

CHAPTER 2

THE CHURCH IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Political background

1. Julians

- a. Augustus (30 BC - AD 14). Established emperorship, with constitutional forms; ordered census when Jesus born (ca. 5 BC; Lk. 2:1)
- b. Tiberius (AD 14-37). (not Lake Tiberias) Adopted son of Augustus, given life emperorship by senate; very suspicious, especially after unsuccessful revolt in AD 31; appointed Pontius Pilate as procurator of Judea, AD 26-36; time of Jesus' ministry and death (cf. Lk. 3:1; 15th year of Tiberius = ca. AD 27)
- c. Caligula (AD 37-41). Mentally unstable (appointed horse to high office); reckless spender, emptied treasury, used extortion to raise taxes; demanded deification while still living (before, emperors had been worshiped as gods only after they died); ordered a statue of himself erected in the Jerusalem temple (Jews conducted "passive resistance," delays, etc.; statue never set up; Caligula assassinated by Praetorian Guard)
- d. Claudius (AD 41-54). Able ruler, but greatly expanded the bureaucracy; hated foreign religions; drove Jews out of Rome (Acts 18:2; ca. AD 51)
- e. Nero (AD 54-68). Son of Claudius, by fourth wife Agrippina; first five years peaceful (epistle to Romans written during this time); became raving maniac; murdered most of his family, including his mother; kicked his wife to death; murdered his teacher Seneca; wasted the treasury; very "dramatic" character; wanted new Rome ("Neropolis"); in July 64, two-thirds of Rome was burned; Nero the popular suspect; in turn he accused the Christians; many put to horrible deaths in Rome;

* * * Nero started the official anti-Christian attitude of the Roman government; after him came intermittent persecutions until Constantine in the fourth century.

Peter crucified in Rome (later tradition, head down); Paul beheaded there (Roman citizen); both put to death ca. AD 64-67; Nero committed suicide when 32 years old (end of Julian line)

2. One-and-a-half year "interregnum"

three generals, each killed by his successor:

Galba (AD 68)
Otho (69)
Vitellius (69)

3. Flavians

- a. Vespasian (AD 69-79). General of the eastern armies; left his son Titus to quell the rebellion in Judea; captured Egypt, then Rome; gave name to dynasty (Titus Flavius Vespasianus); frugal; established order throughout the empire
- b. Titus (AD 79-81). Directed conquest of Jerusalem in AD 70; Triumphal Arch built in Rome commemorates his victory, pictures the Menorah being carried away; also, coins struck; remembered as a popular and generous emperor
- c. Domitian (AD 81-96). Brother of Titus; demanded allegiance as “Lord and God”; tried to restore ancient religion; led second general persecution of Christians; persecuted prominent people for “superstitions”; Apostle John exiled to Patmos, wrote Revelation; later Domitian eased persecution; some exiles permitted to return (John back in Ephesus later, under Nerva); became very suspicious and cruel; his own family had him assassinated in self-defense (end of the Flavian line)

Beginnings of the church

1. Evidence for the period

almost entirely limited to Acts and the epistles of the NT

2. Importance of the resurrection of Jesus

= central point of faith and preaching

3. Purpose of the book of Acts

- a. To trace the rejection of the kingdom by the Jews, and its being opened to the Gentiles, to be realized at a later time

1:6-8 question raised

ch. 2 Pentecost; signs of the kingdom (Joel 2:28ff.)

3:18-21 kingdom offer renewed

5:31 Israel to believe

8:12 kingdom preached to Samaritans

10:1–11:18 kingdom preached to Gentiles

14:22 kingdom preached to Galatians

17:5 Jews in Thessalonica reject kingdom

- 18:6 Jews in Corinth reject kingdom
- 19:9 Jews in Ephesus reject kingdom
- 28:19 last appeal to Jews
- 28:28 final rejection
- 28:31 kingdom preached to all

- b. To show that the Christian religion was and should be under the protection of government authorities: Christian Apologetic

note examples of city magistrates in Philippi, Gallio in Corinth, the city clerk in Ephesus, the tribune Claudius Lysias, the trials before Felix and Festus, the statement of Agrippa, the attitude of the centurion Julius, the chief official Publius of Malta

- c. To demonstrate the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in bringing the gospel and the Christian church all the way from its beginning in Judea to spread through the whole empire and to Rome itself

cf. the “progress reports” interspersed throughout the book of Acts (e.g., 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14, 42; 6:7; 9:31)

- d. To convince the reader that the gospel preached by Peter and Paul and the other Christians in Rome was the same as that founded by Jesus Christ, and was indeed the truth (cf. prologues of Luke and Acts)

4. The place of the apostles

(the NT recognizes 13; the original 12 minus Judas, plus Matthias and Paul)

the apostles provided doctrinal and organizational foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20)

the apostles were testified to by the miracles (examples in Acts, e.g., Acts 8:18); referred to in 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3-4

most of the apostles’ activities not recorded; active in preaching, missionary work; early traditions in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*

only one apostle’s death mentioned in the NT—James the brother of John (Acts 12:2); by tradition, John only one to escape martyrdom

no evidence to support apostolic succession to others, but much evidence against it

