

The First Thousand Years

A GLOBAL HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY



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Ephesus, Rome, and Edessa: The Spread of Christianity

In his *Annals*, an account of the Roman Empire in the first century, Tacitus the Roman historian had this to say about the early spread of Christianity: "The name Christian came from Christ who had been executed by Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea during the reign of Tiberius. But in spite of this temporary setback the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital."

I've always been fond of the phrase "temporary setback." For Tacitus, Christ's death marked failure and defeat, and he was surprised that the followers of Jesus were able to overcome their disappointment and disillusionment to come together as an energetic and enterprising community carrying on the mission of their late lamented leader. For Christians, however, Jesus's death was the culmination of his life, the cross a token of glory, and the resurrection the beginning of a new age. The knowledge that he had risen from the dead transformed their lives and changed how they thought about his person.

Tacitus may have gotten his theology wrong, but his historical sense is sound. For in saying that the Christian movement (the "deadly superstition") had "broken out afresh" after a "temporary setback," he recognized that those who carried on Jesus's mission in spite of his death were the same men and women who had followed Jesus during his lifetime. This is a point of capital importance for understanding the origins of Christianity and the Church's nascent self-understanding.

The first Christian community was made up of men and women who had known Jesus and were "witnesses" to his resurrection (cf. Acts 2:32, 5:32). "Witness" did not mean bystander, like someone who happened on an automobile accident or a passing parade. It designated those who had known Jesus, hearkened to his teach-

ing, served as his disciples, and seen him alive after his death. This group, called the apostles (those who are sent), was the foundation upon which the new community was built. Now, however, they knew Jesus in a new way, no longer simply as a teacher and healer who had lived among them, but as the risen Lord held in memory by stories about him and collections of his sayings circulating in their communities and present among them in the blessing of bread and wine.

All of Jesus's disciples were Jews, and they remained faithful to the ancient traditions and customs of their people, observing the Jewish law, which meant circumcising their male children, abstaining from certain foods, and keeping the Sabbath and holy days. They had no thought of breaking with Jewish ways, nor did they have a mandate to invite non-Jews into their community. At one point in the Acts of the Apostles, Christians are identified as the "sect of the Nazarenes," a tiny band of Jews who worshiped the God of their fathers, revered Jesus's teaching, and awaited with eager hope the resurrection of the dead. They did not constitute a new religion but a "way" among the Jewish people (Acts 24:14).

At first the movement spread among Jews in Jerusalem and the surrounding regions, Judea, and Galilee to the north, but soon there were communities in Lydda and Joppa on the coast, to the east in Damascus in modern-day Syria, even north up the coast in Antioch, the home of a thriving Jewish community. Jerusalem, however, remained the center. During Jesus's lifetime Peter had been the acknowledged leader and spokesman for the disciples. He was one of the first to heed Jesus's call, and his name always stands at the head of the list of disciples. After Jesus's death he continued in that role, but he also shared authority with James, identified in the Scriptures as the "brother" of the Lord (Galatians 1:19; Matthew 13:55).

James does not figure in the accounts of Jesus's ministry in the gospels, and his ascendancy after the resurrection is puzzling. But there is no doubt of his standing among the first Christians. When Paul gave a list of those to whom the Lord appeared after his death, the only name he mentioned besides Peter was James (1 Corinthians 15:7). Later, when Paul made his first trip to Jerusalem, it was to confer with James and Peter (who was called Cephas [Galatians 1:18–24]). It seems that along with Jesus's closest disciples, the leadership of the nascent community fell to a respected member of his family.

Paul was a third prominent figure in the first decades. Unlike the other apostles, Paul had not known Jesus as teacher or mentor. He was born early in the first century A.D. among Jews living outside the Land of Israel, in what was called the "diaspora." His home was Tarsus, a Greek-speaking city in the southeastern corner of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Jews had long lived in other parts of the world, most notably in Babylonia (modern Iraq) and Egypt, and in the centuries before the rise of Christianity their numbers had grown in the cities that were now part of the Roman Empire, cities such as Alexandria on the coast of Egypt, Antioch

in Syria close to the Mediterranean, Ephesus and Sardis in western Asia Minor, Carthage in North Africa, and of course Rome.

Paul boasts that he was "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5). His Jewish credentials were impeccable. As a boy he was educated at home by his father, and later he may have studied in Jerusalem. A zealous adherent of Jewish traditions, Paul, or as he was known then, Saul, first comes into view as a persecutor of Jews who had embraced Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of the Jews. The term *Christ* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *Mashiach*, the "anointed one."

In A.D. 34–35, five years after the resurrection, when Paul was a relatively young man (though we have no certain information about the date of his birth), his life was turned around through an encounter with the risen Christ on a trip from Jerusalem to Damascus. According to his own account Jesus Christ "called" him to abandon the persecution of Christians and to preach the gospel among the gentiles (Galatians 1:1–17). After his conversion the first thing he did was to "go away into Arabia." Where Arabia was located is uncertain, but it seems to refer to the region around Petra, southeast of the Dead Sea in the southern part of present-day Jordan. Why he went there is also unclear, but Petra was a non-Jewish city and he may have set out to preach the gospel to gentiles. He met with little success and soon returned to Damascus. His sojourn in territories east of Jerusalem, however, is not without significance. For it shows that the Christian mission spread not only westward into the cities of the Roman Empire surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, but eastward into greater Syria and ancient Mesopotamia, the area between the two rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, where the population spoke Aramaic (a semitic language spoken in the Middle East), not Greek. Paul's journey east was a portent of the future.

