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Show #1610W

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From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians

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William Cran, Senior Producer and Director

**MINISTER:** The angel Gabriel was sent from God to the city of Galilee-

**NARRATOR:** Every Sunday, in every corner of the world, people gather to hear a story.

**MINISTER:** --and the virgin's name was Mary.

**NARRATOR:** For almost 2,000 years that story has been told and retold. Along the way, each generation has found in its telling its own meaning and interpretation.

**MINISTER:** You shall call his name Jesus.

**NARRATOR:** That story, of a man called Jesus of Nazareth, a man who became Jesus Christ, was originally told by his first followers, and then retold in accounts by later believers in the Gospels.

**MINISTER:** --the Gospel according to St. Luke.

**NARRATOR:** So began the building of a religion. Now it is our turn, with the help of scholars and historians, theologians and archeologists, to return to that time and use our best efforts to understand that story of a man born in obscurity in whose name a faith was made.

We know so little about him: that he was born almost 2,000 years ago and that he lived in Palestine. We know he was baptized and became a preacher. And we know that he was publicly executed.

**READER: [Matthew 8:27]** "What manner of man is this that even the winds and the seas obey him?"

**NARRATOR:** With so little evidence to go by, archeologists must sift the clues and scholars decode the stories told by the first followers of Jesus.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE, University of Texas, Austin:** The problem for any historian in trying to reconstruct the life of Jesus is simply that we don't have sources that come from the actual time of Jesus himself.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX, President, Union Theological Seminary:** The historian's task in understanding Jesus and the Jesus movement and early Christianity is a lot like the archaeologist's task in excavating a tell. You peel



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ABOUT FRONTLINE

back layer after layer after layer of interpretation, and what you always find is a plurality of Jesuses.

**Assoc. Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN, Harvard Divinity School:** History isn't made to record the deeds of a person like Jesus. Jesus is very much like most people, statistically speaking, who have ever existed in the world: poor, obscure, no pretensions to royalty or distinction of any kind. They live under less than desirable conditions and they die that way. There is nothing historically remarkable about that. Billions of people pass through this veil of tears in exactly that way.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE, University of Texas, Austin:** We can tell the story by looking at the way the earliest Christians themselves thought about Jesus, by the way they kept his memory alive, by the way that they told the story.

**NARRATOR:** Central to the story is the fact that Jesus was born a subject of the Roman empire.

**READER: [Luke 2:1]** "And in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed."

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN, DePaul University:** Jesus was born during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, in the sort of a booming economy of the **Pax Romana**, the Roman Peace. And on every coin that Augustus had were the words, **Divi Filius**, "Son of the Divine One," Julius Caesar, son of God.

**Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN:** This is on every billboard in the Mediterranean world. He is the savior of the world, and he brings the peace. Now, you may have scruples about how he brings the peace, but he brings peace to Rome and, as the saying goes in Latin, "Peace to the Rome and quiet to the provinces."

**READER: [Virgil, "The Aeneid"]** "This is he, Augustus Caesar, son of a god, who shall restore the golden age and spread his empire."

**NARRATOR:** Rome's empire spread across the Mediterranean, sweeping through North Africa and reaching as far west as Spain. To the east it encompassed Egypt, Turkey, Greece and Palestine, where Jesus was born in the Jewish land of Judea, then ruled by King Herod.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX:** In Judea the King, Herod, was, in effect, a client king. He ruled almost in place of Rome. He was the voice of Rome, the instrument of Rome-- probably "instrument of Rome" is best in that because he had his own independent notions, certainly.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN, Boston University:** Herod the Great was probably one of the greatest kings of the post-Biblical period in Israel, but you wouldn't want your daughter to date him. He was ambitious, brutal, extremely successful.

**Prof. ERIC M. MEYERS, Duke University:** And it is one of the real untold ironies of Jewish history that this man, who's the guy you love to hate in Jewish history, really, leaves the most indelible mark on the face of the land of Israel.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** It appears that Herod thought of Jerusalem as his showpiece. He really wanted to make it a place where people would come, just as people would have gone to Athens or Rome or the great cities of the Mediterranean world.

**NARRATOR:** A meticulously accurate model of ancient Jerusalem shows the

extraordinary scale of Herod's building program.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** And so when Herod built the city, or helped to rebuild the city, he did so on a monumental scale. And this can be seen in the rebuilding of the temple.

**NARRATOR:** We know exactly how Herod rebuilt the temple because detailed descriptions of the architecture have survived. Along the coast Herod constructed an aqueduct 40 miles long. It brought water to a new sea port he had built. In honor of the Roman Emperor Caesar, Herod named the city Caesarea.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** We really need to get a feel for a city like Caesarea Maritima at the time of Jesus precisely because it shows the crucial intersection of Roman rule in Jesus' own homeland.

**NARRATOR:** In this thriving seaport, the power of Rome, its culture and commerce, commanded every aspect of daily life.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** In the middle of the city was a Roman city, complete with the capital, temples to the deified Roma-- that is, the personification of Rome itself. The political reality of the day was of a dominant power overseeing the life on a day-to-day basis.

**NARRATOR:** Into this political climate, Jesus was born. The Gospels present the familiar account of his birth.

**READER: [Luke 2:7]** "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn."

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** Our best guess for the birth date of Jesus would be 4 BCE. In other words, he was born before the death of Herod the Great, who died in 4 BCE. But I emphasize "best" and "guess."

**NARRATOR:** The Gospels claim Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Historians think it is more likely that he was born and grew up near the sea of Galilee in the village called Nazareth.

**Assoc. Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN, Harvard Divinity School:** The region was known for being a hotbed of political activity, and some of it violent. In the last few generations of New Testament scholarship, the Galilee has achieved this reputation for being the hotbed of radicalism, you know, the-- I don't know, the '60s Berkeley of Palestine.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** The Galilee, by most of the traditional accounts, is always portrayed as a kind of bucolic backwater-- peasants on the hillsides. And yet our recent archaeological discoveries have shown this not to be the case. Nazareth stands less than four miles from a major urban center, Sepphoris. Sepphoris was founded as the capitol of the Galilee. And so, it was really invested, much like Caesarea Maritima, with all the trappings of Greek or Roman city life.

**NARRATOR:** Recent archeological discoveries at Sepphoris challenge the conventional picture of Jesus' life.

**Prof. ERIC M. MEYERS:** One of the more exciting discoveries that we made at Sepphoris was a magnificent Roman villa with a gorgeous, gorgeous mosaic on its floor in a banquet hall. The lady was dubbed "Mona Lisa" by the press when we found her because she's really an extraordinary depiction of a beautiful woman of Roman antiquity. And the picture we get is a community very much

in the mainstream, but on the high end of the scale.

Sepphoris was not just a city with houses and with waterworks and things like that, but it had satellite settlements around. Nazareth, to all intents and purpose, was a satellite village attached to the region or municipality of Sepphoris.

**Prof. HOLLAND L. HENDRIX, Pres. Union Theological Seminary:** The findings really are requiring us completely to rethink Jesus' social-economic setting because we really had thought of Jesus as being really out in the hinterland, utterly removed from urban life, especially Roman-influenced urban life.

What the excavations at Sepphoris suggest is that Jesus was quite proximate to a thriving and sophisticated urban environment that would have brought with it all of the diversity of the Roman empire and would have required, just to get on, you know, as the price of doing business, a level of sophistication that one would not have thought characteristic of Jesus, the humble carpenter.

**NARRATOR:** Scholars today question the image of Jesus, the humble carpenter, and disagree about his social class.

**READER: [Matthew 13:54-55]** "They were astounded and said 'Where did this man get this wisdom? Is not this the carpenter's son?'"

