

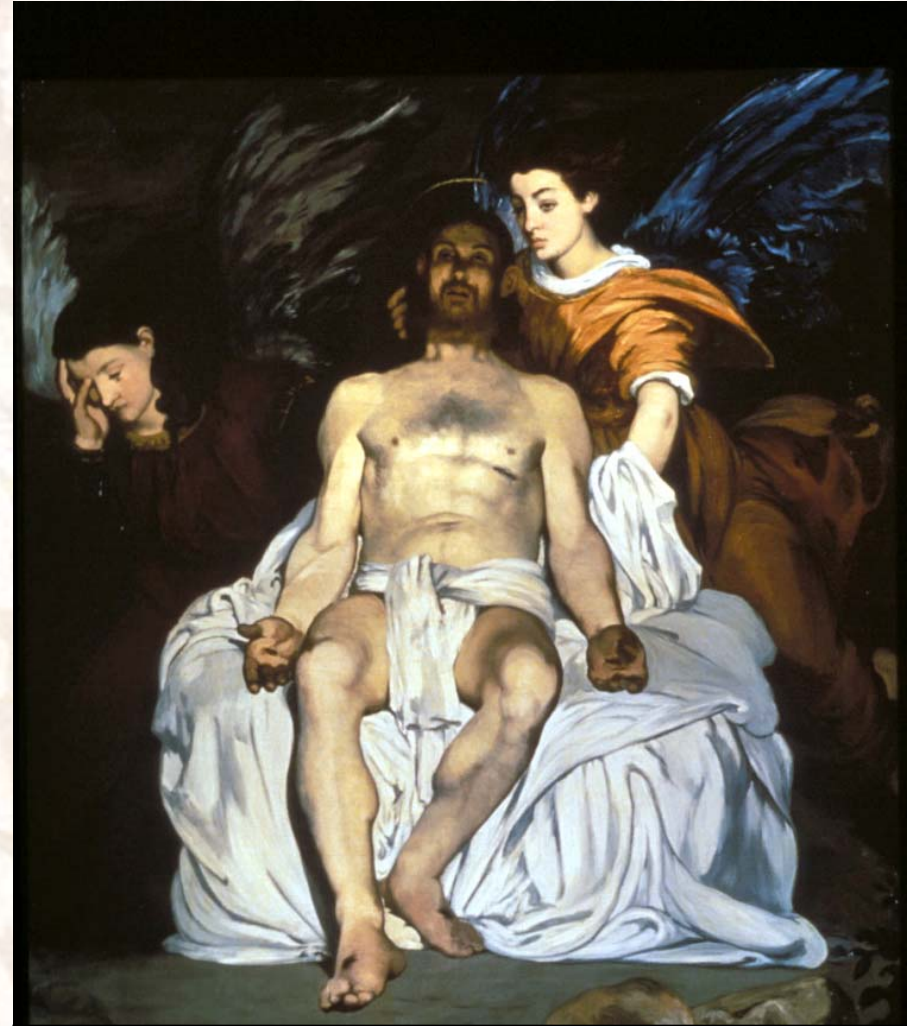
Important Dates in Early Christianity

| | |
|-----------|--|
| ca. 4 BCE | Birth of Jesus |
| ca. 36 CE | Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus |
| ca. 40-64 | Ministry of Paul |
| 64 | Nero blames the Great Fire on Christians |
| ca.65-97 | Publication of the Gospels, including Gnostics |
| ca.100 | Josephus publishes his Jewish histories |
| 250-336 | Life of Arius |
| 284-305 | Diocletian reigns as Roman Emperor |
| 313 | Constantine issues the Edict of Milan |
| 325 | Council of Nicaea (Nicene Creed) |
| 330 | Founding of Constantinople |
| 395 | Theodosius makes Christianity the only religion accepted in the Roman Empire |

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- the biography of **Jesus Christ** lies at the heart of the heart of Christianity
 - but from the perspective of a historian, the life of Christ is hopelessly obscure

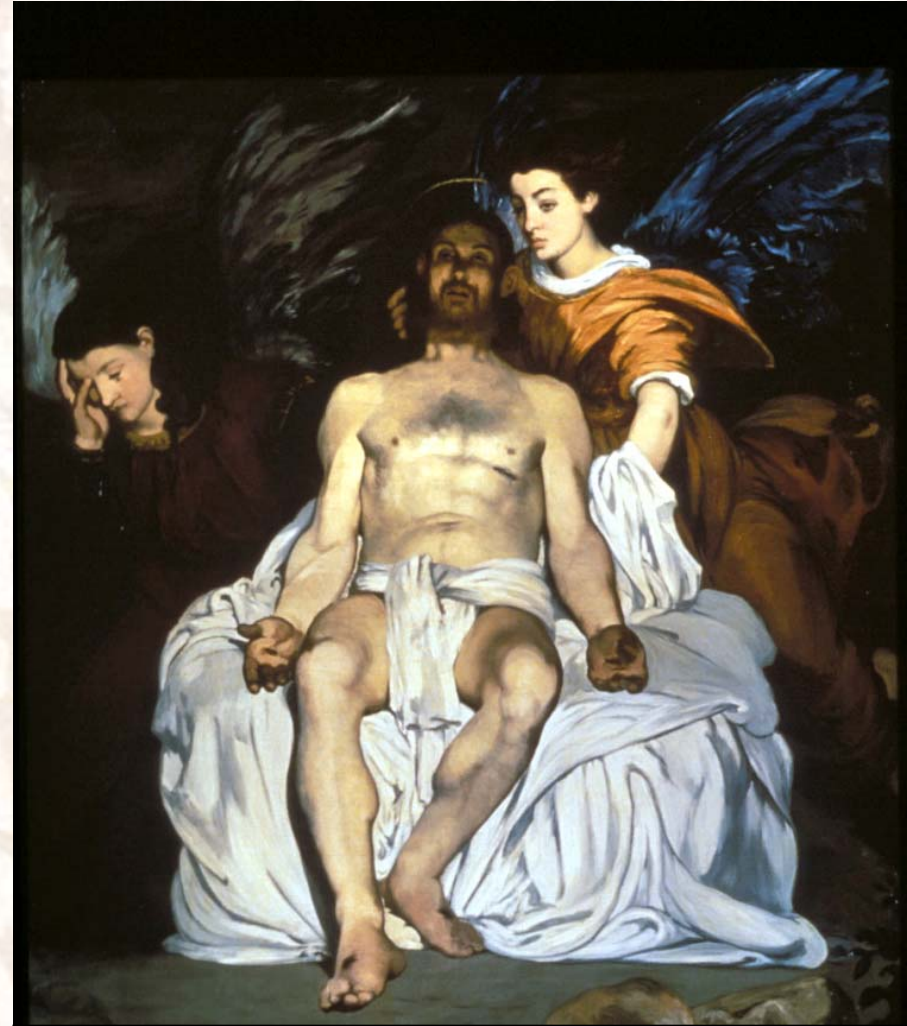


Manet's painting of Christ's body

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- it's also very difficult to situate the **gospels** and Jesus' **apostles** in their historical context
 - they discuss events and issues current after Jesus' lifetime

