

The Early Church

SECOND EDITION

*The Christian Church in the
Roman Empire to AD325*

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Colourpoint
Educational

Contents

AS – The Christian Church in the Roman Empire: Beginnings, Expansion and External Pressure

1	Expansion of Christianity	7
2	Church Government	27
3	Persecution	37
4	Constantine	65
5	Early Christian Thought.	75

A2 – The Continued Development of the Christian Church in the Roman Empire to AD325

6	Church Life and Worship.	99
7	Heresy and Schism	138
8	Defining the Faith.	167
9	Christian Writers.	191
10	The Council of Nicaea.	215
	Glossary	221
	Index	224

Author Preface

This text has been written specifically to assist teachers and students to meet the requirements of CCEA's* GCE Religious Studies AS and A2 courses on the Early Church. The first section of the book covers the AS course ('The Christian Church in the Roman Empire') and the remainder the A2 course ('The Continued Development of the Christian Church in the Roman Empire to AD 325'). In each case the order of the chapters matches that of the topics listed in the relevant section of CCEA's Specification. This order, of course, is not prescriptive and teachers are therefore free to deal with the topics within each section in whatever order they choose.

The abbreviation ANE will be found frequently in the following chapters and provides regular links to relevant primary sources collected in *A New Eusebius*, edited by J Stevenson and revised by WHC Frend (SPCK: London, 1987). There is no substitute for familiarity with the early sources themselves, which students are advised to consult regularly.

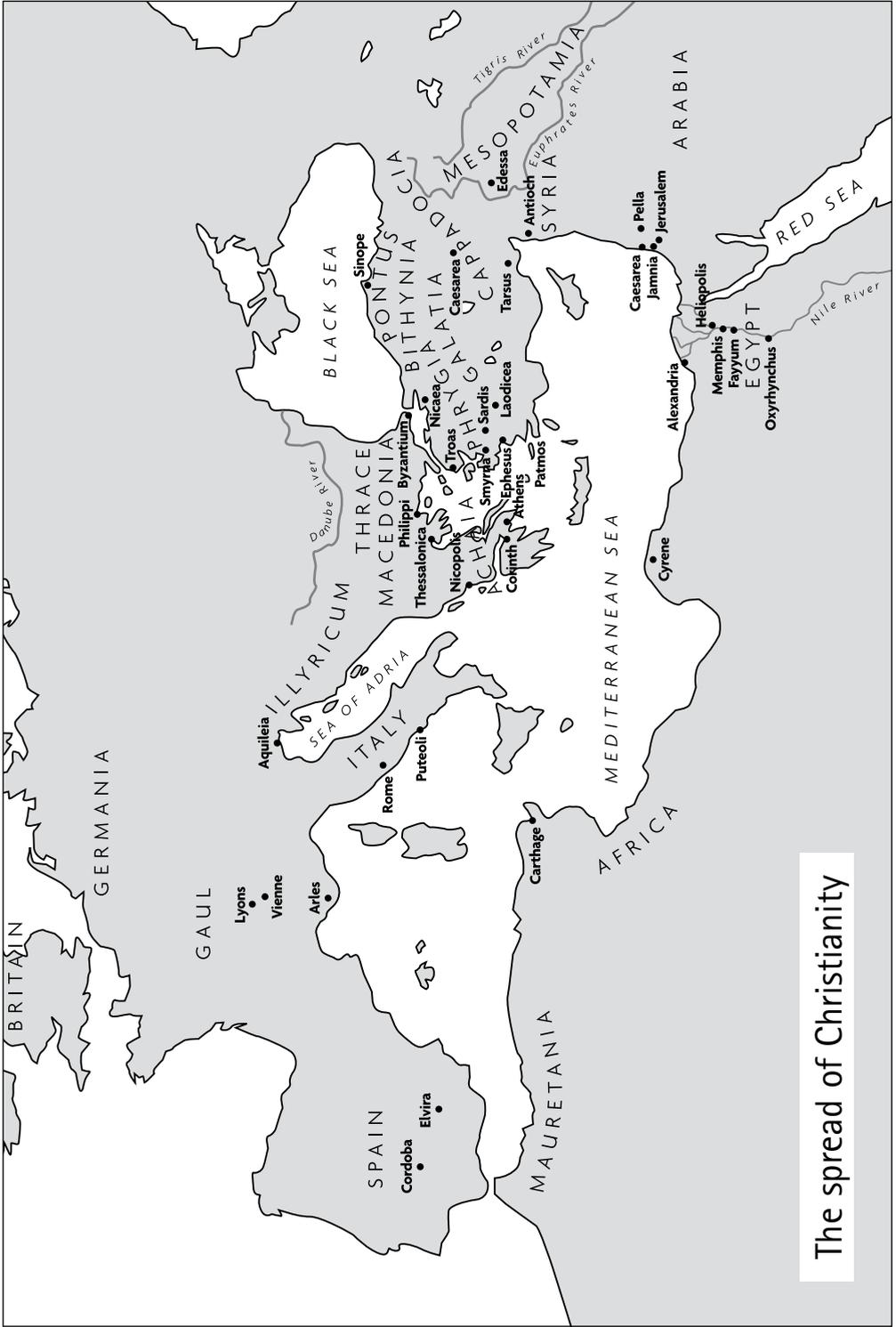
No claim is made for originality as far as the book's contents are concerned. Rather, the book represents a collation of the work of many others before me, to whom I gladly acknowledge my debt, as well as my own understanding of the primary literature. Thanks are due to all at Colourpoint Books for their professional expertise and assistance in the production of this text.

