

*The Jesus Movement and the World of the Early Church* is a solid, simple, straightforward introduction for the undergraduate or general reader to the Jesus movement in its complex cultural and historical world. The people, places, and objects of that world are clearly explained in text and glossaries. This is an excellent resource for the beginning reader.

—Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ, Archivist, Society of the Sacred Heart  
United States-Canada Province

Sheila McGinn's book [*The Jesus Movement and the World of the Early Church*] is a masterful example of an important and difficult genre: the scholar's presentation, for an intelligent and educated but non-specialist audience, of . . . the development of Christianity from Jesus to the period of the apostolic fathers. . . . [She treats] all the New Testament writings and some of the early noncanonical writings in their sociopolitical, economic, and religious contexts. In the process she educates her readers in how to handle ancient historical writings. . . . This will be a valuable text for beginning theology students, parish education programs, and independent lay readers.

—Sandra M. Schneiders  
Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara University

*The Jesus Movement and the World of the Early Church* is a fascinating, decade-by-decade synopsis of earliest Christianity from Caesar Augustus through Emperor Trajan. Using visual and material culture alongside biblical, Greek, and Latin writings, McGinn has written a condensed version of the history from Jesus through Bishop Ignatius that summarizes most New Testament writings, the *Didache*, and *1 Clement*. An especially notable aspect of her book is extensive use of information from the writings of Eusebius, as well as from Josephus and those Roman historians who wrote about this period of time.

—Vernon K. Robbins, Emory University



The  
**Jesus Movement**  
and the World of the Early Church

Sheila E. McGinn

The logo for Anselm Academic features a stylized, wavy line above the text. The word "ANSELM" is written in a large, bold, serif font, and "ACADEMIC" is written in a smaller, all-caps, serif font directly below it.

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This book is the better for the input of all these people; any remaining shortcomings, of course, are attributable to me alone. One hopes that Cicero was correct in asserting that *assiduus usus uni rei deditus et ingenium et artem saepe vincit*.<sup>1</sup>

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1. "Constant practice devoted to one subject often outdoes both intelligence and skill."

Kathy find this book of interest, and even of benefit, it will have been well worth the effort.

A.M.D.G.

Feast of St. Theresa of Ávila, Doctor of the Church, 2013.

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To my students  
*Scientia potestas est.*



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## Preface

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A refrain that I often hear when I do introductory presentations on the New Testament period is “Why didn’t anyone ever tell us this before?” A number of fine histories of the New Testament books and the communities that produced them can be found in college libraries, but they tend not to be found on the shelves of public or church libraries. Such works typically are intended for graduate students who are studying the New Testament or early church history, or they are addressed to specialists in the field. The average reader, new to the study of scripture, tends to be overlooked.

As a result, most Americans today, including introductory students in college-level scripture classes, tend to have a very limited understanding of the realities of Jesus’ own ministry and the dynamics of the earliest communities of disciples. Whatever knowledge they have of these issues has been gleaned from Hollywood films or, if they are church-goers, side remarks from preachers or church educators. Those who want to know more about Jesus’ own theology and practice or the dynamics of Paul’s ministry must resort either to texts written primarily for scholars or to the ubiquitous literalistic treatments of the Bible, which do not address the details of historical scholarship and therefore tend to reinforce readers’ misunderstandings rather than present a cohesive, intellectually defensible alternative.

This volume is designed to present the findings of contemporary historical scholarship in a narrative format accessible to non-specialist readers. I will take a chronological approach to the New Testament period (the years 20–120 CE), focusing on the wider context of these books and the communities that were producing them. Theological issues raised within the books themselves will come to the fore from time to time, but they will not be the primary focus of this volume.<sup>1</sup> The early churches had to make many

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1. Those questions are better addressed by taking a topical approach to the material. Several works that do just this are listed in the select bibliography at the end of this book.

theological decisions, so these doctrinal issues are used to illuminate the various ways in which these communities were developing and the challenges they were facing.

This book is intended as a narrative history of Christianity's first hundred years as it arose in and interacted with the wider world of the Roman Empire. Beginning with background on the world into which Jesus was born, the story will move to the life and ministry of Jesus himself and then, decade-by-decade, will present "what was going on" in and around the first Christian communities in terms of political, social, and economic developments. In the final analysis, I hope to help the reader begin to understand the relationships between these external influences and the various structural changes and theological choices made by the early churches over time.

## The New Testament as Historical Source

While not the only resource for this period, clearly the New Testament is the most extensive collection of literary material on Jesus and the early churches. A chronological approach to the period then raises the problem of dating the New Testament materials. Should a book whose date is debated be used to highlight community life in the 80s or in the 90s? Should the Gospel materials be used to illuminate only the period in which the texts came to their final form, or might they also shed light on events of an earlier time, when the stories were being transmitted orally? Wherever a scholarly consensus exists on the dating of individual New Testament books and of independent units (*pericopae*; sing. *pericope*) within those books, that consensus has been accepted as the starting point for our discussion. Where there is no clear consensus, I will acknowledge the uncertainty, present my view of the most likely date for the material, and refrain from relying too heavily on it for drawing specific conclusions.

A second problem for dealing with this first Christian century is the paucity of evidence for some periods. Individual *pericopae* in longer texts can help to fill in the gaps. In addition, viewing the New Testament material against the backdrop of Jewish and Roman history and within the context of Jewish and Greco-Roman culture helps to fill in the picture. Recent archaeological finds and social-historical studies provide a firmer footing for such inferences.

Finally, but not the least of our concerns, the historian must face the question of the historical reliability of the New Testament sources. Since the nineteenth century, scholars have recognized that no work in the New Testament is a “history” in the modern sense of the word. Even the book of Acts, Luke’s sequel to the Third Gospel, is not the type of detached and “unbiased” report of events that modern historians purport to create, a fact that has made some contemporary scholars disdainful of Luke’s work. Yet the same scholars who shun biblical materials as ahistorical routinely turn to Herodotus, Josephus, Livy, and other ancient historians who likewise fall short of the modern ideal.

If one insists on restricting the evidence to only those sources that pass a “litmus test” of modernity, this enterprise is doomed from the start. However, such a radical step is far from necessary. Ancient historians were not simply creating fiction. Historians even then had particular standards for writing their accounts and commonly-accepted methods of handling their data, including the use of multiple sources for corroborating evidence. Perhaps the best contemporary corollary to ancient historiography would be the docudrama. Actual events form the basic framework for the narrative and historical personages provide the focus, but events are presented to convey more than factual information. The narrative also is meant to entertain, challenge, and educate the audience, and to inspire them to debate and perhaps emulate the actions of the protagonists (the “good guys”) and to shame the antagonists (the “bad guys”). Interpretation of historical events is embedded within the reportage. Edification and inculcation of common values is at least as important as conveying information.

Some years ago, Richard Pervo published a discussion of the Acts of the Apostles called *Profit with Delight*,<sup>2</sup> and this title aptly encapsulates the key feature of ancient historical writing versus modern works. To entertain their audiences while educating them about the past, ancient historians embellished their narratives, for example, with speeches that focus the audience’s attention on the heroes to be honored, virtues to be fostered, and vices to be avoided. In short, ancient history was not merely a matter of conveying information

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2. Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

about persons and events of the past but also—and perhaps more importantly—teaching how one should live as a result of this knowledge. This means that the evidence of ancient histories can be used in contemporary reconstructions of the first two centuries CE, but not all passages in those texts should be given equal weight.

Whether reading Livy's historical writings or Luke's Gospel, the historicity of each section of text must be evaluated on its own terms. For example, speeches convey the basic importance of the event being presented, but they are not exact transcripts of the purported speaker's words on that occasion. Passages that "go against the grain" of the author's basic line of interpretation are more likely to be historical than those that neatly fit with that agenda. To include each of these evaluations in the following discussion would complicate this book unnecessarily, so most of the time the reader will see only the results of this process of critical appraisal. On occasion, however, there is enough debate about a given passage that it is worthwhile to take the reader through the process, step-by-step, to clarify why a particular judgment is being made rather than another.

## The Writings of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles

The Acts of the Apostles tends to receive its most critical appraisal in terms of its treatment of Paul, particularly when one compares its account of Paul with what Paul himself states in his undisputed letters.<sup>3</sup> True, the discrepancies between Luke and Paul are noticeable and significant. Yet one must recognize that when Paul gives an account of "what happened," he is following the same kinds of conventions as did the author of Acts. In addition, Paul was a controversial figure, writing in a polemical context. He was criticized by other leaders of the Jesus movement, sometimes including members of his own communities. In his letters, Paul is not making unquestioned statements of fact; he is arguing in favor of his theological and ethical views over against those of his opponents. Hence, one must allow for some justification and even exaggeration on his part. A

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3. The New Testament includes thirteen letters that bear Paul's name, but scholars long have thought that several of them were written by Paul's disciples rather than Paul himself. Scholars agree that at least seven (i.e., Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) derive directly from Paul. These seven are called the "undisputed" letters.

standard practice in historiography is to distinguish between a “primary source” (a person who was an eyewitness or otherwise immediately involved in an event or situation, or a document produced by such a person) and a “secondary source” (a document that discusses the contents of primary source documents or conveys information learned second-hand). Since Paul’s epistles constitute primary historical sources, whereas the Acts of the Apostles largely (perhaps entirely) constitutes a secondary-source document, the epistles will be given preference when they and Acts disagree. However, Paul’s letters ought not to be used uncritically or dogmatically, as if his every opinion were universally adopted by his contemporaries. If it were, we would have considerably fewer surviving letters from him.

An understanding of Paul as virtually infallible has become an icon for many Christian scholars, but this view is simply untenable. The late Raymond Brown aptly addressed this issue in his book, *Antioch and Rome*.