5. The first century a transition period

transition from Jewish dispensation to universal church dispensation

1. Occasional direct revelation → total written revelation
2. Jewish Church → Gentile Church
3. Synagogue → local church
4. Sabbath → Lord's Day

temple worship required for all

Acts 15:29 decision, normally taken as a compromise: no need to become a ceremonial Jew before becoming a Christian (follower of Jewish Messiah)

Paul's vow, Acts 18:18

request of James, Acts 21:23-26

book of Hebrews, temple worship "obsolete"

after AD 70, clear distinction between the Christian church and the Pharisaic Jewish synagogue

Period of little evidence

1. Reasons for little evidence

- a. papyrus decomposes quickly (parchment start ca. AD 200)
- b. little opportunity or stimulus to write history
- c. expected soon return of Christ (cf. earlier epistles like Thessalonians; gospels written later)

2. God's reason for little evidence (speculation)

make us rely on the NT, not church history

3. Earliest Christian traditions

concern the fate of the apostles and locations of holy places (places in the life of Christ or the apostles)

4. Earliest dated Christian writing

1 Clement (dated AD 95-100)

(So-called *2 Clement* not genuine, written ca. AD 145)

Clement was bishop of Rome (Eusebius says the third bishop of Rome); some identify him with the Clement mentioned in Php. 4:3; Clement wrote to the church in Corinth, where there was strife; officially, the letter is stated as being from the church of Rome

points of interest in *1 Clement*:

urges peace and submission to church officers

*uses “bishop” and “elder” interchangeably, as in Acts 20 and Titus 1

ch. 42, officers of the church are bishops and deacons (as in Philippians 1:1), first appointed by the apostles (Bettenson, pp. 62-63)

ch. 44, church officers are elected

clearly separates himself from the apostles: no succession in Rome

mentions the latter journeys of Paul “even reaching the bounds of the West” (Rom. 15:28) and the deaths of Peter and Paul in Rome (Bettenson, pp. 8-9)

5. Non-Christian sources for the church in the first century

a. Josephus (ben Matthias)

Pharisee from a wealthy priestly family; traveled to Rome to plead for imprisoned Jewish priests; favored by Nero’s wife Poppaea Sabina with many gifts in AD 63 (one year before the fire); returned to Galilee, reluctantly joined the revolt in AD 66 as a general; AD 67, was captured and held captive three years by Vespasian, received a “prophecy”; pleaded with Jews to surrender (hence often regarded by Jews as a traitor); after AD 70, afraid to live in Palestine, branded a “traitor;” rewarded by Romans with a house in Rome, citizenship, and a pension

writings:

Wars of the Jews (ca. AD 78). Accurate record, written under commission of Vespasian; genitive in title probably objective, “Wars against the Jews,” cf. Caesar’s *Gallic War*

Antiquities of the Jews (ca. AD 93). Traces from creation to AD 66, where *Wars* begins; attempt to justify Judaism to the Romans; mainly copies the OT (LXX) and a few legends and a few secular references

Life of Flavius Josephus (ca. AD 100). His Latin name; Hebrew name was Joseph ben Matthias

Against Apion (ca. AD 100+). Defends Judaism against Hellenism.

information relating to church history:

John the Baptist (*Antiquities* 18:5:2, p. 382)

Jesus Christ (*Antiquities* 18:3:3, p. 379)

historical facts confirmed; some alterations by Christian scribes are evident (note of H. St. John Thackeray; see F. F. Bruce, *New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?*, pp. 108-12)

earlier Jewish rebellions (*Antiquities* 20:5:1-2, p. 418)

some of these referred to in Acts 5:36-37; note comments of William La Sor, Introduction to *Josephus*, p. x

martyrdom of James, brother of Jesus (*Antiquities* 20:9:1, cf. Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*, ch. 23)

death of Herod Agrippa I (*Antiquities* 19:8:2, p. 412); cf. Acts 12:19-23

cruelty of Nero (*Antiquities* 20:8:2, p. 421); murdering his family members, etc.

b. Suetonius (ca. AD 75-160; wrote ca. AD 100)

secretary to Hadrian; wrote *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*; basically scandalous stories of emperors and families from Julius to Domitian

concerning Claudius: Jews expelled because of strife arising from “**Chrestus**” (ca. AD 50; Bettenson, p. 2); cf. Acts 18:2

concerning Nero: Christians were punished—”a novel and mischievous superstition” (Bettenson, p. 2)

c. Tacitus (ca. AD 60-120; wrote after AD 100)

high social and government status: praetor (next to consul) in AD 88, praetorian legate, consul in AD 97, proconsul of Asia in AD 112-13; hated autocracy; praised the Germanic tribes for resisting the Romans

writings:

Histories (covers emperors AD 68-96; only 4-1/2 of 14 books remain, covering AD 69-70)

Annals (covers emperors AD 14-68; 12 of 16 books remain, covering Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero)

wanted to write all the way from Augustus through Trajan, but died before he could

events mentioned:

concerning the trial of Pomponia Graecina, accused of holding a “foreign superstition” (AD 57, time of Nero); *Annals* 13:32 (Bettenson, p. 1)

concerning Nero’s persecution (AD 64); *Annals* 15:44 (Bettenson, pp. 1-2); mentions several facts: Pilate, “**Christus**” executed, converts in Rome, Roman fire, Nero’s cruel and unjust punishment of Christians