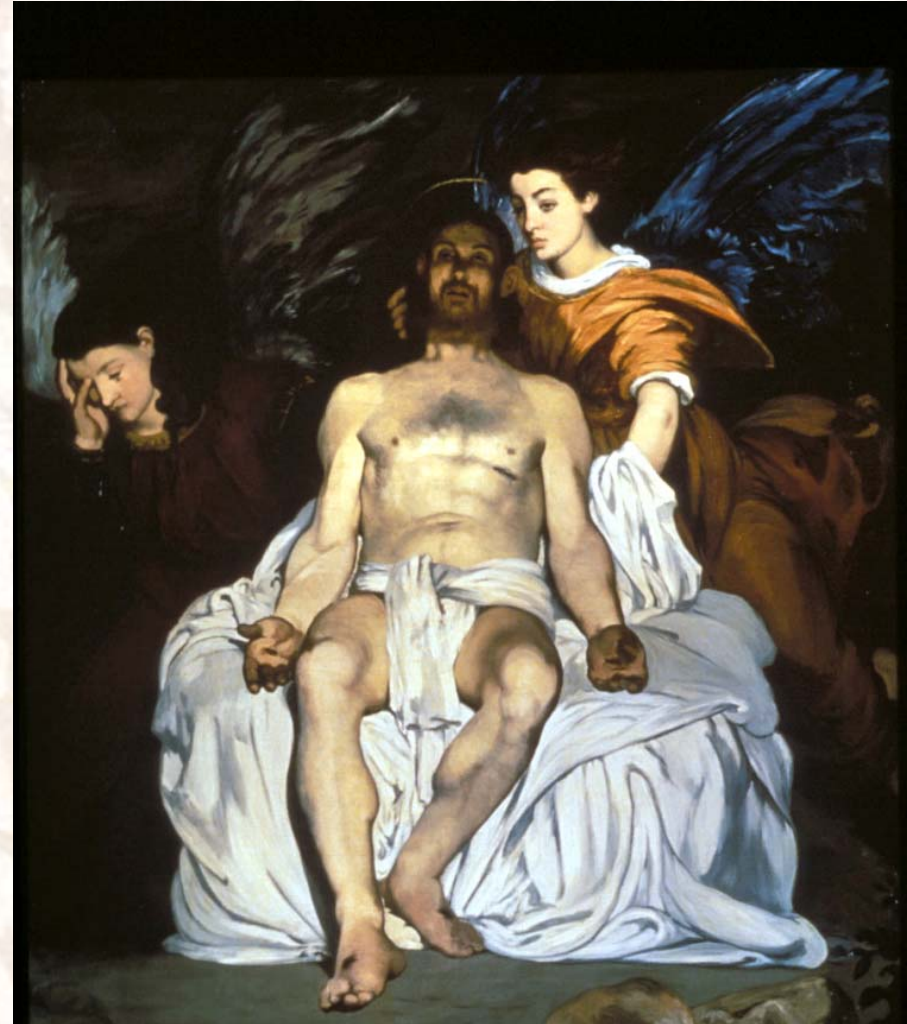


Manet's painting of Christ's body

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- and there are more “gospels” than those included in the New Testament
 - the so-called “Gnostic Gospels”
 - and a new one just published recently: [The Gospel of Judas](#)

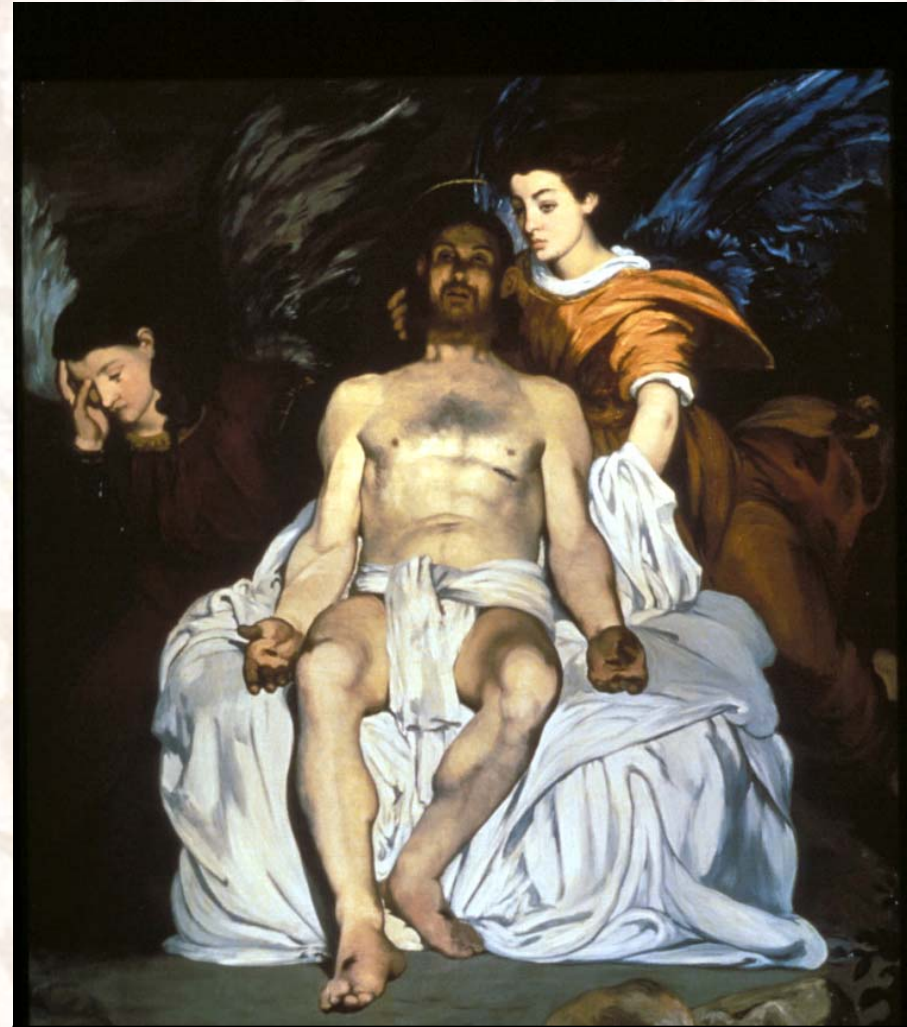


Manet's painting of Christ's body

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- many early Christians saw these Gnostic Gospels as valid accounts of Jesus' life and teaching
 - but not the leaders of the Church



