

Church History

Lesson 1 - Introduction to Church History and the World of the New Testament

1. Introduction - Why Study Church History? How Do We Study Church History?

1.1. Why should we study Church history?

1.1.1. Christianity is a faith that is essentially rooted in history. In our faith, real history matters - it is essential to the faith.

1.1.1.1. From its very beginning, the Christian message was grafted onto human history. The Good News Christians have proclaimed through the ages is that in Jesus Christ, and for our salvation, God has entered human history in a unique way. History is crucial for understanding not only the life of Jesus, but also the entire biblical message. (Gonzales, location 216.)

1.1.1.2. 1 Corinthians 15:14–19 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

1.1.1.3. Other religious systems, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, are not essentially rooted in history. This is not true of Christianity. Our faith hinges on certain acts which happened in real space and time history - and if they did not, we have no faith.

1.1.2. Our Scriptures are full of histories describing how God has acted through people in various times and places.

1.1.2.1. Much of the OT is historical (Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, etc.)

1.1.2.2. The NT also has a lot of history (the Gospels in particular).

1.1.2.3. Luke in particular has given us not only a history of Jesus' work while He walked on earth, but also the first church history - the book of Acts.

1.1.2.3.1. Luke has left us two books, the first on the deeds of Jesus, and the second on the deeds of the Spirit. (Gonzales, location 237).

1.1.2.3.2. After completing his Gospel, Luke continued the story of the Christian church in the book of Acts. He did not do this out of mere antiquarian

curiosity, but rather out of some important theological considerations. According to Luke and to the entire New Testament, the presence of God among us did not end with the ascension of Jesus. (Gonzales, location 230).

1.1.2.3.3.

What this means for those who share in Luke's faith is that the history of the church, while showing all the characteristics of human history, is much more than the history of an institution or of a movement. It is a history of the deeds of the Spirit in and through the men and women who have gone before in the faith. (Gonzales, location 240).

1.1.3. We need to study Church history because it will help us to see how Christian in the past believed, thought and lived in response to the various times and challenges which faced them.

1.1.3.1. This can help us to emulate their faith when we find ourselves in analogous situations. Their actions may illumine wise paths for us to follow.

1.1.3.2. At times we can also learn from them what NOT to do. The Church is not perfect - it is comprised of sinners just like us. Therefore we will see plenty that we do not want to emulate. Studying our past may help us to live more wisely and faithfully in our present circumstances.

1.1.3.3. Just as the biblical record of the people of God is the story of a mixed people with great acts of faith and great failures in sin and unfaithfulness, so is the history of the people who have made up the church through the ages. (Ferguson, Location 554).

1.1.3.4. The contemporary student may find relative degrees of faithfulness and unfaithfulness in all areas of the church's life: doctrine, public worship, prayer and devotion, evangelism and missions, quality of fellowship and caring, and Christian living (morality and benevolence). (Ferguson, Location 556).

1.1.4. We need to study Church history because it is OUR story, OUR history. It is not someone else's story, but ours, for there is one Church, and we are part of that Church.



1.1.4.1. Many Christians today suffer from historical amnesia. The time between the apostles and their own day is one giant blank. That is hardly what God had in mind. (Shelley, location 143).

1.2. How do we study Church history?

1.2.1. We study it as the working of God through fallen sinners like us.

1.2.1.1. There are times that we rejoice as men and women stand strong for the faith as God empowers them to think and act in faith - even in difficult circumstances.

1.2.1.2. There are times we will be rightly revolted at the actions of our forefathers in the faith, as they think and act in carnal rather than spiritual ways, acting more like the world than the Church of the living God.

1.2.2. We study it as the working of God through the Church to keep the faith and the Gospel alive all the way to our own day.

1.2.2.1. We can see the Spirit working, even in dark times, to sustain and keep the Church and the Gospel alive.

1.2.2.2. We can also see how the faith made it to us - even through flawed vessels like us!

1.2.3. We study it to help us wrestle with the text of Scripture and theological questions.

1.2.3.1. We do not read in a vacuum - all of us are heirs of those who have gone before. It is folly to think we read the Scripture with a clean slate.

