

THE CAMBRIDGE  
HISTORY OF  
EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

\*

*Edited by*

FRANCES YOUNG

LEWIS AYRES

ANDREW LOUTH

Assistant editor: Augustine Casiday



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

## Social and historical setting

JOHN BEHR

The first two centuries of the history of Christianity were crucial. It was a period of struggle for survival and the crucible in which the basic elements of Christian identity and church organization were forged. During this time, Christians had to find ways of explaining their relationship to the Jews and the broader pagan world, while suffering sporadic persecution from both, and also learn to resolve internal differences in matters of teaching, liturgy and calendar, and church organization and order. By the end of the second century, there were Christian communities scattered throughout the Empire, from Edessa in the East to Lyon in the West, displaying a remarkable diversity but also a concern to hold a common faith and pattern of life.

The early Church in Jerusalem must have initially appeared as yet another group within the remarkably variegated Judaism of the time. It was a given for Christians that what God had done in Christ must be continuous and consistent with the revelation of God in Scripture, yet it was no less clear that they were reading Scripture in a different manner. Thus while they continued to attend the Temple, the apostles also proclaimed their message from Solomon's Portico and met in their own homes to break bread (Acts 2–3). The apostles' preaching gathered adherents from most sections of Jewish society apart from the Sadducees. Of particular importance were the Hellenized Jews (cf. Acts 6), those Jews who preserved their religion but were otherwise culturally assimilated to their Gentile environment, and their counterparts, the God-fearers, those Gentiles attracted by the moral teaching and monotheism of the Jews but reluctant to embrace the Law fully (cf. Acts 10). It was through the Hellenistic synagogues of the Jewish diaspora, located in cities throughout the Empire, that Christianity would spread. It is probable that there were Christian Jews in the countryside surrounding Judaea and perhaps north into Galilee, but they soon disappeared from history. More important was the spread of Christianity further north into Damascus and Antioch, the capital of Syria and the third city of the Empire, the place where they were first called 'Christians'

(Acts 11:26). In Acts this spread of Christianity beyond Jerusalem is described as a result of a persecution of the Christians there, occasioned by Stephen's speech against the Temple and his subsequent stoning (Acts 6–8, 11:19). Saul, a Pharisee from Tarsus and a student of Rabbi Gamaliel at Jerusalem, was present at this stoning, and continued and intensified the persecution, until his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus persuaded him to use his zeal for proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles. Whatever intentions there had been to spread Christianity to the Gentiles throughout the Empire, Saul became the dominant figure in this mission and, as Paul (Acts 13:9), was thereafter thought of as the apostle to the Gentiles. His letters to the newly founded communities are the oldest Christian writings we have, and appear to have been collected together early; already at the beginning of the second century, Ignatius refers to the 'letters' of Paul.<sup>1</sup> After his first missionary journey with Barnabas, around AD 46, from Antioch to Cyprus, Pamphylia, Pisidia and Galatia, the issue of the inclusion of the Gentiles, and the demands to be placed upon them, implicit already in the account of the Hellenists and Stephen, became critical. There are two differing accounts of the resulting 'Council of Jerusalem' (c. AD 48/9; Acts 15:1–29 and Gal. 2:1–10). Though both agree that circumcision should not be expected of Gentile converts, Acts further adds that such converts should abstain from food with idolatrous associations and unchastity, while the only further stipulation Paul mentions is to 'remember the poor'. After breaking with Barnabas and Peter, who had refrained from eating with Gentile Christians at Antioch when men from James of Jerusalem arrived representing the 'circumcision party' (cf. Acts 15:36–40; Gal. 2:11–14), Paul set out with Silas on further missionary journeys, visiting the communities he had previously established and moving out further into Asia, Macedonia and Achaia. It is probably from Corinth, in the late 50s, that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, preparing the way for his coming visit to Jerusalem so that the community there would accept the collections he had gathered on their behalf (Rom. 15:30–2). When he arrived in Jerusalem, he was greeted with hostility and imprisoned by the Romans for his own safety. After further commotions and plots on his life, he was moved to Caesarea for a couple of years, and finally, as a Roman citizen, to Rome itself for trial in the early 60s. According to the writers of the second century, Paul, along with Peter, was martyred under Nero (cf. Eusebius, *HE* 2.25.5). By the second half of the second century, monuments had already been built for Peter on the Vatican hill, and for Paul on the road to Ostia (*HE* 2.25.7).