Manet's painting of Christ's body

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- the Gnostic Gospels were excluded from the New Testament
 - all were destroyed
 - cf. Akhenaten
 - but a cache of Gnostic texts was discovered at Nag Hammadi (Egypt)

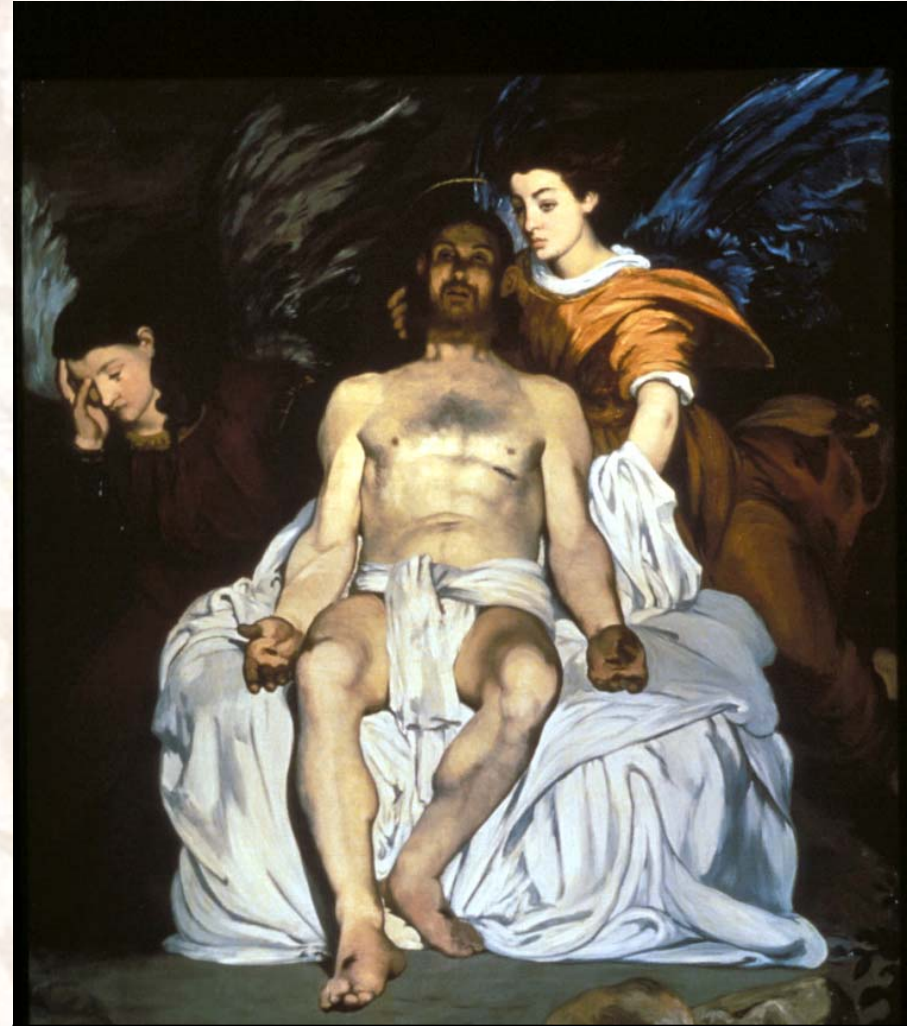


Manet's painting of Christ's body

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- thus, early documents about Jesus are fraught with problems
 - all in all, it's best for historians not to try to puzzle out such a weighty problem on such little evidence



Manet's painting of Christ's body

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- first external evidence: **Tacitus** (Sect. 1)
 - but Tacitus was not an eye-witness of Christ's life
 - and Tacitus' account of early Christians is tainted by his clear objective to revile Nero

Pontius Pilate and Jesus This Byzantine mosaic from Ravenna illustrates a dramatic moment in Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Jesus stands accused before Pilate, but Pilate symbolically washes his hands of the whole affair. (Source: Scala / Art Resource)



Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

Consequently, Nero ... inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians (*Christianos*) by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.

Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*, Book XV

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much for the crime of setting the city on fire, as for a hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*, Book XV

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

Nero offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the Circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.

