

Study Guide for Heikki Räisänen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*

This study guide has been designed to help you read *The Rise of Christian Beliefs* more effectively. For each chapter there is a summary that suggests themes to notice and issues to consider. There are also questions to guide your reading and related bibliography. Other student resources are available on the companion web site, found at fortresspress.com.

It will be helpful for you to read the biblical passages the author cites in each chapter. Note that the Conclusion at the end of the book includes summaries of chapters 4-11.

Introduction

Chapter Summary

This book is an account of early Christian *beliefs*—in contrast to early Christian *theology*. As such, it follows a descriptive rather than a confessional or prescriptive method, avoiding insider language such as “revelation” and “Word of God.” It deals with both canonical and extra-canonical sources, making no distinction between “orthodoxy” and “heresy.” It concentrates on the large issues and themes, acknowledging the diversity within early Christianity as well as the moral and intellectual problems in the sources. The book starts with eschatology and then takes up the themes of sin and salvation, the person and work of the Savior, the spirit, and the forging of Christian identity.

Key terms

Christian
“New Testament theologies”
The descriptive method
The New Testament canon
“Orthodoxy” and “heresy”
Eschatology

Study Questions

1. In what ways is the term “Christian” an anachronism when applied to the early Jesus movement?
2. How central is doctrine or belief in understanding early Christianity?
3. How does the author distinguish this book from “New Testament theologies”? From “confessional” or “normative” constructions?
4. What does the author identify as the distinctive features of this book?
5. What does the author take as the starting-point for this project? In what sequence do the other basic themes follow?

For Further Reading

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Chapter 1

Second Temple Judaism

Chapter Summary

After the Babylonian exile the Persian ruler Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Judea and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Second temple Judaism differed from that of earlier times, centering on the covenant as interpreted by the Deuteronomists and priests who subordinated Temple and cult to their written texts, the Torah. This continued among the later Dispersion in the form of the Greek translation, the Septuagint.

After a century of relative independence under the Maccabees, Roman rule began in 63 B.C.E. by the general Pompey. Herod the Great ruled Palestine for Rome from 37 to 4 B.C.E., followed by his sons and then by procurators or prefects, among whom was Pontius Pilate (26–36 C.E.). Jewish authority was centered in the Sanhedrin, a council over which the high priest presided. Judaism was dominant also in Galilee in the north. Incompetent and inflammatory actions on the part of some procurators led to Jewish resistance to Roman rule, finally leading to full-scale warfare that ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and temple in 70 C.E.

Judaism exhibited certain common elements—the oneness of God, veneration for the temple, synagogue worship—but also significant differences among the important groups: Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. The Essenes who believed that they represented a holy remnant within a sinful people, a tendency reminiscent of the preaching of John the Baptist. Meanwhile, growing antipathy toward Rome increased the influence of the Zealots, who agitated for rebellion.

The majority of Jews in the Roman period lived outside of Palestine—in Babylon, Egypt, Rome, and elsewhere—and they often developed distinctive varieties of Judaism, of which Philo of Alexandria is noteworthy. Jews both in Palestine and in the Diaspora produced an extensive literature, including historical, philosophical, poetic, novelistic, apocalyptic, and rabbinic writings.

Key terms

“Judah” and “Israel”

Cyrus

Deuteronomistic school

Torah

Septuagint

Alexander

Maccabees

Pompey

Herod

Pontius Pilate

Sanhedrin

70 C.E.

Synagogue
Sadducees
Pharisees
Essenes
Philo
Zealots
Qumran
Mishnah
Talmud
Midrash
Targum

Study Questions

1. How did second temple Judaism differ from the Israelite religion that came before?
2. What were the causes and effects of the Maccabean uprising?
3. How were Judea and Galilee ruled after 63 B.C.E.? What were some differences between these two regions?
4. What events led to the disaster of 70 C.E.? What were the results?
5. What were the common elements of Jewish identity in the second temple period?
6. Describe the varieties of Judaism during the Roman period.
7. What do we know about Diaspora Judaism in the Roman period?
8. What kinds of Jewish literature emerged in Palestine during the second temple period? In the Diaspora?

