

Chapter I

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The emergence of Christianity—which quickly spread from a localized offshoot of Judaism, the religion of many Semitic nations in ancient Palestine, to the predominant religion of the vast Roman Empire with a major episcopal center in Rome—took place broadly in the time period between Alexander the Great and Constantine, from 330 B.C.E. to 330 C.E. The period from 330 to 31 B.C.E. is known as the Hellenistic period, one of the most important cultural intersections of the ancient Mediterranean. From 330 B.C.E. until 200 B.C.E. was its heyday, but after 200 B.C.E., Alexander’s successors in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Asia reasserted their native cultures in a newly formed pan-Hellenic world. The Roman period extended from 163 B.C.E.

through the age of Constantine into the early fifth century, although Rome did not control the Mediterranean world until Octavian conquered Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E. Thus, when Jesus the Galilean taught and preached in the early first century C.E., it was in a Semitic world largely influenced by pan-Hellenic culture, education, and philosophy and ruled by Roman government and laws. At that time, the polytheistic Greco-Roman world contained innumerable gods and diverse religions, all implicated to some degree in the political and cultural structures of native populations: the Greek pantheon and Hellenism, the Roman pantheon and emperor worship, mystery religions and their various rituals and

rites, Gnostic beliefs, and, most importantly, Judaism, which was uniquely characterized by monotheism, a strict moral code, and its body of sacred scripture. This chapter will discuss the essential historical background for the understanding of the events leading to the emergence of Christianity in first-century Palestine and its expansion to a fourth-century Rome that had been transformed from the capital of the ancient Roman Empire into a *new* Jerusalem.

Features of Ancient Mediterranean Religious Practices

Greek and Roman Deities

Ancient Greek religion included the polytheistic worship of twelve anthropomorphic, ageless, immortal deities on Mount Olympus, usually Zeus and his wife, Hera; Poseidon, god of the sea; Apollo, a sun god of music, healing, culture, and oracles; Artemis, the goddess of the moon and the hunt who oversaw the maturation of the young; Athena, goddess of wisdom and crafts, especially important as the patron goddess of Athens; Hermes, the messenger god who guided all travelers, including the dead whom he conducted into the realm of the god of the underworld, Hades; Ares, the god of war; Aphrodite, the goddess of love; Demeter, the goddess of grain, whose daughter Persephone was abducted by Hades and then became the queen of the underworld; Dionysus, the god of wine and religious ecstasy; and Hephaestus, the god of fire. Zeus was their leader and there were

thousands of local gods. Religion was everywhere in the Greek world, and there was little distinction between religious and secular. The pan-Hellenic or national festivals of athletic and musical competitions were dedicated to the gods who presided over all community life. The pantheon of gods in the Roman world was modeled upon that of the Greek and similarly implicated with cultural and political life. By the end of the third century B.C.E., the Romans had imported and assimilated the Greek pantheon: Jupiter, like Zeus, was the father of the gods; Juno, the goddess of fertility and matrons, was similar to Hera; Neptune, like Poseidon, was the god of the seas and waters; Apollo remained unchanged; like Artemis, Diana was associated with the moon and hunting as the goddess of woods and nymphs, female divinities who live in mountains, trees, caves or other natural settings; Minerva, a city goddess like Athena, formed the Capitoline Triad with Jupiter and Juno, a trio of divinities brought to Rome by the Etruscans; Mercury corresponded to Hermes as the god of trade and travel; Mars was identified with Ares as the god of war; Venus was the Roman counterpart to the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite; Ceres, the goddess of grain, was compared to Demeter, while Bacchus, the god of wine, was the Roman counterpart of Dionysus; and Vulcan, the god of fire and forges, had attributes similar to the Greek fire god Hephaestus.

Greek and Roman Religious Practices

To the ancient Romans, the core of religion was the cultic act or ritual sacrifice, which,

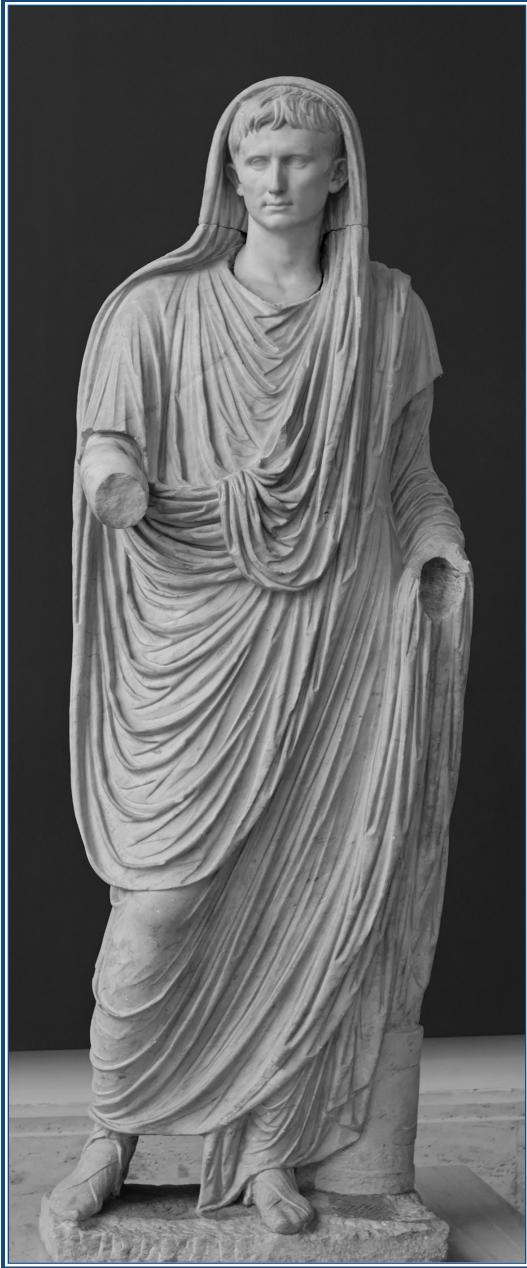


FIGURE 1.1. *Sculpture of Augustus as Pontifex Maximus. This first-century B.C.E. marble statue shows Augustus dressed as the Chief Priest of Rome.*

if correctly performed, ensured the correct contractual response (*quid pro quo*, “something in return for something”) from the deity. Usually a living victim, a pig or sheep or ox, was offered to a god or goddess with a prayer for the continued prosperity of that deity, who then would grant the request of the worshipper. The ritual had to be performed with exacting precision: the size and color of the victim—for example, white for Jupiter and Juno, and black for the gods of the underworld—had to be just right; the dress of the priest, the music, the prayers, and all the ritual purifications were carefully prescribed. If there was an error, the entire ritual had to be repeated.

The *Pontifex Maximus*, “Chief Priest,” oversaw all sacrifices and ceremonies essential to maintaining the *pax deorum*, “peace of the gods.” His role paralleled that of the *paterfamilias*, “head of the family,” who served the gods as the primary guardian and representative of his family. As domestic religious sacrifices performed for births, marriages, funerals, and other rites of passage became community concerns the state began to oversee these sacrifices on behalf of larger communities. Corresponding priesthoods with specific functions developed: *pontifices*, “pontiffs,” had jurisdiction over the religious calendar of holy days, called *feriae*, when religious rites were performed and no business was transacted; *flamines* were priests devoted to particular gods and their temple rites; *haruspices* were priests who read the entrails of sacrificial animals; and *augures* were the colleges of priests who interpreted various *auguria*,

“omens,” such as lightning or the flights of birds, to divine the will of the gods.