As most of the surviving literature is concerned with the development of the Gentile communities, we know relatively little about the Christian community

in Jerusalem after the middle of the first century. James, 'the brother of the Lord', was the leader of the church in Jerusalem after Peter's departure (Acts 12) until his martyrdom in AD 62 (*HE* 2.23, citing the second-century church historian Hegesippus). It is possible that the Jewish War of AD 66–70 prompted Christians to leave the area for Asia. According to second-century writers, John, the son of Zebedee, resided in Ephesus, while Philip the apostle, together with his four prophetess daughters, lived in Hierapolis in Phrygia (Irenaeus, *AH* 3.3.4; *HE* 3.31.2–5). Also from Asia in the early second century, Papias recorded what he claimed were the oral reports of those who had known the apostles, describing the origin of the Gospels: Mark is said to have been the interpreter of Peter in Rome, setting down accurately, but not in order, everything he remembered concerning the words and actions of the Lord, while Matthew composed his oracles in Hebrew (*HE* 3.39.15–16). It is possible that Papias also knew the Gospels of Luke and John, and that what are later regarded as the four canonical Gospels were already beginning to circulate together in codex form in Asia at the turn of the second century.<sup>2</sup> It is only from the middle of the third century onwards that legends start appearing that identify other apostles as the founders of other Christian communities, such as Mark in connection with Alexandria.<sup>3</sup> According to Hegesippus, James, the 'brother of the Lord', was succeeded by Symeon, the 'cousin of the Saviour', as the head of the Jerusalem community (*HE* 3.11). This need for a familial relationship to the Lord as a qualification for leadership seems to have continued at Jerusalem (cf. *HE* 3.20.6), until, as a result of the Bar Kochba rebellion (AD 132–5), Hadrian forbade Jews from entering Jerusalem, which he renamed Aelia Capitolina, and so the succession of the 'bishops of the circumcision' ceased (*HE* 4.5.2–3). No substantial information survives concerning the existence of these Jewish Christians thereafter. They had been excluded from the synagogue and subjected to a curse from about AD 85, and were later required by Bar Cochba to recognize his messianic status and to deny Jesus under the pain of execution.<sup>4</sup> Accepted neither by their own kinsfolk nor by the increasing body of Gentile Christians, by the end of the second century they were known as a deviant Christian sect, the Ebionites, 'the poor ones'. However, it would be wrong to assume that contact between Jews and Christians ceased completely in the middle of the second century. Interaction between the two groups continued for several centuries, as John Chrysostom's polemic against those Christians infatuated with Judaism indicates.<sup>5</sup>

As Christianity spread beyond the bounds of Judaea, most often through towns and cities that already contained Hellenistic Jewish communities, it was unavoidable that Christians should come to the attention of the state. The



Roman Government was usually tolerant of foreign cults and religions, provided that they did not encourage sedition or weaken traditional values.<sup>6</sup> The various local deities of the provinces encompassed by the Roman Empire were easily absorbed into the pantheon and the diverse spectrum of religious life. The God of the Jews, however, demanded exclusive adherence, that sacrifices be performed only at Jerusalem, and prohibited all images. On account of the antiquity of their religion, and their loyalty to the ways of their ancestors, both highly valued by the Romans, the Jews were treated with toleration and were even granted privileges by Augustus and later by Claudius. Christians, however, despite their claims to the ancient Scriptures of the Jews, appeared as newcomers.<sup>7</sup> During the first and second centuries, Christians were not subject to any wholesale attempt at repression, but they were subjected to occasional persecution. When Nero was suspected of causing the fire which destroyed much of Rome in AD 64, he directed the blame upon the Christians. According to Tacitus, Nero executed an 'immense multitude' of Christians,<sup>8</sup> some in the Arena, some by crucifixion and others by fire, using the latter 'to illuminate the night when daylight had failed' (*Annals* 15.44). By the time that Tacitus recorded the event, some fifty years later, while he is non-committal about the allegation, he accepts that Christians deserved to be punished on account of their 'hatred of the human race'. Christians were thought of as 'a class of men given to a new and wicked superstition' (Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2), which, in the popular imagination, included nocturnal meetings at which cannibalism and incest were practised. Nero's actions, though not instigated for ideological reasons, nevertheless set a precedent for condemning Christians to death for no other reason than being Christian. It is probable that pressure on Christians in Rome continued during the following decades. The Letter to the Hebrews, written around this time and connected with Rome, urges Christians not to become disheartened, apostasize from faith in Christ and revert back to their former ways. The situation worsened when Domitian promoted veneration of himself as the divine Augustus and insisted on being addressed as 'lord and god'. After putting a number of senators to death on the suspicion of treason in AD 95, Domitian had the consul Flavius Clemens executed and his wife Domitilla, the granddaughter of Emperor Vespasian, banished. According to Dio Cassius the charge was 'atheism', the abandoning of the Roman gods and the adoption of Jewish practices (*Epitome* 67.14). However, as the Jewish religion was a recognized religion, it is possible that the charge of 'atheism' actually indicates adherence to the Christian faith. Eusebius, describing the events under Domitian, also refers to a Domitilla, this time the niece of Flavius Clemens, who was banished for being a Christian (*HE* 3.18.4). Even if Domitilla herself

was not a Christian, it seems that she patronized the practice of Christianity in her household and that her estate was adopted as a Christian cemetery at the beginning of the third century.<sup>9</sup>

