

The physical and cultural setting of the early church



The Pantheon—a temple to all the gods—built in Rome by Emperor Hadrian in 118

Outline

- **Why do we care?**
- **Roman religious culture**
- **Early Christian worship**
- **Urban life**
- **Cultural conflict between pagans and Christians**
- **Persecution and the early church**

Why do we care?

1 Peter is best understood against the backdrop of first-century life and culture

- 1 Peter was written in the mid 60s
- It was written from Rome
- It was written to several churches in northern Asia Minor
- The readers were predominantly Gentile Christians
- The readers are struggling with some sort of persecution:
 - ❖ They are undergoing “all kinds of trials” (1:6)
 - ❖ The letter talks of their fear and suffering (3:13-17)
 - ❖ The letter refers to those who speak against believers (3:16; 4:5)
 - ❖ Peter calls their sufferings a “fiery ordeal” (4:13), in which they share in Christ’s sufferings (4:13) by bearing his name (4:14, 16)
- In order to know what the points of conflict were between church and culture, we need to ask:

What was first-century life like in the empire?



John and Peter from a section of Albrecht Dürer's *Four Apostles* (1627)

Pagan religion was *everywhere*

- “Birth, death, marriage, the domestic sphere, civil and wider political life, work, the military, socializing, entertainment, arts, music—all were imbued with religious significance and associations... So in things grand and imposing, and in things routine and familiar, religion was involved and divinities revered as appropriate in various devotional practices”
- Any public office had associated religious duties
- Guilds had associated gods and rituals
- Meals generally had a ritual acknowledgment of deities
- Military units had patron deities and associated regular religious acts

“Widespread in the Greco-Roman culture of Paul’s day was the belief that the world is populated by a multitude of suprahuman powers in constant conflict with each other. Human beings could become pawns and players in the rivalry and struggles that marked out the otherworldly realm. The spirit world could envelop the concrete world, as demonic spirits, and spiritual forces were thought to be alive and well, influencing human circumstances and destiny.” *

Pagan religion was *highly visible*

- The standard Roman city would have temples for Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Mercury, Isis and Sarapis (Osiris), Apollo, Liber Pater, Hercules, Mars, Venus, Vulcan, Ceres and the local or regional gods
- The temples were stone, expensive, colorfully painted and prominently placed
- Anywhere from 30-50% of a Roman city's area was taken by public buildings, monuments and temples
- Temples were *multi-purpose complexes*, including various facilities and serving a variety of needs, such as cultural centers, with zoological parks, aviaries, museums, concerts, art galleries, public lectures, and even botanical gardens

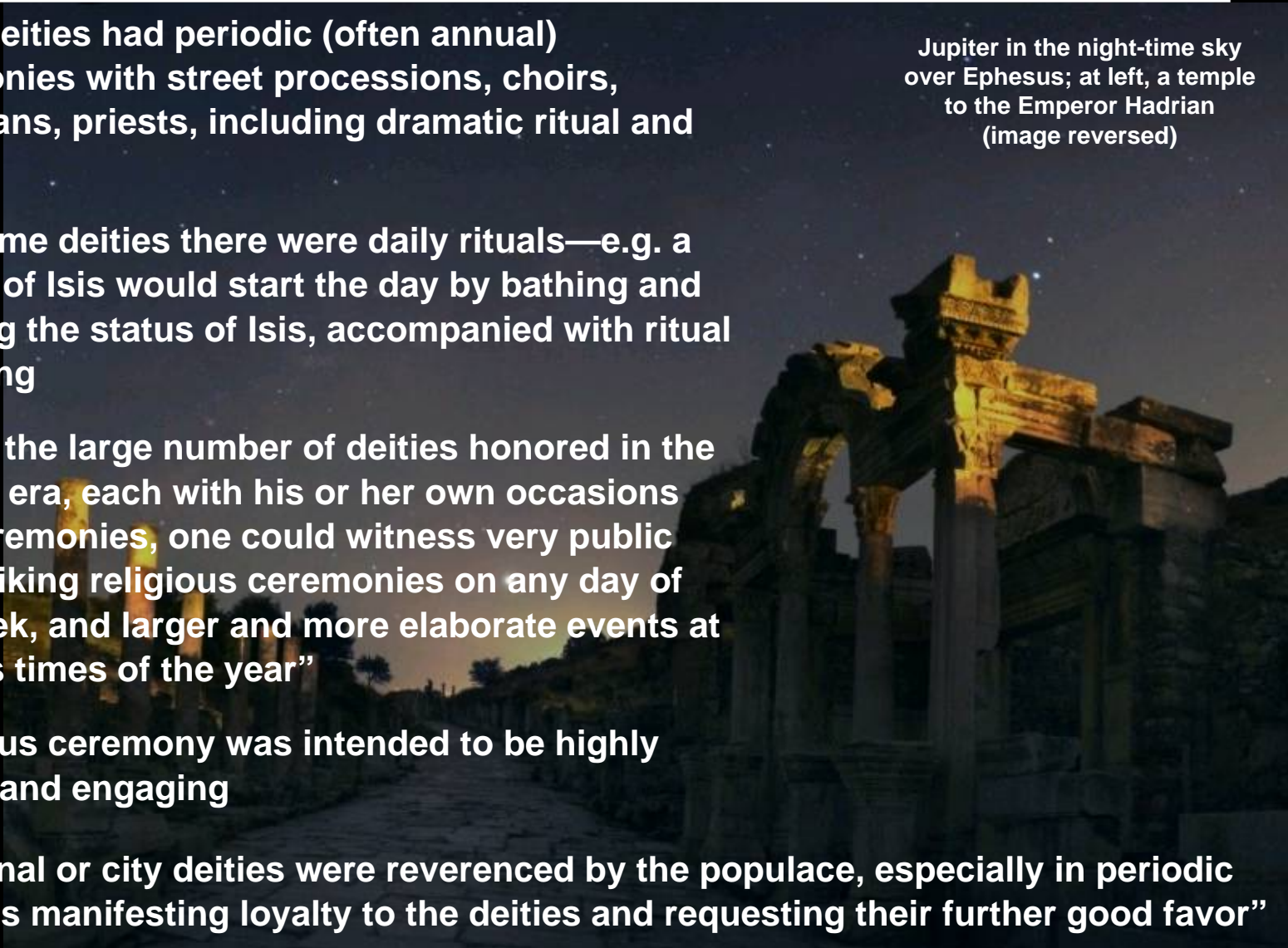


A mosaic floor segment depicting sea beasts, from the Roman temple complex in Bath, England

