

THE EARLIST CHRISTIANS

The 1st Century

The death and resurrection of Jesus occurred in about AD 30 (there is some debate about the actual year). After his ascension from the Mt. of Olives, the disciples of Jesus passed through several important transitions for the balance of the century.

JEWISH PERIOD (Pentecost until after Stephen's martyrdom)

INCLUSION OF NON-JEWS (Samaritans, God-fearers, and converted pagans are added)

CHRISTIANITY BECOMES AN ILLEGAL RELIGION (after the 1st Jewish Revolt, Christians were no longer considered by the Romans to be a sect of Judaism, which had legal status from the Roman Senate; now, they were a religion apart without legal status)

The Jewish Period of the Church

The first important event after Jesus' ascension was the descent of the Holy Spirit. According to Luke, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and were "continually at the temple" (Lk. 24:53). Later, however, Luke indicates that they entered an upper room, where the apostles had been staying (Ac. 1:12-13). Traditionally, this upper room has been believed to be a private residence, the same site as the Last Supper, and due to this ancient tradition, pilgrims ever since the Crusades have been shown a room that stands above a Jewish-Christian synagogue. The columns in this building, reused by the Crusaders in the 12th-13th century, seem to have come from one of the earlier Byzantine churches that once stood adjacent. Carved pelicans with folded wings encircle the pillar capitals, based on the ancient belief (according to Pliny the Elder's 1st century *Natural History*) that parent pelicans feed their young with their own blood, even to the point of sacrificing their own lives. In turn, the pelican became an early Christian symbol for Christ's sacrifice.



This capital from the traditional site of the upper room features a pelican feeding two of its young with its own blood.

It is possible, given what Luke says at the end of his gospel, that the disciples stayed evenings in the upper room but were in the temple in the daytime. If so, then the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost may have occurred in the temple precincts rather than in a residential upper room, and this seems even more likely, since a great crowd of some 3000 assembled to hear Peter's sermon (Ac. 2:5-11, 41). These listeners were all baptized, and it seems likely that these baptisms, which followed the Jewish pattern, would have been conducted in the many *mikva'ot* that surrounded the temple edifice or perhaps in one or more of the large pools in Jerusalem, such as, Bethesda or Siloam.

NT ARCHAEOLOGY

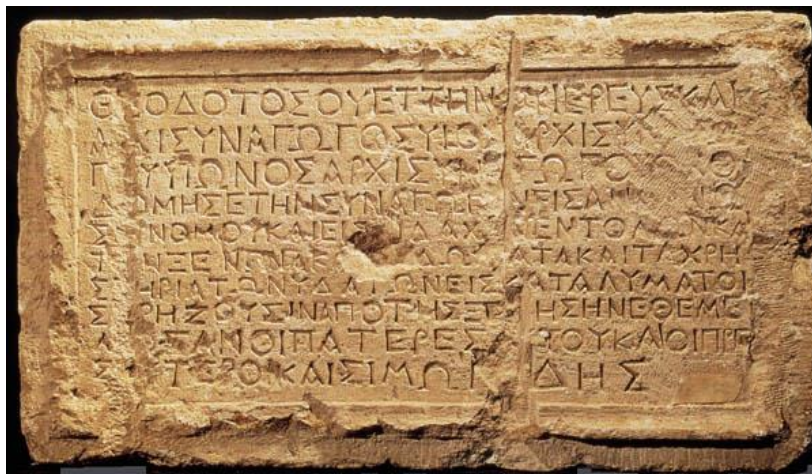
It was natural that the earliest Christians, all of whom were Jews (Ac. 6:7; 11:19), should be centered in Jerusalem, where Jesus had spent his final days before his death. The transition between Judaism and Christianity was neither immediate nor sharp. Christians continued to use the same biblical texts (whether in Hebrew or Greek). Basic structures seemed to retain their value, especially the idea of covenant, ethnicity, and temple. They continued to use the temple as



This excavated mikveh south of the Temple Mount may have been one of the ones used by the apostles to baptize the 3000 candidates at Pentecost.

