

# CHRISTIANITY *and the* ROMAN EMPIRE

BACKGROUND TEXTS



RALPH MARTIN NOVAK

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*and the*  
ROMAN  
EMPIRE

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Background Texts

Ralph Martin Novak Jr.

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*Truth, which is simple and one, does not admit of variety.*

POPE LEO I “THE GREAT”  
BISHOP OF ROME, 440–461 C.E.

*What is Truth?*

PONTIUS PILATE  
ROMAN PREFECT OF JUDAEA, 26–36 C.E.

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## FOREWORD

This book traces its origins to an adult Christian education course entitled “The Roman Empire’s Perspective of Christianity” that I taught at St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Austin, Texas in the fall of 1996. In planning that course I decided at an early stage to rely heavily on readings in the ancient texts. That decision was in part the result of the training I had received from a series of outstanding history professors at Rice University and the University of Chicago, but it also grew out of my perceptions of the people likely to take the course. I anticipated that most of the class would, aside from their familiarity with the New Testament, know little about early Christian history other than as presented by the popular press and Hollywood movies—sources of information better known for dramatic flair and license than understanding or accuracy. For precisely that reason I did not want my class to be just another lecture course. I wanted my students to develop a basic foundation in Christian history and learn how to evaluate the merits of conflicting historical interpretations, so that they would be equipped to pursue sound independent study long after my course had ended. This meant that I would have to introduce the class to the primary sources and guide them in developing a logical approach to the study of the sources. Unfortunately, I could not locate a good primary source book that dealt with early Christian history in an orderly fashion at the non-specialist level, and so I put such materials together myself. Those original materials have grown and evolved over the years, but I have always kept in mind that original target audience: the non-specialist adult who, though perhaps having little formal training in historical study, is willing to learn and apply logic to the primary sources to build a solid foundation in Christian history.

The reader will see that many of the ancient texts reproduced here are radiant with emotion and energy that the centuries cannot diminish. A primary goal of my narrative, therefore, has been to direct the reader along the path of the majority historical consensus without being so intrusive as to obscure the majesty and power of the texts themselves. Whenever I had choices to make concerning the direction and scope of the narrative, in most instances I chose to simplify and summarize rather than to expound at greater length. I have also tried to present the materials in such a way that this book could serve as both a useful adjunct to the work of other scholars in the field and as a stand-alone account for the non-specialist reader. In preparing footnotes I have intentionally

attempted to refer to eminent historians whose works are still widely available in the marketplace, in the hope that the interested reader, who may have neither the time nor the inclination to track down the most current specialist literature, will nonetheless be able to pursue further profitable study through the local library or bookseller.

Sound history must be made available to the non-specialist in an accessible and understandable manner, or else the study of history will eventually be reduced to a mere elitist intellectual pursuit and its value lost to the greater part of the modern world. I will be immensely satisfied if both the non-specialist reader and the professional historian find this book a useful tool for learning and teaching.

There are a great many people I wish to thank for their help in the making of this book. Some are distant in time and place, like my professors Floyd Seyward Lear and Katherine Fischer Drew of Rice University and Stewart Irvin Oost of the University of Chicago, who by shaping me in their ancient history classes helped shaped this book. Other people have been of more immediate assistance. Mikail M. McIntosh-Doty and the rest of the staff of The Booher Library of the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas have provided tremendous help and assistance over the years, both in locating materials and in patiently listening to stories concerning my research. Maritta Terrell and Joann Gunlock have spent many hours assisting with word-processing, preparing correspondence, and listening to yet more stories about the ancient texts. Charlsa Stark and Kathleen Davis Niendorff edited and commented on several of the early chapters of the manuscript and provided invaluable assistance in preparing the all important "proposal to publishers." Kathleen Davis Niendorff also acted as agent for this book, and without her persistence, energy, and knowledge of the publishing field, I do not believe that this book would ever have made it to print. Richel Rivers and Amy Brueggeman read and commented on the manuscript at various stages of the writing process. James Barnes and Jennifer Davis helped work on ideas for the book cover design. Amy Tuvell provided critical last minute assistance in locating copyright holders for permissions as the typesetting deadline for the manuscript loomed close. Henry Carrigan of Trinity Press provided guidance and needed encouragement throughout the editing process, and I am grateful to Henry, Lois Sibley, and the rest of the people at Trinity Press International for their work and their faith in this book. Most of all, I wish to thank those members of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, All Saints' Episcopal Church, and University Christian Church in Austin, Texas who attended my classes over the years and by their interest, questions, criticisms, and comments made this book far better than I could have accomplished on my own.

This book is dedicated to my grandparents, parents, and children.

Ralph Martin Novak, Jr.  
November 10, 2000  
Austin, Texas

# DATES OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS AND PRIMARY SOURCES

ca. 6–5 B.C.E.	Birth of Jesus
ca. 30–33 C.E.	Crucifixion of Jesus
50–51	Hearing of Paul before Gallio
61	Transport of Paul to Rome for trial
64	Nero's persecution of the Christians after the Great Fire of Rome
66–70	First Jewish War with Rome
95–96	Domitian's persecution
ca. 108	Letters of Ignatius
111	Pliny's Letter to the Emperor Trajan
124–125	Hadrian's Rescript to the Proconsul of Asia
155	Justin Martyr's First Apology
ca. 156	Martyrdom of Polycarp
177–180	Local persecutions during reign of Marcus Aurelius
177	Letter of the Gallican Churches
ca. 178	Celsus writes <i>True Doctrine</i>
180	<i>Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs</i>
197–212	Tertullian's writings
ca. 200	Epitaph of Avircius
203	<i>Martyrdom of Perpetua</i>
240s	Origen writes <i>Against Celsus</i>
248	Thousandth anniversary of the founding of the City of Rome
249–251	Persecution of Decius
257–260	Persecution of Valerian
260	<i>Edict of Toleration</i> by Gallienus
270s	Porphyry writes <i>Against the Christians</i>
late third century	Porphyry writes <i>Philosophy From Oracles</i>
303–311	The "Great Persecution" under Diocletian and the tetrarchs
311	Galerius's <i>Edict of Toleration</i> , ending the "Great Persecution"
314	<i>Edict of Milan</i> , recognizing Christianity as a licensed religion
324	Constantine I becomes sole emperor of Rome
361–363	Julian the Apostate attempts to revive paganism
384	Symmachus's Appeal concerning the Senate's Altar of Victory
388	Ambrose's Letter to Theodosius concerning the Synagogue at Callinicum
390	Ambrose's conflict with Theodosius concerning the massacre at Thessalonica
391	Theodosius's Edict prohibiting pagan worship in the temples
391–392	Seizure of the Serapeum in Alexandria; assault on Apamea's Temple
394	Theodosius's military victory over Eugenius
415	Destruction of Alexandria's Jewish Quarter; the murder of Hypatia

# 1 | A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL METHOD

HISTORY IS A JOURNEY INTO OTHERNESS. SURELY IT HAS AS MUCH RIGHT TO HELP  
US OVERCOME OUR LIMITATIONS AS TO MAKE US FEEL AT HOME WITH THEM.  
—PAUL VEYNE.<sup>1</sup>

Christianity's rise to dominance in the Roman Empire during the first four centuries C.E. is the pivotal development in Western history and profoundly influenced the later direction of world history. Yet for all that has been written on the early history of Christianity, the sources of this history are widely scattered, difficult to find, and generally unknown to a layperson. The purpose of this book is to assemble these ancient texts into a single continuous account of the political and social relationships among Christians, the Roman government, and the peoples of the Roman Empire during these crucial four centuries.