R Banks
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Teacher's Note

Relevant consideration of other aspects of human experience is essential to the specification. This edition contains past paper questions relating to these aspects, however, it does not reflect directly on the relationship between them and this unit of study.



The spread of Christianity

Expansion of Christianity

IN THIS CHAPTER WE shall study how the Christian Church expanded numerically, geographically and socially in its first three centuries. We shall also consider the political and religious factors that contributed to the Church's expansion and explore martyrdom and its impact, with particular reference to Justin, Polycarp and Blandina.

NUMERICAL EXPANSION

In the absence of firm historical evidence, various suggestions have been made about the size of the Church and its proportion of the general population during its first three hundred years.

A recent attempt at quantifying the rate and ratio of early Church growth has been made by the sociologist Rodney Stark¹. Estimating a total population of 60 million in the Roman empire he has presented the following outline (Table 1, p8) of the Church's numerical increase and percentage of the general population, assuming a growth rate of 40% each decade. Stark observes that the Mormon church grew on average at about 43% per decade in the twentieth century and argues for a similar rate of expansion for early Christianity.

Stark's numerical scheme is not without its problems. On the one hand, it has been noted that it finds some support from the limited knowledge we already have. In the mid third century, Rome's population was about 700,000 of whom, according to Stark's scheme, around 14,000 were Christians. This fits well with the information reported by Eusebius, the fourth century church historian, concerning the Roman church – about AD250 the church had some 155 clergy and 1500 widows and others in need. However, Stark's uniform and consistent growth rate does not account for the variables of real life. Growth was uneven

Table 1 Christian Expansion (AD40–350)

Year	Number of Christians	% of Population (60 million)
40	1,000	0.0017
50	1,400	0.0023
100	7,530	0.0126
150	40,496	0.07
200	217,795	0.36
250	1,171,356	1.9
300	6,299,832	10.5
350	33,882,008	56.5

throughout the Empire (as the geographical section on p9 will indicate) and fluctuated due to factors such as persecution, plagues and war. Further, it has been pointed out that a fairly slight change of Stark's number of Christians in AD40 (from 1,000 to 2,000) would result in an unlikely 12.6 million (not 6.3 million) Christians in AD300.

Paul McKechnie in *The First Christian Centuries*² believes that at the end of the first century the Church was much bigger than Stark estimates. Unlike some other historians of early Christianity, McKechnie is not sceptical about the numbers of early Christians reported in the New Testament book of Acts. Less than seven weeks after Jesus' death there were about 120 believers in Jerusalem (1: 15), then a little later about 3,000 on the day of Pentecost (2: 41), the number growing to about 5,000 (4: 4) and finally 'many thousands' of Jewish converts in the early 60s of the first century (21: 20). Further, Suetonius reports (*Claudius* 25. 4) that the emperor Claudius expelled certain Jews (probably Christians) from Rome in AD49 because of the trouble they were causing, most likely by their preaching. Thus, not only had Christianity arrived in Rome by this early date, but was also sizeable enough to cause a social disturbance requiring imperial action. In about AD115 the Roman historian Tacitus wrote about the 'vast numbers' in Rome convicted as Christians during Nero's persecution in AD64 (*Annals* 15. 44). The Roman official Pliny in AD112 informed his emperor Trajan of the existence of many Christians of all ages, every rank and both sexes in Bithynia, Asia Minor (modern northern Turkey) and of their rural, as well as urban, influence (*Epistle* 10. 96).