In Damascus Paul seems to have learned a trade, most likely as a "tentmaker" (Acts 18:3). This was a portable skill always in demand that allowed him to support himself on his travels as he went about preaching the gospel and establishing new communities of converts. After three years, however, Paul had to flee to Damascus, and he made his way to Jerusalem. It was a journey with consequences. After his conversion he had assumed the mantle of an apostle, "without conferring with flesh and blood," as he put it (Galatians 1:16), meaning without receiving the blessing of the authorities in Jerusalem, Peter and James. In an extraordinary statement written later he says: "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Corinthians 9:1). Paul's rapid emergence as a commanding presence in the early Christian community changed the dynamic of its leadership and enlarged its vision.

Paul's purpose in going to Jerusalem was twofold. First, from the leaders in Jerusalem he sought legitimation of his mission to the gentiles. Peter had already made some tentative efforts to reach out to non-Jews, but Paul was the first to give

the gentiles an equal place in the emerging Church. Second, he wanted to learn at first hand more about the life of the churches in Judea (Galatians 1:22). He also knew very little about Jesus's life and teaching, and people in Jerusalem had known Jesus in the flesh and had put his sayings and parables to memory. Already something like the account of Christ's life that we know from the gospels was circulating orally.

After winning the support of Peter and James, Paul set out to carry the gospel of the living Christ to other parts of the world. He traveled north into Syria and then headed westward to Cilicia, his native country where Tarsus was located, in south-eastern Anatolia (Asia Minor), then to the island of Cyprus and on to Greek-speaking cities in central Asia Minor, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. He even reached the southern coast of the Black Sea before traveling across the Aegean Sea to Corinth in mainland Greece. This itinerary is based on the Acts of the Apostles, a historical account of Christian beginnings written at the end of the first century, not Paul's own writings, and it may give us a more schematic account of his activities than was actually the case; but from his letters we know that he established churches in western Asia Minor (including Ephesus), Macedonia (the lower Balkans), and Greece (such as in Corinth).

Paul's unbounded confidence, irrepressible energy, directness, and personal charm were irresistible (though not to all), and soon there were tiny Christian communities scattered throughout the region. He was an indefatigable traveler. Given the difficulties and dangers of travel in those days and the extent of territory he covered, his success as a missionary is astonishing. The tiny band that had gathered in Jerusalem only two decades earlier was on the way to becoming a religion not only for Jews but also for gentiles—a form, as it were, of Judaism for the nations.

But there were difficulties. During the first decades most Christians were Jews, and Jewish synagogues in the cities of the Roman Empire were the nurseries in which the seeds of the gospel were first planted. When Paul came to a city he proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ in the local synagogue. These synagogues often included groups of gentiles, "godfearers" they were called, who had been attracted to the Jewish way of life. In Paul's hands the gospel of Christ became compelling to gentiles as well as to Jews, and the churches he founded were composed of Jews and gentiles—a social and religious fact that would provoke the first great controversy in Christian history. However, it should not be forgotten that Paul remained very much a Jew who believed that becoming a Christian meant being joined to the "commonwealth of Israel" (Ephesians 2:12). Christianity was not a revolt against Israel.

After working as a missionary for a decade and a half, Paul went to Jerusalem with a co-worker, Barnabas, a Jew from the island of Cyprus, and a Greek convert

named Titus. Apparently some Jewish Christians, called the "circumcision party," had opposed his mission to the gentiles. At issue was whether gentile converts who joined the Christian "way" must be circumcised and take upon themselves the obligation of observing the Jewish law. Titus had not been circumcised, and Paul held that circumcision was not a condition of membership in the new community. Paul's unwillingness to circumcise Titus provoked a heated dispute. The leaders in Jerusalem argued that the Jewish law was still binding. Jesus had taught that "not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law" (Matthew 5:18). But Paul retorted that if he were compelled by the authorities in Jerusalem to circumcise gentile converts he would have "run in vain" (Galatians 2:2).

Peter acknowledged that God's Spirit was present among gentile Christians (Acts 15:8). The admission of gentiles was God's choice and not his to reverse. In other words, the decision to reach out to the gentiles had already been made. In truth, he adds, "there is no distinction between us and them" (Acts 15:9). Their hearts have been cleansed "by faith" and the distinction between "clean" and "unclean" no longer held. According to the book of Acts, to resolve the dispute James proposed a concrete solution including four points: (1) Gentile Christians should have nothing to do with the pollution of idols, meaning they cannot eat meat that was offered to idols; (2) they should observe Jewish practices with respect to marriage and sexual relations; (3) they should eat only meat slaughtered according to Jewish law; and (4) they should not ingest animal blood. In short, gentiles should observe the law as it had been imposed on "strangers among the Jews" (Leviticus 17:8, 10–13) in the Torah. His was a solution along Jewish lines.

A letter was prepared setting forth the terms of the agreement and dispatched to the Christians in Antioch and elsewhere. Paul makes no mention of this letter, but he does say that James and Cephas (Peter) and John, the brother of James, another of the "pillars" in Jerusalem, "gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised" (Galatians 2:9). Significantly, the leaders in Jerusalem also requested that Paul and his co-workers take up a collection among the new churches for the poor in Jerusalem, a practice that was well established among Jews. By contributing to the material needs of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, the new gentile Christians in Asia Minor and Greece bound themselves to their needy brothers and sisters in a close-knit fellowship transcending ethnic boundaries.