Most of the ancient texts reproduced in this book are taken from literary sources. This is not meant to denigrate the importance of the extant archaeological materials, which are often essential to supplement or correct the conclusions one would draw solely from the literary sources.<sup>2</sup> However, the literary sources do provide a most convenient and useful introduction to our subject if understood in their proper context. A proper understanding of basic historical methodology and its application to written materials will, therefore, greatly enhance our appreciation of these literary sources.

Historical methodology is based upon the application of the rules of logic and deductive reasoning to the available evidence, but the proper application of these rules requires an understanding of the cultural and historical context of the evidence. The essential starting point in studying an ancient text is the effort to understand the perspective, motives, and biases of the author that underlie the words of the text. At minimum, this involves asking five fundamental questions of any given text:

1. *Who is speaking?* Who is the author of the text? What are the author's personal and cultural biases, and how do these biases affect the author's statements?

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1. Philippe Aries and George Duby, (eds.), "A History of Private Life," Vol. 1 *From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*. Paul Veyne (ed.), Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 2.

2. For example, archeological studies indicate that the role of Christianity in the everyday life of Rome's North African provinces during the late fourth century C.E. was much smaller than the writings of St. Augustine suggest. For a discussion of the distortions to the historical record caused by the dominance of Christian perspectives in the surviving literature of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, see Ramsay MacMullen in *Christianity & Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 1–6 and the accompanying notes.

2. *What is the author saying?* Every text must be read carefully to determine what facts, attitudes, and biases are expressed, implied, and/or assumed by the author. The reader must also learn to distinguish between the author's statements of fact and the author's interpretations of fact.

3. *What is the author's source for his or her statements of fact?* How does the author know of what he or she writes? Is the author's information first-hand or second-hand in nature? If second-hand, what are the author's sources for the information and how reliable are these sources?

4. *How does the author's intended audience influence the text's content and perspectives?* Authors invariably select and shape their materials for presentation to a specific audience and this has an obvious influence on the scope, content, and perspectives of the text. Less obvious, but equally important, is that an author will typically omit from his or her text material seen as inappropriate, offensive, or of little interest to the intended audience. Such omissions can gravely distort the overall accuracy of historical analysis based solely on the written text itself. For example, the great majority of ancient writers passed over without mention the cares and concerns of women, the poor, and slaves, even though collectively those groups constituted all but a tiny fraction of the total population of the ancient world. Such omissions tell the modern historian much about the values and perspectives of both the literary class that produced the surviving ancient texts and the intended audience for those texts, and serve as warnings to the modern reader against accepting ancient literary works as full and accurate representations of the past.

5. *What is the author's purpose in making the statements?* Every author has a purpose when he or she takes the trouble to write materials intended for distribution to other people. What is the author's purpose, and how does it influence his or her statements?

Closely related to the issue of understanding the author's personal context is the issue of understanding the larger social and cultural context of the author and the text. While modern Europeans and Americans have many cultural, historical, and linguistic ties to the world of the Roman Empire, there are significant cultural differences between modern Western industrial societies and the agricultural societies characteristic of the Mediterranean region during the Roman Empire. Those ancient agricultural societies were typically organized around the fundamental principles of kinship and politics, and, contrary to modern industrial cultures, religious, social, and economic institutions were but subsets of these two larger systems. Moreover, many of these ancient cultures placed great emphasis on systems of social relationships, such as the client-patron system of Rome, which are without close parallels in modern industrial societies. Even in instances where ancient social institutions seem to have parallels in modern cultures, such as Roman slavery and American slavery, closer inspection reveals fundamental differences between the ancient and the modern institutions.

An understanding of the significant cultural differences that underlie the ancient literary sources brings home the true meaning of Paul Veyne's observation at the beginning of this chapter: history is indeed a journey into otherness. The modern reader simply cannot interpret an ancient text in the light of his or her own cultural values and biases and have any realistic hope of fully understanding the meaning of the text. Rather, an ancient text must first be analyzed and interpreted in the light of the author's own values and culture and only afterward can a modern perspective be applied to the text.<sup>3</sup> Because of the personal biases and perspectives each reader brings to an ancient text, it takes a conscious and persistent effort to remember to seek the author's perspective before interpreting the material from one's own perspective. If the modern reader fails to acknowledge and deal with these historical and cultural differences, then the reader's understanding will be at best egocentric:

Our judgments of value are characteristically dependent on attitudes peculiar to our own place and time. If we universalize these attitudes, as though they were Platonic realities, and assume that they have a validity for all time, we turn history into a mirror which is of significance to us only insofar as we may perceive in it what appear to be foreshadowings of ourselves arising from reconstructions of the evidence based on our own values. And when this happens, history, although it may seem to flatter us with the consoling message "Thou art the fairest of all," becomes merely an instrument for the cultivation of our own prejudices. We learn nothing from it that we could not learn from the world around us.<sup>4</sup>

At its worst, the reader's understanding will simply be wrong:

Not to ask "What do they mean now?" is to refuse to deal with the fundamental intention of the texts, which were certainly written to inform, inspire, challenge, and convict. Not to ask "What did they mean then?" is to run the risk that the answer to the former question will be fantasy.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these general concerns about understanding the historical and cultural context of the ancient texts, the reader needs to be aware of the specific cultural factors and historical problems applicable to Graeco-Roman written materials of the first four centuries C.E. These issues include the following:

**Multiple Translations.** Translating an ancient document always introduces the possibility of altering the meaning of the text. An added complication is that many ancient documents have survived only in a language other than the language of the

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3. See the discussion of this issue by Norman F. Cantor and Richard I. Schneider in *How to Study History* (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1967), 41–44.

4. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 3.

5. University of the South, Sewanee School of Theology, Swannee, TN: *Course Catalogue* 1995–96.

original text. For example, there are many instances in which an original Latin text was translated into Greek, or vice versa, and only the second text has survived. This obviously creates problems where the exact wording of the text is critical to understanding its meaning.

**Cultural Attitudes Concerning History's Purpose.** In studying ancient texts, one finds that while ancient writers appreciated the entertainment value of a good story, relatively little value was placed on the mere preservation of "historical facts" for their own sake. Instead, most ancient writers believed that the primary purpose and goal of historical writing was to illustrate and preserve lessons useful for the moral and intellectual edification of the individual. Thus, neither Christian nor pagan writers were overly concerned with the niceties of "historical accuracy" in a modern sense, particularly when a clever or pointed quotation or moral lesson could be illustrated, or manufactured, from the materials at hand. The great freedom with which many ancient writers adapted their materials to achieve such goals contrasts sharply with the expectations of historical accuracy many modern laypersons presume for the texts.

