

OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY IN 36 ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

LECTURE 3 – EARLY CHRISTIANITY AT ROME AND ALEXANDRIA

We'll start with a prayer from the period we're going to study:

We praise you, Father, invisible, giver of immortality. You are the source of life and light, the source of all grace and truth; you love us all and you love the poor, you seek reconciliation with all and draw them all to you by sending your dear Son to visit them, who now lives and reigns with you, Father, and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

Serapion, Bishop of Antioch, 191-211

Christianity in the West and the East of the Roman Empire developed in different ways, with implications for Christianity to this day. This lecture looks at the early stages of this.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Why study early Christianity at Rome and Alexandria?

In the introduction to the first lecture, I said that we would try to focus on people and events with something to say to us today. You may ask, what possible significance can early Christianity at Rome and Alexandria have for us today? Two answers, at 1.2 and 1.3 below.

1.2 Foundations were laid for Christianity as we practise it today.

In almost any study you undertake, such as the Trinity, the Person of Christ, Christian living, the forgiveness of sin, Church government and many more, you'll find the foundations were laid during the C2 and C3 century, at Rome and at Alexandria and also at Carthage, which we'll look at in Lecture 5. We need to slot these people and places into our jig-saw, and evaluate what they still have to say to us.

The Lecture stops at the year 300, because shortly after that, the Roman Emperor, Constantine, began to favour the Church (lecture 7); this changed relationships, so we're looking today at the years in which the Church was an illegal and suspect organization.

1.3 Different ways of 'doing Church' emerged.

A second reason for studying the early years of these churches is that Christianity in the West and the East of the Roman Empire developed in different ways, with implications for Christianity to this day. The differences increased over the centuries, until they formally split in 1054, but the tensions were already visible in the C2. They reflected the differences between the Western and the Eastern mind.

The Romans, in the Western part of the Empire, were (generally speaking) hardworking, practical, unimaginative, solid, reliable and great organisers. The Greeks, in the Eastern part, were imaginative, colourful, speculative, and their understanding of the Church reflected this. The Romans first language was Latin, although, as mentioned in Lecture 1, most used Greek as a second language; the converse was not so. The West couldn't, and didn't want to, engage in the speculative theological debates which fascinated the Greeks, and the Greeks couldn't understand why the Latins were satisfied with simple, basic, doctrinal statements, as we'll see over the next few Lectures.

For example, for conversion, the West emphasized the Christian life in contrast to pagan vice, starting with individual salvation and followed by the fight against sin - 'faith in action'. The East emphasized that Christianity was superior to pagan philosophy, that redemption was based on the incarnation of the *Logos* and filled mankind with divine power.

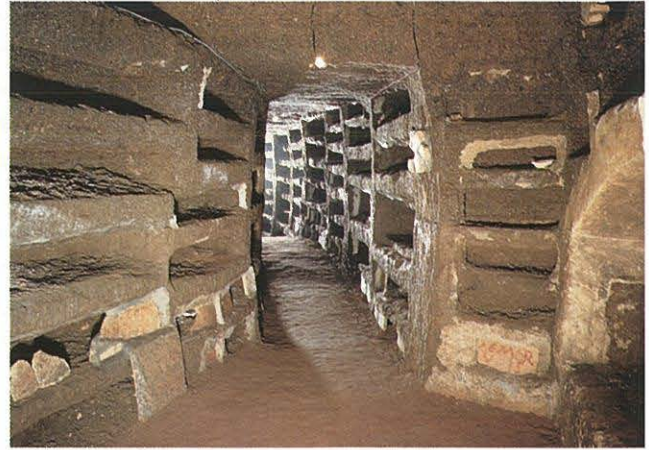
1.4 Catacombs

Christians at Rome built miles of underground galleries, which they used primarily as cemeteries from C1 onward, but which they also used for their worship services during times of persecution, because burial grounds were sacred in Roman law and they would not be molested in them. 40 catacombs have been excavated in an area of 3 miles around Rome, with inscriptions and paintings of Biblical scenes – some illustrations on the next page.