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Chapter 2 Greco-Roman Religion and Philosophy

Chapter Summary

Civic religion in the Greco-Roman world involved many feast days that involved joyous celebrations with processions, music, sacrifices at the temple, and banqueting. These celebrations served civic pride and social unity and were not exclusive. Private associations (*collegia*) also involved feasts and sacrifices.

Mystery cults, like those of Eleusis, Attis, Isis, and Mithras held their rituals and initiations in secret. The initiate was united with the deity, guaranteeing salvation. Healing cults, like those of Asclepius, were also widespread. In addition, many persons sought out an oracle, like those of Delphi, or turned to astrology.

Rulers were often considered specially favored by the deities—or themselves divine (*Divi filius*, son of a God). As such, they could be called “savior” or “benefactor.”

Along with popular religion, the distinctive teachings of the philosophies were widely known, including those of Middle Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Cynicism, and Neopythagoreanism. And Gnosticism, a dualistic world-denying religious philosophy, emerged in a number of cults at the same time as Christianity.

Key terms

Collegia

Mystery cults

Apuleius

Asclepius

Oracle

Middle Platonism

Stoicism

Cynicism

Epicureanism

Neopythagoreanism

Gnosticism

Study Questions

1. Describe the civic cults in the Greco-Roman world.
2. What was distinctive about the mystery cults? What were the functions and purposes of these cults?
3. Describe the function of the cult of rulers in the Greco-Roman world; give examples.

4. Summary the characteristic beliefs and/or practices of Middle Platonism, Stoicism, Cynicism, Epicureanism, and Neopythagoreanism.

5. Describe the worldview of ancient Gnosticism.

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Chapter 3: Events, Persons, Sources

Chapter Summary

Jesus announced the coming of the “kingdom of God,” an eschatological turn in history that would involve the restoration of Israel and the end of Roman rule. This message involved an ethical appeal and also powerful acts of healing and exorcism. He was executed by the Romans as “king of the Jews.”

His followers had visions of Jesus after his death. Paul’s vision of the risen Christ caused him to join the believers. Accounts emerged of the discovery of the empty tomb, of which Mary Magdalene was the recurring witness. Conceptions of the risen Jesus varied considerably, but Jesus’ followers interpreted these experiences as the beginning of the end-time events.

A division among the believers in Jerusalem—between Aramaic-speaking “Hebrews” and Greek-speaking Jews from the Diaspora, the “Hellenists”—occurred quite early. Stephen, spokesman for the Hellenists was accused of speaking against the Torah and temple and was killed in a riot—the first martyr. Some Hellenists fled Jerusalem, leaving the church there in the hands of more conservative leaders, like James. Paul, heir to the Hellenist trajectory, fervently founded churches in Asia Minor and Greece, bringing in large numbers of Gentiles. Whether Gentiles needed to follow the Torah, which involved circumcision, was negatively decided at a conference in Jerusalem ca. 49 C.E. Paul’s letters are the oldest extant Christian writings. Meanwhile, the “sayings Gospel” Q reflected a community that centered on the teachings of Jesus rather than his death and resurrection. The fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 was a fatal blow to conservative Jewish Christianity, which became marginalized as Ebionites.

The more liberal wing of the church produced various writings, including the Gospel of Mark, pseudonymous letters, the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Letter of Barnabas, and 1 Clement—a trajectory that included also the radical ideas of Marcion. The more conservative side produced the Gospel of Matthew, the Didache, the Revelation of John, the Epistle of James, and Luke-Acts. In addition, mystical writings like the Gospel and Letters of John, the Odes of Solomon, the letters of Ignatius, and the Gospel of Thomas emerged, as well as popular writings like the Gospel of Peter. Apocalyptic or prophetic tendencies are found in the Apocalypse of Peter, the Montanist movement.

Proto-orthodox reactions can be seen in the Pastorals, 2 Peter, the writings of Justin. Meanwhile, gnostic teachers like Basilides, Valentinus, and the author of the Gospel of Truth and the Apocryphon of John were rebutted by Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others.

