

## CHRISTIANITY – THE FIRST 300 YEARS

### The Apostolic Period

#### JESUS AND THE NEW ISRAEL

One of the most striking things about the teachings of Jesus was his emphatic link with the Old Testament, but at the same time, a link with new dimensions. Jesus was clear: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mt. 5:17). Everywhere in his ministry, Jesus interacted with the Old Testament, often using the phrase, “It is written...” (e.g., Mk. 7:6; 9:12-13; 11:17; 14:21, 27, etc.). All four gospels have this ubiquitous feature. While Jesus did not follow the oral tradition of the Pharisees, who claimed it had been handed down from Moses (Mk. 7:1-8), he was unequivocal that the written Scriptures would stand unbroken (Jn. 10:34-36).

At the same time, Jesus also anticipated a New Israel. The fact that he chose Twelve from among the larger body of his followers to be his special emissaries, calling them apostles (Lk. 6:13-16), suggested that a New Israel was in view. The number 12, the number of the original tribes of Israel, is hardly coincidental. He also sent out 70 of his disciples to preach in the Galilean villages, and this number is also pregnant with meaning, since 70 was the traditional number of Jacob’s family who went down into Egypt (Lk. 10:1; Ex. 1:5), not to mention the number of elders that Moses appointed as overseers for the Israelite nation (Ex. 24:1, 9).

What is most remarkable about this vision of a New Israel is that the boundaries would be stretched beyond the old limitations of Jewish pedigree. Though during his public ministry Jesus generally only reached out to other Jews (Mt. 10:5; 15:24), at the same time he began crossing the Jewish ethnic boundary to minister to non-Jews (Mt. 15:22, 28; Lk. 7:2-10). He even indicated that some from among the “sons of the kingdom” (i.e., Jews) would be expelled from God’s kingdom, while others from the east and west would be included, implying non-Jews (Mt. 8:11-12). He cogently announced that he had “other sheep that are not of this fold,” again implying Gentiles (Jn. 10:16). The climax of the gospels is the so-called “great commission” in which Jesus directed his followers to go to the nations (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:15; Lk. 24:46-47).



That non-Jews who came to faith in Jesus would now be included as constituent members of the children of God is carried over into the writings of the apostles. Paul uses the analogy of a “wild” olive branch grafted into the natural olive root to illustrate this union (Ro. 11:17-24). He emphasized that all who came to faith were to be considered children of Abraham, regardless of ancestry (Ro. 4:16-17), and even more to the point, that not all those descended from Israel were

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true Israelites (Ro. 9:6-7). Hence, if one belongs to Christ he belongs to Abraham's "seed," pedigree notwithstanding (Ga. 3:26-29). It is this body of mixed ethnicity that Paul can describe as the true "Israel of God" (Ga. 6:15-16). Those once separated because of bloodlines are now "brought near" (Ep. 2:13), and out of both Jew and non-Jew God has created "one new man," where both Jew and non-Jew are "fellow citizens with God's people and full members of God's household" (Ep. 2:14-22). The language that once described the ancient children of Israel at Mt. Sinai would now be used by Peter to describe this New Israel of faith (1 Pe. 2:9-10).

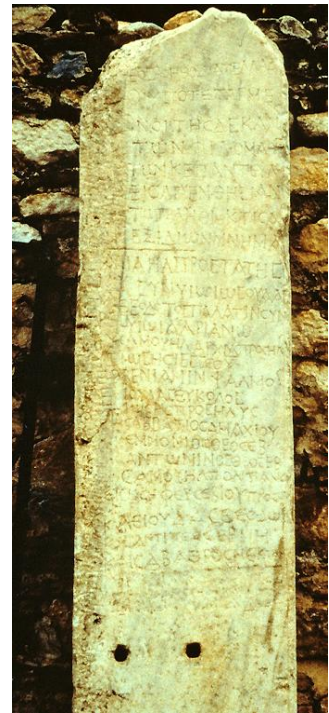
### CROSSING ETHNIC BARRIERS

This vision of a New Israel notwithstanding, crossing ethnic lines beyond the Jewish circle did not come easily for the earliest Christians, all of whom were Jewish. Much of the Book of Acts is given to this issue. The first big hurdle was Samaria, a Yahweh-worshipping ethnicity that Jews ordinarily castigated. Phillip, one of the earliest deacons, began an outreach to the Samaritans, and when many came to faith in Christ (Ac. 8:5-8), the Jerusalem church sent a delegation to investigate (Ac. 8:14). The upshot was that Samaritans who believed in Jesus were also to be accepted (Ac. 8:25). Surely Peter and John, the apostles who investigated this outreach, must have remembered that Jesus also reached out to Samaritans (Jn. 4:4ff.) and had spent two days in Samaria, where many became believers (Jn. 4:40-42).

The next barrier turned out to be a Gentile God-fearer. God-fearers were non-Jews who favored the Jewish religion, attending synagogues, but who had not become proselytes. Here, Peter was the main instrumental in the conversion of a Roman centurion God-fearer (10:2, 22). Peter had experienced a strange vision (Ac. 10:9-18), which compelled him to acknowledge that anyone God accepted must not be considered an outsider. The Roman officer was subsequently baptized (10:47-48). Of course, Peter had some explaining to do when he got back to Jerusalem, and he was criticized for associating with Gentiles (Ac. 11:1-3). In the end, however, the Jerusalem apostles opened their hearts and accepted these Gentile God-fearers as well (Ac. 11:18).