Pagan *temples* were highly visible

- Many deities had periodic (often annual) ceremonies with street processions, choirs, musicians, priests, including dramatic ritual and feasts
- For some deities there were daily rituals—e.g. a temple of Isis would start the day by bathing and clothing the statue of Isis, accompanied with ritual and song
- “Given the large number of deities honored in the Roman era, each with his or her own occasions and ceremonies, one could witness very public and striking religious ceremonies on any day of the week, and larger and more elaborate events at various times of the year”
- Religious ceremony was intended to be highly visible and engaging
- “Regional or city deities were revered by the populace, especially in periodic festivals manifesting loyalty to the deities and requesting their further good favor”

Jupiter in the night-time sky over Ephesus; at left, a temple to the Emperor Hadrian (image reversed)



The pantheon expanded over time

- It was so accepted that different ethnic groups would have their own gods that a visiting Roman dignitary would reverence any local gods
- Ex: Egyptian gods such as Isis were worshipped alongside Roman gods
- This policy was extended even to the Jews, despite their monotheism
- Immigrants and slaves were typically allowed to follow their traditions
- In this context we see Gentiles—e.g. Cornelius—attending synagogues and even developing genuine devotion

Fun fact: During Caligula's reign, a festival honoring Isis was established in Rome. According to Josephus, Caligula took part wearing women's clothing

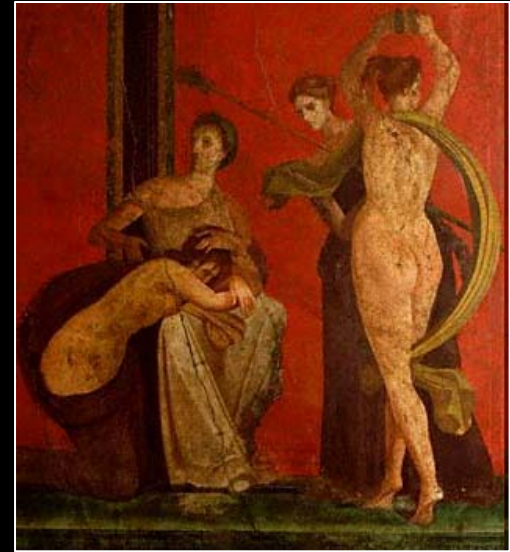
Q: Compare this with the openness or plasticity of modern western religious culture



A second-century AD Roman statue of a priestess of Isis
Museo Archeologico Regionale,
Palermo, Sicily

In addition to the “civic” religions (Jupiter, etc.) and the imperial cult, Rome had many *mystery religions*

- Mystery religions were often imported from the east, esp. Egypt and Persia, and included Cybele, Isis, Mithras, &c.
- At times these were suppressed, but at other times even the emperors even joined in
- These were characterized by elaborate initiation and purification rites, ritual meals and secrecy
- Some were associated with stories of a semi-divine god who dies and is reborn
- Whereas the civic cults reinforced cohesion of state and society, these addressed a more personal need of individual salvation in a world filled with unseen powers
- Some of these appealed to men (e.g. Mithras, popular with soldiers and exclusively male), some to women (e.g. Demeter)
- In contrast to civic cults, they cut across lines of race and class, and were open to slaves and citizens [CH&B]
- Many followers of the mystery religions joined as many as possible, e.g. participating in the rites of Mithras on Monday, Isis on Tuesday, etc. [B]



A fresco from the Villa of the Mysteries, in Pompeii (destroyed in 79 AD)

A “Most commonly, it is thought this illustrates the initiation of a woman into the secret rites of Dionysus... In the scene pictured here, the initiate is flogged, while another woman dances beside her.” (BBC)

Mystery religions bore some similarities to Christianity

- In the Mithras legend's simplest form he overcomes a bull, drags it to a cave and kills it, watering the earth with its blood so life could grow. Mithras also takes part in the rebirth of the bull and acts as a mediator between man and the gods—he, himself, a sin god.
- The early church noticed the similarities:

“The Devil, whose business it is to pervert the truth, mimics the exact circumstances of the Divine Sacraments in the Mysteries of Mithras. He himself baptizes some, that is to say, his believers and followers; he promises forgiveness of sins from the Sacred Fount and thereby initiates them into the religion of Mithras; ...he brings in the symbol of the resurrection, and wins the crown with the sword.” –Tertullian, early 3rd c.



Mithraic temple fresco from Marino, Italy (2nd cent.)

Q: The mysteries clearly predate Christianity, and have some similarities. How do we know Christianity isn't simply another mystery religion, the one which survived?

Q: How are spiritual impulses in modern culture similar to those which fed the desire for mystery religions?

Roman religion had its own forms of superstition and “spiritual” experiences

A notable man of letters (Aelius Aristides, 2nd cent.) describes his encounter with the god Asclepius, the deified Greek physician: *

For there was a feeling as if taking hold of him [the god] and of clearly perceiving that he himself had come, of being midway between sleeping and waking, of wanting to look, of struggling against his departure too soon, of having applied one's ears and of hearing some things as in a dream ... hair stood straight; tears flowed in joy; the burden of understanding seemed light.

What man is able to put these things into words? Yet if he is one of those who have undergone initiation [into a Greek religion], he knows and is familiar with them.

*Corinth had a famed healing shrine, or *asklepieion*

From a papyrus containing magical incantations:

For those possessed by demons, an approved charm by Pibechis: Take oil made from unripe olives, together with the plant mastigia and lotus pith, and boil it with marjoram (very colorless), saying, “Joel, Ossarthiomi, Emori, Theochipsoith, Sithemecho, Sothe, Joe**, Mimipsothiooph, Phersothi, Aeeioyo, Joe, Eochariphtha: Come out of such a one”—and the other usual formulae... But write this phylactery upon a little sheet of tin... It is of every demon a thing to be trembled at, which he fears.

