



A Brief Walk through Christian History

Discover the People,
Movements, and Ideas That
Transformed Our World

Justin Gatlin

THOM S. RAINER, SERIES EDITOR

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A Brief Walk through Christian History: Discover the People, Movements, and Ideas That Transformed Our World

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Preface

WHILE THE FIRST CENTURY of our era was still young and the Roman Empire still strong, the brief ministry of Jesus of Nazareth ended with the sealing of his corpse in a cave—crushing his followers' dreams of a conquering Messiah.

Then something incredible happened. According to Jesus' closest followers, he rose from the dead, returned to Jerusalem for a period of weeks to teach them, and then ascended into heaven, leaving them with a message and a mission:

I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.¹

The resurrection of Jesus turned his bloody murder at Calvary from Rome's seeming triumph into the victory of God over the power of sin and death. The commission he left to his followers

would come to define their identity—and that of all subsequent believers as well.

There are many ways to organize a study of Christian history. We could trace the development of doctrines, examine the interaction between believers and the broader society, or recount the biographies of noteworthy men and women whose lives continue to influence our thoughts and actions today. Those are all valid approaches, and I will use them all at points in this book. But I believe the most organic, most helpful way to think about the story of the church is to view it in the context of the instructions Jesus gave before he ascended to heaven.

This is the story of God’s children taking light into the darkness—sometimes well, often poorly—declaring that the forces of evil may look powerful in the night, but joy comes with the morning.

With that in mind, each chapter will cover a historical period and reflect on it in three sections. First, we will see how Christians in that era attempted to “go.” What were their approaches to evangelism and missions? How did Christianity spread or shift during that period? Second, reflecting on the commandment to baptize, we will examine how the boundaries of the faith were set during that period. What defined a Christian? Who was “in” or “out”? How did church governance reflect those ideas? Finally, we will look at doctrine and practice during each era, as followers of Jesus were taught to obey what he had commanded. What doctrines were clarified or disputed? What did worship look like?

Apart from the chapters on the Empire period (beginning with the conversion of Constantine) and the Reformation—which are understandably longer—the other chapters are roughly the same length. The one exception is the chapter on the twentieth century, in which I cover events that may eventually prove to be blips on

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the historical radar, but are still important for those of us living in their aftermath.

My prayer is that this structure will make the applicability of history to modern life as clear as possible. We have the same responsibility and face similar challenges as those who have gone before us. May we continue to make disciples, knowing that Jesus is with us still—even to the end of the age.

The Setting of Christian History (333 BC–AD 30)

MANY BOOKS ON THE SETTING of the New Testament reference Galatians 4:4: “When the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law.”¹ Whether the early Christians realized it or not, God had prepared the world for the rapid explosion of the gospel. The common use of the Greek language, the philosophical milieu of the Roman era, the relative stability of the *Pax Romana*, and the Jewish diaspora all created an environment ripe for transformation.

The Hellenistic Period (333–320 BC)

In late 2011, three separate wildfires in Central Texas merged into one gigantic conflagration. The resulting blaze killed four people and caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damage.² Firefighters worked bravely for more than a month to bring the

fires under control and another four weeks to extinguish them completely. Even today, more than a decade later, visitors to the Lost Pines Forest can see obvious marks of the devastation. The fire spread rapidly and uncontrollably for a short amount of time, stopped suddenly, and permanently transformed everything it touched. I can think of no better metaphor for the career of Alexander III of Macedon (356–323 BC), commonly known as Alexander the Great.

Many ancient kings were called “the Great” by their admirers, but Alexander is one who earned the title. Though he died suddenly of a fever at the age of thirty-two, during his brief lifetime he conquered Greece and pushed his empire as far as modern-day Pakistan. The empire did not last long without him, but the aftereffects far outlived his reign. It is impossible to understand the history of the Mediterranean without recognizing the transformation of the language, culture, and politics of the region under Alexander.

