

The Apostolic Age

Sources for this Study

Schaff, Philip, *History of the Christian Church*,
Volume I, Chapter III

Encyclopedia Britannica

Josephus, Flavius, *Wars of the Jews*

Books of the New Testament

Introduction

The Acts of the Apostles give us the external, the Epistles the internal history of early Christianity. The Acts bear on the face all the marks of an original, fresh, and trustworthy narrative of contemporaneous events derived from the best sources of information, and in great part from personal observation and experience. The authorship of Luke, the companion of Paul, is conceded by a majority of the best modern scholars; and this fact alone establishes the credibility. Renan (in his *St. Paul*, ch. 1) admirably calls the Acts "a book of joy, of serene ardor. Since the Homeric poems no book has been seen full of such fresh sensations. A breeze of morning, an odor of the sea, if I dare express it so, inspiring something joyful and strong, penetrates the whole book, and makes it an excellent *compagnon de voyage*, the exquisite breviary for him who is searching for ancient remains on the seas of the south. This is the second idyll of Christianity. The Lake of Tiberias and its fishing barks had furnished the first. Now, a more powerful breeze, aspirations toward more distant lands, draw us out into the open sea."

General Character of the Apostolic Age.

The apostolic period extends from the Day of Pentecost to the death of St. John, and covers about seventy years, from AD 30 to 100. The field of action is Palestine, and gradually extends over Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. The most prominent centers are Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome, which represent respectively the mother churches of Jewish, Gentile, and United Catholic Christianity.

Next to them are Ephesus and Corinth. Ephesus acquired a special importance by the residence and labors of John, which made themselves felt

during the second century through Polycarp and Irenaeus.

Samaria, Damascus, Joppa, Caesarea, Tyre, Cyprus, the provinces of Asia Minor, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Beraea, Athens, Crete, Patmos, Malta, Puteoli, come also into view as points where the Christian faith was planted. Through the eunuch converted by Philip, it reached Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. As early as AD 58 Paul could say: "From Jerusalem and round about even unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ." (Rom. 15:19) He afterwards carried it to Rome, where it had already been known before, and possibly as far as Spain, the western boundary of the empire. (Rom. 15:24)

The nationalities reached by the gospel in the first century were the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans, and the languages used were the Hebrew or Aramaic, and especially the Greek, which was at that time the organ of civilization and of international intercourse within the Roman empire.

The contemporary secular history includes the reigns of the Roman Emperors from Tiberius to Nero and Domitian, who either ignored or persecuted Christianity. We are brought directly into contact with King Herod Agrippa I. (grandson of Herod the Great), the murderer of the apostle, James the Elder; with his son King Agrippa II. (the last of the Herodian house), who with his sister Bernice (a most corrupt woman) listened to Paul's defense; with two Roman governors, Felix and Festus; with Pharisees and Sadducees; with Stoics and Epicureans; with the temple and theatre at Ephesus, with the court of the Areopagus at Athens, and with Caesar's palace in Rome.

Sources of Information

The author of Acts records the heroic march of Christianity from the capital of Judaism to the capital of heathenism with the same artless simplicity and serene faith as the Evangelists tell the story of Jesus; well knowing that it needs no embellishment, no apology, no subjective reflections, and that it will surely triumph by its inherent spiritual power.

The Acts and the Pauline Epistles accompany us with reliable information down to the year 63. Peter and Paul are lost out of sight in the lurid fires of the Neronian persecution which seemed to consume Christianity itself. We know nothing certain of that satanic spectacle from authentic sources beyond the information of heathen historians. A few years afterwards followed the destruction of Jerusalem, which must have made an overpowering impression and broken the last ties which bound Jewish Christianity to the old theocracy. The event is indeed brought before us in the prophecy of Christ as recorded in the Gospels, but for the terrible fulfilment we are dependent on the account of an unbelieving Jew, which, as the testimony of an enemy, is all the more impressive.

The remaining thirty years of the first century are involved in mysterious darkness, illuminated only by the writings of John. This is a period of church history about which we know least and would like to know most. This period is the favorite field for ecclesiastical fables and critical conjectures. How thankfully would the historian hail the discovery of any new authentic documents between the martyrdom of Peter and Paul and the death of John, and again between the death of John and the age of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus.