Hard data on the numerical growth of Christianity in its early period is unavailable and Stark's profile provides only a very general framework for the perceived growth of the early Church. When we turn to consider the geographical and social expansion of early Christianity, we are on somewhat firmer ground.



TASK

Outline the difficulties involved in attempting to quantify the growth of early Christianity, with particular reference to Rodney Stark's scheme.

GEOGRAPHICAL EXPANSION

Christianity began in the city where its founder was crucified – Jerusalem. Our earliest Church history, the New Testament book of Acts, records in its opening chapters the progress of the Jerusalem church under the leadership of the apostles Peter and John. We are told that some 120 Christians (1: 15) grew to about 3,000 on the day of Pentecost seven weeks after Jesus' death (2: 41) and 5,000 some time after (4: 4). Later, James is the leader of the Jerusalem church and it is reported that many thousands of Jews have become Christians (21: 17-20). While some regard these numbers as unreliable, others accept them as plausible. Jewish persecution of the Jerusalem church resulted in the dispersal of its members throughout the province of Judaea and neighbouring Samaria, according to Acts (8: 1). Naturally the earliest Christianity in Palestine was of a Jewish character. However, after the First Jewish Revolt (AD66-AD74) imperial policy promoted Gentile elements in the region. And after the Second Jewish Revolt (AD132-AD135) Jewish Christians were removed from Palestine and Gentile Christianity developed thereafter.

From its beginnings in Palestine, Christianity spread out in three main directions: north-west, south-west and east.

North-West

Antioch in Syria, where followers of Jesus were first called 'Christians' (Acts 11: 26), heard the Christian message from members of the Jerusalem church who had been displaced by the persecution at the time of Stephen's death (Acts 11: 19). Both Jewish and Gentile residents of the city became Christians (Acts 11: 19-21). Antioch was the base for Paul's missionary journeys westwards through Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and Greece (Acts 13: 1-3; 14: 26-28; 15: 35, 36; 18: 18-23). In the early second century the church's bishop, Ignatius, was taken from here to martyrdom in Rome. From Antioch the Christian message spread into the neighbouring towns and countryside and indeed eastwards to Armenia,

Mesopotamia and Persia. By the end of the fourth century, half of Antioch's half a million residents were reported to be Christian.

Paul both planted and wrote to Christian churches in **Asia Minor** (modern Turkey). The book of Acts reports his missionary travels in this region (Acts 13 and 14 in particular) and the New Testament contains letters written to young churches there (Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians and the letters in the first three chapters of Revelation; note also 1 and 2 Timothy and 1 Peter). Indeed before Paul, some from this part of the Empire may have been among the converts on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 9, 10, 41). At the end of the first century there were churches in forty-two cities of the Roman Empire and the majority of them were in Asia Minor. Early in the second century, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote letters to five churches in the region (Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia and Smyrna) and one to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Further, around the same time, Pliny's letter to the emperor Trajan gives us an insight into the rapid expansion of Christianity in rural Bithynia, north-west Asia Minor. He mentions that there are many Christians, old and young, male and female, of every class, in town and country. Such was the impact of Christianity that pagan temples were being neglected. However, the urban Greek-speakers of Asia Minor were more responsive to the Christian message than the Greekless rural peoples. In the sixth century the emperor Justinian sought to remove remaining paganism in these inland areas.

For **Macedonia and Achaia** (Greece), we have information in the New Testament about Paul's pioneering missionary activity (Acts 16: 9-18: 18; 20: 1-6) and letters to young churches in the region (1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians). We have also the Roman church's letter to the Corinthian church (*1 Clement*) at the end of the first century and Polycarp's letter to the Philippian church near the beginning of the next. Thereafter, the picture is unclear.

Visitors from **Rome** were present on the day of Pentecost and may have brought the Christian message back to the capital of the Empire a matter of weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection (Acts 2: 10, 41). The emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome in AD49, including Christians whose message seems to have led to disturbances in the city (Acts 18: 1, 2; Suetonius – *Claudius* 25. 4). Certainly there is a well established church there in about AD57, to which Paul wrote his famous letter. Also, the Roman historian Tacitus, in AD115, wrote of 'vast numbers' of Christians in the city who were persecuted by the emperor Nero in AD64 (*Annals* 15. 44). In AD96 the Roman church, as we have seen, corresponded with the Corinthian church (*1 Clement*). Early in the second century, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, writes to the Roman church urging that they do not try to prevent his impending martyrdom in their city.