Here I am proposing what is virtual heresy in the eyes of many Pauline scholars: namely, that Paul was not always consistent in his major epistles; that Paul even changed his mind; that the defiant Paul of Galatians was exaggerated; and that something is to be said for the position of Peter and James over against Paul on observance of some Jewish customs (so long as the observances were not looked upon as necessary for salvation). It is curious that sometimes a radical scholarship that has been insistent upon the humanity of Jesus balks at any real indication of the fallible humanity of Paul.<sup>4</sup>

Nor are Pauline scholars the only ones who have held this view. The presumption of the priority of Pauline theology and near infallibility of the person of Paul is at least as influential among average Christians today as among scholars. The following discussion will challenge this idealized portrait of Paul, not for the purpose of somehow ridiculing Paul or “debunking” his theology, but simply to make clear his own context as *one* of the evangelists for the message about Jesus. Paul was not a “Lone Ranger” in the early gospel mission field.

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4. Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 114.

## The Gospels

It is a truism of biblical studies that the Gospels tell us as much about the communities that produced them as they do about Jesus, since the Gospels were written decades after his life, and their authors, the evangelists, were responding to the perceived needs of their communities. Certainly the Gospels reflect the lives of the early communities that produced them, but this does not mean that they say nothing historically reliable about Jesus himself. The same basic standards for evaluating the historicity of a text as a whole can fruitfully be applied to smaller units within a text such as the Gospels.

## Non-Canonical Sources

The traditional assumption that the New Testament books preceded all other Christian writings and literature has now fallen by the scholarly wayside. So, too, have the notions that gnostic and other works now judged as heterodox were invented to corrupt the true faith or that apocryphal works like non-canonical gospels and acts are silly fictions or clumsy forgeries. On the contrary, many non-canonical texts provide important historical witnesses about Christianity in its first century. From the historical point of view, they have much the same value as do the canonical documents and should be evaluated according to the same rules as the New Testament books. As with the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus, works outside the canon may very well preserve historical material unknown to or unrecorded by the canonical writers. All our sources—Jewish, Christian, or Roman, canonical or extra-canonical—must be used critically, with great care to test which portions are likely to be historically reliable and which are not.

## Women in the New Testament Era

There was a time when one could write a history of the New Testament period without mentioning any women at all—except perhaps Jesus' mother Mary, or Mary Magdalene. Thankfully, this is no longer the case. In recent decades, the role of women in the earliest communities has emerged as a central question among scholars and the

wider public—and the center is precisely where this question needs to be if we are to correct the rather skewed understanding of the significance of women in the early Jesus movement. Integrated with the rest of this historical narrative will be a picture of the women disciples of Jesus and the later Jesus movement. Women's roles changed dramatically over this period, so questions will recur about their origins and developments. As this discussion draws to a close, we will face the various forces that prompted some church fathers to attempt to limit or even eliminate women's leadership roles in the burgeoning communities of Jesus' disciples.

## Theology

All the New Testament authors had theological concerns. The theology of each text expresses the views of the authors and communities that produced these texts, and possibly also those of the communities to which they were writing. Although theological questions will not take center stage in this book, some will be highlighted in order to demonstrate that the question under debate was of concern to the author (and presumably the recipients) of a particular text. The fact that such questions change over time points to changes and developments within these early Jesus-communities.

This book is intended for students and other non-specialists who are interested in learning more about the authors and original audiences of the New Testament texts by looking at the Greco-Roman world in which they lived and breathed. Keeping a New Testament<sup>5</sup> handy while reading this book, and using it frequently, will help fill in the other half of the historical puzzle that this study is designed to explore.

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5. Unless otherwise noted, Biblical quotations in this volume are taken from the New Revised Standard Version. Occasionally, when I think it makes a clearer reading, I provide my own translation, which is noted by my initials (SEM).



# Introduction

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Many people have limited knowledge about Jesus of Nazareth, his early disciples, the people who produced the New Testament books, and the period in general. The following list of facts makes stark claims that run contrary to some of the common preconceptions in the popular imagination about the movement that we (anachronistically) call early Christianity.

1. Jesus was never a Christian.<sup>1</sup>
2. Jesus' disciples were not Christians.<sup>2</sup>
3. Peter, Paul, and other well-known Jesus-movement leaders of that first-generation period were not Christians.
4. The people commonly called "Christians" today did not identify themselves that way until at least the end of the first century CE. Outsiders could not distinguish them from Jews until at least the 60s. In some places (like Antioch in Syria), followers of Jesus continued to identify with and participate in Jewish synagogues well into the fourth century CE.
5. Hence, Jesus did not start a new religion, although eventually his followers did.
6. Jesus did not "found the church" in the sense of establishing a bureaucratic structure remotely resembling any of the various Christian churches that exist today.
7. Saint Paul did not "found the church" either.

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1. "Christian" means "follower of the Christ (Messiah)." Jesus was raised Jewish and remained a Jew his entire life. His original followers, who also were Jews, believed him to be the Christ. Because of this belief, outsiders eventually began to call them "Christians." However, believers did not identify themselves that way until long after Jesus' death and Resurrection (see #4).

2. The term "disciple" means "student" (in the sense of a protégé to a mentor) and is the most common New Testament term for the followers of Jesus. Jesus' immediate disciples all were Jews, as were the authors of virtually all of the New Testament books. At some point after Jesus' lifetime, non-Jews began to join the Jesus movement.

8. Jesus himself did not “ordain” anyone, if this means assigning someone the permanent status of leadership of a community of believers.
9. Paul and some of the other disciples might have ordained people, although not to the kinds of priestly ministries that some Christian communities have today.
10. Jesus began as a disciple of John the Baptist, only gradually coming to understand that he had his own unique calling from God to a ministry distinct from the Baptist’s.
11. Jesus was neither the first nor the last first-century Jewish man to be hailed by some of his peers as God’s “Messiah.” Nor was he the only one to be killed because of this claim.
12. Jesus was not the only miracle-worker in the first century, in the Jewish homeland or elsewhere.
13. Taken alone, Jesus’ miracles did not “prove” anything; certainly not that he was divine. Some of Jesus’ contemporaries thought his miracles showed that he was demonic, or that he was in league with or possessed by Satan.
14. “The Twelve” comprised a distinct group among the disciples of Jesus, however . . .
  - a. If one combines the various New Testament lists of those belonging to “the Twelve,” the names actually number fourteen. Hence, the *idea* of “Twelve” is more important than the reality.
  - b. The number of Jesus’ disciples far exceeded twelve—by dozens, if not hundreds. Some of them were missionaries who took the gospel message to peoples and places beyond Jesus’ immediate circle (i.e., they were “apostles”).
  - c. Likewise, the group of “apostles”—those who were sent out to preach the gospel message—included substantially more than twelve persons.
  - d. Moreover, the Jesus tradition states that the function of “the Twelve” is not to be “apostles” but to serve as judges in the coming kingdom (see Matt. 19:28//Luke 22:30).
  - e. To summarize these points mathematically, “the disciples” ≠ “the apostles” ≠ “the Twelve.”

15. Jesus gave the “office” of the Twelve permanently to a few specific Jewish men. He did not envision it as a role that could be “handed down” any more than the patriarch Jacob could hand over his parentage of the twelve tribes of Israel.
16. The disciples of Jesus included many women.
17. The early churches, including the ones Paul founded, also included many women disciples.
18. The early churches had women missionaries, teachers, preachers, prophets, deacons, patrons, and apostles. This was not an insignificant or sporadic phenomenon. Rather, in the first century, women served as leaders in various capacities in communities of disciples across a wide geographic area, from the Holy Land to Asia Minor, from Macedonia to Rome.

Christians reading this might be feeling a bit uncomfortable about now. These assertions may strike some readers as intriguing, and others as preposterous. All I can do is ask that you make no snap judgments. Keep in mind that “sound bites” never explain anything; they simply assert. Those who hang in there through the remainder of this book should have a better idea of what these assertions mean—and what they do *not* mean.

As a history of the period in which Jesus and the early disciples lived and in which the New Testament books were being written, this volume certainly will address many more issues than those briefly listed above. However, since the misinformation people “know” when they begin to study a subject shapes their ability to gain new knowledge of it, often there is much “unlearning” to do before new learning can take place. The purpose of listing the “sound bites” is to address head-on some of the misconceptions people may have when they come to the study of the New Testament. Explicitly naming them as misconceptions is intended to help readers consciously set aside their assumptions, thereby making the learning process much more efficient.

A few brief remarks concerning terminology are in order. This text avoids using the terms “Christian,” “Christianity,” and “church” when referring to the disciples of Jesus, during or after his earthly ministry. The phrases “Christ-believers,” “community of disciples,” “messianic Jews,” and “Jesus-Jews” are somewhat awkward, but they

have the virtue of not reinforcing the misunderstandings that are highlighted by some of the points in the foregoing list. “Followers of the Way” is Luke’s term for the movement, and it has the virtue of being clear as to its referent and yet relatively unknown. The term “disciples” in itself is fine, but it becomes somewhat problematic because of the way Christian tradition has equated it with “the apostles” and “the Twelve,” so I have tried to use it sparingly. Instead of “Christianity,” typically I use the expression “Jesus movement,” “messianic Judaism,” or (following Luke) the “Jesus-Way.” When referring to an individual community of disciples, I often use the term “*ecclesia*” rather than “church”; although the former is simply the Greek term, its relative unfamiliarity should help mark the distance between the churches of today and those of the first century. The term “house-church,” on the other hand, is retained herein; this technical variation on the term is infrequent enough in popular discussions that it is not likely to tempt readers to merge contemporary experiences of church with those of the earliest believers.