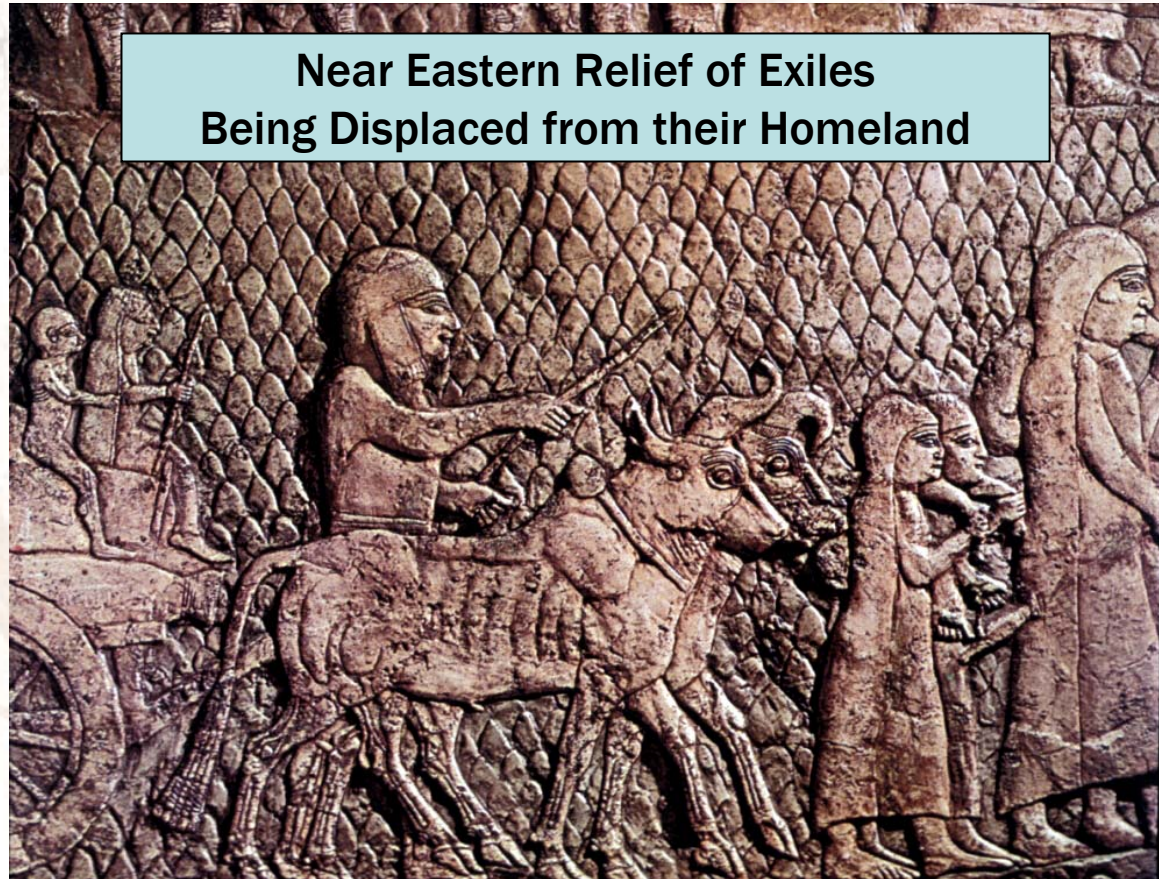
Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*, Book XV

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- the next piece of external evidence in chronological order is **Josephus**

- Jewish general
- like Tacitus, did not see for himself the events of early Christianity

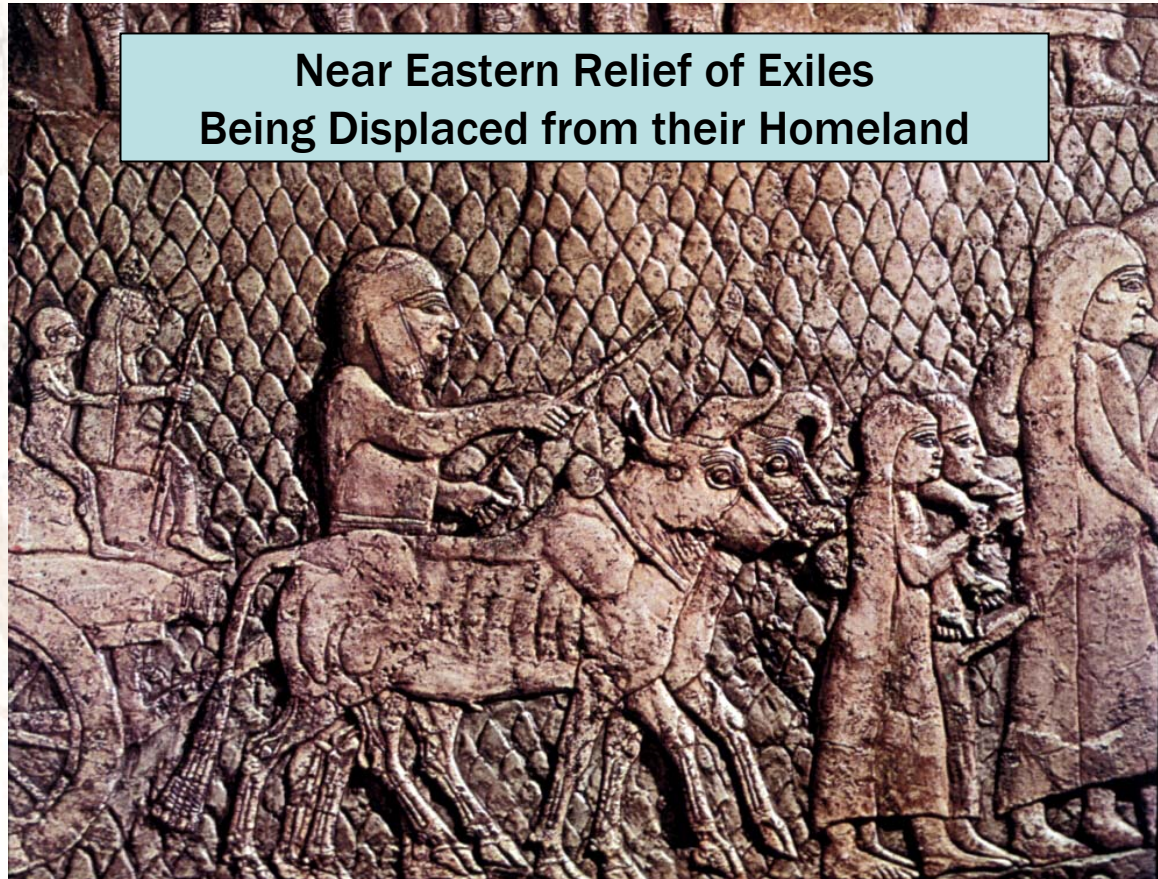


Near Eastern Relief of Exiles
Being Displaced from their Homeland

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- Josephus wrote in the aftermath of the Romans' destruction of the Second Temple
 - which led to the diaspora
 - Josephus focuses on Jewish affairs



Near Eastern Relief of Exiles
Being Displaced from their Homeland

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- the **New Testament** is written in the **Greek** language
 - which is also problematical for historians of the early Christian church
 - as a peasant belonging to the lower class, Jesus lived in a community which spoke **Aramaic** (a Semitic language)
 - cf. Arabic, Hebrew
 - did Jesus know Greek?