Causes of Success.

As to the numerical strength of Christianity at the close of the first century, we have no information whatever. Statistical reports were unknown in those days. The estimate of half a million among the one hundred millions or more inhabitants of the Roman empire is probably exaggerated. The pentecostal conversion of three thousand in one day at Jerusalem, and the "immense multitude" of martyrs under Nero, favor a high estimate. The churches in Antioch also, Ephesus, and Corinth were strong enough to bear the strain of controversy and division into parties. But the majority of congregations were no doubt small, often a mere handful of poor people. In the country districts paganism (as the name indicates) lingered longest, even beyond the age of Constantine.

The Christian converts belonged mostly to the middle and lower classes of society, such as fishermen, peasants, mechanics, traders,

freedmen, slaves. St. Paul says: "Not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble were called, but God chose the foolish things of the world, that he might put to shame them that are wise; and God chose the weak things of the world that he might put to shame the things that are strong; and the base things of the world, and the things that are despised, did God choose, yea, and the things that are not, that he might bring to naught the things that are: that no flesh should glory before God." (1 Cor. 1:26-29) And yet these poor, illiterate churches were the recipients of the noblest gifts, and alive to the deepest problems and highest thoughts which can challenge the attention of an immortal mind. Christianity built from the foundation upward. From the lower ranks come the rising men of the future, who constantly reinforce the higher ranks and prevent their decay.

At the time of the conversion of Constantine, in the beginning of the fourth century, the number of Christians may have reached ten or twelve millions, that is about one-tenth of the total population of the Roman empire. Some estimate it higher.

The rapid success of Christianity under the most unfavorable circumstances is surprising and its own best vindication. It was achieved in the face of an indifferent or hostile world, and by purely spiritual and moral means, without shedding a drop of blood except that of its own innocent martyrs. Gibbon, in the famous fifteenth chapter of his "History," attributes the rapid spread to five causes, namely:

1. the intolerant but enlarged religious zeal of the Christians inherited from the Jews;
2. the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, concerning which the ancient philosophers had but vague and dreamy ideas;
3. the miraculous powers attributed to the primitive church;
4. the purer but austere morality of the first Christians;
5. the unity and discipline of the church, which gradually formed a growing commonwealth in the heart of the empire.

But every one of these causes, properly understood, points to the superior excellency and

to the divine origin of the Christian religion, and this is the chief cause, which the Deistic historian omits.

Significance of the Apostolic Age.

The life of Christ is the divine-human fountainhead of the Christian religion; the apostolic age is the fountainhead of the Christian church, as an organized society separate and distinct from the Jewish synagogue. It is the age of the Holy Spirit, the age of inspiration and legislation for all subsequent ages.

Here springs, in its original freshness and purity, the living water of the new creation. Christianity comes down from heaven as a supernatural fact, yet long predicted and prepared for, and adapted to the deepest wants of human nature. Signs and wonders and extraordinary demonstrations of the Spirit, for the conversion of unbelieving Jews and heathens, attend its entrance into the world of sin. It takes up its permanent abode with our fallen race, to transform it gradually, without war or bloodshed, by a quiet, leaven-like process, into a kingdom of truth and righteousness.

Modest and humble, lowly and unseemly in outward appearance, but steadily conscious of its divine origin and its eternal destiny; without silver or gold, but rich in supernatural gifts and powers, strong in faith, fervent in love, and joyful in hope; bearing in earthen vessels the imperishable treasures of heaven, it presents itself upon the stage of history as the only true, the perfect religion, for all the nations of the earth.

At first an insignificant and even contemptible sect in the eyes of the carnal mind, hated and persecuted by Jews and heathens, it confounds the wisdom of Greece and the power of Rome, soon plants the standard of the cross in the great cities of Asia, Africa, and Europe, and proves itself the hope of the world.