Early in the second century (c. AD 112), Pliny, the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, wrote to Trajan requesting guidance about the correct way to treat Christians (*Ep.* 10.96). According to his reports, Christianity had penetrated not only the cities but also the villages and the surrounding countryside. Pliny knew that there was a precedent for the execution of Christians, but was unsure about the exact nature of their crime, whether they should be punished for their profession of Christianity or for the secret crimes associated with the name. Either way, Pliny had no hesitation in executing those who kept to their profession, as their ‘obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be punished’: a worse crime than being Christian. This had only resulted, however, in an increased number of accusations. When Pliny examined some lapsed Christians, including two deaconesses, he found no evidence of crime: they described how they were accustomed to assemble before daylight on certain days, to sing hymns to Christ as a god, to take an oath that they would abstain from crime, and that they met again later to eat ordinary food (not murdered infants). They had, furthermore, even refrained from meeting in this way when the emperor had forbidden secret societies. In his reply, Trajan assured Pliny that he had acted properly, and that he should pay no heed to anonymous accusations nor initiate any inquisition. If a proper charge was brought against someone (so that the accuser could be accused of slander, and incur a similar penalty), and if the accused was convicted, he or she should be allowed to recant and be pardoned, but otherwise punished (Pliny, *Ep.* 10.97). The same position was taken by Hadrian, around AD 125, in a rescript sent to Caius Minucius Fundanus, the proconsul of Asia. During the second century a number of individuals suffered martyrdom, including Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, in Rome (under Trajan), Polycarp of Smyrna (c. AD 155), and Justin in Rome (c. AD 162–7). The letters of Ignatius exemplify a conviction which, while not necessarily seeking out martyrdom, welcomes it, fearing only that he might be persuaded to turn aside from his triumphal following in the passion of his God (*Rom.* 6). The martyrs became celebrated figures, not only after their death, as with Polycarp, whose bones were valued as ‘more precious than precious stones and finer than gold’ and around which the Christians gathered ‘to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom’ (*MPol.* 18), but also before their death, as they awaited their final trial. For Ignatius, martyrdom was also a test for correctness of faith against those who claimed that Christ only ‘appeared’ to suffer, with the implication that His followers do not need to undergo such

tribulations themselves (*Trall.* 9–11). Only under Marcus Aurelius, in AD 177, did a large, violent persecution break out, stirred by popular suspicion and hatred, against the Christians of Lyon and Vienne in Gaul. It is possible that stronger measures began to be adopted because of an increase in voluntary martyrdom, which Marcus Aurelius found distasteful (*Med.* 11.3), combined perhaps with the provocative behaviour associated with the Montanists.<sup>10</sup> However, there is no suggestion of any misplaced enthusiastic zeal in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, seven men and five women executed three years later in North Africa; rather, the martyrs request a calm hearing as they make their serious confession. Popular sentiment had not been contained by the rulings of Trajan and Hadrian, and the suspicions about the obscenities practised by Christians lingered, as did the conviction that the Christians' refusal to worship any god but their own alienated the goodwill of the gods and precipitated various disasters. Their devotion to their God, neither ancient nor ancestral, but recently condemned as a common criminal, made ready scapegoats of Christians. As Tertullian later commented wryly, 'If there is an earthquake, a famine or pestilence, the cry is raised "the Christians to the lions"' (*Apol.* 40).

However, it must be remembered that during the second century these persecutions were only sporadic, isolated and local events; they were not a deliberate attempt to eradicate Christianity. In this period, although Christians were formally in official disrepute and were socially stigmatized, informally they were usually left to do as they pleased, and were even able to protest against their treatment. For instance, Chadwick describes how, when a certain governor in Asia Minor began to persecute Christians, 'the entire Christian population of the region paraded before his house as a manifesto of their faith and as a protest against the injustice'.<sup>11</sup> By most accounts, the second century was a remarkable period of peace, stability and well-being in the history of the Roman Empire, enabling freedom of travel around an extended realm in a quite unprecedented fashion. Trajan's comment to Pliny that anonymous accusations are 'not in keeping with the spirit of the age' is typical of the self-confidence that could extend generous tolerance to others (*Pliny, Ep.* 10.97). Nor did this escape the Christians. Justin, in his *First Apology*, addressed to Antoninus Pius and his sons, was at pains to point out that Christians, far from being subversive adherents of an illegal sect, were in fact exemplary citizens and that, although they prayed to God alone, they prayed for the emperor (*I Apol.* 17). Justin was even prepared to see the sign of the cross in the legionary ensigns and trophy poles used by the Roman Army (*I Apol.* 55). For Justin, it was not the state itself that was wrong, but rather its failure to recognize the truth of Christianity. A couple of decades later, Athenagoras, in an treatise addressed to

Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, noted the profound peace which the Empire enjoyed by virtue of their wise rule, though he regretted that the equality which all had before the law was not extended to the Christians (*Leg.* 1.2–3). At about the same time, Melito of Sardis pointed out the providential beginning of Christianity under the *Pax Romana* established by Augustus and the fact that it flourished together with the Empire (*HE* 4.26.7). The relative toleration of the second century provided a time during which Christian communities could consolidate and address internal problems of community, identity and organization.

