

On This Rock
The Beginning of the Church
Donald E. Knebel
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1. Today we will talk about the beginning of the Christian church and how it grew from a few people in Jerusalem in about 30 A.D. to a movement that spread all the way to Rome within about 25 years.
2. We will see that the earliest followers of Jesus had different beliefs from what many of us imagine.
3. We will also see that the leader of those earliest followers was a person essentially unknown by most Protestants.
4. Finally, we will see how by about 55 A.D., the followers of Jesus had already divided into two groups in the first of the “points of departure” this series will examine.

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1. Before his final trip to Jerusalem, Jesus took his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, on the northern edge of what is now Israel.
2. This is how that area looks today.
3. First century Greeks and Romans thought the cave was the opening to Hades, the realm of the gods of the underworld.

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1. This shows what Caesarea Philippi may have looked like at the time of Jesus.
2. It included temples to pagan gods.
3. The temple on the left is in front of the opening to Hades.
4. This rock cliff represented everything that first century Jews hoped their expected Messiah would overcome – the Romans and their pagan practices.

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1. In front of this cliff, signifying the power and religion of Rome, Jesus asked his disciples who people thought he was.
2. They gave various answers. *Matthew* 16:13-14.

3. Jesus then asked his disciples the same question: **“But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.’”** *Matthew* 16:15-16.
4. In other words, Jesus was the one who, as the promised Jewish Messiah, would overcome everything first century Jews despised about this site.

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1. Based on Peter’s response, Jesus singled him out for a special blessing, giving him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. *Matthew* 16:19.
2. Jesus also spoke these famous words: **“And I will tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”** *Matthew* 16:18.
3. Based largely on this statement, with no consideration of its context, Peter is typically regarded in the west as the leader of the early church, especially by Roman Catholics.

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1. Upon leaving Caesarea Philippi, Jesus told his disciples he would go to Jerusalem, where he would be killed and would rise again on the third day. *Matthew* 16:21.
2. Of course, Jesus *was* killed in Jerusalem.
3. **“After Jesus’ execution, his followers scattered, shaken with grief and terrified for their own lives.”** Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* at 7.
4. As Karen Armstrong writes: **“That should have been the end of the matter.”** Armstrong, *Jerusalem* at 144.
5. As the Bible itself reports, two other recent Messianic Jewish movements had failed when their leader was killed. *Acts* 5:34-40.

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1. As we all know, the Jesus movement did not die.
2. The tomb of Jesus was found empty on Sunday morning.

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1. Jesus then appeared to his disciples near the Sea of Galilee. *Matthew* 28:16-17.
2. **“[T]he resurrection awoke the dejected disciples to the truth that Jesus was in fact the Messiah.”** Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* at 108.

3. Peter and Jesus' other disciples then began preaching that **“God has raised Jesus to life.”** *Acts* 2:5, 32.

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1. It is common today to say that the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah.
2. There was a time, which we will discuss next week, when Christianity separated from Judaism and virtually all Jews today reject Christian beliefs about Jesus.
3. And many, perhaps most, Jews in the first century did not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah.
4. But *Acts* reports that the message of Jesus was first taken **“only to Jews.”** *Acts* 11:19.
5. This statement was made by Peter, just after Pentecost: **“Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. * * * Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”** *Acts* 2:14, 41.
6. According to *Acts*, although not everyone who heard the message believed, the number of those who did soon **“grew to about five thousand.”** *Acts* 4:4.

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1. Josephus wrote a history of the Jews in about 94 A.D., containing the earliest known statements about Jesus outside the New Testament.
2. Josephus said: **“He [Jesus] drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles.”** Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18:3:2.

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1. This site along the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem is a first century cemetery.
2. The ossuaries were used only by Jews and contained the bones that remained after the body had decomposed while lying in the tomb.

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1. This is a picture of a fragment from an ossuary found in this cemetery.
2. You can see the reference to the Mount of Olives.
3. On the right, you can see the *chi rho* symbol, the first two letters of the Greek word *“Christos,”* which means “Anointed” and from which the English word “Christ” is derived.