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN, DePaul University:** The difficulty for us in hearing a term like "carpenter" is that we immediately think of a highly skilled worker and, at least in North America, in the middle class, making a very high income. As soon as we take that into the ancient world, we are totally lost because, first of all, there was no middle class in the ancient world. There were the haves and the have nots, to put it very simply. And in the anthropology of peasant societies, to say that somebody is an artisan or a carpenter is not to compliment them. It is to say that they are lower in the pecking order than a peasant farmer.

**NARRATOR:** Very few scholars now believe that Jesus was of such lowly birth.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX:** I'm not entirely convinced that we could characterize Jesus as a peasant. I think that probably miscasts Jesus, especially in view of the more recent discoveries at Sepphoris and elsewhere.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE, University of Texas, Austin:** He must be someone in the artisan class if he's working in the building industry. And in all probability, that would mean where he might grow up and live in Nazareth, he likely went to Sepphoris to earn his living. And this puts him in the interesting mix of cultures that would have been the daily life of a city like Sepphoris, through the marketplace, in the building. And Sepphoris itself, as a city, was built precisely at the time that Jesus was growing up and living just next door.

**Prof. ERIC M. MEYERS, Duke University:** You couldn't deal and wheel either in the workplace or in the market without knowing a good deal of Greek. And I can't hardly imagine anybody worth their salt who wouldn't know some Greek. Jesus was tri-lingual. Jesus participated in both the Aramaic and Hebrew culture and its literatures, as well as the kind of Hellenistic Greek that he needed to do his business and his ministry. [[www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org): **The debate on Jesus' social class**]

**NARRATOR:** Despite its Greek and Roman influences, Sepphoris was a thoroughly Jewish city. And Jesus remained faithful to his religious heritage when he left Nazareth to become a preacher.

**READER: [Matthew 5:2,17]** "Then he began to speak and taught them saying, "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN, Boston University:** What we learned from the Gospel stories is not that Jesus was not Jewish. Quite the opposite. He's completely embedded in the Judaism of his time.

**Prof. SHAYE J.D. COHEN, Brown University:** Was Jesus a Jew? Of course Jesus was a Jew. He was born of a Jewish mother in Galilee, a Jewish part of the world. All of his friends, associates, colleagues, disciples-- all of them were Jews. He regularly worshipped in Jewish communal worship, what we call synagogue. He preached from Jewish texts from the Bible. He celebrated the Jewish festivals. He was born, lived, died, taught as a Jew.

Nowadays, there are temples and synagogues everywhere you go. There is not a Jewish community in the world that doesn't have a synagogue, and many of them are called temples. In this period, however, we should always remember that there is only one temple and that's the one temple in Jerusalem.

**NARRATOR:** For Jews living in the time of Jesus, the temple in Jerusalem was center of their religious life.

**Prof. SHAYE J.D. COHEN:** The Jewish historian, Josephus, has a very memorable line. He says, "One temple for the one God." The Jews saw themselves as a unique people, with the one God, the one God alone, and this one God of this one special people had one temple. And that's a very powerful idea, reflecting accurately, I think, the historical truth that the temple was a very powerful unifying source within the Jewish community.

This was the one most sacred place on Earth, the one place on Earth where the earth rises up and the heavens somehow descend just enough that they just touch. This was the only one place on the entire Earth where this was so.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** The temple in Jerusalem was the symbolic heart of the country. Jews everywhere, if they chose to, if they were pious, would put aside part of their income. It's sort of like the way Christmas Clubs operate now. You'd put aside money explicitly to be spent having a party in Jerusalem.

**NARRATOR:** Although the temple was the centerpiece of Jewish life and worship, Judaism was not a state religion.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** There's no such thing as a state church. It's not a monolithic religious or cultural entity at this time. Indeed, what we're seeing more and more through the research and the archaeological discoveries is how diverse Judaism was in this period.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** Sometimes reading ancient sources is like overhearing family quarrels in a distant room. And some of the most endearing aspects-- I can say this because I don't live in the 1st century, but the most endearing aspects of reading this evidence that we still have is overhearing the lively quarrels. I mean, people who weren't priests at all would have absolutely firm opinions on how the priests should be doing their business.

**Prof. SHAYE J.D. COHEN:** There would have been a whole, wide variety of groups in Jerusalem, and perhaps in the countryside as a whole. These are the revolutionary groups, who took their religious understanding of what Judaism was and turned that into a political program, a political agenda. "We must destroy the Roman empire or we must destroy Jews who cooperate with the Roman empire."

**NARRATOR:** We now know that other groups had even more extreme views, and their ideas shed new light on Jesus' own message.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** One of the best examples of the vibrantly different thought that's at work in Judaism in this period is, of course, now what we know from the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. As you leave Jerusalem and go to the south and to the east, toward the Dead Sea, the terrain changes rapidly and starkly. You move off gradually from rolling hillside, through the ravines, and it becomes stark and desolate. It's dry. It's arid. It's rocky and it's rough.

And then all of a sudden, within a span of only about 13 miles, the entire terrain drops out in front of you at the surface of the Dead Sea. It is in that rugged cliff face on the banks of the Dead Sea that the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, at the site known as Khirbet Qumran.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are usually thought to have been produced by a group known as the Essenes. And the Essenes are a group that literally abandoned Jerusalem, it seems, in protest against the way the temple was being run. And they go to the desert to get away from what they see to be the worldliness of Jerusalem and the worldliness of the temple.

**Prof. SHAYE J.D. COHEN:** The "Manual of Discipline," or in Hebrew, "Serekh ha Yahad," envisions a community living in almost total isolation, a community that is self-contained, that is governed very strictly. There is an oath of entry. It is a very much monastic community.

**READER: [Dead Sea Scrolls, The Community Rule]** "Everyone who wishes to join the congregation of the elect must pledge himself to live according to the rule of the community: to love all the children of light and to hate all the children of darkness."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** The Essenes are what we might best call an apocalyptic sect of Judaism. An apocalyptic sect is one that thinks of itself as, first of all, the true form of the religion.

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** By apocalyptic expectation, I mean that some group has an "apocalupsis" in Greek, a revelation that God is going to finally solve the problem of injustice, unrighteousness, evil in the world, by totally eradicating the evil -- that's the terrible price of apocalypse, there's going to be a lot of very dead people -- totally eradicating evil. And we, the good, whoever "we" are, are going to live with God, be it heaven on Earth, or Earth in heaven, forever in justice and holiness and righteousness.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, we hear not of just one Messiah, but at least two Messiahs. Some of their writings talk about a Messiah of Aaron, a priestly figure, who will come to restore the temple at Jerusalem to its proper purity and worship of God. But there's also a Messiah of David that is a kind of kingly figure who will come to lead the war.

**Prof. SHAYE J.D. COHEN:** The Qumran scrolls reveal a variety of scenarios for the end of days. The best known one, perhaps, is the scroll called, "The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness." And at some point, there will be a major battle, a cataclysmic struggle, not just between people, but also between cosmic forces, the cosmic forces of evil and the cosmic forces of good. And needless to say, this will end with a victory for the Sons of Light-- in other words, for the group itself.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Now, we typically think of this as reflecting a belief in the end of the world. But in fact, that's not exactly what they thought. They

used language like "the end" or "the last things" or "the last days", but what they mean is the present evil age is coming to an end. This is really more in the vein of a transformation of the present social order and a return to a kind of golden age of statehood and independence. So it's really kind of a political expectation. It's not otherworldly. In fact, when it comes, it'll be right here and right now. [[www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org): **Apocalyptic world views in Jesus' time**]

**NARRATOR:** History offers no evidence that Jesus was influenced by the Essenes, but their apocalyptic challenge struck chords that reverberated throughout the homeland and echoed through the message of a prophet known as John the Baptist.