Key terms

Kingdom of God

Easter experiences

The Gentile mission

“Hebrews” and “Hellenists”

Stephen
Antioch
Paul
“Apostolic decree”
James of Jerusalem
Q
The Jewish war
The more liberal wing
The more conservative wing
Ebionites
“Mystical” strands
Popular strands
Prophetic and apocalyptic strands
Gnostic strands
Irenaeus and Tertullian

Study Questions

1. What were the implications of Jesus’ announcement of the coming kingdom of God?
2. Compare the New Testament accounts of visions of the resurrected Jesus with accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb. How did belief in the resurrection of Jesus relate to his proclamation of the kingdom of God?
3. Describe the earliest division among the Jesus-believers in Jerusalem. What were its long-range effects?
4. Describe Paul’s relation to the Jerusalem church.
5. What is “Q,” and what kind of community does it reflect?
6. What are some literary products of the “more liberal wing” of early Christianity?
7. What are some literary products of the “more conservative wing” of early Christianity? Discuss the influence of this wing in the second century.
8. What are some examples of a “mystical” strand in early Christianity?
9. Identify and describe some examples of prophecy and revelation in second-century Christianity.
10. Describe the teachings of prominent gnostic leaders.
11. How did the work of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria affect Gnosticism?

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Chapter 4: Last Things First: God, History, and Beyond

Chapter Summary

Ancient Israelites believed that Yahweh acted in history, often in warfare to defend the people. Historical defeats, however, gave such hopes an other-worldly dimension. Under Persian influence, apocalyptic traits emerged; the course of history was predetermined and the present evil age would give way to a new aeon in a great act of judgment. Thus Daniel outlines a series of world empires that will end in a final resurrection both of the righteous and the wicked.

Among various expectations at the time of Jesus there was a widespread hope for national restoration that would involve destruction of the enemies, a general resurrection, re-establishment of the twelve tribes, possibly a new temple, and an aeon of right worship and holy living.

Jesus thought of the kingdom of God in an eschatological rather than a sapiential or moralistic way. Otherwise we can make no sense of his crucifixion, nor can we find a place for him in the trajectory that leads from John the Baptist to him to the Jerusalem community to Paul and to the Synoptics. This kingdom would be earthly but have a transcendent fulfillment. Subsequent believers elaborated this into a full-blown millenarian expectation, as evidenced in the book of Revelation and elsewhere. The concept of the kingdom, however was soon spiritualized into “life in Christ” or other kinds of realized eschatology. The Synoptics anticipate a series of dramatic eschatological events on earth followed by a cataclysmic end of the world and a heavenly fulfillment.

Spiritualized eschatology continued in the post-Pauline letters, in 1 Peter, in Hebrews, and extensively in the Gospel of John. This tendency found its culmination in Gnosticism.

Key terms

1 Enoch

Daniel

4 Ezra

Son of Man sayings

Millenarian eschatology

The eschaton

Millenium

Study Questions

1. What ancient Israelite assumptions prepared the way for postexilic eschatology, including its apocalyptic components?

2. What is distinctive about apocalyptic eschatology? How did Zoroastrian beliefs influence Jewish eschatology?
3. Discuss the significance of Daniel 12:2-3 in the development of Jewish eschatology.
4. What were common elements in Jewish eschatology at the time of Jesus?
5. Was Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God eschatological or sapiential? Explain.
6. Did Jesus think of the kingdom of God as on earth or in heaven? Explain.
7. Summarize the end-time schema of the book of Revelation.
8. Discuss how Paul and others spiritualized the concept of the kingdom of God.
9. In what sense do we find in the Synoptic Gospels a "peculiar combination" of a series of earthly calamities followed by a cataclysmic end of the world and a heavenly fulfillment?
10. Give examples of a "radical spiritualizing" of the kingdom of God from Paul to 1 Peter to John to Gnosticism.
11. How has millenarian speculation been a mixed blessing in Western history?

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Chapter 5: After Death: The Destiny of the Individual

Chapter Summary

The ancient Israelite Sheol was a shadowy state after death. In the Greek Hades, the souls faced judgment, retaining their individuality. In Jewish apocalyptic writings, however, there emerges differentiated destinies for the righteous and compared with the wicked, a concept that presupposes a general resurrection. Some texts, however, suggest a physical resurrection of the body while others spoke of immortality of a kind of spiritual body.