4. The Greek “*Christos*” had the same meaning as “Messiah,” derived from Hebrew.

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1. As Bart Ehrman writes in his most recent book: **“The original followers of Jesus . . . were all Jews, through and through, in every way.”** Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity* at 46.
2. As a result, **“[w]e need to visualize them as having long hair and wearing the prayer shawl – the tallit – as they prayed. They stopped working at sundown on Friday evening. They welcomed and observed the Sabbath, sharing in its festive meal, likely all together, singing, rejoicing, and resting from labor.”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 97.

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1. In addition to attending the regular Jewish services, these early followers also met in their homes to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.
2. **“They broke bread together in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”** *Acts* 2:46-47.

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1. Although Peter was initially active in baptizing followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, he was not their leader, at least after these followers became organized in something we might today call a church.
2. As the church historian Eusebius wrote in about 325 A.D.: **“Peter, James, and John, after the Ascension of the Saviour, did not claim pre-eminence because the Saviour had specially honoured them, but chose James the Righteous as Bishop of Jerusalem.”** Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 36.

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1. One recent author, a Lutheran pastor, writes: **“For thirty years after Jesus’ death, James [the Righteous] was the leading figure in the early church. It can be rightly claimed that if anyone rightly deserves the titles of first ‘bishop’ of the church, or even first ‘pope,’ it is James who justly deserves them.”** *Id.* at 177.
2. A recent biography of Peter agrees that James the Righteous, show in this painting by El Greco, **“supplanted Peter as the leader of the Christians after the Crucifixion of Jesus.”** Grant, *St. Peter* at 139.

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1. When most Protestants think of a Biblical James, they think of the son of Zebedee, an early disciple of Jesus. *Mark* 1:19.
2. But *Mark* also identifies another James as one of Jesus' brothers. *Mark* 6:3.
3. All early sources identify that brother as the leader of the early church.
4. Paul, describing a trip to Jerusalem in which he visited Peter, says that he **“saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord’s brother.”** *Galatians* 1:19.
5. Josephus describes **“the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James.”** Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20:9:1.
6. Eusebius says: **“Then there was James, who was known as the brother of the Lord.”** Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 35.
7. In summary, as a recent author writes: **“The community of believers [Jesus] left behind became the earliest church, headquartered in Jerusalem under the leadership of his brother James.”** Klinghoffer, *Why Jews Rejected Jesus* at 90.

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1. Eusebius describes James this way: **“[H]e drank no wine or intoxicating liquor and ate no animal food; no razor came near his head; he did not smear himself with oil, and took no baths. He alone was permitted to enter the Holy Place, for his garments were not of wool but of linen.”** Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 35.
2. During Jesus' life, James did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. *John* 7:5.
3. Paul reports that Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection, when he apparently became a believer. *I Corinthians* 15:7.

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1. A Lutheran pastor recently wrote: **“James is a vital key to the beliefs and teachings of Jesus.”** Butz, *The Brother of Jesus* at 17.
2. That statement begs the question of what James believed.
3. Although there is continued debate about this, most scholars today believe that the *Epistle of James* was either written by James, the brother of Jesus, or is a modification of one or more letters written or dictated by him.
4. The letter indicates that it was sent to Jewish followers of Jesus.
5. It is expressly directed **“[t]o the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.”** *James* 1:1.

6. In addition, it asks recipients to suppose **“there may come into your synagogue a man with a gold ring.”** *James 2:2* (Young’s Literal Translation).
7. A well-known New Testament scholar writes: **“The Letter of James also, according to the majority of scholars who have carefully worked through its text in the past two centuries, is among the earliest of New Testament compositions.”** Johnson, *The Real Jesus* at 121.
8. As a result, many scholars have concluded that the *Epistle of James* is an important source for determining the beliefs of the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus.

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1. The *Epistle of James* contains a number of sayings of Jesus that are very similar to those reported in *Matthew*, which most scholars believe was written much later.
2. Look, for example, at *James 5:12*: **“Let your ‘Yes’ be yes, and Your ‘No’, no, or you will be condemned.”**
3. It is almost identical to the words of Jesus quoted in *Matthew 5:37* during the Sermon on the Mount: **“Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’, ‘No’; anything else comes from the evil one.”**

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1. Or look at *James 5:2-3*: **“Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded.”**
2. Again, the words are very similar to those of Jesus in *Matthew 6:19*: **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.”**

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1. Finally, look at *James 2:5*: **“Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?”**
2. Again, these words match those of Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** *Matthew 5:3*.
3. Many scholars believe that the writer of *Matthew* used the *Epistle of James* as the source of some of the teachings of Jesus.

