

## Chapter 3 Independence and Apostasy 73-135

While the Church of God at first developed into an extended Judeo-Christian community, oriented toward Jerusalem with most of its members ethnic Jews, in the post-war period (73-135 CE) its demographics shifted. Jewish cultural traditions within Christianity ebbed as Gentile Greco-Romans gradually became the majority. Apostasy and the rise of hundreds of independent groups scattered throughout the Roman world ultimately resulted in many competing and diversifying Christianities. The house-church proliferation fostered disunity and independence.

The Second Jewish–Roman War (132–135 CE), known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt, resulted in the added presence of Greco-Roman Gentile Christians in the Holy Land both in regard to residence and pilgrimage. After the war Roman Emperor Hadrian renamed the region *Syria Palestina* (Syria Palestine) in a symbolic putdown of the Jews.<sup>78</sup> Jerusalem became *Colonia Aelia Capitolina* or commonly *Aelia Capitolina*. Jews were forbidden access to the city.<sup>79</sup>

This fortuity, says Franciscan archaeologist Bellarmino Bagatti, precipitated Gentile Christian contact with indigenous Judeo-Christians leading to conflict and motive to begin a religious war. According to Bagatti:

In fact some gentile Christians could not bear that their coreligionists should perpetuate, more than a century after the death of Christ, those Jewish rites which they, on reading St. Paul, believed had been juridically

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<sup>78</sup> The Philistines were Israel's historic enemy. The land of Israel became by Roman decree the Roman province Palestina which to the Jewish mind the "land of the Philistines."

<sup>79</sup> Michael Avi-Yonah reconstructed the decree as: "It is forbidden for all circumcised persons to enter or stay within the territory of Aelia Capitolina; any person contravening this prohibition shall be put to death" (Avi-Yonah, 1976, pp. 50-51).

abolished. The Christians of Jewish stock, on the contrary, thought that it was wrong to abandon those rites, which neither Jesus nor the apostles, Paul excepted, had abrogated. (Bagatti, 1971a, p. 78.)<sup>80</sup>

The defeat of Bar-Kokhba marked the conclusion of apostolic times and the beginning of the Period of the Great Separation (135–381 CE) in Christendom.

The period 73–136 CE can be understood as a time of transition from the Judeo-Christianity dominated by the apostles to that of the rising orthodox Greco-Roman Christianity of the second century. Arthur Stanley, in his Oxford lectures on the history of the Eastern Church, posed the issue. He wrote:

The first period is that which contains the great question, almost the greatest which Ecclesiastical History has to answer,—How was the transition effected from the age of the Apostles to the age of the Fathers, from Christianity as we see it in the next century, and as, to a certain extent, we have seen it ever since? (Stanley 1862:39.)

In his *The Story of the Christian Church* Jesse Lyman Hurlbut wrote:

For fifty years after St. Paul's life a curtain hangs over the church, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises, about 120 A.D. with the writings of the earliest church fathers, we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul. (Hurlbut 1967:33.)

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<sup>80</sup> To our day, the argument that the Apostle Paul taught the abandonment of the Sabbath and the Biblical holy days (annual or high Sabbaths), prevails among professing Christians. Colossians 2:16-18 is often misquoted as a proof text for an anti-Sabbatarian hermeneutic. The apostles saw the festivals and holy days as having prophetic significance or picturing the unfolding of God's plan of salvation. As the spring festivals pictured the sacrifice of the Messiah for the remission of sins, repentance, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, so the Feast of Trumpets symbolized the return of Jesus the Messiah, the Day of Atonement the reconciliation of God with humanity, the Feast of Tabernacles the one thousand year reign of the Messiah, and the Last Great Day the general resurrection of the dead for judgment. The phrase *sabbaton a eaiiu akia twm meyllontwn* at Colossians 2:16 literally reads "sabbaths which are a shadow of things coming" primarily in reference to annual Sabbaths. See, but remember that the commas were not in the ancient manuscripts, the *NASB-NIV Parallel New Testament in Greek and English* by Alfred Marshall (Marshall, 1986, p. 583). The author of Hebrews utilizes this same sense of symbolism with respect to the high priests "who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (Hebrews 8:4-5) and of "the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come..." (Hebrews 10:1). The critical issue in Colossians 2:16 dealt with who had the authority to determine the proper calendar for festival and Annual Sabbath observance in the Church—the apostles or the troublemakers?