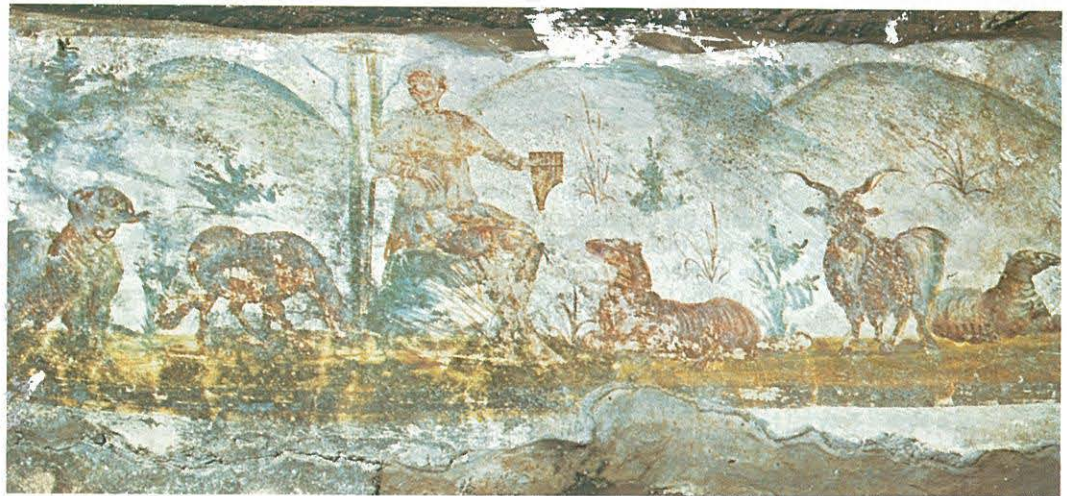
Catacombs at Rome

The first Christians at Rome buried their dead in tunnels or galleries, known as catacombs – the soft volcanic rock under Rome was highly suitable for tunneling, as it was softer when first exposed to air, hardening afterwards. Burial grounds were sacrosanct in Roman law, so persecuted Christians took refuge there.

Christians decorated the catacombs with paintings of Biblical scenes: favourites were Noah's ark, Jonah in the fish, Daniel in the lion's den, Christ being baptised, Peter walking on water, the Good Shepherd and the raising of Lazarus.



The Good Shepherd is one of the most common themes in early Christian art. This painting on the plaster walls of the catacomb of Domitilla in Rome shows the shepherd surrounded by his flock



CATACOMB ART FROM THE VIA LATINA CATACOMB

Due to the dark, cramped space, the art of the catacombs was simple and perfunctory. Though basic, it served to record the memory of the dead and

had biblical scenes to inspire the living. This picture shows Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, with the Egyptians behind them

2. CHRISTIANITY AT ROME, from its origins to 300
 (The rise of the Papacy at Rome will be explored in Lecture 11.)
- 2.1 Origins of the church at Rome

Year 49

We have no record of when and by whom the church in Rome was founded. The furthest back we can go is to the year 49, and from an event in that year we deduce that, as elsewhere, the first evangelists to Rome had focussed initially on the Jewish synagogues, preaching to the Jews and to the God-fearers who attended the synagogues that in Jesus the Messiah had come. The biographer of the Roman Emperor wrote that in the year 49:

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he (the Emperor) expelled them from Rome.’ (Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*, xxv.4)

In other words, the Roman authorities had lost patience with people, associated with the Jewish community, who spoke about Chrestus = Christ, and the opposition this provoked in the Jewish community. The government didn’t recognise Christians as Christians, but thought that they were a troublesome part of the Jewish community in Rome, and so they expelled every Jew, including a married couple, tentmakers, Aquilla and Priscilla, who went to Corinth, where they met Paul in the summer of 50 (Acts 18:1-4) and no doubt gave him full details of the church in Rome.

Year 57 - Paul’s Letter to the Romans (six years after 49)

When Paul wrote to the Romans, Aquilla and Priscilla were back in Rome, hosting a house-church (Romans 16:3-4). Paul’s Letter ends with the first roll-call of Christians and what a diverse community they were, men and women, gentiles and Jews, slaves and middle class business people, native Romans and immigrants, established Christians and recent converts - Romans 16:3-16. Paul urged unity among this diverse community. The content of his letter implies that the church in Rome was not of recent origin – he wouldn’t send such meaty teaching to young Christians.