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- the writers of the Gospels chose Greek because it was used all across the eastern Mediterranean region
 - mostly by people with international interests: merchants and scholars
 - Aramaic was a language not spoken by the upper classes or widely known
- clearly, Greek could spread the gospels to a wider and wealthier readership

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- but then it's very likely that the words of Jesus were translated from the original Aramaic he spoke
 - which does not mean that the New Testament is not “the word of Christ,” just not “the *words* of Christ”
 - but translation *per se* can cause problems, especially for those who base religious policy on specific terminology

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- an excellent example of how difficult it is to situate Jesus historically is the issue of the year of his birth
 - remember that we don't even know the year Julius Caesar was born
 - pinpointing a peasant's birth year is unlikely
 - “Year 1” (A.D. or CE) is based on medieval calculations and few reliable data
 - probably not the correct year of Jesus' birth

Early Christianity and History

Introduction: Jesus and History

- and Jesus' birth story (Luke) and his early years (Matthew) are troubled, when seen as histories
 - no Roman custom of taxing “all the world”: not feasible in the day
 - returning to one's ancestral home-city is a Jewish custom never used by Romans
 - the Slaughter of the Innocents cannot have followed Herod's death in 4 BCE

Early Christianity and History

Early Christianity and History

- thus, the “history” of Christianity begins with Saint **Paul** (ca. 3-67 CE)
 - born “**Saul of Tarsus**” (south-east coast of Asia Minor)
 - a Jew trained in Greek, with Roman citizenship
 - the greatest of Jesus’ early interpreters
 - “the second founder of the Christian Church”



Drawing of Paul
from the catacombs

Early Christianity and History

Early Christianity and History

- Paul was by far the best educated of Jesus' disciples
 - uniquely positioned to bridge the Jewish and Greek worlds
 - blended classical traditions with Christian theology
 - e.g. **Stoicism**
 - all people are essentially equal
 - slavery and war are wrong

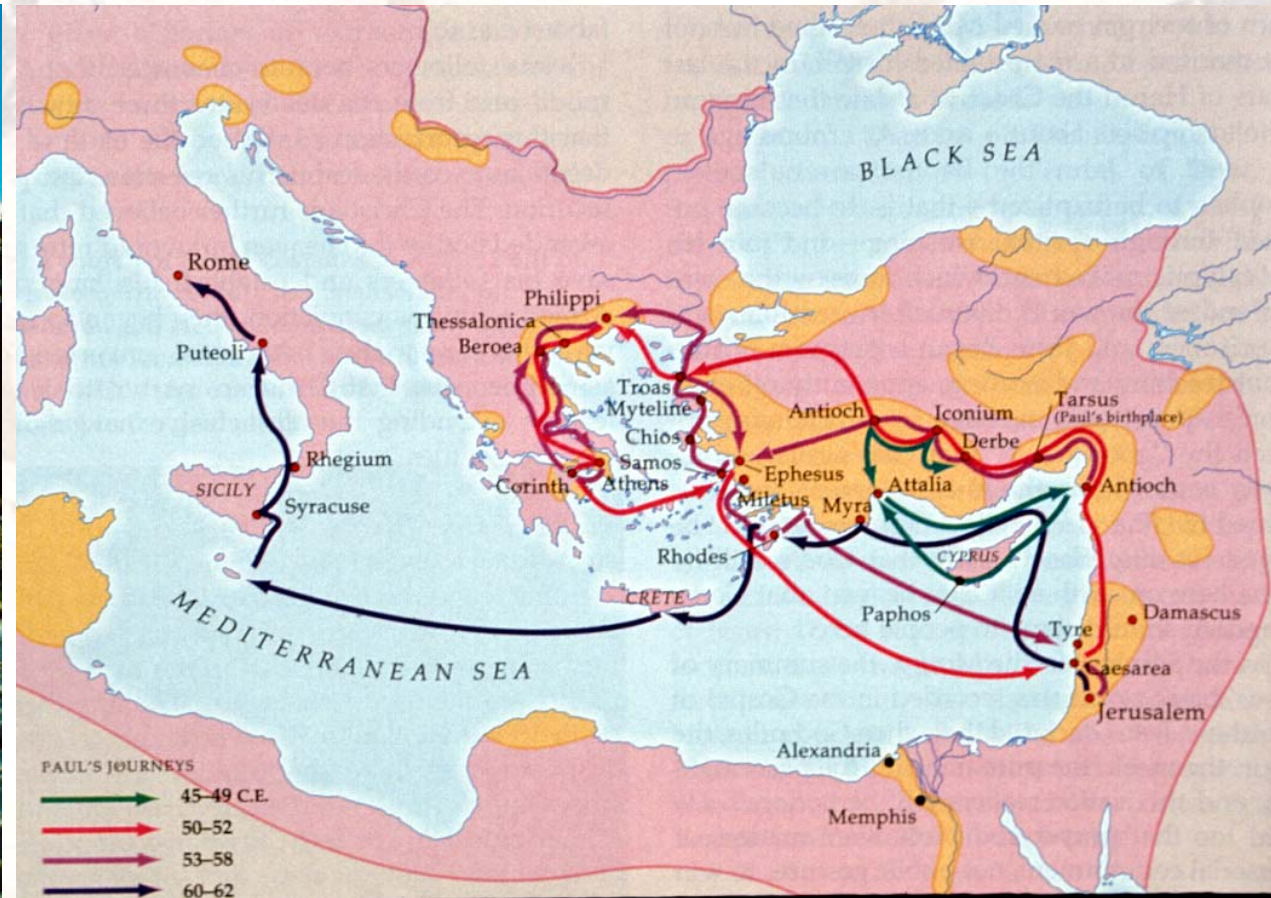


drawing of St. Paul
from the catacombs

Early Christianity and History

Early Christianity and History

- Paul opened Christianity to the world at large



Early Christianity and History

Early Christianity and History

- Paul's letters are tied to cities outside Judea and predate the Gospels by at least a decade
 - Paul set the basic rituals of early Christianity, e.g.
 - mass, communion, redemption through Christ's suffering
 - also began the antagonism between Jews and Christians



St. Paul. From a Ravenna mosaic.

