



## Early Church History

During the first six decades of the first century CE, Judaism was composed of about two dozen competing factions: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, followers of John the Baptist, followers of Jesus of Nazareth and followers of other charismatic leaders. All followed common Jewish practices, such as observing dietary restrictions, worshiping at the Jerusalem temple, sacrificing animals and observing the weekly Sabbath.

The triumph of Christianity is actually a very remarkable historical phenomenon. We begin with a small group from the backwaters of the Roman Empire and after two, three centuries go by, lo and behold that same group and its descendants have somehow taken over the Roman Empire and have become the only tolerated religion, of the Roman Empire by the end of the 4th century. That is a truly remarkable development.

Let's identify the various stages on the path of Christianity to its ultimate victory. In its first stage, Christianity begins not as a religion, it begins rather as the movement of people around a single charismatic teacher, Jesus, who attracted a crowd of disciples who followed him and his various wanderings as he did his healings and teachings. Now this man named Jesus winds up in Jerusalem where he is executed by the authorities, probably as a trouble maker because he posed a threat to the social order.

This is how Christianity began. But it very rapidly turns into something different. What began as a kind of ratter-tag assembly of followers of a holy man turns into what we might call a Jewish sect, a group of Jews which now has interpreted the life, teachings and death of its holy man somehow as having cosmic significance, as having meaning for all time, not just for the specific moment, but somehow affecting God's relationship with the Jews and ultimately with the whole world. This Jewish sect then becomes the next stage in the development of Christianity.

After that, the next stage may be represented by Paul, who then takes this



Mosaic of Christ enthroned

Jewish sect, this Jewish philosophy and now says that these teachings are such that the entire map of the world needs to be redrawn, so that we now no longer have the simple dichotomy of Jews and gentiles, that we no longer simply have a Jewish sect arguing with other Jewish sects about interpretations of law and theology. We now have, Paul says, a new map of the world. Our teachings have within them the secret to understanding the new cosmic order. So that the old distinctions between Jews and gentiles are now obliterated. They have been supplanted by a new and truer and more beautiful map in which we have a new Israel that will embrace both Jews and gentiles, all those who now accept the new covenant and the new faith. Paul, who in his teachings has the beginnings of what we might call the breaking out of Christianity from the Jewish social setting. This is revolutionary in its day.

The revolution, of course, takes place gradually over the next several decades well into the 2nd century . . . It doesn't happen everywhere all at once, in the same way. It's a complex, protracted process. And we must allow for variety; the place of Christianity, let's say in the year 100 CE, may not be the same in Egypt as it is in Judah. It may not be the same in Rome as it is in Asia Minor. We have to ask ourselves constantly - How did the Christians see themselves thru this progression? How did the Jews see the Christians? How did the gentiles see the Christians? How did each of these groups understand the other and how they fit into the larger society? And the answers may not be the same. There's no guarantee that the Christians and the Jews necessarily looked at each other in the same way at any given moment. We have to allow for a wide variety of opinions. But the tendency, nonetheless, I believe is very clear: Christianity is becoming less "Jewish" and is turning into something new and different.

For some Christians, this never happens. They can't bring themselves to say that God has thoroughly redrawn the map of the cosmos and has taken them out of the Jewish world and pushed them out into this stage of history. Other Christians, of course, disagree with Paul on exactly how to read this new map and exactly what it means, and most importantly, where do the Jews fit in now, those Jews who are "being left behind." But, in any case, the Christian church itself was now

emerging as a new, independent group by the middle of the 2nd century . . . independent from Judaism.

The second century of our era was the age of definition, how to define Christianity. Now that it realized it no longer Judaism, it had to figure out, well then, what is it exactly? What is Christianity? What makes it not Judaism, what makes it not Jewish? How is it able to somehow at the same time hold on to the Jewish Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, and still not be Judaism, still not be Jewish? This was one of the major questions confronting Christian thinkers, writers and church leaders in the second century. This was the great age of Christian diversity, sects, schools, heresies of all kinds, confronting Christian thinkers and it was only in the second century that we begin to see the emergence of what we might call an orthodoxy, or something that might simply be called "Christianity" in a kind of uniform body of doctrines and text, that is to say, the New Testament. The New Testament as a collection of texts is a product of the second century, as the church figured out which books are sacred, which books are authoritative and which ones are not . . . in fact which books should be excluded.

