

## Chapter 1

# Jesus and Christian Beginnings

*(First to Fourth Centuries)*

There is no evidence that either Jesus or his disciples wrote anything about him and their shared activities during his lifetime. Even if Jesus' followers had written something, they could not have composed those Jesus books called "gospels." As confessional documents, the four earliest gospels presuppose a "faith perception" that even Jesus' closest associates seemingly lacked until their professed experiences of the living Jesus after his crucifixion and resurrection. Only then did they receive Jesus with conviction as "the messiah" and "the Son of God" and confer on him many other honorific names, and begin proclaiming the message of what God had accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus the Jew belonged to no sect. But after his life, death and resurrection, his movement became a Jewish sect alongside such groups as the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. What distinguished this new community, centered in but probably not confined to Jerusalem, was its commitment to Jesus as God's messiah in fulfillment of promises made of old to Israel. But forty years would pass before Jesus' followers began writing narratives about him, sometime ca. 70 CE. By then, the story of Jesus was no longer confined to the land of Israel. The oral tradition of Jesus' words and deeds was no longer passed on solely in Aramaic, but had been translated into Greek. Just as Jesus came to be called "Christ" so the tellers of his story came to be called "Christians." This first occurred in Syrian Antioch, according to one source



(Acts 11:26). However, the gospels, which narrate Jesus' story, would not represent the earliest writings of the Christian movement.<sup>2</sup>

### *A Strange Case: Paul and his Letters*

Paul, a Jew from the diaspora, possibly from Tarsus in Cilicia, had in all probability not known Jesus during the latter's lifetime. How strange! In fact, Paul had become a persecutor of "the church of God" when he experienced from God a transcendent "revelation of Jesus Christ" and received God's call to announce "good news," not to his own people the Jews but as "an apostle," to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:11–17). There followed three decades of Paul's itinerant activity around the northeastern region of the Mediterranean – from Damascus to Antioch, from Ephesus to Corinth, and finally to Rome, where he was most likely executed during the rule of Nero (mid-60s CE).

Paul's success in creating small communities of believers among the Gentiles necessitated his continuing oversight of these groups, which he exercised through revisits and an extensive correspondence. Thirteen letters attributed to him eventually found their way into the New Testament – nearly half of the writings in the twenty-seven-book collection. Biblical scholarship today considers a core of seven letters, all written in the decade of the 50s CE, as being undisputedly from Paul (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon). Three letters are often disputed (2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians). Three are nearly universally considered not to be by Paul (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus). However, all thirteen can be plotted along a "Pauline trajectory" extending from the 50s CE into the second century. My comments on the letters are here confined primarily to the undisputed seven.

Paul's letters were not written as missionary tracts for unbelievers but as pastoral directives to his own struggling communities, although his letter to the Romans was addressed to a congregation he had neither founded nor yet visited. As a letter of self-introduction, Romans represents the longest, most systematic,



and for later generations theologically the most influential of all his letters. Along the way, many future Christians would be introduced to Jesus through the words of Paul.

Although Paul's correspondence reflects the traditional literary form of Greco-Roman letters, he adapted the form for his apostolic purposes. Paul characteristically greets his recipients with: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He concludes his letters with benedictions that, in one letter, are expressed in a threefold formula: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor. 13:14). Paul's most frequently used titles for Jesus are "Christ" and "Lord." His identification of God as "Father" also serves notice that he understood Jesus to be God's "Son," although he uses this title less frequently (Gal. 1:16). These brief excerpts make the point: Paul does not grapple with the specific issues related to the later debates that resulted in the doctrine of the Trinity, but he certainly has the theological vocabulary: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Paul's claimed apostolic authority came from the resurrected Christ (Gal. 1:1). His preaching centered on the crucified Jesus (1 Cor. 2:2). His letters presuppose and invoke the crucified and living Christ until he returns (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:51–8). However, Paul learned details about Jesus as a historical figure from others, including Peter, whether in Jerusalem or elsewhere. Jesus was human and a Jew (Rom. 5:15, 9:5). Jesus had been born of a woman under the law (Gal. 4:4). Jesus also had brothers, one of whom was named James (1 Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19). Presumably, Jesus had twelve disciples (1 Cor. 15:5). On three occasions, Paul indicates knowledge of Jesus' teachings by citing sayings without directly quoting them (1 Cor. 7:10–11, 9:14; 1 Thess. 4:15–17). Paul also reports Jesus' words at the Last Supper over bread and wine – the earliest written account of the communal ritual later known as the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:23–6).

Within Paul's letters are also various expressions of presumably pre-Pauline traditions related to other liturgical practices of the early church. First, there is an invocation in Aramaic, which has been transliterated into Greek letters: *marana tha* "Our Lord, come!" (1 Cor. 16:22) Secondly, there is a confessional formula in

Greek: *kyrios Iēsous*, “Jesus [is] Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:9). Thirdly, there is an ancient hymn about Jesus’ humiliation and exaltation, in six stanzas of three lines each, into which Paul has probably inserted at the end of the third stanza these words: “even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6–11). Fourthly, there is a credal formula that Paul had received, expanded, and passed on to the Corinthians identifying what was to him of utmost importance: “that Christ died ... that he was buried ... that he was raised ... that he appeared ...” (1 Cor. 15:3–5).

Paul’s letters give explicit confirmation that he was the authority over the congregations he had called together as “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27). Women play significant roles (Rom. 16:1, 3, 6, etc.). Paul can, and does, order the expulsion of a man for immorality from the community at Corinth (1 Cor. 5:1–8). However, the authority within his congregations appears to be based on a charismatic model of personal gifts rather than on a hierarchical model of specific offices (1 Cor. 12–14). But he does address one letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus ... with the bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). By the mid-second century, when the three pseudonymous letters of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus were probably written, churches had offices designated as bishops, elders, and deacons with women expressly subordinated (1 Tim. 2:8–3:16; Titus 1:5–9).

### *Anonymous Narratives: Three Gospels and One Sequel*

As we have seen, Paul’s letters grew out of his mission to preach the “good news” about what God the Father was doing through the Lord Jesus Christ. The salvation offered first to the Jews was now available to the Gentiles – to all who receive Jesus Christ by faith. Paul’s mission and message presupposed a Jesus story. But in his occasional writings there are only glimpses of a back story to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

However, with the gospels included in the New Testament, we finally get narratives about Jesus and his story – or stories. Each author uses available tradition, some oral and some written, to fashion a Jesus story appropriate for the interests and needs of



that community. By contrast to the letters of Paul, the canonical gospels are anonymous documents. Not one writer identifies himself by name. The titles by which they are known today were added in the second century when they were collected together, to distinguish them from one another (“according to Mark,” etc.). The chronological parameters of their composition are 65 to 100 CE. Furthermore, the specific places and circumstances of composition are not divulged. These are indeed Jesus-books, with Jesus himself front and center. Implicit in these narrative gospels is the recognition that Jesus beckons the reader through his words and his deeds to journey with him. Nonetheless, like the letters of Paul, the gospels themselves are theological statements. They are narrative theologues. The structure and the content communicate the Christological distinctiveness of each narrative. Structure and content also provide clues about those for whom each gospel was first written.