**READER: [Matthew 3:1-2]** "In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea; proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** John the Baptist was a renowned kind of eccentric, it appears, from the way that Josephus describes him. But he seems to have this quality of a kind of prophetic figure, one who was calling for change. So he is usually thought of as being off in the desert, wearing unusual clothes, a kind of ascetic, almost.

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** John is taking people out into the desert, crossing the Jordan. He is recapitulating the Exodus. And he is planting little, ticking time bombs of apocalyptic expectation all over the Jewish homeland-- waiting for God to strike, as it were.

**NARRATOR:** It was as John's disciple, the Gospels say, that Jesus submitted to the ancient Jewish rite of baptism.

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** The evidence that Jesus was a follower of John is as strong as anything historians can find about Jesus. The reason is a certain embarrassment in the texts, trying to explain why on Earth would Jesus be apparently inferior to John. If he goes and is baptized by John, then somehow we have to explain how that can happen.

**Prof. HAROLD W. ATTRIDGE, Yale Divinity School:** The Gospels then go on to say that Jesus was the one predicted by John. Most contemporary scholars would see that to be a construct developed by the early church to help explain the relationship between the two.

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** The difference I see between John the Baptist and Jesus is, to use some fancy academic language, John is an apocalyptic eschatologist. An eschatologist is somebody who sees that the problem of the world is so radical that it's going to take some kind of divine radicality. God is going to descend, in some sort of a catastrophic event to solve the world. There is another type of eschatology, and that's what I think Jesus is talking. I'm going to call it ethical eschatology. That is the demand that God is making on us -- not us on God so much as God on us -- to do something about the evil in the world.

**NARRATOR:** We don't know to what extent Jesus remained faithful to John's apocalyptic message, but at some point after his Baptism by John, Jesus seems to have embarked on his career as a preacher.

**READER: [Matthew 4:23]** "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Jesus' career apparently was centered mostly in the

towns and villages and a few small cities in the area of the Galilee, his home region.

**Prof. ERIC M. MEYERS, Duke University:** Jesus' ministry in the Galilee is rather complicated, but I think we can begin to get the real-- better understanding of it through archaeology and through higher literary studies of the Gospels today.

Those villages there were absolutely essential to his ministry. He's avoiding the big towns, or cities, probably because the elements who run those cities are of such a high class that they're probably not interested in Jesus' message.

**NARRATOR:** Whether he was himself a simple man of the people or someone far more sophisticated, Jesus does seem to have pitched his message at ordinary people and to have impressed them with his healing powers.

**Prof. SHAYE J.D. COHEN:** The healings seem to have been something of a specialty of his, for which he had a great reputation. People would bring from miles around, judging from the Gospels-- they'd bring their sick, the frail, to Jesus to be healed.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX, Pres. Union Theological Seminary:** I love the story about Jesus reaching down and picking up the dust and mixing it with his own spit and forming a kind of healing balm that he applies to someone. And it's also interesting that in one healing case, Jesus sort of misses the mark a bit and has to refine the cure that he's applying. So one finds the intrusions of popular culture in these Jesus traditions that are being elaborated through natural processes of storytelling.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE, University of Texas, Austin:** Now, we need to be aware that there are other miracle workers around at the time, so just the idea of performing miracles is not in itself unique.

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN, DePaul University:** In the first century, in one sense, everyone, including later in the century, Vespasian, when he was becoming the Emperor, were miracle workers, if they were important enough. What really was unusual about Jesus was why would God work through a Jewish peasant? That sort of struck the Roman imagination as unbelievable-- not that there would be miracles, but that miracles might be performed by a Jewish peasant.

**Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN:** Jesus limited his circulation to the agrarian populace, and his teaching was characterized by metaphors that would be readily understood by agrarian populations.

**READER: [Matthew 14:16-18]** "Jesus said to his apostles, 'Give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish' and he said, 'Bring them here to me.'"

**Assoc. Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN, Harvard Divinity School:** The feeding of the multitudes is one of the few stories that's told in all four Gospels. That's a story near and dear to many people's hearts.

Jesus goes into the Galilean hillside. He takes about 5,000 people with him. And it's there they have a picnic, even though there are no provisions made for that. He multiplies five loaves and two fishes to feed this multitude of people. Well, I don't think it takes rocket science to figure out why that kind of story is so endearing to poor people. I mean, that's-- that's dinner and a show.

**NARRATOR:** Behind the simple rustic imagery was the message of the coming

kingdom of God, an enigma Jesus did not attempt to simplify.

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** Jesus tells a parable about somebody who takes a mustard seed, plants it in the ground, and it grows up to be a great tree, or a bush, at least, a weed, though, in plain language.

Now, imagine an audience reacting to that. Presumably, the kingdom is like this and you have to figure out, "What's it like? You mean, the kingdom is big? But you just said it's a big weed. So why don't you say a big cedar of Lebanon? Why a big weed? And besides, this mustard-- we're not certain we like this mustard. It's very dangerous in our fields. We try to control it. We try to contain it. Why do you mean the kingdom is something that the people try to control and contain?"

Every reaction in the audience -- the audience fighting with themselves, as it were, answering back to Jesus -- is doing exactly what he wants. It's making them think not about mustard, of course, but about the kingdom. But the trap is that this is a very provocative, even a weird image for the kingdom. To say the kingdom is like a cedar of Lebanon, everyone would yawn, say, "Of course." "It's like a mustard seed? What's going on here?"

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Either people will tend to focus on Jesus as some sort of social reformer, or as an apocalyptic firebrand preaching a coming kingdom of God on Earth. And yet it must be recognized that those are very different images, very different kinds of industry individuals, and yet both are reflected within the Gospels' tradition.

**NARRATOR:** He may have preached social change. He may have preached a new kingdom on Earth. Either way, Jesus was bound to find himself in conflict with the Roman authorities.

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** The core of Jesus' preaching is the kingdom of God. And the difficulty for us is to hear that term as 100 percent political and 100 percent religious. Not one, not the other. In the first century those were inextricably intertwined. The kingdom, if you use that expression in the first century, would have meant the Roman kingdom. It meant the Roman empire. When you talked about the kingdom of God, and we're somehow setting it up in some tension with the Roman empire, you were making a very caustic criticism of the Roman empire, and you were saying that its system was not the system of God.

**Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN:** The Jewish historian Josephus tells us a number of stories about characters whose career could be crudely summarized as following: Some guy wakes up in the morning and he thinks he's the messiah or something. Or he's a prophet and he says-- he gets a group of people to follow him. He says, "We're going to go out in the desert and we're going to wait for God to do something for us." So a whole bunch of people may go with him. Maybe thousands go with him out to this deserted, unsecured place, and they wait for what Josephus calls "the tokens of their deliverance."

And the Romans send a vicious police action out there and kill everybody. When that kind of police action is perpetrated against what we might consider harmless fanatics, the Romans are really giving us a very good historical lesson in how domination works.

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** All the time that Jesus is talking, I cannot not imagine the fact that he's going to be put to death. Everything that he is doing is politically dangerous. If you are following Jesus' life from day to day, you should be saying to yourself, "Somebody is going to kill this man."

**READER: [Luke 19:28]** "After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem."

**Prof. HAROLD W. ATTRIDGE, Yale Divinity School:** Moving to Jerusalem, Jesus was moving from the territory ruled by Herod Antipas to the territory ruled directly by Rome through a prefect, Pontius Pilate.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Pontius Pilate was the governor from 26 to 36, and so that places us very clearly within the early period of Roman rule. These are some of our most important and clearest dates for the activities of Jesus' life. When Jesus actually died we're not absolutely sure. Some people would say as early as maybe 27, maybe some others as late as 33, but we do know it's under Pilate.

