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The Jesus Movement

1. Jews and Gentiles in the early Church

We must leave to our New Testament studies an account of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. What we will be looking at here is the impact which that life and ministry had on men and women in the 1st century AD – the beginnings of Church history. Our primary source is, of course, the book of Acts.

Early Christianity and the early Church were what we could call a *Jesus movement*. In its first years, this was a religious movement which blossomed exclusively within the confines of Judaism, and revolved around Jerusalem as its spiritual home. The original followers of Jesus were all Jews, and they had no intention of being anything other than faithful and pious Jews. They continued to worship in the Jerusalem temple, to obey the law of Moses, and to have a negative attitude towards Gentiles. The living heart of their faith was not so much the death as the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus was executed, despair had engulfed His followers: they seemed to have a dead leader and a lost cause. It was Jesus's resurrection from the dead that transformed these broken and despairing people into the fiery apostles and martyrs of a new faith – a faith which, within three centuries, and despite vigorous persecution, would conquer the whole Roman Empire. In the thought and preaching of the early Church, the resurrection was seen as God's mighty vindication of all Jesus's claims: He really was the long-promised Messiah of Israel, the Son of God, the Saviour of sinners, the source of God's gift of the Holy Spirit to all who obeyed Him

(see, for example, Acts 2:33-36, 4:10-12, 13:30-39, 17:30-32, and Rom. 1:3-4). So whichever period of Church history we are studying, it is always worth pausing and reminding ourselves of this: *the entire history of the Christian Church is rooted in one central reality – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*. If Jesus of Nazareth had not risen, there would be no Church history. The rest of the story told in these pages flows out of the resurrection.

The early Church, then, started its life as a purely Jewish movement, a sect within Judaism. Yet by the end of the 1st century, events had transplanted the Church from its original Jewish soil into the Gentile world, where it became an almost exclusively Gentile movement. How did this astonishing change take place? We find some clues in Acts.

The process of transition began when tensions arose within the early Christian community in Jerusalem between Palestinian Jews, and Jews from a more Hellenistic background (“Hellenism” means Greek culture – see Chapter 1, section 1, under *A common intellectual culture*). We find this tension described in Acts 6, where Luke refers to the two parties as, literally, “the Hebrews” and “the Hellenists”. Many Jews, as we saw in Chapter 1, lived outside Palestine in lands where Hellenistic culture was dominant, such as Egypt and Asia Minor. So the “Hellenists” of Acts 6 were Jews who had been born in a Hellenistic country and grown up in a Hellenistic culture, speaking Greek as their first language. They had then either moved into Palestine and settled there, or perhaps were there as pilgrims for the passover feast. The chief language spoken in Palestine was Aramaic, not Greek, and Hellenistic Jews would have known little or no Aramaic. The “Hebrews”, by contrast, were the Jews native to Palestine. They knew some Greek, but Aramaic was their first language, and they had less contact with Hellenistic culture, which some of them despised as Pagan.

This cultural divide between Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews would already have produced friction between them before any of them became Christians. The problem was that the Palestinians thought of themselves as the true Jews, born and

brought up in the Jewish homeland which God had given to their ancestors, and they looked on Hellenistic Jews as partly foreign, perhaps corrupted by contact with Pagan society. On the other hand, Hellenistic Jews tended to think of themselves as being more cultured and civilised than their Palestinian cousins. They regarded Palestinian Jews as rather narrow-minded, too traditional, not aware enough of the outside world. (This description of Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews applies only in a general way to what most of them tended to be like. There were exceptions. The most notable exception was the apostle Paul, who was brought up in the Hellenistic city of Tarsus in Asia Minor, but surpassed even the Palestinian Jews in his intolerant zeal for traditional Judaism, before his Damascus road experience convinced him that Jesus was the Messiah.)