**Christian Forgeries.** While preserving the texts of original historical documents was not a high priority among ancient authors, various writers did on occasion search out and quote the texts of important letters, statutes, treaties, and treatises and in such a manner preserved many valuable historical documents for the modern historian. This is particularly true of certain fourth-century C.E. Christian writers such as Lactantius and Eusebius, who collectively preserved many important documents on early Christian history. Unfortunately, however, many other Christians forged documents wholesale, usually with attribution to a figure of authority, when a text was needed for theological or political purposes. These Christian forgeries began at a very early period—the Apostle Paul wrote that letters were being forged in his name during his own lifetime (2 Thessalonians 2:1)—and only grew worse with the passing centuries. The historian Robin Lane Fox has written

In the period c.400–600 "aggressive forgeries" added false letters to the collection of almost every early Christian letter writer. These fake texts of theology helped to enlist the great authorities of the past on this or that side of a contemporary schism or unorthodoxy. An expert in Church history [Robert M. Grant] has aptly concluded "Under such circumstances the preservation of any authentic texts seems almost miraculous. The needs of dogmatic theology were undisturbed by much historical sense. [By c.600], they had resulted in a distortion of the historical materials on which theology was supposedly built. The absence of any understanding of historical development allowed genuine and false documents to be so thoroughly mixed that they would not be disentangled for more than a millennium." A critical history of Christian

thought could not possibly begin to have been written until after 1500 because of forgeries by Christians themselves.<sup>6</sup>

In general, this book omits most materials generally acknowledged by modern historians to be forgeries, and where a serious dispute exists concerning the authenticity of any particular text, mention of the issue is made in the narrative or a footnote.<sup>7</sup>

**Cultural Convention Concerning Attribution.** Closely related to the problem of forgeries is the question of the attribution of a work. It was a not uncommon custom in both Classical and Hellenistic Greek society for a student to honor his or her teacher by attributing the student's own work to the teacher. Thus, when a student wrote that "X taught so and so," it is often difficult today to determine what "X" actually taught and what is independent work by the student being attributed to "X." This tradition carried over into the period of the Roman Empire. For this reason it can be difficult for a modern historian to distinguish a well-meaning attribution from an outright forgery. The historian James H. Charlesworth has described seven different types of "attribution" applicable to ancient texts: (i) writings not by an author, but probably containing some of his own thoughts; (ii) writings by someone who was influenced by another person to whom the work is attributed; (iii) writings influenced by the earlier works of another author to whom the work is assigned; (iv) writings attributed to an individual but actually deriving from a circle or school surrounding that individual; (v) Christian writings attributed by their authors to an Old Testament personality; (vi) once anonymous writings now correctly or incorrectly attributed to an individual; and (vii) writings that intentionally try to deceive the reader into thinking that the author is someone else.<sup>8</sup> These attribution issues obviously affect the relative weight and reliability of statements found in a text of uncertain authorship.

**Literary Convention Concerning Speeches.** Because ancient peoples had no mechanical means of recording the spoken word, it was difficult for them to create accurate records of speeches. The clearest expression of both the problem and the "solution" adopted by ancient writers was given by Thucydides (ca. 460–400 B.C.E.), one of the greatest of the ancient historians, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*:

I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the

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6. Robin Lane Fox, *The Unauthorized Version: Truth and Fiction in the Bible* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 153–54.

7. See, for example, the discussion concerning the Rescript of Antoninus Pius in chapter 3, at page 66.

8. James H. Charlesworth, "Pseudo-Epigraphy," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Everett Ferguson (ed.) (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), 765–67, at 766.



same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.<sup>9</sup>

Because of these difficulties, from at least the fourth century B.C.E. it became customary for speakers to issue, after the fact, written copies of important speeches, but it also became customary for the speaker to rewrite the speech as "he wished he had given it." Many ancient historians adopted more or less the same convention, reproducing speeches "as they should have been given," that is, with the content the historian considered appropriate for the occasion and often reworded to meet the rhetorical standards of the historian's day. Over time, this practice evolved into a distinct literary genre in which ancient writers would recreate famous speeches in their entirety as a display of the writer's own rhetorical skills, without any regard for "historical accuracy."<sup>10</sup> The general consensus of modern historians is that many speeches found in the ancient sources are the wholesale creation of the respective authors of the written works in which the speeches appear and that even in those instances where an ancient author attempted to reproduce accurately the actual words of the speaker there may be substantial differences between the original speech and the written report of the speech. Thus, the "facts" set forth in speeches must be evaluated and handled carefully by the modern historian.

**The "Big Lie."** Ancient authors were not always hesitant to tell a whopper of a story, if it served the author's literary, political, social, or theological purpose. Such a technique can be quite effective, as demonstrated by the career of Adolf Hitler, who wrote:

[people] more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters, but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously. . . . The grossly impudent lie always leaves traces behind it, even after it has been nailed down.<sup>11</sup>

The "grossly impudent lie" can usually be detected by reference to the other pertinent evidence, and the historian's job is not to be misled or wrongly influenced by such statements in the sources.

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9. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* I.22, translated by Rex Warner (Baltimore: Viking Penguin, 1980), 47.

10. More or less the same rhetorical convention was accepted with respect to the descriptions of famous battles, which is one reason why so few reliable details are known about many significant ancient battles.

11. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* I.10, translated by James Murphy (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., 1939).

Once the historian understands the evidence in its social and cultural context, the historian can proceed with the orderly application of logic and deductive reasoning to the evidence. A full discussion of such methods is beyond the scope of this chapter, but some of these principles of logic and reason have over the years been distilled into “rules of thumb,” which will be useful to the modern reader in his or her analysis of the ancient texts:

1. William of Occam (ca. 1280–1349 C.E.) promulgated what is known today as “Occam’s Razor”: “*Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*”—“Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.” In other words, a historian does not invent acts or events to resolve problems when there are explanations that do not require such inventions. As a corollary to this rule, if a problem admits of two or more possible answers, one should choose the simplest and least complicated answer as more likely to be correct. Although not infallible, Occam’s Razor is a useful tool for avoiding the endless swamps of improbability and tortured reasoning so beloved by conspiracy theorists and the like.

2. Arguing from the silence of the sources is not good practice. This is particularly true of ancient history, where so much material has been lost over the centuries. However, there is a distinction between an absence of evidence and a meaningful silence in the extant evidence, as demonstrated by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in *The Adventure of Silver Blaze*:<sup>12</sup>

Inspector Gregory: Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?

Sherlock Holmes To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.

Inspector Gregory: The dog did nothing in the night-time.

Sherlock Holmes: That was the curious incident.

The silence of the watch dog was a physical fact from which necessary and obvious deductions could be made; in this case, that the watch dog must have recognized the thief since the dog did not bark while the theft occurred. This is not the same as silence resulting from the absence of evidence.

3. An admission against interest is strong evidence for the truth of a statement. This is a generally accepted rule of evidence in law as well as in history. Most people write to advance a particular point of view. Thus, a statement that contradicts the author’s point of view usually indicates that the author could not deny the truth of the statement, for otherwise the author would not have repeated it. However, that does not mean that the admission is necessarily true, just that the author thought it true.

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12. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Secaucus: Castle Books, 1981), 196–97.

4. A good historian is always aware that no matter how strong the evidence may appear on any point, there is never absolute certainty. Historians bring their personal biases and subjectivity to the interpretation of the available evidence, which is always incomplete and fragmentary. Historians do not study or reconstruct “reality” with anything even approximating the “objectivity” of a mathematician or a physicist.

5. Not all questions can be resolved from the extant evidence. The easiest way to get into trouble as a historian is to stretch an argument too far to reach a conclusion for which there is simply insufficient evidence.

6. Common sense and an understanding of human nature will take one a long way, if one has not already pre-determined the final outcome.

Good historical methodology requires considering all the evidence without a predetermined outcome in mind. To avoid shaping the interpretation of the evidence to reach a predetermined result, the historian must be aware of the personal biases and presumptions of truth that he or she brings to bear on the interpretation of the evidence. No historian can totally eliminate his or her own subjective beliefs and attitudes from the analysis of the evidence. The best the historian can do is to be aware of the problem and attempt to control it. The methodological advantage of analyzing the extant evidence by applying logic and deductive reasoning is that other individuals may use the same methods to evaluate both the evidence and the historian’s interpretation of the evidence. As a result, meaningful distinctions and value judgments can be made: “historian A’s interpretation is better reasoned and more logical than historian B’s interpretation.” On this basis, the advancement of historical knowledge is possible.