Early Christian texts exhibit a variety of conceptions of the afterlife, including hints of annihilation of the wicked. Eternal torment of the wicked is emphasized in the Gospel of Matthew, Revelation, and elsewhere, while for other Christians the notion of hell was incompatible with God's nature. For Origen, God's goal is the restoration of everything—*apokatastasis*.

Although some second-century Christians held to the resurrection of the *flesh*, Paul believed that the resurrection of Jesus was the model for the resurrection of the believers into a "spiritual body," a concept developed by subsequent Christians and by the Gnostics, often under Platonic influence. Some Christians, moreover, spoke of an interim destination after death, a state prior to the resurrection.

Key terms

Sheol

Hades

Apokatastasis

"Spiritual resurrection"

Study Questions

1. Compare the concepts of Sheol and of Hades.
2. What is new in the conception of the afterlife in apocalyptic literature, for example, 1 Enoch?
3. Discuss the relationship between bodily resurrection and the immortality of the soul in Jewish and in Greek writings of the Greco-Roman period.
4. Discuss the variety of conceptions of judgment—including hell—in early Christianity.
5. What was Paul's concept of "spiritual resurrection"?
6. Trace the trajectory of the idea of "spiritual resurrection" after Paul.

7. What evidence is there in early Christianity for an interim state after death, and what is the significance of such an idea?

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Chapter 6: Sold under Sin? The Human Condition

Chapter Summary

The idea of universal sinfulness was widespread in the ancient Near East, although there was a distinction between individual transgressions and sin as a way of life. The story of the “Fall” (Genesis 3) was inconsequential until 4 Ezra.

Assumptions about the power of Yahweh in history led to the explanation of national tragedies as the result of collective guilt.

In the Greco-Roman period, Jews variously found the origin of sin in supernatural powers, demons, or, in the case of 4 Ezra, the garden of Eden.

Both in Judaism and in the New Testament, many thought of sin as transgressions while also categorizing anti-social types and various outsiders as “sinners.” The Gospel of John found the whole world subject to the power of darkness, identifying sin as unbelief in Jesus, with the Jews collectively as the outsiders.

Paul vigorously argued for Sin as an enslaving power with which the individual struggles, usually to no avail apart from divine assistance, and also as a state of existence from which one needs deliverance. The Gnostics, by contrast, generally found the cause of the human plight to be ignorance of the truth, while Augustine formulated the classic Christian doctrine of “original sin” and its results.

Key terms

The “Fall”

4 Ezra

Belial

Sin as individual and as collective

Personified Sin

Original sin

Study Questions

1. What did the ancient Israelites believe about the relation between individual sins and collective guilt?
2. What influence did the story of “the Fall” have in ancient Judaism, in Paul, and in Augustine?
3. Describe various views of the origin of sin among Jews of the Greco-Roman period.
4. Discuss the concept of “sinners” as a social category in ancient Judaism and in the Jesus movement.
5. What do the Synoptic Gospels have to say about sin as transgression?

6. Discuss the idea of sin as a personified, enslaving power in Paul, especially in Romans 5–8 and in relation to the duality of spirit and flesh.
7. How did the Gnostics develop the concept of ignorance as the cause of the human plight?
8. What did Augustine believe about the nature of sin and its results?

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Chapter 7: What Must I Do to Be Saved? Different Paths to Salvation

Chapter Summary

In early Israel salvation meant the survival of the people as a whole. As time passed, however, the assumption took root that only the faithful would be saved. The faithful were the ones in the covenant and who stayed in by following the Torah and by repenting over lapses.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus preached repentance. Jesus accepted “sinners,” but he also taught asceticism. Mark taught that following Jesus’ path of suffering is the way to salvation, while Matthew emphasized the bearing of good fruit (“salvation through action”), as does Luke-Acts in a series of memorable stories, James, Hebrews, and Hermas.