How could this be? The answer lies in the Apostle John's three epistles which provide insight into the state of the people of God in the 80s (80-85 CE). Presumably these letters followed John's Gospel dating to the same period. The serious doctrinal error that Peter had warned of by then had crept into the Church. Here we see the only surviving apostle, an aged one at that, struggling with it.

### Dissident Movements

The messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor, supervised by the aged Apostle John, set forth in the book of Revelation provide us with some insight into troubling events in these churches about 96 CE (Revelation 2-3). These describe some congregations as embroiled in controversy instigated by dissident movements and detractors—Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), the Synagogue of Satan (Revelation 2:9, 3:9), those who hold to the teachings of Balaam (Revelation 2:14), and Jezebel and her followers (Revelation 3:20).

Moreover, about 96 or 97 CE (at the end of Domitian's reign or at the beginning of Nerva's) certain young men, charismatics, became the ringleaders of a revolt in the congregation at Corinth. According to church historian Cyril C. Richardson they "were ascetics observing continence (ch. 38:2)" who "boasted of "gnosis"—secret knowledge of the faith, that is, revealed only to the elite (ch. 48:5)" resulting in their deposing senior elders (ministers) who had been appointed by the apostles themselves (ch. 3:3; ch. 44:6) thereby splitting the congregation (Clement of Rome, *First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*; (Richardson C. C., 1970, pp. 33-34). Sadly, from its New Testament beginnings, the Church of God has had some leaders who claimed to be part of it later falling away beginning their own ministries, evangelic organizations, and churches.

After 70 CE the Church increasingly became a mix of new Gentile converts and second or even third generation members. The influx of Gentiles into the Hellenistic churches, and the loss of the last members of the first Christian generation, poised the early church for the emergence of many nascent Christianities (Pagels, 1979, pp. xxii, 7) and (Stark, 1996, p. 140). The rise of new independent Christian groups, rife with heresies and protracted fragmentation marked this period.

On his journey to martyrdom at Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, who held a theology in agreement with Polycarp, observed “Some, indeed, have a wicked and deceitful habit of flaunting the Name about, while acting in a way unworthy of God” (Ignatius, *Ephesians* 7.1) and (Richardson C. C., 1970, p. 89). Ignatius’ death is generally dated in the latter part of the reign of Trajan (98-117 CE). At this time Polycarp must have been somewhere between forty and fifty years old. The tone of Ignatius’ letter to Polycarp suggests that he had not been in office as Bishop of Smyrna for very long (Richardson C. C., 1970, p. 122).

Christianity became fragmented—divided linguistically, culturally, and doctrinally. During the interwar period, from 74–130 CE, Christianity became increasingly Greco-Romanized as more and more Gentiles became Hellenistic Christians. In 100 CE the number of Christians in the Roman Empire is estimated at about 26,000 (20,000 ethnic Jews and 6,000 Gentiles).

By 135 CE about one out of every four Christians in the Greco-Roman world were of Gentile descent. As more and more Greeks and Latins became believers, Christianity became Greco-Romanized and slowly diffused into thousands of cells or house-churches. The reality of the matter was that both branches of Christendom, the Judeo-Christian of Jewish ethnicity and ideology and the Greco-Roman of pagan stock and philosophy, comprised many factions and sects.

