

# THE SHAPING OF CHRISTIANITY

*The History and Literature  
of Its Formative Centuries (100–800)*

Gérard Vallée



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*Cover design by Nick Markell. The image is based on "Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena holding the 'true cross.'" Fresco of the Yilanli Church (Snake Church) in Göreme, Cappadocia (Turkey).*

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## *Christianity in the Roman World (70–120)*

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Christianity was born along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea; its birth took place in the early decades of the Roman Empire. Those two factors must first be registered, for they constitute the background against which Christianity was to make its start and from which it took over many a feature; like any historical movement it could not possibly operate on an entirely clean slate.

### **The Mediterranean Region**

The Mediterranean Sea, “mare nostrum” (our sea) as the Romans called it, presented all the appearances of a lake of arresting dimensions, providing one of the world’s most natural highways on which circulation from shore to shore was relatively easy. Its lands were blessed with a friendly climate and prevailing clear skies. Scattered around the sea lived populations of varied character and talent, most able to exploit the resources of land and sea. It can be said that geographic, climatic, and human features combined to give an impetus to some of humankind’s highest cultural achievements. So in the course of centuries Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans took turns at promoting that choice commodity: civilization. The turn of the era saw Greek towns of Asia Minor experience a remarkable boom while North Africa continued to attract notice as the intellectual powerhouse of the Latin populations.

### **Advent of the Roman Empire**

When Rome took over from Athens, it found itself to be a bilingual composite; Latin in the West took its place beside Greek, mainly

located in the East. Rome then developed a literature of its own while at the same time transmitting Greek culture to future generations.

By 100 B.C.E., after conquering Italy and the main areas around the Mediterranean and having considerably augmented its population, the Roman Republic seemed to have reached a state of lasting stability. Yet two civil wars between 88 and 45, and the excessively large role of the army, boded ill for its tranquillity and precluded an imminent disintegration. Indeed in 44, having extended the Roman boundaries as far as the Rhine and assumed a kind of perpetual dictatorship, Caesar made no secret of his distrust of the senatorial aristocracy and of his intention of ending the republic. His assassination in the same year led to further troubles until Octavian picked up the pieces of the republic, was declared “Augustus” (“he who rules by divine approval”) by the Senate, and assumed the modest status of “Princeps” (First Citizen), which, in fact, made him “imperator” or supreme chief of the military forces and of the entire estate.

### **The “Roman Peace”**

Under the firm hand of Augustus (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.) the Mediterranean world was submitted to a comprehensive administrative reform that led to stability, security, and peace (the famous *pax romana*). Army and Senate were brought under control. Frontiers were rectified and made easily defensible. The existing seaways and an extended network of paved roads over land effectively bound the empire together.

The early emperors were intent on consolidating the huge territory entrusted to them, with its western extensions and eastern conquests, comprising over thirty-five provinces, a territory the size of the United States. They were also intent on maintaining and developing the system of government they had inherited. There was no civil war after 69 although frontier provinces (e.g., Syria-Palestine) were often on the brink of open revolt. Second-century emperors were generally good rulers.

The cumulative effect of centuries of Roman hegemony left its mark on Western history and amounted to a considerable advance in the domains of culture and civilization. In particular, Romans bequeathed to generations to come eminent achievements as administrators, jurists, and engineers.

## **Society and People in the Second Century**

One hundred years after Augustus, Christians were beginning to make a certain mark on the Roman world. Yet they were still close to being invisible in the huge crowd. How big was the Mediterranean crowd at the beginning of the second century? Obviously general agreement is not the strong point of demographic studies when applied to ancient history. Nonetheless the Roman practice of regular census for fiscal and military uses along with literary, epigraphic, and archeological evidence (mainly limited, though, to upper classes in cities) can help us figure out the demography of the empire. The most serious bets have been able to estimate the population of the empire at 54 million at the death of Augustus in 14 C.E. Then demographers conjecture 60 to 70 million for around 110, although we ought to keep in mind that the small size of the population always remained one of the great weaknesses of the empire. There might have been some 4 to 5 million Jews, of which some 2 million lived in Palestine, and about 50,000 Christians by then, soon to span most of the Mediterranean region and to reach the frontiers of the empire. Imperial Rome had a population of at least 600,000 (but only 200,000 according to some), slightly larger than that of Alexandria, followed by Antioch, Ephesus, and Carthage. In the fourth century the population of Rome was to decrease relative to that of Constantinople. Cities were generally overcrowded within their precincts, and insalubrious, offering a welcoming ground to recurrent epidemics.

