

# In Search of Early Christianity Part II

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*"Christianity was the last great creation of the pagan world."  
Will Durant*

Part I of this two-part series described the massive apostasy that took place within Christianity during the first three centuries. Part II looks at the forces that made the remnant of the true Church an unpopular and increasingly persecuted group of believers.

As startling as it may sound, **the religion the world knows as Christianity was not founded by Jesus Christ!** Within the span of three hundred years, this religion had become a vast organization with a clergy presiding over rites taken from pagan mystery religions and Judaism. It had borrowed the best elements of Greek philosophy and had formed a dogma appealing to human reason and emotion. This religious organization had become a powerful political force in the Roman Empire. **But it was not the Church established by Christ!**

"Contemplate the Christian Church at the beginning of the fourth century, therefore, and some difficulty will be experienced in recognizing in her the community of Apostolic times, or rather, we shall not be able to recognize it at all" (Charles Guignebert, *Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Christianity*, p. 122).

Speaking of congregations that existed at that time, he says the congregations that adhere to the teachings of the apostles and their Jewish disciples are scattered and poor. They live in Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and possibly even in Rome, where they are nearly overwhelmed by the large churches filled with converts from paganism.

In the first part of this series, you read how catholic Christianity rejected its Judaic heritage. Now let's look at some of the forces that influenced this repudiation.

## **Judaism in the Roman Empire**

Jews were widely dispersed throughout the Roman Empire in New Testament times. Because Judaism had a long history as a religion, the Romans allowed the Jews to continue their practices. Julius Caesar granted them the right to observe the Sabbath and to meet in synagogues. He gave them exemption from military service and the freedom to follow their own laws.

Outside of Palestine, Jews were allowed to exist as independent communities of resident aliens within larger cities. They were subject to their own political structure as well as to that of the Roman Empire

In New Testament times, probably as many as 5-7 million Jews lived in the Roman Empire, with roughly a million in Egypt, another million in Syria, and close to one million in Palestine. At least 10,000 Jews lived in Rome; Jewish colonies also existed in the large trading centers of Asia Minor. As Josephus remarked on society of his time, "There is not a community in the entire world which does not have a portion of our people."

Judaism had long been viewed favorably by pagan writers; Jews were thought to be a race of philosophers, much like the Brahmins of India.

"Throughout the Roman Empire, various practices of Judaism found favor with large segments of the populace. In Rome many gentiles observed the Sabbath, the fasts, and the food laws; in Alexandria many gentiles observed the Jewish holidays; in Asia Minor many gentiles attended synagogue on the Sabbath" (Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 55).

The gentiles who venerated Judaism were no doubt the people whom Acts called those who "feared God" (Acts 13:16, 26; 16:14; 17:4; 17; 18:7). They were not necessarily converts to Judaism, but they were appreciative of its doctrines. The major obstacle to their conversion was circumcision, which was looked upon as self-mutilation by Romans.

It has been argued by some scholars that one of the reasons that Jews wrote in Greek was to attract gentile believers. While Judaism had no official missionary work, individual Jews actively sought converts. Christ hinted at this effort when He said: "woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you compass sea and land to make one proselyte...(Matthew 23:15). Judaism continued to gain converts and remained a viable religious movement within the Roman Empire until the end of the fourth century.

Freedom of worship, however, did not mean there was an absence of tension between Jews and Romans. The Jews living as resident aliens in cities throughout the empire wanted both tolerance from and equality with their neighbors. They asked for the continuance of their autonomy as well as full rights of citizenship. Many cities refused and disturbances broke out in Alexandria, Antioch, and Asia Minor during the first century A.D.

The tension was particularly acute in Alexandria, which became a center of anti-Judaic propaganda. "If the Jews wish to be Alexandrians, let them worship the gods of the Alexandrians" was the common sentiment.

It is easy for us in the twenty-first century to underestimate the role that religion played in the political life of the Roman Empire. The worship of local gods was considered a vital aspect of assuring civic peace and prosperity for the local community (Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, p. 58). Ritual and government were closely intertwined and the cities that rejected the Jews' petitions were merely acting on long-standing beliefs.