# The World Jesus Inherited

Writing probably about 53 CE, Paul of Tarsus asserted, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4). Paul was not unique among the early followers of Jesus when he claimed that the Christ was born at precisely the time that God had prepared for that purpose, when the world had “come of age” and human history had ripened to the perfect moment for this radical divine intervention. Oddly enough, this was not a point in time when the Jews held political power or influence in the surrounding world. They did not even have the power of self-determination, much less the “clout” to influence peoples beyond their borders. Instead, they were aliens in their own land, a conquered nation, vassals to a pagan ruler. Jews lived in a Roman world, occupied by a foreign army devoted to deities the Jews viewed as false or non-existent. The world around them thought like Rome and spoke mainly Greek. How could this be the “ripe time” for a Jewish savior?

The Jewish element is an obvious one. Jesus, the foundation of the religious renewal movement that became Christianity, was himself never a “Christian”—that is, he was never a *follower* of the messiah, nor did he attempt to inaugurate a new religion involving worship of himself as Messiah. He was born into a Jewish family,

raised as a Jew, and lived and died a Jew.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of what one may think about Jesus' self-understanding, he never broke from his ancestral traditions. From his baptism by John to the last meal with his disciples, Jesus' words and deeds express a desire for the internal renewal of the Jewish people and their faithfulness to the God of Israel. In fact, the Synoptic Gospels tell a story of Jesus initially refusing to help a Gentile woman who asked him to cure her daughter because he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24 and parallels). All of the earliest disciples, the women and men who traveled with Jesus during his public ministry, were Jews.

After his death and Resurrection, Jesus' followers had to deal with the question of what should be their relationship with those Jews who were not disciples of Jesus. If all of the post-Resurrection converts to the Jesus movement had been born and raised as Jews, this problem is not likely to have arisen. The disciples of Jesus continued to worship at the Temple and participate in the synagogues with other Jews, and there is no particular reason why this should have posed a problem—as long as the converts to the Jesus movement continued to come primarily from among the Jews. However, soon many Gentiles (non-Jews) also were attracted to the gospel of Jesus and the proclamation of his Resurrection. The intermingling of Gentile believers with Jewish disciples is what caused the stir. Disagreement arose as to the relationship of these Gentile proselytes to the Jewish disciples of Jesus and to the wider Jewish community. To understand why this mixing of the "races" raised some hackles,

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1. While modern Judaism began to be formulated in the period after the Babylonian Exile (586–538 BCE), the entire Second Temple Period (538 BCE–70 CE) was a ferment of developing ideas, codifying the scriptural canon, and navigating the relationship between religious observance and the demands of political leaders who were not necessarily very devout and sometimes openly hostile toward the traditions passed down from Moses. What we, in retrospect, call "Judaism" included a spectrum of beliefs and practices that differed across various geographical locations. The Judaism of Galilee, in which Jesus was formed, seems to have differed somewhat from that of Judea, home base of the authorities who objected to Jesus' preaching. Contemporary Judaism, while not identical to any of them, shares an organic connection with these earlier forms of "Judaism." For the purposes of our discussion, "Judaism" will refer to any religious movement that treasures a connection with ancient Israel and shares a respect for the "Law of Moses" as divinely revealed and, in some sense, normative for faith and life.

one must understand more about the culture of the Greeks and Romans and their historical impact on Judaism. So before looking at the Judaism of Jesus' day, it is important to consider how prior events in the wider world affected and shaped it.

## **Empires and Ideologies: From Cyrus to Caesar**

From the early sixth century BCE,<sup>2</sup> the Persian Empire—which, at its height, extended from Iran to Egypt—included Jews among its subject peoples. Because the Persian King Cyrus liberated the Judean exiles from their captivity in Babylon, paid for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple, and allowed them freely to worship the God of their forebears and follow their other ancestral customs and religious traditions, a sixth-century successor to the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem acclaimed Cyrus as God's "Messiah" ("Anointed One"; Isa. 44:28–45:6, 13). Still the Jews were not independent, and especially those from noble and priestly families were not likely to forget this fact. Rather, Judea was a vassal state of the Persian Empire, ruled by a governor appointed by the Persian monarch, who might or might not maintain the permissive and conciliatory stance of Cyrus the Great.

After two centuries of Persian dominance in the Middle East, an ambitious young pupil of Aristotle (384–322 BCE) arose to challenge the Achaemenian Empire.<sup>3</sup> Alexander III, son of King Philip of Macedon (356–323 BCE), succeeded his father as ruler of Macedonia and the city-states of Greece. Believing himself called to fulfill a divine mission to bring true civilization to the world, Alexander "the Great" led a combined Greco-Macedonian army against the Persian Empire, the largest state ever created in the Ancient Near East. Against formidable odds, Alexander succeeded in wresting control from Darius III, conquering the Persian Empire—and the Jews with

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2. "BCE" stands for "Before the Common Era," and refers to the same period of time that Christians traditionally have denoted "BC" ("Before Christ"); "CE" or "Common Era" denotes the period Christian tradition denominates "AD" (*anno domini*, "The Year of Our Lord"). As a gesture of inter-religious hospitality, many scholars use the abbreviations BCE and CE instead of BC and AD.

3. Historians refer to the Persian Empire under Cyrus and his successors as the Achaemenian or Achaemenid Empire.

it. Alexander thereby became the ruler of most of the western world, although an early death from a fever kept him from ruling his new territory. The historical development of the Christ movement was largely determined by this shift of empires in the fourth century BCE.

After his death, Alexander's generals spent two decades fighting for control of the empire. The twenty-one-year civil war ended in 301 BCE with their agreement to divide it into four parts. Lysimachus (ca. 360–281 BCE) took Thrace and Asia Minor; Cassander (ca. 350–297 BCE) received Macedonia and Greece; Seleucus (ca. 358–281 BCE) controlled Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia; and Ptolemy (ca. 367–283 BCE) ruled Egypt and the Levant (the area encompassed by the modern State of Israel).

It took another decade, however, to resolve how to divide the half of Alexander's empire that girded the Mediterranean basin, in the crescent from Egypt clockwise through Syria and into Persia (modern-day Iraq and Iran). Finally Ptolemy I "Soter" ("Savior") and Seleucus I "Nicator" ("Conqueror") agreed to create two new Near Eastern states: the Ptolemaic Kingdom included Egypt, and the Seleucid Kingdom spanned the regions of Syria, Persia (present-day Iraq and Iran), and eventually Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Of course, this left the Israelite homeland right on the boundary between the two kingdoms, which meant that its control continued to be contested long after this agreement was made. The heirs of Ptolemy and Seleucus engaged in a continual tug-of-war over this region. At first, Israelite territory belonged to the Ptolemaic Kingdom. Later it became part of the Seleucid Kingdom. But never did it belong to those who actually lived there.

The Ptolemies and Seleucids, foreign kings ruling their subjects by force, recognized that they could not control vast populations without some unifying power. Following the plans of Alexander, they introduced Greek culture into the Near East, a process called *Hellenization*, that is, "to make Greek." Part of the process was the founding of new cities on the Mediterranean coastlands, cities that would keep Egypt and Syria in contact with the Greek homeland. The best known of these cities were Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria, both destined to play key roles in Christian history.

Greek became the lingua franca, the language of commerce and government. Among the aristocracy, any aspiring young man or

cultivated young woman had to learn it. Among the lower classes, merchants and shippers would know enough Greek to read an inventory or bill of sale; even tradespersons would likely know the few terms or phrases pertinent to their line of business. More than that, Greek became the language people could use when they traveled, not just in the Middle East but throughout most of the known world. The eastern fringes of the Seleucid Kingdom bordered on India, which Alexander had entered but not conquered. On the western side of the empire, and even before the time of Alexander the Great, some Greeks had settled near Marseilles in southern Gaul (modern France) and in southern Italy. Whether or not they could read and write Greek, knowledge of the spoken language could take travelers from Gaul to the borders of India. This made it indispensable for traders, sailors, soldiers, artisans, and all sorts of people who needed to travel to sustain their occupations—including Jewish merchants and tradespersons traveling from their Israelite homeland to the great Gentile cities of the Mediterranean.

Alexander's conquest of the Persians brought the Jews into the Greek world and, for the first time in their history, into a world that looked west. When Alexander's generals fought for their shares of the empire, much of the fighting took place in Israelite territory. By around 300 BCE, some Jews had been taken to Egypt as captives of war. Others were relocated by Seleucus I when he founded Antioch-on-the-Orontes (contemporary Antakya). In addition, because the continual fighting during the period of civil war impoverished the land of Israel, some Jews left their homeland to seek prosperity elsewhere. This emigration of Jews from their ancient homeland is called the *Diaspora*, Greek for "dispersion." The Diaspora started before the Hellenistic period. By the end of the third century BCE, Jews had become a significant presence in cities throughout the eastern Mediterranean and even in Italy. From that point on, Jews would carry their message of the one true God to receptive Gentiles in these areas.<sup>4</sup> Three centuries later, missionaries of the Jesus movement again followed the path of the Diaspora.

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4. That Jews proselytized among their Gentile neighbors is attested by several sources of the first century BCE including, Philo Judaeus (*On the Special Laws* 1.320–23), the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.81–84; 20.17–96), the Gospel of Matthew (23:15), and Roman authors Cornelius Tacitus

As residents of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms and other Greek-speaking states, Jews were caught up in the process of Hellenization. Typical aspects of Hellenistic city life included the public baths, the theater, the gymnasium (a combination health club, educational complex, and social hall), and the town council or *synedrion*. (In the New Testament, it is spelled “sanhedrin.”) The introduction of the Greek language also brought with it new ways of thinking that had originated with pagan philosophers. Many Jews accommodated themselves to the Hellenistic practices of their Gentile neighbors, especially in the Diaspora where they lived in overwhelmingly Gentile circles, but they drew the line when Hellenization threatened their religious beliefs and practices. This was not always an easy boundary to find, however, and Jews continued to debate among themselves what constituted accommodation versus capitulation.



