

# A Brief History of the Christian Church

## *The Years of Silence to the Formation of the Canon*

**INTRODUCTION:** How Should we Understand Church History? What Value does it have?

### Understanding History

[Beginning] Creation → Fall of Man → Redemption → Flood/Age of the Patriarchs/Exodus → Judges → Kingdom → Divided Kingdom → Exile → Return → Years of Silence → Coming of Christ → Crucifixion/Resurrection/Ascension → (RETURN OF CHRIST) → (NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH)

### The Intertestamental Period

#### I. God's providential preparation of the world for the reception of the Gospel

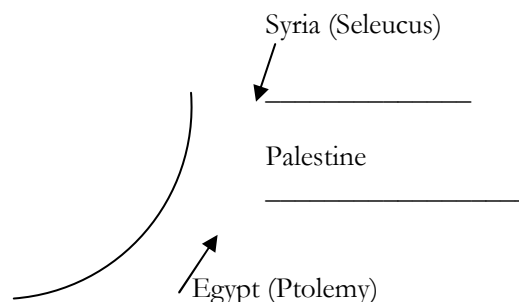
##### **Alexander the Great (356-333 BC)**

Alexander III (the Great), son of Philip II (King of Macedon) and founder of the Hellenistic (Greek) Empire. He was born in 356 B.C. and ascended the Macedonian throne in 336 B.C. Advised by his teacher Aristotle that he could rule the world if he could make people adopt the Greek culture, Alexander extended his empire east from Greece, around the Mediterranean Sea to Egypt, and then to the borders of India. He died in Babylon in 323 B. C. at the age of 33. Because he did not leave an heir who could continue his reign, Alexander's three generals divided his kingdom, with Ptolemy taking Egypt, Seleucus the East, and Cassander Macedonia.

Alexander encouraged the Jews to settle in Alexandria, the city he founded after conquering Egypt. It was at Alexandria that a Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the SEPTUAGINT, was developed (around 250 BC). The Septuagint was the most commonly quoted version of the OT in the NT.

He left culture wherever he went, because he set up the polis, which is a Greek citified culture. He never wiped out people or their culture, and this led to a syncretism. Common (Koine) Greek became the trade/business language. Aramaic had been the lingua franca of the time when the Syrians were in charge, but Greek moved in with Alexander.

After Alexander conquered the Mediteranean at the age of 30, he died soon after leaving no adult heir. After initial squabbling, the Empire was divided up into 4 areas. We're concerned with Syria and Egypt. This would be around 300 BC. These areas were run by generals. Seleucus was the general/leader of Syria, and Ptolemy led Egypt. Though they were at one time friends, they began to squabble and Ptolomy takes Palestine from Seleucus.



Antiochus III or "Great", defeats the Ptolomeys, and takes over Palestine in 198 BC. He went up against the Romans and lost.

**Antiochus IV**, called Epiphanes (circa 215-164 BC), king of Syria (175-164 BC), son of Antiochus III. From 171 to 168 BC, he was involved in a war against Egypt, defeating two Egyptian kings, Ptolemy VI and Ptolemy VIII. He captured Jerusalem, prohibited Judaism, and tried to establish the worship of Greek gods. Under the leadership of the Jewish priest Mattathias (died c. 167 BC) and his sons, the Maccabees, the Jews revolted (168-160 BC) and drove Antiochus from Jerusalem.

In 168 BC the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes forbade the practice of Judaism and also decreed that altars to Greek gods be set up in the Temple at Jerusalem and in country towns. Antiochus deposes the Zadokite priest, at the behest of the temple-based Jews.

IN DECEMBER of 167 BC, Antiochus orders the destruction of the temple, the end of the Jewish religion. He doesn't want them there. He denies them their right to live under the law. It's the end of Sabbath-keeping, and a ban on circumcision. Essentially Orthodox Judaism is banned. This is recorded in 1,2,3,4 Maccabees. Pigs are sacrificed in the Jewish temple. This makes the temple unfit for the true Jews.