It has been noted that 90 percent of Roman society lived in the countryside, and that 2 percent were wealthy and 8 percent middle-class, while the rest lived in poverty and, in cities, counted on the free distribution of grain and meat, the food banks of the time. Although it is not possible to determine the precise ratio of free and unfree persons, this was a slave society in which the major source of energy was human labor, in which patronage and clientage were crucial for protection and well-being, and in which those compelled to work in order to live as well as the “plebeians” generally were held in contempt. Health was rather poor and women were almost invisible. All the same, material prosperity among the “patricians,” well-born, and notables seems to have been on the rise; city life was growing; and the population was increasingly mobile, especially at the frontiers, thus making possible the diffusion of Greco-Roman culture in the provinces.

The empire was run by the urban nobility. After 190/200 a period

of stagnation set in, making the “barbarians” who still lingered outside the frontiers think perhaps of looking south beyond the Rhine and the Danube. They were all the more invited to do so as emperors increasingly assumed the obsolete power of Oriental despots and displayed the debilitating pomp of Asiatic satraps in their courts. An aggravating circumstance was that the general population of the empire, after reaching a ceiling of about 95 million, began to decrease due to a lower birth rate and a marked waning in the recruitment of slaves. This decrease was coupled with military overgrowth and anarchy, pestilence, soil abandonment under excessive fiscal burden, and general economic regression. The decline of the empire had started. It was thought that the barbarians were called in order to offset the shrinking population of the empire. Indeed, the overall population of the empire might have reached its lowest level by 400 (some 45 million). Despite this fact, Augustine and Jerome thought that the population was big enough, perhaps too big; hence there was no necessity for all to get married.

### **The Religious Menu of the Romans**

It could hardly be argued that Romans took to religion more than other peoples did. Yet they cherished, along with astrology and magic, a plethora of gods, old and new. A large pantheon had made room, beside the native Roman gods, for most of the renamed Greek deities; they served the main purpose of attending to various human activities. Rituals and ceremonies were performed with scrupulous precision by appointed personnel (priests, augurs, vestals) in sanctuaries, temples, and homes. Festivals and sacrifices were duly practiced, their observance being commended for the soothing effect they produced.

The Roman conquests had a double impact on the religious makeup of the region. Wherever Romans established a colony, they introduced their trinity — Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. But they also brought home new cults. Meanwhile the state religion that had emerged at the end of the republic was revitalized by Augustus; pride of honor was given to Apollo and Artemis, and the formality unsuitably called “emperor cult” (it showed only weak religious features, if any) was introduced.

The decisive development following the reign of Augustus relates to the spread of Oriental cults over the empire and in Rome itself. They answered needs unfulfilled by traditional religion, above

all those relating to the afterlife and to soteriology. More will be said about them in chapter 4.

Parallel to the appearance of the monarchical system of government, a certain trend toward monotheism can be perceived: More and more local deities were seen as mere manifestations of a single power. The educated Romans, skeptical as to official ceremonies and popular beliefs, and not too inclined to believe in the gods of the pantheon, generally believed in Providence.

### **Prophetic Religions of the Book**

Greek and Roman religions had oracles, providing a much sought-after orientation to life (a function first of all discharged by philosophy). Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were to have prophets and scriptures, the latter an innovation in the Greco-Roman world. Prophets receive a message from God for the people, remind them of their commitment to a personal God, insist that moral codes flowing from faith be adhered to, and act as social critics.

The situation of the Jews in the empire presented special features. A double lot befell them on account of their religion. On the one hand, they were allowed to live according to their laws and enjoyed various privileges. Though under Roman control, they were prospering in many near eastern and western areas and formed important colonies, especially in Alexandria and Rome where they had synagogues and schools. On the other hand, their uncompromising monotheism, certain features of their practices, and their reluctance to participate in public life met with total incomprehension. Nevertheless they possessed a clear identity, listened to their past prophets and present teachers who vigorously denied the existence of all deities but one, and held their scriptures and traditions in great reverence. Family bonds were sacred; Jews, it was generally thought, reprovved abortion and exposed none of their children but (as Egyptians and Germans also did) they raised them all, an oddity in the Roman world where female and malformed infants were often abandoned.

The early Christian communities initially shared the ambivalent lot of the Jews. Soon, however, they were harassed and denied exemption from public rituals. Like the Jews, and even more, they were considered “atheists” and became objects of malevolent gossip. All that

was publicly known about them was that they followed the Galilean prophet Jesus, who had talked about a new kingdom before being ignominiously crucified. They revered their own writings in addition to the Hebrew scriptures, and held meetings mainly at night. After difficult beginnings in Palestine, the early Christians had turned to the Mediterranean world, had opted for the Greek language (emblem of civilization in that Hellenized culture), and were soon found in major centers of the empire (Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus). They opened the doors to the Gentiles, mainly thanks to the influence of Paul, a former Pharisee with Roman citizenship. At the beginning they recruited considerably from the lower classes of society, but gradually members of higher strata also joined, all of them at their own risk since their illicit “name” (or membership in the group) made them virtual outlaws.