Religion at that time was not a matter of personal conviction; it was a civic duty. Nonetheless, the Roman government chose to be somewhat tolerant of differing creeds, that is, provided their adherents could prove that their beliefs were based on long-standing tradition.

Anti-Judaic sentiment was intensified by the wars which the Jews waged against Rome. From A.D. 66-70, Palestinian Jews sought to expel the Roman legions from their homeland. "The war ended with the burning of the Temple and the death of more than

500,000 Jews. Palestine was decimated of half of its population. Surprisingly, Jews in other parts of the Roman Empire suffered no repercussions from the hostile acts of their kinsmen. Yet they too later fought against, the Romans in a major uprising in 115-117 A.D. Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, Cyprus, and Cyrene launched a revolt which brought destruction for both themselves and their gentile neighbors (Wayne A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians*, p. 67 -68). The causes of the war are still unclear, but the result was devastation.

The final war between Romans and Jews was waged in Palestine in 133-135 A.D. Led by Simon Bar Kochba, the Jewish rebellion was caused by Roman actions which are also historically uncertain. Again, hundreds of thousands of Jews were slaughtered and so many sold into captivity that the price of a Jewish slave fell to that of a horse (Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, p. 548). All Jews were expelled from Jerusalem, which then became a city of gentiles.

In the context of these uprisings, it is easy to see how anti-Judaic feeling could develop in the Roman Empire. Resentment toward Jews in Rome became so strong after the first Jewish War that crown prince Titus, who had participated in the sack of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., was forced to give up his desire to marry Bernice, sister of Herod Agrippa the Younger.

One of the common complaints voiced by Roman writers during this time was that Judaism was a superstition. In the Roman view, a superstition was a religious practice that neither honored the gods nor benefited mankind (Wilken, p. 60). The Romans could see no value in the cults of the Jews, Celts, Egyptians, or Germans because they did not honor gods in the manner that Romans thought appropriate. Influential writers such as Quintilian, Plutarch, and Tacitus singled out Judaism as a superstition that was harmful and degrading to Roman society. Yet eventually these feelings subsided and Judaism peacefully coexisted with most religions for several centuries thereafter.

### **The Rejection of Judeo-Christianity**

But another storm was brewing. As they continued to reject the Judaic roots of their religion, catholic Christians increasingly viewed Jews as a problem. The conflict between Judaism and catholic belief became sharper from the second century onward. Instead of accepting their common heritage, the church fathers sought ways to reinterpret the Scriptures and to show the superiority of their new religious movement.

Some of them saw the destruction of the Temple as proof that God had rejected the Jews. Justin Martyr scornfully mocked the Jewish sacrificial system. The heretic Marcion claimed that the God of the Old Testament was evil and that only Paul's doctrines of love represented true Christianity. Although he was noted for his keeping of the Passover on the 14th of Nisan, Mileto of Sardis denounced the Jews as Messiah-killers and criminals. The invective against Judaism was continued by Origen, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Cyprian, Ambrose, and other misguided men.

Tertullian in particular wanted to "disassociate the Christian message from its Jewish trappings in order to give it a truly Latin expression" (Jean Danielou, *The Origins of Latin Christianity*, p. 139). He was not content to confine himself to Judaism, however. He also attacked Jewish Christianity not only in its heterodox forms, but as it existed in the Christian

church during his lifetime. His reaction against the Judeo-Christian element became more pronounced in each of his writings, which influenced a new generation of church leaders.

Ironically, the major criticism leveled at the emerging catholic church was its rejection of Judaism. Around 180 A.D., the Greek philosopher Celsus charged that Christians had deserted the Jewish law. They wantonly disregarded the points that were most clearly set forth—the keeping of the Sabbath, the festivals, and the dietary laws. The fact that church fathers were writing rebuttals 80 years after Celsus' death, shows the impact that he had.

But even more devastating were the arguments of Porphyry, a well-known biographer and philosopher. Several generations of churchmen were unable to answer Porphyry, whose works were finally put to the torch by Constantine. Intimately acquainted with the Scriptures, Porphyry showed that the Christians of his day had abandoned the teachings of Christ and had introduced a new cult in which Jesus Himself was deified. Since they were unable to counter his accusations, the church fathers grew even more vehement in their attempts to allegorize the Bible.