**According to Barrett, possibly a corruption of YHWH

Fun fact: In 13 BC, Augustus tried and failed to ban magical books. Use of magic was so closely associated with the city of Ephesus that books of potions and spells were often called “Ephesian books” [CHB:P]

Pagan religion also made use of smaller gatherings

- “In addition to the public cults there were many voluntary or private groups, sometimes devoted to a deity worshipped more publicly. These private cults might meet in the home of a wealthy individual and be focused on group dining. Sometimes they were made up of primarily an extended family and entailed slaves. And sometimes the leader of the group was a wealthy woman.”
- There wasn't the same sense of religious conversion; e.g., to begin following Zeus didn't entail abandoning Isis
- As relationships between people developed it would be natural to extend invitations to religious activities, such as feasts

❖ Example of a written invitation to a feast in honor of Sarapis*:

Herais asks you to dine in the dining room of [the temple complex of Sarapis] at a banquet of the Lord Sarapis tomorrow... from the 9th hour”

- ❖ In all likelihood, no more than about ~10 guests are being invited to a relatively small dining room
- ❖ At these meals it was understood that the god being honored was present at the table as if hosting the meal

*Horsley, G.H., “Invitations to the *kline* of Sarapis”, from *New Documents illustrating early Christianity* (1981), pp. 5-9

Meals were important to pagan religion

- Religious meals included
 - ❖ sacred feasts in the honor of the city or local gods, open to much of the population
 - ❖ others just for initiates
 - ❖ still other private dinners by invitation only
- Sacrifices entailed a shared meal
- These were generally festive, rather than solemn
- Some were festive enough that among the rules to be observed at the entrances to some pagan shrines was the warning not to vomit up one's wine within the sacred precincts



This *amphoriskos* depicts a Roman orgiastic party

Pagan religion was based on *ritual*

- Roman religion incorporated many rituals, including especially sacrifices
- “...in the ancient world to sacrifice was to make an offering, a gift to the gods, and had a very positive, even joyous meaning. In most cases, for example, sacrificial offerings by individuals seem to have been as thanks to a god for blessings given, often in answer to a prayer. Sacrifice on behalf of groups too (e.g. cities, families or other groups) were most often likewise joyous events, the offering given gladly to the gods as thanks.”
- Often these sacrifices involved meat—and for many Romans, this was the only time they got to eat meat, which was provided by the more wealthy in the group
- Some portion of the sacrifice went to the god by way of the temple priests. As a measure of their devotion they would not make use of it themselves but would sell it to vendors who retailed it in the marketplace to the general public
- Paganism was big business; the Ephesian silversmiths, makers of votive shrines to Artemis, organized a near-riot against Paul for hurting their business (Acts 19)

Q: Given this brief portrait of first-century paganism, how was *Judaism* of the day similar or different?

Paul's advice about meat sacrificed to idols* addresses practical social issues

Problems:

1. Can you buy meat in the market which has been sacrificed to an idol?
2. Can you accept an invitation to a meal overtly in honor of a pagan god?

What we can infer:

1. Some Gentile believers figured that, since the pagan gods aren't real, it doesn't matter
2. Others insisted on distancing themselves as far as possible

Paul's answers require these groups to work together:

1. It's okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols since God made the universe, including the meat!
2. So, they *can* dine with pagans
3. But don't eat meat specifically identified as sacrificial since it might make others stumble (...that is, not if someone who would stumble is present)
4. And never participate in explicit idol worship

Q: Paul prohibited idolatry but allowed a gray zone. What modern gray zones have you encountered? How are these addressed *in community*?

The New Testament authors urged compromise and flexibility when possible

Other advice from the epistles on living in pagan culture:

- Avoid being offensive “to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God” (1 Cor 10:31-32)
- Offer “supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings for everyone, for peaceable life” (1 Tim 2:1-2)
- Christians can pray for the Emperor, just not to him
- Make sure your leaders are above reproach (1 Tim 3:1-7; 6:1)
- Obey the civil authorities (Rom 13; 1 Peter 2)—“render unto Caesar...”



Peter Paul Rubens,
A Roman Triumph (c. 1630)
Left to right:
Maidens who could serve
at sacrificial rites; animals
for sacrifice; musicians;
slaughterers; the priest
(red); a soothsayer
(above); elephants bearing
incense burners

Judaism had some common ground with pagan religion

1. First-century Judaism had its own form of diversity including, for instance, Pharisees, Sadducees, the Qumran community, zealots, &c.
2. Judaism engaged in sacrifices
3. Judaism included sacred meals—often festive—such as at Passover

Fun Fact: Paul read pagan poets. In his writings, he quotes Epimenides of Crete (Tit 1:12), Aratus of Cilicia (Acts 17:28) and Menander, author of the Greek comedy *Thais* (1 Cor 15:33)



Detail from the Arch of Titus, built c. 82 by Emperor Domitian commemorating Titus' victory in the sack of Jerusalem

Judaism, while similar in some ways, differed in important ways from pagan religion

- **Judaism was monotheistic—a very counter-cultural and even offensive stance**
- **in stark contrast to pagan religion, Judaism forbade worship of images**
 - ❖ **The absence of any image of their God in the Jerusalem temple would have struck Romans as very strange**
- **Some sects violently opposed others**
 - ❖ **Ex: The sicarii, described in Josephus, were zealots who would assassinate hellenized Jews in public venues**
 - ❖ **Ex: In the extra-canonical Psalms of Solomon, the author condemns fellow Jews as being “sinners” and violating Torah**

Q: How was early *Christianity* different from Judaism and paganism?