The almost complete lack in the second and third centuries of any centralized organization was due, in part, to the thinking of the apostles and their immediate successors that Jesus Christ, as head of the Church, by means of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit would continue to lead the community. This led to a leadership vacuum spawning a Christendom riddled with heresy. From her analysis of the Nag Hammadi documents Elaine Pagels concluded that: “...diverse forms of Christianity flourished in the early years of the Christian movement. Hundreds of rival teaches all claimed to teach the ‘true doctrine of Christ’ and denounced one another as frauds. Christians in churches scattered from Asia Minor to Greece, Jerusalem, and Rome split into factions, arguing over church leadership. All claimed to represent ‘the authentic tradition’” (Pagels 1979:7).

### The Deepening Cultural Divide

By 74 CE the phenomenon of backing away from Jewish ways had slowed in the Jewish homeland due to cultural restraints but had accelerated in the Hellenistic Dispersion. Social intercourse and intermarriage among believers in the Hellenistic Dispersion integrated Hellenistic Jews and ethnic Greeks into a common cultural fold. This led to the rise of at least two distinct Judeo-Christian communities within the Church of God, which were divided by cultural heritage and language—the Hebrew Nazarenes (Palestinians of Jewish ethnicity) and the Hellenist Christians (non-Palestinians born in the Hellenistic Diaspora of mixed ethnicity). While in Jesus' day there were native Jews in the Jewish homeland and Hellenistic Jews in the Diaspora at the end of the first century the Christian ethnic Jews of Judea and Galilee were significantly culturally different than the mixed Gentile and Hellenistic Jews in the Diaspora.

Before the First Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE), the mother Church of God at Jerusalem was the seat of Judeo-Christianity. It served as the center of operations for the whole Church. The Apostle James, a brother of Jesus of Nazareth, was its overseer or bishop.<sup>81</sup> His successor was his cousin, Simeon, the son of Cleophas. During this Judeo-Christian Period (31-74 CE), the cultural heritage of the Church of God remained decidedly of Jewish character.

Following the war, Jerusalem the mother congregation at Jerusalem no longer served as the focal point of the greater Church but functioned more-or-less as a center for Mishnaic Hebrew-speaking Judeo-Christians in the Holy Land. Eusebius listed 13 bishops, following Simeon son of Clopas (bishop, ca. 63–ca. 98), as serving this Judeo-Christian community but this appears rather unlikely (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.5; Boyle 1955:86. 4.5; Boyle 1955:130-131). The list of bishops appears to have been collapsed by Eusebius. Epiphanius held that Judeo-Christians had left Jerusalem and migrated to Pella just prior to the Roman siege of the city. They returned to Jerusalem after the fall of the city (Epiphanius *De Mensuris* 15; Koester 1989:93). Depending on how one reckons the time of martyrdom of Simeon,

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<sup>81</sup> In the first century a bishop was simply the pastor of a congregation. As the early church gathered together as synagogues the man in charge was an overseer.

the second bishop of Jerusalem, there followed a 28 to 35 year period during which, according to Eusebius, there were thirteen successive Judeo-Christian overseers (bishops).

Jerusalem Judeo-Christian Bishops	Jerusalem Greco-Roman Bishops	Bishops at Rome	Bishops at Antioch
1 James	1. Marcus	1. Linus	1. Evodius
2. Symeon, son of Clopas	2. Cassianus	2. Anencletus	2. Ignatius
3. Justus	3. Publius	3. Clement	3. Heron
4. Zaccheus	4. Maximus	4. Evaristus	4. Cornelius
5. Tobias	5. Julian	5. Alexander I	5. Eeros
6. Benjamin	6. Caius	6. Xystus or Sixtus, I	6. Theophilus
7. John	7. Symmachus	7. Telesphorus	7. Maximinus
8. Matthias	8. Caius II	8. Hyginus	8. Serapion
9. Philip	9. Julian II	9. Pius I	9. Asclepiades
10. Seneca	10. Capito	10. Anicetus	10. Philetus
11. Justus	11. Maximus II	11. Soter	11. Zebinas
12. Levi	12. Antoninus	12. Eleutherus	12. Babylas
13. Ephres	13. Valens	13. Victor I	13. Fabius
14. Joseph	14. Dolichianus	14. Zephyrinus	14. Demetrianus
15. Judas (end of Hebrew list)	15. Narcissus	15. Callistus	15. Paul of Samosata
	16. Dius	16. Urbanus	16. Domnus
	17. Germanio	17. Pontranus	17. Timaeus
	18. Gordius	18. Anteros	18. Cyrillus
	19. Narcissus II	19. Fabianus	19. Tyrannus
	20. Alexander	20. Cornelius	
	21. Mazabanes	21. Lucius	
	22. Hymenaeus	22. Stephanus	
	23. Zabdas	23. Xystus or Sixtus II	
	24. Hermon	24. Dionysius	
		25. Felix	
		26. Eutygianus	
		27. Caius	
		28. Marcellinus	
		29. Miltiades	