Nonetheless, all these writings (excepting perhaps James) place great importance on Jesus’ death as salvific in some fashion. For some, especially Hebrew, Jesus’ death is an atoning sacrifice. Paul speaks of Jesus’ death as accomplishing reconciliation between God and humans, as redemption—being set from slavery to sin, death, and the law, as the overcoming of hostile forces, or as forensic justification. Paul and John also speak of participation “in Christ” as an image of salvation. In all cases, the relation between faith and works is a central concern, with Paul especially vigorous in upholding the primacy of faith. This leads inexorably to the knotty theme of predestination, a doctrine that Paul defends. Salvation by esoteric knowledge of truth was especially typical of gnosticism. There was a variety of views in early Christianity on the fate of those outside the circle of believers. Baptism was important for early Christians the rite of initiation into the faith.

Key terms

Covenantal nomism
Human effort and divine grace
Hussein ibn Ali
Sabbatai Zevi
Sacrifice as means of salvation
Redemption
Reconciliation
Justification
Union with Christ
Faith and works
Predestination

Study Questions

1. Discuss the relation of grace and works in the Judaism of the Greco-Roman period.
2. What is the relation of sin and grace in the teachings of Jesus?

3. What are the various “paths to salvation” in Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, James, Hebrews, 1 Clement, and the Shepherd of Hermas?
4. In what ways did the early Jesus movement interpret Jesus’ death as a saving event?
5. How do Paul and John interpret the theme of participation “in Christ”?
6. What did Paul mean by his contrast of faith and works?
7. Compare various New Testament passages that refer to predestination or universal salvation. What position on this issue was taken by Origen? By Calvin?
8. Which early Christian sources speak of saving knowledge? How do they develop this theme?
9. In what ways did early Christians consider the fate of those outside the circle of believers?
10. What was the role of baptism in the early Christian conception of salvation?

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Chapter 8: True Man or True God? The Mediator of Salvation

Chapter Summary

In Jewish tradition the Davidic king and, by extension, the Davidic Messiah were called “son of God,” an honorific title. First Enoch fused the “son of man” of Daniel with the Messiah, giving the title a transcendent aura, while Philo spiritualized the entire conception. Personified attributes of God, especially wisdom, also played a mediating role between God and humans.

Whether Jesus portrayed himself as Messiah is debated, although he did give himself a pivotal eschatological role. His disciples explained his death as an exaltation to the presence of God, frequently citing Psalm 110:1. From there they expected him to return as judge. At the present, he is to be worshiped as *kyrios*, Lord, but subordinated to God.

Jesus was posthumously viewed as the hitherto unheard-of “suffering Messiah,” devoid of political functions. He acted during his ministry as prophet, healer, exorcist, and the suffering Son of Man, teaching as an envoy of Wisdom.

Paul refers to Jesus’ being “born of a woman,” while both Matthew and Luke view it as miraculous—of a virgin. The virgin birth story—understood as explaining *how* Jesus came to be Son of God—however, is at odds with the idea of his pre-existence, which suggests that he was Son of God from eternity, as in John’s Gospel. Paul asserts pre-existence (with no mention of the virgin birth) but combines it with the idea that the pre-existent Christ emptied himself of his divine prerogatives (*kenosis*) as a man in Galilee. Early Christians differed on exactly how the incarnation should be understood. The final formulation came at the Council of Chalcedon, 451 C.E., with the pronouncement that Christ was one person with God, but in two natures.

Key terms

Council of Chalcedon

Son of man in Daniel and Enoch

Suffering Messiah

Pre-existence

Kenosis

Logos

Docetism

Study Questions

1. Discuss examples of royal and transcendent deliverers in Jewish tradition.
2. What are some indications of Jesus’ self-understanding in the Synoptic Gospels?

3. How did early Christians think that Psalm 110:1 explained what happened to Jesus after his death?
4. According to Acts and Paul, what was the future role of the risen Jesus?
5. How did the early Christians understand the post-resurrection status of Jesus and his presence among them?
6. In what ways did Jesus' death stimulate a new understanding of messiahship?
7. How do the Synoptics interpret Jesus' actions during his ministry?
8. How is the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus incompatible with the idea of Jesus' pre-existence? How were these two beliefs understood?
9. How is Jesus' pre-existence understood in the Gospel of John?
10. What is the difference between "docetic" and "real" incarnation? Give examples.