By the third century of our era, we have this something called Christianity with its own sacred books, its own rituals, its own ideas and at the same time the age of confrontation with the Roman Empire. The third century, of course, is the great age of persecutions, where the Roman Empire now wakes up and realizes that there is something new and from their perspective, sinister, afoot in new groups that are threatening the social order and ultimately the political order of the Empire. And the Roman Empire was correct. The Romans correctly understood that the victory of Christianity would mean the end of the Roman Empire, the end of the classical world as they knew it. As believers, we often think of persecution, of course, in a Christian perspective. We see it as heroic martyrs confronting the might of Rome, which is true. And the martyrs indeed present a wonderful demonstration of Christian faith. By the same token, we must realize that the Roman Empire was doing what all bureaucracies do. It was trying to protect itself, trying to perpetuate itself.

During this period the Romans tried to eliminate Christianity but failed. By the fourth century Christianity becomes the state preferred religion and by the end of the fourth century it is illegal to do any form of public worship other than Christianity in the entire Roman Empire. There is a great mystery in how this happened -- how such an extraordinary reversal, that began with Jesus who is executed by the Romans as a public criminal, as a threat to the social order, and somehow we wind up three centuries later with Jesus being hailed as a God, as part of the one, true God who is the God of the new Christian Roman Empire. This miraculous progress, a remarkable development in the course of three centuries. However, Christianity by the fourth century is not the same as the Christianity that we see in the first or even the second. One of the big changes occur with Emperor Constantine's conversion.

## CONSTANTINE'S CONVERSION

One of the most surprising Christian heroes in this progression is Constantine. He is, first of all, a successful general. He is also the son of a successful general and at the head of the army at the West of the Empire. And he's fighting another successful general in the East, struggling for who is going to be at the top of the heap of the very higher echelons of Roman government. What happens is that Constantine has a vision. "Luckily" for the Church, there's a bishop nearby to interpret what the vision means. Immediately after the interpretation, Constantine becomes a patron of one particular branch of the church. It happens to be the branch of the church that has the Old Testament as well as the New Testament as part of its canon. Which means that since this branch of Christianity includes the story about historical Israel as part of its own redemptive history, it has an entire language for articulating the relationship of government and piety. It has the model of King David. It has the model of the kings of Israel. And it's with this governmental model that the bishop explains the vision to Constantine. A model that Constantine can readily identify with.

In a sense Constantine saw himself as the embodiment of the righteous king in his vision. And once he consolidates his power by conquering, not only the West, but also the Greek East, he assumes that role. Incidentally the East is where a lot more Christians are concentrated in the cities, a real social power of the culture at the time. It puts him in the amazing position of having a theology of government that he can use to consolidate his own secular power. But it also works both ways. The bishops now have basically federal funding to have sponsored committee meetings so they can try to iron out creeds and get everybody to sign up.

Most Eastern Christian churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, consider Constantine a saint. In the East he is sometimes called "isapostolos" or the "13th apostle"

## CONSTANTINE'S IMPERIAL CHRISTIANITY

One of the first things Constantine does, as emperor, is start persecuting other Christians. The Gnostic Christians are targeted . . . and other dualist Christians. Christians who don't have the Old Testament as part of their doctrine are targeted. The list of enemies goes on and on. There's a kind of internal purge of the church as one emperor ruling one empire tries to have this single church as part of the religious musculature of his vision of a renewed Rome. The church merging with the world? Is this possible? It is with this theological vision in mind that Constantine not only helps the bishops to iron out a unitary policy of what a true Christian believes, but he also, interestingly, turns his attention to Jerusalem and with his mother's help, rebuilds Jerusalem. What Constantine does is take the city, which



was something of a backwater area and he begins to build beautiful basilicas and architecturally ambitious projects. The sacred space of the Temple Mount is abandoned. It's not reclaimable. Essentially what he does is religiously relocate the center of gravity of the city around the places where Christ had suffered and where he had been buried. So that in the great basilicas that he built, Constantine has a new Jerusalem, that's splendid and beautiful . . . his reputation as an imperial architect resonates with great figures in biblical history like David and Solomon. In a sense, Constantine becomes a non-apocalyptic Messiah for the church.