This interpretation permits only an average of two to three year terms for thirteen bishops, during a period of little or no persecution or turmoil, which is too little to be taken as normal. The implication is that Eusebius confused the sees<sup>82</sup> and inserted bishops for adjacent localities into the list or that some bishops were coadjutors (Bagatti 1971a:53). There is no reason to doubt that a line of Judeo-Christian bishops continued to serve the local Judeo-Christian community well into the fourth century. Why did Eusebius not list any Judeo-Christian bishops after the founding of *Aelia Capitolina*?

<sup>82</sup> In Eusebius a see was the area in which a bishop has authority.

The sense of his writing is that the ardent Nicene saw Judeo-Christian bishops as true Christians only through Judas but not thereafter. Can we sense why Eusebius and other Greco-Roman Gentile Christians would no longer see the Judco-Christians of Jerusalem and Roman Palestine as part of their fellowship? For his orthodox mind the episcopal throne of James throne passed to the Gentile bishops and that is the history Eusebius proceeded to develop.

According to Bagatti:

Reading Eusebius one gets the impression that the Judaeo-Christians left the city forever, but such was not the case, because things that happened later, when examined, show us that they were still in their old surroundings. From which it is established that the Judaeo-Christians, after having left the city for a time, returned very quickly. This is explained by the fact that with the war a distinction was made between the Jews and the Judaeo-Christians, and that the decree of expulsion, promulgated by Hadrian, concerned only the Jews. (Bagatti 1971a:10.)

This growth, particularly the influx of Gentiles into the Hellenistic churches, and the loss of the last members of the first Christian generation, changed the very nature of early Christianity. Justo Gonzalez holds that as to the Hebrew-speaking branch of Judeo-Christianity:

...the ancient Jewish church, rejected by both Jews and Gentiles, found itself in increasing isolation. Although by A.D. 135 a number of Jewish Christians returned to Jerusalem, their relationship with the rest of Christianity had been almost completely severed, and leadership had passed to Gentile Christians.... When, in later centuries, Gentile Christians deigned to write a few words about that forgotten community, they would speak of its heretics and its strange customs, but they would have little of positive value to say about that church, which faded out of history in the fifth century. (Gonzalez 1984:22.)

Persecution and the rapid succession of bishops at Rome produced inevitable instability and the opportunity for heresy to mature. As the first Christian generation of Peter, Paul, John, James, and their second generation successors passed away, rising heresy and independent thinking within Judeo-Christianity challenged its doctrines and threatened its very existence. Post-74 CE writings in the New Testament (Jude, Revelation, and John's Gospel and his three epistles) indicate discouragement, disruption, and heretical

doctrine as problems within Judeo-Christian congregations during the late first century.

### The Gnostic Challenge

In Acts 8, we are introduced to Simon, a sorcerer from Samaria, better known in secular history as Simon Magus. He was a charismatic Gnostic, believed by some to be the first in religious history, living in Samaria in the first century. Samaritans considered him to be God's divinely chosen representative (Acts 8:9-10). Eduard Lohse, writing in *The New Testament Environment*, states that the expression, "the great power of God," represented Simon's "claim to be the bearer of divine revelation" (Lohse, 1976, p. 269). Once baptized, Simon became a nominal Christian, or more accurately a charismatic Christianized Gnostic. However, the Apostle Peter recognized Simon's real motives. In Acts 8:22-23 Peter rebuked him in the strongest terms as being "in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity" (KJV).

Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity notes: "Early Christian writers regarded Simon as the fount of all heresies" (1977:100). *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th ed.) in its article on Simon Magus identifies him as the "founder of a school of Gnostics and as a father of heresy." In *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* noted historian Edward Gibbon says the "Gnostics blended with the faith of Christ many sublime but obscure tenets, which they derived from oriental philosophy" (Gibbon, 2002, p. 134).

Gnosticism is a term derived from the Greek word *gnōsis* meaning knowledge. A heady way of life, it represented a blending of Babylonian mystery religion and Greek philosophical speculation with an overlay of biblical terminology. Justo González in his *The Story of the Christian Church* says that Gnosticism was "not a well-defined organization in competition with the church; rather, it was a vast and amorphous movement that existed both within and outside the church" (González, 1984, p. 58).

As first-century Judaism was not monolithic, neither was Gnosticism. There were many Gnostic and Proto-Gnostic groups. A number incorporated Christian ideas and became "Christianized" but advocated "false christs." Among the Gnostics, biblical accounts were not to be taken literally but seen as allegories used to teach deeper "truths." Gnosticism stressed pagan dualism with its emphasis on the immortality of the soul and

the inherent evil of matter. It also introduced vain speculation on the nature of God and the spirit realm. Gnostics denied the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth by arguing that the body of Jesus only appeared to be human, but in fact was not.

In the first Christian century, early Gnosticism, called Proto-Gnosticism in both Jewish and Gentile forms did significantly impact the people of God except for Essene intrusions into the life of the Church. The apostles' doctrine often became misunderstood and distorted at the local level as there was no complete New Testament and poor communication systems.

Itinerant teachers from various sects and movements would often visit churches and preach inaccurate information and false teaching. Those with Proto-Gnostics leanings, such as the Essenes, taught there existed mysterious, hidden special knowledge, "gnosis," which the apostles did not know or understand. Paul referred to this spurious knowledge as "knowledge falsely so-called" (1 Timothy 6:20). This insidious Gnostic doctrine in itself appealed to the vanity of some brethren who had compromised themselves. Gnosis appealed to those who because of their ego wanted to know even more than the apostles themselves.

Near the close of his life, Peter addressed this situation. Writing in his second epistle, Peter gently called to his readers' attention that they already had all the knowledge necessary for their salvation and reminded them of their need to persevere in the faith. He then proceeded to render a blistering attack upon those who were the purveyors of dissent, division, and corrupt Gnostic teaching.

Paul's writings, spanning the two decades before the First Jewish Revolt, consistently encouraged the members of the Church of God to place their confidence in the ministry. Those who did not listen to the apostles' teaching about the return of Christ were the ones susceptible to divisive and often heretical teachings. This resulted in a paradox, for such individuals did not realize that by leaving the fellowship of the Church of God, to attain "grace and knowledge" someplace else, that they had left the body of Christ.

The events of 70 CE led to a supreme crisis in the lives of many Christians. In spite of the apostles' teaching to the contrary there were those who believed that Jesus would return with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. This was a badly-misplaced belief. Yet Jesus did not return at the

second Temple's destruction in 70 CE, to the dismay of many. Following this disappointment the Church of God entered a period of disillusionment and decline. After the fall of Jerusalem the church failed to maintain the level of optimism and confidence it once had.

Many, growing older, faced the realization that Jesus Christ was not to return within their lifetime, or perhaps not for many centuries. It meant that they would grow old and die without seeing the second coming of the Messiah in their lifetime. This was more than some could manage. It was difficult for those who had placed their confidence and aspirations on a false hope. With their expectations not realized, some simply gave up. They lost confidence as a result of their misunderstanding and false assumptions. Some no longer were willing to trust in God and relied on their own human reasoning instead.