1.2.3.1.1. The notion that we read the New Testament exactly as the early Christians did, without any weight of tradition coloring our interpretation, is an illusion. It is also a dangerous illusion, for it tends to absolutize our interpretation, confusing it with the Word of God. (Gonzales, location 269).

1.2.3.2. This can be a corrective - for as CS Lewis observed we are all trapped in the blindness of our own culture and age. The only way around this is to engage in dialogue with others who are not part of our age and culture. The best way to do this (especially now that technology is increasingly creating a global culture and age) is by interacting with the writings of the past.

2. The World of the New Testament

2.1. Introduction

2.1.1. The times in which Jesus was born, lived, died, was raised, and in which the early Church grew are not inconsequential - they are integral to those events.

2.1.2. Galatians 4:4 - But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law...

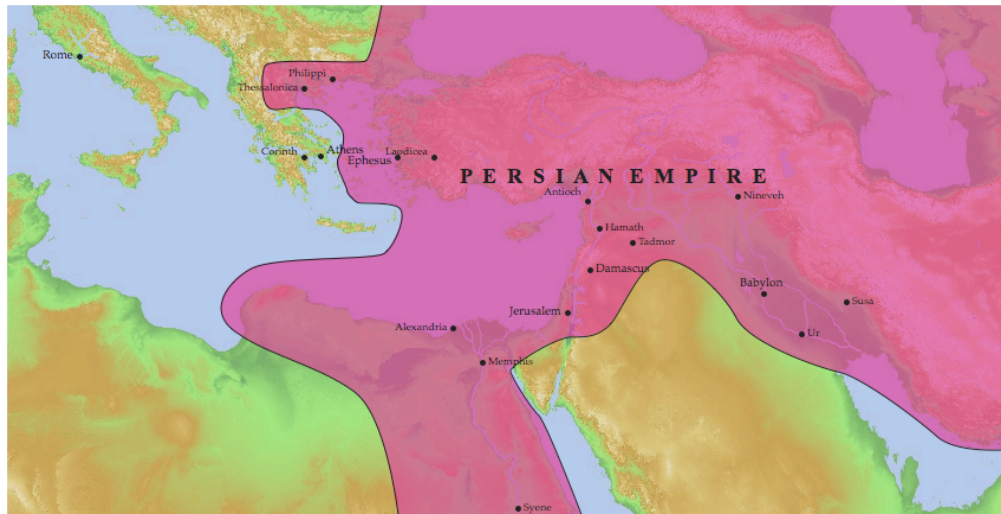
2.1.3. The early Christians did not believe that the time and place of the birth of Jesus had been left to chance. On the contrary, they saw the hand of God preparing the advent of Jesus in all events prior to the birth, and in all the historical circumstances around it. The same could be said about the birth of the church, which resulted from the work of Jesus. (Gonzales, location 522).

2.1.4. Consequently, to properly understand these events as they actually happened, we need to understand the major forces in the world in which they happened.

2.2. The Influence of the Greeks

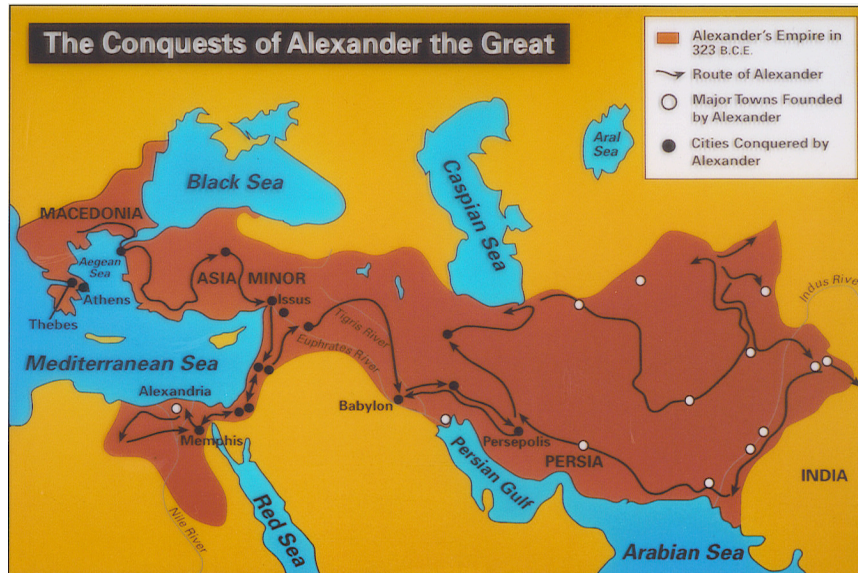
2.2.1. At the close of the Old Testament Babylon had fallen to the Persians, who had allowed Jews to return to the promised land and rebuild the Temple if they desired.