The Gospel of Mark, the shortest and earliest of the four (according to the dominant view of modern biblical scholarship) focuses on Jesus’ activity as an adult. After baptism and testing, Jesus begins proclaiming the coming kingdom of God and performing mighty works in Galilee (chs. 1–9), followed by a brief journey (ch. 10) that takes him to Jerusalem, where he experiences crucifixion (chs. 11–15). Along the way, there is a discourse of parables in Galilee (ch. 4) and in Jerusalem a discourse of sayings about the end-time (ch. 13). Throughout the gospel, there is an enigmatic secrecy about Jesus’ messianic identity involving his presumed self-designation as “the Son of Man” that extends to the brief resurrection account, which originally ended abruptly with an empty tomb to which post-resurrection appearances were subsequently added (16:1–8, 9–20). Increasingly, Jesus becomes alienated and rejected by family and foe; and he begins talking cryptically to his disciples about his impending death and resurrection (8:31, 9:31, 10:32–4). As Jesus hangs dying on the cross, he cries to God with an exclamation of abandonment (15:34, cf. Ps. 22:1) to which the Roman centurion responds, “Truly, this man was the Son of God” (25:39). As this soldier recognizes, Mark’s Jesus is indeed the Christ, the crucified Christ, the Son of God. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ divine sonship is defined in terms of his obedient suffering and death. Theologically, the Jesus in Mark’s



narrative presentation corresponds closely to the Jesus of Paul's letters, given their shared focus on the crucifixion and resurrection.

On the horizon for the readers of this gospel appear the desecration of the Jerusalem temple (13:14) and the imminence of Jesus' eschatological coming as the "Son of Man" (13:26, cf. Dan. 7:13). This gospel represents a call for its community to follow Jesus unto death with the attendant promise that faithfulness will bring salvation (13:13). The emphasis in the gospel on suffering messiahship and suffering discipleship suggests a work having originated out of a situation of suffering such as occurred during the first Jewish revolt against the Romans and the persecution of Christian believers in the city of Rome by the Emperor Nero during the decade of the 60s.

The Gospel of Matthew derives its narrative framework for the Jesus story from Mark, and Jesus again undertakes only one journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (chs. 19–20). However, there are significant literary additions and modifications. The author of Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy and infancy stories (chs. 1–2) and concludes his gospel with stories related to the resurrection of Jesus (ch. 28). On a mountain in Galilee, Jesus affirms the divine authority given to him, commissions his eleven surviving disciples to make disciples of all nations by baptizing them and by teaching them, and finally promises to be with them until the close of the age (28:16–20). Interestingly, the baptism is to be performed with a three-part formula: "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This was the formula that became associated with the baptismal rite by which initiates received Christ. Equally interesting is the subject of the teaching: "all that I have commanded you." The body of the gospel itself has been organized into five blocks of Jesus' teachings, reminiscent of the five books of the Jewish Torah, each with its own theme: the higher righteousness (chs. 5–7); discipleship (ch. 10); secrets of the kingdom (ch. 13; cf. Mark 4); the church (ch. 18); and the end of the age (chs. 24–5; cf. Mark 13). These teachings, especially the so-called Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5–7), became of abiding importance as followers of Jesus acted out their reception of him as the Christ by imitating him – the theme of the *imitatio Christi*.



The Gospel of Matthew recalls Jewish manuals intended for instruction, such as the Manual of Discipline, among the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran, or the rabbinic Mishnah, promulgated several decades after the second Jewish revolt against Rome during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian (132–5). I view the Gospel of Matthew as a similar guidebook that gives instruction in Jesus' own words. Themes and emphases in Matthew suggest that this Jesus book was written for a community of Jewish believers in Jesus as the Christ, the teaching Christ, who is also the crucified Son of God (Matt 27:45–54).

The Gospel of Luke also uses the Gospel of Mark as the literary source for its narrative framework and perhaps acknowledges this in the formal prologue (1:1–4). In Luke, Jesus also takes one journey from Galilee to Jerusalem; but it seems that he will never arrive because of the greatly expanded travel narrative (chs. 9–19), seemingly through the territory of Samaria (9:51–6, 10:28–37, 17:11–19). Like Matthew, Luke has also prefaced his story with infancy accounts, although very different traditions (chs. 1–2). Also like Matthew, he has augmented his narrative with resurrection-appearance stories – but with different stories located in and around Jerusalem, not Galilee (ch. 24). Throughout the gospel appear stories and sayings – particularly parables – that indicate Jesus' concern for representatives of the diverse society of his day: not just outcasts (poor people, women, tax collectors, Samaritans), but also insiders (Pharisees) and outsiders (Gentiles). In Luke, Jesus appears as the universal Christ of God (9:20) who has been crucified as an innocent man (23:15–16, 22, 47).

However, this writer does not stop there. Where the first volume ends the second volume begins – with the ascension of Jesus into heaven outside Jerusalem (Luke 24:50–2; Acts 1:1–11). The book of Acts narrates the story of Jesus' subsequent reception, as the proclamation of him as Christ and Lord was carried from the center of the Jewish world to the center of the Gentile world, from Jerusalem (ch. 1) and eventually to Rome (ch. 28). The mission to the Gentiles is anchored in the leadership of the twelve apostles, with Peter running the first leg (chs. 1–12) and Paul receiving the baton for the final, more difficult, leg (chs. 13–28). That which empowers the outreach to Gentiles is that which





provides thematic unity throughout Luke and Acts: the Holy Spirit. (Luke 1:15, 35, 67, 2:26, 3:16, 22, 4:1, 14, 18, 9:20, 23:46; Acts 1:8, 2:4, 10:44, 11:16, 19:6, 28:25). In Acts, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues provide evidence that the recipients have indeed received Jesus.

Both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are addressed to one bearing the Greek name Theophilus (“God-lover”) – whether an individual or any “God-lover,” Jew or Gentile. I view the context of both works to be the Christian mission to Gentiles. They also reflect a political apologetic on behalf of Jesus’ innocence before the governmental authorities and take a swipe at the Jews who harass Paul every step of the way.

Unlike Paul’s writings, these books are not letters. However, within their narratives about Jesus also appears the language evident in the letters of Paul that would be used years later to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### *An Author Called John: A Fourth Gospel, More Letters, and an Apocalypse*

Among the four gospels, the Gospel of John was the last to be written and is the odd gospel out. I have already sketched differences between the earlier Synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel. Now I will elaborate more on the distinctiveness of John’s story of Jesus.

First, there is the distinctiveness of John’s theological and chronological framing of the Jesus story. John opens with a prologue whose words recall the opening of the book of Genesis: “In the beginning was the Word ... And the Word became flesh ...” (1:1–18). The pre-existent Word has become incarnate as a human in Jesus; and confirmation that Jesus as a human has died comes from the piercing of his side and the resulting flow of blood and water as he hangs on the cross (19:34). The story of Jesus’ public activity extends over three years insofar as three Passovers are mentioned (2:12, 6:4, 12:1), and Jesus makes at least four trips from Galilee to Jerusalem (chs. 2, 5, 7, 12).

Secondly, John’s characterization of Jesus is distinctive. As the incarnate Word, Jesus talks both publicly and privately about





himself through a series of sayings that begin with “I am ...” (6:35, 48, 8:12, 9:5, 10:7, 11, 14, 11:25, 14:6, 15:1), much like God talks in the Jewish scriptures (Isa. 40–55). These sayings are woven into larger discourses, and the central theme becomes “eternal life” (3:16) or simply “life,” as expressed in the gospel’s statement of purpose (20:30–1). Also, as the incarnate Word, Jesus punctuates his talk with references to God as Father, to himself as the Son, and – in the so-called farewell discourses (chs. 13–17) – to the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete (variously translated into English as “Comforter,” “Counselor,” “Advocate”). Jesus also promises that after his return to the Father, the Holy Spirit will come, which does occur on the evening of the resurrection (20:19–23). By contrast to the eschatological perspectives in the authentic letters of Paul and in the Synoptics, the Gospel of John does not anticipate a future coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The distinctiveness of John’s characterization of Jesus is further thrown into relief with the observation that the Jesus figure in John’s Gospel talks more like the author(s) of the three letters attributed to John, especially 1 John, than he talks like the Jesus of the Synoptics. Furthermore, in spite of great differences between the Gospel of John and the Revelation to John, the latter contains one of the best-known “I am” sayings. Both God and the exalted Jesus declare, “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 1:8 and 22:13). Perhaps the Fourth Gospel, by contrast to the three Synoptics, originated out of the experiences of a charismatic community to whom Jesus as the Word become flesh continued to speak after his exaltation through Christian prophets in the first person just as, in the past, God had spoken through prophets to Israel: “I am ... .” John’s community seems to live at a juncture between its synagogue past (John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2) and the threat of those who deny Jesus’ having come in flesh and blood (1 John 4:2–3, 5:6).

