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CHURCH  
HISTORY  
IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

5<sup>th</sup>

EDITION

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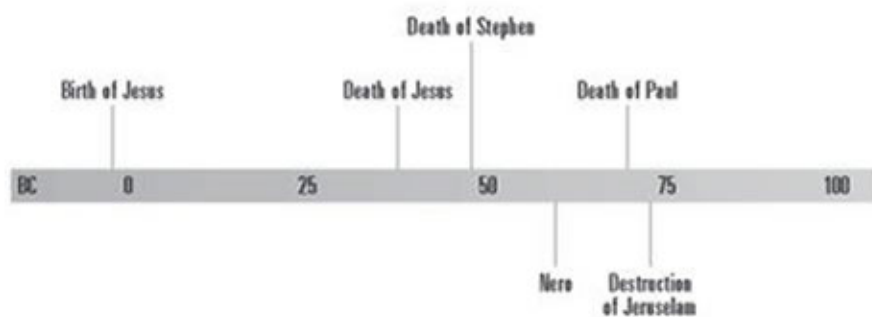
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# THE AGE OF JESUS AND THE APOSTLES

*6 BC–AD 70*

**C**hristianity's roots go back into Jewish history long before the birth of Jesus Christ. It was Jesus of Nazareth, however, who attacked established Judaism and brought a renewal movement into history early in the first century. After Jesus' crucifixion in Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate, a Roman official, Jesus' teachings spread throughout the Mediterranean area. An apostle named Paul was especially influential. He stressed God's gift of salvation for all and led in Christianity's emergence from Palestinian Judaism to a position as a universal religion.

## THE AGE OF JESUS AND THE APOSTLES



## CHAPTER 1

# AWAY WITH THE KING!

### *The Jesus Movement*

**C**hristianity is the only major religion to have as its central event the humiliation of its God.

“Dear dying Lamb,” believers sing, “Thy precious blood shall never lose its power, till all the ransomed Church of God be saved to sin no more.”

Crucifixion was a barbarous death, reserved for rebels, pirates, and slaves. Jewish law cursed “everyone who hangs on a tree,” and Roman statesman Cicero warned, “Let the very name of the cross be far, not only from the body of a Roman citizen, but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears.”

Part of the victim’s punishment was to be whipped and then to carry the heavy crossbeam to the place of his death. When the cross was raised, a notice was pinned to it giving the culprit’s name and crime. In Jesus’ case, the Latin INRI: *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews).

Pontius Pilate, Jesus’ Roman judge, apparently intended it as a final thrust of malice aimed at the Jews, but, as in the cross itself, Jesus’ followers found a special meaning in the message.

## JESUS AND THE CHURCH

Jesus was a Jew. He came from a Jewish family; he studied the Jewish Scriptures; he observed the Jewish religion. Any serious study of his life makes this so clear that many people have asked if Jesus ever intended to create that company of followers we call “the church.” Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary to Africa, believed that Jesus was obsessed with a dream of the impending end of the world and died to make the dream come true. Rudolf Bultmann, an influential German theologian, taught that Jesus was a prophet who challenged people to make a radical decision

for or against God. Other Christians have held that Jesus' kingdom was a brotherhood of love and forgiveness. If he founded a society at all, they say, it was an invisible one, a moral or spiritual company, not an institution with rites and creeds.

This anti-institutional view of Christianity is so widespread that we had better face the question straightaway. Did Jesus have anything to do with the formation of the Christian church? And if he did, how did he shape its special character?

Every reader of the Gospels is free, of course, to judge for themselves, but surely an unprejudiced reading of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John reveals Jesus' plan for a company of followers to carry on his work. For more than two years, he worked with a faithful band of disciples, taught them about life in what he called the kingdom of God, and introduced them to the new covenant that bound them in love and mission.

Granted, that simple company lacked many of the laws, officials, ceremonies, and beliefs of later Christendom, but it was a society apart. Jesus made a persistent point about the special kind of life that separated the kingdom of God from rival authorities among men. Little by little his disciples came to see that following him meant saying no to the other voices calling for their loyalties. In one sense that was the birth of the Jesus movement. And in that sense, at least, Jesus founded the church.

## PALESTINE IN JESUS' DAY

During the days of Jesus, Palestine was full of people with conflicting loyalties. It was a crossroads of cultures and peoples. Its two million or more people—ruled by Rome—were divided by region, religion, and politics. "In a day's journey a man could travel from rural villages where farmers tilled their fields with primitive plows to bustling cities where people enjoyed the comforts of Roman civilization. In the Holy City of Jerusalem, Jewish priests offered sacrifices to the Lord of Israel, while at Sebaste, only thirty miles away, pagan priests held rites in honor of the Roman god Jupiter."<sup>1</sup>

The Jews, who represented only half the population, despised their foreign overlords and deeply resented the signs of pagan culture in their ancient homeland. The Romans were not just another in a long series of alien conquerors. They were representatives of a hated way of life. Their imperial reign brought to Palestine the Hellenistic (Greek) culture that the Syrians had tried to impose forcibly on the Jews more than a century before.