In virtue of this original purity, vigor, and beauty, and the permanent success of primitive Christianity, the canonical authority of the single but inexhaustible volume of its literature, and the character of the apostles, those inspired organs of the Holy Spirit, those untaught teachers of mankind, the apostolic age has an incomparable interest and importance in the history of the church. It is the immovable groundwork of the

whole. It has the same regulative force for all the subsequent developments of the church as the inspired writings of the apostles have for the works of all later Christian authors.

Furthermore, the apostolic Christianity is preformative, and contains the living germs of all the following periods, personages, and tendencies. It holds up the highest standard of doctrine and discipline; it is the inspiring genius of all true progress; it suggests to every age its peculiar problem with the power to solve it. Christianity can never outgrow Christ, but it grows in Christ; theology cannot go beyond the word of God, but it must ever progress in the understanding and application of the word of God. The three leading apostles represent not only the three stages of the apostolic church, but also as many ages and types of Christianity, and yet they are all present in every age and every type.

The Representative Apostles.

Peter, Paul, and John stand out most prominently as the chosen Three who accomplished the great work of the apostolic age, and exerted, by their writings and example, a controlling influence on all subsequent ages. To them correspond three centres of influence, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome.

Paul was called last and out of the regular order, by the personal appearance of the exalted Lord from heaven, and in authority and importance he was equal to any of the three pillars, but filled a place of his own, as the independent apostle of the Gentiles. He had around him a small band of co-laborers and pupils, such as Barnabas, Silas, Titus, Timothy, Luke.

Nine of the original Twelve, including Matthias, who was chosen in the place of Judas, labored no doubt faithfully and effectively, in preaching the gospel throughout the Roman empire and to the borders of the barbarians, but in subordinate positions, and their labors are known to us only from vague and uncertain traditions.

The labors of James and Peter we can follow in the Acts to the Council of Jerusalem, AD 50, and a little beyond; those of Paul to his first imprisonment in Rome, AD 61-63; John lived to the close of the first century. As to their last labors we have no authentic information in the New

Testament, but the unanimous testimony of antiquity that Peter and Paul suffered martyrdom in Rome during or after the Neronian persecution, and that John died a natural death at Ephesus. The Acts breaks off abruptly with Paul still living and working, a prisoner in Rome, "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, with all boldness, none forbidding him." A significant conclusion.

It would be difficult to find three men equally great and good, equally endowed with genius sanctified by grace, bound together by deep and strong love to the common Master, and laboring for the same cause, yet so different in temper and constitution, as Peter, Paul, and John. Peter stands out in history as the main pillar of the primitive church, as the Rock-apostle, as the chief of the twelve foundation-stones of the new Jerusalem; John as the bosom-friend of the Saviour, as the son of thunder, as the soaring eagle, as the apostle of love; Paul as the champion of Christian freedom and progress, as the greatest missionary, with "the care of all the churches" upon his heart, as the expounder of the Christian system of doctrine, as the father of Christian theology.

Peter was a man of action, always in haste and ready to take the lead; the first to confess Christ, and the first to preach Christ on the day of Pentecost; Paul a man equally potent in word and deed; John a man of mystic contemplation. Peter was unlearned and altogether practical; Paul a scholar and thinker as well as a worker; John a theosophist and seer.

Peter was sanguine, ardent, impulsive, hopeful, kind-hearted, given to sudden changes, "consistently inconsistent" (to use an Aristotelian phrase); Paul was choleric, energetic, bold, noble, independent, uncompromising; John somewhat melancholic, introverted, reserved, burning within of love to Christ and hatred of Antichrist. Peter's Epistles are full of sweet grace and comfort, the result of deep humiliation and rich experience; those of Paul abound in severe thought and logical argument, but rising at times to the heights of celestial eloquence, as in the seraphic description of love and the triumphant paean of the eighth chapter of the Romans; John's writings are simple, serene, profound, intuitive, sublime, inexhaustible.

We would like to know more about the personal relations of these pillar-apostles, but must be satisfied with a few hints. They labored in different fields and seldom met face to face in their busy life. Time was too precious, their work too serious, for sentimental enjoyments of friendship.