If the persecutions themselves were neither sustained nor widespread, the effects of the martyrdoms on the developing churches were profound and universal. By the 60s, a whole generation of Christians had passed away without seeing the expected return of Jesus. The readiness of James, Paul and Peter to die for their faith, undaunted by the delay of the Second Coming or the small number of their followers, was an effective testimony against any crisis of confidence. The faith demanded total commitment, and this dedication, which Pliny perceived as ‘obstinacy’, served to strengthen the community immeasurably.<sup>12</sup> The pagan philosopher Celsus, around AD 180, commented that ‘the love which Christians have for one another exists because of the common danger and is more powerful than any oath’ (Origen, *Cels.* 1.1). It was not, however, as Celsus assumed, simply as a result of social stigmatism that Christians had a common bond. The injunction to love one another, as a way of loving God and as a reflection of His love for the human race, was a novelty in the pagan world where, as gods were held to be incapable of feeling love in response to that offered, religion tended to be approached in a self-interested, contractual spirit.<sup>13</sup> That this love should be manifest in care for strangers was even more striking. For Ignatius, martyrdom was not the only test of faith, just as important was active love: he claimed that those who hold incorrect beliefs about Christ ‘have no care for love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the distressed, none for the afflicted, none for the prisoner, or for him released from prison, none for the hungry or thirsty’ (*Smyrn.* 6). Demanding a great deal from the Christians, both in terms of commitment and charity, the churches were also able to offer much to both the spirit and the flesh. That in later centuries the various churches cared for numerous widows, virgins and orphans, and looked after strangers and the destitute, is well known. Julian the Apostate complained that ‘the impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well; everyone can see that our people lack aid from us’ (*Ep.* 22), and tried to initiate comparable charities, but failed, lacking any religious basis for such activity. Such activity took on

an even more heroic quality when disasters struck. In the early centuries, the Christian communities were located primarily in the urban centres of the Empire. But far from being the ordered, civilized places that their ruins suggest, the Greco-Roman cities were overcrowded nightmares.<sup>14</sup> As Stark describes it, people would have ‘lived in filth beyond our imagining . . . The smell of sweat, urine, faeces and decay permeated everything.’<sup>15</sup> They were rife with infectious diseases, such that most people would have suffered from chronic health conditions, and those who survived had a life expectancy of less than thirty years. Cities were subject to frequent fires, collapsing buildings and other disasters. To maintain their populations, the cities needed to be repopulated by newcomers more or less continually, leading to high rates of crime and frequent riots. In such conditions, the Christian church could provide a new basis for attachments and an extended sense of family. When an epidemic struck, such as the first appearance of smallpox from AD 165–80, the fatalities were enormous, probably about a quarter to a third of the total population.<sup>16</sup> The typical response of the pagans, even doctors like Galen, was to leave the cities for the countryside until the danger passed. When another epidemic struck in AD 251, Cyprian of Carthage and Dionysius of Alexandria reported how the Christians, having learnt how not to fear death, remained in the cities nursing the sick, and thereby gaining an immunity so that they could pass among the afflicted, apparently invulnerable. Galen also noted that the Christians’ ‘contempt of death and of its sequel is patent to us every day’.<sup>17</sup> The newly forming Christian communities offered, in Stark’s words, ‘a new culture capable of making life in Greco-Roman cities more tolerable’.<sup>18</sup>

This new culture had a particularly dramatic effect for women in the Christian communities. In a culture where female infanticide was normal, where girls were often married at the age of twelve, and if they did not die as a result of childbirth or abortions, were often widowed at a young age and encouraged to remarry, sometimes under the pressure of penalty, so that they could again be productive members of society, while their inheritance would pass to the new husband, Christianity offered a radically different alternative. The respect in which virgins and widows were held, and the willingness of the churches to support those virgins and widows who were less fortunate, gave women a real choice to remain single, and if they inherited an estate, to keep it and dispose of it as they chose. If they decided to (re-)marry, the prohibition on abortion and infanticide (cf. *Did.* 2.2) prolonged their life-expectancy and also increased their fertility rates, while the rejection of male double-standards concerning fidelity opened up further dimensions in the marital relationship. During the first and second century, the population of the Empire was in decline. Augustus had

promoted legislation encouraging people to have more children, but to little effect.<sup>19</sup> Dio Cassius attributed this barrenness, especially among the upper classes, to a shortage of females (*Roman History* 54.16). In the new culture of Christianity, however, the ratios were reversed. That the predominant number of Christians were female was a fact recognized by Christians and pagans alike. It brought mockery from pagans such as Celsus (cf. Origen, *Cels.* 3.55), and necessitated practical considerations, such as Callistus' decision, at the beginning of the third century, to tolerate 'just concubinage', so that Christian women need not lose their status and legal privileges by having to marry beneath their rank.