The bishops are terribly grateful for this kind of imperial attention. But the lines of power are unambiguous. Constantine is absolutely the source of authority. And there's no question about that. But the bishops are able to take advantage of Constantine's mood and his curious intellectual interest in things like Christology and the Trinity and Church organization. They're able to have bibles copied at public expense. They are finally able to have public Christian architecture and big basilicas. So there's a comfortable symbiotic relationship between the empire and the church, one that, in a sense, is what defines the cultural powerhouse of Europe and the West . . . which does not, in anyway, resemble the original Christian Church of Jesus Christ.

#### **A CHRISTIAN CAESAR**

There's this scripture in the gospel about rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. Jesus said that in the context of a pagan Caesar. Now that Caesar is a "so-called" Christian, things seem to line up differently. Jesus clearly saw a separation of Church and State. So what was happening with Constantine's attempt to merge the two and the church's falling in line with the merger.

#### **Who is Eusebius?**

Eusebius was the bishop of Caesarea in Palestine in the 4th century, and he played a very active role in church politics at the time. He was at the Council of Nicea, which was the first major ecumenical council. And he had contact with the Emperor Constantine. So he was a very prominent figure. He wrote several things during his long and active lifetime including a history of the martyrs of Palestine, a collection of prophetic texts. But the most interesting work is his ecclesiastical history, which describes the development of the church down through his own period and then the persecutions which took place in the first decade of the fourth century. And finally the vindication of the church with the accession of Constantine and his rise to supreme power.

Eusebius clearly has an axe to grind and that axe has to do with the the status of Christians and their relationship with imperial authorities. He rebukes any Christian group who do not sign onto the new Roman order.



Constantine, whom Eusebius describes as a magnificent ruler endowed by God with wisdom, insight and a divine mission to vindicate the church and to bring the church and the state into unity. And so Constantine is viewed by Eusebius as a figure of God's will in human history. In Eusebius, Constantine had a very effective campaign manager.

### **And how does Eusebius portray Constantine?**

Constantine would have been portrayed by Eusebius in magnificent terms. And you have to understand that Constantine, when Eusebius portrays him, is someone who had just achieved total domination over the whole of the Roman Empire. And he was a figure of commanding stature, of commanding power and authority, a figure who by the year 324 had no rivals within the Roman world. And so clothed in imperial garments and radiating the splendor of the sun, he appears in the portraits of Eusebius in some ways as a quasi-divine figure . . . It appears that Eusebius blurred the line between God and this manmade ruler.

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## **COUNCIL OF NICEA**

### **What exactly was the Council of Nicea?**

The Council of Nicea, which took place in 325, was a response to a crisis that developed in the church over the teachings of a priest, of the church in Alexandria. His teachings suggested that Jesus was not fully divine, that Jesus was certainly a supernatural figure of some sort, but was not God in the fullest sense. His opponents included a fellow who came to be bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, and the folk on that side of the divide insisted that Jesus was fully divine. The Council of Nicea was called to try to mediate that dispute, and the Council came down on the side of the full divinity of Jesus. It all boils down to one iota of difference. The debates in the 4th century about the status of Jesus have to do with the Greek word that exemplifies the problem. One party said that Jesus was homo usias with the father, that is of the same being or substance as the father. The other party, the Arian party, argued that Jesus was homoi usias with the father, inserting a single letter "i" into that word. So the difference between being the same and being similar to was the heart of the debate. And the Council of Nicea resolved that the proper teaching was that Jesus was of the same being as the father. The meeting in Nicea represented a major turning point in Christian history.