### **Religious Faith**

Paganism with its ancient and new cults was alive and well when Christianity arose. What singled out Judaism and Christianity among the many religious groups was that these religions required personal dedication to the one God and imposed on their adherents ethical demands as essential to that religious dedication. To the Jewish faith in God and obedience to his commands Christians added a personal devotion to their founder. The linkage of an ethical code with religious faith was practically unknown to most contemporary religions, which rarely went beyond the opinion that the gods liked virtue. Some pagan philosophies (see chapter 3), however, unlike pagan religions, had developed high standards of morality and it is not surprising that Christianity was to seek an alliance with such philosophies. Soon true piety came to be seen as residing in faith and good conduct, over above mere practices; it aimed to mobilize the entire domain of the self in obedience to God’s will.

### **Christianity Around 100 C.E.**

It would doubtless be an exaggeration to state that the empire had been shaken by the appearance of the new religious force. Three generations after the death of its founder, Christianity represented a barely visible minority (some 50,000 members at most). Yet that minority was

rather diverse (they did not seem to agree on the real meaning of the gospel) and remarkably dynamic. Christians seemed to want to take on the entire inhabited world. First excited by the imminent establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, they progressively formed themselves into a less apocalyptic congregation, and went on teaching ways of virtuous life appropriate to various callings in a civilized society. Harassed in Palestine, they moved in all directions, intent on gathering the Gentiles into the “new Israel.” They were soon found in Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, and Rome, where they suffered sporadic persecutions.

At a time when the great majority of people lived a rural life, Christians appeared in cities, recruiting first of all among artisans and tradesmen and their households, that is, among humble persons. In Rome and Corinth, though, they had wealthy patrons, and converts included some people of substance. Outside Palestine they first used the Greek language in its international form called *koine* (common tongue); in the second century in Rome and Africa they adopted the Latin language and remade it into an instrument suited to their needs.

Very early they had leaders—bishops, presbyters/elders, and deacons, all insisting that they had received their mandate from Jesus through the “apostles.” Leaders presided at the worship of the community, cared for the well-being of its members, encouraged them by words and letters to lead a good life and—a shock to the “respectable pagan”—to shun distinctions between Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian, slaves and freemen, men and women.

The first half of the second century saw the first writers appear, who, distinct from the authors of both the “canonical” books of the New Testament and the Christian “apocryphal” literature, were to be called “fathers,” in the present case “apostolic fathers,” because they were in a position to have known personally some of the apostles. Ignatius of Antioch (about 69–112/125) is the most typical among them. As bishop of Antioch, he wrote a series of letters of encouragement to various communities when he was taken as a prisoner to Rome, where he was to be put to death early in the second century.

One important role of the apostolic fathers, traditionally seven in number, must be emphasized. They reflect the first developments beyond the New Testament writings in matters of church order, life practices, language, and theology. Beyond insisting on obedience to the leaders of

the community and warning against heresies and schisms, they offer an initial delimitation of normative Christianity as regards its faith and its literature. They witness to the reception of certain “apostolic” writings as particularly treasured and deserving the name of “scripture”: authentic holy books held to be depository of Christian truth and worthy to be used in the public proclamation of the church. Initiated at that time, the process toward the fixation of the canon of New Testament writings was to be essentially completed by the end of the second century, prompted by the controversies of the period; yet the final determination of the canonical list of twenty-seven books constituting the New Testament took place only in the fourth century, which explains minor variations encountered in various communities or regions.

Other Christian writings of the first centuries (gospels, letters, stories and legends, secret revelations), which, though received by groups as authoritative and apostolic yet were denied inclusion in the canon, came to be called “apocryphal,” that is, secret and not quite reliable. All the same, because of their form, content, and intention of supplementing the canonical works, they are also relevant to an understanding of the faith of the early Christians. More precisely, on the basis of their proximity to the New Testament writings, their study belongs to biblical studies, but to the extent that they were used by the church fathers, they fall under patristics.

Taken together, the New Testament books, apocryphal writings, and the first patristic works are our main sources of information on the manifold diversity of early Christian piety and thought.

### **The Roman Perspective on Christians**

Still more than the Jews, Christians were a puzzle to the Roman world. Officials did not know too well how to deal with these eccentrics who refused to adhere to the Roman way of life. The general populace resented their very difference and was quick to hold them responsible for any untoward happening. In fact, the Christian community presented all the features of an “alternative society”; as such, Christians posed a threat to Roman society and were feared for their vague power. They managed very well to irritate the traditionalists who governed and peopled the empire, by the “abomination” of their practices and their refusal to participate in the prescribed religious rituals.