2.2.2. Some Jews returned home, but many others remained in Babylon and increasingly spread throughout the Persian empire, which was one of the most expansive in the world until that time.



2.2.3. In general, the Persian empire was content to let the peoples they had conquered continue with their own religion, culture, languages, and customs. As long as the people continued to be loyal and pay taxes, they were allowed to remain distinct - there was not attempt to “Persianize” them.

2.2.4. However, beginning around 334 BC, Alexander the Great began his conquest of the Persian Empire. By 323 BC Alexander had conquered most of the Persian empire, including Palestine.



2.2.5. The Empire of Alexander was very different than the Persian empire in that Alexander did not want everyone to remain distinct with their own religion, language, customs and culture. Instead, Alexander wanted to spread the Greek language and culture throughout the world. This process is known as Hellenization.

2.2.5.1. The conquests of Alexander had an ideological basis. He did not wish simply to conquer the world, but to unite it by spreading the insights of Greek civilization. (Gonzales, location 540).

2.2.5.2. Hellenization was achieved with varying levels of success in different areas, and was never fully achieved anywhere.

2.2.5.3. However, the entire Eastern Mediterranean basin, of which Palestine is a part, did fall under considerable Greek influence. Most people throughout this region could speak Greek, and for many of them it became their first language. This obviously had a major effect on the Church - for the New Testament was written in Greek!

2.2.5.4. Furthermore, as a student of Aristotle, Alexander valued and encouraged the spread of Greek philosophy, and this had a major effect on the Church as well.

2.2.5.5. Finally, as part of this process Alexander also founded many cities, some of which, such as Alexandria, become important in the development of the Church.

2.2.5.6. At the height of his powers, Alexander died in 323 BC

2.2.6. The cultural legacy of Alexander

2.2.6.1. As noted above, the process of Hellenization was not equally successful everywhere.

2.2.6.2. However, Greek language and thought did exert great influence throughout the region.

2.2.6.3. During these years, there were different reactions among the Jews to the idea and process of Hellenization. Some embraced Greek language and culture, and even thought these could be used to spread the religion of Judaism. Others, however, resisted Greek culture, language, and ideas, thinking they were incompatible with Judaism, especially the polytheistic ideas of Greek religion, which they took to be inseparable from the rest of Greek culture. Furthermore some Jews interpreted the Old Testament to mean that they should control their own homeland, free of the meddling of foreign overlords.

2.2.6.4. However, many people accepted Greek language. During this time the Old Testament was translated into the Greek language. This translation, known as the Septuagint (because of the myth that it has been translated by 70 scholars who had miraculously arrived at the same exact translation), became a very important version of the Scriptures for the Jews and especially for the early Church. Since almost everyone could speak Greek - including most Jews - but virtually none of the Gentile converts flooding the Church could speak Hebrew, the Septuagint became the de facto Bible of the early Church.