Early Christianity and History

Early Christianity and History

- **Christians irritated Roman authorities by preaching doom**
 - i.e. “Don’t pay your taxes!”
 - Romans saw Christians as a Jewish sect and treated them as “Jews”



early anti-Christian graffito

Early Christianity and History

Early Christianity and History

- Christians irritated Roman authorities by preaching doom
 - to the Romans, the Jews were already a privileged and uncooperative group
 - Jews were exempted from emperor-worship
 - worse yet, Christians riled up Jews



early anti-Christian graffito

Early Christianity and History

Early Christianity and History

- **but in general, Romans were reluctant to persecute any group**
 - they were (in)famous for accepting outsiders' ideas, cf. the Pantheon
- **but at first, exclusivity sounded like “atheism” to Romans**
 - forbidding the worship of other people's gods looked “atheistic” — or selfish at best

Early Christianity and History

Early Christianity and History

- **early Roman persecutions of Christians**
 - **random and relatively few in number**
 - **compared, at least, to what the Romans did to other rebellious groups, e.g. Dacians**
 - **during the economic crisis of the third century CE, most of the persecutions were directed against rich Christians**
 - **many Christians had gotten rich by living in the religious tax-shelter of Christianity**

Early Christianity and History

Early Christianity and History

- at the end of the third century (285 CE)
Diocletian saved the Roman state
 - tough, conservative, no-nonsense, lower-class
 - suspicious of anyone who didn't fight for Rome
 - ordered the last systematic persecution of Christians in the West



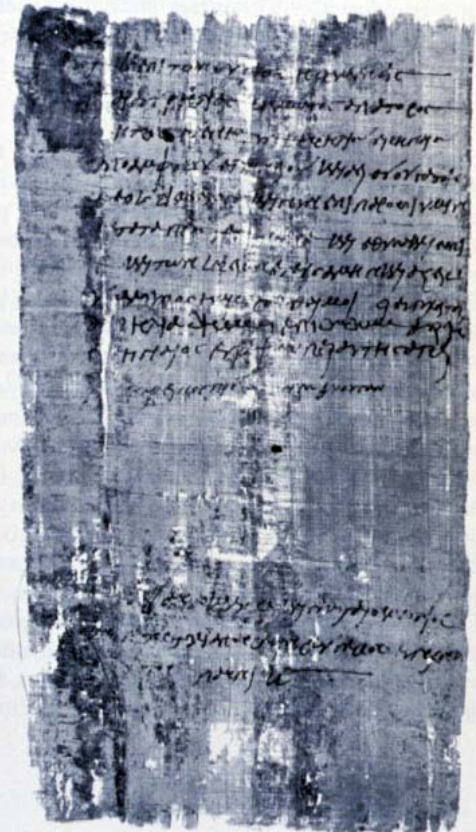
Diocletian

Early Christianity and History

Early Christianity and History

- 304 CE: Diocletian demanded that all Romans sacrifice to his future health
 - he persecuted those Christians who refused
- 311 CE: the last persecution of Christians in the East (Galerius)

CERTIFICATE OF SACRIFICE TO THE OLD GODS as required in 250 by the Emperor Decius from all citizens. 'It has ever been my practice to sacrifice to the gods; now in your presence, in accordance with the Command, I have sacrificed, poured libation, and tasted the offering. I beg you to certify my statement . . . I Aurelia Demos have presented this declaration. I Aurelius Ireneus (her husband) wrote for her as she is illiterate. I Aurelius Sabinus the commissioner saw you sacrificing.'



Early Christianity and History

Constantine and the Triumph of Christianity

- first emperor to embrace Christianity was **Constantine** (ca. 285-337 CE)
 - an enigma historically
 - the illegitimate son of his father Constantius but chosen as his heir
 - raised in the West but preferred to live in the East
 - united Rome by inciting a civil war



Early Christianity and History

Constantine and the Triumph of Christianity

- declared himself “Christian” but worshipped the sun like a pagan
 - founded **Constantinople**
- all in all, Constantine was a transitional figure in history, and apparently also a figure in constant transition himself

Early Christianity and History

Constantine and the Triumph of Christianity

- Constantine claimed to have had a Christian vision before a crucial battle: **in hoc signo vince** (“with this ensign, conquer!”)
 - later “invented history”?
 - cf. Schliemann’s childhood dream of finding Troy



*En touto
nika: In
hoc signo
vince*

Early Christianity and History

Constantine and the Triumph of Christianity

- Constantine issued the **Edict of Milan** (313 CE): official neutrality toward Christianity
 - but tensions within the Church were boiling over
 - Constantine had to decide theology



CONSTANTINE THE GREAT, a contemporary bronze bust now in the museum in Belgrade. Such a bronze head would have adorned his birthplace, Nish in Yugoslavia, as a symbol of imperial authority—liable to mob attack, though such an insult would bring down severe punishment.

Early Christianity and History

Constantine and the Triumph of Christianity

- Constantine's conversion to Christianity failed to create social unity in Rome

- the opposite!

- it alienated traditional pagans

- Lat. *paganus*: “country-dweller”; i.e. draft-dodger

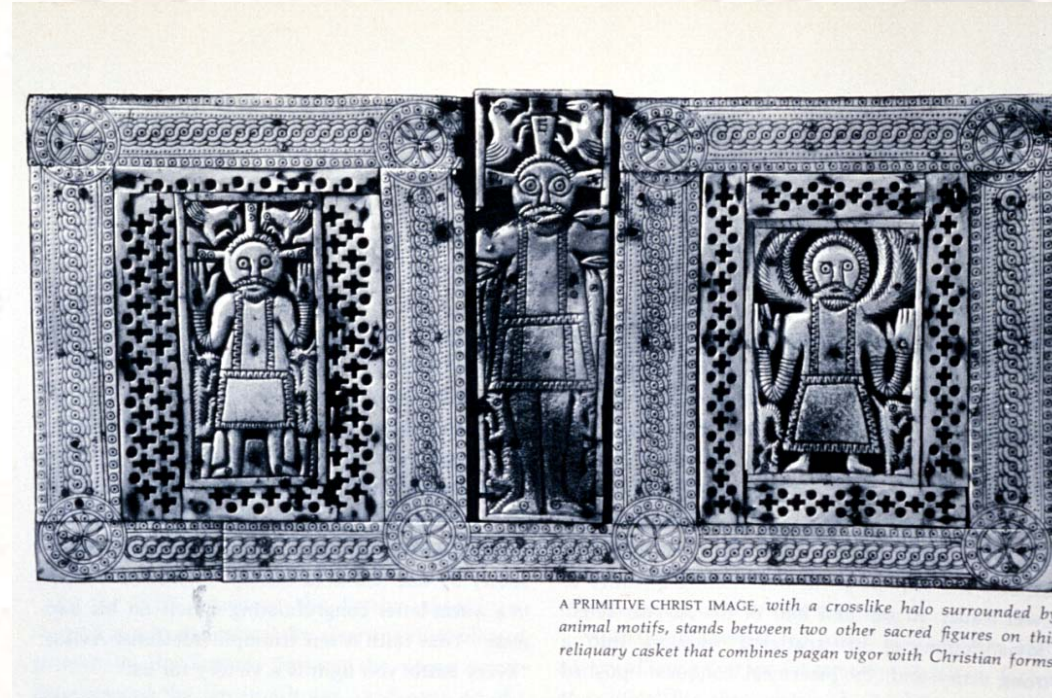


CONSTANTINE THE GREAT, a contemporary bronze bust now in the museum in Belgrade. Such a bronze head would have adorned his birthplace, Nish in Yugoslavia, as a symbol of imperial authority—liable to mob attack, though such an insult would bring down severe punishment.