The New Testament today includes five writings which bear the name of John: the gospel, three letters, and the book that concludes not only the New Testament but the entire Bible. The book at the end appears to be all about the end: Revelation is the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament. Its author has drunk deeply from the well of apocalyptic imagery and symbolism, especially from the books of Daniel and Ezekiel. The book of Revelation



itself reflects a well-delineated literary structure: an introduction (ch. 1); the body (2:1–22:5) and a conclusion (22:6–21).

The introduction (ch. 1) immediately establishes the imminence of the events to be revealed by God through Jesus Christ and his angel with such words as “soon” and “near.” Up front, Jesus Christ is described as a “faithful witness” (Greek, *martyr*). Details follow about the book’s socio-historical origin: written by a man named John, but not identified as the disciple son of Zebedee; written for seven churches in the Roman province of Asia; written on the isle of Patmos, where John himself was suffering exile; and written to exhort its readers and hearers to remain faithful through their present and coming sufferings.

The conclusion (22:6–21) reiterates the imminence of the events outlined in the book with a litany of declarations and invocations: “soon,” “soon,” “near,” “soon,” “come,” “come,” “come” “soon,” “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” That this book was intended for its first-century readers is made certain by the words spoken to John: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near” (22:10).

The body (2:1–22:5) opens with personalized letters from the exalted Jesus addressed to each of the seven churches, which assess the spiritual state of each particular church. There follows a long series of dramatic visions, which assess the state of the world at large. As the story unfolds, the visualization cuts back and forth from heaven to earth. Transcendent figures appear in heaven: God, seated on a throne; Jesus, standing as a slain lamb; the Spirit, having transported John to heaven. Three awful beasts dominate the earth: a great red dragon identified as the Devil, Satan, and ancient serpent; a beast from the sea that defies any known zoological category, which functions politically; and a beast from the land with two horns like a lamb and a voice like a dragon, which functions religiously. At last, a reckoning occurs that includes a first resurrection of martyrs, a stated thousand-year period (the millennium), and a second resurrection of all the dead for final judgment. Along the way, all the dominators and their legions are defeated. A new heaven and a new earth appear. God and the Lamb, martyrs and other faithful ones, are triumphant. Go(o)d wins. (D)evil loses. Christ reigns.



Although I have not commented on all twenty-seven writings in the New Testament, I have considered those most prominent in the reception of Jesus over the subsequent 2,000 years. The letters of Paul will be of greatest interest to those wanting to understand the meaning of Jesus' death. The Synoptic Gospels will be of greatest interest to those whose focus is the shape and events of Jesus' life. The Fourth Gospel will be of greatest interest to those sorting out both the relationship of the pre-existent Word to God and the inter-relationship among God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The book of Revelation, of course, will beckon those concerned about the threat and the promise of Jesus' future coming.

### *Christianity's Earliest Writings: Literary Diversity, Theological Unity*

The twenty-seven writings ultimately included in the New Testament represent several literary genres. In part because of this literary diversity, these writings represent a variety of perspectives on how Jesus was received and portrayed in the earliest Christian literature. However, beneath this diversity lies a basic theological unity: Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

But more than this, the letters of Paul, the four gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, the book of Acts, and the book of Revelation share two basic assumptions: first, that Jesus as the Christ was the fulfillment of promises made by the God of Israel as attested in the Jewish scriptures; and secondly, that Jesus as the Christ of God was a human being who died by crucifixion and was resurrected by God from the dead. These points of unity may sound commonplace, but their significance appears when they are compared to other ancient writings that also testify to Jesus as one from God.

### *Christianity's Transformation: From a Jewish Sect to a Gentile Religion*

The movement initiated by Jesus the Jew during his lifetime continued after his death as a Jewish sect alongside other Jewish





groups such as the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. But within a few years of Jesus' death, the Jesus movement – with its missionary mandate – had established itself in the broader Greco-Roman world beyond the Jewish homeland. The diaspora Jew named Paul became the most important figure in taking the “gospel” about the Lord Jesus Christ to Gentiles. His letters, as well as all the earliest Christian writings, so far as we know, were written in the common Greek language of the eastern Mediterranean region.

By the end of the first century, Christianity was well on its way toward a separation from Judaism as an overwhelmingly Gentile religion within the Roman empire. Two events facilitated this transformation of the Jesus movement from being a Jewish sect toward becoming a world religion. The first event happened within the movement. The second involved the world at large.

The first event, occurring ca. 49 CE, involved Paul and leaders of the Jerusalem church, including Peter: the so-called “Jerusalem conference” (Gal. 2 and Acts 15). Although the two written accounts differ in their details, both agree on the central question discussed and the answer given. The question: must Gentile converts be circumcised? Or, more profoundly: must Gentiles become Jews in order to become people of God through Jesus Christ? The answer: No! With a handshake, the theological basis for the independence of the Gentile churches from Judaism had already been established.

The second event, in 70 CE, was the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple to the Roman legions under Titus, which effectively ended the first Jewish revolt. In later decades, there followed an uprising of Jews in the diaspora centered in Alexandria in Egypt (115–17), and a second revolt of Jews in Judea under the leadership of the messianic claimant Simon Bar Kochba (132–5). Judaism had been forever changed.

The transition had begun from Second Temple Judaism, with priesthood and sacrifice, toward a rabbinic Judaism centered in Torah that resulted in the codification of the Mishnah and the development of the Talmud, the one Palestinian, the other Babylonian. After the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple, the Sadducean and the Essene sects soon passed from the pages of history. The former had been closely associated with the



priesthood and had obvious ties to the temple. The latter, presumably represented by those who lived at Qumran in the Judean wilderness, had experienced the destruction of their settlement after depositing their scrolls in the caves of the Judean wilderness. The Jesus community itself, once located in Jerusalem, was increasingly marginalized among their fellow Jews and fled from that city. The future of Judaism rested with the Pharisees and their scribes. The future of Christianity lay with the churches among the Gentiles.

However, Jewish Christianity itself did not immediately disappear. Christian writers of the second to the fifth centuries refer on occasion to gospels used by Jews who considered themselves to be Christians. These Jewish-Christian gospels are identified by name as the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospel of the Ebionites, and the Gospel of the Nazoreans.<sup>3</sup> However, no extant copies exist, so it is difficult to understand precisely how Jesus was presented in these works, although snippets of some texts correspond to stories or sayings known from other gospels. These Jewish-Christian gospels repeatedly mention John the Baptist; and two describe the scene of Jesus' baptism where the Holy Spirit descends upon him and a voice declares him to be God's "Son." Other episodes involve the call of disciples beside the Sea of Tiberias, the healing of a man with a crippled hand, and the story of a rich man commanded to sell all and give to the poor. The most distinctive theme occurs in the fragments from the Gospel of the Hebrews, where the Holy Spirit is repeatedly described by Jesus as "my mother."

