

# 1. The First Three Centuries

## I. The Birth of the Church

### A. Pentecost

#### 1. Pentecost

Pentecost (πεντηκοστή, from πενήκοντα *fifty*) is the Greek name for the Feast of Weeks, *Shavuot*, one of the three great festivals of the Jewish year (with *Pesah* Passover, *Sukkot* Booths), for which Jews made pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Exod 23:14-17; Deut 16:1-17). Shavuot was 50 days (7 weeks [*shavuot*] + 1 day) after Passover (Lev 23:15-16; Deut 16:9-10), on the 6th day of the 3rd month.

#### 2. The Diaspora

##### Divine Judgment

In the OT, scattering was due to God's judgment:

1. Scattering of the nations: at Babel (Gen 11:8-9).
2. Scattering of Israel.
  - a. Israel taken by Assyria in 722 BC, which scattered the people throughout its empire (the Ten Lost Tribes), and settled foreign peoples in Israel. These foreigners intermarried with the remaining Israelites to produce the Samaritans.
  - b. Judah taken into Captivity by Babylon in 587 BC.

Even after the 70-year Exile was over, few Jews returned to Jerusalem. Most scattered to the four corners of the earth. These scattered Jews became known collectively as the Diaspora (διασπορά, Gk scattering).

##### The Hope of Return

God promised that he would bring a remnant (תִּירְיָאֵף)] home to Jerusalem/Zion (Deut 30:3; Isa 11:11-12; Jer 23:3; Ezek 36:24). Even Gentiles would join the Jews in this world pilgrimage to Zion (Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-3; Zech 8:20-23).

##### Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

On the day of Pentecost, many members of the Diaspora were present in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5, 9-11). They had come from the four corners of the earth:

- east: Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia
- center: Judea
- north: Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia
- west: Egypt, Libya (around Cyrene), Rome (Jews and proselytes), Crete
- south: Arabia

#### 3. The Gift of the Spirit and the Birth of the Church

The empowering of the Spirit enabled Peter's first sermon:

1. **Apologia/defense** (2:14-21): a defense (απολογία) of what has happened. "This is that" (κιν): this (the gift of the Spirit) = that (the promised gift of the spirit in the last days, Joel 2:28-32). Conclusion: the last days have arrived, God has returned to restore his people.
2. **Kerygma/proclamation** (2:22-36): proclamation (κήρυγμα) of the events of Jesus' life. These now make sense.
3. **Call to repentance** (2:37-41): repent and be baptized.

Acts is about the spread of the gospel and the church outwards from Jerusalem under the impulse of the Holy Spirit.

1. Jesus' programmatic statement: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Acts records this witness to Jesus in Jerusalem (1:12-8:1a), in Judea and Samaria (8:1b-12:25), to the ends of the earth (13:1-28:31).

2. Luke gives periodic statements that the word of God and the church grew (αὐξάνω) and multiplied (πληθύνω) (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20).
3. each new stage in the expansion of the gospel is initiated by the Holy Spirit, e.g. 8:29; 10:19; 13:2, 4.
4. Luke records major speeches (απολογία defense or κήρυγμα proclamation): Peter, Stephen, James, Paul.

## B. The Jerusalem Church

### Composition

Nucleus (1:13-14):

1. The apostles: the Eleven recognized the need to expand to Twelve again, the symbolic number of God's people. Qualification: a witness of Jesus' entire ministry from his baptism by John to his ascension (1:22). Reason: to bear witness to his resurrection.
2. The women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Salome (Zebedee's wife, Mary's sister?), Mary wife of Clopas. They had accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, supporting him out of their own means (Matt 27:55-56; Mark 15:40; Luke 8:2-3; 23:49; 24:10; John 19:25).
3. Mary, Jesus' mother:
4. Jesus' brothers: James (Heb/Gk Jacob), Joseph, Simon, Jude (Heb. Judah, Gk Judas) (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3). Jesus made a post-resurrection appearance to James (1 Cor 15:7). James succeeded Peter as leader of the Jerusalem church. The letters of James and Jude are included in the NT General Epistles. James became known as James the Just/Righteous (ὁ δίκαιος).

The community grew rapidly: from 120 (1:15), to 3000 (on Pentecost, 2:41), to 5000 men (4:4).