2.2.7. The political legacy of Alexander

2.2.7.1. At the height of his powers, Alexander died in 323 BC. His empire was eventually split among several generals:

2.2.7.1.1. Ptolemy took Egypt

2.2.7.1.2. Cassander too Macedonia (Greece)

2.2.7.1.3. Seleucus took Babylon, Syria, and Asia Minor

2.2.7.1.4. Antigonius took Asia Minor a few years later

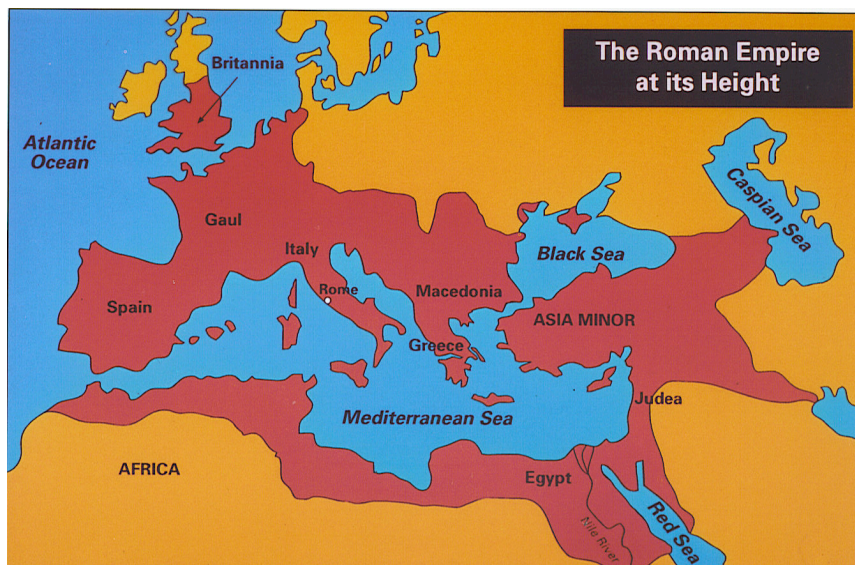


2.2.7.2. As can be seen, Palestine fell under the control of Antigonius initially.

- 2.2.7.3. However, the Generals soon warred with one another, and eventually Palestine came under the rule of the Seleucid rulers. For a long time the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires struggle over Palestine.
- 2.2.7.4. Around 200 BC, Antiochus III, a Seleucid ruler, defeated the Egyptian Ptolemaic armies in Palestine. Initially, he showed the Jews great favor and freedom in following their own culture and religion.
- 2.2.7.5. However, Antiochus eventually suffered major military setbacks against a major new power - Rome.
- 2.2.7.6. Eventually, Antiochus attempted to increase the degree of Hellenization in Judea. Eventually he decided to change the Temple of Yahweh into a Temple of Zeus or Dionysius - whom he took to all be the same God. When many Jews resisted this, the first persecution This zealous attempt at Hellenization eventually led the Jews to revolt under the leadership of a group known as the Maccabees. This revolt was successful, and from around 167 B.C until 63 BC the Jews enjoyed a great measure freedom and self rule.
- 2.2.7.7. However, Rome eventually intervened in a civil war in Judea and conquered Palestine under Pompey in 63 BC. The period of Jewish self rule had ended, and now Palestine was under the domination of Rome.