Roman administrators of the second century were perceptive enough to differentiate between Jews and Christians and usually treated them differently. For instance, Nero in 64 saw Christians as a group distinct from Jews and acted against them; then Nerva (96–98) exempted Christians from the capitation tax imposed on ordinary Jews as a punishment for the revolt of 66–70. Rulers were often quick to impose the death penalty on Christians.

Intellectuals of the time did not hide their contempt for the new believers and their strange doings, and were prone to think of them according to firmly fixed stereotypes. Their beliefs were deemed irrational, their “scriptures” of poor quality, their behavior disrespectful of honorable conventions. They were accused of “hatred of the human race”<sup>1</sup> due to their repressive morality, their imputed neglect of civic duties (e.g., their reserve concerning military service and their unrestrained encouragement of procreation), and their lack of fear before violent death. Christians were generally perceived as scorning respect for the ancestral customs.

On the other hand, and this could have counted in their favor, Christian groups offered definitive analogies with other groups or associations that indeed were tolerated, such as burial societies, philosophical sects, various confraternities of like-minded people pursuing a common interest (be it trade, worship, or even drinking), voluntary associations and clubs. Nevertheless Christian communities were labeled “unauthorized” clubs. Tacitus thought he was in the right in branding Christianity a “deadly superstition”;<sup>2</sup> others kept denouncing the “execrable” practices of Christians. All approved of the treatment meted out to their founder and his disciples. Throughout the second century Christians complained that their actual behavior and doctrines were never really examined; presumably they would have been found quite unobjectionable.

## **The Jewish Perspective on Christians**

Having started as a Jewish sect among other Jewish sects, Chris-

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1. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.6, in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*. London: SPCK, 1987, p. 2.

2. *Ibid.*, 15.44.4.

tianity eventually followed a separate course. Prior to 70, that gradual parting of the ways met with only mild irritation on the part of the Jews: Christians were brothers who had gone astray by believing in Jesus; they were estranged relatives. Bitterness mounted in the late first century as some of the Christian traditions concerning Jesus and the apostles had just been recast in an anti-Jewish spirit (e.g., John's gospel) and as it became clear that the Christian group had been moving step by step away from Pharisaic Judaism. It was then natural for Jews not only to see Christianity as a rival twin, but also to look at Christians as unrepentant renegades and tainted heretics (*minim*). The claims of Jesus had already been stamped blasphemous and his followers had to fall under the same verdict. Those transgressors, those separatists, were not to be assisted. They had used "our" synagogues only to end up proclaiming themselves the "true Israel";<sup>3</sup> they had applauded the fall of Jerusalem and were inclined to dignify the Roman Empire as an instrument of divine will. Christians were henceforth cursed or at least scoffed at in the synagogues, and they had to be denounced; to that effect malicious gossip and gibes were often resorted to. Some popular Jewish pamphlets of the second century onward contain nasty talk about Christians and tend to malign Jesus, Mary, Paul, the apostles, and, generally, the new believers. Clement, in apparent agreement with Tacitus, noted that "jealousy"<sup>4</sup> bred and fed Jewish resentment and verbal assaults. But then, extreme rhetoric in disputes was a practice common to all in the ancient world; in that regard Jews and, later, Christians were no exception.

### **An Ambiguous Start**

By 100 C.E., Christianity seemed to have little to recommend itself in the eyes of the world. Often caught in in-fighting, Christians constituted a weird flock and clearly had bad press. Some of their beliefs (e.g., the belief in resurrection), some of their practices (e.g., the "cannibalistic" eating of "flesh" and "blood"), and some of their attitudes (e.g., their exaltation of virginity and continence) inspired repulsion and verged on the scandalous. Their books were odd and could certainly not match the great productions of Greco-Roman culture.

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3. Dial. 123.

4. Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* 5.2, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 4.

Keeping aloof from society while deploying an unavailing aggressiveness, those aliens seemed to have no positive contribution to make. Hence labeling, name-calling, and stereotyping were soon to be the easy way of dealing with the early Christians.

As it entered the second century, the Christian movement had to assert and define itself in relation to the surrounding world; otherwise its identity threatened to fade into invisibility. In the process it was exposed to a double challenge. On the one hand, its relation to Judaism, which it was gradually abandoning, remained still largely unreflected on and had to be explicitly worked out. On the other hand, its relation to Hellenistic culture and especially to the more or less popular moral philosophy, which seemed to offer it support and expression, still had to be clarified. This double relationship must now be examined.

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