The preponderance of women, especially among the upper classes, had significant implications not only for their role with respect to family life, but also within the Christian communities, at least until the fourth and fifth centuries when, as Christianity became the dominant religion, the ratios levelled out. It has already been noted how Pliny examined two deaconesses. Half a century earlier, Paul's letters indicate that women were fulfilling significant roles in the churches. Though in 1 Corinthians 14:34–6 he enjoins the women to keep silent in the churches, learning from their husbands at home, he also makes it clear that they have his consent to pray and prophesy in public (cf. 11:5, with the head veiled). In the same letter Paul also mentions Aquila and Prisca and the church gathering in their house (1 Cor. 16:19); that Prisca is even named suggests that she was an important person. This is confirmed by Romans 16:3, where she appears first: 'Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks; greet also the church in their house.' Prisca is clearly a missionary, alongside Paul, and a patron of the community that meets at her house. In the preceding verses, Paul commended 'our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae', who has been a leader or patron (προστάτις) for Paul and many others (Rom. 16:1–2). Whether or not the term διάκονος here should be taken as representing an office (as it perhaps does in Phil. 1:1), Phoebe was evidently a woman of means and importance within the community. In the remainder of Romans 16 no less than eight other women are singled out for personal greetings. Colossians 4:15 also refers to a church meeting in the house of Nympha, and the same is probably indicated by Paul's reference to 'Chloe's people' (1 Cor. 1:11).

Something of the impact and controversy created by the new roles which women were assuming within the Christian communities is reflected in the popular apocryphal acts, especially those claiming the authority of Paul. In the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a betrothed virgin called Thecla chances to overhear

Paul speaking publicly about virginity. She is converted to this new lifestyle, miraculously escapes the male authorities, who are furious with Paul, 'a sorcerer who has misled our wives' (*AcPT* 15), but is supported by the women of the city. After baptizing herself (*AcPT* 34), she cuts her hair short and dresses as a man, and then sets off to follow Paul. Paul directs her to 'teach the word of God' (*AcPT* 41), which she does, 'enlightening many by the word of God' before falling asleep (*AcPT* 43).<sup>20</sup> The radical freedom from societal constraints advocated by such Christianity was expressed concretely in self-control (ἐγκράτεια) and represented by a pure, virgin or celibate body.<sup>21</sup> By the end of the second century, such ascetic tendencies were described as 'Encratite', and its advocates were accused of rejecting the use of wine and meat, and insisting on total sexual abstinence for all Christians; these tendencies are often associated with Tatian, who taught at Rome in the middle of the second century, before returning home to Syria, taking with him his *Diatessaron* and perhaps his ascetic leanings.<sup>22</sup> The later Pastoral Epistles, on the other hand, again laying claim to the authority of Paul, tended to emphasize the subordination of women within the general household order expected of the Christian communities, and rejected any desire for disruptive asceticism. Nevertheless, women still played an important role, not only as widows and deaconesses, but also as prophetesses. Papias held the daughters of Philip, and their prophetic words, in high regard (*HE* 3.39.9). And Miltiades, an anti-Montanist writer in the late second century, spoke of a prophetess Ammia with respect, arguing that the 'Montanist women' did not inherit her prophetic gift (*HE* 5.17). He was referring to Maximilla and Prisca (or Priscilla), the associates of Montanus who, probably in the early AD 170s, had proclaimed a new dispensation and outpouring of the Spirit expressing itself in the form of a new and authoritative prophecy. Montanism, or 'the (New) Prophecy', soon spread beyond Phrygia, advocating greater enthusiasm and more rigorous disciplinary practices. The movement brought to a climax various unresolved tensions which had been simmering during the second century, and gave further occasion to consolidate the developing forms of church organization.