Major roads in Palestine at the time of Jesus' ministry

All the children of Abraham despised their overlords; they simply disagreed about how to resist them.

Centuries earlier the prophets of Israel had promised a day when the Lord would deliver his people from their pagan rulers and establish his kingdom over the whole earth. On that day, they said, he would send an anointed ruler—a messiah—to bring an end to the corrupt world of the present and replace it with an eternal paradise. He would raise the dead and judge their actions in this world. The wicked would be punished,

but the righteous would be rewarded with eternal life in the kingdom of God.

According to the book of Daniel and other popular Jewish writings, the Lord's kingdom would be established only after a final, cosmic struggle between the forces of evil led by Satan and the forces of good led by the Lord. It would end with the destruction of the existing world order and the creation of a kingdom without end (Dan. 7:13–22). This belief, along with ideas about the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment, was in Jesus' day very much a part of popular Jewish faith.

Out of this distaste for life under the Romans, several factions arose among the Jews, each interpreting the crisis in a different way. The Jesus movement was one of them.

One group, the Pharisees, emphasized those Jewish traditions and practices that set them apart from pagan culture. Their name means "separated ones," and they prided themselves on their strict observance of every detail of the Jewish law and their extreme intolerance of people they considered ritually unclean. This piety and patriotism won respect among the people.

On the other hand, some Jews found Roman rule a distinct advantage. Among them were members of Jerusalem's aristocracy. From this small group of wealthy, pedigreed families came the high priest and the lesser priests who controlled the temple. Many of them enjoyed the sophisticated manners and fashions of Greco-Roman culture. Some even took Greek names. Their interests were represented by the conservative political group known as the Sadducees. At the time of Jesus, these men controlled the high Jewish council, or Sanhedrin, but they had less influence among the common people.

Another party, the Zealots, was bent on armed resistance to all Romans in the fatherland. They looked back two centuries to the glorious days of the Maccabees, when religious zeal combined with a ready sword to overthrow the pagan Greek overlords. Thus the hills of Galilee often concealed a number of guerrilla bands ready to ignite a revolt or destroy some symbol of Roman authority in Palestine.

Finally came the Essenes, who had little or no interest in politics or warfare. Instead, they withdrew to the Judean wilderness, believing the temple of Judaism to be hopelessly compromised. There, in isolated monastic communities, they studied the Scriptures and prepared themselves for the Lord's kingdom, which they believed would dawn at any moment.

The Essenes were likely the inhabitants of the Qumran community who copied ancient manuscripts and wrote commentaries. These documents, called the Dead Sea Scrolls, were discovered in 1946.

Jesus had to call for the loyalty of his followers without confusing the purpose of his mission with the objectives of these other parties among the Jews. It was a tough assignment.

## JESUS' MINISTRY

Jesus began by identifying with a new movement in the Judean wilderness led by a prophet named John. The ford of the Jordan, just north of the Dead Sea, was one of the busiest parts of the whole region, so John the Baptist had crowds stopping to hear him. Wearing a garment of camel's hair, his eyes ablaze, he stood on the riverbank and warned all who passed by to repent of their sins and prepare for the coming day of judgment by receiving baptism in the Jordan. Israel first entered the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan near this spot; Jesus began his ministry at this pivotal place.



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The oldest excavated synagogue in Galilee is at Magdala. Jesus may have taught in this synagogue (Matt. 4:23).

**PROFILES of Faith**

**Mary of Nazareth** (first century) was called “highly favored” by the angel Gabriel. Elizabeth called her “blessed among women.” And Mary herself, in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), proclaimed, “The Mighty One has done great things for me.” This Jewish teenager had become the chosen vessel for the incarnation, the fulcrum around which salvation history pivots. Despite a modest role in the biblical texts—she gave birth to Jesus, was present at his crucifixion (John 19), and was in the upper room with the Eleven as a part of the early Jerusalem community (Acts 1)—Mary has held an almost unrivaled place in historical Christianity.

In as early as the second century, Irenaeus offered theological reflection on Mary as the “second Eve” who, through her radical submission and obedience to God, reversed the deadly consequences of Eve’s rebellion. Seeking links between Jesus’ birth and Old Testament prophecies, Christians focused on Mary’s miraculous virgin conception. This became a key confirmation for early believers that Jesus was the Christ long expected. Virginity was also an ascetic ideal for Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine, each of whom celebrated Mary as the premiere example of chastity as a spiritual vocation. Devotion to Mary as an intercessor blossomed in the Byzantine church and continues today in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and other Christian traditions.

Many thought John was the promised Messiah, but he vehemently denied any such role. He explained his mission in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’” (Matt. 3:3). He was, he claimed, only the forerunner of the Messiah. “I baptize you with water,” he said. “But . . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).

Jesus found in John’s message the truth of God, so “to fulfill all righteousness” he submitted to John’s baptism and soon afterward began his own mission, proclaiming, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

Jesus, however, rather than remaining in the desert, began his mission