This enkindles the Maccabean revolt. It was started by a priest named Mattathias. He had 5 sons. His son Judas was a brilliant warrior. His nickname is the "Hammer", which is the word Maccabee. One of the great generals in Jewish history, Judas Macabee, with a few thousand followers, defeated several numerically superior Syrian armies in succession (166-165 BC). In December 165 BC, he led his insurgent army into Jerusalem, and in 164, purified the Temple, which had been used for Greek rites during the preceding three years, and restored the Jewish rites. This purification and restoration is commemorated by the Jewish festival Hanukkah. He defeats the Syrians, and there is a 100 years (164 – 63) of peace.

The **Hasmonaean** dynasty, or Maccabees, became the leaders and, finally, the kings of an independent Jewish state. Under the Hasmonaean, the Jews concentrated their efforts to keep their religion pure and free of foreign influence. The two major political parties that came into being, the Sadducees and Pharisees, differed as much in religious doctrine as they did in political theory. Other religious factions of the period included the Essenes, Jewish religious brotherhoods that maintained a monastic way of life in communal settlements. The Hasmonaean established the *Sanhedrin*, a council of state composed of 71 Jewish leaders and sages that was the supreme authority for civil and religious legal decisions. The kingdom was expanded and, under John Hyrcanus, came to include Samaria and Edom, known as Idumaea, where the inhabitants were compelled to accept Judaism.

### **Hyrcanus II**

(d. 30 BC), king of Judea from 67 to 63 BC. He wasn't too smart and became essentially a pawn of others. In 76 BC he was appointed high priest by his mother, then ruler of Judea, and after her death he also became king. His younger brother, **Aristobulus II**, seized the government, however, and forced Hyrcanus to agree to an arrangement whereby Aristobulus held the temporal power, and Hyrcanus the religious power. At this time, **Antipater**, known as the Idumaeen, and influential resident of Jerusalem who was seeking to further his own ambitions, offered to help Hyrcanus II regain the throne. Antipater raised a revolt in support of Hyrcanus, and another general civil war ensued (67-63 BC).

In 63 BC on the day of atonement, the Roman general Pompey the Great entered the war by capturing Jerusalem, exiling Aristobulus II and his immediate family, along with many other Jews, to Rome, and reestablishing Hyrcanus II as high priest (but *not* as king). They were now under the subjugation of Rome. He ultimately took many Jews back with him to Rome, and restored temple worship.

After Pompey's death in 48 BC, Hyrcanus and Antipater (father of Herod the Great) supported Gaius Julius Caesar and in return, in 47 BC, Antipater was made procurator (Roman governor) of Judea, and Hyrcanus II was confirmed as high priest and given limited political power. In addition, Jewish territories seized by Pompey were returned, and all Roman soldiers were withdrawn from Judea. Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC and Antipater in

43 BC, and in 40 BC **Antigonus II**, the surviving son of **Aristobulus II** and last of the Hasmonaean dynasty, captured Hyrcanus with the aid of Parthian troops.

Antigonus now proclaimed himself king of Judea, and High Priest, but the next year (39 BC) the Roman Senate declared Herod, known as **Herod the Great**, king of Judea; and Herod promptly set out to unseat Antigonus. Aided by Roman soldiers, Herod succeeded in capturing Antigonus (37 BC) and in having him put to death. Herod then brought the aged Hyrcanus II back to Jerusalem, where later he became involved in an intrigue against Herod, was charged with participating in a conspiracy, and was executed in 30 BC.

**Herod the Great** (73-4 BC), Roman-backed king of Judea (37-4 BC).

Herod was born in southern Palestine, of Arab origin on both sides. His father, Antipater, was made procurator of Judea by Julius Caesar in 47 BC; Pompey the Great had previously deposed the Hasmonaean dynasty. Over Hasmonaean opposition, the Roman Senate recognized Herod as king in 39 BC, but his actual rule began two years later. He then sought to consolidate his position with the Jews by marrying **Mariamne**, a princess of the Hasmonaean line, whom he later put to death.