The earliest references to Christianity and Jesus from outside Christian circles appear near the end of the first and at the beginning of the second century. The earliest reference from a Jew comes from the historian Flavius Josephus (37–100). He was writing from Rome under the patronage of the Flavian emperors: Vespasian (69–79), Titus (79–81), and Domitian (81–96). Josephus himself had participated in the first Jewish revolt against Rome by leading Jewish forces in Galilee. He defected and became an interpreter for the Roman general Titus, the son and successor of Vespasian, during the siege and subsequent destruction of Jerusalem (70 CE).





After the war, Josephus settled in Rome and wrote two important histories explaining Jews and Judaism to Greco-Roman audiences: *The Jewish War* and the *Antiquities of the Jews*. The latter work, a sweeping chronicle of the Jewish people, contains two passages that seemingly mention Jesus. I say “seemingly” because Josephus’ writings were preserved by Christian scribes, who probably inserted or modified the two references to Jesus, who is acknowledged to be the Christ (*Antiquities* 18:63–4 and 20:200). The first passage reads like a miniature gospel insofar as Jesus is described as a “wise man” and “a teacher,” who performed wondrous deeds. Jesus is also identified by the narrator as “the Christ,” who was condemned to crucifixion by Pilate at the instigation of the Jewish leaders, but subsequently was raised from the dead. In the second passage, the narrator describes and deplors how the Jewish leaders had killed “James ... the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

The earliest perspectives on how Romans themselves viewed Christians and Jesus come from three writers who had served emperors in various capacities: Suetonius (d. ca. 122), Tacitus (d. ca. 117), and Pliny the Younger (d. ca. 113).

In his history of *The Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius comments on the reign of the Emperor Claudius (41–54) and notes how Claudius had expelled Jews from Rome because of disturbances involving “Chrestus,” probably a Latin variant of *Christos*.<sup>5</sup> In his *Annals*, Tacitus demonstrates the cruelty of the Emperor Nero (54–68) by graphically describing how Christians, blamed for the great fire in Rome, had been fed to the dogs, or crucified, or torched alive. Although Tacitus acknowledges the guilt of Christians, he matter-of-factly connects them with a Jesus who had been executed during Tiberius’ reign by Pontius Pilate the governor of Judea).<sup>6</sup>

A third Roman voice is heard through a letter from Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan (98–117). While governor of the province of Pontus and Bithynia, in what is now northern Turkey, Pliny wrote to Trajan asking for advice on how to deal with Christians who refused to participate in the public honors accorded the emperor, but who customarily came together to “share a meal” and “to sing a hymn to Christ as if to a god.”<sup>7</sup> Here, through the eyes of a Roman official, we see what we have already learned





about Christian worship from its earliest beginnings. A meal was integral to worship (1 Cor. 11:17–26). Hymns were also sung celebrating Jesus as a mediator between heaven and earth (cf. Phil. 2:6–11 and Col. 1:15–20).

All three Roman writers describe Christianity as a *superstitio* (superstition) – a group whose beliefs and practices were considered by the Romans to be alien and strange. Since Christians lived throughout the empire as “the Other,” here was trouble waiting to happen. Like the Jews before them, Gentile Christians set themselves apart from their neighbors and were accused of being “human-haters” (Greek: *misanthrōpoi*). Also like Jews, Christians professed an exclusive belief in the oneness of God, so they were also called “atheists” (Greek: *atheoi*) for not supporting the public piety of Rome by honoring emperors and the traditional pagan deities. Christians also had their own peculiar public relations problems, facing accusations of practicing magic, cannibalism, and sexual immorality.<sup>8</sup>

Two of the most penetrating and far-ranging intellectual challenges to Christians and Christianity in the second and third centuries came from the writings of Celsus and Porphyry. Both were philosophers in the Platonic tradition. Both were familiar with Christian literature, including the scriptures.

Celsus wrote his critique, *The True Word* or the *True Doctrine*, sometime in the 170s CE.<sup>9</sup> This work itself has not survived; however, much has been reconstructed based on the expansive rebuttal titled *Against Celsus* by the theologian and scholar Origen (185–ca. 254). At the center of Celsus’ characterization of Jesus lies the claim that Jesus himself concocted the tale of his virgin birth to cover up his illegitimacy, and that he fled to Egypt, where he learned the magical arts; upon his return, he declared himself to be “Son of God.” But in fact, Jesus was “a magician” whose followers continued practicing magic after his death. By contrast, Porphyry (233–304) – known for his polemical treatise *Against the Christians* – reached a more appreciative assessment of Jesus himself.<sup>10</sup> He characterized Jesus as one of those “pious” men who encouraged his followers to worship the supreme One. It was Jesus’ followers who later claimed that Jesus was the “Son of God” and the “Word” through whom all things were made (cf. John 1).



## Emerging Christianity: A “Catholic” Church

As Christianity established itself in the wider Greco-Roman world, the diversity evident in the first century became even greater. Both the expansion and diversification resulted in an “explosion” of literature. However, Gentile Christians continued to define themselves in relation to Judaism and to address concerns raised by the encounter with pagan religion and culture.

In relation to Judaism, Christian writers increasingly expressed a theological anti-Judaism that prepared the way for a de-Judaizing of Jesus. Collections of texts from the Jewish scriptures were used both to support the Christological claims about Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises and to establish that the Jews, responsible for the death of Jesus, had always been a “stiff-necked people” (Exod. 33:5). This so-called *adversus Judaeos* tradition, anticipated in the gospels themselves, expressed itself through the epistle of Barnabas and the writings of such theologians as Justin Martyr (ca. 100–65) and Tertullian (ca. 160–240), and continued virtually unabated into later generations.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, Christians began to speak to power in defense of Christianity – even to Roman emperors. Justin Martyr and Tertullian were also among these apologists.<sup>12</sup> Justin, who was a native of Neapolis in Samaria and became at mid-century a resident of Rome, addressed his *First Apology* to the emperor Antoninus Pius (138–61). Therein he expounds on the divine Word (Logos) incarnate in Jesus and defends the virgin birth, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ. Tertullian was born in Carthage in North Africa, and studied the law in Rome before returning to Carthage. He has been called the “father of Latin theology,” as the first prominent thinker to write in Latin rather than Greek. He receives credit for being the first writer to use the word *trinitas* for the triune God and for introducing the concept of *persona*, or person, into Trinitarian thought. His *Apology*, which appeared around the year 197, addresses the rulers of the Roman empire and refutes in biting language many of the usual charges directed at Christians. He counter-attacks by pointing out



that all persons are allowed to worship whatever gods they choose, except Christians, who worship the one true God.

However, Christianity did not only define itself in relation to the Jews and the pagans. Christians also began to define themselves in relation to each other. Many Christian authors characteristically described themselves as constituting a “catholic” church (from the Greek, meaning “universal”). This use of this term to identify the church appears for the first time in the writings of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (d. ca. 117).

The means by which the emerging Catholic Church defined itself and thereby facilitated the transmission and reception of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, involved the development of institutional polity, community scriptures, and summary statements of belief. To put it bluntly: bishop, canon, and creed

First, bishops. Within earliest Christianity there had been impulses toward a more egalitarian order that included women in leadership roles. But by the second century a hierarchical polity with bishops, elders, and deacons was establishing itself, with a delineation between those with priestly privileges and the laity. The authority of the bishops, grounded in the apostles of the first generation, came to appeal to the legitimating principle of apostolic succession. One of the themes in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea (ca. 263–339) – dating from the early fourth century – was his tracing the succession of bishops in the sees of Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, and Alexandria.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, canon. Of particular interest for the ongoing reception of Jesus was the process by which the disparate writings produced by the earliest first-century Christians eventually comprised a new collection of authoritative writings – a New Testament.