Though the Greek language and culture had already spread east before the time of Alexander, his rule accelerated and intensified this movement. Having been tutored personally by Aristotle, Alexander was saturated in Greek culture, but his primary goal was conquest; spreading the culture was a means, not an end. As regions were conquered, their gods were assimilated with the Greek gods and their ideas adopted into the broader philosophy. This amalgamation is known as *Hellenism*. The cultural changes ranged across the spectrum, leading to the adoption of Greek thought, dress, and culture to varying degrees in different geographic areas and levels of society. For the Jews in Palestine, and later the Christians across southern Europe and Asia Minor, religious syncretism was unacceptable. They worshiped one God, and he could not be identified with Zeus any more than he had been with Ra in Egypt.³

The Ptolemaic (320-198 BC) and Seleucid (198-167 BC) Periods

When Alexander died, his empire was divided between several of his top generals. One of these was Ptolemy (pronounced with a silent *P*), who took control of Egypt, setting up his capital in Alexandria. He also deposed the governor of Palestine in 320 BC. Josephus (an important Jewish historian who lived from AD 37–100) describes the conquest:

[Ptolemy] seized Jerusalem by resorting to cunning and deceit. For he entered the city on the Sabbath as if to sacrifice, and, as the Jews did not oppose him—for they did not suspect any hostile act—and, because of their lack of suspicion and the nature of the day, were enjoying idleness and ease, he became master of the city without difficulty and ruled it harshly.⁴

After the initial invasion, Ptolemy seems to have softened his approach.

This cultural transformation was sufficiently successful that during the reign of his son, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, the Old Testament was translated for a Jewish culture now more comfortable with Greek than with their ancestral Hebrew. The Septuagint (abbreviated LXX) is an uneven translation, but it was often—though not exclusively—quoted by the New Testament authors and early church fathers. As the original preface to the King James Version puts it, “The translation of the Seventy [Interpreters] dissenteth from the Original in many places, neither doth it come near it, for perspicuity, gravity, majesty; yet which of the Apostles did condemn it? Condemn it? Nay, they used it.”⁵

Ptolemy's dynasty continued to reign until Egypt fell to Rome with the death of Cleopatra in 30 BC, but their control over Palestine had ended in 198 BC when Antiochus III of Syria defeated Ptolemy V. Not all Israelites were pleased with the change. The high priest (Onias III) supported the Egyptians, while the wealthy Tobiads supported Syria. At first, the Oniads were able to maintain their power, but Antiochus IV (the self-proclaimed Epiphanes, who said he was the manifestation of Zeus) was much more aggressive and egotistical. He set up Onias's brother, Jason, as a puppet high priest who would funnel the riches of the Temple to Antiochus.

The Maccabean/Hasmonean Period (167-63 BC)

In 167 BC, Antiochus determined to bring the Jewish people into submission by sending an emissary to a village about ten miles north of Jerusalem to enforce sacrifices to the Roman gods. An elderly priest named Mattathias resisted both bribes and threats, personally killed a Jew who attempted to comply, killed the king's emissary, and tore down the altar (1 Maccabees 2:17-26). When he fled with his five sons, a group of the faithful (called Hasideans or "pious ones") came to him and revolted against the Syrians.

Mattathias did not live long enough to see the full fruit of his faithfulness, but his son Judas—nicknamed Maccabeus, or "the Hammer"—was a skilled military commander. Under his leadership, the Maccabees successfully obtained religious freedom in 164 BC, and Judas was able to rededicate the Temple (an achievement still celebrated today at Hanukkah).

Unfortunately, pure motives sometimes go sour. After Judas was killed in battle while still striving for Israelite independence, his brothers proved to be more pragmatic than pious. Jonathan was an effective commander but accepted an appointment as high priest as part of the political machinations of Antiochus's

successors. After Jonathan's death, Simon was able to secure Jewish independence in 142 BC, and he also accepted the office of hereditary high priest. Operating as both priest and king, Simon consolidated power just as King Saul had centuries before.

Simon's descendants, called the Hasmoneans, drifted further and further from their Hasidean roots, becoming increasingly Hellenized. The Hasideans eventually evolved into the group we know as the Pharisees, and the wealthy and powerful priestly families evolved into the Sadducees. For Christians, the most famous Hasmoneans were the people of the Herodian dynasty, whose wickedness and corruption were illustrative of the group.