Year 64 - Christians made scapegoats for a fire that devastated the city

Our next knowledge of the church in Rome is in the year 64, when, to divert suspicion that he was responsible for a fire which had devastated the city. the Emperor Nero ‘... fastened the guilt and inflicted tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace.’

This means two things, (one) Christians were now recognized as a distinct group, different and identifiable and (two) they were sufficiently numerous to provide for a big spectacle, because ‘... an immense multitude was convicted, nor so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race.’ (Tacitus, *Annals*, xv.44.2-8).

- 2.2 Years 64 to 300

Our next glimpse of the church in Rome is not for another 30 years, when Clement wrote a *Letter to the Church in Corinth* (Lecture 2, p. 3) in 96). From it, and from the *Shepherd of Hermas* in 140, and Justin Martyr’s *Apology* c150 (Lecture 2 at 2.3), it

seems that the church had recovered from the horrors of 64 and was now confident and growing. From these documents we can draw five inferences:

(a) By the year 200 there were c30,000 Christians in Rome. As the saying went, ‘All roads led to Rome’, and people flocked to it, including Christians from every part of the Empire.

(b) It was developing patterns of worship like other churches. Our Topic for Lecture 2 looked at a typical mid-second-century Sunday service and much of the information for that came from the Church at Rome. People moved around a lot, so it was important to have a standard format for church services, so strangers could feel at home and join in.

(3) The church at Rome was composed, at this time, mostly of poor people and slaves. Paul ended his Philippian letter, written from Rome, with greetings from some of Caesar's household (Phil. 4:22) and in Romans 16 he mentioned Priscilla and Aquila, business people who had a house large enough for the church to meet in, but we deduce that the majority were poor people and slaves, because they worshipped and spoke to each other, and its leaders wrote to each other, in the Greek language. We saw in Lecture 1 that Greek was the trade language of the whole Roman Empire, spoken by all classes, but in the Latin-speaking West, educated people spoke their own language, Latin, to each other. No leader of the Church at Rome spoke Latin until Victor c190, and Latin wasn't used in Church services at Rome until after year 240, and Novation c250 first to write in Latin, so we infer that the great majority of the congregation until then were less well educated, and had come from all over the Empire.

(d) Because of the numbers of Christians and the size of the city, there must have been quite a few different meeting places throughout the city, in homes or in halls, with local leaders, elders and deacons; there were no purpose-built churches in those days, so congregations were dependent on wealthier members making their homes or a hall available; it's estimated that you wouldn't get a room that held more than 150 people, 200 at the most. But, and this is the important point, the Christians at Rome thought of themselves as one church - the church at Rome, not a collection of congregations.

(e) Leadership under a single bishop seems to have come later to Rome than to the churches of Asia – Clement did not claim in 96 to be an authoritative figure and when Ignatius wrote to the church in Rome about 115 he did not mention a single Bishop, so it seems that they still had a team of presbyters. When Marcion was expelled in the year 144, it was a team of leaders who dealt with him. No Bishop of Rome emerged as the distinctive figure, distinguished in office from the other presbyters, until after 200.

In Lecture 11 we'll look at the claims by the present Roman Catholic Church, that there is an unbroken line, which they call apostolic succession, from Peter to the present Pope. Suffice to say for now, that none of the bishops of Rome, up to the year 300, described themselves by the word Pope.

2.3 Callistus and Hippolytus – forgiveness for post-baptismal sin

The next page starts with a list of three bishops, that is the senior clergyman in the church in Rome, in the left-hand column and then, opposite them and in the right of the column, people who disagreed with them and formed rival congregations. The latter are described as anti-popes, but that is an anachronism because the bishops of Rome didn't call themselves Popes at that stage, so their rivals shouldn't be anti-popes, but that's the word that historians use. What was it all about? (Continued after the chart at top of next page.)