The word “canon” (from the Greek word for a “reed,” which could be cut and used as a measuring stick), came to designate a rule or a standard. By extension “canon” has come to mean any body of writings considered authoritative by a particular social group. Thus the New Testament represents the foundational written authority for believers in Jesus as the Christ. By the mid-second century, all the books eventually included in the new Christian scriptures, including the originally anonymous gospels, bore the names of specific apostles or persons closely associated



with the apostles, such as Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, and Jude. Dozens of other writings were also circulating with attributions to these and other apostles, such as Thomas and Philip.

But how did the twenty-seven-book canon come to be? I prefer to say that these books “canonized” themselves, meaning that they earned the respect of believers, through their “apostolicity,” their “catholicity,” and their “orthodoxy.” In fact, the role of the bishops, who themselves represented Christ through a line of succession from the apostles, became determinative for which writings could be used by the gathered community in its worship. In responding to the question of how the twenty-seven-book canon came to be, we will note a few markers along the canonization trail, generally following the path of Bruce M. Metzger.<sup>14</sup>

The earliest followers of Jesus, like their Jewish contemporaries, had scriptures – at least the scrolls identified in Hebrew as the “the Law (*Torah*) and the Prophets (*Nebi'im*).” No doubt the letters of Paul, the four gospels, and the writings we surveyed earlier would have been considered authoritative, in some sense, by the communities who originally received them. The letter now known as 2 Peter, considered by many scholars to be the last New Testament book written (as late as the 140s) refers to multiple letters of Paul, suggesting that a gathering of his letters had already occurred (2 Peter 3:14–16). The Church Fathers, such as Ignatius, disclose in their writings varying levels of familiarity with some of the letters and the gospels.

In Rome, at mid-first century, Justin Martyr knew at least the three Synoptic Gospels and collectively refers to them in several of his writings as “Memoirs of the Apostles.” Given his exposition on the divine Word (*Logos*), mentioned earlier, it seems likely that Justin also knew the Fourth Gospel. More importantly, Justin discloses the importance of the gospels for the life of his church. During Sunday (not sabbath!) services, he reports, the memoirs were read alongside the prophets. The leader used the readings as the basis for instruction and exhortation. Thus if the gospels were used in worship in a manner comparable to the prophets, then the gospels were approaching canonical status, at least for that community.

The person often credited with defining the first Christian canon is Marcion (ca. 110–60), who had also established himself in Rome as a generous benefactor of one of the congregations there, although he was a native of Sinope, a seaport on the Black Sea. In 144 his ideas resulted in his being excommunicated from that community. Marcion had adopted for his “Bible” ten of Paul’s letters and the Gospel of Luke. His sparse selection of writings cannot be called a New Testament because there was no Old Testament. He totally rejected the Jewish scriptures.

Underlying Marcion’s proposal was his reading of the Jewish scriptures and his understanding of Paul, whom he considered to be the only apostle to have correctly understood the gospel. Marcion juxtaposed the creator God as a jealous deity of justice over against the transcendental alien deity of love. It was the God of love who was revealed through Jesus Christ in order to liberate humankind from the domination of the creator God. Therefore, there are two Gods. But Marcion’s distinction between the lesser God of justice and the supreme God of love probably comes not from mythological speculation but from a common-sense reading of human experience and Paul’s antithetical message of “law” and “gospel.” Therefore, although Marcion has often been identified as a “Gnostic” (based on a Greek word meaning “knowledge”), he probably was not a Gnostic insofar as he affirmed salvation by faith not by knowledge. However, Marcion did advocate a Christology that was “docetic” (based on a Greek word meaning “to appear,” or “seem”) and claimed that Jesus Christ only appeared or seemed to be human (cf. Roman 8:3).<sup>15</sup> Marcion’s major work, appropriately called *Antitheses*, has not survived. Nonetheless, much of his thought is recoverable from the writings of his opponents, such as Tertullian, who wrote an extensive rebuttal *Against Marcion*.<sup>16</sup>

A contemporary of Marcion, who had studied in Rome with Justin Martyr, was a man from Mesopotamia named Tatian (d. ca. 185). Tatian approached the gospels quite differently than had Marcion. He took Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and wove them together into one consecutive narrative of the Jesus story. This act provides evidence that these four gospels had already been gathered together. Tatian’s harmonized version was called the *Diatessaron* (in Greek, “four-in-one”).

Given Marcion's appropriation of the ten letters of Paul and Tatian's use of the four gospels, it is clear that by the middle of the second century the basis for a two-part canon of gospels and letters had already been established. Perhaps Marcion's preference for one gospel and Tatian's harmonization of the four gospels into one gospel prompted Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon (ca. 120–202), to declare that the Word had given the gospel in fourfold form, but united by the one Spirit: the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.<sup>17</sup> Just as the emerging canon would have multiple letters, so the canon would also have multiple gospels.

Fast forward to the early fourth century: and consider again Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea, and his completed masterwork, *Ecclesiastical History* – from the incarnation of Jesus to the peace of the church under Constantine. Another theme that runs through his work is his judicious review and evaluation of the many so-called apostolic writings with regard to their acceptance or non-acceptance throughout the church. The approval list, as reported by Eusebius, included: the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the book of Acts; the thirteen letters of Paul; the letters of 1 John and 1 Peter; and (possibly) the book of Revelation.<sup>18</sup> By this reckoning, at the beginning of the fourth century, the list included twenty-one or twenty-two of the twenty-seven writings eventually comprising the New Testament. The first enumeration of exactly twenty-seven New Testament writings appears in the year 367, in an Easter letter from Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria to his priests in Egypt, which identified those writings considered approved for liturgical reading.<sup>19</sup> But even then the canon was not “closed.”

Now for the third dimension involved in the self-definition of the church in the second and third centuries: creed. The expansive ecumenical creeds of the fourth century were preceded by more succinct formulations of doctrine intended to communicate to even the least members of the church the essential teaching of the community and to establish doctrinal boundaries. These brief doctrinal summaries constituted what in the second century were identified as “the rule of faith.”

Already we have seen how the Gospel of Matthew concluded with the risen Jesus' command that his followers baptize “in the



name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). Just as the baptismal formula in Matthew contains Trinitarian talk of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so does a somewhat expanded “rule of faith” (approximately a hundred words in length) set forth by Irenaeus that includes these words: “in one God, the Father Almighty, the creator of heaven, and earth ... and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God ... and in the Holy Spirit ... .”<sup>20</sup> Trinitarian talk runs through the varied writings of theologians in the beginning centuries of Christianity: from Justin to Irenaeus, from Tertullian to Origen.<sup>21</sup>

But it is the meaning of the Trinitarian talk that matters. Already among the theologians of the second and third centuries had emerged the Christological issues that would dominate the theological agendas for the subsequent 200 years.

### *“Gnosticism”: The Nag Hammadi Library*

Those early church leaders who described the church as being catholic or universal, also defined the church as representing “orthodoxy” (from Greek, “right opinion”) in contradistinction to “heresy” (again from the Greek, with a derived meaning of “deviancy”). Paul himself uses the Greek word “heresies” to describe factions quarreling among themselves in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:19).