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1. If, as more and more scholars believe, the *Epistle of James* reflects the authentic teachings of Jesus, what can we learn about those teachings and about the beliefs of the earliest followers of Jesus?
2. One thing we can learn is that those Jewish followers accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah **“who had died and been raised from the dead.”** Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity* at 55.
3. *James* is directed to **“[m]y brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.”** *James* 2:1.
4. As noted earlier, the word “Christ” is derived from a Greek word meaning the same as “Messiah.”
5. We can also learn that these early followers believed that Jesus would soon return to judge the living and the resurrected dead.
6. The letter states: **“You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door.”** *James* 5:8-9.

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1. Unlike the letters of Paul, nothing in *James* refers to Jesus as the “Son of God” or makes any claim to his divinity.
2. For many Christians today, this does not seem to be an important omission because the author clearly accepted Jesus as the Jewish Messiah.
3. Most Christians assume that first century Jews, like Christians today, believed that the Messiah would be born divine and therefore be a literal “Son of God.”
4. But, as N.T. Wright, a retired Anglican bishop, says: **“That is simply not the case.”** Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* at 107.
5. Most first-century **“Jews expected the prophesied messiah of the Hebrew Bible to be a human prophet with the temporal role of evicting the Roman occupiers.”** Wade, *The Faith Instinct* at 165.

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1. Many scholars believe the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus similarly **“believed Jesus was a human prophet, not a god, born of human parents.”** Wade, *The Faith Instinct* at 164.

2. Scholars base this conclusion on the beliefs of early Christians called “Ebionites” who claimed a **“fundamental and ongoing continuity with Jesus and the apostles.”** Shanks, *Partings* at 192.
3. **“[The Ebionites] regarded [Jesus] as plain and ordinary, a man esteemed as righteous through growth of character and nothing more, the child of a normal union between a man and Mary.”** Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 90.
4. They believed God had “adopted” Jesus to be the Messiah at the time of his baptism by John. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 101.

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1. Writing in about 160 A.D., Justin Martyr identified Christians who believed Jesus had been **“born man of men”** and **“became the Christ by election,”** which most scholars believe is a reference to the Ebionites. Jergins, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 60 and n. 12.
2. Eusebius says this about the Ebionites: **“[T]hey held that they must observe every detail of the Law – faith in Christ alone, and a life built upon that faith, they would never win salvation.”** Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 90.
3. This is precisely the view set out in the *Epistle of James* in similar words: **“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. *** What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?”** *James* 2:10, 14.
4. When challenged as heretics, the Ebionites **“maintained that their views were authorized by the original disciples, especially by Peter and Jesus’ own brother, James, head of the Jerusalem church after the resurrection.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 100.
5. A Christian author writes that the Ebionites were **“no doubt the heirs of the primitive Judaean churches.”** Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* at 40.
6. A Jewish author says that the Ebionites preserved the tradition of the earliest followers of Jesus **“as if in amber.”** Klinghoffer, *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus* at 92.

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1. Although useful, we do not need to look to the *Epistle of James* or the Ebionites to conclude that the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus were meticulous in following Jewish law.
2. For example, *Acts* reports that **“many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law.”** *Acts* 21:20.

3. Until Peter had a vision, long after the death of Jesus, he continued to follow the strict Jewish dietary laws and avoided eating with Gentiles. *Acts* 10:14.
4. And, of course, the *Gospel of Matthew*, directed to Jewish followers of Jesus, quotes Jesus as saying this: **“For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”** *Matthew* 5:18.
5. If, as many scholars now believe, the earliest followers of Jesus believed they had to follow the law of Moses to the letter, how did we get to the fourth century conclusion of Eusebius that the requirement that Christians follow Jewish law reflected **“a poverty of their intelligence”**? Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 91.

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1. The answer, as many people know, are the teachings of Paul.
2. Paul, who claimed to be a Pharisee, was born in Tarsus in what is now Turkey.
3. In the two or three years following the death of Jesus, Paul persecuted his followers.
4. Most Christians never ask why Paul was persecuting these early followers, often assuming it was simply because he was a Pharisee.