The agreement, however, did not hold. Its shortcomings became apparent early in matters of food, or how to deal with table fellowship between Jewish and gentile believers. Could Jewish Christians who observed Jewish law, such as abstention from pork and not mixing meat and milk dishes, eat with gentile Christians? Soon after the meeting in Jerusalem, Peter had journeyed to Antioch, home to a Christian community composed of Jews and gentiles; according to the book of Acts, the

followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" in the city of Antioch (Acts 11:26). Initially Peter followed the local custom of eating with gentile Christians. But some Jewish Christians, complaining that they could not abandon the laws on food, sent a delegation to inform James in Jerusalem what was being asked of them. In response James sent emissaries to Antioch with this message: abandoning the food laws was not what he had in mind when he signed off on the agreement with Paul. When they arrived, Peter broke off fellowship with the gentile Christians. Even Barnabas, Paul's companion, went over to the Jerusalem side. Paul realized that if Jerusalem carried the day his mission to the gentiles would be undermined. So he challenged Peter: "If you as a Jew live in gentile, not Jewish fashion, how can you compel the gentiles to live like Jews?" (Galatians 2:11-14). The break had to be clean; there was no way to hold on to some practices of the law and dispense with others. Obedience was owed only to Christ.

It is easy, looking back from the far side of Christian history, to see only Paul's side of this controversy and to slight the arguments of the leaders in Jerusalem. Their insistence on keeping the Jewish law seems alien to the "freedom in Christ" (Galatians 2:4) celebrated by Paul. But the dispute shows that the first Christians were pious and observant Jews, not renegades. For them the law was a good and holy thing, a gift from God that gave grace and beauty to their lives and lifted their hearts to the praise and adoration of God. Their faithfulness to the Jewish law (in matters that still define Jewish observance) was a sign of a living faith. It is tribute to their faithfulness that they were unwilling to jettison the ancient ways of their people without a vigorous defense of their traditions. Even when the matter came to a decision at a meeting in Jerusalem (Acts 15), according to the Acts of the Apostles, they proposed a solution in traditional Jewish terms. In the end, however, signs of the presence of the Spirit among gentile Christians set the Christian "way" on a different course.

Paul then resumed his missionary work in the west. He returned to Corinth, where he had founded a congregation, and from there he sailed to Ephesus on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, where he remained for several years. In Ephesus he wrote several letters to the church in Corinth. Next he headed to Troas, a city in northwestern Asia Minor where he hoped to meet up with Titus, who had been in Greece overseeing a collection for the poor in Jerusalem. Titus had already left, but Paul caught up with him in Macedonia. He sent Titus on to Corinth and later joined him there. Over the winter (in A.D. 55 or 56), while staying in Corinth, he wrote a letter to Christians in Rome.

The Epistle to the Romans is Paul's weightiest and most influential letter, and it reminds us that he is significant not only for what he did but also for what he wrote. He is sometimes regarded as the first Christian theologian, for he began the daunting task of interpreting the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth in the light of his

resurrection from the dead, the central conviction of the young community. In Paul's letters we see how after the resurrection Jesus was confessed as the Son of God, and Christian faith came to be centered on his death and resurrection. Jesus was not one thing and Christ another. The Christ of Christian faith was the same person as the Jesus of Nazareth who proclaimed the kingdom of God, prayed to God the Father, healed the sick, and was crucified outside Jerusalem. Paul makes this clear in the opening paragraph of the epistle: Christ was "descended from David according to the flesh" and "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:3-4).

Paul taught that all human beings have sinned and turned away from God, but through his death Christ has made peace with God. "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." For "if we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son . . . how much more shall we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:9-10). One of his favorite expressions is "in Christ." In one of the most arresting passages in the book of Romans, Paul says that those who have been "baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death." If one is buried with him in baptism, Paul writes, so "we believe that we shall also live with him." All who have been united to Christ share in his life.

For Paul to become a Christian meant being joined to a body of persons in intimate union with Christ. His thinking is profoundly corporate. "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:16). Reading Paul's letters one understands why as a missionary he was not content to "convert" individuals; he established local churches that were bound together by their fellowship with Christ and with other believers.

At several places Paul speaks of Christ as the "image" or "likeness" of God. He believed that Jesus Christ, though he was born of a woman and lived a fully human life, shared in God's life and was to be venerated as "Lord." In a memorable passage in his letter to the Philippians, Paul quotes an early Christian hymn that praises Christ who, though "in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." He took on human form and "became obedient to death, even death on a cross." Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him a name above every name, so "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:5-11).

This exaltation of Christ to divine status is not unique to Paul. Another early writing that bears his name, though it may not have been written by him, the letter to the Colossians, uses even more elevated language. Christ is called the "image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation, for in him all things were created. . . . He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:15-17).

And the Gospel of John, written at the end of the first century, begins: "In the beginning was the Word [Christ], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In these and other passages early Christian writers always present Christ's divine status in relation to God the creator.

In other passages Paul mentions a third divine reality besides God the Father and Christ: the Holy Spirit. His second letter to the Corinthians ends this way: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you" (2 Corinthians 13:14). "Spirit" is a translation of the Greek term *pneuma*, for breath, or wind, and signifies the life-giving power of God. Through Christ, says Paul, believers have been justified and have access to God, and through the Holy Spirit God's love has been poured into their hearts (Romans 5:1-5).

In these early Christian writings (which became part of the New Testament) one can discern the lineaments of the distinctively Christian teaching, that the one God has a mysterious triune, or threefold, nature. It took centuries for Christian thinkers to work out the implications of such terms as "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit," as we shall see in later chapters. Here I wish only to note that trinitarian language is found in the earliest Christian documents.