Paul went to Jerusalem AD 40, three years after his conversion, for the express purpose of making the personal acquaintance of Peter, and spent two weeks with him; he saw none of the other apostles, but only James, the Lord's brother. He met the pillar-apostles at the Conference in Jerusalem, AD 50, and concluded with them the peaceful concordat concerning the division of labor, and the question of circumcision; the older apostles gave him and Barnabas "the right hands of fellowship" in token of brotherhood and fidelity.

Not long afterwards Paul met Peter a third time, at Antioch, but came into open collision with him on the great question of Christian freedom and the union of Jewish and Gentile converts. The collision was merely temporary, but significantly reveals the profound commotion and fermentation of the apostolic age, and foreshadowed future antagonisms and reconciliations in the church. Several years later (AD 57) Paul refers the last time to Cephas, and the brethren of the Lord, for the right to marry and to take a wife with him on his missionary journeys.

Peter, in his first Epistle to Pauline churches, confirms them in their Pauline faith, and in his second Epistle, his last will and testament, he affectionately commends the letters of his "beloved brother Paul," adding, however, the characteristic remark, which all commentators must admit to be true, that (even beside the account of the scene in Antioch) there are in them "some things hard to be understood."

Peter was the chief actor in the first stage of apostolic Christianity and fulfilled the prophecy of his name in laying the foundation of the church among the Jews and the Gentiles. In the second stage he is overshadowed by the mighty labors of Paul; but after the apostolic age he stands out again most prominent in the memory of the church.

He is chosen by the Roman communion as its special patron saint and as the first pope. He is

always named before Paul. To him most of the churches are dedicated. In the name of this poor fisherman of Galilee, who had neither gold nor silver, and was crucified like a malefactor and a slave, the triple-crowned popes deposed kings, shook empires, dispensed blessings and curses on earth and in purgatory, and even now claim the power to settle infallibly all questions of Christian doctrine and discipline for the Catholic world.

Paul was the chief actor in the second stage of the apostolic church, the apostle of the Gentiles, the founder of Christianity in Asia Minor and Greece, the emancipator of the new religion from the yoke of Judaism, the herald of evangelical freedom, the standard-bearer of reform and progress. His controlling influence was felt also in Rome, and is clearly seen in the genuine Epistle of Clement, who makes more account of him than of Peter.

But soon afterwards he is almost forgotten, except by name. He is indeed associated with Peter as the founder of the church of Rome, but in a secondary line; his Epistle to the Romans is little read and understood by the Romans even to this day; his church lies outside of the walls of the eternal city, while St. Peter's is its chief ornament and glory. In Africa alone he was appreciated, first by the rugged and racy Tertullian, more fully by the profound Augustine, who passed through similar contrasts in his religious experience; but Augustine's Pauline doctrines of sin and grace had no effect whatever on the Eastern church, and were practically overpowered in the Western church by Pelagian tendencies.

For a long time Paul's name was used and abused outside of the ruling orthodoxy and hierarchy by anti-catholic heretics and sectaries in their protest against the new yoke of traditionalism and ceremonialism. But in the sixteenth century he celebrated a real resurrection and inspired the evangelical reformation. Then his Epistles to the Galatians and Romans were republished, explained, and applied with trumpet tongues by Luther and Calvin. Then his protest against Judaizing bigotry and legal bondage was renewed, and the rights of Christian liberty asserted on the largest scale. Of all men in church history, St. Augustine not excepted, Martin Luther, once a contracted monk, then a prophet of freedom, has most affinity in word and work with the apostle of

the Gentiles, and ever since Paul's genius has ruled the theology and religion of Protestantism. As the gospel of Christ was cast out from Jerusalem to bless the Gentiles, so Paul's Epistle to the Romans was expelled from Rome to enlighten and to emancipate Protestant nations in the distant North and far West.

St. John, the most intimate companion of Jesus, the apostle of love, the seer who looked back to the ante-mundane beginning and forward to the post-mundane end of all things, and who is to tarry till the coming of the Lord, kept aloof from active part in the controversies between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. He appears prominent in the Acts and the Epistle to the Galatians, as one of the pillar-apostles, but not a word of his is reported. He was waiting in mysterious silence, with a reserved force, for his proper time, which did not come till Peter and Paul had finished their mission.