However, in the second century, theologians created a literary form that catalogued and analyzed various expressions of false belief and improper behavior by those individuals and groups who professed to be followers of Jesus Christ. These vigilant writers earned for themselves the designation of heresiologists. Although not alone in his condemnation of heretics, Irenaeus the bishop of Lyon, in Gaul, certainly became the best known in the second and third centuries through his detailed five-book diatribe *Against Heresies*. He condemned both Marcion and Tatian, among others.

One of the most interesting developments in recent decades has been the growing recognition that the theological and institutional diversity evident in twenty-first-century Christianity also characterized Christianity during its opening centuries. The titles



of books by Bart Ehrman<sup>22</sup> and Richard Valantasis<sup>23</sup> have even announced the rediscovery of ancient Christianities that had been “lost” or had “vanished.” Perhaps an observation is appropriate here. These Christianities were never completely lost nor did they absolutely vanish, since the beliefs and practices have been known through the writings of those theologians – such as Irenaeus – who opposed these versions of Christianity.

The recognition that earliest Christianity was quite diverse has also led to the designation of the theological-ecclesiastical traditions represented by the orthodox catholic church before Constantine as “proto-orthodox,” not yet the ecclesiastically established “orthodoxy.” Perhaps another observation is also appropriate here. The categories of “catholic,” “orthodoxy” and “heresy” were already being used by the “proto-orthodox” leaders before Constantine. The war of words was vicious and slanderous from both sides, much like the venom often spewed forth in our own day – whatever the ideology, whatever the topic.

Gnosticism, as a worldview, identifies a particular way of understanding reality. Scholars continue to discuss the complex origin of Gnosticism. They have identified a number of factors and several possible sources, including Persian-Iranian religion, Jewish teaching, Greek philosophy, and Christianity itself. Scholars also despair of the possibility of defining the phenomenon.<sup>24</sup> The variety of texts and persons purported to represent it do not lend themselves to a simple definition. Nonetheless, I suggest that Gnosticism foundationally represents a dualistic worldview that sharply distinguishes between the realm of spirit and the realm of matter, between the individual soul and the physical body, and that judges the spiritual realm to be the source of good and the material realm to be the occasion for evil. Consequently, this definition brings with it several corollaries: this world must be the work not of the one supreme God but of some lesser being. The human problem can be described as ignorance derived from the individual soul’s entrapment in the material world. Salvation comes through realizing the knowledge (or “gnosis”) of one’s predicament and how to escape – a knowledge often mediated by a redeemer figure.

When the Christian – or Judeo-Christian – story was interpreted through the lens of this worldview, that story often

involved the recognition that the God who sent Jesus into the world as savior had not created this world. Furthermore, Jesus as the emissary from the supreme God was not fully human but only seemed to be human (“docetism”). Resurrection, the transition from death to life, occurred when the knowledge imparted through Jesus was realized, not after physical death.

For centuries, knowledge about Gnostics and the teaching of Gnosticism was derived primarily from the polemical writings of the heresiologists. However, in 1945 all this changed with the discovery in Upper Egypt, near the town of Nag Hammadi, of a buried jar containing thirteen codices of fifty-two texts written on papyrus in the Coptic language but translated from Greek. These texts were published in English translation as *The Nag Hammadi Library* under the general editorship of James M. Robinson.<sup>25</sup> The evidence indicates that the collection was buried sometime in the fourth century, perhaps to hide it from church authorities after Christianity received recognition as a licit religion within the Roman empire. Most of the documents were not previously available in manuscript form, but they give indication of having been written by Christians with Gnostic sensibilities. Since we are interested in the library for the light it might shed on how Jesus was received and perceived by these believers, what can we say?

More than thirty of the writings from the Nag Hammadi trove make mention of Jesus by personal name and/or by honorific addresses such as “Christ,” “Savior,” and “Lord.” Several of the tractates have been identified as writings associated with Valentinus (ca. 100–75), a philosopher from Alexandria, who in the mid-130s moved to Rome and participated in the churches there until he relocated to Cyprus around 160.<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus attributes to Valentinus a complicated myth of origin that leads to the birth of Jesus; but he also mentions The Gospel of Truth, one of the Nag Hammadi texts that represents a mystical meditation on the meaning of Jesus’ coming, as one through whom those devoted to him realize knowledge about themselves. In one passage, this document uses the traditional language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but with a gnosticizing twist.

Perhaps the best known of the Nag Hammadi tractates today is the Gospel of Thomas, introduced as “the secret sayings which



the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.” The contents consist of 114 sayings, many enigmatic and peculiar to this gospel but others strikingly similar to sayings in what became the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But the collection contains no narrative gospels comparable to these four.

Several writings are what might be called Jesus books that take the form of a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, which – like the Gospel of Thomas – takes place after his resurrection. These include: the Apocryphon of James, the Apocryphon of John, the Book of Thomas the Contender, Eugnostos the Blessed, the Sophia of Jesus Christ, the Dialogue of the Savior, and the Letter of Peter to Philip. This use of a dialogue format projects Jesus as a teacher of esoteric wisdom, appropriate for Gnostic gospels and Gnostic communities.

Although these gospels from Nag Hammadi are not narratives, we find scattered throughout the Christian writings in this long-lost collection references to familiar names and events mentioned in the canonical gospels. We find mention of Jesus’ birth, his transfiguration, his crucifixion, and his resurrection. We discover on Jesus’ lips the phrases “the kingdom of God” and “the kingdom of heaven.” There is an occasional parable and references to his healings. His disciples are identified collectively as being both eleven and twelve in number. Among those named individually are Peter, Andrew, James, John, Levi, Matthew, Thomas, Philip, and Judas. We also find the names of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist; Mary his mother; Mary Magdalene, his companion; and his brother James. Simon (of Cyrene) is also mentioned.

The Gospel of Philip contains sayings of Jesus that, in Gnostic fashion, challenge traditional Christian beliefs in the virgin birth and bodily resurrection. But the most memorable characterization of Jesus appears in the Apocalypse of Peter, where, again in Gnostic fashion, he laughs as his captors crucify him by nailing him to the tree. He laughs because they think he suffers but, in reality, he feels no pain. He is a docetic redeemer figure. This has resulted in the characterization of the Gnostic Jesus as “the laughing Savior.”<sup>27</sup>





Two other Gnostic gospels, neither of which was discovered at Nag Hammadi deserve brief comment because of more recent publicity. The Gospel of Mary describes Mary Magdalene as being loved by Jesus more than the other disciples, and she demonstrates one-upwomanship against Peter who, of course, indeed became the rock on which Rome built its church.<sup>28</sup> The Gospel of Judas presents Judas the betrayer as the one disciple who “gets it” and complies with Jesus’ request to surrender him to the authorities. Gnostic Christians know the old, old story of Jesus but they plumb the depths of its meaning.<sup>29</sup>

### *Living as Christians in the Roman Empire: The Threat of Persecution*

Persecution and martyrdom were woven into the story of early Christianity. Stephen has been remembered as the first “Christian” martyr, on which occasion Saul, or Paul, was present. Like Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, Stephen in the book of Acts offers up his spirit and asks forgiveness for his killers – only now Stephen directs his petition to the “Lord Jesus” (Luke 23:45; Acts 7:59).

The Gospel of Mark and the book of Revelation have often been understood to have been composed in persecution situations, perhaps during the imperial reigns of Nero and Domitian. However, contrary to a common view on the persecution of Christians by imperial Rome, any persecutions aimed at Christians during the reigns of these two emperors would have been local and episodic, not empire-wide.