Roman Emperor Worship

From the time of Alexander the Great, eastern monarchs had become demigods whose native citizens worshipped them and performed sacrifices dedicated to them. As early as the second century B.C.E., rulers routinely adopted the title *epiphanes*, a term that means “the divine presence coming into light.” Although Octavian, the first emperor of Rome, ostensibly refused to be worshipped as these eastern leaders, he did allow his name to be joined with the goddess *Roma* and his image to be placed in sacred places throughout the empire. Gradually the worship of his divinity took root in the Near East, especially after the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E., when he adopted

the title *Augustus* meaning “revered” or “honored.” The province of Pergamum dedicated a temple to Augustus and *Roma* in 29 B.C.E. In the west, his stepson Drusus dedicated an altar to Augustus and *Roma* in 12 B.C.E. at Lugdunum, the modern Lyon, and by the end of his reign there was one in almost every province. It was not until after his death, however, that Augustus was proclaimed a god of the Roman state when a senator at his funeral attested to seeing him ascend into heaven.

This association of deification and death prevented other emperors from allowing themselves to become deified during their lifetimes. They did, however, allow their *genius* or “divinity,” to be worshipped. Among the Julio-Claudians, Caligula (37–41 C.E.) built a temple and established a priesthood and ritual dedicated to his divinity in his own lifetime, and

Personalities in Christianity I.1

AUGUSTUS

Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (63 B.C.E.–14 C.E.) was the first emperor of Rome. Julius Caesar's great nephew (the son of his sister's daughter), he delivered the important funeral oration of his grandmother (Caesar's sister) in 51 B.C.E. and was adopted by Caesar in 45 B.C.E. When Caesar was murdered, his will named Octavian as his heir. He surprised many older statesmen and generals by his effective consolidation of power in a political alliance with Mark Antony and M. Aemilius Lepidus, called the Second Triumvirate. In several successive battles he first subdued Brutus and Cassius, the leaders of the conspiracy against Caesar, and then, in 31 B.C.E. at the Battle of Actium, he defeated Antony, his former fellow triumvir and brother-in-law (in 40 B.C.E. Antony had married Octavian's sister, Octavia) who had allied himself with Cleopatra. This was a great turning point in his political career and in the history of Rome, for the wealth and power and resources of the east now belonged to the Rome. Octavian received the quasi-divine title *Augustus*, which means “revered” or “honored,” and with his two close supporters, M. Vipsanius Agrippa and C. Maecenas, he instituted a new governmental structure, an empire ruled by a monarch, that lasted until 410 C.E. His reign inaugurated a period of widespread



peace and prosperity. The literary circle patronized by Maecenas that promoted this peace after so many years of civil wars produced a literary corpus that has been called the *Golden Age* of Latin literature. His building program also emphasized the peace and prosperity of his reign: he beautified Rome with temples and restored shrines, he built libraries and theatres, and he associated his domestic building with the god Apollo on the Palatine Hill. The biblical account (Luke 2:1) of the taxation system implemented in the Roman provinces associates the birth of Jesus with the *pax Romana* of Augustus. In subsequent centuries, ecclesiastical historians regarded the peace and territorial expansions of the reign of Augustus as a divinely ordained preparation for the entire world to receive the teaching of Jesus.

In the matter of succession, Augustus was continually foiled. In 39 B.C.E., he divorced his first wife Scribonia, the mother of his only child, Julia, to marry Livia Drusilla, who was at that time pregnant with her second son. Livia's sons, Drusus and Tiberius, several of Julia's children from a series of politically expedient marriages, and other relations (even Mark Antony's son) were all in the mix of candidates to succeed Augustus. In the end, Livia's son Tiberius succeeded to the throne, but by then Augustus had reconstituted the patrician senate and the resulting government was a shared monarchial system.

Claudius (41–54 C.E.) officially inserted the worship of the imperial *genius* into the state religion; the Flavian emperor Domitian (81–96 C.E.) referred to himself as *dominus et deus*, “lord and god.” By the second century C.E., the Roman emperor had melded into local religious rituals all over the empire and was worshipped as a god, although there was no strict imperial religion with priests and prescribed rituals. Beginning with Diocletian in the late third century, court ceremonial surrounding the person of the emperor became increasingly elaborate. The emperor wore a purple robe, the symbol of his absolute power, and all who entered his presence were required to kiss the hem of the purple robe in a ritual called the *adoratio purpurae*, “adoration of the purple,” and to approach his presence on their knees. Christians, as all citizens, were required to swear an oath to the *genius* of Caesar or be

charged with treason. It is in this period, when the worship of an emperor's “divinity” was becoming more widespread, that Christianity was viewed as a threat to the state and that we date most systematic attempts to eradicate it through persecution. As offensive as emperor worship was to Christians, it nonetheless continued even after Constantine had proclaimed Christianity a legal religion.

Mystery Religions

Like Christianity, the mystery religions of the Greco-Roman world promised a blessed life after death through an initiation, baptism, and communion with the deity. One of the most important of the mystery religions in the ancient world was the annual ceremony connected to the worship of Demeter and her daughter Kore/Persephone at Eleusis, near Athens. The story of Demeter and Persephone

is a mythical explanation for the seasons and their agricultural cycles. During the Eleusinian mysteries, the abduction of Persephone by Hades was ritually reenacted in a procession from Athens to Eleusis. At Eleusis, the initiates entered a dark pathway (a metaphor for death) and experienced a mystical union with the divine that left them serenely reconciled to death and hopeful of a blessed afterlife (a metaphor for the burgeoning of life in the spring). The rites of Isis and Osiris in Egypt and of Attis and Cybele in the Near East have their roots in a similar agricultural cycle of death and rebirth. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods these exotic oriental and Egyptian deities appealed to initiates who wanted to experience a personal epiphany that promised a blessed afterlife. Non-Roman priests of Cybele were so carried away by the ecstatic otherworldliness of their worship that they castrated themselves in dedication to the goddess. In what has been interpreted according to tradition as a Christian version of this act, Origen, the third-century Christian ascetic leader of the catechetical school of Alexandria, allegedly castrated himself to “renounce marriage for the kingdom of God” (Matt 19:12). Romans, however, were legally prohibited from participating fully in the worship of Cybele, whose rites they considered wild and grotesque, and which they eventually suppressed.

Mithraism was perhaps the most widespread of the ancient mystery religions even though it was based primarily in military camps and was exclusively male. According to the scant literature and the somewhat more abundance archaeological remains, the con-

gregants of the Roman sun-god Mithras experienced a kind of “rebirth” after an elaborate initiation ceremony centered upon the cult image of Mithras slaughtering a bull. After this secretive initiation, they enjoyed the benefits of an exclusive religious-social community as well as the promise of salvation after death.

Certain Christian rituals and teachings about the afterlife were similar to those of various mystery religions. Christ (from the Greek *Christos*, “anointed”), called the Messiah, “anointed of God” in Hebrew, was sent from heaven to bring his Father’s kingdom into the present time. The gift he promised was God’s heavenly kingdom in the afterlife, that is, a divine gift of salvation. After an initiation by baptism, Christians could expect the forgiveness of sins, a life of fellowship with a shared code of morality, and the hope of resurrection. In 1 Cor 15:51, Paul’s language echoes that of the mystery religions when he writes, “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” Just as those of many mystery religions, Christian rituals and beliefs were influenced in many ways by the rituals and beliefs surrounding an age-old pagan agricultural god who died in the winter and was resurrected in the spring.