The classical gymnasium was a center for physical training and for competitions, such as the footrace depicted on this ancient Greek cup. Unlike the modern gymnasium, however, it also hosted discussions about philosophy and the arts. Gymnasia constituted key elements in the promotion of Hellenization.

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(*Annals* 2.85), Gaius Suetonius (*Tiberius* 36), and Valerius Maximus (*Memorable Doings and Sayings* 1.3.3); cf. Dio Cassius 57.18.5a and several rabbinic texts, including *M. Nazir* 3.6; *T. Sukkah* 1.1; *Beresbith* (*Genesis Rabbah* 46.11. For a recent survey of the evidence, see John P. Dickson, “Winning the Gentiles: Mission and Missionaries in Ancient Judaism?” in *Mission—Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities: The Shape, Extent and Background of Early Christian Mission* (Tübingen: Mohr-Seibeck, 2003), 11–50.

Americans tend to assume that religion and politics are inherently distinct from or even opposed to one another, but no one in the ancient world would have agreed. Every kingdom had patron deities whom the people venerated to guarantee the well-being of the nation. Many pagan nations deified their rulers. The Egyptian Pharaoh is perhaps the most well-known example of this “ruler cult,” but it was by no means unique. Some upstart rulers even deified themselves—Gaius “Caligula,” the third Emperor of Rome, is a case in point. Venerating the ruler was an act of patriotism; refusing to do so could be construed as an act of treason. The precise dynamics of the ruler cult (for example, its centrality and persuasiveness) varied from one nation to the next, but nearly every nation had some form of it. In an earlier period, even Jews asserted that their king was God’s “Son” (Pss. 2; 89). However, this notion of “divine kingship”—that the king rules by divine right, being chosen by God rather than mere mortals—should be distinguished from worship of the ruler as a God.

The Torah, from the earliest law code (Exod. 20:23–25, ca. 1250 BCE) to the last (Deut. 6:4–15, ca. 450 BCE), clearly prohibits idolatry (that is, worship of some other person or object in place of the one true God). The Hebrew Prophets concur with a constant refrain abhorring idolatry (e.g., Isa. 44:8–20). The sheer weight of repetition suggests that Jews experienced a chronic temptation to succumb to the influence of their Gentile neighbors and participate in such pagan practices. It also affirms, however, that faithful Jews were convinced they could neither venerate their rulers nor participate in worship of foreign deities. Any Israelite monarch who tried to establish a ruler cult like those of the other nations would have been vigorously resisted.

How ancient pagans understood ruler worship is not clearly understood, but it certainly formed the backbone of ancient patriotism. One could not attend any civic function without witnessing, and thereby tacitly approving, some sort of sacrifice and prayer to the patron deities of the town and the ruling monarch. Hence, devout Jews living outside the land of Israel had to exclude themselves from much of civic life, which meant that they often were suspected of harboring anti-social or subversive tendencies. Once the land of Israel was subject to a Gentile ruler, the same problems arose at home as previously had applied only to Diaspora Jews. However,

Jews could—and routinely did—pray to their one and only God for the health of the ruler and welfare of the state. From the time of King Cyrus the Great, most of their foreign rulers accepted this compromise and the Jews’ modification of the divine kingship model, at least until the second century BCE.

This changed dramatically circa 180 BCE with the ascension of a Seleucid ruler, King Antiochus IV, who claimed the title *Epiphanes* (“God manifest”). Antiochus tried to eradicate Judaism by suppressing the Jews’ ability to practice their ancestral traditions. He outlawed the teaching of Torah, and even the practice of circumcision, the traditional sign of the covenant between God and the Chosen People (Gen. 17). Some Jews went along with the king, but many were so horrified that they nicknamed the king *Epimanes* (“madman”).

Because of the adamant and intolerable persecution by Antiochus IV, five brothers known as the Maccabees organized a revolution. In 167 BCE, the Jews succeeded in driving the Seleucids out of Judea and winning independence. The Maccabean family reestablished the Israelite monarchy under the Hasmonean dynasty, thus founding an independent Jewish state that endured for a century, until the Roman conquest in 63 BCE. However, Jewish independence could not stem the tide of Hellenization. Rather ironically, the history of the Hasmonean revolt, contained in the two Books of Maccabees, was written in Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic. Some of the most famous tales about the revolt, included in 2 Maccabees, are based upon the work of a Diaspora Jew (from Cyrene, in North Africa) with the Greek name of Jason. Moreover, in spite of opposition from



A coin depicting Antiochus IV Epiphanes

traditionalist Jews, at least a few Greek institutions, including the gymnasium and *synedrion*, had been transplanted to Judea to stay.

The surest proof that Diaspora Jews had made their peace with a religiously tolerant form of Hellenization is the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. A popular legend from Alexandria in Egypt claimed that, miraculously, seventy scribes independently produced the identical translation, and so the Greek version of the Jewish Bible is called the *Septuagint*, the Work of the Seventy (abbreviated LXX). Exactly when the Septuagint was produced is not known, but a date no later than the third century BCE is probable. Diaspora Jews had a version of the Bible in the language they used for everyday public life. Significantly, virtually all the New Testament citations of the Jewish Bible are from the Septuagint, including Jesus' scripture quotes in the Gospels. Since Jesus spoke largely to Galilean peasants and townspeople, very likely he quoted the Bible in Hebrew. Nevertheless, the Gospel writers (or "evangelists"), with a view toward a wider audience, cited the Septuagint text instead.

Diaspora Jews borrowed other elements from Greek culture. (Some even went so far as to write tragedies in the Greek style.) The most famous of these Jewish writers was Philo of Alexandria (ca. 10 BCE–ca. 45 CE), who made use of Greek philosophy in interpreting the Bible. Yet Philo and other Diaspora Jews maintained their allegiance to Judaism and did not want Hellenistic culture to compromise their religious commitments.

Following the Maccabean War, the Ptolemies (in Egypt) and Seleucids (in Syria) continued to feud with one another over who would control the Holy Land, wasting their political energies and financial resources. Furthermore, many proved to be ineffective or overly ambitious rulers, ill qualified to meet a threat arising in the West: the Roman Republic.

## **Roman *Imperium* and Religion**

From its founding until the middle of the third century BCE, Rome had expanded at the expense of its Italian neighbors. Two third-century BCE wars with the North African state of Carthage made the Roman Republic an international power that could not avoid getting involved in the affairs of the eastern Mediterranean. The Romans wanted land

and they wanted order. In the second century BCE, the Roman Senate, the Republic's ruling body, began a halting but steady conquest of the Seleucid lands. Part of this conquest involved a treaty made in 161 BCE with the Maccabees, a move that furthered destabilized the Seleucid Empire. By the first century BCE, the Seleucid Kingdom had become a petty dynastic state, virtually incapable of governing. The Romans saw their opportunity and decided to take over what was left of the Seleucid lands. The Roman General Pompey conquered Syria in 64 BCE. While he was there, he decided to annex the smaller Jewish state to the south, where there also had been some dynastic disputes. Pompey entered Jerusalem in 63 BCE and put an end to the Hasmonean Kingdom (as the Maccabean state had become known). The Romans reorganized the area as the Province of Judea.

Egypt remained the only country in the eastern Mediterranean not under Roman rule, but in little more than thirty years, after the infamous exploits of the Roman dictator Julius Caesar, the Roman general Mark Antony, and the Egyptian pharaoh-queen Cleopatra VII, Rome annexed that ancient kingdom as well. The Mediterranean had become a Roman lake, what the Romans called *mare nostrum*, "our sea."

At this time, Rome itself changed forever. All the land and riches acquired by the Republic during its conquests had spawned a series of dictators who used money and force to overawe the senators and get their way. One dictator, Julius Caesar, reached too far too soon and was assassinated by several senators, but the Republic itself could not be saved. After his defeat of Cleopatra and Mark Antony in 31 BCE, Gaius Octavian Caesar was acclaimed *Imperator* ("commander"; in English, "Emperor") and became sole ruler of Rome. The calendar inscription raised in about 9 BCE at Priene (in contemporary Turkey) eulogizes the coming of Octavian as a divine intervention:

It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia, in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus: "Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior [*soter*], both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance [*epiphanein*] (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors,

and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings [*evangelion*] for the world that came by reason of him,” which Asia resolved in Smyrna.<sup>5</sup>

While these words are tendentious and exaggerate Octavian’s importance, it is true that Augustus ended the strife among Romans, stabilized the economy, and established important legal reforms. Official documents continued to carry the notation *SPQR* (*Senatus Populusque Romanus*, “the Senate and the people of Rome”), implying that the legislation was the result of a democratic process, but the Senate essentially became the Emperor’s advisory body at best or rubber stamp at worst. Yet this change in governmental structure had very little impact on the vast majority of the population. In the Republican era, only aristocratic men (that is, wealthy landowners) could vote, and they comprised a very small minority of Rome’s inhabitants. What the average person noticed was not that the Senate had been disenfranchised but that the fighting was over, prices had stabilized, and they could afford to pay for their basic needs. Whether the ruler was an *imperator* chosen by the army or a *princeps* elected by a small group of wealthy men, neither arrangement constituted a “democracy” in the modern sense of the word. The only ones who objected to the changes were the other contenders for the throne. Four years later, the cowed Senate gave Octavian the title *Augustus* (“worthy of worship”), the name by which he is known to history (e.g., Luke 2:1, “A decree went out from Emperor Augustus”). Jesus was born during the Augustan era. Jesus himself, his family, friends, and disciples, everyone connected to the New Testament, lived in the Roman Empire established by Octavian.