These ruminations on Paul's thinking were prompted by his letter to the Romans. Besides its rich theology, the letter to the Romans is significant for another reason. Unlike the churches his other letters were addressed to, in Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, and others, Paul had never visited Rome. The church there, as in Antioch in Syria, was founded by someone else. This letter is evidence that there were other emissaries of the gospel at work in the cities of the Roman Empire besides Paul. The impression one receives from the New Testament (and from the maps of Paul's missionary journeys that are sometimes included in Bibles) is that he and his co-workers were the principal missionaries in the early decades. But the existence of a church in Rome shows that others had gotten there before him, and it is certain that Christian communities had been established in other metropolitan areas. At the end of the letter Paul wrote that he not only wanted to visit the Christians in Rome, he also hoped to journey farther westward, even to Spain (Romans 15:24). But first he had to return to Jerusalem with the "collection" for the poor that he and his co-workers had been gathering from the churches he had founded.

Because of his powerful personality, and the historical information contained in Paul's letters, it is tempting to follow out the rest of his story. If we wish to keep before us the larger picture, however, we cannot allow the charisma and glamour of Paul's life to overshadow what was happening elsewhere.

It is very likely that the Christian gospel reached Alexandria on the coast of Egypt in the first century. This glittering cosmopolitan city was the home of a large Greek-speaking Jewish community, and it was easily accessible by sea from Palestine. Paul's co-worker Apollos was a native of Alexandria, and early Christian

tradition venerates the evangelist Mark as the founder of Christianity in Egypt. There is no hard evidence from the first century of a Christian community there, but archaeologists have found fragments of papyri in Egypt with verses from the Gospel of John dating to the early second century. By the middle of the second century Christianity was well established in Egypt, and Alexandria was to become one of the premier Christian cities, along with Antioch and Rome.

The Christian mission also made converts east of Jerusalem. Before Paul's conversion a Christian community had been established in Damascus, a Greek-speaking city located in the midst of a large geographical area in which the populace spoke Aramaic. One of the principal cities in the region was Edessa (modern-day Sanliurfa in eastern Turkey), some 150 miles northeast of Antioch on the Silk Road leading to India and China. The city was pleasantly situated among a ring of hills and surrounded by a fertile plain at the head of the crescent formed by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and linked to the Mediterranean by a string of towns. Edessa was the home of a flourishing Jewish community, and the city had been drawn into Rome's orbit during the century before the birth of Christ.

The gospel may have been carried there by Jewish merchants from Antioch. But the Christians of Edessa had a much more colorful tale of how Christian faith came to their city. According to a fascinating legend recorded in the first church history, written by Eusebius of Caesarea in the early fourth century, it is said that the king of Edessa, Abgar, "monarch of the peoples of Mesopotamia," was dying from a terrible disease that baffled his physicians. Hearing about a Jewish prophet who had the power to heal, he sent a letter requesting Jesus to come to Edessa. According to the legend, Jesus responded with a personal letter and promised to send one of his disciples to Abgar. In his letter Jesus wrote: "As to your request that I should come to you, I must complete all that I was sent to do here, and on completing it must at once be taken up to the One who sent me. When I have been taken up I will send you one of my disciples to cure your disorder and bring life to you and those with you."

After Jesus was "taken up," or ascended into heaven (Acts 1), so goes the story, the apostle Thomas sent Thaddeus, another apostle (cf. Matthew 10:3 and Mark 3:18) to Edessa. Thaddeus healed many people in the city and the surrounding region, and the king sent for him. When Thaddeus appeared before him, the king saw a marvelous vision on Thaddeus's face, and he "bowed low before the apostle." Abgar asked whether he is a disciple of Jesus, and Thaddeus said that if you believe in him he will cure you. Abgar said: "I too have believed in Him and in his Father," and Thaddeus laid his "hand on him in His name." At once Abgar was cured of the disease. Then Thaddeus asked Abgar to call together the people so that he could preach to them "and sow the word of life." In gratitude Abgar offered Thaddeus gold and silver, but he refused, saying: "If we have left our own property behind, how can we accept that of other people?"

The story is legendary, but when read in light of other evidence it suggests that

Christianity came early to the region. It is also very likely that early in the second century there were Aramaic-speaking Christians farther east in Adiabene (modern Arbil) in northern Iraq. In the early years as Christianity was moving westward into the cities in the Roman Empire it also spread eastward. This historical development has great significance, as we shall see in later chapters. The gospel was brought to Central Asia and to China by Syriac-speaking missionaries. There were other linguistic worlds, those of the Copts up the Nile River in Egypt, the Nubians (of present-day Sudan), the Ethiopians farther south, the Armenians east of Asia Minor, and the Georgians between the Black and Caspian Seas, but the three most important Christian languages in the early centuries were Latin in Italy, North Africa, Spain, and western Europe, Greek (and later Slavic) in the eastern Mediterranean and eastern Europe, and Syriac in the Middle East. Already in the early centuries Christianity had the makings of a global religion.