We learned much more about early Gnostic sects, along with their various teachings, with the discovery of twelve codices in the Nag Hammadi library of Coptic texts. Among these were some forty previously unknown Gnostic texts (along with a few we had previously known only by name). From these texts,



FIGURE 1.2. *The Mithraeum of San Clemente. Dedicated to the worship of Mithras, this second-century altar is located in a sanctuary beneath the fourth-century Basilica of San Clemente in Rome.*

we learn that strains of Gnostic belief predated Christianity and that there were many and various sects within the movement that drew upon the teachings of Plato, Judaism, and, later, Christianity. Like the mystery religions, Gnosticism, from the Greek *gnosis*, “knowledge,” held that there were two worlds, that of matter and that of spirit. In the second century, one form of Gnostic Christianity promised an escape through knowledge from the world of matter into the world of spirit where *gnosis* was reserved for an elect few. There was a complex cosmogony of emanations (called aeons) from a creator god who was derived

from an unknowable supreme god. Only the elect, in whom there was some divine flicker of the supreme divinity, were receptive to *gnosis*, which was sent through Jesus by the supreme divinity. According to the Gnostics, god the creator was distinct from the supreme divine god; the creator god was imperfect and, therefore, so was the material world. This belief came to be considered heretical, this is, opposed to church doctrine, by the developing Christian church in the first and second centuries, along with another of the Gnostic doctrines, namely, that Jesus did not truly assume humanity but rather only appeared to be human.

Historical Background of Judaism

Short History of the Jews

Through its many stages of development from the Mosaic covenant through the early Christian period, the Jewish religion was variously characterized by monotheism, adherence to a body of written scriptures called the law, dietary and food restrictions, a deliberate separation from non-Jews, and fractious dissent within and among the different Jewish communities. Their long and complicated history encompasses several periods of domination by political overlords who, to some extent, seem always to have recognized Judaism as a *religio licita*, “tolerated religion”: the Persian Empire from 539 to 333 B.C.E., the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great from 333 to 320 B.C.E., the Seleucid Empire from 320 to 140 B.C.E., and the Parthian period from 140 B.C.E. to 226 C.E. The Roman period overlapped with the Seleucid and the Parthian empires and extended from 163 B.C.E. to 135 C.E., when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.

For centuries, Judaism and the Hellenism of Alexander the Great and his successors’ kingdoms were assimilated and polarized in mutual exchanges. Hellenism, as it appeared in Israelite accounts, was a derogatory term and referred particularly to those customs that contravened Jewish law, especially the Hellenic athletic pursuits practiced at the gymnasium. In 2 Macc 4:14-15, the Jewish priests were criticized for neglecting the Temple sacrifices to participate in unlawful athletic exercises, like discus-throwing. This “craze for Hellenism” as it was called in Maccabees not only reflected

the Jews’ resentment of their foreign domination but also the antagonism between traditional and reformed religious obligations. Jewish monotheism was not compatible with any polytheistic traditional religions and it forbade the worship of the Roman emperor. Nonetheless, in the Temple in Jerusalem the Jews willingly offered a daily sacrifice for the well-being of the emperor.

Despite their long resistance to foreign rulers, the different Semitic communities throughout Palestine did not form a homogeneous religious entity. There were many different groups who worshipped the god of Israel, and they variously resisted, accommodated, and mixed with their fellow Jews. In the early Christian period, there were three sects of Jews, each distinct to some degree in their social, political, cultural and religious practices; yet, each one claimed to represent the true Judaism. The Sadducees and Pharisees were priests and religious leaders, who differed acrimoniously in their interpretation of Mosaic Law. The Sadducees were aristocratic and elite; they insisted upon a literal and strict interpretation of the written scripture, called the Torah, and they were devoted to Temple ritual. The Pharisees, in addition to the Torah, also honored laws handed down by oral tradition (eventually codified in the Talmud), and they believed (unlike the Sadducees) in a bodily resurrection in a messianic age yet to come. The Essenes were an ascetic sect that seems to have preferred to live outside of the urban Judaism of Jerusalem, although the “Gate of the Essenes” identified in Josephus (*Jewish War* 5.4.2) is perhaps evidence in this

period that they continued to visit the Temple in Jerusalem. They followed careful ceremonial rituals regarding purity and adhered to an esoteric set of doctrines. Another ascetic Jewish community in Qumran was perhaps related to the Essenes. This community is known from the Dead Sea Scrolls, a cache of Hebrew and Aramaic prayers, hymns, and biblical texts discovered in 1947 in the Qumran caves along the northern shore of the Dead Sea. This collection of texts considerably enhances our understanding of the range of Jewish sects in the milieu of Jesus and his followers.

In addition to these sects, there were class distinctions among the various Israelite communities. By and large the priestly class was wealthier, better educated, and more likely to collaborate with their Hellenized rulers. This kind of collusion ensured social mobility and financial security, and it was the primary riff in the separation between the Hellenizing Jews and the traditionalists in Jerusalem. Four families—the Oniads, Simonites, Tobiads, and Maccabees—contended through the Hellenistic period for the high priesthood and were (at different times depending upon who was in power) pro-Seleucid, pro-Ptolemaic, traditionalists, or Hellenizers (to different degrees).

Judean Priest-Kings

The Maccabees, called the Hasmoneans from their ancestor Hashmon, emerged to rule, first as high priests then as priest-kings, after leading a revolution against the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–163 B.C.E.) and the Hellenized high priests (Jason

and Menelaus) whom he had appointed. In the bargain, the Maccabees had initiated an alliance or *amicitia* with Rome, which had established dominion in Greece and Asia in a series of wars with Philip V of Macedon and Antiochus III in Asia. The Hasmoneans ruled from 161 B.C.E. until internal wars among competing family members left Judea vulnerable to foreign domination. In 63 B.C.E., Pompey the Great conquered Judea and introduced Roman rule.

The dissolution of the Hasmonean-led Jewish nation, from 63–40 B.C.E., coincided with the escalating presence of Rome in the east. Just as Pompey was claiming Syria from the Seleucids, the Jews were embroiled in a civil war between the Hasmoneans Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. Antipater, the Idumean general of Hyrcanus I, backed Hyrcanus II while shoring up power for himself and his own son, Herod (known to history as “Herod the Great”). When Pompey’s legate (or deputy) Scaurus arrived in Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E., delegations from both parties besieged him; Scaurus backed Aristobulus, but Pompey was less accommodating. Rather than back either claimant, he declared war on Jerusalem and after a three-month siege finally took the Temple. After his victory, Pompey entered the Temple and the Holy of Holies.

In the parade of spoils from his conquests, Pompey led Aristobulus II and his sons through Rome as prisoners. Hyrcanus II remained in Jerusalem as High Priest. Much of what had been part of the Jewish state was now annexed by Syria. The Greek city-states enjoyed a new revitalization under Pompey’s reorganization,

and they offered support in return; the Jews and other Semitic nations, however, resented the Roman presence and control. Reduced to a client state of Rome, the same outrage against a foreign ruler and the same desire for religious and national independence that characterized Judea in the Hellenistic period and that had long plagued its internal politics now set the stage for the Messiah king, Jesus Christ, to incite a revolution for the return of an independent Judea ruled by a High Priest/King of the Jews.

Dynasty of the Herods

As administrators, the Herods were effective, but many resented them as outsiders: not only had they not descended from any priestly family, but they were Idumeans, who became proselytes during the territorial expansions under the Maccabeans. Moreover, they had supplanted the legitimate dynasty of Maccabean priest-kings and they served the interests of the Roman overlords as their client kings.

The only substantial account of the Herods comes from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37–100 C.E.) whose two principal works—the *Jewish War* (*Bellum Iudaicum*) and the *Jewish Antiquities* (*Antiquitates Iudaicae*)—cover the Maccabean period into the 70s C.E., the First Jewish War. (The *Antiquities* begins with the account of the world’s creation.) Alternately described with praise and with hostility, the first of the Herods, Antipater, was a politically astute opportunist. He had been appointed as royal governor of Idumea under the Hasmonean Alexander Janneus, and he

had formed an independent alliance with the neighboring Nabateans by marrying the king’s daughter, named Cyprus. During Rome’s civil war between Pompey and Caesar, Antipater successfully aligned himself first with Pompey and then with Caesar, earning for himself Roman citizenship, immunity from taxation, and secular authority over Jerusalem. When Caesar recognized him as the official administrator of Judea in 47 B.C.E., Antipater immediately appointed his son Herod as the local governor of Galilee.