**READER:** "Pontius Pilatus, Trifectus Judeae-- Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea."

**Prof. HAROLD W. ATTRIDGE:** And we know of him as an effective and a fairly ruthless administrator of his territory, the area of Judea. There are several episodes recorded by Josephus where eschatological prophets emerge and Pilate has no hesitation in eliminating them or in suppressing episodes of potential conflict or revolt within that territory.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN, Boston University:** People from all over the empire went to Jerusalem on Passover. It's one of the most populated times in the whole city. It's a madhouse. There are extra animals being brought up-- sheep, because of the Passover holiday. There are pilgrims coming in from everywhere. And Jesus comes up to town, too. He could have stayed home and had Passover in the Galilee, but he didn't. He's up in Jerusalem because this is important.

Pilate would get nervous when there were crowds of Jews and, of course, he was legally responsible to be up in Jerusalem when it was the most crowded of all. He would leave this very nice, plush seaside town in Caesarea which was, you know, a nice pagan city, plenty of pagan altars, all the stuff he wanted. And he had to go up to Jerusalem where all these Jews were congregating and stay there for crowd control until the holiday was over. He was in a bad mood already by the time he got to town, and Passover would fray anybody's nerves.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** If you were a pilgrim coming to Jerusalem in these days, you would walk through the streets of this magnificent city. As you approach the temple mount, you come up to this massive, monumental complex that we call the temple, and there are grand staircases up which one can go and get up to the top. And you come out up on top of the platform in the outer precincts of the temple complex.

The soldiers that were garrisoned in Jerusalem would have been stationed in the nearby fortress called the Antonia, which literally stands adjacent to the temple complex and kind of looks over it. They could keep an eye on things there and, of course, everyone in the temple knew they were there, too.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** Particularly at Passover, which is a holiday that vibrates with this incredible historical memory of national creation and freedom-- and the Roman soldiers standing among the colonnade of the temple, looking down at Jews celebrating this. So it's a politically and religiously electric holiday.

**READER: [Matthew 21:12]** "Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** The difficulty with the story of Jesus and the money changers in the temple is that the story is told in slightly different ways in different Gospels. For example, in Mark's Gospel -- and in fact, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, all three -- this event occurs in the last week of Jesus' life and is clearly the event which brings him to the attention both of the temple leadership and the Roman authorities. It is, in effect, what gets him killed.

John's Gospel, interestingly enough, though, puts the story of the cleansing of the temple as the very first episode in Jesus' public career, more than two years earlier. And no mention is made of it near his death. So there are a few problems with the story itself, although it is one of the stories that appears in all the Gospels. So something is going on there.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** It's unclear how he actually gets into trouble. He wouldn't have wandered into the crosshairs of the priests because, compared to how the Pharisees are criticizing the priests, what Jesus is doing is fairly minimal. If he had been complaining about the priests, or criticizing them, or criticizing the way the temple was being run, this would just-- it's business as usual. This is one of the aspects of being a Jew.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Another possibility, though, is that Jesus sounds more like the Essenes, who were really criticizing the whole way the temple is run, as having become too worldly, too caught up in the money of the day, or maybe just too Roman. And if that's the case, then his action looks much more like an act of political subversion. [[www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org): **More on Jesus' last days in Jerusalem**]

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** Try and imagine the temple for what it was. It was both the house of God and the seat of collaboration. It was the high priest, Caiaphas, who had to collaborate with the Roman occupation. Now, how would Jesus, as a Galilean peasant, see the temple? I think with ferocious ambiguity.

On the one hand, it was the seat of God and you would die to defend it from, say, a Roman emperor like Caligula putting a statue in there. But what would do you when it was also the place where Caiaphas collaborated with the Romans? Was the temple really the house of God anymore? What Jesus does is not cleanse the temple, he symbolically destroys it.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** If you really think the end of the world is at hand, that has a kind of liberating and frantic energy that goes along with it. It's not good for quiet crowds and social stability. And given the emotional and religious tenor of this holiday anyway, to have somebody preaching that the kingdom of God was really on its way -- perhaps it was going to be coming within, you know, that very holiday -- preaching that in the days before Passover, it's the equivalent of shouting, "Fire!" in a crowded theater.

**NARRATOR:** The Gospels agree that this politically charged climate was the occasion for his arrest. But what happened next -- and the role played by the priests -- remains unclear.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** I think there's some kind of cooperation between the chief priests and Pilate. The chief priests always had to cooperate with Rome because it's their jobs. They're mediating between the imperial government and the people. And there was a perceived danger that Pilate was on the verge of some kind of muscular crowd control. People would get hurt or killed when Pilate felt so moved. And perhaps for this reason Jesus was turned over to Rome.

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** The most difficult thing for us after 2,000

years is to bring our imagination down when we're looking at the passion of Jesus because we want to think the whole world was watching, or all of the Roman empire was watching, or all of Jerusalem was watching. I take it for granted there were standing orders between Pilate and Caiaphas about how to handle -- lower-class especially -- dissidents who caused problems at Passover.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX:** Jesus would have represented, you know, a kind of activist and resister, in Pontius Pilate's experience, that he had been dealing with for years, and with varying degrees of success and effectiveness, obviously. Jesus would have been a blip on the screen of Pontius Pilate because the unrest and the uprisings were so common, part of daily life for the Roman administration of Judea, that Jesus would have been seen I think as very little out of the ordinary.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** I don't for a moment think that Pilate would have been worried that Jesus could have challenged the power of the emperor. That's not the point. The point is any challenge to Roman authority, any challenge to the peace of Rome, would have been met with a swift and violent response.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX:** In dealing with a person who was guilty of sedition, Pilate had considerable leeway. He was probably driven by convention, and that is the process of executing state criminals through crucifixion.

**Prof. ERIC M. MEYERS:** There is no doubt in my mind but that the persons responsible for the actual execution of Jesus were the Romans. The Romans practiced crucifixion. It was-- while it was not unknown to the Jewish people, it was not a form of Jewish execution.

**READER: [Matthew 27:33]** "Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means the place of a skull."

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** A crucifixion site was usually near, say, a main road into the city. It was a warning location. The uprights for the crosses were usually left there permanently. And you have to think of that site as not a place where people would go regularly. It an abhorrent site. It's supposed to be a warning, even when nobody is hanging there.

So the idea that there would be crowds around the crucifixion -- leave out Passover or anything like that -- just watching-- I think most people would probably avert their eyes and walk away because they don't want to be on the side of the Romans, who are killing and crucifying one more good Jew among the thousands who have been crucified in the first quarter of that century.

**Prof. ERIC M. MEYERS:** Death by crucifixion was certainly an awful, awful experience for the persecuted individual. It was slow, it was painful and it was public terror.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** It's not from bleeding. It's not from the wounds themselves that the death occurs. It's rather a suffocation because one can't hold oneself up enough to breath properly. And so over time, really, it's really the exposure to the elements and the gradual loss of breath that produces death.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** We don't have that much detail about the actual crucifixion of Jesus. What we have are the stories in the Gospels. And they're-- interestingly and appropriately, the Gospel writers are drawing on Psalms, Psalms that in the Jewish canon are often cries to God. And that's-- they're grabbing onto that literature to shape their narrative presentation of the crucifixion.

Those are cries of terror and loneliness. They're really appeals to God for meaning. The words that are put in Jesus' mouth in Mark, "Why have you forsaken me?"-- it's the religious power of the Psalms that is really one of those wonderful moments of concrete continuity between what this very passionately religious 1st century Jew might have been thinking as he was dying this horrible death on the cross as the finale to this week of passionate religious excitement and commitment, and asking God what happened.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** The plaque that was nailed to the cross is one of the few clear pieces of historical evidence that we have.