The first Christian leaders in Jerusalem were Jews. Even though they confessed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah of the Jews, they had not given up their Jewish ways, and they shared the fate of their people. Jerusalem had been conquered by the Romans in 63 B.C., and over the course of the next hundred years the Jews living in Palestine were ruled by procurators (governors) from Rome or by kings appointed by the Romans, most famously Herod the Great. The Jews, however, lived with the memory of the time when they had their own kings and Jerusalem was the capital of a Jewish kingdom. During Jesus's lifetime and in the decades after his death, organized bands of Jews had provoked and challenged Roman authority. On occasion the yearning to cast off Roman hegemony broke into open rebellion. By the sixties these insurrections had become bolder and more persistent, and Jews were able to overpower Roman garrisons in certain towns, such as Jericho in the Jordan Valley and Masada on the Dead Sea. In 66 the Jews even minted their own coins with the inscription ISRAEL'S SHEKEL YEAR I and HOLY JERUSALEM, marking the years from the "liberation of Zion" [Jerusalem].

In response to Jewish resistance, Emperor Nero sent one of his ablest generals, Vespasian, to crush the revolt. Given command of three legions, about forty thousand men in all, in the spring of 67 he advanced down the Mediterranean coast from Antioch to Palestine, subduing Jewish towns in the north of the country and the area around Jerusalem. But Nero committed suicide in June 67. At first Vespasian, the heir apparent, bided his time as other generals swore allegiance to him. Then he returned to Rome to be acclaimed emperor. His son Titus was given charge of the campaign against the Jews.

The siege of Jerusalem took place in the spring of A.D. 70. Although Jewish leaders were determined to fight to the end, they were divided among themselves, weakening their defense. Nevertheless they heroically withstood the Roman siege engines for several months. In August, however, Roman legions broke through the city walls, destroyed the Antonia fortress, a military barracks in the city, and on

August 10 (9 Ab by Jewish reckoning) set the torch to the most hallowed place in the city, the Jewish temple. By early September Jerusalem lay in ruins.

Vespasian issued coins to commemorate the triumph with the inscriptions IUDAEA CAPTA (Judea captured) and DEVICTA IUDAEA (Judea conquered). Some time after A.D. 81, a large triumphal arch was constructed in Rome to commemorate the victory. One of the friezes depicts the large solid gold seven-branched menorah (lampstand) held aloft on two horizontal staffs borne by Roman soldiers as it is being carried out of the temple. This arch is still standing, and even today the melancholy scene of Jewish defeat and humiliation stirs visitors who pause to look up at it in the Forum in Rome.

The fall of the city of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple changed forever the life and institutions of the Jewish people. Without the central sanctuary of Jewish religion there could be no priesthood and no sacrifices, pious Jews could no longer travel to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual religious festivals, or offer the first fruits of grain and produce to God, and the high priest could no longer enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. The Romans made Jerusalem off limits to the Jews, and those who did make their way to the city came no longer to pray in the temple but to mourn the city's destruction and weep over its ruins. In the generations and centuries that followed, Jewish leaders gradually adapted their ancient traditions to the new facts of Jewish life. The result was a profound transformation that led to the religion we know today, Judaism centered on the synagogue whose life is ordered by the Talmud, that enduring collection of Jewish law gathered in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D.

For the Christians in Jerusalem the fall of the city and the destruction of the temple were no less momentous. Some fled the city and settled in a town called Pella east of the Jordan. But not all. A nucleus remained in the city and, according to one early source, Christian life in Jerusalem continued without interruption. One writer in the second century even provided a list of bishops, Christian leaders in Jerusalem, up to the year 135, all of whom were Jewish. The list may be fictitious, but it does suggest that the Christian community in Jerusalem survived through the turbulent years following the Roman conquest.

In the wake of the Roman conquest the early structure of authority in Jerusalem gave way to new forms of leadership in the churches founded by the first generation of missionaries. Jerusalem came to be celebrated more in memory than in fact; in the central narrative of Christianity's history during the first two centuries, Jerusalem was a minor player. Only in the fourth century, with the building of the Church of the Anastasis (Church of the Resurrection, today known as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher) over the tomb of Christ and the mounting stream of pilgrims who came to worship at the holy places, would Jerusalem assume its historic place as the "holy city" of Christians.

The Making of a Christian Community

Early in the second century, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, a metropolis in ancient Syria (southeastern Asia Minor) near the Mediterranean coast, was arrested during a persecution of Christians in the city. He was sent to Rome under guard of a cohort of ten soldiers. Along the way his keepers picked up other prisoners to be taken in chains to the capital. From Antioch they sailed to the southwestern coast of Asia Minor, where they planned to make their way to Ephesus, but instead they headed northeast to Philadelphia. While in Philadelphia, Ignatius was allowed to meet with a group of Christians in the city. Then the company of prisoners journeyed west to Smyrna (modern Izmir), on the Aegean coast, where Polycarp was bishop. Decades later as a very old man Polycarp would be martyred there.

In Smyrna, Ignatius received visitors from Christian communities in Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles, Greek-speaking cities in the western part of the peninsula. He also wrote a letter to the church in Rome to inform the Christians there that he was being taken to the capital under guard. Fearing that some might intervene on his behalf to have him freed, he urged them to let things run their course. "Grant me nothing more," he wrote, "than to be poured out as a libation to God while an altar is at hand."

Then the company traveled to Troas, near the Hellespont, where the waters of the Sea of Marmara flow into the Aegean. While in Troas he learned that the persecution in Antioch had ceased and "peace" was restored, but that did not win his release. Still, he was able to write letters to the churches in the cities he had just visited, to Philadelphia and Smyrna and also to his fellow bishop Polycarp. Next the tiny group made its way to Neapolis, the seaport of Philippi in Macedonia at the head of the Aegean Sea, where Ignatius again met with members of the Christian community. Finally the band of soldiers and prisoners headed westward via the

Egnatian Way to Dyrrhachium on the Adriatic coast (in modern-day Albania) to board a ship sailing to the eastern coast of Italy. From there they made their way overland to Rome.