It was on the clear understanding that he would champion Rome against the Parthians that the triumvirs Antony and Octavian appointed Herod tetrarch and then, in 40 B.C.E., King of the Jews. At the death of Cleopatra just after the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E., Octavian confirmed Herod’s throne and enlarged his kingdom considerably. He enjoyed great political favor as a client-king when Augustus became emperor, and, despite his family intrigues, rivalries, and murders, his three sons were formally recognized as his heirs at his death in 4 B.C.E. Of the three, Herod Antipas ruled longest, until 39 C.E.; Herod’s grandsons, Agrippa I and Agrippa II, ruled until 44 C.E. and c. 100 C.E. respectively, but no one of his heirs achieved the broad territorial expansion and power of Herod the Great.

Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee was born into this Semitic milieu under Herod and in the reign of the emperor Augustus (31 B.C.E.–14 C.E.) probably in, or shortly before, 4 B.C.E. (The sixth-century Greek monk Dionysius Exiguus, which means “Denis the Small,” was

the first to calculate dates from the birth of Jesus labeling them accordingly A.D., which is the abbreviation for *Anno Domini*, “in the year of our Lord.”) The ministry of Jesus, that is, the time between his baptism and his death, when he traveled and taught in the area of Jerusalem that is now called the Holy Land, spanned a two- to three-year period between 30 and 33 C.E. entirely in the reign of the emperor Tiberius (14–37 C.E.) and the tetrarch Herod Antipas (4 B.C.E.–39 C.E.). It ended with his crucifixion, the outcome of a sequence of controversial inquiries. After the Passover meal, Jesus led several disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives outside the Jerusalem city walls. It was here that he was arrested after being betrayed by Judas. Gospel accounts differ concerning the trial, but Jesus seems to have appeared before the Sanhedrin, or Jewish council, where he was charged with blasphemy for claiming to be the Son of God and the Messiah (Matt 26:63). But whether this was an *ad hoc* investigation, an informal inquiry, or a formal trial is a matter still contested by scholars. Whatever else the Sanhedrin determined, they agreed to deliver Jesus to the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate. Of the gospel accounts, Luke (23:6-11) alone records that Pilate did not want to pass judgment on what seemed to be a question of religion but preferred to send Jesus to Herod Antipas, as a Jewish authority. Rather than judge the case, however, Antipas and his retinue mocked Jesus and sent him back to Pilate. Ultimately, Pilate condemned Jesus to death for claiming to be “King of the Jews” (Matt 27:11; Mark 15:1; Luke 23:2; John 18:33),

a *crimen maiestatis*, or “crime against the emperor,” who alone could be called “King.”

Rise of Christianity

After the death of Jesus, Christian Judaism became divided. Following Acts 6:1, we may conveniently distinguish between the Christian Hebrews, who spoke Aramaic (and perhaps also Greek) and continued to hold the Temple and the sacrificial cult in Jerusalem at the center of their worship, and the Christian Hellenists, or “Greek speakers,” who seem to have been Jews whose different ethnic communities met for prayer in synagogues throughout Jerusalem (Acts 6:9). It is vital to recall, however, that in this very early period, there is not a clear distinction between these groups, and that there must have been many groups who perceived themselves as Christian Jews but who were “Hellenized” to various degrees. Paul, the Greek-speaking Pharisee who later became a Christian missionary to the Dispersion Jews and to the gentiles (from the Latin *gens*, “people,” which to the Jews meant anyone who was not a Jew), initially harassed those early Hellenized Christian Jews. He zealously persecuted these Christian Hellenists who were beginning to develop and expand the gospels in the wider Jewish community, and he was present at the stoning in 35 C.E. of the proto-martyr Stephen, a Christian Hellenist who spoke against the Temple (Acts 6:13). After a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19), however, Paul traveled through the cities of Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece to preach the message of Jesus to Jews and gentiles. According to Acts 11:26, it was

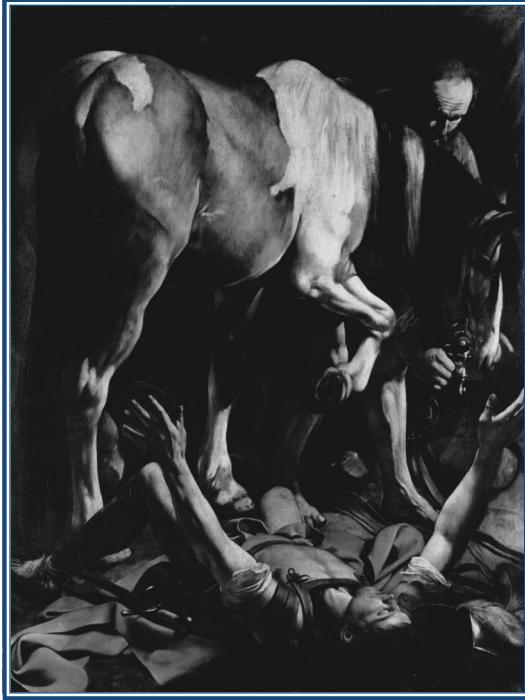


FIGURE 1.3. *The Conversion of Saint Paul. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus is shown in Caravaggio's (1571–1610) dramatic painting, now in the Basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome.*

in Antioch, one of the most important urban centers of the church outside of Palestine, that the term *Christianoi* was first used to refer to Christians. Scholars agree, however, that the term may have been in use earlier than the reference in Acts suggests, either by Christians to self-designate, or by non-Christians when referring to these “followers of Christ.”

From the accounts in Acts, we can trace the growth of the church from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, Galilee and the coasts, to Antioch, to wide areas around the Aegean, and, finally, to Rome. In the expansion, as had happened

within Jerusalem, the sects of Christian Jews as well as Jews and gentiles disagreed on several practical and theological issues, and all the while the Jews more generally were at odds with the Romans. Several events mark this transition of the mission of the church from Jews to gentiles: shared fellowship between Jews and gentiles (Acts 10:28); remission of sins for all who believe in Jesus (Acts 10:43); and baptism for all in the name of Jesus (Acts 10:47). Arguments about circumcision were settled, according to Acts 15, at the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem where it was decided that gentiles who converted to Christian Judaism no longer had to be circumcised. In his *Epistle to the Romans* (1:16–18), Paul insists that faith in God, morality, and ethical conduct, if not circumcision, bound Jews and converts alike to the Torah. But the only way to salvation was by repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38) through Jesus.

To many Jews such new directives, for example, repentance and baptism in Jesus Christ as the only means to salvation, were offensive. Moreover, the Jewish priests and scribes resented the popularity of Peter and Paul and the other missionaries, and they questioned their right to preach in this way (Acts 4:7). Fearing that the missionaries sought to replace Moses and the scriptures with faith in Jesus, a power struggle erupted among the various sects of Jews and Christian Jews. These examples from within the Jerusalem religious communities as well as from the tumultuous missionary experiences of Paul illustrate the growing conflict. Herod Agrippa I, who ruled in Jerusalem from 41–44

c.E., persecuted Christians in an effort to appease the traditional Jews who were not followers of Jesus and who were suffering under the increasing hostility and religious intolerance of local Roman governors. Often when Paul preached, local Jews rioted and stoned him, to force him to leave their synagogues and their cities. Both at Philippi in Greece and in Judea, Roman officials had to step in when the rioting became too serious. In Judea, fellow Christians feared for Paul's life and he was spirited away and brought before the Roman governor in Caesarea. There he was kept under house arrest for over two years. At that time he appealed his case to the emperor, a privilege reserved for Roman citizens, rather than stand trial against his accusers in Jerusalem. In 58

c.E., just before leaving Caesarea to go to Rome, Paul had an audience with Agrippa II, King of the Jews, and his sister Berenice at which Agrippa is reputed to have interrupted Paul's discourse to concede that he would soon make a Christian of him if he kept up his preaching. En route to Rome, where his case had been transferred, Paul was shipwrecked on Malta. Upon arriving in Rome, he was under house arrest but seems to have continued preaching until at least 64 c.E. Although Christian tradition provides several vivid accounts of Paul's death by martyrdom in Rome, perhaps under Nero, one of our most ancient documents (apart from the New Testament) is more vague. In the *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, the apostolic father Clement of Rome reports



FIGURE I.4. *The Arch of Titus. The treasures from the destruction of the Jewish Temple (70 c.E.) are displayed in this triumphal procession on the Arch of Titus in Rome.*

only that Paul departed from the world and was taken up to a holy place (*1 Clement* 5.6).