Movies often have portrayed the Romans as heartless, brutal, and fond of persecuting Christ-believers, but this is a gross exaggeration. Most Roman rulers were interested in two things: peace and taxes. Because he definitively ended decades of civil war, Octavian was celebrated for bringing peace to Rome and acclaimed “Savior of

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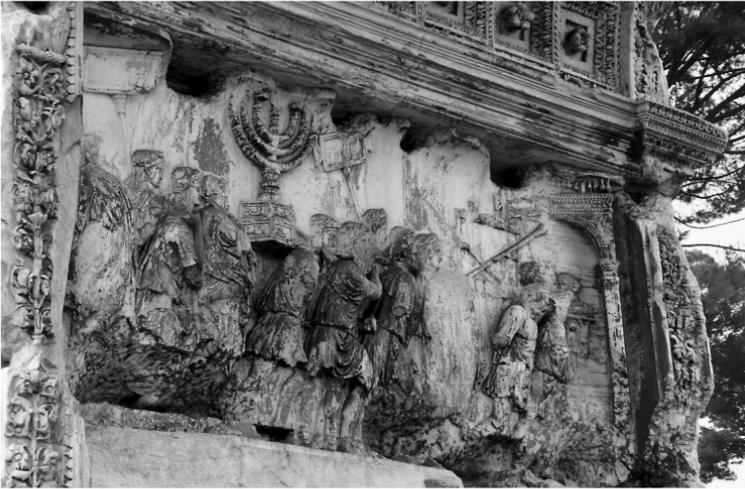
5. The English translation used here is taken from Craig A. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel,” (n.p.); <http://craigaeans.com/Priene%20art.pdf>. For the Greek text of the inscription, see W. Dittenberger, ed., *Oriental Graecae Inscriptiones Selectae*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1903–1905; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1960), 2.48–60 [= OGIS 458].

the world.” Most people accepted monarchy not only as a legitimate form of government but, in fact, as divinely ordained. They expected the ruler to be just and concerned about the people. Revolts against Roman rule were few, and those that did occur were not intended to establish democracies but to redress social or nationalistic grievances. Presumably nations would have preferred to be ruled by one of their own people, but an impoverished rural peasantry would have worked long, arduous days no matter who the ruler was—Greek, Seleucid, Jewish, or Roman.

The Roman persecution of Christ-believers conveys an image of religious intolerance, but that also is exaggerated. In general, the Romans tolerated any religion as long as it did not promote social unrest. In one of the few instances of official intolerance, the Romans persecuted the Druids in Britain because they feared the Druids would stir up British nationalism and thus cause a revolt. The occasional Roman persecutions of followers of Jesus in the first two centuries resulted not from religious concerns but from fears that the movement was anti-social or a threat to the state.

Official Roman tolerance of Jews is extensively documented. The Romans exempted Jewish men from military service because it would have forced them to violate Torah—for example, they would have had to be a party to pagan sacrifices—and the Roman authorities saw the Jews’ desire to maintain their ancestral traditions as a legitimate expression of filial piety. The Romans financially supported the priests at the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, collecting a Temple tax from Jews all over the Empire earmarked precisely for that purpose.

Anti-Judaism existed at Rome, sometimes at high levels, but it never became official policy, even when the Judeans revolted against the Empire in 66–73 CE. True, the Romans mercilessly suppressed the revolt. When the Legions regained control of Jerusalem (in 70 CE), they indiscriminately slaughtered hundreds of Jews, torched their homes, and burned the Temple to the ground; surviving captives were sold into slavery and the Temple treasures taken in triumph to Rome. Yet even during the war, Diaspora Jews maintained their rights, and Roman officials are remembered for defending those rights against anti-Jewish mobs in places like Alexandria and Antioch. Like Cyrus of Persia, the Romans realized that religious tolerance was good social policy because it gave the occupied peoples one less reason to revolt



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Titus assumed command of the Roman troops in Judea when his father, General Vespasian, left for Rome to become emperor. The Arch of Titus celebrates Titus' triumph in the First Jewish War. This panel shows the victorious Romans parading with spoils from the Jerusalem Temple.

against their overlords. As long as the native religions served to pacify their subject peoples, the Romans were satisfied.

In addition to this stratagem of religious tolerance, the Romans had a parallel political practice of co-opting the indigenous elite, especially pre-existing ruling houses, and appointing them to govern on the local level on behalf of Rome. In Judea, the local rulers came from the dynasty of Herod the Great (37–4 BCE). There were many advantages to this policy of using indigenous rulers.

1. It gave the powerful, elite families a strong incentive to cooperate with Rome, since they might get other favors or official appointments.
2. For the peasant class, it made the transition to Roman rule relatively seamless, sometimes even invisible. Often they found themselves obeying laws from and paying taxes to the same monarch as they had before the Roman conquest. Whatever revenues the monarch passed along to Roman coffers, the peasants neither saw nor cared.

3. The indigenous ruler could be expected to have a thorough understanding of the occupied people's attitudes, traditions, alliances, and so forth, which would make the official better able to anticipate—and defuse—potential problems.
4. Other leading families provided a built-in form of “checks and balances” of official abuses. The possibility of being replaced by a member of another influential local family provided the appointee with an incentive to perform well in office. In the case of any misbehavior or mismanagement in office, if the other local leaders were unsuccessful in persuading the Roman appointee to change, they could appeal to Rome to intervene to correct the abuses, even to the extent of removing the person from power and appointing someone else. The Province of Judea is a case in point. When Jesus began his public career (ca. 28 CE), during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius (14–37 CE), Judea was governed by a Roman procurator named Pontius Pilate, while Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, ruled Jesus' home territory of Galilee, and Antipas' brother Herod Philip ruled an area called Trachonitis. Yet less than ten years later, by 38 CE, Herod Antipas, Herod Philip, and Pontius Pilate all had been removed from office due to mismanagement of various types. Instead, the Jewish King Herod Agrippa I (10 BCE–44 CE), grandson of Herod the Great and former classmate of Prince Claudius, had become sole ruler over the entire territory.

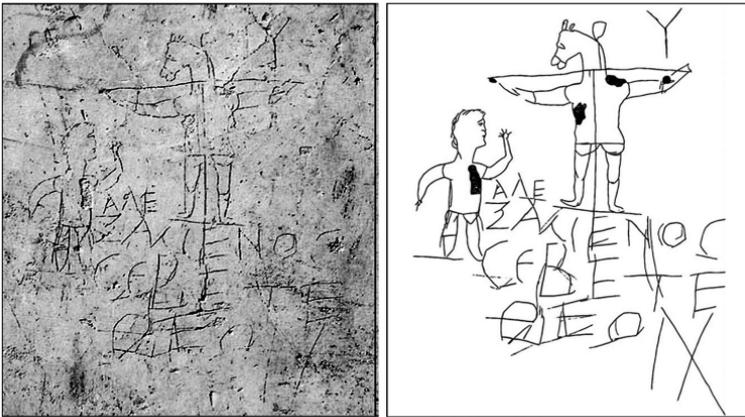
The local rulers could do nothing that threatened Rome, but otherwise they had considerable latitude. Roman authorities used whatever means and whatever persons were effective, as long as they could maintain peace and collect taxes.

### **The Way of Jesus versus the Ways of Rome**

By the first century CE, the Romans had abandoned attempts at Hellenization, but the Jesus movement could not help but be influenced strongly by the dominant Greco-Roman culture. Less than a decade after Jesus' death, the gospel message had moved beyond Judea and taken root in Gentile territory, most prominently at Antioch in Syria, but also in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Greece, and Italy.

Greco-Roman culture permeated the social world of Jesus and his followers. One sees its most obvious impact in the fact that all the New Testament authors wrote their works in Greek rather than in Hebrew or Aramaic. Many also had more than a passing familiarity with prominent pagan writers. For example, Mark's Gospel is very like the romance novels of the time; the book of Acts includes scenes reminiscent of Homer's *Odyssey* (e.g., Acts 27); and Luke portrays Paul quoting a Greek poet (Acts 17:28).<sup>6</sup>

Still, where these early members of the Jesus movement recognized a conflict between the Jewish Law and Greco-Roman culture, Torah won out. For example, Torah forbids the making of images of people or animals (Lev. 19:4). Jesus' followers seem to have continued to observe this prohibition, for there are no images of Jesus until at



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The earliest artistic representation of Christ's crucifixion may be this mocking portrayal made by an opponent. The so-called "Alexamenos Graffito" (ca. 210 CE), from the Palatine Hill in Rome, presents an image of a Christ-believer named Alexamenos, one hand raised in the *orans* gesture of worship, standing before a cross on which hangs the corpus of a man with the head of an ass. The accompanying inscription reads ΑΑΕΑΜΕΝΟC CΕΒΕΤΕ ΘΕΟΝ, "Alexamenos worships [his] God."

6. See, e.g., Michael E. Vines, *The Problem of Markan Genre: The Gospel of Mark and the Jewish Novel* (Boston: Brill, 2002); Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); Gilbert G. Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977); Benoit Standaert, *Évangile selon Marc: Composition et Genre Littéraire* (Brugge: Zevenkerken, 1998); and Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

least the third century CE, and that earliest image (of the crucifixion) was made by an opponent.