The earliest draft of the creed known to us today and the one which was agreed upon at the council is as follows:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of all things, visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father; he is begotten, that is to say, he is of the substance of God, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten and not made, being of one

substance with the Father; by whom all things, both in heaven and on earth, were made. Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and took our nature, and became man; he suffered and rose again the third day; he ascended into heaven, and will come to judge the living and the dead. And we believe in the Holy Ghost. The holy catholic and apostolical church condemns all those who say that there was a period in which the Son of God did not exist; that before he was begotten, he had no existence; that he was called out of nothing into being; that he is of a different substance from the Father; and that he is susceptible of variation or of change.

Thus an entirely new theology would be developed out of the Nicene Creed— a theology far removed from the original doctrines of Jesus and his apostles. The new theology evolved from the Nicene formula promoted a passivity on the part of the average Christian. According to the creed, Jesus is God and he has already accomplished the salvation of every believer. The believer need only accept the creed, partake of the sacraments, obey the bishops and the decisions of the councils in order to be saved. He need not go through his own crucifixion and resurrection as Apostle Paul taught and demonstrated. He need not become one with the Father as the Christian-Gnostic taught. The Nicene Creed prepared the way for the ultimate abdication by the faithful of their own nature as sons of God— that sonship that Arius and his followers were attempting to uphold in vain. The Nicene Creed prepared the soil into which was planted the new doctrine of original sin by Augustine in the following century, thus contributing to the final debasement of humanity.

### **Who called the Council of Nicea?**

The Emperor Constantine was the moving force in the Council and he, in effect, called it in order to solve this dispute. He did so because at that time he had just completed his consolidation of authority over the whole of the Roman Empire. Up until 324, he had ruled only half of the Roman Empire. And he wanted to have uniformity of belief, or at least no major disputes within the church under his rule. And so he was dismayed to hear of this controversy that had been raging in Alexandria for several years before his assumption of total imperial control. And in order to dampen that controversy he called the Council.

#### **IMPLICATIONS OF CONSTANTINE'S CONVERSION**



Bishops holding books  
(catacomb painting)

### **Did Constantine confer real benefits on the Christian church?**

The benefits of imperial patronage were enormous. There are a lot of questions about the sincerity of his conversion experience, since he still seems to carry on pretty much like a pagan, even after the vision on the Milvian Bridge. To Christians of that

day thought what was most important is that Constantine signaled a kind of détente (cease fire) that was reached between the church as a force to be reckoned within imperial society and the Roman state . . . Constantine is a historical point man with respect to the relationship of the Roman state to the growing Christian movement as an institutional force in society.

### **What benefits does he confer, practically?**

There's an imperial underwriting of pilgrimage and pilgrimage sites, and so a lot of money goes to refurbishing those pilgrimage sites that exist and making them bigger and even grander attractions. Constantine also created pilgrimage sites where none existed previously . . . This sends a kind of cultural shockwave to the entire society. Now, pilgrimage is a very important activity among Roman elites and others who now identify themselves as Christians - to go to the holy places and see the holy things. Christianity becomes another kind of institutional force after this detente, so to speak . . .

From the beginning of the Jesus movement, there was always the problem of negotiating the proper relationship between the members of the movement, who owed their allegiance to a different Lord (Jesus) and the powers of the state - the state which, incidentally, killed Jesus. And the story of this coin business that keeps coming up . . . "Shall we pay tribute to Caesar?" and Jesus says, "Well, show me a coin. Whose face is on it? Caesar's. We'll render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and render unto God that which is God's." This is Jesus' famous non-answer to the question of that relationship between the Jesus movement and the powers of the state. In early Byzantine political ideology the thought is that both could peacefully co-exist. Again, the question remains . . . is a co-existence what Jesus advocated?