Disillusionment gave rise to doubt. Doubt resulted in questioning the veracity of apostolic teaching. The credibility of the apostles was put in to question. Discouragement fueled the endeavors of Gnostic teachers. The Gnostic movement seized the opportunity. Those brethren who had placed their hope in the second coming at the fall of Jerusalem were vulnerable.

Disappointed, some allowed themselves to become disillusioned and subject to Gnostic arguments resulting in some doubting, in others commencing to leave the Church, and still others having left the Church entangling themselves in lawlessness. Gnostic teachers held that they possessed certain secret or special mystical knowledge that was crucial to salvation. These heretics professed to have a deeper understanding of truth than the apostles. They argued that only those with true discernment could comprehend the mystical understanding not known by the apostles or by their successors.

These Gnostic teachers denied the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth by arguing that the body of Jesus only appeared to be human, but in fact was not. Gnostics believed that the Logos only appeared to be in the flesh; he was a phantom in human form. When John wrote his gospel ca. C.E. 90 he specifically addressed this matter in contravention to Gnostic arguments at the beginning of his gospel, declaring that "the Word," which had been with God for all eternity, literally became flesh and blood in the man Jesus Christ. According to Gnostics, salvation consists of the liberation of the divine and

immortal spirit that is imprisoned in the human body. According to Gnostic belief the Demiurge created human flesh and flesh was evil.

The letters of 1 and 2 John constitute a polemic against this tendency. John wrote in reference to the teaching of a gnostic group. John's phrase "if someone says" was not conditional but rather implies that these things were being said. Thus John was dealing with the impact of persons who said that Christians were not bound by God's commandments and who refuse to acknowledge that Jesus was the Christ (1 John 2:22). He stated that there are "many false prophets" (1 John 4:1 NASB).

When Gnostics came to know early Christianity and saw its great appeal, they attempted to take those aspects of Christianity which seemed most valuable to them and adapt them to their systems. Gnostics incorporated the name of Jesus, some basic Christian teachings, e.g., the existence of the angelic realm, and continued under the rubric Christian—they were actually no more than another Christianized Gentile movement. So there were "many false prophets," claiming to be ministers of truth, who went out from the Judeo-Christian community of faith into the world (1 John 4:1).

Gnostic groups were not the only problem. The church's relations with non-Christian Jews, the Ebionites, the mystery religions, and the Romans also weighed heavily. For example, the Ebionites placed emphasis on Christ's humanity but not his divinity and the Pharisaic Jews adopted and enforced a polemic against the church, called the *birkat ha-minim* (Benediction against Heretics), at the Council of Jamnia. Other detractors and dissidents sought to undermine the apostolic teachings of the first Christian generation by claiming that the church had a weak message.

About 96 CE Gnostic teachings had impacted the church at Pergamos. There were persons who held Gnostic teachings, reported as holding the teachings of Balaam (Revelation 2:14). These people were affiliated with the same group whom Jude wrote (Jude 11). By the time of Jude's epistle the battle to prevent a split in the church in Asia Minor was lost. Predominately those of Gentile descent withdrew from the community of faith who along with their false teachers formed various factions of Christianized Gentiles. Those Asia Minor churches which remained continued under the leadership of the Apostle John. At this time the split appears to have been primarily but not exclusively Gnostic.

## Apostasy

When Jude wrote an apostasy was in full swing. Conventional thinking places his letter ca. 75 CE as it confirms the warnings in 2 Peter. However, the conditions in Jude appear more severe than we see in the epistles of John and clearly John intentionally placed it as the last of these letters. This would suggest the date of Jude a decade later (85-90 CE) as its placement as the last of the seven epistles in the set and the severity of the apostasy in those days.