The impact of Paul's organized ministries in synagogues throughout the Diaspora was strengthened by the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E. under the Flavian emperors Vespasian and his son Titus. This war is considered by many to be the clear break between Judaism and Christianity: while the destruction of the Temple profoundly altered the nature of Judaism, Paul's message that salvation was possible without the law simultaneously hastened Christianity's transformation from a reform movement within Judaism into an *adversus Judaeos*, "against the Jews," religion. Christianity was a challenge to Judaism. For example, Christians conceived of Jesus as God and they believed that the prophecies of scripture were fulfilled in him, but this was something no Jew could accept; and although Jews and Christians both awaited the Messiah,

the Christians considered Jesus the Messiah and expected his return. By the early second century, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, had written a series of letters while traveling to his martyrdom in Rome in which he drew a clear line of separation between Christians and Jews, claiming that it was monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism.

Christianity and the Roman Empire

First to Second Centuries

For Romans, the distinction was not so clear. In the early second-century accounts of imperial reactions to Christians, Jews and Christians often seemed to be conflated, as the testimony of classical writers attests.

The historian Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (75–140 C.E.) wrote his *Lives of the Caesars* while serving in the court of Hadrian (117–138

FROM AN ANCIENT TEXT ❖ | . |

Tacitus on the Expulsion of Jews from Rome

Although not extant in their entirety, the Annals, written by the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (58–116 C.E.) treat the period from the death of Augustus to the death of Nero (14–68 C.E.). Annals 2.85 includes the account quoted below of Tiberius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome in 19 C.E.

Another debate dealt with the proscription of the Egyptian and Jewish rites, and a senatorial edict directed that four thousand descendants of freedmen, tainted with that superstition and of a suitable age, were to be shipped to the island of Sardinia to catch pirates and he said that if they were to die in the oppressive climate, it would be a cheap loss. The rest were to leave Italy unless they had renounced their profane rights by a certain day.

Source: Tacitus, Annals 2.85 in Tacitus, tr. John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library, 5 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937), vol. 3, Annals I–III, p. 517.

FROM AN ANCIENT TEXT ❖ | 2

Suetonius on the Expulsion of Jews from Rome

Tiberius

Suetonius twice mentions the expulsion of Jews from Rome: the first is under the emperor Tiberius in 19 C.E.

He abolished foreign cults, especially the Egyptian and the Jewish rites, compelling all who were addicted to such superstitions to burn their religious vestments and all their paraphernalia. Those of the Jews who were of military age he assigned to provinces of less healthy climate, ostensibly to serve in the army; the others of that same race or of similar beliefs he banished from the city, on pain of slavery for life if they did not obey.

Source: Suetonius, *Life of Tiberius* 36 in Suetonius, tr. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939), vol. 1, *The Lives of the Caesars*, p. 324.

Claudius

In the second instance, Jews are expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius in 49 C.E. Here, “the Jews” may have been Christians since they are charged with causing dissension at the instigation of a certain Chrestos, which may be a corruption of Christus (“Christ”).

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome.

Source: Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 25.3 in Suetonius, tr. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939), vol. 2, *The Lives of the Caesars*, p. 53.

C.E.). The *Lives of the Caesars* was published in 120 C.E. and includes biographies of the twelve Caesars from Julius Caesar to Domitian.

According to both Tacitus and Suetonius, the emperors expelled the Jews in fear that their proselytizing would result in larger close-knit religious communities that refused to participate in the religious practices, such

as sacrifices and emperor worship, of the wider Roman state.

The emperor Nero (*Lives of the Caesars*, *Nero*, 16.2) called Christianity a “new and depraved superstition” (*superstitio nova ac malefica*), and Tacitus (*Annals* 5.44.1-8), who served under Trajan as a provincial governor, tells us that Nero blamed the Christians for

FROM AN ANCIENT TEXT ❖ 1.3

Tacitus and Suetonius on Nero and the Christians

Both the Roman historians Cornelius Tacitus (58-116 C.E.) and Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (75-140 C.E.) corroborate Nero's conflict with the Christians. Christians are identified as troublemakers and Christianity as a new and malicious superstition that Nero attempted to check.

Tacitus on Nero

But these were only the precautions of human wisdom. Soon a way of propitiating the gods was sought, and the Sibylline Books were consulted and, according to the directions given there, prayers were offered to Vulcan, Ceres, and Proserpina. Juno was entreated by matrons, first in the Capitol, then on the nearest part of the coast, from where they drew water to sprinkle the temple and image of the goddess. And there were sacred banquets and all-night vigils celebrated by women with living husbands. But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor and the propitiations of the gods, could not dispel belief that the fire had been ordered. Consequently, to get rid of the rumor, Nero provided scapegoats and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on those hated for their abominations and popularly called Christians. Christus, the founder of the sect, was executed during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of the procurator, Pontius Pilatus. For the moment this pernicious superstition was checked, but it broke out again not only in Judea, the origin of the evil, but even in Rome, where all horrible and shameful things from every part of the world come together and gain a following. Accordingly, the first to be arrested were those who confessed; then, on their evidence, a huge multitude was convicted, not so much for the crime of arson in the city, as for their hatred of mankind. Mockery of every sort was heaped on them as they died: wrapped in the skins of wild beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or they were nailed to crosses, or prepared to be torched, so they could be burned as torches in the night. Nero gave his own gardens for this spectacle and performed a Circus game, in the habit of a charioteer mixing with the plebs or driving about the race-course. Even though they were clearly guilty and merited being made the most recent example of the consequences of crime, people began to pity these sufferers, because they were consumed not for the public good but on account of the fierceness of one man.

Source: Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.1-8 in *Tacitus*, tr. John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library, 5 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937, repr. 1991), vol. 5, *The Annals Books XIII-XVI*, pp. 283-285.

Suetonius on Nero

Punishments were inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and depraved superstition.

Source: Suetonius, "Life of Nero" 16.2 in *Suetonius*, tr. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939), vol. 1, *The Lives of the Caesars*, p. 111.



FIGURE I.5. *Story of the fiery furnace. The story of the redemption of three young men in the “fiery furnace” from the Old Testament (Daniel 3) is depicted in an early Christian setting. This late third-century painting is in the Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome.*

the great fire of 64 C.E. in Rome, in order to deflect the charge that he had started it himself so that he could build his famed *Domus Aurea* (“Golden House”). Tacitus’s account of the fire reveals the reason that Christians were despised enough to become Nero’s scapegoats: they were misanthropes who rejected civic intercourse. For this, Tacitus tells us, the Christians were covered with the skins of beasts and torn apart by dogs, or they were nailed to crosses and set on fire, then used as human torches to light the night. Suetonius also wrote of the antipathy Nero held for Christianity.

Pliny the Younger, who also served Trajan as a provincial governor, corresponded with him about the Christians. In his letter (*Epistula* 10.96) to Trajan, Pliny called Christianity a depraved and excessive superstition (*superstitio prava et immodica*) and described the Christian practices of worship and communion. He was unsure of whether he should punish those denounced to him as Christians, or how; whether he should allow them to recant; or whether they were genuinely conspiratorial and therefore subverting the interests of the state. For Trajan, as for his successor

FROM AN ANCIENT TEXT ❖ |.4

Pliny and Trajan on the Trials of the Christians

Pliny, friend of the emperor Trajan (98–117 C.E.), was sent to Asia Minor in 112 C.E. to the province of Pontus-Bithynia on the Black Sea. He wrote ten books of letters concerning his administration, among which are two letters on the Christians and their practices, the earliest by any Roman writer. In this exchange from his letters (10.96–97), Pliny seems to make a genuine attempt to deal fairly with the Christians, who are accused of impeding temple sacrifices.