The first years of Herod's reign were troubled by hostility between two Jewish sects, the Sadducees and Pharisees, and by the enmity of surviving members of the Hasmonaean house, who secured a friend in Cleopatra, queen of Egypt. Herod ultimately prevailed against his adversaries, mainly because of the defeat of Cleopatra and Mark Antony at the hands of Gaius Octavius, later Emperor Augustus. Although Herod had supported Mark Antony in his power struggle with Octavius, the latter was convinced that Herod would continue to rule according to the dictates of Rome and confirmed him as king in 31 BC. Thereafter Herod's political enemies were suppressed.

The years from 25 to 13 BC were for the most part prosperous. During this period Herod devoted himself to a great number of architectural projects, including the construction at Jerusalem, Jericho, and Caesarea of theaters, amphitheaters, and hippodromes for the Grecian games inaugurated in honor of Augustus. To protect the Judean frontier against Arab incursions, he built or rehabilitated a chain of fortresses, which were later to prove of great value to the Jews in their insurrection against Rome. **He began the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem around 20 BC through 62**, with close regard for the religious scruples of the people. In fact it was built while Christ was alive, and finished just in time for it to be destroyed. Under his rule, the High Priest was an appointed office that would never again have the same kind of political power as had prevailed under the Hasmoneans.

The final years of Herod's reign were embittered by the ceaseless and complicated political intrigues within his palace. He killed his wife, Mariamne, his mother-in-law, Alexandra, his oldest son, Antipater, and two other sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. He also killed his brother-in-law, his uncle and thousands of others (including the infants of Bethlehem per Matt. 2) to ensure that he and he alone would be the king of Palestine.

When he died at Jericho in March or April of the year 4 BC, Herod's kingdom was divided among three of his sons (amazingly there were some left alive!)—Herod Antipas (Galilee and Peria), Archelaus (Judea), and Herod Philip (North). They ruled for about 30 years each. Although himself a practicing Jew, and despite his attempts to win their favor, Herod was hated by the Jews as a foreigner and a friend of the Romans.

Archelaus inherited all his bad qualities, and the Jews petitioned to Rome to remove him. Rome agreed that he was rotten, so Rome replaced him with strict Roman governors. These governors ruled from 6 – 40 BC. This caused a revolt, bringing to the fore the Zealots, who are ready to die for God and Judaism.

**Herod Agrippa I** (circa 10 BC-AD 44), **last king of Judea** (AD 41-44), after the rule of the governors. A grandson of Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa spent his youth at the court of the Roman emperor Tiberius, where he was appointed companion to the emperor's grandson, Gaius Caesar (later Emperor Caligula). When Caligula acceded to the throne in AD 37, he made Agrippa tetrarch (ruler) of Batanea and Trachonitis, territories east of the Sea of Galilee, in what is now southern Syria. His possessions were later expanded, and in 41 Emperor

Claudius I made him king of Judea. To preserve peace, Herod Agrippa adopted a pro-Jewish policy. His extreme personal piety and official support of Jewish interests endeared him to the people but earned him the strong disfavor of both the Roman civil population and the Roman troops in his domains.

Herod Agrippa is mentioned in the New Testament as a persecutor of the Christians. According to Acts 12, he ordered the death of **James the Great**, brother of John, and the imprisonment of Peter.