This was no ordinary journey of no ordinary man. Even though Ignatius was shackled to one of his guards, his slow peregrination to Rome was a triumphal procession played out before Christians in Asia Minor and Greece. He was to become one of the most celebrated martyrs in the Church's early history. After the paucity of information about Christian leaders during the first generations (save Paul), Ignatius is the first major figure to come clearly into view. His letters reveal a man whose mind and heart were passionately devoted to Christ. His intense and fervid piety, his affecting witness, his florid images, and the evocative language of his prose have endeared him to later generations.

The power of his person is evident in his description of the journey. "I am fighting wild beasts from Syria to Rome, by land and sea, by night and day, bound to ten leopards. . . . By their mistreatment I become more of a disciple though 'not for that reason am I justified' (1 Corinthians 4:4). May I benefit from the wild beasts prepared for me, and I hope they will make short work of me. I shall even entice them to eat me up at once and not hold off. . . . ; and if they are reluctant, I shall force them. Indulge me; I know what is to my good; now I begin to be a disciple. Let nothing of things visible and invisible stand in the way of my reaching Christ. Let fire and cross, packs of wild beasts, the wrenching of bones, the mangling of limbs, the grinding of my whole body, cruel punishments of the devil on me—my only wish is to attain Jesus Christ." Someone who wrote this way is not easily forgotten.

Ignatius's vivid and flamboyant imagination was displayed in very public letters he had every reason to believe would be read aloud in the communities that received them and even preserved to be copied and read by others after his death. They display a studied awareness that the journey to his death offered an unparalleled opportunity to instruct and edify the churches. Again and again he urges his fellow Christians to look below the surface—someone in chains being led to almost certain death—to the deeper meaning of his trial. By his sufferings he wished to bear witness to the suffering of Christ, for he yearned "to die in union with Christ's passion."

His letters are valuable for another reason. They allow us a rare first-hand glimpse of the inner life of the Christian community as it was taking form at the beginning of the second century. The churches in Asia Minor were not isolated circles of believers existing independently of one another; they understood themselves to be part of a larger body bound together in a mysterious spiritual unity. Ignatius is the first to use the term "catholic church." This expression would grow in meaning as the centuries passed, but already it carried some of its later overtones, namely that the churches

formed an organic fellowship belonging to a single and undivided communion united to Christ. The sign of this unity was the person of the bishop. As Ignatius puts it in one of his letters: "Wherever the bishop is, there one finds the fellowship; just as wherever Jesus Christ is there is the catholic Church."

Christianity came into the world as a community, not a casual association of individual believers. How the internal life of the churches would be ordered was a matter of more than pragmatic arrangement. I deliberately use the word "ordered" rather than "organized," because in Christianity authority and governance are never simply a matter of function. Order implies a point of reference beyond itself. For the early Christians leadership was an affair not only of how things work or what is most efficient, but of the faithful transmission of the teaching of the apostles. There was a spiritual affinity between oversight and teaching, between leadership and divine authority, as the letter to the Hebrews has it: "Keep in mind those who have been placed over you who *spoke* to you the word of God" (Hebrews 13:7). The letters of Ignatius provide an occasion to look at the early stages of what would become a distinctive and enduring Christian "institution," the office of the bishop. In the early history of Christianity the bishops are often the central players.

In the first generation leadership rested on those who had been disciples of Christ during his lifetime and were witnesses of his resurrection. Authority was yoked to memory. The task of the first leaders was to preserve and transmit the teachings received from Jesus and the traditions about Jesus. In the first decades the two figures to whom the churches looked were Peter, the leader of the disciples during Jesus's lifetime, and James, the "brother" of Jesus. Even as charismatic and strong-willed a person as Paul was deferential to these "pillars" (Galatians 2:9) in Jerusalem. After his conversion he made a special trip to the holy city to ensure that his mission to the gentiles had the blessing of Peter and James.

New communities were, however, established not only in Palestine but also in Syria, in Asia Minor, in Greece, and even as far distant as Rome in Italy. The founders of these churches did not reside in their congregations. Paul was always on the move and kept in touch by letter, visiting the churches he founded only intermittently. He was not a resident pastor. In his absence (and after his death) many questions arose: Who would be responsible for handing on the traditions about Jesus? Who would oversee the affairs of the church? Who would lead the congregation in prayer and preside at the communal meal? Who would baptize converts? Who would deal with matters of discipline? In Corinth, a congregation Paul had founded, the community became divided as different persons vied for authority. Some said, "I belong to Apollos," and others, "I belong to Paul" (1 Corinthians 1:11-17).

Eventually the first missionaries had to allow the young communities to fend for themselves, and the Acts of the Apostles, written toward the end of the first century,

sheds some light on the transition from the first generation to the next. According to Acts, in his final visit to the church in Ephesus, Paul called together the "elders [*presbyteroi*] of the church" to bid them farewell and to ready them for the tasks that lay ahead. He urged them to continue the work he had begun: "Take heed to yourself and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [*episcopoi*] to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son" (Acts 20:28).