The basic locus for these church communities was the private house. Chapter 16 of Romans, written in the late AD 50s, suggests that alongside the 'house church' of Prisca and Aquila (vv. 3–5), there were at least four other distinct groups (vv. 10, 11, 14, 15) in Rome, each associated with particular names. There is no indication that the Church of Rome had corporate ownership of any property during the first two centuries; the later designation of the older churches in Rome as *tituli* churches, of which twenty have no record of their foundation and so may well date from the earliest days, implies, under Roman

law, private ownership.<sup>23</sup> When great teachers, such as Justin, Valentinus and Marcion, arrived in Rome in the second century, their disciples gathered in private property. In the *Acts of Justin and Companions*, Justin claims that he and his disciples meet ‘above the baths of Martin’, while Valentinians seem to have met at a villa on the via Latina.<sup>24</sup> Various models have been suggested for the formation of these communities, such as burial societies, voluntary associations, philosophical schools and cultic associations.<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that these Christian house communities embraced all the dimensions of church life. Justin’s community was not simply a school or a place of catechesis alongside, and independent from, an otherwise constituted church. To those who assembled around him, Justin did indeed ‘impart the words of truth’ (*AcJ*), yet none had been converted by Justin. Justin’s precious description of the liturgical life of his community is also set within the same context (*I Apol.* 61, 65–7). Here he describes how the newly baptized are brought in to join the brethren, and how the president (the προεστώς) of the brethren celebrates the eucharist, which the deacons distribute to those present, and later to those who were absent. He also comments that the community gathers together weekly, on Sundays,<sup>26</sup> for the reading of Scripture, instruction and exhortation by the president, and the offering of prayer and the eucharist. Though Justin does not use the language of bishops (ἐπίσκοποι – lit. ‘overseers’) or presbyters, his community does clearly reflect the two offices, *episcopos*-presbyter and deacons, described in the Pastorals as the model of church organization (1 Tim. 3, 5:17; Titus 1:5–7; in 1 Tim., both are described, in various contexts, as ‘presiding’, cf. 3:4, 5, 12, 5:17).

Although there were a number of different communities in Rome, there was also a sense of communal identity. When Paul, and later Ignatius, wrote to the Christians of Rome, they sent a single letter, clearly intending that it be circulated amongst the various congregations, though Ignatius’ awkward phrasing in his opening greeting (‘to the church . . . in the place of the country of the Romans’) betrays a certain hesitation about the location of the church to which he is writing.<sup>27</sup> A glimpse of the relations between these various communities in the first half of the second century is offered in *The Shepherd of Hermas*. In one of his visions, Hermas is instructed to write two books, and to give one to Clement and the other to Grapte: ‘Clement will then send one to the cities abroad, for this has been committed to him, and Grapte shall exhort the widows and the orphans. But you shall read them to this city accompanied by the presbyters who preside over the church’ (*Vis.* 2.4.3). The terminology of presbyter, president and bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) was still fluid; Clement himself used the terms presbyter and *episcopos* interchangeably (cf *I Clem.* 44.4–5), and



even at the end of the second century Irenaeus could still use these terms as equivalents (cf. *AH* 3.2.2, 3.1; cf. *HE* 5.24.14). Hermas also suggests that there was only one such presbyter-president in each community and that he held ‘the chief seat’ (πρωτοκαθεδρία; *Mand.* 11.12, cf. *Vis.* 3.9.7). It seems, therefore, that in Rome there was a general assembly of the presbyters or presidents of the various communities, with someone charged with the specific duty of communicating with other churches on behalf of the Roman assembly, and another with the oversight (ἐπισκοπή) of charity. Thus, a letter could be written anonymously on behalf of the Church of Rome to Corinth, though it was generally known to have been written by Clement (cf. *HE* 4.22.2, 23.11). And, while each presbyter-president was responsible for the distribution of charity within his own community (cf. Justin, *I Apol.* 67), as the church in Rome increased in size and wealth, the responsibility for administering charity at large and abroad also became more important: Dionysius of Corinth praised Soter of Rome for increasing Rome’s ancestral custom of sending contributions to the many churches in every city (*HE* 4.23.10). In addition to these offices held on the part of the Roman Church at large, the various congregations used to express their communal identity by the exchange of the eucharistic gifts, later known as the *fermentum* (cf. *HE* 5.24.15). In this arrangement, especially as there was no common, corporately owned, property, excommunication was a self-chosen affair. In the case of Cerdo, for instance, Irenaeus describes how he sometimes taught secretly and at other times confessed openly, but when refuted for his false teaching ‘he separated himself from the assembly of the brethren’ (*AH* 3.4.3). Rather than share in the common teaching, Cerdo preferred to break with the brethren, probably symbolized by the refusal to exchange the *fermentum*. Even though such communities were outwardly similar to the others, by the time of Irenaeus such a decision would be described, pejoratively, as the founding, of a school with its own succession of teaching (Ptolemy from Valentinus, *AH* pr.2; Marcion from Cerdo, *AH* 1.27.2), all ultimately deriving from Simon Magus (*AH* 1.22.2ff.) and so not part of the succession of teaching which was traced back to the apostles (*AH* 3.3).