sacred space, meeting there and observing the hours of Jewish prayer (Ac. 2:46; 3:1; 5:12, 20-21, 42a; 21:20-26). They continued to attend synagogue worship as well (Ac. 6:9ff.). However, Jews who remained opposed to Jesus were regarded as rejecting God's messiah (Ac. 3:22-23; 4:8-12). The message to fellow Jews as to change their minds about Jesus, for in him alone was true forgiveness (Ac. 2:38; 5:30-31). Such teaching was bound to bring the early Christians into sharp conflict with the Sanhedrin and the Temple, who easily cast them as anti-Torah and anti-Temple—and this is precisely what happened (Ac. 6:11-14; 7:48-53).

The tension came to a head due to an early Christian leader named Stephen, who vigorously debated with his fellow Jews (Ac. 6:9b-10). Stephen seems to have been associated with a certain



The Theodotus inscription describes this synagogue with hostelry facilities for diaspora Jews. Some scholars believe it to be the synagogue of Stephen and Saul of Cilicia.

Synagogue of the Freedmen (Ac. 6:9a), and some scholars have identified it with an excavated inscription from a 1st century Jerusalem synagogue. This synagogue not only was a place for prayer and reading the Torah, it also included a hostelry with rooms and baths for the accommodation of Jews traveling from abroad. Luke's description of a synagogue for "freedmen" suggests that it may have been a congregation

largely made up of former slaves who, after emancipation, returned to Jerusalem to live and worship together in a Greek-speaking congregation.

Going Beyond the Jewish Boundary

Stephen's debates ultimately led to him being lynched as the first Christian martyr, a stoning witnessed by Saul, a young rabbi from Cilicia who was studying under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel (Ac. 7:54-60; 22:3). A vitriolic persecution now began against the Christians from their fellow Jews (Ac. 8:1-3), and many of them began to leave Jerusalem. Philip went to Samaria and preached there (Ac. 8:4), and later, he baptized an Ethiopian eunuch in the Gaza Strip, possibly at Ein Yael (Ac. 8:36-38). In general, however, the Christians who fled northward from Jerusalem toward Phoenicia, the island of Cyprus, and Antioch, Syria only shared the message of Jesus with other Jews (Ac. 11:19). Two incidents, however, would change their limited perspective.

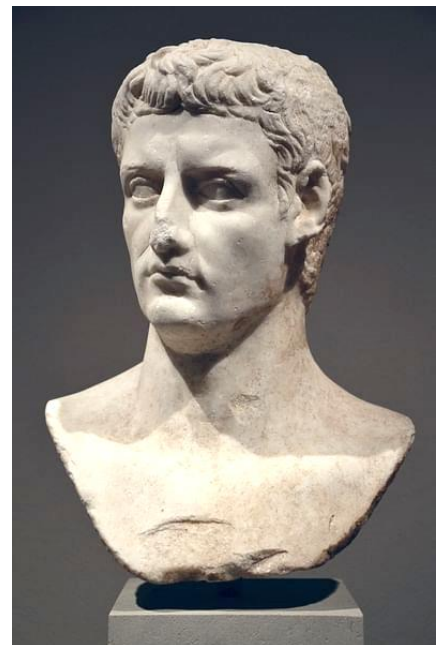


This roster of God-fearers from Aphrodisias includes some 54 Gentiles alongside Jews from the synagogue.

The first was the conversion of a Gentile God-fearer in Caesarea through Simon Peter (Ac. 10). God-fearers were sympathizers to Judaism associated with the synagogues but not full converts, and they are known from Latin and Greek literature as well as Josephus and Philo. They are referenced in the New Testament as well (Lk. 7:1-10; Ac. 10:2; 13:16). At an ancient theater in Miletus, some synagogue seats seem to have been reserved for God-fearers.