The believers were all Jewish: Hebrew-speaking Palestinian Jews, Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora, proselytes (προσήλυτος, Gentile convert to Judaism).

The believers were from all levels of society: property-owners, priests, the poor.

### Meeting Places

The believers met in several locations:

1. the Upper Room (τὸ ὑπερφῶν 1:13): probably the same room used for the Last Supper (Luke 22:12) and Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to his disciples. Perhaps in the house of John Mark's mother (12:12) in the Upper City (Mt Zion). Referred to as the Cenacle (Lat *coenaculum*, "dining room").
2. the Temple (2:46), especially in Solomon's Colonnade (5:12), a portico along the east side of the temple's outer court.
3. individual homes: to eat meals together (2:45).

### Names

The believers referred to themselves with a variety of names:

1. the brethren (οἱ ἀδελφοί, eg 1:15; 6:3).
2. the believers (οἱ πιστεύοντες, e.g. 2:44).
3. the disciples (οἱ μαθηταί, 6:1-2), specifically the Lord's disciples (9:1)
4. the saints (οἱ ἅγιοι, e.g. 9:13, 32, 41).
5. the Way (ἡ ὁδός, 9:2; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14,22).
6. the church (ἐκκλησία, e.g. 5:11; 8:1,3). Perhaps best translated as "congregation." Etymologically derived from ἐκ "out of" + καλέω "call", i.e. "call out of," but etymology ≠ meaning. LXX translation of Heb. קהל *qahal*, קָהָל assembly, congregation of Israel. Used both for the believers everywhere (9:31) and for the church in a specific location. English "church" is from Gk κυριακός *kuriakos* "of the Lord."

Josephus described Judaism as divided into three sects: Essenes, Sadducees, Pharisees (*Ant.* 18.1.2). Non-believing Jews referred to the believers as a sect (αἵρεσις 24:14; 28:22), specifically "the sect of the Nazarenes" (ἡ αἵρεσις τῶν Ναζωραίων 24:5), distinct from the sect of the Pharisees (ἡ αἵρεσις τῶν Φαρισαίων, 15:5), the sect of the Sadducees (ἡ αἵρεσις τῶν Σαδδουκαίων 5:17).

Why Nazarene? Jesus is described as ὁ Ναζωραῖος (*Nazōraios*, Semitic), ὁ Ναζαρηνός (*Nazarēnos*, Hellenistic),

## Christianity and the Middle East

usually translated “of Nazareth.” Jesus’ residence in Nazareth (spelled variously Ναζαρά, Ναζαρέθ, Ναζαρέτ) was in fulfillment of the prophets: “He shall be called a Nazarene (Ναζωραῖος)” (Matt 2:23). But no prophecy refers to Nazareth. Two possibilities:

1. Shoot: “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (נֶזֶר *nēšer*) from his roots (שֹׁרֶשׁ *shoresh*) shall bear fruit” (Isa 11:1). cf. prophecies of The Branch (צֶמַח) (Zech 3:8; 6:12; Jer 23:5; 33:15).
2. One who watches/keeps (e.g. the Torah): נֹשֵׂר *nōšer*, to watch, keep.
3. It is not related to נַזִּיר *nāzîr*, Nazirite; Hebrew spelling of town is נַצְרַת.

“Nazarene” was used in the Semitic world of the East: Heb. Talmud נֹזְרִי, pl. נֹזְרִים; *nošri, nošrim*; Syriac *Nāšrāyā*, Arabic *Našrani*, pl. *Našāra* (first letter ن *noon*).

When the church expanded to a non-Jewish environment, the unbelievers called the believers Christians (Χριστιανοί), “followers of Christ.” They were first called this in the Gentile city of Antioch (11:26). “Christian” was used in Greek and Latin of the West.

### Leadership

The Twelve, with Peter as spokesman. Leadership later passed to James, brother of Jesus, whom tradition identifies as the first bishop of Jerusalem.

### Opposition

This ideal life of the church did not last for ever. The church was troubled by external opposition and internal conflict.