### **How complete and how sincere was Constantine's conversion?**

Constantine continued to behave like a pagan well after his so-called conversion. It didn't stop him from doing all of the kinds of unsavory things that Roman emperors did. But again, I think from an institutional perspective, the change that was inaugurated by, let's say, the re-orientation of his personal commitments . . . signaled the reconfiguration of relationship between institutions in the late Roman Empire. When we go farther than that, we go to Eusebius and other apologists for Constantine and we know what they really wanted to do. They wanted to put his best face forward even if they had to put a lot of makeup on it. We understand Eusebius' motivations. . . unity at any cost.

Some bishops, blinded by the splendor of the court, even went so far as to laud the emperor as an angel of God, as a sacred being, and to prophesy that he would, like the Son of God, reign in heaven. It has been asserted that Constantine favored Christianity merely for political motives and has been regarded only as an enlightened despot who made use of religion only to



advance his policy. Where the policy of the State required, he could be cruel. Even after his conversion he caused the execution of his brother-in-law Licinius, and of the latter's son, as well as of Crispus his own son by his first marriage, and of his wife Fausta.

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#### CONSTANTINE'S CONVERSION

Constantine's conversion to Christianity, I think, has to be understood in a particular way. And that is, I don't think we can understand Constantine as converting to Christianity as an exclusive religion. Clearly he covered his bases. I think the way we would put it in contemporary terms is -- it's another insurance policy one takes out. And Constantine was a consummate pragmatist and politician. And I think he gauged well the upsurge in interest and support Christianity was receiving and so played up to that very nicely and exported it in his own rule. Because it's clear that after he converted to Christianity he was still paying attention to other deities. We know this from his poems and we know it from other dedications as well. But for whatever motives, Constantine was a remarkable supporter of Christianity. He legitimized it as a protected religion of the empire. He patronized it in lavish ways. The rule of Caesar now had become legitimized and undergirded by the rule of God, and that is a momentous turning point in the history of the early church.

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#### AN IMPERIAL JESUS

The transformation of Christianity over the first 300 years of its existence is really a profound one. What started out as a Messianic political rebel group, by the time of the conversion of Constantine becomes the official religion of the Roman Empire. And even then, that's not a simple transformation. It would take another hundred years before most of the Roman world really converted to Christianity. But still, with the conversion of Constantine, it's a very significant change and the change is one we can see in several stages. What is originally a movement oppressed by Caesar becomes its competitor, eventually becomes a flourishing culture lead by Jesus Christ by the time we get to the late first and early second century. Then with the conversion of Constantine, it becomes an imperial religion. At this point, Jesus has been transformed into the Lord Christ of Heaven and Constantine, the emperor, ruled in his name on earth.

The imperialization of Christianity can be seen in some of the monuments of Rome itself where imperial ideology and symbolism, the trappings of imperial grandeur, are brought into and overlaid onto the Christian tradition itself. This is probably seen as well as anywhere else in the apse mosaic in the Church of Santa Podenziana at Rome. Here, we have what looks at first to be a very traditional scene from the gospels: Jesus is seated in the middle of his apostles flanked along either side of him. It looks very much like a kind of Last Supper scene, and yet you notice that there are two women seated behind, and they look

like very noble Roman women. It's probably the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, also flanking the apostles. But then you look closely and you realize that this Jesus looks differently from what we had seen previously in the iconographic tradition of, say, the catacombs. Jesus is in a very elaborate, expensive toga, seated enthroned in an imperial chair. This Jesus looks like the emperor himself, and here he sits enthroned in front of a very elaborate cityscape behind. And it's not the city of Rome, it's the new imperial city of Jerusalem. Behind him, we see Constantine's Church of the Holy Sepulchre that had only recently been completed in Jerusalem itself, and behind is the rest of the new city of Jerusalem, rebuilt for the first time after it had been destroyed in the first revolt. So, Constantine's imperial patronage of the church is reflected in a variety of ways in the rebuilding of Jerusalem, in the establishment of Christian monuments and in one more way . . . in the presentation of Jesus and his disciples. Now they look like the Roman aristocracy; they are a part of the mainstream of Roman society. They had created an imperial Jesus.