The Roman church grew as Christians from elsewhere came to the city and swelled its numbers. In AD166 Bishop Soter reports that there are more Christians

than Jews in the city. In the mid third century we have specific details about the size of the Roman church from bishop Cornelius (cited by Eusebius) – forty-six presbyters, seven deacons, seven sub-deacons, forty-two acolytes, fifty-two exorcists, readers and door-keepers and over 1,500 widows and needy persons. This may have represented some 14,000 Christians out of a population of around 700,000. However, the Church historian Adolf von Harnack reckoned that it reflects over twice this number of Christians. In Italy as a whole at this time, there were one hundred dioceses, ie areas governed by bishops. The prestige and authority of the Roman church and its successive bishops developed, of course, into the medieval papacy and its supremacy in the western church.

Christianity may have been first brought to **Gaul** (France) by Paul's companion Crescens, who is said to have gone to 'Gaul', as ancient commentators and some manuscripts interpret 2 Timothy 4: 10. Tradition connects him with the churches of Vienne and Mayence. Irenaeus was bishop of Lyons in the late second century in the south of Gaul where Christianity made most progress. As well as combating Gnosticism in the area, Irenaeus used Celtic to evangelise the rural areas, as well as Greek for the townspeople. In AD177 Christians in Lyons and nearby Vienne were tortured and martyred during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. However, the church in Gaul grew and in the early fourth century, Arles, Vaison, Autun, Rouen, Paris, Bordeaux, Trier and Rheims all had episcopal oversight.

Spain was in Paul's sights as he looked for new mission fields. He told the Roman church that he had spread the Gospel from Jerusalem all the way round to Illyricum (modern Albania) and was planning to go to Spain (Romans 15: 19, 24). In the late second century Irenaeus (Lyons) and Tertullian (Carthage) are aware of a Christian presence in Spain and in the mid third century, Cyprian (Carthage) knew of churches in several of its main cities. Near the end of the third century, the region had almost sixty churches. In the first decade of the fourth century, thirty-six dioceses were represented at the Council of Elvira, the canons of which reveal limited Christian influence in the region.

As for **Britain**, Tertullian (in early third century Carthage) and Origen (later that century in Alexandria) believed that there were Christians there in their time. It may be that St Alban was martyred there during the Great Persecution (early fourth century) – pilgrims were visiting his shrine by the early fifth century. And we know that three British bishops, from York, London and Colchester or Lincoln, were at the Council of Arles (AD314) in southern Gaul. Archaeology has uncovered evidence of fourth century British Christianity – a chapel in a villa in Kent and Christian silver at a fort near Peterborough. Pelagius is the earliest Christian writer from Britain (early fifth century) and Patrick began his mission to Ireland in about AD432. In Britain it appears that the Christian faith took hold among the urban Romano-British, rather than the more primitive Celts.

TASK

In bullet point form, make brief notes on the main areas to which Christianity spread north-westerly from Palestine.

South-West

To the south-west of Palestine, **Egypt** and especially the port of Alexandria, became an important centre and missionary base of early Christianity. Egyptians were present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 10) and if they were among the many Christian converts on that day (Acts 2: 41), then they would have taken the Christian message back to their homeland. The book of Acts also tells us about an Alexandrian Jewish Christian called Apollos (18: 24), a convert from among the city's large Jewish population. Firm evidence about the origins of the Alexandrian church is lacking, despite the early tradition (eg Clement of Alexandria, late second century) that it was founded by Mark, the presumed author of the New Testament Gospel that now bears his name. There is evidence, however, of Christian expansion in the second century, especially among the Greek speaking urban dwellers rather than the Coptic peasants. The famous catechetical school founded by Pantaeus and headed in turn by Clement (about AD150-AD215) and the very influential Origen (about AD185-AD254), sought to combine Christian orthodoxy and Greek philosophy, while rejecting Gnosticism. In the mid third century the Bible was translated into local dialects (Coptic) and later that century Egypt was becoming the home of early Christian monasticism under such monastic pioneers as Anthony and Pachomius. At the end of the third century there were around one hundred dioceses.

Christianity spread further west to **Cyrene**, home of Simon who carried Jesus' cross and whose sons were known to the original readers of Mark's Gospel (probably in Rome – Mark 15: 21; Romans 16: 13). Some from this region were present on the day of Pentecost and, as we have noted in other cases, may have brought the Christian message home from Jerusalem (Acts 2: 10, 41). Also in the book of Acts, we are told that Cyrenians were among those who first brought the gospel to Gentiles (11: 19, 20). By the early fifth century there were six dioceses in the region.