1. External opposition
  - a. From the Sanhedrin
  - b. From the Synagogue of the Freedmen(6:9). Produced the first martyr, Stephen.
2. Internal conflict
  - a. Ananias and Sapphira: cf. the sin of Achen (Josh 7).
  - b. Distribution of relief funds to widows: conflict between Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora) and Hebrews (Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking Jews of the Land; 6:1)

## II. The Expansion of the Church: From Jerusalem to Antioch

### A. Moving out from Jerusalem

Persecution: Stephen’s sermon provoked not only his own death but also a great persecution against the Jerusalem church (8:1). Saul took a leading role (8:3; 9:1-2). He was driven by zeal for his ancestral traditions (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:6). The persecution was probably aimed primarily at the Hellenistic believers (Jews of the Diaspora).

Scattering: a new diaspora: this persecution forced all the believers except the apostles to flee Jerusalem. Henceforth the Jerusalem church was almost exclusively Hebraic. This new diaspora, unlike previous diasporas, was under God’s blessing.

Evangelism and Church Growth: as the believers moved out from Jerusalem, they proclaimed Christ and performed miraculous signs wherever they went:

1. general statement (8:4)
2. Philip in Samaria, on the desert road to Gaza, in the coastal towns from Ashdod to Caesarea (8:5-40).
3. Peter in Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea (9:32-10:48).
4. Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (11:19-21).

The gospel went out to a widening circle of people:

1. Samaritans (8:5-9:25)
2. God-fearing Gentiles (Ethiopian eunuch, 8:26-39; Cornelius, 10:1-48)
3. Gentiles (Antioch, 11:20)

Confirmation: the Jerusalem church vetted each new development to ensure it was from God:

1. sent Peter and John to Samaria to investigate conversion of Samaritans (8:14-17).
2. Peter defended the coming of the Spirit upon Cornelius, a god-fearing Gentile (11:1-18).
3. sent Barnabas to Antioch to investigate conversion of Gentiles (11:22-24).

## B. Antioch

Antioch was the 3rd most important city in the Roman Empire (after Rome, Alexandria; Ephesus was actually bigger than Antioch, but not as important). It was the meeting point between West and East, between the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, between Rome and Parthia.

Here the gospel was first preached to pagan Gentiles (11:20). The church was a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, sharing table fellowship. Barnabas, as the Jerusalem church's delegate, gave official approval (13:22-24). He enlisted Saul's help to teach in Antioch for a year. It was from this church not the Jerusalem church that Paul was sent out.

## III. Expansion Westwards

### A. First Missionary Journey (48-49)

Acts 13:1-14:28

At the instigation of the Holy Spirit, and set apart by church leadership with laying on of hands, Paul and Barnabas took John Mark (Barnabas' cousin), and sailed from Seleucia, Antioch's port.

1. Cyprus: home of Barnabas (4:36), those who evangelized Antioch (11:20).
2. Perga in Pamphylia, where John Mark abandoned and returned home to Jerusalem. Headed inland.
3. Galatia: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe; then retraced their steps.
4. Return to Antioch: reported to the church about the expansion to the Gentiles. Churches had been established in several cities in s. Galatia.
5. Visit by Judean delegation: Soon thereafter, Palestinian Jewish believers from Judea visited Antioch, teaching that Gentile believers must become observant Jews (15:1). They probably continued into Galatia, teaching the same thing. In response, Paul wrote a letter to these Galatian churches: Galatians, his first extant letter (alt. 1 Thess).
6. Jerusalem Council (49; Acts 15)

### B. Second Missionary Journey (50-52)

Acts 15:36-18:22

1. Jerusalem Council: Jerusalem church delegated Judas Barsabbas and Silas to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch to give the personal validation of the Jerusalem church to the letter written at the Jerusalem Council (15:22). The letter was addressed to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. Paul proposed to Barnabas that they visit the churches established on the first trip, i.e. Cyprus and Galatia. Paul objected to Barnabas' desire to take his cousin Mark. Barnabas and Mark sailed for Cyprus, Barnabas' home province. Paul took Silas and headed inland.
2. Galatia: Paul and Silas visited the largely Gentile churches in Syria and Cilicia, strengthening them and delivering the Jerusalem letter (16:4). Timothy joined the party in Lystra.
3. Macedonia and Achaia: prevented from entering Asia or Bithynia, Paul went to Troas. Here he had a vision: the "Macedonian call." Luke joined the party in Troas. They crossed to Europe: Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth.
4. Return to Antioch.