Nonetheless, Christians themselves began to produce a growing body of writings about those who had remained faithful unto death. These martyrologies, or stories of martyrdoms, circulated among the churches. Martyrs came to be venerated as exemplars of faithfulness and holiness – as saints. But the martyrs themselves are identified as the imitators of Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Around the time that Pliny was writing to the Emperor Trajan, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, wrote seven letters to different churches while en route to Rome under guard for trial. In his *Letter to the Romans*, Ignatius asks that the believers there not



interfere with what he fervently desired – to be torn apart by wild animals for Christ’s sake and thus to “imitate the Passion of my God.”

Midway through the second century, there appeared *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, apparently a first-hand account of events related to the execution by fire of the beloved and aged bishop of Smyrna, sent by the church at Smyrna to the church at Philomelium. When the flames would not consume Polycarp’s body he was stabbed, and his blood extinguished the flames. The structure and details of this narrative recall the passion of Jesus.

Still later there appears a lengthy letter from the churches of Vienne and Lyon to fellow believers in Asia and Phrygia about the horrific spiral of violence that happened in these towns in 177. What began as the social ostracism of Christians in public places escalated first to physical abuse by mobs and then to proceedings before the local civil authorities, followed by days of blood-sport – all during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161–80). These events ended days later when the burned remains of the martyrs were mockingly swept into the river Rhone.

Not until the rule of the emperor Decius (249–51) was there an edict that required all inhabitants of the empire, including Christians, to sacrifice to the traditional pagan gods and to receive a certificate validating the required act. After Decius’ death in battle against the Goths, his near-successor Valerian (253–60) reaffirmed the policy targeting especially bishops, clergy, and others of high standing, which continued until his capture by the Persians.

The next wave of persecution – the so-called Great Persecution – was initiated during the latter years of the reign of the reforming emperor Diocletian (284–305), who established a tetrarchy of emperors: an Augustus and a Caesar in the east and an Augustus and a Caesar in the west, although he remained the senior emperor among the four. In 303, for whatever reason, Diocletian abandoned a policy of toleration toward Christians and issued edicts requiring the destruction of Christian scriptures and church buildings, and also forbidding Christians to assemble for worship. The enforcement of these edicts varied greatly throughout the empire: it was severe in many locales, but lightest in Gaul and



Britain, where Constantius served as the Augustus. Thus, in a convoluted, ironic way, these anti-Christian edicts prepared the way for Constantius' succession by his son Constantine. After Constantius' death, by natural causes, in the summer of 306, Constantine was proclaimed emperor in what is now known as the city of York – where Constantine today sits proudly cast in bronze outside the great cathedral of York Minster.

### *Christianizing the Roman Empire: Constantine the Great*

With the death of Constantius and the succession of Constantine in the west, the tetrarchy collapsed, with several claimants vying for imperial positions. Decisive moments in Constantine's consolidation of his own power occurred in the years 312 and 313.<sup>31</sup>

In 312 Constantine brought his army into Italy bound for Rome, where he encountered and defeated the larger army of Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge, which resulted in the death of Maxentius and in Constantine becoming sole ruler of the empire in the west. It was before this military engagement that Constantine experienced his famous vision of the cross in the sky, reported in various accounts. According to this story, after Constantine had called upon the highest God for help he saw in the sky a cross arising from the sun with some such words of assurance or exhortation as "By this sign, conquer." So Constantine, according to tradition, had the monogram for Christ – the transversed *chi* (X) and *rho* (P) – placed on his military standards and the shields of his men. Constantine had previously expressed devotion to solar deities such as Apollo, Sol Invictus, and Mithras. Although Constantine may have attributed his victory before the city of Rome to the God of the Christians, his own transition from paganism to Christian monotheism probably occurred over a longer period of time.

Subsequently, in 313, Constantine and Licinius – his counterpart in the east – issued the so-called Edict of Milan, which proclaimed toleration throughout the Roman empire for Christians and all others to worship and observe their religious obligations unhindered. Furthermore, Christians were to have restored the





property previously taken from them, whether it was individually owned or corporate property such as churches. Whatever the reason Constantine – and his father – had for not hounding Christians during the recent persecutions, he was becoming one of them and a generous patron of Christianity and the Church. The Roman empire was being transformed into a “Christian” empire.

But in 312 and 313 much still lay ahead. Constantine would not become the one and only ruler of the entire empire until a decade of skirmishes between him and Licinius had resulted in Licinius’ defeat and eventual death in 324. By then, Constantine was already thinking about moving the capital of the empire eastward from Rome. But before that geographical move, there would occur an event that would forever shape the Christianity adopted by him – the Council of Nicaea in 325. But, before going forward, we must look back to consider how the reception of Jesus as the Christ created the demand for scribal rewriting of his story, and how Jesus was becoming publicly ever more visible through images of him and buildings dedicated to him.

### *Material Culture: Manuscripts, Architecture, and the Visual Arts*

With Constantine early Christianity experienced a sudden reversal of fortune. The one-time Jewish sect and later persecuted minority in the Greco-Roman world had suddenly found favor with a Roman emperor. It is understandable, therefore, that material remains from the Christian movement would be scarce before the fourth century. Nonetheless, physical evidence for Jesus’ reception does appear in the areas of manuscripts, architecture, and the visual arts.

Although the twenty-seven documents later incorporated into the New Testament were originally written in Greek in the latter half of the first century, none of the original manuscripts exists today. What is considered to be the oldest fragment of any New Testament book, containing only a few lines from John 18, dates from ca. 125. Known as P<sup>52</sup>, with the “P” indicating papyrus as the writing material, it is preserved in the library of the University





**Figure 1** Graffito of a crucified donkey man discovered scratched on a wall on the Palatine hill in Rome (possibly second Century). *Photo: AGK Images*

of Manchester. Among the earliest collections of subdivisions of the New Testament, probably from the third century, are the papyri housed in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin: P<sup>45</sup>, four gospels and book of Acts; P<sup>46</sup>, Pauline letters; and P<sup>47</sup>, the book of Revelation. Not until the fourth century are there manuscripts which bind between the same covers subdivisions of a New Testament together with the Greek version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (LXX).<sup>32</sup>

The Greek word translated “church” in the New Testament is *ekklesia* (Latin, *ecclesia*), from which the English adjective “ecclesiastical” is derived. The word *ekklesia* appears only twice in the New Testament gospels, both times in the Gospel of Matthew, both times on the lips of Jesus (Matt. 16:18, 18:17). The first

passage represents what later became known as the “investiture of Peter” that has been used to support the authority of the bishop of Rome, the Pope: “You are Peter [*Petros*] and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my church” (Matt 16:18; also 18:17). However, the word *ekklesia* has the etymological meaning of “being called out from” and in the Greco-Roman world was used to designate human assemblies of various kinds (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). Thus there was “church” before there were “church” buildings.

As is evident in Paul’s letters, his churches gathered together in the houses of members. The head of household where the community gathered would have served as host and patron. Paul identifies some hosts, or patrons, by name: Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16, 16:15), the couple Prisca and Aquila (1 Cor. 16:10; Rom. 16:3); Gaius (Rom. 16:23); and Philemon (Philem. 1:2). This arrangement would have necessitated meetings in the houses of more prosperous members of the community with adequate space. The letter called 1 Corinthians provides insight into the order, or disorders, of worship in such a house church. One can imagine a diverse group gathered around a common table in the dining area where a meal is shared, perhaps bracketed by the breaking of bread and sharing the cup (1 Cor. 11:23–6). Therefore the private house – or domicile – represents the earliest communal gathering-place for the early Christians in the first century, and it continued to provide such into the second century.

However, the Edict of Milan, which in 313 granted toleration of worship and reparations for property seized or destroyed in the recent persecutions, presupposed that Christians owned places of assemblage. Furthermore, as we shall explore later, Constantine immediately and aggressively undertook building programs in Rome, and elsewhere, through which he transformed the urban landscape by constructing churches of monumental size following the architectural design of the Greco-Roman basilica.