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1. But as one author writes: **“Many members of the Jesus Movement came out of the Pharisaic party within Judaism without arousing any antagonism from other Pharisees.”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 145.
2. *Acts* itself reports that **“[t]he number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”** *Acts* 6:7.

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1. Paul gives this explanation for his persecution of the followers of Jesus: **“For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”** *Galatians* 1:13-14.
2. Paul does not explain what traditions he thought the first Jewish followers of Jesus were threatening.
3. As we have seen, all the evidence demonstrates that the early Jewish followers of Jesus were scrupulous in following Jewish traditions.

4. As one author states: **“The Judeo-Christians considered themselves Jews and their outward behavior and dietary customs were Jewish. In fact, they faithfully observed all the rules and regulations of Mosaic law.”** Shanks, *Partings* at 257.

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1. According to *Acts*, Paul approved the stoning of Stephen. *Acts* 7:60.
2. But it was not because Stephen did not respect Jewish law – Stephen railed at people who **“have not obeyed [the law].”** *Acts* 7:53.

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1. Deuteronomy says that **“anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.”** *Deuteronomy* 21:23.
2. Paul later wrote that the claim of a crucified Messiah was **“a stumbling block to Jews.”** *1 Corinthians* 1:23.
3. But Jewish beliefs in the first century did not preclude a Messiah who had been killed. Klinghoffer, *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus* at 85.
4. In sum, scholars have never agreed on what motivated Paul to persecute the early Jewish followers of Jesus – it was certainly not because following Jesus was inconsistent with being Jewish.
5. In fact, some recent scholars have speculated that Paul was not really Jewish.
6. One writes: **“He had a Jewish background and came to lead a movement that was anything but. He was a Jewish dropout.”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 143.
7. Another says that **“Paul was a faker who didn’t understand the [Jewish] faith.”** Klinghoffer, *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus* at 115.

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1. Whatever Paul’s motivation for attacking Christians, a few years after the death of Jesus, *Acts* reports that Paul went to Damascus to find followers of Jesus and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment. *Acts* 9:1-2.
2. While on the road to Damascus, a light blinded him and he fell off his horse, as shown in this statue in Damascus.
3. Paul later reported that the resurrected Jesus appeared to him in a vision and asked him why he was persecuting Jesus’ followers. *1 Corinthians* 15:8.

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1. When Paul reached Damascus, his sight was restored and he was baptized in a house on Straight Street. *Acts* 9:11, 17-19.
2. This underground chapel on Straight Street in Damascus is said to be in the house where the baptism occurred.

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1. Paul, who never met Jesus and never heard him preach, went out of his way to point out that he did not learn about Jesus from other men, including those who were part of the church in Jerusalem.
2. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes: **“I did not receive [the gospel that I preached] from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”** *Galatians* 1:12.
3. Paul is the only Biblical writer who reported that he had spoken to Jesus after his ascension and his words therefore assumed special authority.

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1. *Acts* reports that **“[P]aul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.”** *Acts* 9:20.
2. It is not clear how much success Paul had in preaching his message to the Jews in the synagogues.
3. Bart Ehrman concludes that Paul’s churches were **“comprised exclusively or almost exclusively pagan converts.”** Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity* at 75.

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1. What is clear is that **“[Paul’s] message resonated with one particular constituency found within Hellenistic synagogues, the ‘God-fearers.’”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 112.
2. In Athens, Paul **“reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks.”** *Acts* 17:17.
3. After speaking at the synagogue in Thessalonica, **“[s]ome of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.”** *Acts* 17:4.
4. As Garry Wills puts it, these “God-fearing Greeks” were Paul’s **“obvious hunting ground.”** Wills, *What Paul Meant* at 64.

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1. **“The God-fearers were Gentiles who liked the ethics and monotheistic beliefs of Judaism. They valued its antiquity. They found that these writings, discussions, and intellectual debates represented a sober contrast to the enthusiastic and orgiastic celebrations of the Roman mystery religions.”** Wills, *What Paul Meant* at 64.
2. Most God-fearers did not become Jews for a very simple reason.