**READER: [plaque]** "Jesus Nazareno Rex Iudorum."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** The plaque, which names him as Jesus, the king of the Jews, suggests that the charge on which he was executed was one of political insurrection, a threat to the Pax Romana. But he's also now a victim of the Pax Romana.

**ANNOUNCER:** "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians," will return in a moment.

**[intermission]**

**ANNOUNCER:** We now return to "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians."

**NARRATOR:** In the year 51 of the Common Era, by the shores of the Aegean sea, a visitor arrived at the Greek city of Corinth. His name was Paul of Tarsus.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE, University of Texas, Austin:** Let's imagine Paul going up the main street of Corinth through the monumental Roman archway into the forum, the center of city life, the place where all the business and most of the political activities are done in the public life of this Greco-Roman city. Here are the shops. Here are the offices of the city magistrates. And we are standing literally in the shadow of the great temple of Apollo.

**NARRATOR:** Apollo, the sun god, watched over the fortunes of Corinth. Like Zeus, Hera, Artemis and Athene, Apollo was one of the Olympian Gods, that family of divinities who presided over the ancient and diverse pagan universe.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN, Boston University:** Paganism is our designation for what 90-something percent of the people in the Mediterranean were doing. Jews are a visible minority, and then everybody is doing lots of other things.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX, President, Union Theological Seminary:** One would have found a rich array of deities meeting the various needs of individuals. It's like going to a supermarket and being able to sort of shop for God. And you have them at various times in your life and for various functions of your living.

**NARRATOR:** By the time Paul arrived in Corinth, pilgrims had been worshipping for centuries at local shrines like the sacred spring of the Pierenne. To devote pagans like these, Paul's message of a Jewish messiah come to save all mankind -- Jew and gentile alike -- must have seemed outlandish.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** And so when we hear Paul say, "I've determined to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah and him crucified," that must have struck an interesting chord among these cosmopolitan Greeks who would have inhabited Corinth at that time.

**READER: [Acts 22:3]** "I am a Jew born in Tarsus in Cilicia, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous about God."

**Prof. WAYNE A. MEEKS, Yale University:** The apostle Paul is, next to Jesus, clearly the most intriguing figure of the first century of Christianity and far better known than Jesus because he wrote all of those letters.

**READER: [Letter to the Corinthians]** "For as long as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

**[Letter to the Thessalonians]** "Wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead."

**[Letter to the Philippians]** "Whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** We're beginning to get for the first time in the New Testament the language that will become the hallmark of all the later Christian tradition. You see, it's Paul who starts the writing of the New Testament by writing letters to these fledgling congregations in the cities of the Greek East.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX:** Paul alludes in a number of his letters to the message that he would have communicated verbally, probably. He emphasizes two things: on the one hand, very clearly the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus; on the other hand, he also emphasizes the importance of understanding the end time and the immediacy of the end time, and that one must be prepared for it, and the way one prepares for it is to be good. We find a lot of ethics in Paul, and it's around this issue of how one lives in anticipation of the end time that's just around the corner for Paul.

**NARRATOR:** The death and resurrection of Jesus lie at the very heart of Paul's preaching. But it is a story that predates Paul and goes back to the first followers of Jesus in Jerusalem.

**READER: [Matthew 27:59-60]** "Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** The movement that originated around Jesus must have suffered a traumatic setback with his death-- not so much that a Messiah couldn't die, but that nothing happened. The Kingdom didn't arrive immediately, as they might have expected.

**Assoc. Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN, Harvard Divinity School:** The effect that the crucifixion had on Jesus' followers was the desired effect, from the Roman perspective-- that is, that people who were associated with Jesus were terrified. I mean, before the Easter proclamation, there must have been some sort of Easter panic, you see, that folks were hiding out, as they should have, because now they were accomplices of an executed criminal.

**Prof. WAYNE MEEKS:** The followers of Jesus, who don't go away as they're supposed to when Pilate caused this, have to deal with that fundamental question: "What does this mean that the one that we had all of these expectations about has been crucified? How do we deal with this, not merely the end of this life, but the shameful end of this life?"

**Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN, DePaul University:** The only place they can go, eventually, is into the Hebrew Scriptures, into their tradition, and find out, "Is it possible that the elect one, the Messiah, the righteous one, the Holy One," any title they use of Jesus "is it possible that such a one could be oppressed, persecuted and executed?" They go into the Hebrew Scriptures, and of course, what they find is that it's almost like a job description of being

God's righteous one, to be persecuted and even executed.

**Prof. WAYNE MEEKS:** And the amazing thing is, they said, "Hey, Pilate's right. He was the king of the Jews. And moreover, God has vindicated this claim that he is the king of the Jews by raising him from the dead."

**READER: [Matthew 28:2-6]** "An angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone. He said to the women, 'Jesus who was crucified, he has been raised. Come see the place where he lay.'"

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN, Boston University:** The stories about the resurrection in the Gospels make two very clear points: first of all, that Jesus really, really was dead, and secondly, that his disciples really and with absolute conviction saw him again afterwards. The Gospels are equally clear that it's not a ghost, I mean, even though the raised Jesus walks through a shut door in one of the Gospels, or suddenly materializes in the middle of a conference his disciples are having. He's at pains to assure them. "Touch me. Feel me. It's bones and flesh." In Luke he eats a piece of fish. Ghosts can't eat fish.

As a historian, this doesn't tell me anything about whether Jesus himself was actually raised. But what it does give me an amazing insight into is his followers, and therefore indirectly into the leader who had forged these people into such a committed community.

**NARRATOR:** According to the Book of Acts, Christianity began at a single place, at a single moment in time. Fifty days after the death of Jesus -- now known as Pentecost -- a miraculous event took place.

**READER: [Acts 2:2-3]** "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them."

**Prof. HAROLD W. ATTRIDGE, Yale Divinity School:** That's the picture that we get in Acts. The historical reality is probably much more complex. And the Christian movement probably began not from a single center, but from many different centers where different groups of disciples of Jesus gathered and tried to make sense of what they had experienced with him and what had happened to him at the end of his public ministry.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX:** The Acts account of early Christianity presents a very cogent, coherent image of earliest Christianity, when, in fact, the more we find out about early Christianity, the more widely variegated a phenomenon it appears to be.

**Prof. ELAINE PAGELS, Princeton University:** As far as we can tell, the beginnings of Christianity occurred in many different places, in many different groups. There were wandering charismatics who went around from door to door preaching without an ordinary occupation, depending on people with whom they stayed for hospitality, for food. There were settled groups in little towns. There were radical groups trying to give up ordinary occupations and family life, following the teachings of Jesus. It must have been an amazing mixture, amazingly diverse range.

**Prof. WAYNE MEEKS:** It's clear from the very beginning of Christianity, that there are different ways of interpreting the fundamental message. There are different kinds of practice. There are arguments over "How Jewish are we to be?" "How Greek are we to be?" "How do we adapt to the surrounding culture?" "What is the real meaning of the death of Jesus?" "How important is the death of Jesus?" "Maybe it's the sayings of Jesus that are really the

important thing and not his death and not his resurrection."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** I think we're right to call it the "Jesus movement" here because if we think of it as Christianity -- that is, from the perspective of the kind of movement and institutional religion that it would become a few hundred years later -- we will miss the flavor of those earliest years, of the kind of crude and rough beginnings, the small enclaves trying to keep the memory alive.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** We're hampered by our vocabulary. We know that this group will eventually form a gentile community and they'll be known as Christians. But this group didn't think that. This group expected Jesus to return and establish the Kingdom of God.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** He is a Jewish Messiah. They are followers of a Jewish apocalyptic tradition. They are expecting the coming of the Kingdom of God on Earth. It's a Jewish movement.