Bishops**'Anti-Popes'****Callistus**

bishop 217-22

Hippolytus

died 235

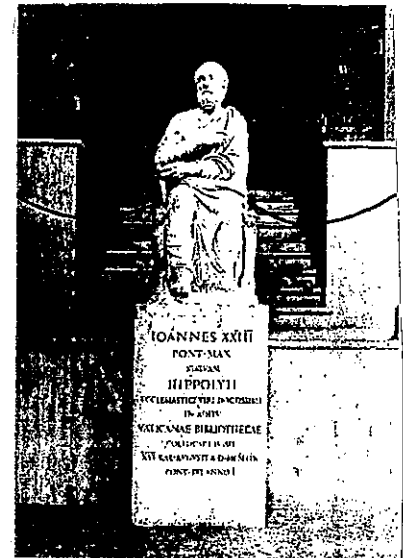
'Apostolic Tradition'

Cornelius

bishop 251-53

NovatianLeading figure in 251,
hoped to be bishop**Stephen**

bishop 254-57



Statue of Hippolytus

During excavations in 1551, a statue was discovered, which was cleaned up and attributed to Hippolytus; it is now in the Vatican.

IOANNES XXIII	John 23
PONT MAX	Pope
STATUAM	Statue
HIPPOLYTI	of Hippolytus
ECCLESIASTICI	a very learned
VIRI DOCTESSIMIA	churchman

Under Callistus, the church at Rome included forty-six presbyters, seven deacons, seven sub deacons, forty-two acolytes (people performing ceremonial duties such as lighting candles), fifty-two exorcists, readers and doorkeepers and they provided support for fifteen hundred widows and needy people. This must have made them the largest church in the world.

When the Bishop of Rome died in 217, the Church held an election for a new one. One candidate, Hippolytus (in statue), was a man of tradition, a strict disciplinarian, and a serious theologian. He was defeated in the election by Callistus, an easygoing moderniser, who said (among other things) that no sin was unforgivable, because you could have a second baptism, and that since Roman law forbade marriage between slaves and people of high rank, the Church should bless their living together without marrying – what's new?

Over the next few years, the disgruntled Hippolytus wrote voluminously to the church members, protesting at Callistus' doctrinal unsoundness and his lax attitude to Christian living. Because Hippolytus pointed out, in great detail, what had always been done at Rome until Callistus came along, we have an invaluable picture of church life at Rome, including a full description of baptism, the Lord's Supper, ordination and other church practices. His best-known work is the *Apostolic Tradition*.

Hippolytus was martyred, and so his grave was known and venerated from the time of his death. During excavations in 1551, that is 1,300 years after Hippolytus' death, a C3 statue was discovered in a cemetery near his tomb in Rome, so it was cleaned up and sculptors added the present inscriptions and attributed it to Hippolytus; that shows the regard they had for his memory – there is no comparable memorial for Callistus.

2.4 The issue between them

The main issue between Callistus and Hippolytus was: Could murder, denial of the faith (apostasy) and immorality, committed after baptism, be forgiven by the Church?

By 150, most Christians in the West believed that repentance which culminated in baptism washed away all sins committed up to that point in time. Serious sin after baptism had serious consequences, and again we'll see in Lectures 5 how the Church supervised public confession of sin and the performance of penitential works.

Until Callistus became bishop in 217, the Church at Rome taught that the three sins just mentioned could never be forgiven by the Church. The sinner should undertake penance, and God might forgive, but the Church should never admit to communion.

However, Callistus said that he would readmit penitent Christians, whatever they had done, and that no sin was unforgivable by the Church. Hippolytus and others were horrified, but we'll see in later lectures that over time, Callistus' view prevailed.

2.5 Cornelius and Novatian – rebaptism if you changed church?

When Cornelius (next name in the left-hand column on the previous page) became bishop of Rome in 251, he followed the same policy as Callistus, receiving Christians who had committed serious post-baptismal sin back into communion. A senior churchman at Rome called Novatian, a talented and able man who had hoped that he would be appointed bishop, was so disgusted that he formed a break-away church, which called itself the Puritans. They would never readmit. The church spread rapidly from Spain in the West to Syria in the East.