Even more than other Jews of this era, it was inevitable that the followers of Jesus would have to negotiate conflicts between Torah requirements or the teaching of Jesus and Greco-Roman mores or Roman law. Their very stance as followers and imitators of Jesus put them in an existential position of opposition to the Roman *imperium* that had slain their innocent Lord. Jesus had lived as an obedient subject of the Roman Empire, preaching a message of return to the God of Israel, the God of Justice. In response, that empire executed him as a threat to the stability of the Roman state.

Jesus' crucifixion, in the eyes of his followers, was the blasphemous result of world structures irreparably opposed to God. God had created this world and did not want to condemn it (John 3:17), but radical surgery was going to be necessary to save it from the evil powers that held it enthralled. Disciples like Paul of Tarsus expressed this belief in their doctrine of the *Parousia* (literally, "coming" or "appearance"), which contemporary Christians usually call the "second coming." Even Jesus seems to have thought that the *Parousia* would occur very soon (see Matt. 16:28), and Paul was convinced he personally would be alive to see it (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:29; cf. 1 Thess. 4:15–5:11). Then all pagan authorities and other enticements to disobey God would be overthrown. Instead, Messiah Jesus would rule on God's behalf, establishing whatever structures would be necessary to ensure that humans would live as God intended, in harmony with God, each other, and the rest of God's creation. For most of the first century, the followers of Jesus did not anticipate having to wait long for God to effect this radical renewal on the face of the earth.

As the end of the century drew near, Jesus' disciples began to realize that they would be in the pagan world for an indefinite period of time. With more pagans converting to the movement, Christ-believers became more receptive to Greco-Roman culture and more transparent in their use of it. For example, Clement of Rome, writing about 95 CE, expressed his admiration for the organization of the Roman army and used the myth of the phoenix (the mystical bird that yearly died in flames and then came back to life) to illustrate a point about Jesus' Resurrection. By the middle of the second century, writers such as Justin Martyr (*d.* ca. 155–165) openly

relied upon Greek philosophical notions to convey the significance of the gospel to their audience of predominantly Gentile converts. However, Greek philosophy had little explicit impact on the New Testament. Luke rather fancifully portrays Paul debating with some Greek philosophers in Athens (while others dismiss him as a babbler), but Colossians 2:8 links philosophy with “empty deceit,” and in 1 Corinthians 1–2 Paul warns his Greek converts not to be puffed up with human knowledge. Several New Testament books show that their authors knew at least basic elements of such common philosophies as Stoicism and Platonism. Gnosticism and Docetism, two movements later rejected by the church as heretical, were grounded at least partially in Greek philosophical notions. However, none of the New Testament authors used Greco-Roman philosophy as the foundation for their presentations.

## Varieties of “Judaism” in the First Century CE

Neither Greek nor Roman religion had much impact upon Jewish religious practice, but since religion, society, and politics were interwoven, religious developments among the Jews often had social or political ramifications, especially in a land ruled by Gentiles. At least five parties or sects existed within Judaism in the first century CE, and each of them had different ways of making the connections among their religious beliefs, political affiliations, and social policies. The two best-known groups are the Sadducees and Pharisees, both mentioned in the New Testament as disputing with Jesus over religious topics. The other three parties were the Essenes, a variety of armed resistance movements that Josephus calls “Zealots,” and the Jesus movement or “Followers of the Way” (as Luke names it in the book of Acts).<sup>7</sup> One could be a Jew and belong to any of these groups or none of them. All of them influenced first-century Judaism. Since the Jesus movement will be discussed throughout the book, this section will focus on the other four parties.

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7. Mark 3:6; 12:13 (= Matthew 22:16) refers to “the Herodians,” presumably supporters of the Roman puppet-king Herod Antipas, but they are mentioned nowhere else. Scholars are not sure what kind of group this actually was or what significance it had.

## The Sadducees

The Sadducee party was composed of Temple functionaries and members of the priestly caste, both of whom received their ranks by blood inheritance. They were an established, elite class who ministered in the Jerusalem Temple and performed the sacrifices there. The group probably dates back to the era of Ezra and Nehemiah (ca. 444 BCE), reformers who established the framework for modern Judaism in the midst of the Persian Empire after the Judeans' liberation from the Babylonian exile. As members of the Jewish aristocracy, the Sadducees had tremendous wealth and influence in political and economic life. They seem to have emphasized the importance of religious ritual and the prerogatives of the priestly class. They both accepted and benefitted from Roman rule since the priests functioned as part of the Roman system of authority in the imperial Province of Judea.

Sadducees believed in the Torah (or "Pentateuch," the first five books of the Bible) as the only divinely inspired scriptures, focusing on the letter of the written Torah. They did not accept the Pharisees' oral tradition of interpretation (see below). Since the Torah never mentions a messiah—a divinely sent savior-king—they did not expect one. They believed in neither a resurrection of the dead nor a spiritual afterlife; like the human body, the human soul was mortal. They accepted the divine election of Israel (the idea that Israel was God's own people, chosen for a particular role in human history), but they did not emphasize divine providence. The God of Israel, the only transcendent deity, demanded exclusive worship, yet God did not intervene in daily human affairs. Like most ancient people, the Sadducees had an ethnocentric worldview. Marriage was the accepted way of life for these Jews because it fulfilled the divine command in Torah to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28).

## The Pharisees

Somewhere around the second century BCE, the Pharisee movement (from the Hebrew *perushim*, "the pure") arose from a group who called themselves *Hasidim* ("pious ones"), possibly an offshoot of the Sadducees. Over time, the Pharisees seem to have become the majority party in Judaism, and they probably gave rise to the rabbinic movement (the model for what would become Jewish orthodoxy) by

about 100 CE. Their movement was a force for “democratization” in the sense that it was a shift from the exclusive influence of the priests and scribes to a primarily lay brotherhood. The Pharisees became influential at the time that local synagogues were established outside of Jerusalem, and they often are credited with their origin. They valued piety and knowledge of the Torah more than sacrificial rites. They did not reject Temple worship, but thought it alone was not enough for a living faith. God should always be worshiped through daily prayer and study of the Torah, even away from the Temple and outside of Jerusalem (cf. 1 Thess. 5:16–18).

The Pharisees promoted the Jewish rituals and scrupulous observance of the Mosaic Law. In their focus on teaching and understanding God’s law, they accepted not only the Torah but also the oral tradition of its interpretation. In addition, they held the Prophets and the Writings to be inspired scripture. Synagogues played an important role in Pharisaic Judaism because such gatherings provided a venue not only for daily prayer but also for teaching the scriptures and thereby counteracting the pagan influences that surrounded Jews on a daily basis. The Torah was not a static revelation; rather one should read it with reason according to its spirit. This permitted an evolution in decisions concerning how to understand the Torah. It also required a greater fluency in the legal decisions of various rabbis (teachers and scholars of the Jewish scriptures).

While the Sadducee form of Judaism looked very much like other Greco-Roman religions of the day, with its emphasis on cultic observance administered by a priestly caste located in one cult center, Pharisaic Judaism looked to outsiders more like a philosophical school. The synagogues were gatherings for prayer but not sacrifice. The Pharisees made them places where participants could discuss how the scriptures could be applied to the pertinent issues of the day—religious, political, social, and economic.

For Pharisees, the divine election of Israel meant that Jews had a predestined role in the world, but this was coupled with individual free choice and responsibility. The one true God loves all humanity since he is their Creator; all are equal in God’s sight, but Israel is set apart for a special role in the world. Of particular importance is the role that Israel plays in giving birth to God’s Anointed, the Messiah who will gather all Jews and, indeed, all nations under divine rule. Marriage not

only fulfills the divine command in Genesis 1:28 but also makes it possible to share in God's salvation of the world by bringing forth the Messiah. Ritual purity is one means of witnessing to this special role of Israel, the nation God chose to teach justice to the whole world.

Like many non-Jews, Pharisaic Jews believed in an afterlife of the immortal soul. Unlike non-Jews, they believed this afterlife was based upon a resurrection of the body on the "last day" or "Day of the Lord" (Dan. 12:2–3; Hos. 6:2), when divine judgment would be meted out to all people and they would receive their just rewards or retribution. God is transcendent and beyond human understanding. Yet the law of God has been revealed to his people; it can be understood—and must be obeyed. The purpose of human freedom is to make it possible to choose willingly to follow God's law. For the most part, the Pharisees accepted the ruling authority of Rome, but it could never be absolute; the ruling authority of God manifest in the divinely revealed Law and the Prophets trumped all. The classical Judaism that began to emerge in the late-first and early-second centuries shared more in common with the Pharisee movement than with any other first-century Jewish group.

The "Followers of the Way" also shared the most similarities with the Pharisee movement, which may be one reason why the evangelists depict more debates between Jesus and the Pharisees than with any other Jewish sect. Both groups believed in miracles and angelic messengers sent by God to communicate with human beings; Jesus' disciples claimed that he himself did miracles by the power of God. Both accepted the Torah and Prophets as divinely inspired scriptures, and believed in the efficacy (even necessity) of ongoing interpretation of those scriptures in light of the contemporary situation; Jesus' disciples privileged his interpretation over any others. Both groups believed in the resurrection of the just in the "final days"; Jesus' disciples affirmed that those final days had already begun when God raised Jesus from the dead.

## The Essenes

Like the Pharisees, the Essene party also arose out of the *Hasidim* in about the middle of the second century BCE. The Essenes' primary goals were to study the Jewish law, uproot pagan influences

from the midst of Israel, and promote Jewish rites, including scrupulous observance of the Mosaic Law. The Essenes accepted both the Torah and the Prophets as inspired by God. They also included other written traditions in their study of religious texts. The library of scrolls found in 1948 at Kirbet Qumran on the Dead Sea usually is attributed to the Essenes. It includes several biblical texts as well as such non-biblical works as *The Community Rule* (a sort of “constitution” for the community), *The War Scroll* (an exposition of how believers should behave in the coming messianic war), a psalter (a hymn book), and commentaries on writings from the Bible.