Elsewhere, in the early part of the second century, there are two other important witnesses to church organization. The *Didache* (c. AD 100) seems to indicate a community in transition. Several chapters describe how to receive itinerant apostles and prophets, with a special concern for detecting false prophets (*Did.* 11–13), and the direction to ‘let the prophets celebrate a Eucharist as they will’ (*Did.* 10.7). But, in addition, the congregation is enjoined to appoint bishops and deacons as permanent local ministers, and it further specifies that

‘they also minister to you the ministry of the prophets and the teachers’ (*Did.* 15.1). With Ignatius of Antioch the ministry of itinerant charismatics has completely disappeared. He emphasizes that as a bishop he does not have the authority to give orders as did the apostles (*Trall.* 3.3; *Rom.* 4.3), though he seems to claim for himself the right to speak with prophetic authority (*Philad.* 7.1). Most important, however, is Ignatius’ insistence on three distinct clerical orders, bishop, presbyters and deacons, and the central role of the bishop in the church. Ignatius exhorts the Smyrnaeans, for example, to be sure to follow the bishop as Christ follows the Father, doing nothing pertaining to the church without the bishop, and always to be present wherever the bishop appears, just as wherever Christ is ‘there is the catholic church’ (*Smyrn.* 8). But Ignatius’ emphasis on the centrality of the bishop for the community within any given geographical area, his ‘monepiscopacy’, must not be construed in terms of the later ‘monarchian’ position of the bishop.<sup>28</sup> The obedience that the Smyrnaeans owe their bishop is also due to the presbyters (*Smyrn.* 8.1). Similarly, the Magnesians and the Ephesians are exhorted to do nothing without the bishop and the presbyters and are to obey them both, as well as be subject to one another (*Magn.* 7.1, 13.2; *Ephes.* 2.2, 20.2). Ignatius also speaks of the bishop and the presbyters as both ‘presiding’, the one in the place of God and the others in the place of the council of apostles (*Magn.* 6.1). And, again, the heretics are the ones who have separated themselves from the body of the church, choosing not to join the common assembly (*Ephes.* 5.3), rather than having been excluded by an episcopal decision.

The date at which monepiscopacy became established at Rome is a matter of debate.<sup>29</sup> But another practice from the East certainly contributed to its establishment there. A number of churches in Asia Minor were accustomed to celebrate Easter, the Christian Passover, on the same day as the Jewish Passover, the fourteenth day of the month Nisan, whatever day of the week it might be, and so are described as Quartodeciman. Other Christians, however, perhaps desiring to distinguish themselves from the Jews after AD 135, kept their celebration of Easter on the Sunday following Passover. It is difficult to determine how early either practice is: Eusebius records a letter from Polycrates of Ephesus, which defends the Quartodeciman practice as being the ancient tradition, upheld by luminaries like Philip and John (*HE* 5.24.1–7), but provides no comparable evidence for the celebration of Easter on Sunday. According to Eusebius, after receiving this letter from Polycrates, Victor, who ‘presided at Rome’ (AD 189–98), tried ‘to cut off from the common unity all the dioceses (*paroikias*) of Asia along with the adjacent churches, on the

grounds of heterodoxy, and he placarded this by means of letters, proclaiming that the brethren there were absolutely excommunicated. But all the bishops were not pleased by these events' (*HE* 5.24.9–10). These events, which Eusebius reconstructs, in fourth-century terms, as an action of the pope of Rome against churches in a different country, should probably be understood as the unilateral action of the *episcopos*-presbyter of one community in Rome against the other communities *there*, an action which not surprisingly caused consternation. This presumptuous action was criticized by Irenaeus of Lyon, who wrote to Victor, pointing out that not only was a plurality of practices possible, but that 'the presbyters before Soter, who presided over the church of which you are now leader, did not themselves observe it, . . . though they were at peace with those from the dioceses where it was kept when they came to them,' and that 'no one was ever rejected for this, but the presbyters before you [Victor] who did not observe it sent the Eucharist to those from other dioceses who did' (*HE* 5.24.14–15). Irenaeus continued by reminding Victor that when Polycarp of Smyrna had visited Rome, in the middle of the second century, 'Anicetus was not able to persuade Polycarp not to observe it . . . nor did Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it,' but both kept respect for each other and peace was preserved in the church (*HE* 5.24.16–18). It is probable that prior to Soter (i.e., before AD 165) there was no fixed celebration of Easter at Rome, at least there is no evidence for it, so that the divergence of practice was more than simply a matter of dates.<sup>30</sup> Nor is there any evidence, despite Eusebius' fourth-century convictions, that there were any councils of bishops meeting over this controversy and coming to a unanimous agreement for celebrating Easter on Sunday (*AH* 5.23); in fact, the only two letters which Eusebius goes on to cite, Polycrates and Irenaeus, argue for recognition of diversity.<sup>31</sup> Rather, just as Polycarp's discussion with Anicetus concerned the practices of Christians in Rome, so also the point of Irenaeus' letter was to restore peace between the communities, and their leaders, in Rome.<sup>32</sup> Although the date for Easter was one of the primary topics treated at the Council of Nicaea, the Quartodeciman practice continued, especially in Asia Minor, into the fifth century.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the flurry of letter writing the affair occasioned, like the Montanist controversy (cf. *HE* 5.19), certainly contributed towards a greater awareness of the Church as a universal body. This unity was one perceived both by Christians themselves, such as Avircius Marcellus, the bishop of Hieropolis in Phrygia at the end of the second century, who on his own epitaph describes how he has travelled from Nisibis to Rome and found the same faith, serving the same nourishment, everywhere,<sup>34</sup> and by pagans such as Celsus, who differentiated between various sects and 'the Great Church'.<sup>35</sup>