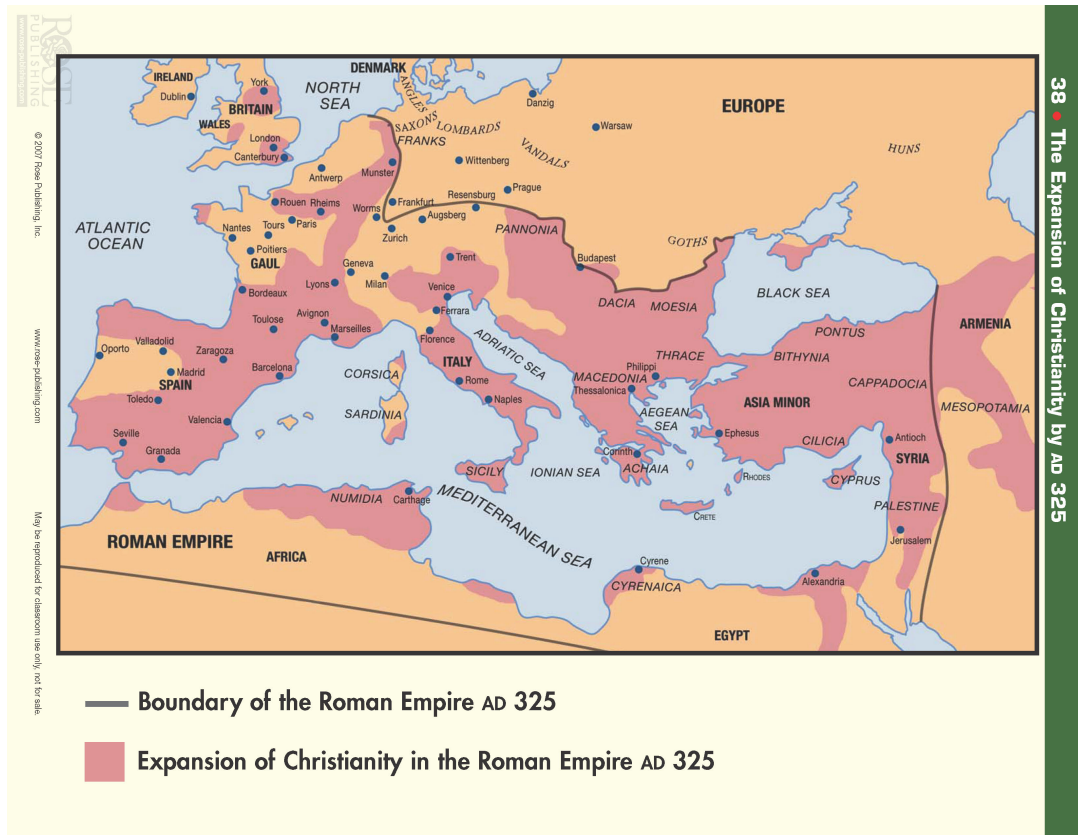
2.3. The influence of Rome

- 2.3.1. As noted above, under the general Pompey, Rome had become the rulers of Palestine.
- 2.3.2. Rome had conquered much of the empire of Alexander plus a great deal of extra territory. At its height, this was the largest empire the world had known to that point:



- 2.3.3.** The language of Rome was Latin, and this was the official language of government. However, in practice the Romans adopted much of the language and culture of the Greeks, and so Hellenization continued throughout their rule as well. They certainly did adapt the customs of the Greeks, so the resulting culture or civilization is often called the Greco-Roman civilization, not only to show the chronology, but to show the marriage of many of the ideas and cultural practices of the two groups.
- 2.3.4.** This meant that although many people could speak Latin, the dominant language continued to be Greek. This was especially true in the Eastern Mediterranean area, where Greek continued to be the dominant language until the fall of the Byzantine Empire in the mid 1400's!
- 2.3.5.** It should be noted that Latin became the increasingly dominant language in the Western part of the Empire. It eventually supplanted Greek as the dominant language not only of society at large in the Western section of the empire, but in the Western Church as well.
- 2.3.6.** The real genius of Rome was often seen not as being philosophy but rather law, organization and government. They had very efficient organization for their empire, and had been ruled by a Senate until the rise of Julius Caesar around 50 BC. In fact, "The organization of the empire seems to have provided a pattern for the eventual development of the church's hierarchy, and procedures in the senate at Rome and at city councils influenced the conduct of church synods." ((Ferguson, Location 595).
- 2.3.7.** In general, Roman policies toward the religions and customs of conquered people were rather tolerant.
- 2.3.8.** As part of this process, the Romans appointed Herod the Great, who could claim distant relation to the Maccabees, as king of Judea in 40 BC. However, the family of the Herod's were often viewed with great suspicion as puppets of Rome rather than true Jews, especially because they were generally ardent fans of Hellenization.
- 2.3.9.** During this time, there was almost continual unrest in Judea, which was often met with the boot of Roman power and crushed.
- 2.3.9.1.** This led to almost continuous rebellion. When Jesus was a child there was an uprising against Archelaus, Herod's son, who had to call in the Roman army. The Romans then destroyed a city in Galilee near Nazareth, and crucified two thousand Jews. (Gonzales, location 564).
- 2.3.10.** Rome did bring an unprecedented level of political and economic stability, as well as ease of travel. Never had it been easier to move freely from Asia Minor to Spain, from Northern Africa to France and Germany. There was one empire, common language, a good road system, and good protections. Furthermore, the spread of Jews throughout this area continued throughout this period. All of this was

obviously important in the early spread of Christianity. which largely followed the contours of the Roman empire:



2.4. The Jews of New Testament Times

2.4.1. Throughout the period discussed above, there were different ideas about how Jews should address Hellenization and the Roman Empire. This gave rise to a variety of groups within Judaism.