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- also, there were also tensions within the Church
- **orthodoxy** (“straight opinion”): approved by the Church
- vs. **heresy** (“choice”): free choice



Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- earliest known and most prominent heretical group is the **Gnostics**
 - denounced by the Church
 - the Gnostics — not pagans! — were the real enemy from the Church's perspective
- Gnostic theology is complex
 - the Church banned and burned Gnostic texts almost all of which were lost

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- Gnostic gospels rediscovered in the **Nag Hammadi** library
 - Naj ‘Hammadi (southern Egypt), 1945
 - fifty-two lost early Christian texts, some of which were once part of accepted “biblical” scripture but later removed

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

The early church recognizes the New Testament

AD 100

All dates approximate

Different parts of our New Testament were written by this time, but not yet collected and defined as 'Scripture'. Early Christian writers (for example Polycarp and Ignatius) quote from the Gospels and Paul's letters, as well as from other Christian writings and oral sources.

Paul's letters were collected late in the first century. Matthew, Mark and Luke were brought together by AD 150.

AD 200

New Testament used in the church at Rome (the 'Muratorian Canon')

Four Gospels
Acts
Paul's letters:
Romans
1 & 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 & 2 Thessalonians
1 & 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

James

1 & 2 John
Jude
Revelation of John
Revelation of Peter
Wisdom of Solomon

AD 250

New Testament used by Origen

Four Gospels
Acts
Paul's letters:
Romans
1 & 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 & 2 Thessalonians
1 & 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

1 Peter
1 John

Revelation of John

AD 300

New Testament used by Eusebius

Four Gospels
Acts
Paul's letters:
Romans
1 & 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 & 2 Thessalonians
1 & 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

1 Peter
1 John

Revelation of John
(authorship in doubt)

AD 400

New Testament fixed for the West by the Council of Carthage

Four Gospels
Acts
Paul's letters:
Romans
1 & 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 & 2 Thessalonians
1 & 2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon

Hebrews
James
1 & 2 Peter
1, 2 & 3 John
Jude
Revelation

To be used in private, but not public, worship
The Shepherd of Hermas

Disputed
Hebrews
James
2 Peter
2 & 3 John
Jude
The Shepherd of Hermas
Letter of Barnabas
Teaching of Twelve Apostles
Gospel of the Hebrews

Disputed but well known
James
2 Peter
2 & 3 John
Jude
To be excluded
The Shepherd of Hermas
Letter of Barnabas
Gospel of the Hebrews
Revelation of Peter
Acts of Peter
Diatheche

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- **Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels***

Yet even the fifty-two writings discovered at Nag Hammadi offer only a glimpse of the complexity of the early Christian movement. We now begin to see that what we call Christianity—and what we identify as Christian tradition—actually represents only a small selection of specific sources, chosen from among dozens of others. . . . Now, for the first time, we have the opportunity to find out about the earliest Christian heresy; for the first time, the heretics can speak for themselves.

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- in general, Gnostics saw a “less literal” Jesus who was not part of an evil, material world
 - to Gnostics, Jesus’ godhead was more spiritual
 - his appearance on earth was an illusion
 - thus, no suffering on the cross
 - no point in baptism or martyrdom

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- the conflict between the Gnostics and the Church centered on the formation of a religious bureaucracy
 - Gnostics called Church structures and rituals (e.g. mass) “waterless canals”
 - instead, according to Gnostics, people should find their own path to heaven
 - Gnostic **Theodotus**: “each person recognizes the Lord in his own way, not all alike”

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- **basically, the Gnostics resisted the growth of the Church as an institution**

[I]nvestigation of the newly discovered Gnostic sources . . . suggests that these religious debates—questions of the nature of God, or of Christ—simultaneously bear social and political implications that are crucial to the development of Christianity as an institutional religion. In simplest terms, ideas which bear implications contrary to that development come to be labeled as “heresy”; ideas which implicitly support it become “orthodox.” (Pagels)

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- Gnostics focused on Christ's miracles as evidence that he was supernatural
 - thus, gender was unimportant, cf. Akhenaten and the aten
 - **Gospel of Mary**: Mary Magdalene was an apostle, the “woman who knew all”
 - other Gnostics speak of “God the Mother”

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- all in all, Gnosticism offered a very different take on Christ's teaching from the early Church's position
 - Gnosticism had a more radically and fundamentally different message from almost any type of Christian doctrine formulated since antiquity
- and Gnosticism was far from the only “heresy” out there

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- **Gnosticism was relatively easy to crush since Gnostics refused to organize**
 - individual Gnostics could be isolated and stifled or eradicated
- **but a much more effective foe to orthodox policy was lurking inside the Church itself**

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- the nature of Christ as a deity was problematical: both divine and human at the same time
 - unlike Dionysus who was mortal, then died, then was reborn as a god in triumph



Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- also, what is the nature of the Trinity?
 - is the Son subordinate to the Father?
 - if he is, Christianity is then a branch of Judaism
 - if not, how does God become his own son?
 - this complex issue caused problems for those trying to convert uneducated barbarians



Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- rise of **Arianism**: a simpler form of Christianity than that endorsed by the orthodox Church
 - originated with a dynamic and well-educated priest **Arius** (ca. 250-336 CE) who lived in Alexandria (Egypt)
 - Arianism: Jesus is God's son and therefore secondary to the Father
 - hard argument for the Church to counter

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- the Church's response was led by **Athanasius**, the bishop of Alexandria
 - i.e. he was Arius' boss!
 - Athanasius' answer: the Holy Trinity is a mystery
 - in other words, Arius should shut up and stop making trouble



Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- to solve the Arian crisis, Constantine called the **Council of Nicaea, 325 CE**
 - the bishops voted at Nicaea to back Athanasius and issued the **Nicene Creed**

- Christ is “begotten, not made” by God

But those who say that there was once when he was not and before he was begotten he was not and he was made of things that were not or maintain that the Son of God is of a different essence or substance or created or subject to moral change or alteration—the Catholic and Apostolic Church condemn them to damnation.