Notes

- 1 *Ephes.* 12.2. Cf. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 58–65.
- 2 Cf. C. E. Hill, ‘What Papias Said About John (and Luke): A “New” Papian Fragment’, *JTS* n.s. 49/2 (1998), 582–629. Needless to say, the location and occasion of the New Testament writings has been endlessly debated; for a summary, see R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997).
- 3 Cf. *HE* 2.16.1, which is phrased in deliberately vague terms. There is very little information on Christianity in Alexandria and Egypt during the second century. This silence, together with the fact that prior to the episcopate of Demetrius (c. 189–230) we hear only of figures such as Basilides and Valentinus, seems to support Bauer’s claims about the priority of ‘heresy’. Cf. W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 44–60. However, the numerous papyri suggest the substantial presence of those who would later be called ‘orthodox’. C. H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*; C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity*.
- 4 Cf. Justin Martyr, *I Apol.* 31; S. G. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians 70–170CE*.
- 5 Cf. W. A. Meeks and R. L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era*; R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 63–9.
- 6 Cf. R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*.
- 7 On the appropriation of Scripture, and the claim that classical culture was derivative from it, see F. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, 49–75.
- 8 M. Sordi suggests that, in the horror caused by the events, ‘a few hundred victims’ would merit this description, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, 31.
- 9 On the two accounts about ‘Domitilla’ and the catacomb bearing that name, see J. S. Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome: Social Order and Hierarchy in Early Christianity*, 48–62; and P. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten*, 166–72 (ET: 198–205).
- 10 Cf. Sordi, *Christians*, 72–3; for qualification see C. Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 123–9.
- 11 H. Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 55.
- 12 Cf. Stark, *Rise*, 163–89.
- 13 Cf. MacMullen, *Paganism*, 52–3; Stark, *Rise*, 86.
- 14 Estimates for the population density of Rome range from 200 to 300 inhabitants per acre; modern-day Manhattan has 100, yet in Rome it was illegal to build private buildings higher than 20 metres. For Greco-Roman cities, see Stark, *Rise*, 147–62; J. Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*.
- 15 Stark *Rise*, 153–4.
- 16 On epidemics, see *ibid.*, 73–94; W. H. McNeill, *Plagues and People* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).
- 17 Cited in R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians*, 65.

- 18 Rise, 162.
- 19 For a collection of sources, see Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Source Book in Roman Social History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 28–9.
- 20 J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 364–72. Cf. V. Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts*.
- 21 Cf. P. Brown, *The Body and Society*; A. Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*.
- 22 Cf. H. J. Drijvers, 'East of Antioch: Forces and Structures in the Development of Early Syriac Theology', in *East of Antioch: Studies in Early Syriac Christianity*, ch. 1.
- 23 Cf. A. Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop*, 399–400; Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen*, 304 (ET: 362).
- 24 Cf. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen*, 257–64, 306 (ET: 298–313, 364–5).
- 25 Cf. R. L. Wilken, 'Collegia, Philosophical Schools, and Theology', in S. Benko and J. J. O'Rourke, eds, *The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The Roman Empire as the Setting of Primitive Christianity*, 268–91; W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 75–84.
- 26 On the emergence of Sunday as the regular weekly day of worship, see S. Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*; W. Rordorf, *Sunday*; Wilson, *Related Strangers*, 230–5.
- 27 Cf. Brent, *Hippolytus*, 410.
- 28 Cf. A. Brent, 'The Relations between Ignatius and the *Didascalia*'.
- 29 Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen*, argues for the time of Victor (189–98); Brent, *Hippolytus*, places the crucial period slightly later with Callistus (217–22).
- 30 Cf. Wilson, *Related Strangers*, 235–41.
- 31 Cf. W. L. Petersen, 'Eusebius and the Paschal Controversy', in H. Attridge and G. Hata, eds, *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, 311–25.
- 32 Cf. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen*, 322–3 (ET: 381–7); Brent, *Hippolytus*, 412–15.
- 33 Cf. A. Strobel, *Ursprung und Geschichte des frühchristlichen Osterkalenders*.
- 34 Text in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, 143.
- 35 Cf. Origen, *Cels.* 5.59–61.