The Dead Sea Scrolls tell us several things about the Essenes. The very existence of the library shows that this was a scribal community. This in turn puts the group among the aristocracy of their day. The *Copper Scroll*, which lists their treasures, shows that the community had considerable wealth. The *Community Rule* indicates that this was a communalist sect that was mostly celibate, although they did not forbid marriage. The Essenes emphasized ritual purity, including various ritual ablutions and a water baptism, along with study of the Torah, which was interpreted in light of their sect and its ideals. The Essenes believed they were a people set apart by the one God to become a “saving remnant” in Israel, a people of the “new covenant.” The Jerusalem Temple was God’s proper house of worship, but it had been profaned by those currently exercising priestly authority in Jerusalem. Those priests had sold out to the pagan rulers and had thus profaned Temple worship and the sacrifices. God would intervene at the proper hour and restore both the kingship and Temple to Israel through the agency of two messiahs, a general-king of the line of David and a priestly one descended from Aaron, Moses’ brother and Israel’s first priest. Meanwhile one must wait and pray.

The Essenes held a dualistic worldview in which God loves the “sons of light” and hates the “sons of darkness.” Not only are non-Jews excluded from the children of light but even some Jews as well. Only the “true Israel” is the elect of God. One becomes a member of the elect by divine predestination. This election brings Israel responsibility but entails no human free choice. The primary responsibilities in the present involve study, prayer, worship, and preparation for the coming messianic war against the “sons of darkness.” God is the world ruler whose providence determines the future, for good

or for ill. Those who are obedient to this divinely ordained plan will be rewarded with immortal life for their souls, while the disobedient will be punished.

## Resistance Movements and the “Zealots”

The armed resistance movements are the most difficult of these four Jewish groups to describe. Some may have begun as smaller groups of brigands and then coalesced and developed a tighter organization. Although often viewed as purely political, in fact they had religious motivation for their militancy. These groups seem to have shared a belief that God had chosen Israel to be a people directly ruled by him, worshiping only him. It was an affront to the chosen people to be ruled by idolatrous foreigners. Consequently, the militants had little or no use for the Temple priests, who were appointed and paid by Rome. According to them, only when Israel (the promised land) had been liberated would true worship of God be possible.

Styling themselves defenders of Mosaic Law and Jewish national life, the resistance movements gradually began to coalesce so that by the sixties, with the onset of the first Jewish Revolutionary War against Rome, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus can call them a Zealot party. While different armies gave their allegiance to at least three different Generals, overall the Zealots engaged in relentless political activity, refusing to pay taxes and harassing both Romans and the Jews they thought to be in league with Rome—including the Sadducees who controlled the Temple priesthood. Some of the revolutionaries even used coercion and violence against other Jews in an attempt to intimidate them into supporting the revolution. They did not shy from punishing those who would not cooperate, and earned the nickname *sicarii* (“dagger-carriers”) from their guerilla tactics and assassinations.

The dominant religious beliefs among the revolutionaries included a fierce nationalism and the messianic expectation that God would redeem Israel from Gentile rule and restore a Davidic-type monarchy. This suggests that they accepted both the Torah and the Prophets, since only the prophetic writings proclaim the coming of a messiah. They shared this messianic expectation with many other first-century Jews, including those of the Pharisee and Essene

parties, although the Zealots' militant nationalism seems rather a distinguishing feature.

Exactly when the Zealots became a formally organized military movement is not known, but it was no later than 66 CE, when the Jews began their war of independence from Rome. Josephus depicts the Zealots as mere outlaws, but one must remember that his *Jewish War* is a tendentious production created at the behest of a Roman master whose patronage was so important to Josephus that he had taken the name "Flavius" in his honor. Josephus' imperial patron did not want to hear that the Jews had a legitimate claim for independence, nor that they were coordinated and competent strategists. Josephus remarks about the internecine strife among the revolutionaries but, whatever internal squabbles they may have had, the revolutionaries agreed on the objective of ousting Rome from the land of Israel. In addition, they obviously had sufficient strength and coordination in prosecuting the hostilities against Rome, for they sustained a protracted seven-year war against the world's strongest military power. That achievement is not the result of mere bandits. The fact that they had sufficient money for weapons suggests that at least some of their supporters came from the aristocratic class; in fact, Josephus mentions that some of the younger priests initiated the revolt.

The fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 CE largely put an end to the revolution, but a group of *sicarii* under the leadership of one Eliezar held out at Herod the Great's fortress at Masada until 73 CE, when Josephus tells us that the besieged Jews committed mass suicide rather than fall into Roman captivity (*Jewish Wars* 7.8–9). If their suicide was fueled in part by a belief in some kind of resurrection and an afterlife, then they shared somehow the beliefs of the Pharisees and Essenes. In any case, the Jews who made the "last stand" at Masada took their place with the heroes of the Maccabean era as iconic figures, faithful martyrs in the cause of divine justice.

## Historical Sources and Their Uses

Having considered the historical setting of the earliest communities of Christ-believers, it is well to look at the sources of information about them.

Sources come in all forms. Archaeology can provide information about the physical lives of people and can support written evidence. History and geography can explain such things as why the communities of disciples expanded to the West rather than to the East (they lived in the Roman Empire and followed the Diaspora) or what road the Apostle Paul probably took on his travels (the only usable road in a particular area). However, the bulk of the evidence is literary.

The most obvious sources are the books of the New Testament. Some have clear historical value, such as the Pauline Epistles. For example, Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians not only tells us what the apostle thought the Corinthians should do, but also provides evidence for what was occurring in the Corinthian community that prompted Paul's response. Anonymous or pseudonymous (falsely named) epistles present problems and must be used more cautiously; examples of these would be Hebrews (attributed to no one in the text itself) and Colossians (attributed to Paul but probably not written by him).

Under the general "Pauline" heading would be seven undisputed letters (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon), and then six more letters that are attributed to Paul in the New Testament but that scholars doubt were written by Paul himself (Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus). The letter to the Hebrews was attributed to Paul by some early church fathers, although the letter itself is anonymous. Some of these letters clearly are linked to one another (1 and 2 Timothy); others legitimately may be linked to the Pauline tradition (Colossians), while still others stand on their own (Hebrews). The genuine Pauline Epistles trace the thought and activities of the most well-known apostle, while the others reflect the situations in the post-Pauline communities.

Since the eighteenth century, the seven New Testament letters not written by or traditionally attributed to Paul (that is, James; Jude; 1 and 2 Peter; and 1, 2, and 3 John) have been called the "Catholic Epistles." Unlike the Pauline letters, they were thought to have been addressed to all the followers of Christ rather than to particular ecclesial communities; thus, "catholic" (meaning "universal").<sup>8</sup> Grouping

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8. Scholars now know this assumption to be mistaken; each of these writings seems to have a particular community in mind.

these letters together under the title “Catholic Epistles” might seem to imply that all seven letters have something in common, but that is not the case. The two letters attributed to Peter are related to each other, as are the three letters attributed to John, but nothing links all seven letters except their inclusion in the New Testament.

The Book of Revelation is a complex vision of the imminent transformation of the world to one where God is totally in charge and directly present to the faithful. The vision provides no direct historical content, but the existence of the book demonstrates that revelatory thinking was known among Christ-believers at the end of the century. In addition, the book reflects the views of some late first-century disciples (e.g., the very anti-Roman stance), and the letters included in the first three chapters convey some information about their communities in Asia Minor at the turn of the century.

The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—focus on Jesus, but they too can provide some information about the early communities of disciples. To use a brief example, the earliest Gospel (ca. 70 CE), that of Mark, contains no infancy narrative. The next two Gospels (ca. 80–90 CE), Matthew and Luke, do contain accounts of Jesus’ birth. These later two Gospels convey information about Jesus that Mark did not: the tradition that he was born in Bethlehem. In the process, they also demonstrate that sometime between the publication of Mark and the composition of the next two Gospels, Jesus’ disciples had acquired an interest in his birth. The last Gospel, John (ca. 100 CE), speaks not of Jesus’ birth but of his divine generation. This study will attempt to discover what elements in the history of the Jesus movement in general or of specific local communities prompted these particular theological interests.

Only one book says anything about the earliest, post-Resurrection communities, and that is the Acts of the Apostles, a product of the same person who wrote the Third Gospel, traditionally called the Gospel according to Luke. Who was this “Luke”? Has this author reported reliable information about the early “followers of the way”?

Starting in the second century, ecclesial tradition identified the author of the Third Gospel as Luke, a fellow-worker of Paul who appears in the letter to Philemon (v. 24) and two post-Pauline works (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11). Second Timothy repeats what Philemon says, that Luke was a fellow-worker of Paul, and thus adds no new

information. Colossians, on the other hand, identifies Luke as a physician. Gallons of ink have been spilled trying to validate or invalidate this identification. For example, for generations scholars noted that Luke used medical terminology in his writings. Yet modern scholars have demonstrated that the medical terminology one finds in the Third Gospel and Acts was common knowledge, rather than terms that only physicians would know because of their technical training; thus the use of such terms does not prove Luke was a physician. On the other hand, the evangelist was not writing the Gospel for physicians but for a general audience. Hence, even if he were a physician, it would be logical for him to use non-technical language. Whether or not the New Testament author was a physician or a colleague of Paul must remain an open question, but this does not mean one can know nothing of the author.