Note that the terms "elder" (*presbyter*) and "overseer" (*episcopos*) are used interchangeably. In time the term *episcopos* would become the Greek word for "bishop," and *presbyter* would become "priest," but at this stage the two terms were used without distinction for members of a council of elders. The invocation of the Holy Spirit implies not only that there was a process of selection but also a ritual for setting the elders apart for their distinctive service. Unlike ancient Israel, Christianity had no hereditary priesthood passed on in certain families. Among the Jews, only those belonging to the tribe of Levi could serve as priests in the temple in Jerusalem. In the Church the ministers had to be chosen from mature and able members of the congregation and invested with authority. From letters written toward the end of the first century we know that this took place through the "laying on of hands" (1 Timothy 4:14).

By the beginning of the second century, in some regions the system of elders had begun to give way to a single office, that of the bishop, who acted in concert with a council of presbyters. Ignatius is an early witness to what is called the *monoeπισκοπος*, one bishop as head of the local church. But it took some time for this way of ordering the Church's life to establish itself as the norm across the Christian world. In other regions, particularly in the larger cities, there was a constellation of small groups each with its own elders. In the course of the second century, however, the principle of one bishop for a city gradually took hold, and by the end of the century it had become almost universal.

The reasons were several. The single bishop was the sign of the unity of the Church. As Ignatius put it, there is one Eucharist, one altar, one cup, one Christ, and one bishop. There could be no liturgical celebration, no communal action, no public teaching except in fellowship with the bishop. Unlike the pagan priest whose function was chiefly ritualistic, the bishop was overseer of the community (hence the title *episcopos*) and teacher, as well as priest. He was responsible for the care of orphans, widows, and the poor. The bishop kept in touch with other bishops through correspondence, and later, as church-wide disputes arose, bishops came together (in what came to be called a synod or council) to resolve conflicts. Strong leadership was indispensable for unity and stability, even for survival. As the Church grew in numbers and influence the bishop became the public face of the Christian community. In the office of bishop we can discern the beginning of a kind of constitution for the

Church as a distinct society with its own form of governance. As the churches began to lay down rules on matters such as admission, liturgical practices, and discipline, the bishop was charged with seeing that rules that governed the Church's life were carried out. Because the office conferred a status that transcended his person and abilities, the love and affection of the faithful came to rest on the figure of the bishop.

Of course the bishop was assisted by the presbyters and deacons. In a rhetorical flourish Ignatius writes: "Let the bishop preside in God's place, and the presbyters take the place of the apostolic council, and let the deacons (my special favorites) be entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ." Over time the offices of presbyter and deacon were defined more precisely. In the absence of the bishop, presbyters consecrated the Eucharist, preached, and baptized; the deacons served at the altar, read the gospel in worship, and cared for poor and needy, the aged and infirm, and widows. By the third century other minor "offices" had come into being, lector (reader in the liturgy), subdeacon, acolyte (servers at the altar), exorcist, doorkeeper, but there was a distinct hierarchy and the bishop was the acknowledged head of the community. Order requires hierarchy, a truth that Shakespeare put well in *Titus Andronicus*: "Take degree away, untune that string, and hark! What discord follows."

A principal responsibility of the bishop was to "offer the gifts"—that is, to preside at the celebration of Eucharist. A second was to receive new members into the community through baptism. It is not "permissible," said Ignatius, "either to baptize or celebrate the 'love feast' apart from the bishop."

The word "baptism" comes from a Greek term meaning to immerse in water, and in Christianity baptism designates a solemn washing with water. Ritual cleansings with water were practiced in Judaism, such as washing one's hands before eating, the high priest bathing his body before entering the Holy of Holies, women bathing after menstruation. But Christian baptism has its origin in the practice of John the Baptist, who immersed in water those who responded to his proclamation of the kingdom of God. Jesus was also baptized by John, and the gospels give his baptism a prominent place in his life. They do not, however, tell us why Jesus was baptized, and this caused some puzzlement in the early Church. In the account in the Gospel of Matthew, for example, John at first refuses to baptize Jesus and only relents after Jesus says that it was necessary "to fulfill all righteousness," apparently meaning that his baptism is part of God's plan. Whatever the reason, Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River became the model for Christian baptism. In the words of Ignatius, "Christ submitted to baptism so that by his passion he might sanctify the water."

Christian baptism differed from traditional ritual washings in Judaism in two ways. First, one did not perform it on oneself; baptism was administered by someone else. Second, it was done only once, although in the third century there was a dis-

pute over whether someone who had been baptized in a schismatic group should be rebaptized on being received into the catholic Church. Baptism was the ritual by which one entered the Church, the way "we dedicated ourselves to God when we were made new through Christ," as one early writer put it.

We cannot be certain what words were used for the rite of baptism in the early decades. It is possible that some baptized "in the name of the Lord Jesus," but the formula that became standard was this: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." As for the method, baptism was always by full immersion in water, not sprinkling or pouring. Later, when Christians began building receptacles to hold the baptismal water they constructed good-sized pools with steps on either end so one could go down into the water at one end and exit on the other.

The person to be baptized went down into the water unclothed and, while in the water, was asked three questions. "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?" "Do you believe in Christ Jesus the Son of God?" "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the holy Church?" After each question, he or she answered, "I believe," and was fully immersed. After coming up from the water those who had just been baptized were anointed with oil and the bishop laid hands on them as he prayed: "Lord God, you have made them worthy to deserve the remission of sins through the washing of regeneration; make them worthy to be filled with the Holy Spirit, send your grace upon them that they may serve you in accordance with your will; for to you is glory, to the Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit in the holy Church both now and to the ages of ages. Amen." Baptism was a rebirth, the beginning of a new life.