By the end of the third century, the Jews had become an embarrassment. They represented a large and unpopular group that should have, but would not accept catholic norms. Under the emperor Theodosius, when Christian uniformity became the official policy of the empire, Christian mob attacks on synagogues grew common. This unlicensed violence was contrary to Roman public policy, since Jews were regarded as valuable and respectable members of society for their general support of authority.

In 388 the Jewish synagogue at Callinicum on the Euphrates was destroyed at the instigation of the local bishop. Theodosius decided to make the incident a test case and ordered it rebuilt at Christian expense. The bishop Ambrose hotly opposed the decision, and Theodosius withdrew his orders. This event marked an "important stage in the construction of a society in which only orthodox Christianity exercised full rights" (Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p. 104-105).

### **The Survival of the "Faith Delivered to the Saints"**

An even greater embarrassment to the church was the continued existence of Jewish Christian congregations—the element that Tertullian wanted to extirpate. In their efforts to disavow the influence of Judaism, catholics soon viewed these Christians as heretical.

"Yet what was Christian heresy? And for that matter, what was the Church? Most of our knowledge of early Christian history comes from the writings of Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century. Eusebius was in many ways a conscientious historian, and he had access to multitudes of sources which have since disappeared...He wanted to show that the church he represented had always constituted the mainstream of Christianity, both in organization and faith. The truth is very different...A dominant orthodox Church, with a recognizable ecclesiastical structure, emerged only very gradually" (Johnson, p. 43).

The apostle Jude, a brother of Christ, urged Christians at the end of the first century to "earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints." His epistle is regarded by some modern scholars as one of the literary remains of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, written after the fall of Jerusalem. What is significant is that **the primitive Church was already**

**being threatened from within at the time of Jude!** True Christians were forced to begin to defend the faith against men who called themselves brothers in Christ.

Christianity did not follow a smooth evolutionary path after the mother Church in Jerusalem was scattered. It divided and re-divided. Gradually, a group of people who called themselves catholic agreed to accept certain doctrines—not the plain and simple doctrines of the New Testament, but doctrines which had been allegorized and reconfigured to their ideas and values.

By the end of the second century, the way of life transmitted by the primitive Christian community in Jerusalem was in grave danger. A few historians believe that it actually perished. Historical information about the groups that followed the apostolic traditions, unfortunately, is sketchy and comes almost exclusively from the writings of the church fathers. Under Theodosius and a later emperor named Valentinian, all writings hostile to the catholic church—including Christian works deemed heretical—were burned.

Yet a few historical traces have been preserved. After the fall of Jerusalem, a certain group of Jewish Christians remained faithful to the apostolic traditions, while another began to incorporate elements of legalism, Essenism, and even Gnosticism into its religious thought. Justin Martyr was the first to point out the difference between the two groups. Some Jewish Christians wanted to impose ritual laws on Gentile converts, but others did not.

Jewish Christians who maintained the apostolic legacy were accepted by neither Jew nor professing Christian. They were occasionally viewed as a political threat by authorities. Several Roman emperors examined their leaders, who were the descendants of Jesus' family, to see if they were a potential menace to the empire. From 90 A.D. the Jews banned them from the synagogues, and from the middle of the second century catholic churchmen strongly condemned their beliefs as unworthy of Christ.

Very likely, the group known historically as the Nazarenes represented the Jewish Christianity taught by the apostles. The term "Nazarene" is first mentioned in Acts 24:5 where it is used to refer to true Christians. Later Jewish writings also referred to Christians as Nazarenes. Two catholic writers, Epiphanius and Jerome, stated that the Nazarenes of their day dwelt in Berea, Pella, and in other cities in the hill country of Judea and Syria. Julius Africanus corroborates that Jewish Christian leaders included offspring from Jesus' family. These Christians had a complete gospel of Matthew in Aramaic, as well as commentaries on the Old Testament, which Jerome himself used. They followed Law of Moses along with the teachings of Christ.