**Prof. SHAYE J.D. COHEN, Brown University:** The Jewish sect, then, is a group which sees itself as Jews, recognizes that there are other Jews out there, but claims that those other Jews out there have it all wrong. They don't fully understand what Judaism is all about and only the members of the sect do.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Sectarian groups are always in tension with their environment. That tension is manifested in a tendency to want to spread the message out, to hit the road and convince others that the truth is real.

**READER: [Matthew 10:5-6]** "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

**Prof. WAYNE MEEKS:** One of the characteristics of the Roman empire is there is suddenly great freedom of movement, more so than in any period before that, and in some ways, more free than any period that will happen again until the invention of the steamship.

**READER: [Matthew 10:7]** "As you go, proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven has come near."

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX:** One would have encountered on the Via Egnoci, or any other major Roman road, a wonderful variety of journeyers. Some would be certainly engaged in commerce, taking their commercial products from place to place. Some would be involved in goods and services, taking their particular services to different places. One would have found philosophers. One would have found persons such as Paul, preachers, missionaries of particular religious views and religious movements.

What, in a sense, is sort of ironic is that the network that was established for the mobility of the Roman army finally became the network that was probably most instrumental in the spread of Christianity.

**NARRATOR:** Jews had traveled along this network for centuries, and Jewish communities were spread throughout the empire.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** By the time of the first century, there were probably then, as now, more Jews living outside the land of Israel than within the land of Israel. There's a very energetic Jewish population in Babylon. There is a very wealthy, vigorous Jewish population living in the major cities around the Mediterranean.

It's because of Diaspora Judaism, which is extremely well established, that Christianity itself, as a new and constantly improvising form of Judaism, is able

to spread as it does throughout the Roman world.

**NARRATOR:** Paul himself was a Diaspora Jew. Convinced that God had chosen him to spread the word about Jesus, he traveled to Antioch, the capital of Roman Syria.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Antioch has one of the largest Jewish communities outside of the Jewish homeland. It's been suggested that maybe something like 40,000 people in this Jewish community. So we can-- we must imagine a number of different Jewish congregations and subsections of the city in and through which Paul could have moved and still felt very much at home within the Jewish community.

**Prof. SHAYE J.D. COHEN:** Wherever you have a sufficient number of Jews, you would have a Jewish community. Wherever you would have a Jewish community, you would have a Jewish synagogue.

**NARRATOR:** By the 4th Century, the synagogue had become a formal place of worship. But in Paul's day, especially in the Diaspora, it was more of a community center.

**Prof. SHAYE J.D. COHEN:** Another remarkable feature of the synagogues in the Diaspora is not only that they attracted large crowds of people, but among these crowds will have been gentiles. There is no barrier between Jews and gentiles, and gentiles found the Jewish synagogues and the Jews themselves, apparently, as open, friendly, and why not go to the Jewish Synagogue, especially because there are no non-Jewish analogs. There's nothing equivalent to this communal experience anywhere in pagan or Greek or Roman religions.

**NARRATOR:** Gentiles attending synagogues would have been exposed to Judaism's variety of beliefs. In Antioch, this new Jewish sect, the Jesus movement, found a following in some synagogues. Paul felt that the time was right for these Jews to bring the gentiles into their movement.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE, University of Texas, Austin:** Paul's message of the conversion of gentiles seems to be predicated on the Isaiah language of what will happen when the Kingdom comes, when the Messiah has arrived and there will be a light to the nations, a light to the gentiles? And in that sense, Paul views the messianic age, having arrived with Jesus, as being a window of opportunity for bringing in the gentiles into the elect status alongside the people of Israel.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN, Boston University:** Why do gentiles join the movement? There is this tremendous religious prestige, thanks to the antiquity of the Jewish Bible. By entering into the church, these Christians enter into that history as well. That's tremendously prestigious and important.

**Prof. ELAINE PAGELS, Princeton University:** I think perhaps, originally, they were attracted to the claims of salvation, regeneration, eternal life. You're baptized. You're illuminated. Probably they were attracted to the rituals and to the communities.

**NARRATOR:** Like most Jewish communities, the early followers of Jesus assembled for worship in each other's homes.

**Prof. WAYNE MEEKS, Yale University:** Among the things that make the Christians different are a couple of rituals, which they developed early on, before the very earliest sources that we have about them. One of these is an initiation ceremony, which they call "baptism," which is simply a Greek word that means dunking. A second major ritual which they developed is a meal, a

common meal which they have together, which is designed as a memorial of the Last Supper which Jesus had with his disciples.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Now the situation seems to be that initially, when people were attracted to the Jesus movement, they first became Jews.

**NARRATOR:** Becoming a Jew was no easy matter. It meant conforming to strict Jewish laws.

**READER: [Leviticus 11:46-47]** "This is the law to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** There are several issues involved here. One is the notion of the dietary laws, the eating restrictions that would have obtained for eating certain kinds of food if one was an observant Jew, also with whom one could eat.

**NARRATOR:** In Paul's view, it was now possible to allow gentiles, who didn't observe all the Jewish food laws, to participate in the communal meals of the movement.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** But because it's at a meal, it also runs headlong into some Jewish sensitivities about what kind of foods you can eat and with whom you can eat.

**NARRATOR:** Dietary laws were not the only regulations that marked Jewish identity.

**READER: [Genesis 17:10-11]** "Every male among you shall be circumcised and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Of course, the major issue in converting to Judaism for a gentile, for a non-Jew, is that one must, if a male, become circumcised. And of course, this was an obvious distinction if one is working out in a Greek gymnasium, where everyone was nude to begin with. So the ritual of circumcision is one of those major hurdles that people would have thought about from the Greek world.

**NARRATOR:** Paul argued that the rite of baptism could replace circumcision. This breakthrough allowed gentiles to more freely join God's chosen people.

**Prof. SHAYE J.D. COHEN, Brown University:** We now have, Paul says, a new map of the world. The old distinctions between Jews and gentiles are now obliterated. They have now been supplanted by a new and truer and more wonderful and more beautiful map, in which we have a new Israel that will embrace both Jews and gentiles, all those who now accept the new covenant and the new faith.

**READER: [Galatians 3:28]** "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** And that would spark one of the most important controversies of the first generation: Do you have to become a Jew in order to be a follower of Jesus as the messiah?

**READER: [Galatians 2:1-2]** "I went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas and I laid before the acknowledged leaders the gospel that I proclaim among the gentiles."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Paul says explicitly that he went down to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders of the church there. He calls them the "pillars."

**Assoc. Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN, Harvard Divinity School:** We have some names of people who must have been the big shots in the movement: Peter, James. Now, this James is not the James who's in the list of the Apostles. This James is the brother of the Lord.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** It's somewhat surprising that we should hear of Jesus' own family members among this earliest group in Jerusalem, precisely because in the Gospels, the family is usually portrayed as being antagonistic toward his public ministry. At one point, in Mark's Gospel, they think he's gone crazy and they try to take him away before he can do himself some harm.

And they go down to ask the question of "How do we deal with these gentile converts?" And they manage to get some sort of rough agreement with the Jerusalem leadership. They agree that it's okay for Paul to convert these gentiles and yet not to force them to be circumcised.

**NARRATOR:** As part of the compromise, Paul agreed to collect money from his gentile congregations to support the church in Jerusalem.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** So when Paul goes back to Antioch, he seems to think that he's won a major victory in the understanding of what the Christian message will be. Shortly after his return to Antioch, however, Peter arrives from Jerusalem.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** One of the most vivid episodes he sketches is in the Epistle to the Galatians, when he's talking about a face-off he and Peter have in Antioch.

**Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN:** A classic showdown in the history of earliest Christianity, and Paul tells the story this way. He says that in Antioch he encountered Peter, who was having a meal with non-Israelite Jesus people. Peter thought this was all right until the contingent from Jerusalem came.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** And they tap Peter on the shoulder and Peter stops attending these banquets. And then we get a great passage of "Espuit de l'espalier." It's probably what Paul wishes he had thought to say to Peter at the time, but in the letter it's presented as what he says to Peter. And he's yelling at Peter for not being true to the Gospel and not being true to Christ and not being true to this vision of things. And what he's really yelling at Peter about is food.

**Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN:** And the way Paul tells it is he says, "Well, you know, I confronted Peter publicly. I told him he was a hypocrite. I told him off to his face. I told him off in front of everybody." End of story.

Well, the story really doesn't have an end. You know, we'd like Paul to tell us that after he told Peter off, he sort of skulked back to Jerusalem with his tail between his legs and then Paul gave James and his party the what for and then he threw them out or something like that. Nothing like that. Paul's completely silent.

Now, this suggests to us that Paul indeed had a showdown in Antioch. He did face off with Peter. He didn't win. He didn't carry the day, at least not that day. So this suggests to us that James's party was influential and influential outside its Jerusalem jurisdiction, and that perhaps James and his posse were there because they felt that their authority should be exercised outside of the jurisdiction of Jerusalem.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** The blow-up in Antioch over eating with gentiles probably is the turning point in Paul's career. Paul left and went to western Turkey or Asia Minor and Greece. For the next 10 years, from 50 to roughly 60, Paul will concentrate all of his efforts in this region of the Aegean basin.

It's probably Ephesus and the areas immediately around Ephesus that will be his most important base of operations. Ephesus was a cosmopolitan environment. The inscriptions and the statues and the artwork and the buildings all tell us that this is really a crossroads of culture and religious life throughout the Mediterranean world.

**Prof. WAYNE MEEKS:** When you read Jesus' parables, you immediately think of agriculture. You think of peasants. You think of landowners. You think of farming. When you read Paul's letters, you think of the school. You think of the philosopher. You think of the orator. You think of the city.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX, Pres. Union Theological Seminary:** In Paul's view, at least, the city was the natural environment, if you will, for Christianity. He has way of coming back to the same city. He has a way of visiting new cities, and talking about visiting new cities, and it was cities that he was going to, not just general geographical areas. It's important to understand, I think, that it was from these cities that Christianity ultimately was spread.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Paul mostly travels around in a kind of circuit of these congregations around the Aegean rim, or he sends out his helpers and his co-workers, people like Timothy and Titus, to take information or check out what's happening over in Philippi or some place like that, sometimes perhaps even to go and help start a new congregation, some place over in, say, Colossae or maybe up toward the interior in Galatia. So we have to imagine the Pauline mission as a kind of beehive of activity. [[www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org): **More on Greco-Roman cities**]

**READER: [Romans 16:5-10]** "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Apelles, greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ and my beloved Stachys."

**Prof. WAYNE MEEKS:** The traditional view of the composition of the early Christian communities is that they are from the proletariat. Early Marxist interpreters of Christianity make a great deal out of this. It's a movement of the proletariat. It's essentially from the lowest classes. But if you actually look at the Book of Acts, and you look at Paul, and you begin to collect the people who are named or identified in some way-- here you have Erastus, the City Treasurer of Corinth.

**NARRATOR:** An ancient inscription with the name of Paul's follower, Erastus, can still be seen in the ruins of Corinth.

**Prof. WAYNE A. MEEKS:** You have Gaius of Corinth, whose home is big enough to let him be not only Paul's host, but the host to all of the churches of Corinth. All of the little household communities can meet in his house at one time. You have Stephanos and his household, who have been host to the community. You have Lydia in Philippi, who is the seller of purple goods, a luxury fabric. You have Prisca and Aquilla, and we wonder why the woman is usually mentioned before her husband. She must be a woman of some consequence.

You begin to get the impression that you have quite a variety of different social levels represented in these early Christian communities-- not people at the absolutely top level. You have, with the exception possibly of Erastus, no one

from the aristocratic orders, no one who would be a member of the city council. You have no agricultural slaves, who are at the bottom of the hierarchy. But in the rest of the social pyramid, everything in between, you seem to have representatives in these early Christian groups.

So we begin to get a picture of upwardly mobile people, to use a modern anachronistic way of describing them, people who have mixed status, who probably will be viewed by the aristocracy outside as nouveau riche, not-- people who don't quite belong, but in their own eyes, perhaps deserve more status than they are getting from the larger society and have found within this community a role of leadership and a role which is recognized.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** The worship of an early Christian house church probably centered around the dinner table. The term "communion" actually comes from this experience of the dining fellowship. We also know that all other aspects of worship that we think of as going with early Christian practice probably happened around the dinner table, as well. Paul refers to one person having a song and another person bringing a prayer. Everyone is contributing to the banquet, whether it's in the form of food or in the form of their piety and worship.

**Prof. ELIZABETH A. CLARK, Duke University:** Throughout the New Testament, particularly in Paul's letters and the Book of Acts, we find out that women owned the houses in which the early Christians met. This I think is significant because I don't think the women who owned the houses were simply providing coffee and cookies, in effect, for the Christian community. I think that this probably gave them some avenue to power and actual roles in the church.

**Prof. ELAINE PAGELS:** Paul speaks of women as his fellow evangelists and teachers and patrons and friends, as he does of men. But I don't see a picture of a golden age of egalitarianism back there. I see a new, unformed, diverse and threatened movement which allowed a lot more fluidity for women in certain roles for a while in some places and not in others. [[www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org): **More on women in the early church**]

**NARRATOR:** Paul's way of building a community was just one of the many interpretations of the Jesus movement. He had to fight a running battle to keep his fledgling congregations from falling under the influence of rival preachers.

**READER: [Galatians 3.1]** "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"

**Prof. ALLEN CALLAHAN:** His relationship with these folks is not entirely unproblematic. For one thing, he's got to manage a long-distance relationship, and we all know how difficult that is. And he has to do this by letter.

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** In his letters, he's often recapitulating for the recipients fights he's had prior to the fights he's having currently with this congregation.

**Prof. WAYNE MEEKS:** The early Christians did have turf wars over who had it right, and you see this from the very beginning-- the Apostle Paul, his opponents in Galatia, who say, "Wait a minute. If you're really going to be a real Christian, first you have to be a real Jew, and that means you have to be circumcised and you have to keep certain regulations out of the Torah. So Paul has not got it right." Paul has say, "No, you don't understand how radically new this thing is which God is doing here."

**NARRATOR:** Paul preached the imminent arrival of God's Kingdom on Earth and salvation for those converted to Jesus.

**READER: [Romans 13:11]** "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** It's clear that one of the concerns that keeps showing up throughout this period of Paul's ministry is "When is this Kingdom going to arrive? What's going to happen, how soon?"

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN:** They are still, 25 years after the fact, anticipating the imminent return of Christ and the imminent arrival of the Kingdom. And it's this kind of, you know, "Don't slow me down with the facts" impatience and energy that we get in Paul's letters. [[www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org): **More on Paul's letters**]

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Paul's very first letter, the earliest single writing that we have in the New Testament, is I Thessalonians, and already in I Thessalonians Paul is having to console them when people are starting to die within the congregation and the Kingdom hasn't arrived yet.

**NARRATOR:** Paul believed the earthly world order was about to change, that time was running out and the end was at hand.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX:** Clearly, the message about the coming end time was the part that would have been threatening to a Roman official, and would have been threatening to any native population that had vested some authority in Roman officialdom.