What if you were baptized in a Novatian church, or some other non-established church, and wanted to move to another church? The stricter churches would not recognise baptism carried by anyone outside their own church, so if you wanted to move from one church to one of their churches, you had to be (re)baptised; they said that what had taken place elsewhere had no validity. Cornelius said that if anyone had been baptised with water in the name of the Trinity, their baptism was valid - it didn't matter that it had been in different church. (Parallel arguments today!)

2.6 Stephen – claimed authority over others on these issues

The last name in the left-hand column, Stephen, the next Bishop of Rome, tried to force his views on these two issues on other churches, and he was so furious that other churches were taking Novatian's side that he began to claim, for the first time, that the Bishop of Rome was the direct successor of of 'Peter, the rock on which Church was built' (Matthew 16:8). The other churches refused to recognize this and maintained that all bishops were equal. Significance of this will be taken up in Lecture 6 and then developed when we come, in Lecture 11, how the claims of the bishop of Rome developed into the Papacy.

TOPIC – THE DATE OF EASTER – was taken at this point in the Lecture; here, it is printed at the end of the Notes for this Lecture.

We move now from the West (Rome) to the East (Alexandria).

3. CHRISTIANITY AT ALEXANDRIA

(Cairns, 108-110; Lion, 88; Vos, 19-20; Olson, 81-82)

3.1 Origins of Church

Alexandria, the capital of Egypt, was the second city of the Roman Empire, and the Church there developed differently from the churches in the West, partly for the reasons set out at 1.3 on page 2. We'll keep seeing this right through our lectures, as the differences multiplied down the ages. For this Lecture, just one aspect; the Alexandrians distinctive approach to Scripture became a major issue between Alexandria and the rest of the Church; it reverberated down through the Middle Ages, was debated at the Reformation, and is still discussed to this day. How do you interpret Scripture – literally or allegorically?

We know nothing about the origins of Christianity at Alexandria, but it was an obvious target for Christian preachers – it had a large Jewish population. The first name we know is Pantaenus, who died c190, a Christian teacher who led an even more brilliant Alexandrian pagan, Clement (3.2) to Christ.

3.2 Clement of Alexandria (c150 - c215) (Olson, 85-90; Lane, 20-21)

Titus Flavius Clement, known as Clement of Alexandria to distinguish him from other Church leaders of the same name, was born c150 of pagan parents, probably at Athens; like Justin Martyr (Lecture 2), he did the round of philosophic schools, looking for truth. He travelled throughout the empire, trying various teachers; the one who impressed him most was Pantaenus, head of a Christian school in Alexandria, who was teaching converts from paganism and the children of believers. He convinced Clement about the truth of Christianity and Clement became a Christian, aged about 30. There's a fresco of Clement, and a little about him, on the next page.

From Clement we learn that by that time the church at Alexandria was large, with many well to do and educated members. When Pantaenus died c190, Clement was ordained by the Church and took over leadership of the Christian school, teaching those who were to be baptised at the next Easter baptismal service. Baptism was carried out once a year, on Easter Sunday, and in preparation for it, the Church instructed catechumens (as they were known, from Greek *katecheo*, 'I teach or instruct') for two or three years prior to their baptism. We noted how seriously post-baptismal sin was taken, and for this reason the 'discipleship classes (as we would call them) at Alexandria lasted until the Church leadership was fully persuaded that the candidates for baptism were equipped to live the Christian life in a hostile world.

Clement wrote extensively, (a) to win converts, (b) to instruct new converts in leading the Christian life, (c) to show the superiority of Christianity over pagan philosophy and (d) to provide commentaries on Scriptural passages. His handbook for new converts examined every area of life - food, drink, home, marriage, recreation, music, dancing - setting out how Christians should behave. When persecution broke out in 202, Clement left Alexandria, and that is almost the last we hear of him. He died in Asia Minor before 216.

His greatest positive contribution to Church life was to challenge the heresy known as Gnosticism (Lecture 4, section 3), which was rampant in Alexandria. Faced with it, other Christians had taken the line that one should simply believe and not face up to awkward questions. Clement showed that orthodox Christianity was intellectually viable, that one could use philosophy to explain it without falling into heresy.