The second was an overt outreach in Antioch, Syria to Greeks (Ac. 11:20). Here, Christians were first dubbed with the name "Christian"

(Ac. 11:26b). At Antioch, a Christian prophet predicted an empire-wide famine, which occurred during the tenure of Claudius Caesar, and in response to this prediction, the Antioch church sent a relief offering to the Christians in Jerusalem (Ac. 11:27-30). Even more important, the Antioch church would become the first sending-church for missionaries to the larger Greco-Roman world (Ac. 13:1-3).



Claudius Caesar (Emperor 41-54 AD)

The broadening of the boundaries of Christianity to include God-fearers and Greeks lay behind the first missionary effort, and Luke introduces us to the central figure in this effort by describing

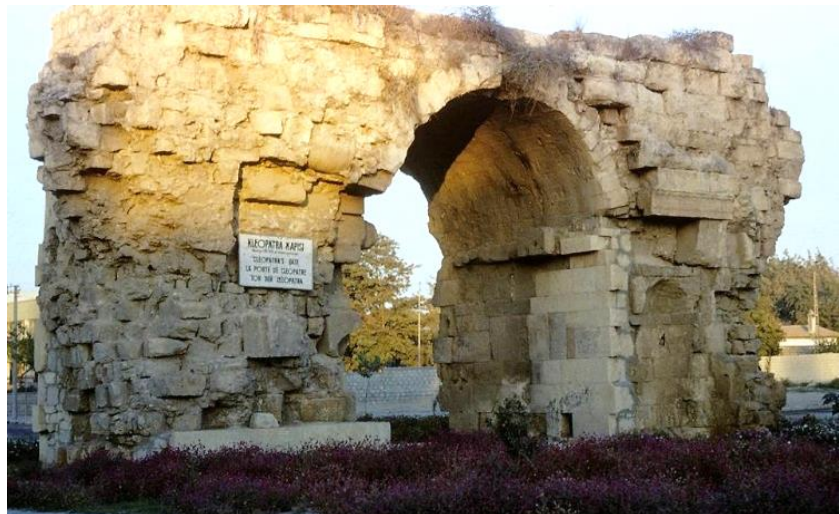


The Corona Muralis was an adornment of Fortuna, goddess of cities.

the conversion of Saul, the young rabbi from Cilicia who witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen (Ac. 9). Serving as an inquisitor for the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, Saul was on his way to Damascus to extradite Christian Jews, where by his own admission, he had been testifying against them as blasphemers all the way to the death penalty (Ac. 22:4-5; cf. Dt. 13:9-10). Near Damascus, he was suddenly struck to the ground and blinded by a heavenly light. The voice of the risen Jesus spoke to him, telling him to find Ananias, a Christian in Damascus on Straight Street, who would tell him what to do. Subsequently, Saul was baptized and immediately began to preach in the Damascus synagogues that Jesus was God's very own Son. His debates were so successful that the Jews in Damascus conspired to assassinate him, and his new Christian friends slipped him out of town by lowering him in a basket over the city wall. Later, Paul would recount this incident in a veiled irony, since "going over the wall" was an action of heroism in the Roman

army, but for Paul, an ignominious escape (2 Co. 11:32-33). The first soldier who "went over the wall" was awarded a wall crown; Paul was awarded nothing at all—but at least he escaped whole.

Saul (his Hebrew name) is better known as Paul (his Roman *cognomen*), and in time, he would become the most active missionary in the early church and write about a quarter of the New Testament. As a diaspora Jew, his home was in Tarsus, Cilicia, but he had traveled to Jerusalem to study with Gamaliel, and apparently, he had a sister in Jerusalem with whom he presumably stayed (Ac. 23:16). After his conversion, he spent time in the Nabataean kingdom (Ga. 1:13-17), then returned to his home in Tarsus for a time (Ac. 9:30; Ga. 1:21). Roman ruins in Tarsus consist of three gates, including Cleopatra's Gate.



One of three gates surviving from the Roman Period, Cleopatra's Gate led into the city of Tarsus from the Cydmus River. Its name derives from a state visit Cleopatra made to Tarsus in 38 BC.