The Roman Period (63 BC-AD 30)

From 264–146 BC, Rome was occupied by Carthage, her chief rival in the Punic Wars. Though initially Carthage had naval superiority, the Romans proved incredibly adaptive in duplicating the enemy's techniques and were ultimately triumphant.⁶ This adaptability marked Rome's overall approach, whether it was adopting local deities into their pantheon or leaving local governments in place under Roman domination. Rome's initial forays into Asia Minor were designed to bring peace and stability to a region still fractured by Alexander's successors, but power once taken is rarely surrendered.

After the Maccabean revolt, Israel enjoyed freedom for the first time in centuries. But by 63 BC, the Romans were no longer distracted by other conflicts, and their general Pompey conquered Palestine. The Romans allowed peaceful provinces to exercise local rule within their "law of the province," and each region maintained its distinctive character.⁷ Rebellious Palestine was accorded fewer privileges.

Gradually, Julius Caesar coalesced power around himself and became emperor in all but name. Following the assassination of

Julius and the Liberators' Civil War, his nephew Octavian became the first formal emperor of Rome in 27 BC. Octavian took the name Augustus, "the majestic one," declared that Julius was a god, and identified himself as the son of god.

After subduing his internal rivals, and with no important external enemies left, Augustus was the first leader to enjoy the *Pax Romana* (the peace of Rome), which would endure for about two centuries. In AD 14, Augustus's son Tiberius took the throne and reigned during the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. These pieces set the scene for the story of the Christian movement. Wicked rulers at every level, a widespread regional empire, a virtually universal language, and a remarkable peace all prepared the way for the message of Jesus to turn everything upside down.

Evangelism and Expansion

The spread of the Greek language and Hellenistic culture defined the era, creating a common intellectual milieu and facilitating international communication. Greek was the language of both the academy and the marketplace, and the translation of the Old Testament into Greek made the Hebrew Scriptures accessible to outsiders, preparing a newly interconnected world for the preaching of the apostles. A common language was as important in the first century as Gutenberg's printing press was in the fifteenth or the internet is in the twenty-first.

The Old Testament had what is often called a centripetal approach to bringing people to God.⁸ Instead of Israel going out to the nations, the nations were expected to be drawn to the glory and blessings of God's chosen people. Gentiles who committed themselves to the Law were circumcised, were given a ritual bath, and performed certain sacrifices were called proselytes (Acts 2:10-11, *ESV*).

Boundaries of the Community

In the eyes of the governing authorities, there were Romans and there were barbarians. Yet even within Roman society there were several important layers. At the bottom were the slaves, comprising maybe 20 to 40 percent of the population of Rome.⁹ Above them were the freemen, former slaves who had obtained emancipation. At the top were full citizens, who themselves fell into two classes, only the highest of whom had the right to vote or hold office. These strata created significant boundaries between classes of people, which could only be overcome by extraordinary circumstances, such as wealth (see Acts 22:28, for example) or patronage from the emperor.

In Israel, the basic distinction was between Jew and Gentile. The rabbis forbade a Gentile woman from nursing a Hebrew child, and it was also forbidden to teach a Gentile boy a craft that would give him a livelihood.¹⁰ During the Ptolemaic period, the rulers took Jews and Samaritans to Egypt and trained them in Hellenistic culture. To a lesser extent, those remaining in Palestine were Hellenized by trade and by the Greek cities in their midst. In backlash to this, other Jews (particularly in the area near Jerusalem) doubled down on their commitment to traditional Hebrew culture.

Discipleship

For the Greeks and their successors, people were disciplined primarily through trade and economic might. Jewish boys who wanted the honor of participating in Greek athletic competitions would undergo painful procedures to hide their circumcision, and those who wanted wealth and influence conformed to Roman culture. Within Israel, one of the important developments during this period was the creation of the synagogue. Although the specifics

are open to debate, synagogues were an important part of community life that gradually emerged around 300 BC. There the Torah could be read, people could be taught, and disputes could be settled.¹¹ At the same time, the oral law took on a central place in the lives of the Pharisees, passed on from the rabbi to their students.