U.S. religious culture is also open and diverse

- Only 4% of Americans identify themselves as atheist
- Many Americans are open to spiritual, other-worldly or just plain wacko ideas (including some who identify themselves as Christians):
 - ❖ “Dreams sometimes foretell the future...”: 53%
 - ❖ “Ancient advanced civilizations, such as Atlantis, once existed”: 43%
 - ❖ “Places can be haunted”: 37%
 - ❖ “It is possible to influence the physical world through the mind alone”: 29%
 - ❖ “It is possible to communicate with the dead”: 18%
- Most Americans believe in an afterlife:
 - ❖ 63% of Americans are absolutely sure that Heaven exists; 19% “pretty sure”
 - ❖ 73% of Americans believe in Hell
 - ❖ 46% of Americans are “quite certain” they’re going to Heaven
- 43% of Americans believe that most evil in the world is caused by the devil or mankind or both

Q: Given these statistics, and what you know of American religious culture, compare and contrast it with that of ancient Rome

The NT and early sources show a diversity of worship

- Temple worship (Acts 2:46)
- Synagogue worship (Acts 16:13, 16)
- A fellowship meal concluded by the Lord's supper (1 Cor 11)
- A charismatic type of service with emphasis on prophecy (1 Cor 14)
- The Didache, a late 1st century manual for Christians
 - ❖ Describes congregational baptisms, fasting, prayer, etc.
 - ❖ Includes a post-confession Eucharistic liturgy for believers
- Pliny's report to Trajan (~112):
 - ❖ Regular meetings before dawn
 - ❖ Recitation of words addressing Jesus as a god
 - ❖ Communal oaths to live righteously
 - ❖ Followed later by an ordinary meal

Note: not much resemblance to Greek worship



Painting from the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome depicting an early Christian ritual meal

Our earliest complete description of Christian worship comes from Justin Martyr ~150

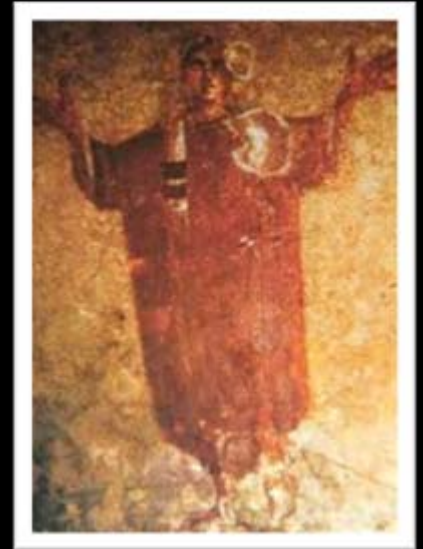
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“then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.

“Then we all rise together to pray, and...

“when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen;

“and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit...” (*First Apology*, 67)



A typical early Christian prayer stance, symbolizing Christian on the cross, also from the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome

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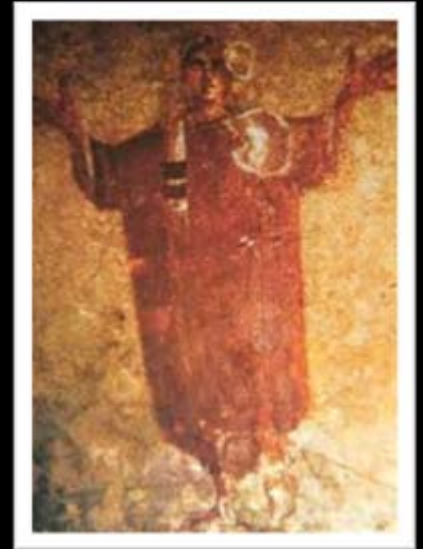
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Liturgical reading

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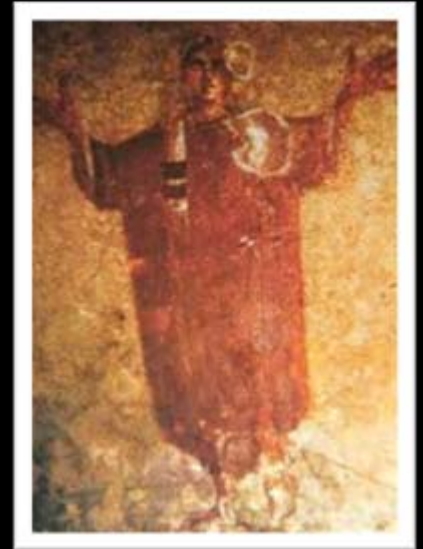
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Possibly a pastoral figure preaching a sermon.

Synagogues also had presidents.



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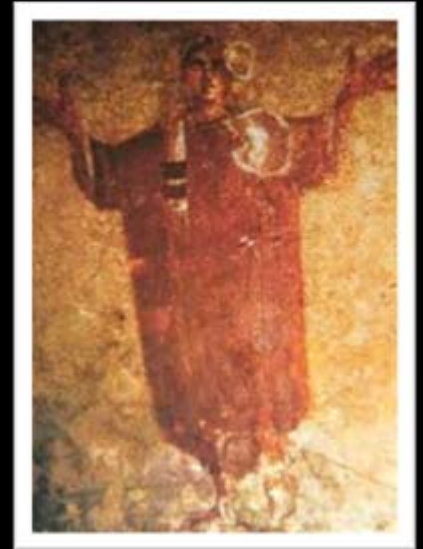
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Apology,

Standing was a sign of joy and boldness, showing the freedom of God's children to come into his presence.

On the first day of the week, this also called to mind the resurrection.

“It was evidently a free prayer.” [CH&B]



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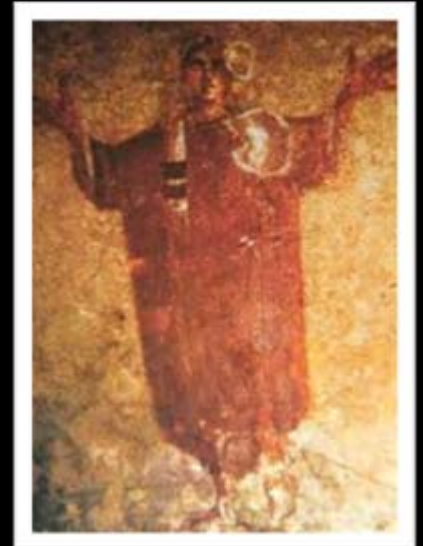
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“and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And there are some who abstain from wine and from flesh, while others abstain from wine only, and others abstain from both. It was not, however, the rule of all Christians to abstain from these things, and yet to receive the Eucharist, but all did so according to their conscience (Justin, *Apology*, 67)



A typical early Christian prayer stance, symbolizing Christian on the cross, also from the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome

The Eucharistic elements are consecrated. The water may be a reference to the common practice of mixing water with wine for drinking. By pointing this out Justin may be countering rumors of excessive drinking.