Further west again, **North Africa** (modern Tunis and Algeria) became one of the leading provinces of early Christianity. The Christian message came from Rome across the Mediterranean and from Egypt in the east. However, Henry Chadwick notes that Carthage had trade links with eastern Mediterranean countries and that the first missionaries may have come from there³. With the martyrdom in Carthage of twelve Christians from nearby Scilli in AD180, we have the earliest

indication of Christianity in the region. Here we find the beginnings of Latin speaking Christianity, particularly with the influential writings of Tertullian (about AD160-AD220) and Cyprian (about AD200-AD258). Tertullian could write of the Church's growth in the following terms:

We are but of yesterday and we have filled everything you have – cities, islands, forts, towns, assembly halls, even military camps, tribes, town councils, the palace, senate and forum. We have left you nothing but the temples.

(Apology, 37)

He is aware of churches not only in the north of the region in and around Carthage but also further afield in what is now south Tunisia and Algeria. In the mid third century there were about eighty bishops. Indeed the region had a higher concentration of bishops than elsewhere in the West where they were found only in the cities rather than in town and village too. By the end of the third century there were over one hundred, mostly urban, churches and local Christian writings reveal that there was most success among the Romanised upper classes.

East

Among the Pentecost pilgrims in Jerusalem were Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia (Acts 2: 9), some of whom may have been among the many Christian converts on that day (Acts 2: 41). Christianity may well have spread to the lands east of Palestine by means of these returning pilgrims, and also from Antioch in Syria which became an important missionary base for the eastwards expansion of the Church. Certainly, by the end of the second century the Christian faith had taken hold in Persia (modern Iraq and Iran), centred in the Syriac speaking cities of Nisibis and Edessa. And by AD235 the Persian empire had some twenty bishops and eighteen dioceses. Probably from Edessa and Syria, Christianity spread northwards to Armenia – Tertullian knew of Christians there in the early third century. And in neighbouring Georgia there were Christian converts in the second and third centuries. By the early third century Syriac Christianity had spread as far east as what is now southern India, if we can rely on the 'Acts of Judas Thomas'.

This outline of the geographical spread of early Christianity shows that the Church had most success north-west of Palestine through Syria, Asia Minor, Rome and south Gaul; south-west to Egypt and North Africa, and eastwards through the Persian empire. However, it was not an even expansion and was most successful in urban areas where there was a sizeable Jewish population.



TASKS

- a) In bullet point form, make brief notes on the main areas to which Christianity spread south-westerly and eastwards from Palestine.
- b) On a map, indicate the main areas to which Christianity spread from Palestine in the first three centuries.

SOCIAL EXPANSION

From the start, in theory at least, Christianity cut across social boundaries. Its socially inclusive message disregarded economic inequalities. While Jesus was presented as the champion of the materially poor and the socially marginalised (especially in Luke's Gospel), he also attracted some wealthier followers (eg Joseph of Arimathea – Matthew 27: 57). The classic egalitarian New Testament text is Galatians 3: 28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus". In Christ there is a religious equality which overrides racial, social and gender distinctions.

However, it is clear from the beginning that the new faith was accepted mostly among those of a lower social status. Paul reminded the Corinthian church that such was their social background at the time of their conversion – 'not many' of them were wise or influential or of noble birth, rather God had chosen the foolish, the weak and the lowly (1 Corinthians 1: 26-29). James similarly referred to God's choice of the poor when social favouritism reared its head in the Church (James 2: 9).

The fact is that until the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the early fourth century Christianity spread mostly among the lower and middle classes.

By and large early Christian writings appear to be addressed to non-elites such as merchants and craftsmen. In the late second century Celsus, a pagan opponent of Christianity, made the somewhat exaggerated observation that the Church's converts were merely women, children, slaves and fools.

However, there is early evidence that Christianity made some impact on the upper end of the social scale. Around the same time as Celsus, the Christian Apologist Tatian provided a counter-balance to the pagan's charge by writing, "Not only do the rich among us pursue our philosophy, but the poor enjoy instruction gratuitously" (*Address to the Greeks*, 32). At times, as in the book of Acts (17: 4, 12), the upper classes were evangelised through converted wives.