E. P. Sanders has addressed this problem of personal bias and presumptions of truth in his own research into the historical Jesus:

. . . some may claim special privilege for the gospel material on the ground that it is revealed. The believer *knows* that Jesus was raised, that his miracles were truly supernatural, and so on. This special revelation means that the ordinary canons of critical investigation cannot be applied. Perhaps the erroneous nature of this insidious form of obscurantism (*we know secrets which you cannot know*) may best be shown by pointing to its logical consequence. The person who argues this way when it comes to knowledge about Jesus may apply the same argument to any number of issues. The Bible says that the world was created in six days. Does this then give the believer access to cosmological information which should supplant the evidence of astronomy, geology, archaeology, chemistry and physics? A few will argue that it does. This chapter is clearly not for them: they are at a level of fundamentalism which is beyond reasonable argumentation. Many others, however, will grant to science free rein in its own domain, but will want a protective wall built

around their portrait of Jesus, which they will see as based on revelation. A sufficiently detailed exploration would show that what is revealed to one person is not to another: that the appeal to “revelation” about Jesus as a historical figure usually masks entirely human biases, individual preferences and wishful thinking. The academic historian may have biases and presuppositions, but they can be exposed by people using the same critical tools, and thus progress can be made towards sound historical knowledge. The appeal to revelation as the ground of historical information essentially denies the possibility of learning, and that is an extremely unfortunate denial. Those who are tempted to look for a protective wall are urged not to do so, but to be genuinely open to investigation which leads to historical knowledge and insight. The historian, in any case, whatever her or his theological beliefs, has no choice but to soldier on. Academic study has its own rules, and one of them is that nothing is exempt from scrutiny and verification.<sup>13</sup>

The same point was made by Clement of Alexandria (Titus Flavius Clemens, ca. 150–215 C.E.), head of the Christian catechetical school in Alexandria, Egypt, in approximately 200 C.E.:

If our faith. . . is such that it is destroyed by force of argument, then let it be destroyed; for it will have been proved that we do not possess the truth.<sup>14</sup>

The faith of the historian lies in following the evidence wherever it will lead, rather than requiring the evidence to go where the historian desires.

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13. E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying The Synoptic Gospels* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1989), 303–304. Emphasis is that of Sanders and Davies.

14. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 6.10.

## 2 | THE EAGLE AND THE CROSS: THE FIRST CENTURY C.E.

The exact year of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is not known, but most historians believe that His birth occurred some time between 10 B.C.E. and 4 B.C.E.<sup>1</sup> Such a date falls roughly in the middle of the reign of Gaius Octavius, the founder and first emperor of the Roman Empire. Octavius, who is better known today by the name of Augustus or Caesar Augustus, was the nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar. Octavius had come to power by winning the more or less continuous civil war for control of the Roman state that had begun in 49 B.C.E. with the conflict between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great and had ended in 31 B.C.E. with Octavius's decisive defeat of Marcus Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium.

One of Octavius's strengths was his political astuteness and it was his desire to avoid the fate of Julius Caesar, who had been assassinated by senators who feared that Caesar desired to be king over the Romans, that led Octavius to seek a political basis other than mere military might to govern Rome in the years after Actium. Using the leverage provided by his unchallenged military strength, Octavius maneuvered over a number of years to consolidate control of the Roman state in his person while avoiding the appearance of a dictatorship. A key step in this reordering of the Roman state took place in 27 B.C.E., when in a carefully managed piece of political theater Octavius surrendered his powers to the Roman Senate only to have the senate immediately bestow many of the same powers on him again as a "voluntary" gesture of gratitude for his service to the Roman people. In this way Octavius could plausibly claim to have restored the Roman Republic and rule by the senate, but in fact the many offices and powers the senate granted to Octavius, while individually consistent with prior practice during the Roman Republic, were collectively an unprecedented concentration of governmental power and authority in one man. Many Romans of course recognized the reality of Octavius's position, but there was a widespread sense of true gratitude toward Octavius for his moderation in victory after the civil wars, and so it was that in 27 B.C.E. the senate also bestowed on Octavius the title of "Augustus," or "revered one," that was used by all later Roman emperors.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See Appendix E for a discussion of the sources pertinent to the determination of Jesus' year of birth.

2. Octavius himself, in keeping with his program of maintaining the facade of Republican government, preferred the title of "Princeps," which implied only that he was first among equals.

Rome's transition from an oligarchic republic to an empire governed by a single individual was greatly aided by the fact that Octavius lived for forty-four years after his victory at Actium, a reign so long that by his death most peoples of the Roman Empire had no personal experience with any form of Roman government other than rule by Octavius with the assistance of members of his immediate family. Moreover, during his later years Octavius spent so much effort attempting to orchestrate the succession to the throne by one relative or another, most of whom inconveniently died as Octavius lived on, that when Octavius finally died in 14 C.E. and his stepson Tiberius succeeded to the emperor's position, hereditary succession must have been seen by most of the Empire's population as the normal and expected mode of transferring imperial power. The concept of hereditary succession had strong support within the Roman army and so the practice continued after Tiberius, as the subsequent emperors Caligula (37–41 C.E.), Claudius (41–54 C.E.), and Nero (54–68 C.E.) were all related to Octavius in one way or another.

The family dynasty founded by Octavius ended with the death of Nero in 68 C.E. In 69 C.E., the "year of the four emperors," the Roman general Vespasian won a brief civil war among various Roman army commanders for succession to the vacant throne. Vespasian founded what is now known as the Flavian dynasty, as he was succeeded as emperor by his sons Titus (79–81 C.E.) and Domitian (81–96 C.E.). Vespasian proved to be a capable ruler and the Roman Empire prospered during his reign. His son Titus was also very popular, although his reign was too short to indicate clearly whether he would have been a successful ruler. Domitian, however, governed autocratically and displayed increasingly megalomaniac tendencies over the years, which led to his murder in 96 C.E.

In the confusion that followed Domitian's assassination, the Roman Senate attempted to preempt the Roman military commanders in the selection of the next emperor by moving quickly to name one of its own as emperor, a well-respected but elderly senator named Nerva. The Roman generals were apparently reluctant to risk the outbreak of civil war over succession as had followed Nero's death as they did not take action to block Nerva's assumption of the throne (96–98 C.E.). The Praetorian Guard of Rome, however, soon became unruly and threatening towards the new emperor and neither Nerva nor the senate had sufficient strength to assert firm control over the Praetorians. In 97 C.E., Nerva moved to secure his position by adopting the prominent general Trajan as his son and successor. Trajan (98–117 C.E.) quickly brought the Praetorian Guard under control and when Nerva died the next year Trajan succeeded to the emperor's position without contest.

The civil war after Nero's death and Nerva's adoption of a military commander as successor are evidence that, as during the reign of Octavius, the Roman emperor's power was ultimately based upon his control of the Roman legions. While there were political conflicts between the emperors and senators throughout the first century C.E., by the end of the century the senate and the senatorial order no longer constituted a serious challenge to the concepts of

one man rule and hereditary succession to the throne. Rather, by that time Rome's senatorial order was more concerned that the emperor respect the dignity and privileges of the senate and use its members to assist in the governing the Empire.