These existing problems between Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews carried over into the Jesus movement. Jesus of Nazareth had followers from both the Hellenistic and Palestinian sections of the Jewish people, and the friction between them continued, despite their common faith in the risen Messiah. Acts 2:44-45 relates how the early Christian community in Jerusalem cared for its poorer members; the provision of food for Christian widows was part of that system of care, since widows were unable to support themselves economically and depended on others. However, the Hellenists felt (rightly or wrongly) that the widows from their section of the community were not getting a fair deal. Luke records in Acts 6 how the Hellenists complained that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food. This particular problem was resolved by the appointment of seven deacons whose names are all Greek – an indication that they were elected from the Hellenistic group within the Jesus movement. But the underlying tensions between Palestinian and Hellenistic believers remained.

The non-traditional attitudes and outlook of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians surfaced in a dangerous way when they began to take a more openly negative, critical stance towards the history and traditions of Israel. It seems that they started to view these things afresh in the light of their new faith in Jesus, and to show

less respect for the temple and the law of Moses than was customary. Their spokesman was the Hellenistic deacon Stephen, and his lengthy speech recorded in Acts 7 shows us the sort of criticisms that Hellenistic believers could make of Jewish history and tradition. This provoked and outraged the Jewish authorities, and led to the first great persecution of the Church. Stephen was stoned to death, and many believers were forced to flee from Jerusalem. This persecution, however, seems mainly to have affected the Hellenistic section of the Church. The more traditionally minded Palestinian believers, represented by the apostles, were mostly left alone by the Jewish authorities; Luke makes it clear in Acts 8:1 that the apostles were not affected by the persecution. Ordinary Palestinian believers who were scattered from Jerusalem would have dispersed into other parts of Palestine, and then reassembled in Jerusalem after the trouble had died down, as Acts 11:1 indicates. Hellenistic believers, however, appear to have left Palestine entirely.

From this point onwards the Christian community in Jerusalem was purified of its Hellenistic elements, and became entirely Hebrew and Palestinian in character. It was led by **James**, known as “the Lord’s brother” (Gal. 1:19, 2:9), who remained so faithful to Jewish tradition that even unbelieving Jews admired him. Much debate has centred on the identity of James. Some think he was the same person as James the apostle, son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3, Acts 1:13). If so, his title “the Lord’s brother” must mean “the Lord’s kinsman” or “cousin”, otherwise the apostle James would be called “son of Joseph” rather than “son of Alphaeus”. (The word “brother” can be used in the Bible in this more general sense of “kinsman”, rather than strictly “brother”.) Whether or not James the Lord’s brother was the same person as James the apostle, he clearly played a dominant role in the Jerusalem church – see Acts 15. Also known as James the Righteous, he was martyred in AD 62 by the Pharisees. According to early Church tradition, James was appointed by the apostles as the first bishop of the church in Jerusalem (see Chapter 3, section 2 for bishops in the early Church, and the end of this Chapter for the story of James’s martyrdom).

The scattering of the Hellenistic believers from Palestine was the event which first took the Jesus movement into the non-Jewish world. First, the Hellenistic Christians broke through the age-old divide between Jews and Samaritans, as Luke narrates in Acts 8. Philip, one of the Hellenistic deacons, was responsible for this bold venture. The Samaritans were of mixed Jewish and Gentile descent, existing on the borderlands between Judaism and the Gentile world. Acts 10 then relates how the centurion Cornelius and his kinsmen became the first Gentile converts in Palestine; but Cornelius had already embraced most of the teachings of Judaism – he was a “God-fearer”.

The first largely Gentile church from a Pagan background was founded outside of Palestine in the Roman province of Syria, in the great Eastern city of Antioch. Although Antioch had a big Jewish community, it was basically a vast, throbbing centre of Gentile Hellenistic civilisation. Some of the Hellenistic Christian refugees from Jerusalem made their way to Antioch and began preaching the gospel, not only to Jews, but to Pagan Gentiles as well. Luke records the momentous event in Acts 11:19-21: “Now those who were dispersed after the persecution that arose over Stephen journeyed as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to the Jews only. But some of these were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, after they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, and preached the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number of Hellenists believed and turned to the Lord.” In this way the first mainly Gentile church, made up of converts from Paganism, was established in Antioch through the preaching of the scattered Hellenistic believers of Jerusalem.