Before Constantine we know of at least ten Roman aristocrats in Christian churches⁴. During the Decian and Valerian persecutions of the mid third century

senators and equestrians were among those who suffered for their faith. And surviving early Christian literature is testimony to the fact that there was a sizeable number of Christians in the top 2% of society. Also, social levels were not unalterable castes. Some Christians were upwardly mobile slaves who gained their freedom and entered the imperial civil service.

Indeed, there are various pieces of evidence which reveal the presence of Christians in imperial and government circles. As early as the sixties of the first century there were Christians in 'Caesar's household' (Philippians 4: 22). The third century Roman historian Dio Cassius reports that the emperor Domitian (reigned AD81-AD96) persecuted prominent Romans for atheism and Jewish sympathies, in what is probably a reference to Christians. Titus Flavius Clemens, consul in AD95, was executed and his wife Flavia Domitilla was exiled. In the fourth century they were regarded as Christian martyrs. In the *Martyrdom of Justin* (Justin was martyred in Rome in about AD165) we read that Euelpistus, one of his followers, was an imperial slave. Also, Callistus bishop of Rome was once the slave of Carpophorus, a Christian in the household of the emperor Commodus (AD180-AD192). Around this time too Irenaeus and Tertullian are aware of Christians in the royal palace.

Certainly, after Constantine and the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the empire, many social elites joined the Church. Christian sermons from the fourth and fifth centuries reflect a largely upper class audience. In the view of such preachers and writers it was the middle classes (eg landowners, merchants, craftsmen) who were the 'poor'. Rural peasants were often passed by and only attended the urban churches on special holy days. Thus, before and after Constantine the social constitution of the Church was markedly different. What initially was a largely low to middle class Jewish community eventually became the preserve of predominantly upper class Gentiles. In earlier days the Church was a persecuted minority whom the general public was at least suspicious of and often hostile to. It seemed inconceivable then that one day Christianity would become the imperial religion, to which allegiance was advisable.



TASKS

- a) Compare and contrast the social constitution of the Church before and after Constantine.
- b) What evidence is there of Christian influence on the upper classes?
- c) Research the martyrdom of the noble-woman Perpetua and the slave-girl Felicitas (early third century Carthage) as a powerful symbol of the social equality of early Christianity.

Early Christian Thought

APOSTOLIC FATHERS

SINCE THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY the name 'Apostolic Fathers' has been used to refer to a collection of early Christian writings from the late first to the mid second century. These are the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament. It is important to note that the name and the collection are late even though the individual writings themselves were composed in early Church history.

The collection includes the following writings:

The Letters of Ignatius

The Didache

The Letter of Polycarp

The Letter of Barnabas

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

The Shepherd of Hermas

1 Clement

The Letter to Diognetus

2 Clement

The Fragments of Papias

The great value of these individual writings is the historical and theological insights which they provide into earliest Christianity outside the New Testament. Convenient English translations of and introductions to the collection include *Early Christian Writings* (Penguin Classics, Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth 1968/1987; which, however, does not include Hermas, Papias and Quadratus) and *The Apostolic Fathers* (Baker Books, Michael Holmes, 1999; which also includes the Greek texts).

Clement of Rome

Clement was a late first century Christian leader in Rome to whom two writings in the Apostolic Fathers have been traditionally attributed. *1 Clement* is a long letter from the church in Rome to the church in Corinth, Greece (see its opening words), probably written about AD95-AD97. While the letter does not identify its author, most manuscripts and early tradition recorded by Eusebius attribute it to Clement. The Roman church had heard of division in the Corinthian church and that younger men had removed its presbyters from office (3. 3; 44. 6; 47. 6, 7). In addition to the letter, which appealed for a removal of jealousy and strife (3-6) and for order, harmony (eg 63. 2) and respect for leadership (44), the Roman church sent mediators (63. 3, 4; 65. 1) to restore peace in the church.

The letter gives us an insight into Church leadership and perceptions of the Roman Empire at this time. While Irenaeus in the late second century regarded Clement as the third bishop of Rome after Peter, there does not appear to have been monarchical episcopacy in Rome at this time. Rather, the terms 'bishop' and 'presbyter' appear to be synonymous and leadership was provided by a group of such men (44. 1-6). In *1 Clement* we have the first appearance of the laity (people) as distinct from the leaders (40) and of apostolic succession – the idea that bishops and deacons are successors of the apostles of Christ (42-44; see *ANE* pp7-9). As for attitudes to the Empire, *1 Clement* has a much more positive view of the Roman authorities (eg 37; 60. 4-61) than is found in the New Testament book of Revelation, written around the same time, in which Rome is a prostitute, drunk with the blood of the saints, reflecting the views of Christians in Asia Minor.