The first century of rule by emperors was generally a period of military success and geographical expansion for Rome. While Rome did not attempt to re-occupy the province of Germania, that portion of modern Germany lying between the Elbe and the Rhine Rivers, lost during the later years of Octavius's reign, the emperors after Octavius expanded Roman rule into the English Isles, the Balkans, the Arabian Peninsula, and northwest Africa, and strengthened Rome's frontier defenses along the Rhine and Danube River to the north and the Persian frontier to the east. Aside from the brief civil war after Nero's death, the most significant military conflict within the territories of the Roman Empire after Augustus's death was the massive Jewish rebellion in Palestine known as the "First Jewish War," which Rome brutally suppressed after four years of fighting (66–70 C.E.). The outcome of the First Jewish War had significant implications for the growth of the Christian faith.

#### THE EARLIEST NON-GOSPEL SOURCES FOR CHRISTIAN HISTORY

While Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus, Jesus' ministry was conducted entirely during the reign of Augustus's successor Tiberius (14–37 C.E.). As with the year of Jesus' birth, the exact years of Jesus' ministry during Tiberius's reign are uncertain, but the evidence indicates that Jesus' ministry consisted of a two- or three-year period that ended with his crucifixion sometime between 30 and 33 C.E.<sup>3</sup> Under the leadership of the twelve apostles, James, Paul, and other leaders, the new Christian faith continued to grow after Jesus' death, but relatively little is known about the details of Christianity's growth during the reigns of Caligula (37–41 C.E.), Claudius (41–54 C.E.), and Nero (54–68 C.E.) because the extant sources for the first thirty or so years of Christianity are limited. Among the most important of these sources are the letters of Paul the Apostle and the Acts of the Apostles, which pertain to or describe events between Jesus' crucifixion in 30/33 C.E. and 63 or 64 C.E. The history of Christianity during the subsequent Flavian dynasty (69–96 C.E.) is even more obscure because there are even fewer relevant sources for that period.

What evidence does exist has been interpreted to indicate that, notwithstanding the efforts of the first few generations of Christian leaders, the absolute number of Christians in the Roman Empire during the first century C.E. was very small. Estimates for the number of Christians by 100 C.E. range from as low as 7,500<sup>4</sup> to upwards of 50,000<sup>5</sup> out of the approximately sixty million

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3. See Appendix E for a discussion of the sources pertinent to the determination of the dates of Jesus' ministry and death.

4. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 6–7.

5. Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 31.

inhabitants of the Roman Empire. The small number of Christians is a likely factor behind the paucity of contemporary historical sources on Christianity during the first century, as it appears that there were simply too few Christians to attract the attention of the social and political elite of the Roman Empire who wrote the contemporary histories and literary works. The only apparent references by first-century Jews to either Jesus or Christians are two short passages in Josephus (Selections 2.2 and 2.13) and the prayer benediction instituted by Gamaliel II (Selection 2.19). The earliest Roman references to Christianity date to approximately 110–120 C.E., in works written by Tacitus (Selection 2.15), Suetonius (Selection 2.16 and possibly Selection 2.6), and Pliny the Younger (Selection 3.3.). Aside from these Jewish and Roman sources, there appears to be only one other contemporary reference to first-century Christianity by a non-Christian, a letter written by a Syrian sometime between 70 and 100 C.E. (Selection 2.21).

The earliest surviving Roman authors to mention Christianity—Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, and Suetonius—each seems to have performed imperial service in provinces where Christians had conducted extensive missionary work during the first century C.E. Tacitus served as proconsul of Asia, a Roman province located in the area of modern southwestern Turkey, during the years 112–113 C.E., and Asia, with its principal city of Ephesus, was the site of extensive missionary work by Paul and other Christians during the first century C.E. While it is uncertain whether Tacitus wrote his famous account of Nero's persecution of Christians before or after this proconsulship, Tacitus's extremely critical attitude toward Christians (Selection 2.15) would suggest that he had some personal familiarity with Christians and their beliefs and it is tempting to speculate that this familiarity was the result of contacts in Asia during his proconsulship. Pliny the Younger, a close friend of Tacitus, served as the special imperial legate of the Emperor Trajan to the neighboring provinces of Bithynia and Pontus, located in modern northwestern Turkey, during the period of approximately 110–112 C.E., and while Bithynia and Pontus were not areas visited by the Apostle Paul, we know from Pliny's famous exchange of letters with the Emperor Trajan (Selection 3.3) that during his mission Pliny personally interrogated members of an active Christian community. There is reason to believe that Suetonius was a member of Pliny's personal staff during this mission,<sup>6</sup> and if so then Suetonius presumably also had contact with these same Christians. As with Tacitus, it may be that any such contacts influenced Suetonius to mention Christians in his later historical writings.

While the non-Christian sources on Christianity during the first seventy or eighty years of its existence are quite brief, these materials do indicate that even when the Jewish or Roman authors were aware of the early Christians, they did

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6. See, e.g., Pliny, *Letters* 3.8 and 10.94; Michael Grant, *The Ancient Historians* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 330; and *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), "Suetonius," 1451–52.



not consider Christianity sufficiently important to devote much time to describing it. Typical in this regard is the following passage by Tacitus.

2.1 Tacitus, *The Histories* 5.9 (ca. 106 C.E., concerning events ca. 63 B.C.E.–37 C.E.)

The first Roman to subdue the Jews and set foot in their temple by right of conquest was Gnaeus Pompey; thereafter it was a matter of common knowledge that there were no representations of the gods within, but that the place was empty and the secret shrine contained nothing. The walls of Jerusalem were razed, but the temple remained standing. Later, in the time of our civil wars, when these eastern provinces had fallen into the hands of Mark Antony, the Parthian prince, Pacorus, seized Judaea, but he was slain by Publius Ventidius, and the Parthians were thrown back across the Euphrates: the Jews were subdued by Gaius Sosius. Antony gave the throne to Herod, and Augustus, after his victory, increased his power. After Herod's death, a certain Simon assumed the name of king without waiting for Caesar's decision. He, however, was put to death by Quintilius Varus, the governor of Syria; the Jews were repressed; and the kingdom was divided into three parts and given to Herod's sons. Under Tiberius all was quiet.

Tacitus was quite aware that Christianity had originated in Palestine during the reign of Tiberius, but here, in his great history of Rome's emperors and legions, Tacitus did not treat Christianity as being worthy of mention in his account of the difficulties Rome encountered in maintaining control over Palestine during the period of approximately 63 B.C.E. to 37 C.E.

The same attitude is found in the earliest Jewish historical work to mention either Jesus or the Christians, the *Jewish Antiquities* of Josephus, which was published in 93 or 94 C.E. Even though Josephus wrote from the perspective of some sixty years after Jesus' death, Josephus devoted more space in his history of the Jewish people to John the Baptist than to Jesus and dealt with Jesus and his followers in only the two short passages reproduced below at Selections 2.2 and 2.13. From the modern historian's perspective, even more unfortunate than the brevity of Josephus's references is that the text of the most important passage was altered in antiquity and has come down to us in two versions.

2.2 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63–64 (ca. 93 or 94 C.E.)

*Western Vulgate Version*

About this time [following Pontius Pilate's seizure of the temple treasury funds to build a new aquaduct for Jerusalem] there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the

highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not cease. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.

*Arabic Version* as preserved in a tenth-century manuscript of *Universal History* 8.3, by the sixth century Syrian churchman Agapius (Mahboub of Menbidj):

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good, and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.