The term *Christian* was also first used in Antioch: “And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11:26). This makes sense, because in a Gentile city like Antioch, where the followers of Jesus were mostly Pagan converts, they would have seemed to the Gentile population to be something other than a Jewish sect. The label *Christians* (in Greek, *Christianoi*) may have been formed by a process derived from the Latin language. In Latin, a plural word ending in *-iani* could describe

the troops of a particular general. For example, *Galbiani* would mean “Galba’s troops,” “Galba’s men”. So *Christiani*, or in Greek *Christianoï*, may have meant “Christ’s men,” “followers of Christ”. By the AD 60s the word was widely accepted by all believers in Jesus as a suitable name for themselves; 1 Peter 4:16 uses the term. Prior to this, Christians called themselves by labels such as “followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2, 22:4); their Jewish enemies called them “the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5).

It was from the Gentile church in Antioch that the first organised Christian mission went out, headed by the apostle *Paul* (Acts 13). From this point onwards, Paul dominates the story of the Jesus movement. From fanatical Jewish opponent and foremost persecutor of Jesus’s followers, he became through his encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road (Acts 9) Jesus’s most ardent convert and apostle. It was through Paul’s missionary activities that the Jesus movement went west into Europe, rather than staying in Palestine and the Middle East. As more and more Gentiles became Christians, it was Paul who insisted against the more traditional Jewish believers of Palestine that Gentile converts did not have to accept the law of Moses or be circumcised in order to be true followers of Jesus. More than any other individual, the apostle Paul was the man who made it possible for the Jesus movement to turn from being a purely Jewish sect into a largely Gentile body.

Paul was also the supreme thinker and theologian of the early Church. His letters form the largest single ingredient of the New Testament, and throughout the history of the Church they have provided a unique source of spiritual and doctrinal renewal for theologians and preachers. Many great movements of reform or revival in the Church can be traced to a fresh appreciation of Paul’s writings. Next after Jesus Himself, Paul has had the greatest historical impact on the life and thought of the Christian Church over the past 2,000 years.

2. *The persecution under Nero*

In the days of the apostles, the authorities of the Roman Empire were generally friendly or at least neutral towards the Jesus

movement. Opposition and persecution came mainly from unbelieving Jews, and sometimes from ordinary Pagan Gentiles (Acts 19:21-41), but not usually from government officials. The apostle Paul certainly gives a very positive view of the Roman government in Romans 13.

However, this was not always to be the case. In AD 64, the emperor *Nero* (AD 54-68) launched the first great official persecution of Christians by the Roman government. In that year, the worst fire that Rome had ever known swept through the city and destroyed ten of its fourteen districts. Many people suspected that Nero himself had started the fire so that he could rebuild Rome in a grander style. In order to divert popular anger away from himself, Nero decided to blame the fire on the Christian community in Rome. The Roman historian *Tacitus* (AD 55-117), who was alive at the time, tells us what happened:

To end the rumours [that he had started the fire] Nero accused and tortured a group who were hated for their abominations – the group commonly known as Christians. The sect had been named after Christ, executed by the governor of Judaea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was emperor. Their fatal superstition had been checked temporarily, but was beginning to break out again – not only in Judaea, but even in Rome itself, where all kinds of vile and shameful activities gather and catch on. First, the authorities arrested those who confessed to being Christians. Then, on information obtained from them, the courts convicted hundreds more, not so much for starting the fire as for their anti-social beliefs. Mockery was heaped on them in their deaths. They were covered in the skins of wild beasts, torn to death by dogs, crucified, or set ablaze – so that when night-time fell, they lit up everything like torches. Nero had opened up his own gardens for this spectacle and gave a show in the arena, where he mingled with the crowd, or stood in the garb of a charioteer in a chariot. Consequently, although his victims were guilty and deserved to die, people began to feel compassion for them. For they realised that they were being killed, not for the public good, but to gratify one man's madness.

Nero's persecution shows that by the AD 60s the Roman authorities recognised Christians as a distinct group, separate from the Jews. Christians were obviously unpopular with the ordinary inhabitants of Rome; people looked on Christians as being rather strange and suspicious folk who did not mix with non-Christians. The authorities may have regarded them as a secret illegal society. Tacitus's reference to Christ being crucified under Pontius Pilate is the first known evidence we possess of a Pagan writer testifying to the events recorded in the New Testament. (Tacitus wrote in the opening years of the 2nd century AD.) The great Jewish historian *Flavius Josephus* (born AD 37, died after 100) also mentions these events in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, written in AD 93-94 (see the end of the chapter for a quotation).