A fresco painting of Clement of Alexandria (150-215)

A convert to Christianity, he was an educated man who was familiar with classical Greek philosophy and literature. He was the first Christian theologian (writer) to use an allegorical interpretation of Scripture; when he became head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria, his teaching that the Bible has hidden meanings, to incite us to search for deeper (hidden) meanings, was hugely influential. We will see how the Church at Antioch, which concentrated on the literal interpretation of Scripture, reacted vigorously against Alexandrian allegory in C4 and C5.

3.3 Origen (c185 - c254) (Cairns, 109-110; Olson, 99-112; Lion, 107, 110; Lane, 21-26)

When Clement left Alexandria in 202, a young man of 18 was ready to take his place. He was born in Egypt c185, probably at Alexandria and was brought up in a Christian home. His education was twofold - study of Bible - his father supervised his learning the Bible by heart - and Greek philosophy.

During the persecution in 202, when Clement left Alexandria, Origen's father was martyred. When peace was restored, the bishop of Alexandria, Demetrius, put Origen in charge of the Christian school. His life was prayer, fasting and poverty. He was a successful teacher, and many of his pupils followed his ideals; Origen never forgot that he was the son of a martyr and lived accordingly.



Origen

As head of the Alexandrian school, Origen had the prospect of a splendid career, but sadly he and his bishop, Demetrius (bishop from 189, died c231), quarrelled bitterly. The bishop tried to control the school, and Origen resisted, defending the school's independence. He was exiled from Egypt and settled in Caesarea in Palestine, where he continued teaching and preaching for rest of his life. A generous friend put shorthand writers at Origen's disposal, and his regular expositions of Scripture were taken down; we have 240 transcripts of sermons. During persecution (250) he was tortured, and although he remained steadfast in spirit his physical strength was broken and he died c254.

Clement and Origen had an enormous impact on the Church in many ways, and we'll conclude this Lecture by looking at one only of them.

3.4 Allegorising Scripture

Allegorising Scripture (which as evangelicals we don't approve of) is to look briefly at the normal meaning of a passage of Scripture and then to go on to look for two deeper and more spiritual meanings, and to regard them, the spiritual meanings, as more important than the original meaning.

It began at Alexandria, but not with the Christians. Long before the gospel came to Egypt, pagan Alexandrians, who thought themselves genteel and polite people, were embarrassed by the crudities and immorality in much of Greek mythology. They didn't approve, so they looked behind the stories, and found a hidden significance in the story, and said that that was the important one, not the literal text.

The Christian school run by Clement and then by Origen found themselves similarly embarrassed at some of the stories in the Old Testament, like Noah getting drunk and making a fool of himself, families committing incest, Abraham saying that his wife was his sister so their hosts wouldn't kill him, kings keeping concubines and much else. They treated Scripture in the same way as pagan Alexandrians treated Greek folklore – they allegorised. They said, well, ok, yes, that did happen, but the real significance of the story is (and they found a hidden meaning that wasn't embarrassing) and, here's the problem, they gave the hidden meaning (the allegorical meaning) more significance than the literal meaning. In other words, the Bible doesn't

mean only what it says – that’s just meaning One, the plain reading of the text; you have to find meanings Two and Three for every passage and (here’s the danger) what you read into the passage is more important than the literal meaning. Once they started, they couldn’t stop. Origen taught that every passage of Scripture has three meanings, which he called Body, Soul and Spirit:

In ascending order:

- < *Literal or historical meaning*, the plain reading of the text, for people in the pew, which Origen called the *Body* meaning,
- < but below the surface, hidden underneath the literal meaning, there was a *moral or ethical meaning*, for those who had made some progress in the Christian faith, which Origen called the *Soul* meaning, and
- < thirdly, there was a spiritual or theological meaning, for mature Christians - this was the most important for Origen, so he called it the *Spirit* meaning. Wherever the text came from in the OT, and whatever it said literally, the important meaning was what it said about Christ and the Christians’ relationship with God, as we’ll see in two examples.