**Herod Agrippa II** (27AD-circa 93), ruler of various territories in northern Palestine, the last descendant of Herod the Great to reign there. The son of Herod Agrippa I, he was born in Palestine, but received his early education at the court of Emperor Claudius I in Rome, and in 53 he was made tetrarch of Batanea and Trachonitis. Parts of Galilee were added to his domain in 56. Although himself Romanized, Agrippa was well acquainted with the customs and traditions of the Jews and during his reign attempted to settle the conflict between them and Rome. At the outbreak of the Jewish revolt (66-73), however, he remained loyal to Rome. He was rewarded for his allegiance at the end of the war by a northward extension of his territory, and in 75 he was honored with the rank of praetor. According to Acts 25:23, Paul was brought before Herod Agrippa and sister Bernice on the eve of his deportation to Rome.

The Roman governors of Judea were despotic and gave little respect to the Jewish religion. In AD 66 a violent insurrection, led by the Zealots, a fanatic Jewish sect, was launched against Roman authority. Emperor Nero sent the Roman general Vespasian (later emperor) to put an end to the conflict. Revolt began in 66. The Romans sent legions, under their leader, General Vespasian. Vespasian is able to circle Jerusalem with his forces, but is called back to Rome to become Emperor. Josephus had been a Jewish commander in the region of Galilee.

As Jerusalem is about to fall (73 AD), a scribe, a lawyer, Johanan ben Zakkai, a scribe who escapes the attack, is caught by the Romans. During the siege of Jerusalem by the Roman armies, Johanan, a prominent member of the Pharisees, escaped from the city to the Roman encampment, according to tradition in a coffin borne by his pupils. He has a Word of knowledge for Titus: Titus will eventually become emperor. He founded a school at Jabneh (near present-day Tel Aviv, Israel) with the permission of the Roman emperor Vespasian, with whom he gained favor and who treated him well. The Academy became the focal point for the reconstitution of Jerusalem. Jabneh (or **Jamnia**) became the headquarters of the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, of which Johanan was a member. They were scribes and lawyers. It became the liberal center of Pharisism. For the next half century Johanan's school replaced Jerusalem as the spiritual center of Judaism. COUNCIL OF JAMNIA determines corpus of OT books, rejects pseudopigrapha.

**Conclusion:** Palestine brought first into the Hellenized world and given a common language – Koine (common) Greek, then brought into the Roman Empire and given access to the known world via roads and the freedom to travel them by the Pax Romana. This facilitates the spread of the Gospel throughout the world.

## II. Formation of the New Testament Canon

**Canon** – from the Greek *Kanon* – it means rule or standard and refers to the list of books that constitute the Old and New Testaments. The books that constitute authoritative Scripture.

First Christians possessed no New Testament canon; relied on the preaching of the Apostles and others, and on what we call the Old Testament Canon (codified at Jamnia, but certainly known before hand – the authenticity of these books of the OT is attested again and again in the NT).

### Why were these Books Written?

*Luke 1:1-4 "Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed."*

*John 20:29-31 "Jesus said to him, 'Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."*

#### Warfield on the Formation of the NT Canon

"What needs emphasis at present about these facts is that they obviously are not evidences of a gradually-heightening estimate of the New Testament books, originally received on a lower level and just beginning to be tentatively accounted Scripture; they are conclusive evidences rather of the estimation of the New Testament books from the very beginning as Scripture, and of their attachment as Scripture to the other Scriptures already in hand. The early Christians did not, then, first form a rival " canon " of " new books " which came only gradually to be accounted as of equal divinity and authority with the " old books "; they received new book after new book from the apostolical circle, as equally " Scripture " with the old books, and added them one by one to the collection of old books as additional Scriptures, until at length the new books thus added were numerous enough to be looked upon as another section of the Scriptures.

...