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1. **“[Circumcision] was a nonnegotiable requirement of the Torah, going back to the time of Abraham, likely some eighteen hundred years earlier.”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 112.
2. The male body was very important to first-century Greeks and Romans, who considered circumcision mutilation.
3. So there was no way that God-fearers would follow the law of Moses in order to become followers of Jesus.
4. They were not willing to join a religion **“which involved restricting activities on Saturday, giving up pork and other popular foods, and, for the men, undergoing surgery to remove the foreskin of their penises.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 103.
5. But many God-fearers believed in the message of Paul and wanted to become followers of Jesus because of the promise of eternal life.

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1. Recognizing the appeal of his message to Gentiles, Paul began preaching that believers of Jesus did not need to follow Jewish law, at least with respect to circumcision.
2. As one author states: **“To the Jews these measures were commands ordained by God, but to the uncomprehending Gentiles they were a senseless barrier, which Paul was determined to remove.”** Moynahan, *The Faith* at 26.
3. At Pisidian Antioch, Paul had said: **“Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from the law of Moses.”** *Acts* 13:39.

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1. Paul went beyond teaching that circumcision and following Jewish law were not necessary for those who wanted salvation through believing in Jesus.

2. He suggested that circumcision and faith in Jesus were inconsistent with each other: **“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.”** *Galatians 5:2.*

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1. At some point, James learned that Paul was telling Gentiles that they did not have to follow the law of Moses to become followers of Jesus.
2. As leader of the early church, James sent a delegation from Jerusalem to Antioch where Paul was preaching to try to change this situation. *Galatians 2:12.*
3. The followers of Jesus were first called “Christians” in Antioch, then the third largest city in the Roman Empire. *Acts 11:26.*
4. This is the cave in Antioch where tradition says Paul was meeting with followers.

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1. The emissaries from James said: **“Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”** *Acts 15:1.*
2. Paul derisively called them the **“circumcision group.”** *Galatians 2:12.*
3. Peter, who was with Paul in Antioch, sided with James in what Paul labeled **“this hypocrisy”** because, as Paul states, Peter **“was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.”** *Galatians 2:11-12.*
4. That fact alone shows that it was James and not Peter who was leading the early church, at least as understood by Paul.
5. Even Paul’s traveling companion Barnabas sided with James’ view that people who did not follow the laws of Moses could not become followers of Jesus. *Galatians 2:13.*
6. As Bart Ehrman notes, Paul’s response to the emissaries of James **“seethes with white-hot anger.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 161.
7. Writing to the Galatians, Paul described following the law of Moses as a **“curse.”** *Galatians 3:10-13.*
8. He said: **“As for those agitators [preaching circumcision], I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves.”** *Galatians 5:12.*

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1. Bart Ehrman writes: **“One can only wonder what [the circumcision group] may have said in return.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 161.

2. Other scholars believe we know the response.
3. Look at this statement in Paul's letter to the Galatians setting out why he believed that James was wrong to insist that Gentiles be circumcised: **“[H]aving known also that a man is not declared righteous by works of law, if not through the faith of Jesus Christ, also we in Christ Jesus did believe, that we might be declared righteous by the faith of Christ, and not by works of law.”** *Galatians 2:16* (Young's Literal Translation).
4. Now look at this statement in the *Epistle of James*: **“Ye see, then, that out of works is man declared righteous, and not out of faith only.”** *James 2:24* (Young's Literal Translation).

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1. Look at this passage in Paul's letter. **“Consider Abraham: ‘He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith”** *Galatians 3:6-8*.
2. Now look at this verse in *James*: **“And the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness’ and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”** *James 2:24*.
3. So similar are these opposing passages that one author concludes that James **“may have had the passage from the Letter to the Galatians in front of him”** when he penned his letter. Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 153.
4. Whether or not James had Paul's letter in front of him, it is likely that James was responding to Paul's claim that following Jewish law was not important.
5. It is also likely that James had Paul in mind when he said this: **“When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment of it.”** *James 4:11*.