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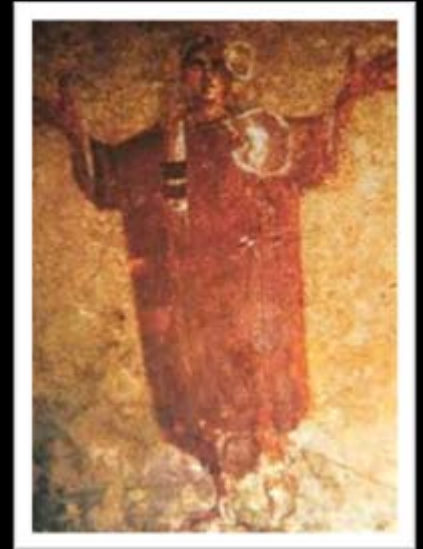
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“and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the bishop. And thou hast well to do, and wilt be glorified in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.” (Justin, *Apology*, 67)



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At several point Justin emphasizes thanksgivings.

“Unlike the bloody offerings of paganism, Christians offered to God the pure spiritual sacrifice of prayer and thanksgivings.” [CH&B]

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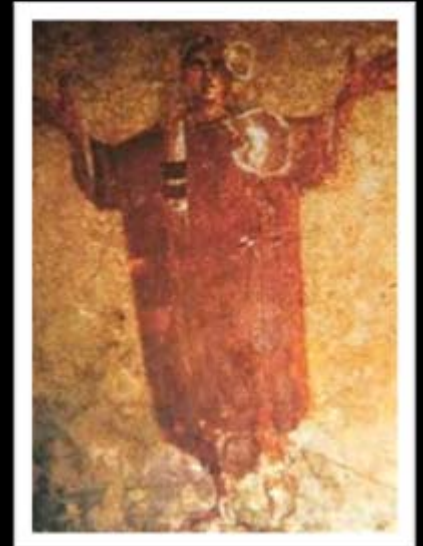
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Justin indicates the collection is distributed by the president to the “orphans and widows, those who are in need on account of sickness or some other cause, those who are in bonds, strangers who are sojourning, and in a word he becomes the protector of all who are in need.”

Since the offering was voluntary, “the congregational contribution, therefore, was unlike the ‘dues’ of the clubs and private associations that were so common in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. It was a freewill gift.” [CH&B]

Note: Other sources indicate the singing of hymns, not mentioned here.

over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. **And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit...** (*First Apology*, 67)



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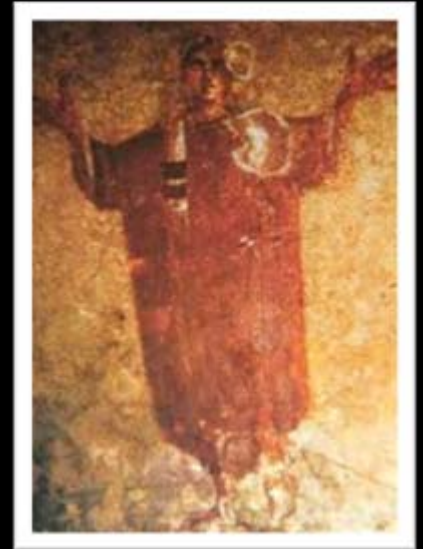
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Q: How would this worship have struck pagans of the day? How would it strike a modern Christian?



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First-century urban life was *crowded*

- “Christianity was an urban movement, and the NT was set down by urbanites” [S]
- Greco-Roman cities were small by our standards
 - ❖ Antioch, the fourth largest city in the empire, and a major center for the early church, had a population of 150,000 at the end of the first century
- They often started as walled cities, and it was expensive to expand the walls
 - ❖ Antioch began as 1 mi², and grew to 1 x 2 mi²
- The population density was high
 - ❖ Antioch: ~200 persons/acre; compare this with modern Chicago: 21/acre, Manhattan: 100/acre, Bombay: 183/acre
- Roman law required at least ~10-foot-wide streets, though many parts of the city only had footpaths
 - ❖ The main street of Antioch, famed throughout the empire, was 30'
- The central section of Rome, rebuilt after Nero's fire, had wider streets, prompting some to complain of less shade from buildings across the street

Most people lived in apartment blocks called *insulae**

- The well-off lived in country houses (*villa*) or spacious urban houses (*domus*)
- In Rome there was only one private house for every ~26 blocks of apartments
- The lowest floor was used for shops and the upper floors for apartments
- The rooms were sparsely furnished by our standards (chair, table, etc.)
- We would have considered these apartments very crowded
 - ❖ Families typically lived in a single room—so, not much privacy
 - ❖ Usually no separate kitchen or bathroom
- Nevertheless, “Those who lived in the apartments did not consider them too small because everything from bathing to entertainment took place outside the home... Most of the things that we do in a bathroom at home the Romans did in public facilities.” [B]
- “To the Romans these sunny and airy rooms, with their perfectly straight walls, provided comfortable and civilized living. The only constant complaint was that the rents were too high” [B]

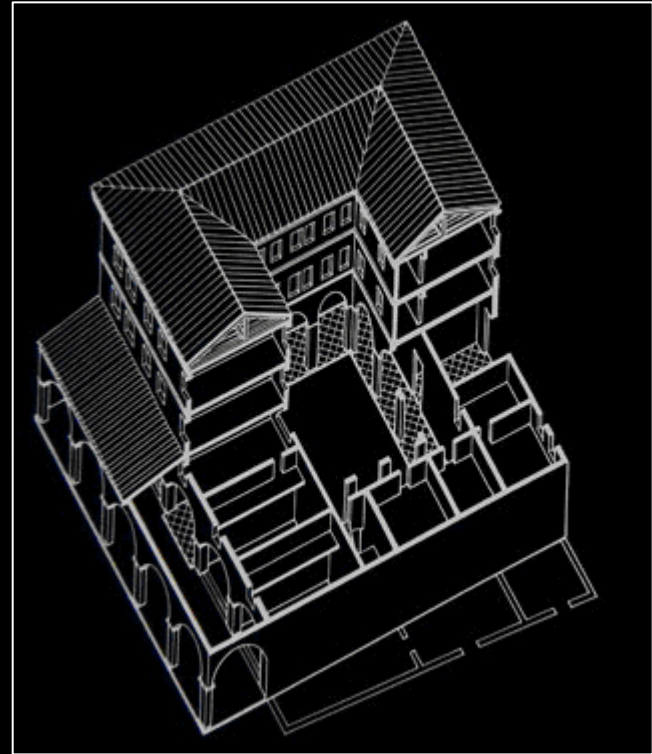
*from the word for “island”