Even prior to the publication of the Arabic manuscript of *Universal History* by Shlomo Pines in 1971,<sup>7</sup> a wide variety of circumstantial evidence had led most modern historians to doubt the authenticity of the Western Vulgate text of Josephus. The earliest example of the Western Vulgate text is found in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History* 1.11.7–8 (ca. 311–323 C.E.). The historian Louis H. Feldman has noted that at least eleven church fathers living before or contemporaneously with Eusebius cited Josephus in their works but did not cite this particular passage and that five of the six church fathers, including Augustine, living in the century after Eusebius who cited Josephus also never referred to this passage.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to believe that all of these early church fathers would have passed over without comment a passage by the famous Jewish historian Josephus describing Jesus as the Messiah if the passage were in fact in their texts of Josephus. Moreover, Jerome (345–420 C.E.), the sole early church father after Eusebius to refer to this passage,<sup>9</sup> quoted the text of Josephus as reading that “Jesus was believed [*credebatur*] to be the Messiah.” Other strong evidence of tampering with the original text of Josephus is found in two works of the great Christian scholar Origen (185–254 C.E.). In *Against Celsus* 1.47, Origen wrote, “For Josephus in the eighteenth book of the *Jewish Antiquities* bears witness that John was a baptist and promised purification to people who were baptized. The same author, although he did not believe in

7. Shlomo Pines, *An Arabic Version of the Testimonium Flavianum and Its Implications* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1971), 70.

8. Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata (eds.), *Josephus, Judaism and Christianity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 57.

9. Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 13.14.

Jesus as Christ, sought for the cause of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple.” Similarly, Origen, while discussing Josephus’s account of the trial of James by the Sanhedrin, wrote, “and wonderful it is that while he [Josephus] did not receive Jesus for Christ, he did nevertheless bear witness that James was so righteous a man.” [*Commentary on Matthew* 10.17] These two passages obviously indicate that the text of Josephus available to Origen, who wrote some seventy years before Eusebius, did not contain any reference to Jesus being the Messiah. In view of this literary evidence and the alternative text found in the Arabic manuscript, the majority consensus among historians today is that while Josephus did refer to Jesus at this point in *Jewish Antiquities*, the surviving passage is not the original form of Josephus’s text.

Although historians agree that the original text of Josephus has been altered, they have engaged in lengthy and often bitter arguments about the proper reconstruction of the wording of the original text.<sup>10</sup> However, one would probably not stray too far from the sense of the original text by simply dropping what appear to be the obvious Christian interpolations in the Vulgate text and substituting the second and sixth sentences of the Arabic manuscript version for the second and sixth sentences of the Vulgate version, leaving the following:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man. And his conduct was good, and [he] was known to be virtuous. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love [him] did not cease. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still up to now not disappeared.

The Western Vulgate version of Josephus’s text was regarded by medieval Christians as very important testimony by a first-century Jew as to the messiahship of Jesus, and it was probably because of the weight given this passage that an unknown Christian copied the passage from *Jewish Antiquities* into the text of Josephus’s *The Jewish War* and there greatly expanded the text.

2.3 Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.9.3 (Slavonic Manuscript Tradition)  
(Interpolations to the text, according to Eisler’s edition, are shown in brackets.)

At that time there appeared a man, if it is permissible to call him a man. His nature [and form] were human, but his appearance [was something] more than [that] of a man; [notwithstanding his works were divine]. He worked miracles wonderful and mighty. [Therefore

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10. Many of the suggested reconstructions for the text are set forth and discussed by Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 65–74.

it is impossible for me to call him a man]; but again, if I look at the nature which he shared with all, I will not call him an angel. And everything whatsoever he wrought through an invisible power, he wrought by word and command. Some said of him, "Our first law-giver is risen from the dead and hath performed many healings and arts," while others thought that he was sent from God. Howbeit in many things he disobeyed the Law and kept not the Sabbath according to [our] fathers' customs. Yet, on the other hand, he did nothing shameful; nor [did he do anything] with aid of hands, but by word alone did he provide everything. And many of the multitude followed after him and hearkened to his teaching; and many souls were in commotion, thinking that thereby the Jewish tribes might free themselves from Roman hands. Now it was his custom in general to sojourn over against the city upon the Mount of Olives; and there, too, he bestowed his healings upon the people.

And there assembled unto him of ministers one hundred and fifty, and a multitude of the people. Now when they saw his power, that he accomplished whatsoever he would by [a] word, and when they had made known to him their will, that he should enter into the city and cut down the Roman troops and Pilate, and rule over us, he disdained us not.

And when thereafter knowledge of it came to the Jewish leaders, they assembled together with the high-priest and spake: "We are powerless and [too] weak to withstand the Romans. Seeing, moreover, that the bow is bent, we will go and communicate to Pilate what we have heard, and shall be clear of trouble, lest he hear [it] from others, and we be robbed of our substance and ourselves slaughtered and our children scattered." And they went and communicated [it] to Pilate. And he sent and had many of the multitude slain. And he had the Wonder-worker brought up, and after instituting an inquiry concerning him, he pronounced judgment: "He is [a benefactor, not] a malefactor, [nor] a rebel, [nor] covetous of kingship." [And he let him go; for he had healed his dying wife.]

[And he went to his wonted place and did his wonted works. And when more people again assembled round him, he glorified himself through his actions more than all. The teachers of the Law were overcome with envy, and gave thirty talents to Pilate, in order that he should put him to death. And he took (it) and gave them liberty to execute their will themselves.] And they laid hands on him and crucified him contrary to the law of [their] fathers."\*

*\*The Rumanian text of Josephus reads: "according to the law of the emperors."*

Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* appears to be the only surviving first-century C.E. Jewish reference to the crucifixion of Jesus, as there is a general consensus

among historians that the scattered references to Jesus in early rabbinic writings either date from no earlier than the second century C.E. or were later insertions into first-century C.E. texts.<sup>11</sup> Of these various rabbinical writings, one of the more significant texts dates to the early second century C.E.

2.4 A Rabbinic Account Of The Death Of Jesus (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 43a, second century C.E.)

On the Sabbath of the Passover festival Yeshu [Jesus] the Nazarene was hanged. For forty days before execution took place, a herald went forth and cried: "Here is Yeshu the Nazarene, who is going forth to be stoned because he practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forth and plead on his behalf." But since nothing was brought forth in his favor, he was hanged on the eve of Passover. . . .

This text presents Jesus as a blasphemer who "enticed Israel to apostasy" and was duly punished by being stoned to death and afterwards hung on a cross. (Stoning, the traditional Jewish punishment for blasphemy, was the fate of Jesus' brother James. See Selection 2.13, below.) The reference to a forty-day opportunity for anyone to come forth to defend Jesus has no certain explanation, but it may have been intended to counter Christian accusations that Jesus was unfairly tried and executed in too quick a proceeding. While the text as a whole appears to be a second-century Jewish response to Christian accounts of Jesus' trial and crucifixion rather than an independent account of those events, curiously, this Jewish account makes no mention of any Roman involvement in Jesus' execution and the time of the execution ("the eve of Passover") corresponds to the date given in the Gospel of John, rather than the date indicated by the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>12</sup>

During the years after Jesus' crucifixion, the members of the new "Jesus Movement," or "The Way" as it was known to its adherents,<sup>13</sup> began to spread through Judaea and the neighboring provinces of the Roman Empire. One of the earliest known direct contacts between Christian missionaries and Roman imperial officials occurred about 46–48 C.E., when the Apostle Paul had an audience with Sergius Paulus, the Roman governor of Cyprus.