The internal evidence of 1 John (written ca. 84 or 85) shows that a rebellion within the Asia Minor congregations of the Church of God led to its writing. The difficulty had reached a point where some dissident members, including teachers (elders), had separated themselves from the others and were in the process of setting up their own fellowships (1 John 2:19). Although the breach was complete, the dissidents continued to keep in touch with the rest of the membership and were actively trying to recruit and to entice them to join the new groups (1 John 2:26). With the breach of fellowship, there came also a breach in understanding the faith. What earlier may have been hypothetical questions now became tenets of the rival movement, identified in John's epistles primarily by what the false teachers denied.

1 John 2:12-14, 19; 3:1; 5:13 make it clear that this writing was for and addressed to the people of God. John sees unconverted men as outside the family of God. The epistle itself does not indicate who his intended readers were or where they lived. The fact that it mentions no one by name suggests it was a sermon-like circular communiqué sent to Christians in a number of places. Evidence from early writers places the Apostle John in Ephesus during most of his later years (ca. CE 70-100).

The recipient of 2 John (presumably written ca. 85 or 86) is the elect or chosen lady and her children (2 John 1). The literature presents arguments as to whether the elect lady is a specific individual or a congregation of the people of God. It was, however, a letter to a specific congregation where John dealt with a Proto-Gnostic threat. When John refers to "many deceivers" (2 John 1:7 NASB) he writes of a large but indefinite yet significant number. Verse 7 refers to "those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh" (2 John 1:7 NASB).

In the immediate context “those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” is a reference to people <sup>who</sup> hold to a form of early Docetism (be aware that not all Docetists are Proto-Gnostics or Gnostics). Docetism is the belief that Jesus’ physical body was an illusion, as was his crucifixion. In verse 9 John says that: “Any one who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the father and the Son” (2 John 1:9 NASB). The “goes too far” is in the sense of “going beyond” the teaching of Jesus or more bluntly apostatizing. Such “going beyond Jesus” is Proto-Gnostic teaching or a movement in that direction. It is unclear whether John dealt with clear-cut Docetism or Cerinthianism<sup>83</sup> or a less defined variety of proto-Gnosticism. It does appear that it is the same group John dealt with in 1 John.

The letter of 3 John, probably written at least a year or two after 2 John (w. abt. 86/87 CE), presumably dates to ca. 88 or 89 CE. Traveling teachers, probably elders, sent out by John were rejected in a congregation in the province of Asia by one Diotrephes. This man went so far as to reject the Apostle John’s written instructions to the congregation, refused to accept what John had to say, accused John with “wicked words” (slander), and excommunicated (disfellowshipped) any members who received or supported John’s messengers.

Diotrephes, apparently the ringleader of a rebellion within the congregation, sought power and control for himself, or as John phrases it he was one “who loves to be first among them” (3 John 1:9). John expresses his own intent with “if I come” (3 John 1:10) and “I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face” (3 John 1:13), and indicates he would deal with Diotrephes for he would “call attention to his deeds which he does” (3 John 1:10). Presumably the Apostle John intended to “mark” Diotrephes before the remaining loyal brethren.

About this time, 85-90 CE, Jude wrote his short epistle referring to the apostles as figures of the recent past and to speak of the faith once delivered to the saints. While the book of Jude is rather short, being only 25 verses long, it is generally divided into two sections: (1) The danger of false teachers

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<sup>83</sup> Cerinthus taught that the Christ descended into Jesus at his baptism and left him again before the Passion.

(1-16) and (2) The duty to fight for God's truth (17-25). The conditions warned about in 2 Peter had become a painful reality at the time Jude penned his epistle.

He wrote his letter to combat false teachers in the church who were undermining "the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). Peter foretold that these false teachers would arise. Jude confirms that by the time of his epistle that they had successfully infiltrated the church (compare 2 Peter 2:1-3 and Jude 4). These false teachers taught that God's grace gave Christians the freedom to commit immoral acts and to sin all the more. It was a complete rejection of the doctrine of faith at work and the law of God. It was not wholly unlike the lawlessness so extant in modern day Evangelicalism.