### C. Third Missionary Journey (53-57)

Acts 18:23-21:16

1. Galatia, Phrygia
2. Ephesus (19:1-20:1): 2+ years, "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (19:10).
3. Macedonia and Greece

## Christianity and the Middle East

4. Return: Troas, Miletus
5. Jerusalem: for Pentecost 57.

### D. Arrest & Journey to Rome (57-62)

1. Jerusalem Temple: near-lynching; rescued by Roman troops.
2. Caesarea (57-59): 2-year imprisonment under Felix, Festus
3. Journey to Rome
4. Rome(60-62): 2-year house arrest

### E. NT Writings

Much of the NT is connected with the Levant, east end of the Mediterranean:

1. Gospels: Matthew probably written in Antioch; John in Ephesus. Luke did his research during Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea.
2. Epistles: many written to Anatolia: Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, 1 Timothy (to Ephesus), 1 Peter (to Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia).
3. Jewish Christians: James, Jude, both brothers of Jesus. (Hebrews perhaps addressed to Jewish believers in Rome).
4. Revelation: 7 churches in province of Asia.

## IV. Expansion Eastwards

### A. Legends

Tradition identifies two disciples with the spread of the gospel eastwards: Thaddeus, Thomas.

#### 1. Thaddaeus (Syr. Addai)

This legend grew by stages:

1. Eusebius (*HE* 1.13; 2.1.6-8; written 301): King Abgar V of Osroene, capital Edessa (BC 4–AD 7; AD 13-50) was ill with an incurable disease. Having heard of Jesus' fame as a healer, he wrote a letter to him. Jesus replied that he would send someone (Eusebius claims to have seen the correspondence in Edessa). After Jesus' ascension Thomas (of the Twelve) sent Thaddeus (of the Seventy-Two, Luke 10:1). The king was healed and converted.
2. Later tradition: Abgar's messenger was a painter who painted a picture of Jesus which he gave to Abgar. This painting had miraculous powers.
3. Later still, this image was identified as an image imprinted on a cloth: the Image of Edessa, the Mandylion (*mendil*, towel, burial cloth). An example of *acheiropoieta* ἀχειροποίητα (not made with human hands), cf. Shroud of Turin, Veil of Veronica (or *sudarium*, L. sweat cloth), the Hodegetria (Ὁδηγήτρια painted of Madonna and child by Luke).

Whether any of this is true, the Church of the East regards Addai as its founder and first leader.

#### 2. Thomas

*Acts of Thomas* (Syriac, 2d-3d cent.). Thomas passed through Mesopotamia, to north India, then south India to evangelize the Jewish community. This was quite feasible as there were Roman trading routes to s. India. He died in s. India and his bones were brought back to Edessa. The church he founded was under the Patriarch of the East in Mesopotamia.

The church founded by Thomas survives today in south India, on the Malabar coast, in the state of Kerala. Known as St Thomas Christians, or Syrian Christians, or Nasrani. Now divided into many different branches, including Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Catholic. Still use Syriac liturgy.

## B. History

### 1. Early Christian Centers

Three small kingdoms, buffer states between Rome and Parthia, were of great importance.

1. **Osrhoene.** Capital Edessa (modern Urfa, sw Turkey). Language: Syriac (eastern version of Aramaic). By the 2nd cent. Edessa was a vibrant Christian center, remaining so until 471.
2. **Adiabene** (Gk; Syr *Ḥadyab*), capital Arbela (modern Erbil/Irbil/Arbil).
3. **Armenia:** Gregory the Illuminator (c. 240-332) grew up in exile in Cappadocia, then returned to Armenia. Through him King Tiridates converted in 301. Armenia was the first state to adopt Christianity as its national religion, and has remained Christian ever since. The Armenian Apostolic Church is the oldest national church.

### 2. The Sassanid Empire (226-637)

In 226 the Sassanids defeated the Parthians. They kept the capital at Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the Tigris. This was the largest city in the world 570-637.

In 280 the first bishop was appointed in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. In 498 the Catholicos of S-C assumed the title Patriarch of the East.