Pliny to Trajan

It is my regular custom, my lord, to refer to you all questions which cause me doubt, for who can better guide my hesitant steps or instruct my ignorance? I have never attended hearings concerning Christians, so I am unaware what is usually punished or investigated, and to what extent. I am more than a little in doubt whether there is to be a distinction between ages, and to what extent the young should be treated no differently from the more hardened; whether pardon should be granted to repentance; whether the person who has been a Christian in some sense should not benefit by having renounced it; whether it is the name Christian, itself untainted with crimes, or the crimes which cling to the name which should be punished.

In the meantime, this is the procedure I have followed in the cases of those brought before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians. If they admitted it, I asked them a second and a third time, threatening them with execution. Those who remained obdurate I ordered to be executed, for I was in no doubt, whatever it was which they were confessing, that their obstinacy and their inflexible stubbornness should at any rate be punished. Others similarly lunatic were Roman citizens, so I registered them as due to be sent back to Rome.

Later in the course of the hearings, as usually happens, the charge rippled outwards, and more examples appeared. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians and called upon the gods after me, and with incense and wine made obeisance to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought in together with images of the gods for this very purpose, and who moreover cursed Christ (those who are truly Christian cannot, it is said, be forced to do any of these things), I ordered to be acquitted.

Others who were named by an informer stated that they were Christians and then denied it. They said that in fact they had been, but had abandoned their allegiance, some three years previously, some more years earlier, and one or two as many as twenty years before. All these as well worshipped your statue and images of the gods, and blasphemed Christ. They maintained,

however, that all that their guilt or error involved was that they were accustomed to assemble at dawn on a fixed day, to sing a hymn antiphonally to Christ as God, and to bind themselves by an oath, not for the commission of some crime, but to avoid acts of theft, brigandage, and adultery, not to break their word, and not to withhold money deposited with them when asked for it. When these rites were completed, it was their custom to depart, and then to assemble again to take food, which was however common and harmless. They had ceased, they said, to do this following my edict, by which in accordance with your instructions I had outlawed the existence of secret brotherhoods. So I thought it all the more necessary to ascertain the truth from two maidservants, who were called deaconesses, even by employing torture. I found nothing other than a debased and boundless superstition.

I therefore postponed the inquiry, and hastened to consult you, since this issue seemed to me to merit consultation, especially because of the number indicted, for there are many of all ages, every rank, and both sexes who are summoned and will be summoned to confront danger. The infection of this superstition has extended not merely through the cities, but also through the villages and country areas, but it seems likely that it can be halted and corrected. It is at any rate certain that temples, which were almost abandoned, have begun to be crowded, and the solemn rites which for long had been suspended are being restored. The flesh of the victims, for which up to now only a very occasional buyer was found, is now on sale in many places. This leads me readily to believe that if opportunity of repentance is offered, a large crowd of people can be set right.

Trajan to Pliny

You have followed the appropriate procedure, my Secundus, in examining the cases of those brought before you as Christians, for no general rule can be laid down which would establish a definite routine. Christians are not to be sought out. If brought before you and found guilty, they must be punished, but in such a way that a person who denies that he is a Christian and demonstrates this by his action, that is, by worshipping our gods, may obtain pardon for repentance, even if his previous record is suspect. Documents published anonymously must play no role in any accusation, for they give the worst example, and are foreign to our age.

Source: Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96–97 in *Pliny the Younger Complete Letters*, tr. P. G. Walsh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 278–279.

FROM AN ANCIENT TEXT ❖ 1.5

Rescript of Hadrian on the Christians

Like Trajan, Hadrian emphasizes the point that only public (not anonymous) accusations will be heard in Roman courts, and that false charges will be severely punished.

I have received a letter written to me by His Excellency Serennius Granianus, your predecessor. It is not my intention to leave the matter uninvestigated, for fear of causing the men embarrassment and abetting the informers in their mischief. If then the provincials can so clearly establish their case against the Christians that they can sustain it in a court of law, let them resort to this procedure only, and not rely on petitions or mere clamor. Much the most satisfactory course, if anyone should wish to prosecute, is for you to decide the matter. So if someone prosecutes them and proves them guilty of any illegality, you must pronounce sentence according to the seriousness of the offense. But if anyone starts such proceedings in the hope of financial reward, then for goodness sake arrest him for his shabby trick, and see that he gets his deserts.

Source: Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 4.9 in Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine, tr. G. A. Williamson, rev. and ed. Andrew Louth (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 112.

Hadrian, Christianity was no crime as long as Christians participated in the worship of the state gods. Both of these emperors advised their local governors not to accept anonymous denunciations of Christians and to pursue a practice of leniency where possible.

In his letter to the proconsul of Asia, Minucius Fundanus, in 124–125 C.E., the emperor Hadrian (117–138 C.E.) makes clear that a Christian must be accused of definite crimes under due process of law before being condemned, and if the charge is false, the accuser may be cross-charged.

Among the Flavians, Domitian accused Christians of atheism for refusing to worship him as a god. He also prosecuted members of his family in the imperial court for Judaizing, that is, worshipping and living like Jews but

refusing to pay the *fiscus Iudaicus*, the tax for the Temple in Jerusalem. Many scholars interpret this to mean that those who refused to pay the tax were not *really* Jews, but seemed to be to those who could not distinguish between Christians and Jews. So while the target of Domitian’s wrath seems to have been Jews or their sympathizers, in fact, “Judaizing” may refer to non-Jews (including Christians) who seem (still) very similar to Jews in their personal conduct and worship.

The second century saw the greatest geographical expansion of the Roman Empire—approximately 2.5 million square miles—under the famous widespread peace called the *pax Romana*, “Roman peace.” Some fifty to eighty million inhabitants stretching between Spain and the Rhine, Danube, and

Euphrates rivers, and from the Sudan northwest to Scotland lived under Roman rule. This perception of widespread peace inspired many Christian writers to consider the *pax Romana* as God's plan to ensure that Jesus' word could spread as efficiently as possible to the largest audience. In Rome alone there were estimated to be 1,000,000 people, who were governed by a broadly homogeneous imperial aristocracy. The economic structure of the empire was largely agrarian; there was a uniform currency and cheap labor. The *lingua franca*, "common language," in the west was Latin and in the east, Greek. Roman citizenship alone was enough to guarantee safe travel, and the general economic prosperity and peace promoted trade all over the empire. In this century, emperor worship was unchecked. Like a god on earth, the emperor governed all provinces, led the army, dispensed justice, and acted as the mediator between the gods and his citizens.

At the same time, the reverence the emperor demanded caused the Christian communities to erupt into open conflict with the state. To ensure the *pax deorum*, "peace of the gods," which, in turn, sustained the *pax Romana*, the emperor's *virtus*, "noble excellence," and *pietas*, "piety," had to be properly acknowledged through ritual rites performed by professional priests. Christians refused to do this. They were attacked as atheists who had apostasized from the old religion, the *mos maiorum*, "customs of the elders," and abandoned the mysteries, the sacrifices, and the initiations; they were said to practice Thyestean feasts (so called from the mythical banquet where Atreus killed his brother Thyestes's children and served them

to him) in taking the Eucharist, which they interpreted as the flesh and blood of Jesus; and to indulge in Oedipean intercourse (from the legend of Oedipus who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother) in kissing each other during their worship and referring to each other as "brother" or "sister" or "father." In the first two centuries, Christian apologists (from the Greek *apologia*, "speech in defense") wrote to counter the charges of cannibalism and incest against their faith.