2.4.2. The major groups within Palestinian Judaism

2.4.2.1. The Pharisees

2.4.2.1.1. The name probably derives from the idea of “separated ones.” This could mean one of three things:

2.4.2.1.1.1. They separated themselves from common, lukewarm Jews

2.4.2.1.1.2. They separated themselves to the study of the Law

2.4.2.1.1.3. They separated themselves from pagan practices

2.4.2.1.2. They were the party of the populace, who did not enjoy the material benefits of Roman rule and Hellenistic civilization. To them, it was important to be faithful to the Law. Much of

what later developed into the legalism decried by Jesus and the apostles were originally attempts to help the people understand how to be faithful and obey the law in light of the new situation created by Hellenization and the Roman empire.

2.4.2.1.3. The Pharisees accepted the entire OT canon, were centered in the synagogue rather than the Temple, and their focus was on the study, interpretation and application of the Law rather than the rituals associated with the Temple.

2.4.2.1.4. In order to develop and apply the Law to changing situations, the Pharisees also developed the oral tradition. This was rejected by the Sadducees - and Jesus.

2.4.2.1.5. This explains why so much of Jesus' conflict in the Judean countryside was with the Pharisees rather than the Sadducees.

2.4.2.1.6. Consequently, when the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD shortly after time of the New Testament, the Pharisees were uniquely prepared to continue their tradition without the Temple.

2.4.2.1.7. This also means that much of the conflict in the early church was around disagreements with the Pharisees rather than the Sadducees, Zealots, or Essenes.

2.4.2.2. The Sadducees

2.4.2.2.1. The Sadducees were in many ways one of the most conservative of all of the Jewish groups. They only accepted the Torah as Scripture, and rejected many of the practices of the other groups as later additions to the faith that should not be embraced. For example, they rejected the oral law.

2.4.2.2.2. However, due to a very strict system of interpretation and rejection of anything other than the first five books of the Scripture, they also denied life after death, the resurrection of the body, rewards and punishments after death, the existence of angels and demons, etc. Jesus rebuked them for this.

2.4.2.2.3. By and large, they belonged to the Jewish aristocracy, and they were conservative in both politics and religion. They were members of Jerusalem's aristocracy. From this small group

of wealthy, pedigreed families came the high priest and the lesser priests of the temple. Many of them enjoyed the sophisticated manners and fashions of Greco-Roman culture. Some even took Greek names. At the time of Jesus, these men still controlled the high Jewish council, or Sanhedrin, but they had little influence among the common people.

2.4.2.2.4. Their practice was centered around the Temple and sacrifices. This is why Jesus' main conflicts with them occur in Jerusalem rather than in the far flung countryside. It also explains why when the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD it was a mortal blow to the Sadducees - they simply could not practice their faith apart from the Temple and sacrificial system.

2.4.2.3. The Zealots

2.4.2.3.1. This group believed that Jews should take up arms and throw off the shackles of their foreign overlords. They resisted working in any way with the foreign oppressors. They refused to pay taxes, or often tried to force others from adopting Greek or Roman practices.

2.4.2.3.2. The Zealots were bent on armed resistance to all Romans in the fatherland. They looked back two centuries to the glorious days of the Maccabees - and wanted to return there!

2.4.2.3.3. According to Josephus, the Zealots led the revolt under Judas the Galilean in 6 AD, which led to the crucifixion of 2,000 Jews.

2.4.2.3.4. The Zealots were similar to the Pharisees, but thought armed resistance was necessary to bring in the Messianic Age.

2.4.2.3.5. One of the disciples - Simon - was a zealot.

2.4.2.3.6. This party helped foment the final rebellion in Jerusalem in 66 AD, and ceased to exist after the Jews were expelled from the Promised Land.

2.4.2.4. The Herodians

2.4.2.4.1. As their name implies, this group existed under the reign of the Herod's.

2.4.2.4.2. Their main factors regarded politics rather than religion, and their main concern was keeping power.

2.4.2.4.3. As such, they obviously accepted Hellenization and the rule of the Romans.

2.4.2.5. The Essenes

2.4.2.5.1. This group appears to have arisen in response to a corrupt priesthood (the Sadducees). They may have been the group at Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

2.4.2.5.2. This group stressed asceticism and withdrawal from the corrupt world. They rigidly adhered to the law, accepted the whole Old Testament, but also other books outside of the canon as being authoritative.