The Canon of the New Testament was completed when the last authoritative book was given to any church by the apostles, and that was when John wrote the Apocalypse, about A.D. 98. Whether the church of Ephesus, however, had a completed Canon when it received the Apocalypse, or not, would depend on whether there was any epistle, say that of Jude, which had not yet reached it with authenticating proof of its apostolicity. There is room for historical investigation here. Certainly the whole Canon was not universally received by the churches till somewhat later. The Latin church of the second and third centuries did not quite know what to do with the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Syrian churches for some centuries may have lacked the lesser of the Catholic Epistles and Revelation. But from the time of Irenaeus down, the church at large had the whole Canon as we now possess it. And though a section of the church may not yet have been satisfied of the apostolicity of a certain book or of certain books; and though afterwards doubts may have arisen in sections of the church as to the apostolicity of certain books (as e. g. of Revelation): yet in no case was it more than a respectable minority of the church which was slow in receiving, or which came afterward to doubt, the credentials of any of the books that then as now constituted the Canon of the New Testament accepted by the church at large. And in every case the principle on which a book was accepted, or doubts against it laid aside, was the historical tradition of apostolicity.

...

The early churches, in short, received, as we receive, into the New Testament all the books historically evinced to them as give by the apostles to the churches as their code of law; and we must not mistake the historical evidences of the slow circulation an authentication of these books over the widely-extended church, evidence of slowness of " canonization " of books by the authority or the taste of the church itself. "

#### Codification or "lists"

The codification of lists was heavily influenced by the need to remove heretical books being circulated, or lists such as Marcion's (a Gnostic) that excluded legitimate works. By the end of the second century we have the Muratorian List which has virtually all of the 27 books we include. By 367 the lists that the church tends to circulate include all 27 books.

Carson, Moo, and Morris comment: "Indeed it is important to observe that although there was no ecclesiastical machinery like the medieval papacy to enforce decisions, nevertheless the worldwide church almost universally came to accept the same twenty-seven books. It was not so much that the church selected the canon as that canon selected itself. This point has frequently been made and deserves repeating. The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character. When consideration is given to the diversity in cultural backgrounds, and in the orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level" [*Intro to the NT*]

### Authenticity of the Manuscripts

F.F. Bruce Comments:

"Perhaps we can appreciate how wealthy the New Testament is in manuscript attestation if we compare the textual material for other ancient historical works. For Caesar's Gallic War (composed between 58 and 50 BC) there are several extant manuscripts, but only nine or ten are good, and the oldest is some 900 years later than Caesar's day. Of the 142 books of the Roman History of Livy (59 BC-AD 17) only thirty-five survive; these are known to us from not more than twenty manuscripts of any consequence, only one of which, and that containing fragments of Books iii-vi, is as old as the fourth century. Of the fourteen books of the Histories of Tacitus (about AD 100) only four and a half survive; of the sixteen books of his Annals, ten survive in full and two in part. The text of these extant portions of his two great historical works depends entirely on two manuscripts, one of the ninth century and one of the eleventh. The extant manuscripts of his minor works (*Dialogus de Oratoribus*, *Agricola*, *Germania*) all descend from a codex of the tenth century. The History of Thucydides (about 460-400 BC) is known to us from eight manuscripts, the earliest belonging to around AD 900, and a few papyrus scraps, belonging to about the beginning of the Christian era. The same is true of the History of Herodotus (about 488-428 BC). Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest manuscripts of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals.

But how different is the situation of the New Testament in this respect! In addition to the two excellent manuscripts of the fourth century ... which are the earliest of some thousands known to us, considerable fragments remain of papyrus copies of books of the New Testament dated from 100 or 200 years earlier still. The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, the existence of which was made public in 1931, consist of portions of eleven papyrus codices, three of which contained most of the New Testament writings. One of these, containing the four Gospels with Acts, belongs to the first half of the third century; another, containing Paul's letters to churches and the Epistle to the Hebrews, was copied at the beginning of the third century; the third, containing Revelation, belongs to the second half of the same century.

Earlier still is a fragment of a papyrus codex containing John xviii. 31-33, 37 ff., now in the John Rylands University Library, Manchester dated on palaeographical grounds around AD 130."

[F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*]

### Non-Canonical Books

Rejected works: The Apocrypha, and the Pseudopigraphical writings. *Tobit*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, etc. These were rejected by the church as they were recognized to be either inauthentic and/or recent.