At times, the Christians seem just as unsure as the pagans and Jews about the details of their religious practices. In many instances these are clarified as orthodox (from the Greek *orthodoxia*, "right thinking") after long theological and doctrinal clashes against the opposition, called heresy (from the Greek *hairesis*, "choice"). We have seen above that Gnosticism, the belief that certain elite people had special knowledge that ensured their salvation, in its varied forms was deemed a Christian heresy almost from its inception. We have also seen mentioned above the idea that God only appeared to be human but that he never really assumed a mortal incarnate existence, a heresy called Docetism (from the Greek *dokesis*, "disguise").

Third to Fourth Centuries

The third century, in sharp contrast to the widespread peace and prosperity of the second century, was rife with disaster, instability, and decline. Under the four Severans (193–235 C.E.), the empire moved toward military anarchy as pressure from the barbarians in the northern and eastern empire increased. Septimius



FIGURE I.6. *The Roman Empire*



Severus's wife Julia Domna and her sister Julia Maesa came to Rome bringing their native Syrian culture and a religious syncretism that was perpetuated in their sons and grandsons, rulers of the Severan dynasty. Elagabalus, Julia Maesa's grandson, proved to be a voluptuary on the scale of Nero; as a hereditary priest of the sun god of Emesa, his devotion to that deity had a long-term effect on Roman religion. He introduced the worship of the sun god to Rome when he transferred the black conical stone, the god's sacred symbol, from Emesa to the *Elagaballium*, the huge temple he built to receive it on the Palatine Hill. This movement toward henotheism (the belief in a single god while acknowledging others) in the form of a sun god would be revived under Aurelian (270–275 C.E.) and then again by Constantine (306–337) who in some ways conflated the sun god with the God of the Christians. Severus Alexander, the cousin of the fanatical Elagabalus, returned the black stone of the sun god to Syria and promoted religious syncretism. According to his biography in the *Historia Augusta* (29.2), a collection of Latin imperial biographies that are widely considered dubious, Alexander Severus is even said to have counted Jesus among the gods in his palace shrine; and, according to Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (6.21.3) Alexander Severus' mother Julia Mamaea sent an armed escort from Antioch to summon Origen, the great Alexandrian Christian theologian, to discuss Christian philosophy and doctrine with her.

From the time of Stephen, the Christian "proto-martyr" who was stoned to death in Jerusalem just after Jesus' death, there were iso-

lated instances of the persecution of Christians who refused to worship the gods of the state or the divinity of the Roman emperor. Under Marcus Aurelius, Justin Martyr was beheaded in Rome in 165 C.E., and several Christians were martyred in Lyon in 177 C.E. In 202 C.E., during the reign of Septimius Severus, a group of Christians was sent into the arena against wild beasts for refusing to worship the state gods at the celebrations for Geta's birthday in North Africa. Among these martyrs was the young noble woman Perpetua, whose martyrdom is unusual in that it was told in her own voice. In her *passio*, "martyrdom," Perpetua insisted that she could not recant, that she could not renounce Christianity, despite the fact that her father was beaten before her eyes and her newborn baby was wrenched away from her so that she could be taken to prison and then die in the arena fighting against wild beasts.

In the fifty years following the Severans, the fabric of the empire frayed. Barbarian invasions, depopulation, civil wars, and natural disasters led the emperors to attempt to restore the traditional forms of worship in order to win the favor of the gods. The emperors variously termed themselves *reparatores*, "restorers," or *conservatores patriae*, "preservers of the fatherland." In this period, a certain fear took root, that Christians were too active in all levels of the imperial government and that the old religion was being abandoned in favor of Christianity, to the empire's detriment. Under the emperor Philip (244–249 C.E.), coins issued in celebration of Rome's millennium (247 C.E.) bore the inscription *Roma aeterna*, "eternal Rome." The political ideal of Rome's

sacred mission and her *aeternitas*, “eternity,” gained momentum, the more so as Philip was considered by some contemporaries to be a practicing Christian. In fact, it was very likely the fear that the steady crumbling of the empire was retribution for the impiety of the Christians that led to his murder. The new emperor Decius (249–251), a Pannonian officer and Roman traditionalist, was welcomed by the senate and dubbed a new Trajan. He was staunchly anti-Christian; he is even said to have claimed that he would rather meet a rival emperor in the field than a Christian bishop in Rome. For Decius, only the restoration of the state religious practices could preserve the empire. In the first general persecution of the Christians, he insisted that all citizens obtain a *libellus*, “certificate,” as proof that they had poured a libation and sacrificed to the gods of the state and then tasted the sacrificial meat before a specially appointed commission. For Christians, this meant a denial of their faith. His conservative radicalism typified the new group of Illyrian soldiers that stood for traditional Roman values of which Diocletian and the tetrarchy were more severe examples.

Diocletian (284–305 C.E.), the son of slaves in the house of a senator, finally transformed the principate of Augustus into a theocracy (disguised as an absolute monarchy). Almost immediately upon taking office he proclaimed himself Augustus and associated himself with a subordinate co-ruler, and he reinstated the ancient Roman gods, most importantly *Iuppiter, conservator Augusti*, “Jupiter, the protector of Augustus.” The co-rulers assumed the titles *Iovius* and *Herculius*,

where Diocletian was the supreme ruler (like Jupiter) and Maximian his Herculan co-ruler. Shortly thereafter, Maximian was promoted to co-Augustus and a Caesar or co-ruler appointed to each. This was the beginning of the tetrarchy (from the Greek *tetrarchia*, “rule of four”): the Augustus Diocletian and his Caesar Galerius ruled in the east; the Augustus Maximian and his Caesar Constantius Chlorus ruled in the west. These leaders were worshipped as though they were gods. They insisted upon a splendid court ceremonial and depicted themselves as personifications of the Roman virtues and of the Roman state. Their rare appearances featured the scepter and the orb and they wore purple robes embroidered with silk. An extravagant adoration gave rise to an aura of the divine supernatural that was reiterated in their building programs.

Highly successful in their various military campaigns, the tetrarchs reorganized the army and secured the empire’s borders. From different and mobile locations around the empire, they regulated agriculture, industry, trade, and coinage. Moreover, this division of power was designed to ensure a peaceful succession.

Diocletian’s first visit to Rome may have been on the occasion of his twenty-year anniversary, the *Vicennalia*, in late 303 C.E. He seems not to have been present even in 299 C.E. to dedicate his ample baths project, the largest bath complex ever built in Rome. In May of 305 C.E., he abdicated and forced his co-Augustus Maximian to do the same. The world at that moment could fairly be described as at peace, yet the tetrarchs had launched the longest and most virulent persecution ever

undertaken against the church (303–313 C.E.). Why, after nineteen years of reforms and military victories and toleration for Christianity, Diocletian conceived of a superstitious fear that precipitated widespread persecution is unclear.

In February 303 C.E., by an edict of Diocletian, churches and scriptures were destroyed by fire; later that year, two more edicts were published requiring all ecclesiasts to make sacrifice to the gods. Only upon apostasizing could they be freed. In 304 C.E., a fourth edict required all Christians all over the empire to make sacrifices and pour libations to the gods. In a fifth and final edict in 308 C.E., all goods for sale in markets were polluted by sacrificial libations.

At Diocletian's abdication persecution in the west ended, partly because Constantius Chlorus had not implemented any but the first edict. In Rome, where Maximian's son Maxentius was quickly elected Augustus at his father's abdication, church property was restored immediately along with the freedom to worship the Christian God. Persecution continued in the east under Galerius until April of 311 C.E. When he knew he was dying, he freed confesors from prison and begged the Christians to pray to their God on his behalf. Maximinus Daia, however, the new Augustus in the east, continued the persecution even more horrifically. The church historian Eusebius (who cannot be considered unbiased) recorded seeing ninety-seven Christians, including children, en route to the mines, each missing the right eye and crippled in the left foot by hot irons, at Maximinus Daia's command.