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1. According to the *Book of Acts* the **“sharp dispute”** between James and Paul over circumcision led to a conference in Jerusalem attended by both Paul and Barnabas. *Acts 15:2*.
2. *Acts* suggests this conference took place early in Paul's ministry.
3. Paul says that a meeting took place in Jerusalem about 17 years after his experience on the road to Damascus. *Galatians 2:1-6*.
4. According to the account in *Acts*, Paul spoke about the success that he had had among the Gentiles. *Acts 15:12*.

5. During the meeting, Peter reported on an earlier decision that he had made, after a vision. *Acts 15:7*.
6. Peter interpreted this vision as saying that if God had sent the Holy Spirit to Gentiles who did not obey the Laws of Moses, Peter was not in a position to oppose God. *Acts 11:17*.
7. Others, described as **“the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees,”** argued that Gentiles must be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses before they could become believers. *Acts 15:5*.
8. Again we see that being a Pharisee was not inconsistent with being a Christian.

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1. After hearing from both sides, James, as head of the church, announced his decision.
2. He said: **“It is my judgment that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”** *Acts 15:19*.

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1. James then directed that a letter be written stating that it was enough that Gentile followers of Jesus follow a list of laws that did not include circumcision. *Acts 15:20*.
2. These are known as the “Noahide laws” because of their traditional association with Noah: **“You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.”** *Acts 15:29*.
3. A recent author says that the letter ordered by James **“is effectively the founding document of Western civilization”** because it allowed Christianity to break away from its Jewish origins and spread throughout the Roman Empire. Klinghoffer, *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus* at 98.

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1. Because of major discrepancies between Paul’s letters and *Acts*, some scholars have concluded that the Jerusalem council, **“as such, did not actually take place,”** but was an effort by the writer of *Acts* to explain why **“[t]wo separate Christian missionary areas were now in existence . . . , one for Jews and one for Christians.”** Grant, *Saint Peter* at 127.
2. Conference or not, by about 55 A.D., the followers of Jesus could be divided into two groups.
3. One group of believers, almost all Jewish, looked to James, the brother of Jesus, for leadership.

4. Here is how one author describes this group: “[It] was a **Torah-observant group, ensconced within Judaism as one more form of this religion alongside such other Jewish factions as the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots.**” Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 95.
5. This group followed the laws of Moses as they awaited the return of Jesus to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.
6. They believed that Jesus was not born divine, but had been adopted by God as the Messiah at the time of his baptism.
7. Most scholars believe the Ebionites, later branded as heretics, were the spiritual descendants of this group of believers.

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1. The other group consisted largely of Gentiles, some of them God-fearers who had worshipped alongside the Jews in synagogues and some of whom had previously worshipped Greek and Roman gods.
2. This group looked for leadership to Paul, who exercised that leadership through letters and personal visits.
3. This group did not follow the law of Moses and saw Jesus as a spiritual savior, the divine Son of God who had been offered as a sacrifice for the salvation of mankind.
4. Paul’s letter to the Romans, written in about 55 A.D., epitomizes this view: **“For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.”** *Romans* 8:3.
5. The majority of Christians today are the spiritual descendants of this group.
6. So different were the beliefs and practices of these two groups that one recent author describes them as **“two separate, parallel religions.”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 238.

Slide 51

1. Why do so few Christians today know of the early Jewish followers of Jesus, led by the brother of Jesus, who expected those followers to obey all the laws of Moses?
2. The first answer is that when church leaders beginning in the fourth century declared that Mary had remained a virgin her entire life, the claim that Jesus had a brother who had led the early church became difficult to reconcile with that declaration.

3. It became easier to believe that Peter had been the founder of the church, centered in Rome, even though there is no conclusive evidence that Peter was ever in Rome and he certainly didn't found the church in Rome.

Slide 52

1. More important, by the fourth century, Christian orthodoxy had come to be defined **“almost exclusively on Pauline teachings and Gentile understandings.”** Butz, *The Brother of Jesus* at 171.

2. The teachings of *James* that following Jewish law is essential to salvation ran counter to Paul's teaching that salvation comes **“by faith alone.”** Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 90.

3. As a result, the teachings of *James* came to be seen as flawed or even heretical.

4. Martin Luther taught that because the *Epistle of James*, perhaps the closest of all New Testament books to the authentic teachings of Jesus, **mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture, . . . I will not have him in my Bible to be numbered among the true chief books.”** *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 at 395-399.