Then, after their departure, he revealed the hidden depths of his genius in his marvellous writings, which represent the last and crowning work of the apostolic church. John has never been fully fathomed, but it has been felt throughout all the periods of church history that he has best understood and portrayed the Master, and may yet speak the last word in the conflict of ages and usher in an era of harmony and peace. Paul is the heroic captain of the church militant, John the mystic prophet of the church triumphant.

Far above them all, throughout the apostolic age and all subsequent ages, stands the one great Master from whom Peter, Paul, and John drew their inspiration, to whom they bowed in holy adoration, whom alone they served and glorified in life and in death, and to whom they still point in their writings as the perfect image of God, as the Saviour from sin and death, as the Giver of eternal life, as the divine harmony of conflicting creeds and schools, as the Alpha and Omega of the Christian faith.

Chronology of the Apostolic Age.

The chronology of the apostolic age is partly certain, at least within a few years, partly conjectural: certain as to the principal events from AD 30 to 70, conjectural as to intervening points and the last thirty years of the first century. The

sources are the New Testament (especially the Acts and the Pauline Epistles), Josephus, and the Roman historians. Josephus b. 37, d. 103) is especially valuable here, as he wrote the Jewish history down to the destruction of Jerusalem.

The following dates are more or less certain and accepted by most historians:

1. The founding of the Christian Church on the feast of Pentecost in May AD 30. This is on the assumption that Christ was born BC 4 or 5, and was crucified in April AD 30, at an age of thirty-three.
2. The death of King Herod Agrippa I. AD 44 (according to Josephus). This settles the date of the preceding martyrdom of James the elder, Peter's imprisonment and release Acts 12:2, 23).
3. The Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, AD 50 (Acts 15:1 sqq.; Gal. 2:1-10). This date is ascertained by reckoning backwards to Paul's conversion, and forward to the Caesarean captivity. Paul was probably converted in 37, and "fourteen years" elapsed from that event to the Council. But chronologists differ on the year of Paul's conversion, between 31 and 40.²⁴⁵
4. The dates of the Epistles to the Galatians, Corinthians, and Romans, between 56 and 58. The date of the Epistle to the Romans can be fixed almost to the month from its own indications combined with the statements of the Acts. It was written before the apostle had been in Rome, but when he was on the point of departure for Jerusalem and Rome on the way to Spain,²⁴⁶ after having finished his collections in Macedonia and Achaia for the poor brethren in Judaea;²⁴⁷ and he sent the epistle through Phebe, a deaconess of the congregation in the eastern port of Corinth, where he was at that time.²⁴⁸ These indications point clearly to the spring of the year 58, for in that year he was taken prisoner in Jerusalem and carried to Caesarea.
5. Paul's captivity in Caesarea, AD 58 to 60, during the procuratorship of Felix and Festus, who changed places in 60 or 61, probably in 60. This important date we can ascertain by combination from several passages in Josephus, and Tacitus.²⁴⁹ It enables us at the same time, by reckoning backward, to fix some preceding events in the life of the apostle.
6. Paul's first captivity in Rome, AD 61 to 63. This follows from the former date in connection with the statement in Acts 28:30.
7. The Epistles of the Roman captivity, Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, AD 61-63.
8. The Neronian persecution, AD 64 (the tenth year of Nero, according to Tacitus). The martyrdom of Paul and Peter occurred either then, or (according to tradition) a few years later. The question depends on the second Roman captivity of Paul.
9. The destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, AD 70 (according to Josephus and Tacitus).
10. The death of John after the accession of Trajan, AD 98 (according to general ecclesiastical tradition).

The dates of the Synoptical Gospels, the Acts, the Pastoral Epistles, the Hebrews, and the Epistles of Peter, James, and Jude cannot be accurately ascertained except that they were composed before the destruction of Jerusalem, mostly between 60 and 70. The writings of John were written after that date and towards the close of the first century, except the Apocalypse, which some of the best scholars, from internal indications assign to the year 68 or 69, between the death of Nero and the destruction of Jerusalem.

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