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Chapter 9: The Empowering Presence: Experiences and Doctrines of the Spirit

Chapter Summary

In the Hebrew Bible the spirit of Yahweh empowers extraordinary abilities and skills, including leadership, ecstatic speech, religious rapture, communication with the heavenly world, and prophetic utterance. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus is filled with the spirit at his baptism, and in Acts the spirit falls on the believers at Pentecost and on those who come to believe, sometimes involving glossolalia, miraculous healings, visions, and various “spiritual gifts.” Christian prophets arose, including the author of Revelation. Paul tried to domesticate ecstatic behavior among his converts by subordinating glossolalia to prophecy and by “discerning the spirits.”

In Acts the spirit plays a role at every important turn in the life of the church. For Paul the spirit has a more “inward” role, while in John the spirit is primarily a teacher of truth. The interpretation of the work of the spirit was subject to dispute, and the Didache, for example, offers ways to distinguish true from false prophets.

The spirit became “hypostatized” in early Christianity or personified as an attribute of God, perhaps identified as Wisdom. Eventually the spirit came to be identified as the third person of the Trinity.

Key terms

Ruah

Glossolalia

Pneuma

“Discernment of the spirits”

Study Questions

1. What kinds of behavior were assumed to be evidences of the divine spirit in Jewish and Greek traditions?
2. Discuss some examples of the activity of the spirit in the ministry of Jesus and in early Christian literature.
3. What did Paul say about “spiritual gifts” among the believers?
4. In what ways does the spirit guide the church, according to Acts, Paul, John, Ignatius, and the Pastorals?
5. What were some problems of identifying and authenticating the activity of the spirit in early Christianity?

6. Discuss various ways the phenomenon or “person” of the spirit was understood in early Christianity.

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Chapter 10: True Israel: From Jewish to Christian Identity

Chapter Summary

Christianity began as a Jewish movement but, by the end of the second century, it had become a largely independent movement. Jewish identity was based on the concepts of election—being chosen by God as a holy people—and the covenant—life based on the ordinances of the Torah given to Moses. The most prominent identity-markers were abstention from “idolatry,” circumcision, food laws, and the observance of the Sabbath and other festivals. These set off Jews from others, although some rabbis allowed for the salvation of “righteous Gentiles.”

Jesus aimed at the restoration of Israel, and his first followers understood themselves as a distinct group within Judaism. Jesus’ brother James, leader of the Jerusalem community, was an observant Jew, well-regarded by believers and other Jewish alike. The inclusion of Gentiles among the believers at Antioch, however, was a contentious issue at first, but Paul’s mission among non-Jews was approved by James, even though conservatives like the Ebionites considered Paul the enemy. Whether Paul faithfully observed the Torah in his personal life, he was convinced that a new order had replaced the Torah with respect to salvation.

Among early Christian writings, the continuity of the Jesus movement with Judaism is upheld by Mark, Matthew, James, the Didache, Revelation, Luke-Acts, and 1 Peter, while John and the Pastorals suggests that the Christian community had usurped the place of Israel. Finally, the Jewish identity of the new faith is denied by Barnabas, Ignatius, the Preaching of Peter, the Letter to Diognetus, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Truth, Marcion, Justin, and Melito of Sardis.

Key terms

Shema

“Identity markers”

“Righteous Gentiles”

Philo

James (Jesus’ brother)

“Hellenists”

Antioch

Ekklesia

Ebionites

Marcion

Justin

Study Questions

1. What were the hallmarks of Jewish identity in the second temple period?
2. What was Jesus’ intention? How did the earliest Jesus-believers understand themselves in this context?