But how did Christianity get from the house church to the basilica?<sup>33</sup> In recent years, developmental architectural models have presented themselves, which begin with the “house church.” By definition, this structure is a house being used for assemblies “as is” without architectural changes. The next step of development would be what has been called a *domus ecclesiae* (literally,

“house of a church”), which means a house that has been architecturally adapted for use as a church. Still another step of development would be an *aula ecclesiae* (“hall of a church”), which identifies a building constructed as a place of assembly. The final step would be the basilica itself, such as those ordered by Constantine, a building on a grand scale intended to be used for worship.

What has enabled the conceptualization of this developmental model was the discovery, beginning in the 1920s, of the buried remains of the Roman garrison town of Dura-Europos situated on the Syrian frontier. The town was destroyed, along with a Jewish synagogue and a Christian church, by the Sassanian Persians in 256. This church building represents the only certain surviving example of a *domus ecclesiae* – between the period of Paul’s missionary movement and Constantine’s basilica-building campaign. Architectural adaptations of the house for Christian use included the enlargement of the dining room to create a rectangular assembly hall by removing a wall. Also, one of the rooms was transformed into a baptistery richly displaying images appropriate for its intended use. Among the subjects of the frescoes are the good shepherd, the walking on the water, the stilling of the storm, the woman at the well, the healing of the paralyzed man, and (apparently) three women approaching a tomb. Here the confession of Jesus as the Christ by his followers along the Euphrates river informed the shaping of the material world – architecturally and visually.

Dura-Europos has also contributed to an understanding of the origins of the Christian appropriation of the visual arts by providing evidence that early Christian artistic expression was not confined to a funereal setting. Nonetheless, much of the evidence for Christian art and other artifacts before Constantine come out of the catacombs of Rome.

The catacombs began as a burial place, not as a hiding place. Early in the second century, people began using the underground network to bury their dead. Toward the turn of the next century, the Roman church appointed a pensioner named Callistus, who had served time as a Christian in the mines of Sardinia, to supervise the Christian cemetery. Later the catacomb he supervised

came to called, and is known today as, the catacomb of St. Callistus.<sup>34</sup>

From the St. Callistus catacomb, companion catacombs in Rome, and other sites – including the baptistery at Dura-Europos – come a number of pictorial representations deemed to be pre-Constantinian in date. These representations appear in four media: frescoes, murals, sarcophagi, and statues.<sup>35</sup>

An inventory of the subject matter by Graydon Snyder lists thirty-one different biblical scenes that occur a total of 181 times. Since our principal focus centers on Jesus as the Christ, I comment here specifically on how Jesus fares in the cemetery competition. Of the thirty-one biblical scenes, fifteen relate to the Jesus story. As I tabulate the results, the baptism of Jesus receives six votes with the raising of Lazarus a close runner-up with five. But taken together, minus the raising of Lazarus, scenes depicting Jesus' healing someone of some malady takes in seven votes. This commentary on the inventory is descriptive, not analytical. But it does suggest that Jesus Christ appears as a savior who delivers his own through acts of healing. Notably absent from the art prior to the fourth century is any depiction of Jesus fixed to a cross – that, is, a crucifix.

However, there is the graffito of what has been described as “the crucified donkey man.”<sup>36</sup> Discovered in 1856 in the servants' quarters of the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill in Rome, this drawing depicts a person with the head of a donkey fixed to a cross. Another man points upward toward the so-called donkey man with an inscription in awkward Greek that can be translated, “Alexamenos worship(s) God.” Perhaps material evidence of this kind of derision against Christians helps explain the avoidance of representations of the crucified Son of God by Christians. After all, a publicly visual reminder that the subject of Christian devotion had been executed by the Roman state immediately casts suspicion upon all those who identify themselves as “Christians.” Perhaps this also explains the apparent popularity, based upon material evidence, among Christians in the second and third centuries of such symbols as the anchor, the boat with a mast, the fish, and the fish-related acrostic IXΘΥΣ (“Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior”).



## Notes

- 1 L. Michael White provides a detailed account of Christian beginnings, as he sees them, through the end of the second century: *From Jesus to Christianity: How Four Generations of Visionaries and Storytellers Created the New Testament and Christian Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).
- 2 For further information on the New Testament writings within their socio-historical setting consult standard introductions, such as Bart D. Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), or Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student's Introduction*, 6th edn. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2009).
- 3 Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, revised and expanded edn. (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 1994), 225–46.
- 4 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. Louis H. Feldman, 9 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926, 1965), 9:49–51 and 495–7.
- 5 “Claudius” 25.4; see Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914, 1959), 2:52.
- 6 *Annales* 15.44; see Tacitus, *Annals*, trans. John Jackson, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937, 1962), 4:283–4.
- 7 *Epistulae ad Trajanus* 96; Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, trans. William Melmoth, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935, 1963), 2:401–5.
- 8 Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 54–78, 103–39.
- 9 Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 108–12.
- 10 Wilken, *Christians*, 159–60.
- 11 Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote a seminal study on the *adversus Judaeos* tradition that focuses especially on the Church Fathers: *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1974), 117–82.
- 12 Bart D. Ehrman has gathered into one volume an informative collection of writings that represent the diverse dimensions of earliest Christianity, which counts Justin Martyr and Tertullian among the apologists: *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 57–65, 75–82.



- 13 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake and J. E. L. Oulton, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).
- 14 Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988). For a more recent proposal on the canon issue, see David Dungan, *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).
- 15 The non-Gnostic view of Marcion's program has been advocated by R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Marcion on the Restitution of Christianity: An Essay on the Development of Radical Paulinism in the Second Century* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 155–84.
- 16 Tertullian, *Against Marcion* The Ante-Nicene Fathers, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, repr. 1993), 3:269–475.
- 17 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 3.11.8.
- 18 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1:3.25.1–7.
- 19 Metzger, *Canon*, 211.
- 20 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.1
- 21 For developments before Nicaea, see Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicaea: The Dialectical Development in Trinitarian Theology*, trans. Conn O'Donovan (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).
- 22 Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 23 Richard Valantasis, *The Beliefnet Guide to Gnosticism and Other Vanished Christianities* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).
- 24 Karen King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).
- 25 James M. Robinson, gen. ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). Elaine Pagels was among the first scholars to gain public attention about these finds with her *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979).
- 26 Bentley Layton has reconstructed the “family” relationships among the Nag Hammadi texts, distinguishing between the Valentinians and other groups, in his *The Gnostic Scriptures: Ancient Wisdom for the New Age*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1987), chart, p. xvi.
- 27 John Dart, *Laughing Savior: The Discovery and Significance of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).



- 28 Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2003).
- 29 James M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and his Lost Gospel* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).
- 30 The ancient texts, which report the martyrdoms epitomized in the narrative, are found in Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, 28–30, 30–5, 35–41.
- 31 A major secondary source for understanding the Constantinian era is the study by Charles Mason Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- 32 Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 52–92. Also see Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006).
- 33 L. Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, ASOR Library of Bible and Near Eastern Archaeology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
- 34 Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante-Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 87.
- 35 Fabrizio Mancinelli, *Catacombs and Basilicas: The Early Christians in Rome* (Florence: Scala Books, 1981).
- 36 G. M. A. Hanfmann, "The Crucified Donkey Man," in Günter Kopke and Mary B. Moore, eds. *Studies in Classical Art and Archaeology: A Tribute to Peter Heinrich von Blanckenhagen* (Locust Valley, NJ: J. J. Augustin, 1979): 205–7.