***Insulae* were innovative by the day's standards, but unstable**

- They were usually built with concrete walls, surrounded by brick and plaster or stucco, with tiled roofs
- Romans, inventors of concrete, were excellent architects for their time
- Still, “Rome was constantly filled with the noise of buildings collapsing or being torn down to prevent it; and the tenants of an *insula* lived in constant expectation of it coming down on their heads” [S]
- From Juvenal's *Satires* (no. 3; late 1st or early 2nd cent.):

Here, one neighbor discovers a fire and shouts for water, another neighbor moves out his shabby possessions. The third floor, where you live, is already smoking-but you don't even know! Downstairs there is panic, but you, upstairs, where the gentle pigeons nest, where only thin tiles protect you from the rain, you will be the last to burn.

The remains of the top floors of an *insula* near the Capitolium in Rome, and a typical floor plan



Fun fact: In Roman prisons, as in many modern third-world prisons, the prisoner provides his or her own food. Those prisoners who could afford it were placed under house arrest, as Paul was in Rome. Paul was probably kept in the 3rd floor of an *insula*—the first being shops and the second too expensive [CHB:P]

Or, if this makes it easier to picture, the façade of an *insula*, in Legos



Fun facts: “Simon and Andrew with their wives, their children and also their parents (?) and parents-in-law, lived in an *insulae* (a single-story clustered dwelling) in Capernaum, which they may have owned.

Peter and his brother Andrew, with the Zebedee brothers, were “partners in a fishing cooperative in Capernaum in Galilee.”

In the socio-economic structure of the society of Galilee at the time, Simon was part of the small ‘middle class.’” *

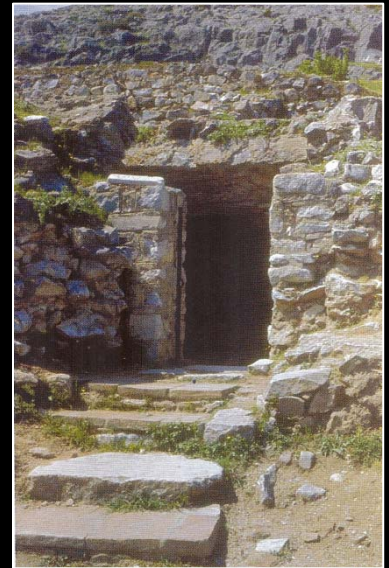
Q: How do you usually picture the context of NT narratives, e.g. in Acts?

As if that weren't enough...

- Roman cities had courts, but no police force
- Unsanitary living conditions, lack of refrigeration, inadequate sewage, and high density of people and animals led to a smelly, diseased environment *
- “It was not until the 20th century that urban mortality was sufficiently reduced that the cities of western Europe and North America could sustain their populations without additional in-migration from rural areas.

If this was true of relatively modern cities, think what must have been the case in places like Rome and Antioch.”
[Stark quoting Wrigley]

Fun fact: Many Roman men of Paul's day curled their hair. Men also applied oil and grease to their hair; it was one way people de-loused themselves. These concoctions were made from such substances as the marrow of deer bones, the fat of bears and sheep, and the excrement of rats.



A jail cell in Philippi similar to the one in which Paul would have been kept. Most jails were dark chambers in which prisoners were held until their trials, often in chains

*And no soap, either! Bathers applied oil then scraped it, and the dirt, off with *strigils*. Urine, because of its ammonia, was often used to clean clothes. (The clothes were then rinsed.) It's no wonder that Pliny advised that “all water is the better for being boiled” [Stark]

“Nasty, brutish and short”

- Mortality rates were high, and those who *didn't* die likely suffered from various chronic health problems and handicaps
 - ❖ This is seen in ancient legal documents, where the parties are commonly identified by distinguishing features, including scars and disfigurements
- Stark estimates, for Antioch, one natural or social catastrophe every fifteen years on average (e.g. famine, earthquake, epidemic, devastating riot, or fire)
- “Any accurate portrait of Antioch in the NT times must depict a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair, and hatred... where the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half of the children died at birth or during infancy, and where most of the children who lived lost at least one parent before reaching majority.” [S]

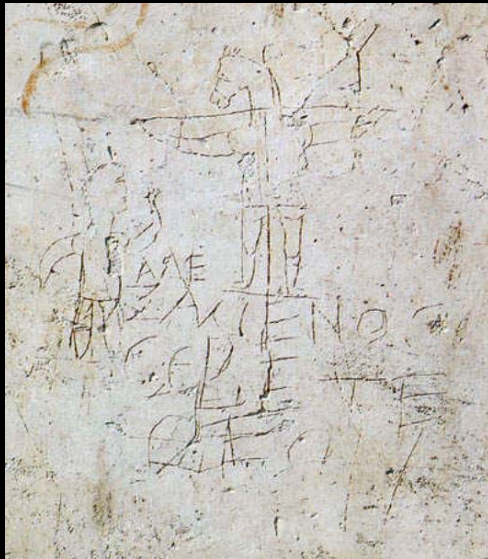


Karl Brullov, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (c. 1830)

Christian scruples inevitably led to conflict

- “Among Gentile Christians, their advocacy of Jesus would characteristically have been accompanied by their refusal to participate in traditional religious practices of the family and the wider social group”—e.g. worshiping deities of city, region, guild, etc.—“providing a further basis for antagonism” [H]
- Refusal to appease local gods would be seen as next to treasonous, even as endangering the welfare of the city, since in the Roman mind “sacrifice keeps the tenuous balance between the human world and the divine realm intact, assures that the vagaries of the divine dissatisfaction will be held in check.” [H]

Q: In what other ways would Christian belief have caused friction and conflict?