5. As a result, most Protestants never learn about the relationship of the *Epistle of James* to the teachings of Jesus and the beliefs of early Christians.

Slide 53

1. A Lutheran minister who has studied the teaching of the *Epistle of James* and early Christians writes: **“It is bitterly ironic that what was certainly the original orthodoxy became branded as heresy.”** Butz, *The Brother of Jesus* at 177.

2. A Jewish author agrees: **“Ironically, however, in the long run this type of Jewish Christianity came to be labeled as heretical by the emerging mainstream tradition of the Christian movement because they insisted on Torah observance and claimed that Jesus was human-born and only adopted as God's son, the messiah, at his baptism, in accordance with the scriptures.”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 406.

3. Many scholars accuse Paul of having rejected the teachings of *James* and the beliefs of early Jewish followers of Jesus, and perhaps of Jesus himself, and having **“invented”** a form of Christianity attractive to Gentiles in the Roman Empire. Butz, *The Brother of Jesus* at 177.

4. One author goes so far as to say that Paul's mission to the Gentiles was successful because he **“adopted the [Roman mystery] cults' central idea of a sacrificial god and grafted it onto the ancient religious heritage of Judaism.”** Wade, *The Faith Instinct* at 166.

Slide 54

1. Before we take these ideas too far, let's look again at the reported words of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, substituting the original Greek words in a few places.
2. **"Petros,"** translated as "Peter" in English, is a masculine word meaning a small stone or rock.
3. **"Petra"** is a feminine word meaning a large boulder or cliff.
4. *Matthew* uses **"petra"** to describe the cliff in which Jesus' tomb was hewn. *Matthew 27:60.*
5. The Greek conjunction **"kai"** can be translated as "and yet" to show an ironic comparison, as in: **"But John tried to stop him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?'"** *Matthew 3:14* (Christian Standard Bible).
6. In other words, Jesus said to Peter: **"You are called a stone and yet I will build my church on this cliff. The gates of Hades will not prevail against it."**
7. It seems obvious that "this cliff" was exactly what the location of his statement at Caesarea Philippi suggests.
8. Jesus would build his church among the pagan temples of the Roman Empire, which is exactly where it did grow rapidly after James agreed that followers of Jesus did not have to be circumcised.
9. And the pagan gods believed to live beyond the cave that was the literal Gates of Hades were not able to stop it.

Slide 55

1. Seen this way, the fact that Paul's views prevailed over those of James and the circumcisers could have been God's plan, of which we are the beneficiaries.
2. As one author recently wrote: **"For if one truly believes that God is at work in the world and in history . . . then the course of events that has transpired has surely been the unfolding of God's will, and James's obfuscation may be seen to fulfill a higher purpose."** Butz, *The Brother of Jesus* at 177.

Slide 56

1. Because James allowed Paul to continue converting the Gentiles without the requirement of circumcision, one recent author calls James the **"forgotten hero of . . . Western Civilization."** Butz, *The Brother of Jesus* at 178.
2. Another author recently wrote: **"Had the 'circumcision party' prevailed, . . . [n]one of the achievements in culture, law, morality, or science associated with the**

rise of the church would have taken place, at least not in the forms in which we know them.” Klinghoffer, *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus* at 99.

Slide 57

1. As we will see in the fourth presentation, the views of the early Jewish Christians did not disappear – they survive in the teachings of Islam, which denies the divinity of Jesus and affirms the Jewish view that salvation is a matter of following God’s laws.
2. As one author writes: **“Thus we have a paradox of world-historical proportions, viz., the fact that Jewish Christianity indeed disappeared within the Christian church, but was preserved in Islam and thereby extended some of its basic ideas even to our own day. According to Islamic doctrine, the Ebionite combination of Moses and Jesus found its fulfillment in Muhammad.”** Schoeops, *Jewish Christianity* at 140.

Slide 58

1. As we end today in about 55 A.D., two versions of Christianity co-existed, one practiced by Jews and one practiced by Gentiles.
2. The harmony did not last.
3. Christianity began moving further and further away from its Jewish roots and eventually separated entirely from Judaism.
4. Next week, we will take a look at that separation and the events that caused it.

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