Christians also celebrated a communal meal called the Eucharist or the Sacrifice. The Eucharist had its origins in the Last Supper, the meal that Jesus celebrated with his closest disciples the night before he died. In the early decades it took the form of a meal with eating and drinking and concluded with the blessing of bread and wine. By the end of the first century a ritual meal had begun to be celebrated separately, though at one place Ignatius refers to the "love feast," by which he apparently meant a meal followed by the blessing of the bread and the cup.

The words spoken over the bread and wine were taken from the accounts of the Last Supper in the gospels. The precise form varied but it was similar to what Paul handed on in his first letter to the Corinthians. "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:23-27).

By the second century the blessing of bread and wine had become part of a service that included readings from the Scriptures interspersed with psalms or canticles. The readings were followed by a homily or sermon in which the bishop explained and interpreted what had been read and applied it to the lives of the faithful. After the exposition of the reading, the congregation offered prayers for their needs and the needs of others and greeted each other with a kiss.

Then bread and wine and water were brought forth. We are not certain as to why water was included, but the practice of adding water to the wine was widespread. In the third century a Christian bishop insisted that the practice went back to the apostles. The bishop took the bread and wine mixed with water and offered thanksgiving "to the Father of the universe through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

In Greek the term for "thanksgiving" is *eucharistia*, hence the popularity of the word Eucharist for the principal service of Christian worship. In the early years the prayer over the gifts was extempore, but over time it was written down and took a fixed form. *The Apostolic Tradition*, an early "church order"—a collection of directives on liturgy and administration—gives us the words of a prayer used most likely in Rome in the third century.

We give thanks to you God, through your beloved child Jesus Christ, whom in the last times, you sent to us as savior and redeemer and angel of your will, who is your inseparable Word through whom you made all things and who was well pleasing to you. When he was handed over to voluntary suffering, in order to dissolve death and break the chains of the devil . . . he took bread and giving thanks to you he said; take, eat, this is my body which will be broken for you. Likewise with the cup saying: this is my blood which is poured out for you. Whenever you do this, you make me present among you. Remembering therefore his death and resurrection, we offer you this bread and cup, giving thanks to you because you have held us worthy to stand before you and minister to you as priest. . . .

As this prayer makes clear, the Eucharist was understood to be an offering, and what was offered were not simply words of thanksgiving and praise but the consecrated bread and cup. Already in the New Testament, Saint Paul drew an analogy between the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper and the sacrifices in the Jewish temple and pagan sacrifices (1 Corinthians 10:14–22). Ignatius calls the table on which the bread and wine were offered an "altar," a term that implies sacrifice. Two generations later, in commenting on a passage from the prophet Malachi—"In every place incense shall be offered to my name and a pure sacrifice (Malachi 1:11)"—Justin Martyr, an early Christian philosopher, said that here the term "sacrifice" refers to "the sacrifices which are offered to God by us gentiles, that is the

bread of the Eucharist and likewise the cup of the Eucharist." Accordingly "sacrifice" or "the sacrifice" was used to designate the Eucharist.

In the ancient world religious worship without sacrifice was inconceivable, and the most esteemed form of sacrifice was the roasting and eating of an animal. This was as true of the Jews as of the Greeks or the Romans. The Scriptures are filled with sacrificial language, and the book of Hebrews presents the death of Christ as a sacrifice. "[Christ] entered once for all into the Holy place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12). When Christ blessed the cup he spoke of the "blood of the covenant" (Mark 14:24), and Paul called the cup "communion with the blood of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:16), implying sacrifice.

The term "sacrifice" comes from the Latin, *sacrificium*, "to make something holy," that is, to set it apart from common usage and offer it to God. Many things could be offered—grain, wine, honey, flowers, cheese, fruit, milk—but the highest form of sacrifice was the killing and roasting of an animal. In contrast to grain or wine, an animal was a living thing and its blood carried the principle of life. In the sacrifice, after the animal was roasted, its vital parts—those that gave life, the heart, liver, kidneys—were offered to the gods, and the other parts were consumed by the people.

The Christian sacrifice differed, however, from pagan sacrifices in one very significant way. It did not involve the actual killing of an animal. In the language of the ancient Christian liturgies, it was an "unbloody sacrifice," meaning no blood was shed. But it was a sacrifice nonetheless, because it celebrated Christ's death, in which blood was shed. Hence Christians believed that in eating the consecrated bread and wine they were eating the "flesh and blood" of Christ. "The Eucharist is the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ who suffered for us," wrote Ignatius. In the blessing of bread and wine the Church offered to God what it had first received, the Christ who had come into the world to offer his life for sin. Through eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ, Christians believed they had communion with the living Christ.

The early Church was a community with a distinct anatomy; it was not simply an aggregate of individuals who believed the same things. Of course Christianity was also defined by its beliefs. Outside observers knew that a unique feature of the Church was, as a Roman governor put it at the beginning of the second century, that Christians worshiped Christ—a human being—as "god." But to be baptized meant becoming part of a society within society with its own rituals and rules, governance and discipline. The office of the bishop, baptism, and the Eucharist gave shape to the community. There would be other things, such as creeds, fixed formulations of Christian belief, and a collection of authoritative writings, a Chris-

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tian sacred Scripture. But I single out these three at the beginning to stress that what set Christianity apart was not simply its beliefs but also the architecture of its communal life. At this stage the Church as a corporate body was relatively invisible to the larger society, but within its life it moved to the rhythms of a well-ordered and purposeful fellowship, a Christian "commonwealth," as one early writer put it. This hardly meant the churches were free of controversy. Now it is time to turn from the somewhat benign portrait of Christian life sketched in this chapter to several of the disputes that divided Christians in the second century.