Early graffito from Rome, c. 200;
The inscription reads, “Alexamenos
worships his god”
The figure shows a donkey-headed
man being crucified

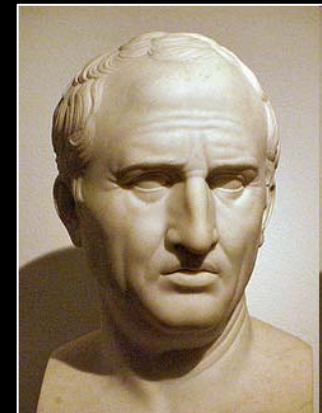
Christians were seen as atheists because of their refusal to worship pagan deities

- Paganism was seen as a virtue central to society:

“In all probability, disappearance of piety toward the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all the virtues... life soon becomes a welter of disorder and confusion”

—Cicero (106-43 BC)

- Religions were accepted because of
 - Long-standing tradition (e.g., certain Bacchic rites were allowed to persist)
 - Their association with a particular homeland (e.g. Egyptian gods were accepted)
- Given its distance from Judaism, *Christianity had neither of these*



Modern copy of a Roman bust of Cicero

Q: What aspects of modern culture make it difficult to be a Christian? How are Christians regarded in our culture? (Answer both for America and any other countries with which you have experience)

Mixed marriages could be a source of conflict

- Paul advises both Christian husbands and wives in mixed marriages, suggesting that such did occur (1 Cor 7:12-16)
- Plutarch's essays of advice to married couples give some insight into the cultural ideals for wives:

A wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals or outlandish superstitions. For with no gods do stealthy and secret rites performed by a woman find any favor. (140 AD)

- Pliny (~110 AD) refers to Christianity as “a perverse and extravagant superstition,” phrasing similar to that used by other critics of Christianity and Judaism



A bust of a young married woman
(c. 30 AD)
Saal der romischen Bildnisse, Germany

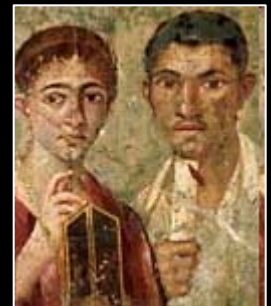
Q: What religious friction have you seen in modern marriages?

Females were valued less than males in ancient Rome and given fewer rights

- Female babies were much more likely to be “exposed” a common practice of discarding in particular locations in the city where, if not adopted, they would die
- A papyrus letter from Hilarion to his pregnant wife Alis (1 BC):

Know that I am still in Alexandria. And do not worry if they all come back and I remain in Alexandria. I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive payment I shall send it up to you. If you are delivered of a child [before I come home], if it is a boy keep it, if a girl discard it. You have sent me word, “Don’t forget me.” How can I forget you? I beg you not to worry.

- Under the Republic, women had no legal rights independent of their husbands *
- Daughters had to have a male “tutor”—first their fathers, then usually husbands
- Under the Empire, a woman had to bear three children to be free from a guardian
- Divorce was easy for men, consisting of little more than sending a wife away because she was disagreeable; women had a much harder time
- Paul’s relative even-handedness in 1 Cor 7 (“likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does”) was at total variance with pagan and Jewish culture

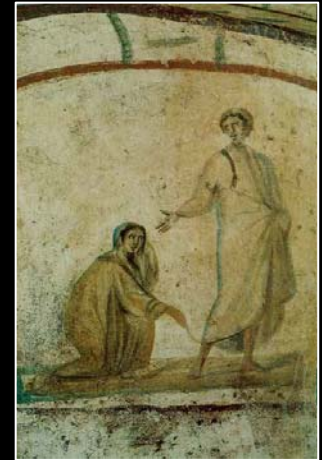


Fresco portrait from Pompeii of magistrate Terentius Neo and his wife

* Widows might have limited rights e.g. in choosing a tutor

Men outnumbered women in ancient Rome, but apparently not in the early church

- It is estimated that there were ~130 males per female in the city of Rome
- In addition to infanticide, abortion was not uncommon
- More often than not, men made the decision to abort
- Abortions were dangerous for women, given medicine at the time
- From a study of inscriptions at Delphi 600 families were reconstructed; of these, only six had raised more than one daughter
- Indirect evidence (archeological and biblical) indicates the fraction of women in the church was much higher
- The early church was not as skewed in gender in part because, as in Judaism, it rejected the practices of exposure and abortion
 - ❖ “[Christians] marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring.”
—Epistle to Diognetus 5:6 (2nd cent, perhaps early)
 - ❖ “you shall not procure abortion, nor commit infanticide...”
—Didache (late 1st or early 2nd cent.)
- As a result, Christian fertility rates were higher [Stark]



Fresco from the catacomb of St. Peter and St. Macellinus in Rome of the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage

Unlike in the surrounding culture, women in the early church were allowed positions of authority

- In the NT women are shown as witnesses to the resurrection, deaconesses, prophets, and even an apostle, Junia (Rom 16)
- Roman governor Pliny's letter regarding interrogations of Christians describes the leaders as two female slaves
- "It is well known that the early church attracted an unusual number of high-status women... [In addition,] there is virtual consensus among historians of the early church that women held positions of honor and authority [in the church]" [Stark, 107-9]
- The use of women in leadership would have seemed strange or worse to their pagan neighbors
 - ❖ Celsus, a 2nd-c. critic, complained the church attracted only "the silly, the mean, and the stupid, with women and children."
- This would also have set the church apart from the synagogues, where women were forbidden to teach or learn, and denied authority



St. Apollonia, patron saint of dentists 3rd century deaconess who was seized by a persecuting mob who knocked her teeth in and burned her to death. Painting by Francisco de Zurbaran

Unlike in the surrounding culture, women in the early church were allowed positions of authority

- In the NT women are shown as witnesses to the resurrection, deaconesses, prophets, and even an apostle, Junia (Rom 16)

Many ancient sources attest to the gender imbalance in the early church. “This was not peculiar to the early Christian church. Greek and Roman writers routinely ‘portrayed women as particularly liable to succumb to the charms of [new religions].’ Thus, for example, as the cult of Isis spread west from Egypt, it attracted mainly a female following, as did the cult of Dionysus.” [Stark]

The same is true today: women (69%) are more likely than men (57%) to believe in God without doubts or reservations, and men are twice as likely to be atheists.