2.5 The Acts Of The Apostles 13:4–12 (written ca. 80–85 C.E.)

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish

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11. See the discussion of these rabbinic passages in Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 74–76 and John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* Vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 93–98.

12. See the discussion of this point in Appendix E, pages 303–5.

13. See, e.g., Acts 24:22.

false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) withstood them, seeking to turn away the proconsul from the faith. But Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Acts depicts the proconsul Sergius Paulus as having been convinced of the truth of Christianity by the demonstrated power of the Christian God and not by the teachings of Jesus. This emphasis on the power of the Christian God would be a key part of the Christian message to pagans and Jews during the first four centuries C.E.:

We are sometimes told that the unique attractiveness of the central figure of Christianity as presented in the Synoptic Gospels was a primary factor in the success of Christianity. I believe this idea to be a product of nineteenth-century idealism and humanitarianism. In early Christian literature those aspects of the Gospel picture which are now most prominent in homiletic writing are not stressed, and all the emphasis is on the superhuman qualities of Jesus, as foreshadowed by prophecy and shown by miracle and Resurrection and teaching, and not on his winning humanity. He is a savior rather than a pattern, and the Christian way of life is something made possible by Christ the Lord through the community rather than something arising from imitation of Jesus. The central idea is that of divinity brought into humanity to complete the plan of salvation, not that of perfect humanity manifested as an inspiration; it is *Deus de deo* rather than *Ecce homo*. The personal attractiveness of Jesus had done much to gather the first disciples, though even then the impression of power was probably more important than the impression of love: thereafter the only human qualities which proved effective were those of individual Christian teachers and disciples.<sup>14</sup>

Soon after Paul's meeting with Sergius Paulus there was another incident that may have involved Roman officials taking administrative action against members of an early Christian community.

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14. A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and The New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933, 1961), 210.

## 2.6 Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 25.4 (ca. 122 C.E.)

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

Claudius's expulsion of the Jews from Rome is generally dated to 49 C.E.<sup>15</sup> The issue raised by this passage is whether "Chrestus" is to be understood as referring to Christ and thus by implication indicating that at this early date there was a sufficiently active Christian community in Rome to create some conflict or turmoil with the local Jewish community, which came to the attention of the Roman authorities. In support of this interpretation is that fact that the late second-century C.E. Christian writer Tertullian wrote that the Romans sometimes mispronounced "Christianus" as "Chrestianus," a word derived from the Greek "chrestos," meaning "good."<sup>16</sup> However, "Chrestus" was a relatively common name in antiquity.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Suetonius clearly named "Christians" as a distinct social/religious group in his *Life of Nero* (Selection 2.16, below) and thus it is not clear why he would use the term "Chrestus" here, if he meant either Christ or a Christian community. If this text does refer to an actual incident between the Christians and Jews of Rome, then Suetonius's source material was presumably vague or confused as to both the relationship between Christians and Jews at this early date and the time of the death of Jesus (who was crucified at least five years before the reign of Claudius) since Suetonius did not make the connection between Chrestus and the Christians.

Claudius's expulsion of the Jews from the city of Rome is mentioned in The Acts of the Apostles and thus it provides an important chronological reference for Paul's career.

## 2.7 The Acts Of The Apostles 18:1–2 (ca. 80–85 C.E.)

After this he [Paul] left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

Sometime after meeting Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth, Paul was brought up on charges before the Roman governor of Greece ("Achaëa") by the local Jewish leaders.

## 2.8 The Acts Of The Apostles 18:12–16 (ca. 80–85 C.E.)

But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaëa, the Jews made a united attack upon Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, "This man is persuading men to worship God contrary to the law." But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, I should have reason

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15. The fifth-century C.E. Christian Orosius wrote that Claudius expelled the Jews in the ninth year of his reign, which ran from January 24, 49 C.E. to January 23, 50 C.E. *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, 7.6.

16. Tertullian, *Apology* 3.5, written ca. 197–98 C.E.

17. See the discussion of this point in Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 18–19 and note 44.

to bear with you, O Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I refuse to be a judge of these things.” And he drove them from the tribunal.

As a result of the discovery of the following inscription at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece, we can roughly compute the years during which Lucius Annaeanus Junius Gallio, brother of the famous Roman philosopher Seneca, was proconsul in Achaëa.

2.9 The Gallio Inscription At Delphi *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum* 801D (third ed.)

Tiberius [Claudius] Caesar Augustus Germanicus [Pontifex Maximus, in his tribunician] power [year 12, acclaimed Emperor for] the 26th time, father of the country, [consul for the 5th time, censor, sends greeting to the city of Delphi] I have for long been zealous for the city of Delphi [and favorable to it from the] beginning, and I have always observed the cult of the [Phythian] Apollo, [but with regard to] the present stories, and those quarrels of the citizens of which [a report has been made by Lucius] Junius Gallio my friend, and [pro]consul [of Achaëa]. . .

From other inscriptions, we know that Claudius was first acclaimed emperor (*imperator*) on January 25, 41 C.E., that he was acclaimed for the 22nd, 23rd, and 24th times in his eleventh year of rule, and that his 27th acclamation occurred no later than August 1, 52 C.E., his twelfth year of rule.<sup>18</sup> While the dates of the 25th and 26th acclamations are not known, they could not have occurred before late 51 C.E. and must have been prior to August 1, 52 C.E., when Claudius was acclaimed for the 27th time. We also know that Claudius held the tribunician power for the 12th time from January 25, 52 C.E. through January 24, 53 C.E.<sup>19</sup> The Delphi inscription must therefore refer to an event sometime between January 25 and August 1 of 52 C.E.

During Claudius's reign, a proconsul such as Gallio normally left the city of Rome in mid-April to assume his post by the late spring or early summer of the year, usually for a term of one year but occasionally for two years.<sup>20</sup> Because the Delphi inscription refers to an event that could have occurred as late as June or July of 52 C.E., it is not certain whether Gallio was then serving a year of office that ran from the late spring or early summer of 51 C.E. through late spring or

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18. See C.K. Barrett (ed.), *The New Testament Background* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1987), 52 and note 1.2, and Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), 392–94. The dedicatory inscription on the Claudian Aqueduct in Rome gives a date of August 1, 52 C.E. and states that Claudius was then imperator for the 27th time and holder of the tribunician power for the 12th time.

19. See Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 90–91, 392.

20. The third century C.E. Roman historian Cassius Dio wrote that Claudius required governors to leave for their provinces before the middle of April and that his governors normally only served for one year. *Roman History* 60.11.6, 17.3, 25.6.



early summer of 52 C.E., or from the late spring or early summer of 52 C.E. through late spring or early summer of 53 C.E. Moreover, we do not know whether Gallio served one or two years as proconsul of Achaëa or whether Paul's trial occurred early or late in Gallio's proconsulship. Thus, the possible range of dates for Gallio's proconsulship, and hence for Paul's trial, runs from the late spring of 50 C.E. at the earliest (on the assumption that the Delphi inscription dates to early 52 C.E., during the second year of a two-year proconsulship) to the early summer of 54 C.E. at the latest (on the assumption that the Delphi inscription dates to the late spring or early summer of 52 C.E., during the first year of a two-year proconsulship for Gallio).<sup>21</sup>