The persecution was limited in scope to the city of Rome. It did not extend throughout the Empire. However, it claimed two great victims. The apostles Peter and Paul were probably both in Rome during Nero's persecution, and it seems likely that they were both executed at this time. Tradition says that imperial soldiers beheaded Paul and crucified Peter upside-down. As a Roman citizen, Paul could not be subjected to the humiliation of death by crucifixion. According to tradition, Peter thought he was unworthy to die in the same way as his Lord, and so to humour his scruples the authorities agreed to crucify him head-downwards.¹

Nero was the first Roman emperor to persecute Christians. Others were to follow in his footsteps. In the 1st century, the emperor *Domitian* (AD 81-96) also unleashed his fury on the Church in the final year of his reign, AD 96; it was Domitian who banished the apostle John (by then an old man and the last surviving apostle) to the island of Patmos, just off the west coast of Asia Minor (see the end of the Chapter).

1. Another tradition says that Peter and Paul survived Nero's persecution and were executed a few years later in about AD 67. If this is correct, Nero was still persecuting Christians even after the affair of the great fire in Rome in AD 64.

3. The Jewish War

The Jewish War (or Jewish Revolt) had a far greater effect on the future of the Jesus movement than Nero's persecution in Rome did. The War came about through the final triumph of Zealot opinion in Israel; the Zealots led a mighty nationalist uprising against the Roman Empire, lasting from AD 66 to 73. After the most appalling bloodshed, Rome's armies totally crushed the revolt, almost completely destroyed Jerusalem, and reduced the temple to a pile of smouldering ruins. The loss of Jewish life was horrific; the Jewish historian Josephus, who was alive at the time and wrote a history of the Jewish War, estimated that 1,100,000 Jews were killed in the fighting, and 97,000 taken captive and then sold into slavery or put to death for sport in the Roman arenas.² The Jewish Palestinian Christians, however, took no part in the War; in obedience to the prophetic words of Jesus in Luke 21:20-24, they left Judaea before the serious fighting started, and took refuge in the Gentile town of Pella, in northern Peraea, east of the Jordan (near the brook Cherith— 1 Kings 17:3-5).

The Jewish War had a number of far-reaching consequences:

- (i) The fall of Jerusalem meant that both Judaism and the Jesus movement lost their spiritual home. Jerusalem, once the "mother church" of apostolic Christianity, ceased to have any importance in the life of the early Church for the next 300 years. This geographical separation of the Jesus movement from its Palestinian roots quickened the Church's drift away from a Jewish to a Gentile membership.
- (ii) The refusal of Jewish Palestinian Christians to help their fellow Jews in the revolt against Rome meant that they were regarded as traitors in Jewish eyes. This

2. An arena was a sort of sports stadium. Roman sports were quite violent, e.g. fighters known as "gladiators" who fought each other to the death for the amusement of the crowd.

helped to widen the gap between the Christian faith and the Jewish people.

- (iii) The crushing of the Jewish Revolt by Rome meant that the Pharisees became the controlling force within Judaism. The failure of the great Zealot rebellion destroyed the influence of the Zealots as a national party. The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple removed the power-base of the priestly, aristocratic Sadducees. The War also wiped out the Essenes, because they too had joined in the revolt against Rome; their community at Qumran (the one we know most about) was destroyed by the Romans in AD 68. So only the Pharisees were left to offer spiritual leadership to the Jewish people and guide their future; and the Pharisees had always been the most determined Jewish enemies of Jesus and His followers. Gathering together after the War in the city of Jamnia (or in Hebrew, Jabneh) on the southern coast of Palestine, the Pharisees re-established the Sanhedrin, and rallied the shattered forces of Judaism around their own strict interpretation of the Old Testament and the Mosaic law. They placed a curse on all Christians (“the Nazarenes”) in the Jewish liturgy (the prayer-book used in worship); this made it impossible for Jewish Christians to worship any longer in the synagogue.