2.4.2.5.3. They rejected the Temple and sacrifices were hopelessly corrupt and therefore rejected them (and the Sadducees.) They were strict pacifists and thus rejected the Zealots. They were monastic and eschewed politics and thus rejected the Herodians. As ascetics they did believe in the immortality of the soul, but rejected the resurrection of the body.

2.4.2.5.4. The group was strongly apocalyptic. They thought the end was near, when righteousness would be restored and Israel would return to her glory. However, this would all be done by God apart from political or military intervention by Jews.

2.4.2.5.5. Some scholars think John the Baptist may have been an Essene.

2.4.2.5.6. This group faded away shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem, as their eschatological hopes were dashed.

2.4.3. The Jewish Diaspora

2.4.3.1. As noted above, many Jews never returned from the exile, and continued to flourish and spread throughout the Roman empire.

2.4.3.1.1. By the time of Jesus, there were sizable Jewish communities in every major city in the Roman Empire. These Jews, scattered far and wide, but with strong emotional and religious connections with the land of their ancestors, are called the "Diaspora" (Gonzales, location 604).

2.4.3.2. Of necessity these Jews, although still emotionally and religiously connected with their homeland, had to embrace Hellenism to a large extent. In fact, after a period of time, many of the Jews of the Diaspora could no longer speak or read Hebrew, but only Greek and other local dialects.

- 2.4.3.3.** Therefore, it was natural that when the Jews of the Diaspora began losing their Hebrew they would translate the Scriptures to Greek. This translation (which I mentioned above), originated in Alexandria—the main city in Egypt - is called the Septuagint, or the version of the Seventy (usually abbreviated as LXX). It's importance in the history of the Church can hardly be overstated.
- 2.4.3.3.1.** The Septuagint was of enormous importance for the early church. It is the text of Scripture quoted by most New Testament authors, and it profoundly, influenced the formation of early Christian vocabulary—including the very name of “Christ,” which was the Septuagint word for “Anointed One” or “Messiah”. (Gonzales, location 618).
- 2.4.3.4.** Furthermore, Jews in the Diaspora, and especially in Alexandria, began to try and synthesize Judaism and certain elements of Greek philosophy. The most notable proponent of this was Philo of Alexandria. To do this, Philo interpreted the Scriptures using an allegorical method. Through this type of interpretation Philo tried to show that the God Yahweh and the God of the Greek philosophers (which was distinct from the popular system of polytheism.) Philo's method of allegorical interpretation would later be embraced by many Christians and would have a large influence in the development of how Christians read the Scriptures all the way until the time of the Reformation (and for many it still does!)
- 2.4.3.5.** Finally, the Jews of the Diaspora were important because they provided a ready pool of possible prospects as Christianity spread. They already embraced the Old Testament (and tended to use the Septuagint as did the early Church), followed a similar ethical code, and were ready to hear about the coming of the Christ. Obviously many did not convert, but many did and helped form an early nucleus with the Church as it spread.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1.** The world into which Jesus was born, and in which the early Church grew and spread, was a mixture of Jewish, Greek, and Roman influences.
- 3.1.1.** The dominant religious influence on the early Church came from Judaism, but it was a Judaism wrestling with outside influences. In fact, as the Church spread outside of Palestine, the form of Judaism encountered was increasingly Hellenized.
- 3.1.2.** The dominant cultural influence on the early Church came from the Greek process of Hellenization. The dominant language of the early Church was Greek, the Old Testament generally used was the Greek

Septuagint rather than the Hebrew, and the New Testament and other writings were originally written in Greek. Furthermore, the influence of Greek philosophy would also make itself felt in the early Church.

- 3.1.3.** The dominant legal and governmental influence was the Roman Empire. The system of roads, the relative peace, and the good systems of travel within the Roman Empire would all be used by the Church to help spread the Good News of Jesus Christ across the Empire. Furthermore, in the West Latin would increasingly become the language of the Church, and throughout the Empire the interplay between the Church and the government would be a major factor in the development of the Church.
- 3.2.** All three of these influences will be seen as we begin our journey into the history of the Church.