Fourth Century: Constantine to Theodosius and the Primacy of the Church of Rome

Although the expectation was that Constantine, the son of Constantius, and Maxentius, the son of Maximian, would be appointed Caesars at the abdication of their fathers in 305 C.E., this did not happen. In the east, Galerius became the Augustus and appointed friends and relatives as his co-Augustus and their Caesars. This second tetrarchy fell into crisis at the death of Constantius in 306 C.E. His father's army immediately proclaimed Constantine the new Augustus and, shortly thereafter, Maxentius proclaimed himself *princeps*, "leader," in Rome. By 310 C.E., there were five different claims on the title of Augustus, and by October of 312 C.E., the two claimants in the west, Constantine and Maxentius, engaged in battle at the Milvian Bridge, just north of Rome. Here, just before the battle, Constantine is reported to have seen a vision in which he read the words *hoc signo vinces*, "by this sign you will conquer." He ordered his troops to mark their shields with the chi-rho symbol, the first two letters of the Greek *χριστός* ("Christ") superimposed upon one another. He was victorious in the battle and was quickly proclaimed Augustus by the senate. By imperial decree, the Christians were freed from persecution and from the enforced worship of the traditional religions of the empire.

In the scramble for power at the death of Constantius on July 25, 306 C.E., Maxentius, the son of the former Augustus Maximian, at first seemed to be the stronger contender. Over Constantine, the son of Constantius

and Helen, who, according to Ambrose, was a tavern keeper, he could claim that he was the legitimate son of an emperor; and, too, he was married to the daughter of Galerius, Augustus in the east. Moreover, he had the support of Rome, still a glorious and formidable power (at least nominally) and fractious in response to the steady diminution of its political clout under the tetrarchs. Constantine's victory against Maxentius and the traditional *mos maiorum*, therefore, seemed all the more influenced by the divinity of his vision. His building program was designed to broadcast the fact that Christianity was now a favored religion but also to suppress the memory of Maxentius whose own extensive building program was dedicated to the history and civic values of the *mos maiorum*. The strong visualization of Christianity in sacred sites ultimately converted Rome into the Christian center of the church. Next to beautiful temples and statues commissioned by secular aristocrats were the Christian holy places, the basilicas commissioned by Constantine. In the catacombs, especially, pagan and Christian images are (sometimes jarringly) juxtaposed. Rome took on its unique pagan, imperial, and Christian character in precisely this period though Constantine founded and consecrated Constantinople, the modern Istanbul, as the new Christian capital in 330 C.E.

After Constantine, the only return to a pagan imperial government occurred during the reign of Julian (361–363 C.E.) who was Constantine's nephew. As a young boy, he had seen his own father and several male

relatives murdered by his Christian relatives in dynastic rivalry. Though he was raised as a Christian he seems to have acquired an abiding love of Greek and Latin literature and philosophy. As a young man he apostasized from Christianity to worship a syncretistic religious philosophy. When he became emperor in 361 C.E., he immediately issued an Edict on Religious Toleration and ordered that pagan temples, altars, sacrifices, and priesthoods be reinstated. State support for Christianity was minimized although there was no overt persecution. His aim was to unite the empire under a shared high culture based upon the Greek ideal of education, called *paideia*. For Julian, the divine word of the gods, the way to true salvation, was revealed in the incomparable and quasi-divine literature of writers like Homer, Hesiod, and Demosthenes and in the culture such literature engendered. Christians, on the other hand, bereft of this literary culture, relied upon the strange (he called it “deranged”) myth of Jesus Christ. Because they rejected Hellenism, Julian issued the Edict on Teaching in 362 C.E. that forbade Christian teachers to teach classical literature. In another anti-Christian directive later that same year, he ordered that the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt. Upon his death a year later, the Christian Jovian became emperor. That high-ranking polytheists in Julian's court (who could have) did not attempt to become emperor or to continue his reforms suggests that they did not fear the religious policies of a Christian emperor, and that Christians and non-Christians were not so clearly divided as our modern perspective suggests.

From Constantine to Theodosius the duality of pagan and Christian Rome persisted—in architecture, sculpting, painting, and literature. The east could boast shrines and sites with biblical and New Testament associations, but Rome had the bones of the martyrs Peter and Paul, the twin founders of the church. Yet this was not enough to make Rome the major see of the early church. In addition to the apostolic association Rome claimed through the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, and in addition to Constantine’s Christian building program, it was still necessary for Christians to appropriate a Christian antiquity. This they did in the Codex-Calendar of 354 C.E. and in the rise of the worship of saints, under Pope Damasus (366–384 C.E.).

The Codex-Calendar established a Christian identity for Rome that could be traced well into antiquity, parallel to its polytheistic heritage. By associating commemorations and feasts for the Christian martyrs with pagan religious festivals and celebrations, the Codex-Calendar melded pagan and Christian sacred time and authenticated a Christian history. In addition to the Codex-Calendar, Constantine’s churches built around the periphery of the city formed a liturgical pattern of sacred commemorative spaces. The tombs of Peter and Paul secured the identity of *Roma Christiana*, that is, “Christian Rome,” in the apostolic succession of churches. Pope Damasus effectively consecrated Rome as the center of pilgrim worship. Sainted bishops’ and martyrs’ tombs and their relics become popular pilgrimage sites, and under Damasus

rites associated with relics, sacred Christian places, and Christian epigrams established Rome as a “new” Jerusalem.

Conclusion

Constantine adapted the vital tenet—*quid pro quo*—of polytheism to Christianity. He attempted to unify the empire in a single religious experience that had widespread appeal. The divinity, pleased by the broad worship, would (he anticipated) respond favorably. By establishing Christianity as a state religion and by inaugurating a vast and splendid Christian building program that invited all levels of society to convert, Constantine reestablished the old polytheistic pattern of common rituals and shared values. Among rival sects and heresies he promoted harmony, so that the state could receive the full benefit of the divinity’s prescribed and united worship, just as had been insisted upon by so many previous emperors who persecuted the Christians for refusing to worship the state gods. Damasus oversaw the development of the cult of martyrs and saints whose relics and tombs formed a new Christian topography around which liturgies and pilgrimages developed. His interpretation, like that of Constantine, relied upon the same *quid pro quo* association with the gods that polytheistic Rome had demanded: pilgrims who performed the “sacrifices” properly, that is, who came to Rome to pray at the tombs of martyrs and saints, would be heard by God.

The literary debate over traditional polytheism and Christianity is played out in the texts of Symmachus and Ambrose who contend between themselves in a published correspondence about the removal of the altar of Victory from the Roman senate house. The identity of Rome was in the balance. Polytheism had the strength of antiquity, the traditional *mos maiorum*; Christianity had imperial support.

Through their combined efforts, Constantine, who institutionalized Christianity, Damasus, who organized Rome as a web of holy places, and the Christian emperors who passed legislation against pagan religious practices and gave legal sanction to Christianity created *Roma Christiana*, the new center of the Christian church, over and above Jerusalem and Constantinople.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1 What does the Latin phrase *quid pro quo* mean, and how does it apply to Roman cult practice?
- 2 Using the bibliographic resources provided at the end of this book, conduct further research into the differences and similarities—organization, relationships with native populations, treatment of the emperor, and so on—between the eastern and western imperial cults.
- 3 List the different sects of Jews that inhabited ancient Palestine and provide a brief description of each.
- 4 Is it appropriate to speak of early Christianity as a religion *adversus Judaeos* (“against the Jews”)? At what point did early Christianity break away from Judaism, and on what points did the two faiths disagree?
- 5 Why did early Christians come into conflict with Roman authorities? What criminal charges were frequently raised against early Christians and why?