The ultimate effect of the Jewish War was to cut Christianity off almost completely from its Jewish origins. From now on, the future of the Jesus movement rested in the Gentile world.

Important people:

The Church

James the Lord's brother (died AD 62)

Peter (died AD 64 or 67)

Paul (died AD 64 or 67)

John (died end of 1st century)

Political and military

Emperor Nero (AD 54-68)

Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96)

Others

Flavius Josephus (born AD 37, died after 100)

Tacitus (AD 55-117)

Josephus's testimony to John the Baptist and Jesus

Some Jews thought that the destruction of king Herod's army [in AD 36 by an Arabian king] was a righteous punishment from God, on account of the way Herod had treated John who was called the Baptist. For Herod killed him, and John had been a good man who had exhorted the Jews to train themselves in virtue, to be fair towards each other and holy towards God, and to come together for baptism. God would accept their baptism, John said, on condition that they received it, not to escape the punishment their sins deserved, but to purify the body, as the soul had already been purified by righteousness. When crowds gathered around John, aroused by his words, Herod became afraid that John's amazing power over the people would lead to a rebellion, since the people seemed ready to do anything John said. So Herod decided to prevent any movement towards revolution which John might inspire, by getting rid of John, rather than waiting for a revolt to happen and then blame himself when it was too late. So because of Herod's suspicions, he sent John in chains to the fortress of Machaerus and had him executed there ...

At this time Jesus appeared, a highly gifted man, if we can call him a mere man; for he was a miracle-worker, a teacher of those who loved to hear the truth, and he gained many followers from among the Jews and even the Gentiles too. He was the Messiah. The most important men in Israel prompted Pontius Pilate to condemn him to death on a cross; but those who loved him from the beginning did not stop loving him, for on the third day he appeared to them alive again. The inspired prophets foretold this and many other wonderful things about him. Even today

the group of people named after him, the “Christians”, have still not died out.³

Josephus

Antiquities of the Jews, Book 18, chapter 2

The martyrdom of James the Lord’s brother

Guidance of the Church passed to the apostles, together with the Lord’s brother James. From the Lord’s time until our own, everyone has named him “James the Righteous”. There were many people called James, but this one was holy from birth; he drank no wine or intoxicating drink, and ate no meat; he never shaved his head; he did not cover himself with oil and he took no baths. He alone was allowed to enter the Holy Place, for his garments were not made of wool, but of linen. He used to go into the sanctuary by himself, and was often found there on his knees, asking forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew as calloused as a camel’s from always bending them in worship to God, and praying for forgiveness for the people. Because of his righteousness which no-one surpassed, he was called “James the Righteous” and *Oblias* (in our own language, “Bulwark of the people, and Righteousness”), in this way fulfilling the prophecies which had been made about him ...

Because many of the rulers too believed in Jesus, the Jews and scribes and Pharisees were greatly agitated; they said there was a danger that the whole people would expect Jesus to return as the Messiah. So they gathered together and said to James: “Be kind enough to restrain the people, for they have turned

3. Some scholars have disputed whether Josephus, a non-Christian Jew, could have written such a “Christian” testimony about Jesus; they suggest that this part of Josephus’s *Antiquities* was inserted into the book by Christians. However, every single copy of the *Antiquities* which we possess contains this passage, and modern scholars have defended its reliability. And perhaps Josephus’s positive statements about Jesus are not his own opinion but his record of what Christians believed. “He was the Messiah” – that is, He claimed to be, and His followers believed Him to be, the Messiah. [The Arabic version of the *Antiquities* is slightly different from the Greek; instead of “He was the Messiah,” it reads, “He was believed to be the Messiah.”]

aside after Jesus, believing that He is the Messiah. Please make the facts about Jesus plain to all who come for the passover day. We all accept what you say; we can confirm, and so can all the people, that you are a righteous man and do not judge according to appearances. So make it clear to the crowd that they must not go astray concerning Jesus; everyone, including us, accepts your judgment. So take your stand on the parapet of the temple, so that from that height you may be seen easily, and your words be heard by everyone. Because of the passover, all the tribes of Israel have gathered here, and also the Gentiles.”