**NARRATOR:** Paul attacked those who preferred peace and security to the coming Kingdom of God.

**READER: [I Thessalonians 5:3]** "When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them."

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX:** Scholars have wondered who this people is who are saying "peace and security." Some interpreters think that it's the first lapsed Christians. They're no longer serious about the end time coming immediately. I tend to think, though, that it refers to those who are supportive of the imperial rule, the peace and security of Augustan and imperial governments. So that Paul is saying, "Those who are on the side of Augustus will reach their end first. Divine wrath will come upon them first." So Paul is very clearly drawing here a remarkable antithesis between the rule of the emperor, on the one hand, and the rule of God, the Kingdom of God, on the other hand.

**NARRATOR:** Apocalyptic expectations were fueling political turmoil throughout Judea. Jewish resistance to Roman rule was growing daily.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** The situation in Jerusalem was becoming increasingly tense through the mid-60s, also. Josephus tells us that there was growing tension over the last few governors of the countryside. He tells us that they were pretty abusive and corrupt administrators, robbing the people, as it were, in order to line their own pockets.

Josephus also tells us that there's another source of growing tension in the country at this time because there's an increasing number of bandit and rebel types coming out of the woodwork in the country. And so between growing banditry, the rise of the Zealot movement, a politically active insurgency movement, and then the corruption of the administration, the situation in Jerusalem is becoming very, very tense indeed.

**NARRATOR:** In the year 60 of the Common Era, after a decade building

communities in the Greek east, Paul decided that his work there was done.

**READER: [Romans 15:23, 25]** "Now, with no further place for me in these regions, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Paul wants to fulfill the promise that he had made to Peter and James back in the Jerusalem conference. For these 10 years that he's been in the Aegean, he's had his congregations collecting monies together to take back to Jerusalem. Now we find him gathering all that up, each congregation sending an emissary with their part of the contribution, and they're all going as an entourage to lay it at the feet of James in Jerusalem.

**READER: [Romans 15:29]** "I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** What seems to have happened is when he went back to Jerusalem with the contribution, he was arrested as some sort of rabble-rouser.

**NARRATOR:** According to the Book of Acts, Paul was taken to Rome to stand trial before the emperor. Within a short span of time, the leading figures of the early Jesus movement were wiped out.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** The tradition holds that Peter and Paul both died in about the year 64. About the same time, Josephus tells us that James, the brother of Jesus, at Jerusalem, has also been killed, all in about the same two- or three-year period. With the passing of this first generation, the expectation that all of those coming events must be close at hand probably was a concern for a lot of people.

**NARRATOR:** In the year 66 of the Common Era, Jewish resistance broke out into open conflict against Rome. The rebels seized Jerusalem. The first Jewish revolt had begun.

**READER: [Dead Sea Scrolls, The War Scroll]** "Truly the battle is thine! Their bodies are crushed by the might of thy hand and there is no man to bury them."

**NARRATOR:** It seemed that the fiery predictions of the Essenes were about to come true.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Most people in the First Revolt really thought it was the apocalyptic event, it was the coming of a new Kingdom on Earth. Several of the leaders within the revolt really claimed to have messianic identity or prophetic identity.

**READER: [Dead Sea Scrolls, The War Scroll]** "They shall be a flaming torch in the straws to consume ungodliness."

**NARRATOR:** True to their beliefs, the Essenes marched out to fight the Romans and were annihilated.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Even many Christians thought that the war was the actual apocalyptic event.

**READER: [Dead Sea Scroll, The War Scroll]** "Valiant warriors of the angelic host are among our numbered men and the hero of war is with our congregation."

**NARRATOR:** A prisoner of war who defected to the Roman side, the Jewish

historian Josephus personally witnessed the sack of Jerusalem.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Josephus describes walking around the walls of Jerusalem and pleading with people on the inside to give up rather than go through the suffering and agony that would come from a long, protracted siege. For two years, then, Jerusalem was under siege. Starvation, disease, murder were the order of the day. The loss of life must have been catastrophic to the Jewish population as a whole.

By the month of August in the year 70, the fate of Jerusalem was a foregone conclusion. The Roman armies were massed. They were ready to break through. Everyone knew it. It was just a matter of when. But they were going to fight to the death, and many of them did die. So on that fateful morning when they broke through, Josephus describes the events of them breaking through the walls, the Roman soldiers running through the streets, going into every house.

**READER: [Josephus, The War of the Jews]** "Pouring into the alleys, sword in hand, they massacred indiscriminately all whom they met and burned the houses of all who had taken refuge within, running everyone through who fell in their way. They clogged the alleys with corpses and drowned the whole city in blood. The dead bodies of natives and aliens, of priests and laity, were mingled in a mass, and the blood of all manner of corpses formed pools in the courts of God."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** It's a pretty awful slaughter, and we have lots of evidence of it now, between the artifacts that one finds of the first revolt that are scattered throughout this layer of the archaeological record-- arrowheads, spears, other kinds of indications of pretty serious hand-to-hand combat in all parts of the city.

**READER: [Josephus, The War of the Jews]** "Towards evening they ceased the slaughter. But as night fell, the fire gained the mastery and the dawn broke in flames upon Jerusalem."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** One of the most recent and poignant examples of this comes from the archaeology, something called "the burnt house," which actually shows us one of the houses that apparently was burned during this. All of the furniture and the implements are here in place, with a layer of ash and residue of the burning still quite clear.

**READER: [Josephus, The War of the Jews]** "The Romans set the temple on fire. All that was left was the platform wall that once supported the symbol of the center of the nation of Israel."

**NARRATOR:** Roman troops sacked the temple and carried off the sacred symbols of Judaism.

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Jerusalem, the sacred city, the temple, the center of piety and identity, is gone.

It's very important that we remember that up to and through the First Revolt, Christians are still part of Judaism, and the revolt and its aftermath is just the beginning of a split, as each group tries to rethink its earlier traditions in the light of the failure of the First Revolt.

We have to imagine the refugees fleeing from the burning ruins of Jerusalem. And as they look back at the smoke rising against the horizon, they might have remembered the words of the Psalm from the first destruction back in the time of the Babylonian exile: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and

wept when we remembered Zion."

**ANNOUNCER:** Tomorrow night--

**READER: [Josephus]** The Romans expected to make an assault upon the fortress--

**ANNOUNCER:** --Masada, the end of Jewish resistance to Rome--

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE, University of Texas, Austin:** The failure of the first revolt really was a traumatic event for everyone living in the Jewish homeland, Jews and Christians, alike. As a result, they had to start rethinking their own assumptions.

**ANNOUNCER:** --and the beginning of the Gospels--

**READER: [John 8:12]** "I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

**Prof. PAULA FREDRIKSEN, Boston University:** The gospels are very peculiar types of literature. They're not biographies. They're a kind of religious advertisement. What they do is proclaim their individual author's interpretation of the Christian message.

**ANNOUNCER:** --telling and retelling stories about Jesus.

**READER: [Mark 4:40-41]** " 'Why are you afraid, have you no faith?' And they were filled with awe and they said to one another, 'Who is this then that the wind and sea obey him?'"

**ANNOUNCER:** And it is the story of the broken relationship between Jews and Christians--

**READER: [Acts 14:1-2]** "But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers."

**Prof. MICHAEL WHITE:** Luke is reflecting the development of the Christian movement more away from the Jewish roots.

**ANNOUNCER:** --and the conflict between the Roman empire and the Kingdom of God.

**HOLLAND L. HENDRIX, President, Union Theological Seminary:** Christians could be arrested simply because they bore the name "Christianos," Christian. That was enough under Roman convention to convict one of a capital crime.

**ANNOUNCER:** Watch the final two hours of "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians" tomorrow night on FRONTLINE.

There is much more to explore about early Christianity at FRONTLINE's Web site, more of the interviews with scholars on the new and controversial historical evidence. Explore the maps, a special report on early Christian women. View the primary sources and much more, including the online teacher's guide, at FRONTLINE online at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)

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