First example: the spies sent to Jericho, as described in Joshua chapter 2. Rahab concealed the spies from their pursuers and in return they promised that her household would escape when the city was attacked; she hung a scarlet cord from the window to mark the house; the spies kept their promise, and Rahab’s household was saved. Now, what does the story mean? Rahab was a brothel-keeper, which polite Alexandrian Christians found offensive, so Origen found other meanings in the story: (1) yes, Rahab and her family were spared (saved) when the city fell (the literal meaning), (2) more importantly, she hung a scarlet thread out of the window, to identify her house, and that allegorically foreshadows death of Christ - scarlet for blood - (this, the second meaning, was the moral or ethical meaning of the story) and (3) thirdly, only those in Rahab’s house were saved, no one else in the city, teaching that salvation is only for those in the Church as the household of faith (that’s the spiritual, the deepest meaning of the passage, for the most mature Christians).

‘If anyone wishes to be saved, let him come to this house where the blood of Christ is a sign of redemption. ... Outside this house, that is, outside the Church, no one is saved.’

Second example: Crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14). It was a historical event, (the literal meaning), but what else? Allegorically, God rescuing his people from slavery is a picture of salvation, prefiguring the saving work of Jesus, (this is the second, the moral or ethical meaning of the story). Thirdly, they went through water - although the water was held aside, it’s a symbol of baptism (the spiritual meaning).

Origen explained:

‘Scriptures... have not only a meaning that is manifest but also others that are hidden as far as most people are concerned.’

and Origen felt it was his Christian duty to find these others, numbers two and three. Furthermore, Origen said the third meaning, the spiritual one, was always there, however hidden, and almost always about Christ or a Christian’s relationship to God; Origen insisted that the spiritually minded Christian must seek it and find it above all other.

Now, looking for ‘Christ in all the Scriptures’ is no bad thing, but Origen took it to the extreme what you read into the passage is more important than the literal meaning. You’ve heard the saying that ‘we shouldn’t judge Scripture’, we should ‘let Scripture judge us’. Well, the allegorical school judges Scripture, instead of letting Scripture judge us.

We’ll see this from time to time as we work through the Middle Ages and the Reformation. Our textbook, Cairns, says about Clement and Origen and their allegorical interpretation of the Bible, ‘it has plagued Christianity ever since’ (page 108).

3.5 Literal interpretation of Scripture

The ‘literal’ interpretation of Scripture (which evangelicals approve of) takes the words of Scripture to mean what words usually mean, to read history in the Bible as history and figures of speech in the Bible as figures of speech. So literal is not the same as ‘literalism’. When the Psalmist David called God ‘my rock and my fortress’ (Psalm 18:2), he didn’t mean that God was a large stone or a military tower - he meant that just as walls and fortresses protect us from our enemies, so God gives protection. We realise that ‘rock’ and ‘fortress’ are figurative, and interpret them accordingly. That’s not allegory – that’s taking the words in their every-day usage.

3.6 Allegory and Typology (Cairns, 77, 108, 135, 139, 162)

Two hundred years after Origen, the Church at Alexandria had a heated debate with the Church at Antioch about the relationship between Christ’s deity and his humanity, to be explored in Lecture 10 at 5.1. They had different answers because they had different ways of understanding the Bible.

(a) Allegory – Alexandria

Alexandria still looked briefly at the normal meaning of a passage of Scripture and then went on to look for deeper and more spiritual meanings, which they regarded as more important than the original meaning.

(b) Typology - Antioch

Antioch read the Bible as ‘grammatico-historical’ – ‘grammatico’ is Greek for ‘literal’. and ‘historical’ means accepting historical facts as true – so the phrase means ‘at face value’.

Antioch’s method of interpreting the Bible is known today as ‘typology’ (Greek *typos*, a pattern or a figure). This can be helpful, because it does not undervalue, much less dispense with, literal sense of Scripture. It sees events, people and institutions in Old Testament as not only historical facts but also as ‘types’ which prefigured and anticipated events and personages in New Testament, where they are technically known as ‘antitypes’ (Hebrews 9.24). For example:

Water from rock – Exodus 17.6 and 1 Corinthians 10.4.

Serpent in wilderness – Numbers 21.8-9 and John 3.14.

Melchizedek – Genesis 14.18-20 and Hebrews 5.10, 6.20 and 7.1-17

Adam as a type of Christ – Romans 5.14

Tabernacle – Hebrews 9.8-10.