Up to this time, Jewish Christians had only shared the message of Jesus with other Jews (Ac. 11:19), but now some of them traveled to Antioch, Syria, the third largest city in the empire, and began to speak to raw pagans (Ac. 11:20-21). Many came to faith! Once again, the Jerusalem church sent an investigative representative, a deeply respected man named Barnabas, who confirmed that all was well here, too (Ac. 11:22-24).

The capstone would be the missionary journeys of Paul. The Antioch church, who first shared the message of Jesus with Gentile pagans, would become the first church to send missionaries into the Gentile world under the leadership of Paul and Barnabas, and later, Paul and Silas. Luke describes three lengthy mission trips in detail,



*This roster of God-fearers is one of various inscriptions referring to pious Gentiles who were sympathetic to the Jewish religion. It lists 54 Gentiles associated with a local synagogue.*

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resulting in new Christian congregations Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece (Ac. 13:1-3 and extending through chapter 20). Paul would eventually be arrested (Ac. 21:33) and sent to Rome under armed guard (Ac. 27:1ff.), and Luke’s description of the early church in the Book of Acts climaxes with one, powerful word—*ακωλυτως* (= unhindered) ...*proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus with all boldness—unhindered* (Ac. 28:31).

## THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS

The earliest Christian literature begins within just a few years of the death of Jesus. It starts in about AD 49 with a letter composed by the Jerusalem church to the new Gentile congregations, a letter resolving a problem in which some Jews were urging that Gentiles who came to faith in Christ had to become Jews in order to become Christians (Ac. 15:1, 5, 23-29). This letter from the apostles negated this point of view and was carried northward by Paul and some other Christian



*P46, the earliest copy of the Roman letter containing Romans 11:36—12:8 and dating to ca. AD 200.*

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P. Mich. Inv. 6238  
Epistles of Paul  
Romans 11,36 - 12,  
Romans 12,10 - 13,

leaders, where it was publicly read to the church in Antioch (Ac. 15:22, 30-31), and eventually, to the new congregations beyond (Ac. 16:4-5). Even more importantly, other Christian literature began appearing. James wrote a letter of moral advice, often echoing the teachings of Jesus, to Christians who were facing “trials of many kinds” (Ja. 1:2). We don’t know exactly when he wrote, but since he was martyred in AD 62, it had to have been earlier than that, probably sometime in the 50s perhaps even the late 40s. Christians, apparently, were still attending the synagogues at the time of writing (Ja. 2:2).<sup>1</sup>

More well-known, of course, are the letters of Paul, where 13 known documents have been preserved in the New Testament. (Paul wrote more than these 13, cf. 1 Co. 5:9; Col. 4:16, but they have not survived.)

Very early, Paul’s letters were copied and began circulating among the Christian churches. Peter, for instance, offers the somewhat humorous assessment that Paul was not always easy to understand (2 Pe. 3:15-16), a point more than a few would echo over the centuries since, but remarkably, he did not hesitate to include Paul’s letters with “the

other Scriptures,” which almost certainly refer to the texts in the Hebrew Bible. As such, Paul gives us the earliest written material about Jesus (e.g., 1 Co. 15:3-8) and the theology of the early

<sup>1</sup> The Greek word James uses to describe Christian meetings is *συναγωγή* (= synagogue).

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church. His earliest letter, probably Galatians, would have been written in the late 40s, his Thessalonian letters in about 50, the Corinthian and Roman letters in the mid to late 50s.

The dates for the composition of the four gospels are debated, but the salient point is that all of them were written within the lifetime of living witnesses who had heard and known Jesus personally. Such witnesses served as implicit guarantors to the authenticity of the record. As the pool of living witnesses became smaller due to death, it was incumbent to preserve the accounts of Jesus' teachings and actions by those who had known him best. This oral tradition, which had been carefully preserved in the memories of the earliest Christians, soon became a written tradition. Most scholars reckon Mark's Gospel as the earliest of the four and date it about AD 65, since, according to Papias (an important early Christian post-apostolic leader), Mark's Gospel preserves the memories of Simon Peter, and presumably Mark would have written it upon Peter's death (though possibly earlier). Matthew and Luke would be somewhat later, and John was probably the last to be composed, probably in the 90s.

### THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCHES

Many New Testament appearances of the word *ἐκκλησία* (= church) refer to individual congregations in the various towns and cities. It is used as a plural to refer to the congregations collectively (Ac. 15:41; 16:5; Ro. 16:4, etc.), and it is used as a singular to refer to some congregation in particular (Ac. 13:1; 18:22; 1 Co. 16:19b). However, a broader use of this term develops to refer to the whole body of Christians in the Roman world. As such, "the church" is a universal term. When Paul speaks of the "church of God" or simply "the church" (1 Co. 10:32; 12:28; 15:9; Ep. 1:22; 3:21, etc.), he is not referring any particular congregation, but rather, to the whole church in the whole world. Later, this would come to be described by the term "catholic" (Greek *καθολικός*; Latin *catholicus*), meaning universal, which is to say, the whole church. Ignatius of Antioch is the first to use the term "catholic church" in his letter to the Smyrnaeans in about AD 110.



*Ancient church at Antioch, Syria (modern Antakya, Turkey) in a cave above the city. Peter is believed to have preached here.*

### THE END OF THE APOSTOLIC PERIOD

The Apostolic Period ends with the death of John in about AD 100. He was the last living apostle. With his death, the pool of those who had known Jesus personally came to an end. The baton was now passed to the second generation of Christians, many of whom had been disciples of the apostles. It was their task to preserve unchanged the message of Jesus. While there would be developments as the Christian church moved forward, the center would hold.