2 Clement is neither a letter nor a writing of Clement. It is rather a sermon based on Isaiah 54: 1. (2: 1 – 'Rejoice, O barren woman, who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who have no labour pains; for many are the children of the deserted woman, more than she who has a husband.'). It is the earliest surviving complete Christian sermon. The anonymous author, apparently an elder (17. 3), writing to a mainly Gentile readership (1.6. 3.1), which may be subject to Gnostic influence (10. 2-5; 1. 1; 9. 1-5), appeals for repentance (eg 5. 1; 8. 1; 13. 1), purity of life and brotherly love (eg 4), in the face of persecution (eg 4. 4; 5). The origin and date of the work is unknown. Rome, Corinth and Egypt have all been suggested, as have dates ranging from the late first to late second century.

In relation to the New Testament Canon, Clement probably reflects awareness of a collection of Paul's letters including Roman, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Timothy and Titus. He also knows Hebrews and possibly Acts and James or 1 Peter. He knew of sayings similar to those in our New Testament Gospels but evidence of direct dependence on them is lacking. *1 Clement* itself was regarded as 'Scripture' by some early Fathers eg Clement of Alexandria. *2 Clement* reveals knowledge of Matthew, Luke, 1 Corinthians and Ephesians and possible awareness of Hebrews, James and 1 Peter. It also contains

the earliest example of a New Testament passage being cited as ‘Scripture’ (2. 4 quoting Mark 2: 17/Matthew 9: 13).

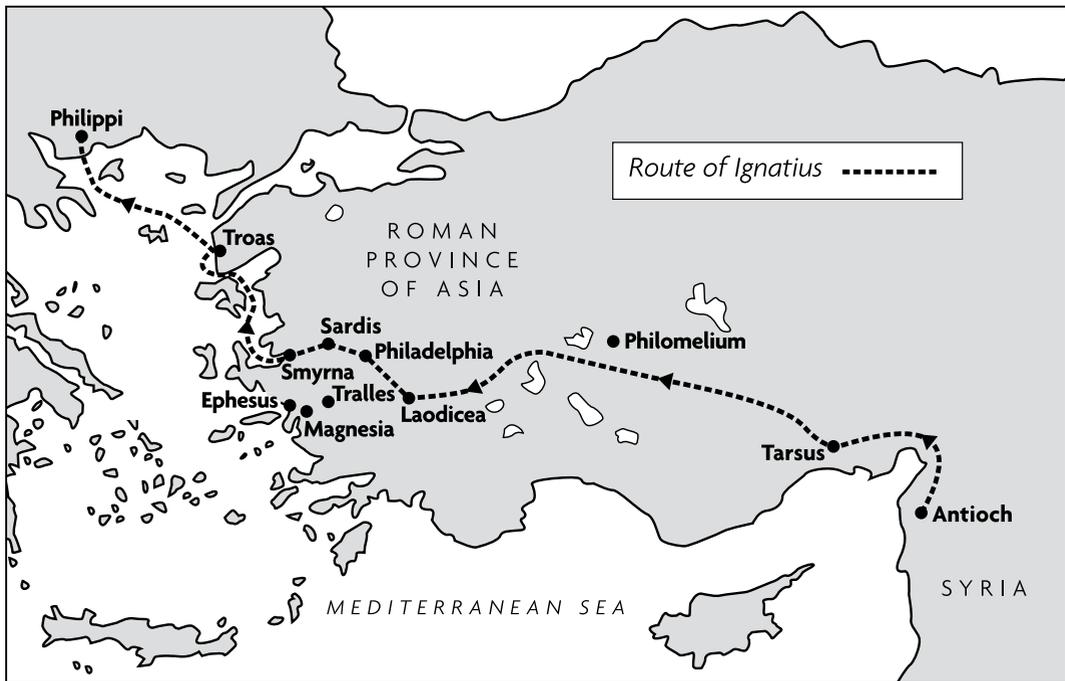
TASKS

- a) Outline the background and contents of 1 and 2 Clement.
- b) What can be learned about the early Church from these writings?

Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius (around AD35-AD110), who also introduces himself in each of his letters by the name Theophorus (‘God-bearer’), was bishop of Antioch in Syria. Here he was arrested and brought under guard by ten Roman soldiers (the ‘ten leopards’ of Romans 5. 1) to Rome to be thrown to wild beasts. The circumstances of his arrest are unknown, though it has been suggested that divisions within his own church (Phld 10. 1; Smyrn 11. 2; Pol 7. 1) had brought the Christians and their leader, in particular, to the attention of the local authorities. It may be that he was brought to Rome, along with others, as part of a quota of victims which the provinces had to supply for the Roman amphitheatre. According to Eusebius, his martyrdom occurred during the reign of Trajan (AD98-AD117) in about AD107/8. Many, however, would place it later in Trajan’s reign and some even locate it in Hadrian’s time (AD117-AD138).

On his way to Rome, he was met by representatives of various churches to which he then wrote letters (see map on p78). In Smyrna he met the local bishop, Polycarp, and wrote to the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia and Tralles, whose delegates he had met, and also to the church in Rome where he was heading. In Troas he wrote to the churches of Philadelphia and Smyrna, whose delegates he had met also, and to Smyrna’s bishop, Polycarp. Thus, Ignatius wrote letters to six churches, five of which were in Asia Minor, and one individual, Polycarp. At Philippi he was welcomed by the church (Pol Phil, 1. 1) and then, presumably, was taken on to martyrdom in Rome. It seems that Polycarp later collected Ignatius’ letters and sent them, for instance, to the church in Philippi, at their request, telling them that they would benefit greatly from them since they had to do with faith, endurance and edification (Pol Phil 13. 2; ANE p16, 17). The letters have a complicated manuscript history and exist in three forms (long, middle, short), the so-called ‘middle recension’ preserving the original letters.



From *Early Christian Writings*, Penguin Classics, Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth 1968/1987

According to Michael Holmes, three main concerns appear to have been on Ignatius' mind as he wrote his letters en route to Rome¹.

TASK

Outline the main known facts of the life of Ignatius.

Heresy

Ignatius was concerned that heretics (false teachers) were disrupting and deceiving the churches. The heretics were of two kinds – Judaizers and docetists. Though, it is possible that Ignatius was writing against one heresy which contained both Judaizing and docetic elements.

The Judaizers were Gentile Christians, probably former converts to Judaism, who believed that Old Testament requirements, such as the observance of the Sabbath, should still be followed. In the church at Philadelphia there was a group of Christians in disagreement with the bishop, because they believed that the Old Testament had supreme authority in relation to the Gospel. Ignatius himself, having been allowed to spend an hour with the church, had heard them say that if they did not find a particular teaching in ‘the archives’ (probably the Old Testament) they would not believe it in the Gospel. For Ignatius, ‘the archives’ were Jesus, his death and resurrection and the faith that came by means of him (Phld 8. 2). Ignatius loved the Old Testament prophets because they waited for and believed in Christ. Then he added:

“But if anyone explains Judaism to you, do not listen to him. For it is better to hear about Christianity from a circumcised man than about Judaism from an uncircumcised man.”

(6. 1)

The church at Magnesia was also under threat from Judaizing Christians. Ignatius warned the church not to be deceived by strange teachings and ancient myths: “For if we are still living according to Judaism, we admit that we have not received grace.” (Magn 8. 1; ANE p13, 14). Even the Old Testament prophets, argued Ignatius, lived in accordance with Christ and were his disciples in the Spirit. Some Christians had lived in ancient practices but no longer kept the Jewish Sabbath, living now in accordance with the Christian Lord’s Day. The old, bad leaven, which had become stale and sour, should be thrown out and the new leaven, Jesus Christ, should be received. “It is absurd to profess Jesus Christ and to follow Judaism. For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity ...” (Magn 10. 3; ANE p14).

Docetists (from the Greek for ‘appearance’) taught that Jesus only ‘appeared’ or ‘seemed’ to be human, to have a body, to have been born, to have suffered, died and risen again. In reality, he had no human nature or body since God would not unite himself with flesh. That he appeared to be human was merely an accommodation to human weakness. From Ignatius’ letters, it is clear that three churches he wrote to were threatened by docetism – Ephesus, Tralles and Smyrna.

In creed-like statements, Ignatius insisted on the reality of Jesus’ incarnation and humanity as essential for salvation. Writing to the Ephesians, he contrasted Jesus’ two natures (human and divine) and his two states (humiliation and exaltation):

There is only one physician, who is both flesh and spirit, born and unborn, God in man, true life in death, both from Mary and from God, first subject to suffering and then beyond it, Jesus Christ our Lord.

(7. 2; ANE p13)