The median of this range is 52 C.E., but a slightly earlier date of late 50 or 51 C.E. for Paul's trial is indicated by the Acts account of the circumstances surrounding the trial. Acts 18:2 states that when Paul arrived in Corinth he met Aquila and Priscilla, who had "recently" come to Corinth because of Claudius's expulsion of the Jews from Rome in 49 C.E.<sup>22</sup> Acts 18:11 states that Paul lived in Corinth for eighteen months. Acts 18:18 states that Paul remained in Corinth "many days" after the Gallio trial before departing the city, presumably at the end of the eighteen months mentioned in Acts 18:11. These texts help establish a range of possible dates for Paul's stay in Corinth when related to the 49 C.E. date for Claudius's expulsion of the Jews. If Claudius's edict were issued in January of 49 C.E. and Paul came to Corinth and met Aquila and Priscilla, within six or so months of the edict, then an eighteen-month stay in Corinth would indicate that Paul's trial must have occurred sometime after late spring of 50 C.E. and "many days" before January of 51 C.E., since Gallio assumed office no earlier than the spring of 50 C.E. under any dating of the Delphi inscription. If Claudius's edict were issued in December of 49 C.E., then under the same assumptions Paul arrived in Corinth by the summer of 50 C.E. and his trial must have occurred "many days" prior to January of 52 C.E. Thus, 50 or 51 C.E. seem the most likely dates for Paul's trial.

The Acts account of Paul's appearance before Gallio indicates that the Roman proconsul did not understand Christianity to be anything other than a sect of Judaism.<sup>23</sup> While many modern Christians seem to believe that Christians and Jews were sharply separate and distinct groups from the earliest days of the Christian movement, the consensus of modern historians is that during the first century C.E. most Christians perceived themselves as more or

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21. While this analysis was independently developed by the author, it closely parallels the arguments of F. J. F. Jackson and Kirsopp Lake in *The Beginnings of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), V.459–64.

22. The fifth century C.E. Christian Orosius wrote that Claudius expelled the Jews in the ninth year of his reign, which is known to have run from January 24, 49 C.E. to January 23, 50 C.E. *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, 7.6.

23. The reader may refer to Acts 21:27–40, 23:6–10, and 23:12–35 for similar New Testament accounts describing the refusal of Roman officials to intervene in a "Jewish" dispute and/or Roman intervention to protect Paul from Jewish mobs.

less a part of Judaism. Indeed, it is easy to believe that most first-century Jewish converts to Christianity saw themselves simply as Jews who believed that the Messiah prophesied by the Jewish Scripture had come, in contrast to those Jews who believed that the Messiah was still to come. The divergence of the two faiths widened with the growing importance of the gentile-oriented churches founded by the Apostle Paul and other missionaries. The tension between Christians and Jews in Palestine itself during the first century C.E. apparently increased significantly after the First Jewish War (66–70 C.E.), when the system of worship based on the Second Temple was destroyed and the newly prominent rabbis sought to maintain a stricter religious discipline among the surviving faithful. However, the more or less final break between Judaism and Christianity does not appear to have occurred until approximately 130–150 C.E., a time when Christian separateness was marked by both increasingly distinct doctrine and the general Christian refusal to aid Jews in the Second Jewish War against Roman rule (ca. 132–135 C.E.). The degree of separation between the two faiths should not be overemphasized, however, as for the next several centuries many Christians continued to move freely in and out of worship within the Jewish synagogues, a fact of great concern to the Christian bishops and emperors of the fourth century C.E.

#### THE DEATHS OF THE APOSTLES JAMES, PAUL, AND PETER

Claudius was succeeded as emperor by Nero (54–68 C.E.). The sources on Christianity during Nero's reign are extremely significant because, among other matters, they describe the arrest of Paul, the execution of the Apostle James, and the earliest known Roman persecution of the Christian church. Even prior to these events, however, there was an earlier incident that some have interpreted to indicate that Christianity had penetrated into at least one family of the Roman governing elite.

2.10 Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome* 13.32 (ca. 110 C.E.)

These events date to ca. 57 C.E.

Pomponia Graecina, a woman of high family, married to Aulus Plautius—whose ovation after the British campaign I recorded earlier—and now arraigned for alien superstition, was left to the jurisdiction of her husband. Following the ancient custom, he held the inquiry, which was to determine the fate and fame of his wife, before a family council, and announced her innocent. Pomponia was a woman destined to long life and to continuous grief: for after Julia, the daughter of Drusus, had been done to death by the treachery of Messalina, she survived forty years, dressed in perpetual mourning and lost in perpetual sorrow; and a constancy unpunished under the Empire of Claudius became later a title to glory.

Some historians have suggested that this “alien superstition” was Christianity, connecting the “constancy unpunished,” which “became later a title to glory,” to the fact that archaeologists have discovered in the Catacombs of

Callistus in the city of Rome burial vaults with Christian inscriptions honoring the Pomponia clan and a "Pomponius Graecinus." However, the most recent archaeological studies indicate that these Christian burial vaults date from the mid-second century C.E. at the earliest and thus could not be related to this Pomponia Graecina.<sup>24</sup> If the "alien superstition" were in fact Christianity, then the text indicates the disrepute with which Christian belief was held among the Roman upper classes during this period: Aulus Plautius invoked "ancient custom" to convene a private family inquiry rather than suffer the embarrassment of a public inquiry into his wife's religious beliefs.

At approximately the same time as the inquiry into Pomponia Graecina's "alien superstition," the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem attempted to silence once and for all the Apostle Paul, but the plot miscarried and Paul was taken into Roman custody and eventually transported to Rome.

2.11 The Acts Of The Apostles 23:12–13, 16–17, 23–34; 24:1, 22–23, 26–27 (ca. 80–85 C.E.) These events date to ca. 58–60 C.E.

<sup>23</sup> When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. . . . Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush; so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. And Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune; for he has something to tell him." So he took him and brought him to the tribune. . . . Then he [the tribune] called two of the centurions and said, "At the third hour of the night get ready two hundred soldiers with seventy horsemen and two hundred spear men to go as far as Caesarea. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride, and bring him safely to Felix the governor." And he wrote a letter to this effect: "Claudius Lysias to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. This man [Paul] was seized by the Jews, and was about to be killed by them, when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. And desiring to know the charge on which they accused him, I brought him down to their council. I found that he was accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him." So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. And on the morrow they returned to the barracks, leaving the horsemen to go on with him. When they came to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. . . .

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24. W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (New York: University Press, 1965), 216–17.

<sup>24</sup> And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul. . . . But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case." Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but should have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs. . . . At the same time he [Felix] hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. But when two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

Most historians believe that Felix was procurator of Judaea from 52–60 C.E. and that the text of Acts means that Paul was under arrest from 58–60 C.E. However, a few historians have argued that the "two years" mentioned in Acts 24 refers to the term of Felix's office and not to the period of Paul's arrest.<sup>25</sup> Under this minority view, Paul was under arrest from approximately 52 to 54 C.E. and the dates given below for the subsequent events described in The Acts of the Apostles would be adjusted forward by approximately six years.

2.12 The Acts Of The Apostles 25:13–21, 25-26; 27:1 (concerning events ca. 60 or 61 C.E.) and 28:16, 30 (concerning events ca. 61–63 C.E.)

<sup>25,13</sup> Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to welcome Festus [the new Roman governor]. And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man left prisoner by Felix, and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews gave information about him, asking for sentence against him. I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up any one before the accused met the accusers face to face, and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. When therefore they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought in. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed; but they had certain points of dispute with him about their own superstition and about one Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions I asked whether he wished to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the Emperor, I commanded him to be held until I could send him to Caesar. . . .

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25. For the arguments in favor of the minority view, see Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 35 note 3.