3. What was the role of Jesus' brother James in the Jerusalem church and in relation to the inclusion of Gentiles in the Jesus movement?
4. What was the stance of the Q community with respect to Judaism?
5. What events led to the acceptance of Gentiles in the churches? What was Paul's perspective on this issue?
6. To what extent did Paul follow the dictates of the Torah in his personal life? What was his attitude toward the Torah?
7. What does Paul say about the Jews in Romans 9?
8. What is the relation of the Gospel of Mark to Jewish identity and tradition? Of the Gospel of Matthew? Of James, the Didache, Revelation, and of Luke-Acts? Of the Gospel of John?
9. Which early Christian writings reflect a separation of Jesus-believers from Judaism?

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Chapter 11: Strangers in a Transitory World: Christians and Pagans

Chapter Summary

Already in the first century, Christians began to think of themselves as distinct from both Jews and pagans. Their attitude toward pagans was based on an intolerance of idolatry, although on the issue of eating meat that had been offered to idols Christians differed, with Paul more tolerant than Revelation.

Accusing the Christians of “hatred for humankind,” pagans were offended by the Christian avoidance of traditional rituals and other marks of social cohesion. Persecution erupted under Emperors Nero and Domitian. Martyrdom served to strengthen the internal coherence of the churches and produced opposite reactions among the believers. Some, like John of Revelation, took a bellicose attitude toward Rome while others—Paul, Luke-Acts, and the apologists—tried to defend Christianity vis-à-vis Rome.

Christians were divided also in their attitude toward Greek philosophy. Some argued against the “wisdom of this world,” while others, especially the apologists, incorporated philosophical principles in their defense of the new faith, a tendency that culminated in Origen’s *De principiis*, the first Christian manual of dogma.

Key terms

Idolatry

“Idol meat”

“Strong” and “weak” in 1 Corinthians

Nicolaitans

Pliny

Martyrdom

Apologetics

Polycarp

Basilides

Valentinus

Origen

Study Questions

1. What was Paul’s attitude toward idolatry in general and “idol meat” in particular?
2. What were some reasons for pagan distrust of Christians in the first two centuries?
3. What Roman persecutions of Christians took place in the first century, and what were the reasons for them?
4. What effects did martyrdom have on the Christian churches?
5. How did Paul, Luke-Acts, and Justin try to defend Christianity vis-à-vis Rome?

6. What attitudes toward Greek philosophy do we find in Paul, Luke-Acts, and the apologists?
7. What were the effects of Christian apologetics and intolerance of non-believers in the first several centuries?

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Chapter 12: Toward Christian Orthodoxy

Chapter Summary

In dealing with doctrinal diversity, leaders of the early church appealed to scripture, tradition, and persons—all of them linked to the principle of supposed apostolicity.

Alongside of the Old Testament in Greek, Christian writings, by usage and prestige, eventually came to comprise a Christian canon, although this process lasted until the fourth or fifth century. Paul's letters were first gathered together and then, with Luke, formed the basis of Marcion's canon. Four Gospels were widely used, along with 1 Peter and 1 John.

Because the Christian writings were themselves subject to various interpretations, appeal was made to authoritative tradition—creed-like statements. Paul already appealed to tradition in his disputes. Gradually various Christian groups clarified and codified their “rule of faith,” which would eventually evolve into an authoritative creed.

In the meantime, competing rules of faith required arbiters—authoritative interpreters and decision makers. Jesus' inner circle of disciples came to be thought of as the original such authoritative figures, and the idea gradually emerged that the bishops of the churches were their successors—the locus of authority over Christian belief and practice. During this process, the leadership roles of women in the earliest churches was suppressed (except in the churches of Marcion, the Montanists, and presumably the Gnostics). Nonetheless, a number of groups continued to venerate Mary Magdalene as spiritual authority.

Key terms

Canon

Marcion

Tatian

“Rule of faith”

Episkopos

Apostle

Ekklesia

Apostolic succession

Mary Magdalene

Study Questions

1. Summarize the events and issues that led to the formation of the Christian canon.
2. Trace the evolution of creed-like formulations in the church of the first and second centuries.
3. Trace the evolution of authoritative offices in the early church.

4. In what ways did the concept of apostolicity underlie the early Christian attitude toward authoritative scripture, tradition, and persons?
5. Discuss the variety of opinions in the first three centuries about women as leaders in the church.

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