Q: To what do you ascribe the gender imbalance in these two contexts?

Q: Speculate on the effects of this on church life, both then and now



St. Apollonia, patron saint of dentists 3rd century deaconess who was seized by a persecuting mob who knocked her teeth in and burned her to death. Painting by Francisco de Zurbaran

Up to a third of those living in the Empire were slaves obtained from conquest or breeding

- When a senator proposed slaves wear distinctive clothing, he was summarily voted down by those objecting, “For then they would see how few we are” [B]
- A domestic slave could be and was often freed, as a reward for service or perhaps at the end of a master’s life
- Rarely, a slave could buy freedom, by presenting the appropriate price at a temple, symbolically transferring ownership to a god
- Freed slaves often continued in the employ of their former masters, but were then free to marry other citizens
- “The result was that, by the first or second century AD, essentially everyone in Rome was related to a former slave. This is why Roman citizens, originally a fair-skinned people, are represented in portraits from the late Empire as dark-haired and dark-skinned, the ‘Mediterranean’ type one still associates with southern Europe.” [B]



Slaves braiding their mistress' hair
(3rd cent. bas relief)

Q: What effect would a large slave population have had on the early church?

Slaves were in a particularly vulnerable position

- Slaves were seen as mere “bodies” at the complete disposal of their owners
- A master who hurt or killed his or her slave might receive no more than a reprimand, like someone who abused a pet
- The NT gives a clear indication of Christian slaves with both Christian and pagan masters
- Many scholars infer that a significant portion of the church were slaves
- Some slaves—e.g. domestic slaves, probably not those who worked in the mines—had some free time of their own, in addition to some holidays
- But: “Aside from the question of what rights slaves had to make their own religious choices without the approval and consent of their masters, especially if slaves demurred from further participation in the religious rites of the household, this may well have been taken as an offensive and disrespectful stance by their masters/mistresses.” [H]
- Paul taught the “stay in place” principle: a slave (as any believer) should “lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him.” [cf. 1 Cor 7:17-24; Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22-25; Tit 2:9-10]

Persecution came from both official policy and fellow citizens

- Persecution often originated in the general populace rather than official edicts, and was often localized and focused on church leaders and church property
- Response to persecution included martyrdom, flight, and apostasy—often followed by reassertion of faith after the persecution had ceased[†]
- Christians were accused of cannibalism and incest, perhaps because of their “love feasts”
- Acts describes persecution by Jews and by the Roman authorities
- Claudius established an edict in 49 expelling Jews from Rome because they “constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus*” (Suetonius, ~70-160)—perhaps reflecting Jewish-Christian conflict
- In 64, after the fire of Rome, Nero deflected suspicion by accusing Christians
- Tacitus (Annales XV, 44, ~115 AD) describes Christians as a “class hated for their abominations” and guilty of “hatred of the human race”; a “superstition”, like Judaism and Druid-ism
- Peter and Paul are believed to have been martyred in Nero’s persecution ~65

[†]In the third century there were schisms in the church over whether to readmit lapsed believers [CHB]

**Chrestus* is thought by many to be a corruption of *Christus*

The Gospels provide a possible window into social conditions of the early church

- Jesus' words regarding friction and persecution likely reflect the social conditions *during the time the Gospels were written*, in the second half of the first century:
- ❖ “You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them.” (Mk 13:9)
- ❖ “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” (Mk 13:12-13)



*Funeral of a Young Martyr in the Catacombs of Rome, 1847 Jean Victor Schnetz (1787-1870)
Musee des Beaux-Arts, Nantes, France*

Fun fact: Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was martyred ~156. When told to recant, he replied, “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”

Official persecution was periodically harsh

- In ~112 AD, we read of Pliny the Younger, governor of Pontus and Bithynia, responding to complaints against the Christians (quite possibly in part for financial reasons) by requiring suspects to curse Christ and sacrifice to the emperor
- He found a group guilty only of meeting, worshiping, and swearing to live righteous lives
- Those who confessed were executed: “for I held no question that whatever it was that they admitted, in any case obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be punished”
- Christians were not the only group to suffer persecution:

“Pliny knew that on previous occasions Roman officials had had to deal with troublesome foreign religious groups—for example, the Druids, the Bacchae, the Jews. Livy, the Roman historian, whose writings Pliny knew, recounts a particularly well-known case early in the second century BCE, when the Roman senate suppressed the spread of Bacchic rituals in Italy... Some of the things reported by Livy—for instance, the mingling of males with females, the abandonment of modesty, the indiscriminate defilement of women—appear in reports about the Christians.” *

Early Christianity faced numerous cultural challenges

- Roman social life was highly religious, but Christianity did not fall on their spectrum of acceptable belief
- Christian belief was a barrier to normal social interactions
- Christianity was an urban movement in a day when cities were cramped and dangerous
- Christians faced unofficial and occasional official persecution of varying degrees

Q: What aspects of the first-century Roman context helped the growth of Christianity? Which aspects hindered it?

“But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.”

—1 Cor 16:8-9



Cult statue from Ephesus called 'Beautiful Artemis'. The temple in Ephesus to fertility goddess Artemis (worshipped by Romans as Diana) was four times the size of the Athens Parthenon and was considered one of the seven wonders of the world.

Useful resources

- CHB: *Christian History & Biography*, Issue 27, “**Persecution in the Early Church**”
- CHB:P: *Christian History & Biography*, Issue 47, “**The Apostle Paul & His Times**”
- RS: Rodney Stark, ***The Rise of Christianity***
- LH: Larry Hurtado, ***At the Origin of Christian Worship***
- F. F. Bruce, ***New Testament History***
- Paul Barnett, ***Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity***
- Constance Bouchard, ***Life and Society in the West: Antiquity and the Middle Ages***
- Robert Wilken, ***The Christians as the Romans Saw Them***
- Michael Green, ***Evangelism in the Early Church***
- C. K Barrett, ed., ***The New Testament Background***
- Stephen Benko, “**Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries AD**”, *ANRW*, Vol. II.23.2: 1055-1118 (1980)

(Not all of these resources were used in this presentation)

The following slides are under construction...

Extra topic: Education

...

- The goal of education was to mold character and conduct



A carving of a Roman school scene. The bearded teacher was likely a slave