So the scribes and Pharisees forced James to stand on the sanctuary’s parapet and exclaimed to him: “Righteous one, you whose words we are all bound to accept, the people are turning aside after Jesus who was crucified. So tell us, what is meant by ‘the door of Jesus?’”⁴ James replied with a loud voice: “Why do you ask me about the Son of Man? I tell you, He sits in heaven at the right hand of the Supreme Power, and He will come on the clouds of heaven.” Many were convinced and exulted in James’s testimony, crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” But the scribes and Pharisees said, “We’ve made a bad mistake here, giving such an opportunity of testimony to Jesus. We had better go up and throw James off the parapet, to terrify the people and stop them believing him.” So they called out, “Well, well! So even the Righteous one has been deceived!” ...

So they went up and threw the Righteous one off the parapet. Then they said to one another, “Let’s stone James the Righteous!” So they began stoning him – for despite his fall, he was still breathing. But he turned and knelt and said, “O Lord God and Father, I pray You to forgive them; they know not what they do.” While they showered him with stones, one of the family of Rechab the son of Rachabim (the priestly family to which the prophet Jeremiah testified⁵) called out, “Stop this! What are you doing? The Righteous one prays for you!” But one of them, whose job was to cleanse and bleach cloth, picked up his club

4. “The door of Jesus” refers to John 10:9.

5. Jeremiah 35.

with which he beat out the clothes, and crushed the head of the Righteous one. And thus James was martyred. They buried him in that very place, by the sanctuary, and the gravestone is still there by the sanctuary. He proved a faithful witness both to Jews and Gentiles that Jesus is the Messiah.

Eusebius of Caesarea

History of the Church, Book 2, chapter 23

The martyrdom of Peter and Paul

So it happened that Nero, the first man to stand out as a notable fighter against God, was led on to murder the apostles. In his reign (so it is recorded) Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and Peter too was crucified. This record is confirmed by the fact that the cemeteries in Rome are even today named after Peter and Paul. It is also confirmed by a Churchman called Gaius, who lived when Zephyrinus was bishop of Rome [AD 199-217]. In his book *Dialogue with Proclus*, a leader of the Montanist heretics,⁶ Gaius says this about the place where the bodies of the two apostles have been reverently laid: "I can point out the monuments of the triumphant apostles. If you go as far as the Vatican or the Ostian Way, you will find the monuments of the men who founded this church [in Rome]."

Eusebius of Caesarea

History of the Church, Book 2, chapter 25

The persecution by emperor Domitian and the exile of John to Patmos

Domitian's horrible cruelty struck down many victims. In Rome, he put to death large numbers of distinguished, high-born men of great achievements, without a fair trial. He banished countless other eminent men for no reason at all and seized their property. And then at last Domitian showed himself to be an emperor who walked in the steps of Nero for his hatred and hostility towards God. Indeed, he was the second emperor to organise a persecution of us Christians, although his father Vespasian had

6. For the Montanists, see Chapter 4, section 3.

harboured no evil designs against us. There is abundant evidence that the apostle and Gospel-writer John was still alive at that time, and because of his testimony to God's Word he was sentenced to exile on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9) ... In fact, our faith shone out so brightly at that time, that even historians who rejected our beliefs wrote down without hesitation in their history books both the persecution and the martyrdoms it produced. They also recorded the exact date of the persecution, that it was in the fifteenth year of Domitian [AD 96]. Flavia Domitilla, who was a niece of Flavius Clemens, one of Rome's consuls [chief magistrates] that year, was banished to the island of Pontia, along with many others, as a punishment for their testimony to Christ ...

After fifteen years of Domitian's rule, Nerva became emperor. The Roman Senate voted to strip the dead Domitian of his honours, and to return to their homes all whom he had unjustly banished, restoring their property to them. The historians of the time record this. At the same time the apostle John, after his exile on Patmos, went back to live once more in his home at Ephesus, as early Christian tradition says.

Eusebius of Caesarea

History of the Church, Book 3, chapters 17-20