Origen explained why Greek-speakers at Alexandria interpreted the Christian message so differently from the Latin-speaking Westerners:

‘So then, since Christianity appeared to many scholars among the Greeks as something worthy of serious attention, sects inevitably came to exist, not at all on account of factions and love of strife, but because several learned men made a serious attempt to understand the doctrines of Christianity. The result of this was that they interpreted differently the scriptures universally believed to be divine, and sects arose named after those who, although they admired the origin of the word, were impelled by certain reasons which convinced them to disagree with one another. (*Contra Celsum*, iii.12)



The Greek-speaking churches in the East of the Roman Empire, now called the ‘Orthodox Church’, developed over the centuries differently from the Latin-speaking churches in the West. There are theological differences, but this picture shows some of the more obvious differences:

1. Icons (on the wall at the back of the photograph) are of great importance to Orthodox Christians. These paintings are ‘windows into the kingdom of God’. They are used in worship both in the decoration of the church and for private homes.
2. Incense is burned in ornate golden censers that hang at the end of three chains, representing the Trinity.
3. Most Orthodox clergy have long hair and beards. Clement of Alexandria wrote c195: ‘This, then, is the mark of the man, the beard. By this, he is seen to be a man. It is older than Eve. ... It is therefore unholy to desecrate the symbol of manhood, hairiness.’

OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY IN 36 ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

TOPIC FOR LECTURE 3 – THE DATE OF EASTER

Cairns, 101. 121 (last line), 197; Lion 30-31, 152.

For us, Easter Sunday is a 'moveable feast' – the date changes every year, by as much as a month, because it is celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox, which is March 21; in 2008, Easter Sunday was on March 23 and in 2011 it was on April 24. How did this come about?

Lecture Three is about differences between the Church in the West of the Roman Empire and the Church in the East of the Empire, and how they resolved them. For this Topic, please tell us why the date of Easter became an issue between West and East, how Rome dealt with the issue, and any other aspects about the date of Easter that you think will interest us. The key phrase to look for, in the index of textbooks or on the Internet, is 'Easter controversy'.

Part of the answer given by the student was:

The first 'difference of opinion' between West and East was about the date of Easter. The churches in the East kept Easter on 14 Nisan (the day on which the Jewish people killed the Passover Lamb) regardless of the day of the week on which it fell. The Churches in the West celebrated Easter on the Sunday following 14 Nisan. One of the issues was Western Christians wanting to establish their identity apart from Judaism.

The difference approaches became visibly evident in every seventh year, because in those years the large Christian community from Asia living in Rome celebrated the death of Christ while the rest of the Roman Christians were celebrating his resurrection. It mattered because Easter was such an important event for them, with an overnight feast and joyful Eucharistic service, baptism and other Christian rites.

Between 154 and 166, the Bishop of Rome, Anicetus, discussed the date of Easter with Polycarp, the Bishop Smyrna in the East. Although Sunday had replaced the Sabbath everywhere by then, Asia Minor wanted to maintain the Jewish Passover date of 14 Nisan for Easter.

About 195, the Bishop of Rome, Victor, got agreement to the Western way of thinking everywhere except for the provinces of Asia Minor. In a moment of arrogance he excommunicated the recalcitrant churches. He was met by a dignified letter of protest from the senior bishop, Polycrates of Ephesus, who quoted Apostolic authority for the Asian rite; Bishop Irenaeus (an Easterner living in the West, to be studied in Lecture 4) offered to mediate to defuse the situation. Victor withdrew his excommunication. For the next half-century, compiling calendars to fix Easter independently of Jewish tradition was a frequent task among Western theologians, but it was not easy to reconcile the Jewish lunar calendar to the Roman solar calendar.

It was not until the Council of Nicaea in 325 that Asia finally abandoned 14 Nisan and accepted the 'full moon following the vernal equinox' calculation.

The dating of Easter became an issue again in the seventh century, when, after years of isolation on the western fringe of 'Europe', the Celtic Church resumed a relationship with the Catholic Church. A Synod of Whitby in 644 examined the question afresh, as will be explored in Lecture 13 and Topic 13.