Augustine of Hippo was acquainted with such groups as late as 400 A.D. In Antioch, "the synagogue on Saturday, the church on Sunday" was a familiar summary of practice. John Chrysostom lamented the fact that some catholics had begun to observe the Jewish holy days and Sabbath; he admitted that many had high regard for the Jews and believed that their way of life was holy.

In the 430s, the Christian Council of Laodicea ruled in detail against Christian observance of the Jewish Sabbath, their acceptance of unleavened bread from Jews, and their keeping of Jewish festivals (Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 482). The truth that had been abandoned by the apostolic Church was not easily extinguished.

Did this truth perish after the fourth century? The answer is no. As the catholic church moved into the Middle Ages, what it called Judaizing never ceased to exist. "In the decrees of the Church councils, the term gained currency from the time of the Council of Laodicea in the fourth century onward. It was used by Christian ecclesiastics like Agobard,

who charged Christians at Lyons (in the ninth century) with Jewish inclinations and habits. In the historical literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the term 'Judaizer' won frequent place, and came to designate either individuals or groups, who, as in Lombardy, adopted a Jewish outlook on life, and Jewish forms of ceremony and conduct. It was employed to designate certain heretical groups which challenged papal authority. Papal bulls during these centuries when heresies flourished are filled with references to Judaizers and 'Re-Judaizers,' the latter term being applied to Jewish converts to Christianity who later returned to their original faith" (Louis Newman, *Jewish Reform Movements*, pps. 1-3).

### **Is Modern Christianity an Anachronism?**

The truth has never been lost, but it has been ignored by the majority. Only within this century have scholars attempted to reconstruct early Church history apart from the writings of the church fathers. A few of them have been provocative in their re-evaluation.

Not long ago, Vanderbilt University New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine stated, "If you get the [Jewish context of Christianity] wrong, you will certainly get Jesus wrong."

Whether or not contemporary scholars agree with his conclusions about the divinity of Christ, most Biblical scholars recognize that Hugh Schonfield made a significant contribution to our knowledge of church history. Along with S. G. F. Brandon and Robert Eisler, Schonfield clearly demonstrated that **the early Church was a sect within Judaism, not a new religion.**

In his book, *Those Incredible Christians*, Schonfield presents an interesting thesis. He says that the religion known as Christianity is an anachronism—an institution out of its proper time. He asserts that, by adopting the trappings of paganism, Christianity reverted to an ancient past. Yet paganism as a religious movement had been slowly dying out among the educated classes of the Roman Empire. In a curious twist of fate, educated Romans were moving toward the monotheism that Judaism had embraced for centuries. By converting to Catholicism, they fell back into a form of polytheism evidenced by belief in the trinity.

Schonfield challenges the Christian reader to examine his or her own religious beliefs. He concludes his book with an invitation to Christians to "go back to the beginning and search out anew in the context of the Jewish vision, which the Church forsook, the mysteries of the Kingdom of God" (p. 225).

In this age of intellectual enlightenment, it is amazing that the modern Christian clings to outdated myths and practices. The one area of life--religion--that a Christian should consider of supreme importance is too often based on fallacy! It is not uncommon for a television evangelist to admit that major holidays are pagan in origin, yet he 'claims them for Jesus' just the same.

Is that what Jesus Christ wants? Christ placed a great deal of emphasis on knowing the truth. Remember that He had to combat the false doctrines and ideas of His time. He said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). He also said, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Some claim He was referring to "spiritual" truth---not something as mundane as truth based on historical evidence.

But twenty centuries later, we are faced with a unique dilemma. **To understand spiritual truth, the modern Christian must understand historical truth.** It is difficult to

separate Christian theology from Christian history, because they had an enormous impact on each other. Modern Christianity was shaped by key events and trends in history, as well as by the long process of doctrinal development.

If you believe you are a Christian, it is time to ask yourself some hard questions. Do your beliefs agree with those of primitive Christianity or have they been accommodated to the society around you? **If your church has not been built on the foundation of Christ and the apostles as described in the New Testament, your faith may be a hollow shell--a relic of ancient religions far removed from the God of the Bible.**

May God guide you as you seek the answers to these questions!

For more information, check us out on the web at [DynamicChristianMinistries.org](http://DynamicChristianMinistries.org).

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