Luke was probably a Gentile by birth, since he confuses the ritual requirements of Torah concerning purification of a mother after childbirth and circumcision of a son (Luke 2:21–24). He does show some familiarity with Torah, however, and has a pattern of showing Jesus and his parents as observant of Jewish law (e.g., Luke 1:59; 2:21–24). This suggests that he either was a convert to Judaism or a “God-fearer” (a Gentile who studied Torah and observed its prohibitions, but had not yet accepted circumcision and the other positive requirements of the law).

Luke wrote no earlier than the 80s, a half-century after Jesus’ death, when his disciples were beginning to realize that they would be in the world for some time—a significant change from their earlier views that the world would end soon (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 15:51–52; 1 Thess. 4:13–17). Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles partly to legitimate the community of disciples as the continuation of Jesus’ work. He did not want believers to think that the *ecclesia* was a sort of last resort—if the world is not going to end, one might as well form some kind of lasting community—but that community-in-discipleship was part of Jesus’ plan. Of all the evangelists, only Luke includes an account of Jesus’ ascension into heaven. In fact, he tells the story twice, once at the end of his Gospel and again at the beginning of Acts, thus linking the two works. This scene serves as a transition point between the earthly life of Jesus and that of the apostolic community. The risen Christ

has returned to his Father in heaven. (In the first century, this was believed to be above the sky, which is why Jesus had to “ascend.”) From heaven, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to continue his work on earth. Luke emphasizes this by having some disciples, in the power of the Spirit, perform miracles similar to those performed by Jesus. This earthly work of the Spirit-filled disciples in imitation of Jesus cannot be confined just to Jews; Luke’s hero, Paul, under divine guidance, spreads the gospel message to the larger Roman world while the other apostolic leaders acknowledge the rightness of Paul’s cause (e.g., Acts 15:1–33).

This may sound as if Luke did not write an entirely objective history of the earliest community. That is true; he did not. However, no historian writes a totally objective history. No matter how objective one tries to be, every historian brings personal background and attitudes to any topic, however unconsciously; this is true even today when it is expected that histories will be written objectively. (The author is bringing her outlook and background to the writing of this book, and readers are bringing their outlook and backgrounds to the reading of it.) In the ancient world, on the other hand, historians were not expected to write objective histories. On the contrary, they were expected to glorify rulers, to further a cause, or to instill patriotism in their readers. More than that, in order to be convincing, historians had the freedom to put speeches in the mouths of their characters, as long as they believed that the speech reflected what the character would have or should have said. This was not the practice of hacks but of truly great historians, like the Greek Thucydides (ca. 455–ca. 400 BCE) and the Roman Tacitus (ca. 56–ca. 118 CE). Luke follows their example. In his Gospel, everyone from peasants to aristocrats speaks the same educated style of Greek, and the characters in Acts give impressive speeches.

To say that modern people cannot rely on Luke would be an overreaction. If one is willing to read only writers who took a modern approach, one would never be able to read any ancient history at all—whether Roman, Jewish, Egyptian, Greek, or any other. Although ancient writers imposed their own views on the materials, they are not likely to have created events that never happened. One can use their works but must do so with care, considering how the author’s background and outlook may affect the presentation of the material.

For example, Luke may have elevated the role of Paul in spreading the message of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire, but no scholar doubts that Paul did bring the gospel message to the Gentiles of the eastern Mediterranean.

Non-biblical works contemporaneous with the New Testament typically resemble the epistles in being occasional documents written to address particular situations. All reflect the views of the diverse groups that produced them. One source, much later than the New Testament, is uniquely significant because of its scope. In the fourth century, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–339 CE) compiled his *Ecclesiastical History*, the first history of the Jesus movement. This work traces the period from the earliest communities of disciples to the reign of Constantine the Great (314–337 CE), the first Roman Emperor to take the name of “Christian.” Eusebius often saw history as a form of apologetics, so one must use his work carefully, but he has preserved a large number of traditions, some very ancient, which modern scholars accept as historical. Frequently he is the only source of information about some of the great figures and events of this nascent period.

One of Eusebius’ main sources was a second-century believer named Hegesippus (fl. ca. 150–180 CE), whose work is known solely from quotations by Eusebius. Hegesippus apparently journeyed by sea from Corinth (in Greece) to Rome, collecting information about episcopal succession from various bishops along the way. Hegesippus was well informed about events in Judea, leading scholars to think he had roots there and perhaps was from a Jewish family. Scholars vigorously debate how much of what Eusebius quotes is actually from Hegesippus and how much from Eusebius himself. Still, the traditions Eusebius reports are worth examination.<sup>9</sup>

In general, Jewish and pagan sources say little about the Jesus movement, but the little they say is often of great value. These sources will be discussed later on.

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9. Since the extant (surviving) source is Eusebius, not Hegesippus, quotations and references to the traditions from Hegesippus will cite Eusebius.

## Why Bother with History?

To people accustomed to contemporary historiography, when everything is dated and authors' names are known, studying ancient history can seem daunting, but it can be done. One cannot do it in the way that one can with modern history, but one can follow the general outline of early ecclesial developments, focus on many of the specifics, and get a good idea of how the early followers of Jesus understood themselves and their communities.

This history also may help one to understand the church of the present day by helping to explain how it came to take the particular forms that it did in those early times. For example, because Jesus and his disciples were Jewish and lived in the Roman Empire, the Jesus movement expanded along the routes of the Jewish Diaspora within the empire. Consequently, it gradually became a primarily Western religion in culture and outlook. Awareness of this phenomenon should raise important questions for contemporary Christians. For example, as Christianity today becomes a universal religion in a way that the New Testament authors could never have imagined, and as the numbers of Christians in Africa and Asia continue to grow, should the church continue to express itself exclusively in Western ways or should it incorporate the images and practices of these other cultures as well?

## Summary

Half a millennium of strife in the Mediterranean world preceded the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Augustus Caesar had brought an end to a century of Roman civil war, which led the Romans to acclaim him "Savior of the World." Prices stabilized, roads were built, and the local aristocracy was coopted into the Roman power structure. Once the actual fighting had ended, the average peasant noticed little difference from the previous period under Jewish (Maccabean) rule. They continued to pay onerous taxes, as they had in the past, little aware that the funds now flowed along those Roman roads to Italy. Soon the gospel would follow the same routes to Rome.

Several groups within the Jewish people took different stances toward the political shifts in the period leading up to and following

the Roman conquest. Jews were torn on the one hand between an aristocratic priesthood, beholden to the Roman regime for their control of the Jewish Temple, and the abhorrent prospect of syncretism with powerful Gentiles (“pagans”) on the other hand. Two of the Jewish responses to this dilemma, those of the Pharisees and Sadducees, figure in the biblical materials; those of the Essenes and “Zealots” are known from the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus. Jesus himself, always and only a Jew, became the foundation of the “fifth philosophy” when his disciples acclaimed him “Messiah.”

Social and political pressures in the centuries before Jesus, during which time the Jewish people had suffered as political pawns of shifting world powers, inspired them to dream for a time and realm in which the peace and bounty of God would prevail. Apocalyptic hopes and moves toward political liberation during the centuries preceding Jesus made the people ripe for his message of the “kingdom of God.” Several of the intertestamental and New Testament books reflect this apocalyptic attitude. Meanwhile, however, what determined power was where one stood in relation to Rome.

Jesus and his message represented an explicit challenge to Roman power and the supremacy of Caesar. The evangelists present Jesus, not Caesar, as the divinely born savior of the world, advancing God’s kingdom. Religious, economic, and political spheres all were one in the ancient mind: religious claims had simultaneous political, social, and economic implications; all of life was spiritual, social, and political-economic at the same time.

This last point in particular holds the key for a responsible reading of the historical sources. Knowledge of Jesus’ contemporaries, predecessors, and successors, derives from documents written at a time and place dramatically different than the present. These histories and letters refer to people and events fresh in common memory, so their contents would have been much more easily understood by the original audience. The best strategy for reconstructing the history is, whenever possible, to use multiple sources that talk about the same events.

Christianity always has been a religion that functioned in history, preserving the heart of Jesus’ message while constantly interacting with the world in which it found itself. It still does. The next chapter will turn to the earliest disciples as they began this balancing act.

## Questions for Review

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1. What factors contributed to make the early first century CE the “right time” for the successful spread of the Jesus movement?
2. What does “Hellenization” mean, and how were the people of Judea affected by it?
3. What is the “Diaspora” and how did it come about?
4. What was the Hasmonean Dynasty? How did it begin, and how did it end? How was Judea governed thereafter?
5. Who was Caesar Augustus and what was his significance?
6. What was the attitude of the Roman Empire toward Jews?
7. What was the First Jewish War? Why did it begin and what was its outcome?
8. What sources are available for a historian wishing to reconstruct the early history of the Jesus movement?

## Questions for Discussion

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1. The spread of Greek culture and language was appealing to many of the inhabitants of Judea, especially members of the upper class. Why do you think some Jews accepted Hellenization? Why did some reject it?
2. Why do you think ancient peoples accepted the intermingling of religion and state (as in ruler cults) as natural and appropriate? What are the advantages of such an approach? What are the disadvantages?
3. Most of the Greek rulers who succeeded Alexander the Great saw it as their duty to “improve” the lives of subject peoples by forcing them to accept Greek culture, even when that meant coercing people to abandon their traditional beliefs and practices. Even today the state is sometimes called upon to override citizens’ religious beliefs so as to serve their best interests—for example, in cases when parents refuse, on religious grounds, necessary medical treatment for a child. Is this sort of state intervention essentially different from Antiochus Epiphanes’

program of suppressing Jewish beliefs and practices? Why or why not?

4. Each of the four major Jewish “groups” within first-century Judea managed to attract a certain following; what was the appeal of each group for the people of that time and place? Which group do you think you would have joined, had you lived at that time, and why?