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- but despite the “damnation” of the Council of Nicaea, Arianism thrived!
 - later councils voted to support Arius’ views
 - Arian Christian missionaries converted many barbarians



CHRIST AS THE DIVINITY OF A GERMANIC WARRIOR ARISTOCRACY. In this funerary plaque from Gröden, Puy-de-Dôme (possibly seventh century), he is shown 'armed as a soldier, scaramax [Frankish battle-axe] in belt and lance in hand, with other curious accoutrements. He has a long phallus, there are beasts round him and a snake under his feet; and he wears a head-dress not unworthy of a pagan god. It has points of resemblance to the figure on a brooch from Finglesham in Kent, which is now thought to be Woden'—J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, p. 28.

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- the success of Arianism forced the Church to harden its policy toward all heresies and internal dissent
 - it was decided only Church authorities were allowed to interpret scripture
 - this is when the New Testament was set at the 27 canonical books
 - Gnostic Gospels were censured/destroyed
 - a Gnostic buried the Nag Hammadi library

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- the Church endorses the seven sacraments

- baptism
- confirmation
- Eucharist
- penance
- marriage
- ordination
- final unction



Early Christianity and History

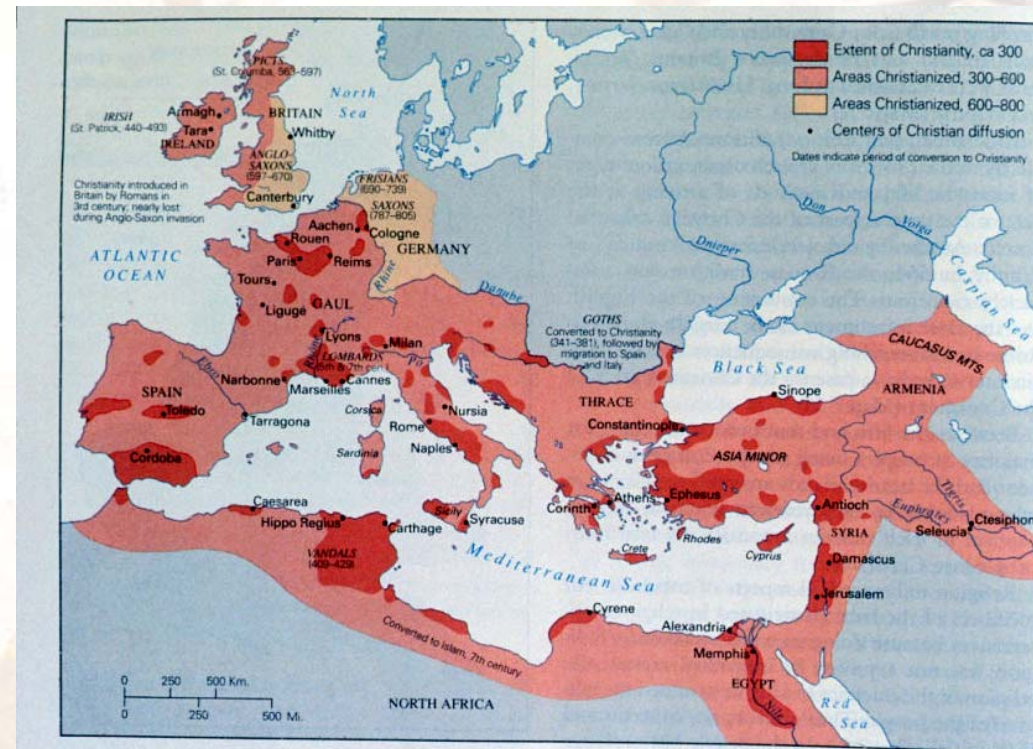
Early Christian Controversies

- leadership roles were assumed by the **bishops** governing Christian **sees**

- archbishop of Rome: **papa**

- i.e. the pope

- archbishop of Constantinople: **patriarch**



MAP 7.2 The Spread of Christianity Originating in Judaea, the southern part of modern Israel and Jordan, Christianity spread throughout the Roman world. Roman sea lanes and Roman roads facilitated the expansion.

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- the division of the Christian world into sees and bishoprics was based on the principle of **apostolic succession**
 - Christ's disciples founded the bishoprics
 - probably, an invented history
 - created to tie the Western Church more closely to the New Testament

Early Christianity and History

Early Christian Controversies

- after the “Fall of Rome,” the Western and Eastern Churches grew estranged
 - in the eleventh century (1050’s CE), they formally separated from each other
 - the schism between the Western Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church
- thus, the Church could not hold itself together as a unified body
 - the Gnostics are probably laughing!

Early Christianity and History

Conclusion: What Early Christianity Teaches

- **early Christian controversies offer a very different view of Christianity**
 - e.g., God the Mother, Mary Magdalene the Apostle, Jesus not suffering on the cross
- **an upside-down tree of evolution**
 - greater diversity early rather than later
 - after the establishment of the Church, it was hard to change essential premises about Jesus' nature and teaching

Early Christianity and History

Conclusion: What Early Christianity Teaches

- what is the lesson historians learn from early Christianity?
 - Christ's life is obscured by a lack of data and too much interest in his biography
 - that makes him an ideal target for invented history
 - which is not to say any particular history attached to him is invented, only that the wise historian is suspicious of any purported report about his life and teachings

Early Christianity and History

Conclusion: What Early Christianity Teaches

- in the end, one view of Jesus' life and teaching won out over all others
 - e.g., that he was actually human and his suffering on the cross was real
- but in the day that was not the only way to see him and his ministry
 - the “realistic” view suited the society of later Rome and the Church's needs best

Early Christianity and History

Conclusion: What Early Christianity Teaches

- and this was anything but the end of the debate about the nature of God and how to organize a church
 - others would suggest very different views about Jesus and how to read the heritage of the “ancient Hebrew scriptures”
 - next up: Muhammad and Islam!