the door of Jesus'?"⁴ James replied as loudly as he could: "Why do you ask me about the Son of Man? I tell you, He is sitting in heaven at the right hand of the great Power, and He will come on the clouds of heaven." Many were convinced and gloried in James's testimony, crying out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" But the scribes and Pharisees said to each other, "We've made a bad mistake here, giving such an opportunity of testimony to Jesus. We had better go up and throw James off the

4 "The door of Jesus" refers to John 10:9.

The persecution by emperor Domitian and the exile of John to Patmos

Domitian's horrible cruelty struck down many victims. In Rome, he put to death large numbers of distinguished, high-born men of great achievements, without a fair trial. He banished countless other eminent men for no reason at all and seized their property. And then at last Domitian showed himself to be an emperor who walked in the steps of Nero for his hatred and hostility towards God. Indeed, he was the second emperor to organise a persecution of us Christians, although his father Vespasian had harboured no evil designs against us. There is abundant evidence that the apostle and Gospel-writer John was still alive at that time, and because of his testimony to God's Word he was sentenced to exile on the island of Patmos (*Revelation* 1:9)... In fact, our faith shone out so brightly at that time, that even historians who rejected our beliefs wrote down without hesitation in their history books both the persecution and the martyrdoms it produced. They also recorded the exact date of the persecution, that it was in the 15th year of Domitian [AD 96]. Flavia Domitilla, who was a niece of Flavius Clemens, one of Rome's consuls [chief magistrates] that year, was banished to the island of Pontia, along with many others, as a punishment for their testimony to Christ...

After 15 years of Domitian's rule, Nerva became emperor. The Roman senate voted to strip the dead Domitian of his honours, and to return to their homes all whom he had unjustly banished, restoring their property to them. The historians of the time record this. At the same time the apostle John, after his exile on Patmos, went back to live once more in his home at Ephesus, as early Christian tradition says.

Eusebius of Caesarea's *History of the Church*, Book 3, chapters 17-20

(412 c.f.)

parapet, to frighten the people and stop them believing him." So they called out, "Well, well! So even the Righteous one has gone astray!" ...

So they went up and threw the Righteous one off the parapet. Then they said to one another, "Let's stone James the Righteous!" So they began stoning him – for despite his fall, he was still alive. But he turned and knelt and said, "O Lord God and Father, I beseech you to forgive them; they do not know what they are doing." While they pelted him with stones, one of the descendants of Rechab the son of Rachabim (the priestly family to which Jeremiah the prophet bore witness⁵) called out, "Stop! What are you doing? The Righteous one is praying for you!" But one of them, whose job was to cleanse and bleach cloth, picked up his club with which he beat out the clothes, and crushed the head of the Righteous one. And thus James was martyred. They buried him on that very spot, by the sanctuary, and his headstone is still there by the sanctuary. He proved a faithful witness to Jews and Gentiles alike that Jesus is the Messiah.

Eusebius of Caesarea's *History of the Church*, Book 2, chapter 23
(412 c.f.)

The martyrdom of Peter and Paul

So it happened that Nero, the first man to stand out as a notable fighter against God, was led on to murder the apostles. In his reign (so it is recorded) Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and Peter too was crucified. This record is confirmed by the fact that the cemeteries in Rome are even today named after Peter and Paul. It is also confirmed by a Churchman called Gaius, who lived when Zephyrinus was bishop of Rome [AD 199-217]. In his book *Dialogue* with Proclus, a leader of the Montanist heretics,⁶ Gaius says this about the place where the bodies of the two apostles have been reverently laid: "I can point out the monuments of the triumphant apostles. If you go as far as the Vatican or the Ostian Way, you will find the monuments of the men who founded this church [in Rome]."

Eusebius of Caesarea's *History of the Church*, Book 2, chapter 25

(412 c.f.)

⁵ Jeremiah 35.

⁶ For the Montanists, see Chapter 4, section 3.