Now why was this short letter by Jude included in the New Testament? Think critically about it. What do we learn from Jude that we do not already know from 2 Peter? If you correctly discern that then you know one reason why this epistle is in the New Testament canon—to let later generations of God's church, including the Church of God today, know that as the Apostle Peter had prophesied, false teachers did indeed successfully penetrate God's church in the late first century and introduced destructive heresies, including lawlessness and the denial of Jesus Christ.

These Greco-Roman dissidents denied Christ by teaching a different Jesus and a different Gospel and leading people into lawlessness, such as rejecting God's weekly Sabbath, the annual Holy Days and the like. These false teachers created the religious systems we know as Greco-Roman Gentile Christianity, in its Greek (Byzantine) and Latin (later Roman Catholic) divisions, of the second century. The epistle of Jude allows us to see the heresy, work and effect of these dissidents and to understand that their Christianity rejected God's laws and ways.

As Jude reports "they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah" (Jude 1:11). The letter we know as 1 Clement is a letter from the Church of God at Rome (not the later Greco-Roman Gentile church in Rome which nearly a

millennium later became the Roman Catholic Church<sup>84</sup>) to the Church of God at Corinth as it was being torn asunder by heresy and rebellion. The people who took over the congregation at Corinth were early Byzantines.

When we later look at the congregations in Asia Minor as described by the Apostle John in Revelation 2 & 3 we see late first-century controversies raging within God's church. Realize, however, by that time (about 100 CE) there were proliferating anti-Judaic dissident groups not in fellowship with God's church teaching a different Jesus and a different Gospel. It was a rising movement eventually splintering into hundreds of different factions. Over time they became more centrally organized and we begin to see their leadership.

By 135 CE the dissidents successfully had their own first Greco-Roman (early Byzantine) bishop, one Marcus, in place in Jerusalem (*Colonia Aelia Capitolina*). The Nazarenes (the Church of God) were there as well, and of course we still have the remains of their church-synagogue meeting hall now known as the Cenacle/Tomb of David located on Jerusalem's western hill (Mount Zion or Sion), where they met for weekly and annual Sabbath services and the like.

There is yet another canonical reason for the inclusion of Jude. Think about the epistle of Jude's placement in the New Testament. Since Jude is so much like 2 Peter would you not expect it to immediately follow? Remember that the apostles did not leave the matter of creating the New Testament to other generations or to Christians not in their fellowship.

Assembling the New Testament and establishing the NT canon of Scripture, including the inspired ordering of its books, was the work product of the apostles themselves—specifically Peter and John. In the NT canon where is Jude placed? It is positioned at the very end of the General Epistles. In today's Bibles the book of Revelation follows Jude, but this is not the original ordering of the books. The General Epistles immediately preceded the Pauline epistles. Jude's epistle was meant to serve as a transition.

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<sup>84</sup> Some writers refer to Greco-Roman Gentile Christianity as Roman Catholic but that is an oversimplification. Certainly the rise of the Latin form of this system impacted the Church of God in the second and third centuries but the early heresies were decidedly of Greek character. They arose in Asia Minor and in Achaia.

### Apostolic Interpretation of Scripture

The method of interpretation used by early Christian leaders, a form of proof-texting, was rather different than the exegetical approaches practiced today. This involved their finding images in the Hebrew Scriptures which they could apply to Jesus of Nazareth. It amounted to giving new theological meaning to scores of texts in the Hebrew Scriptures. According to Bagatti:

The method of procedure adopted consisted in this: first take a deed or saying in the life of Jesus, and then proceed to find the biblical text which could explain it. (Bagatti 1971a:138.)

There are numerous examples in the New Testament where you can easily verify this. For example, consider 1 Corinthians 10:4 where the Apostle Paul insinuates that Christ was the rock struck by Moses (Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:11). The Apostle Peter, according to Acts 2:34, provided an incredible construal of Psalms 110:1 when he claimed that the "Lord" was not David but Jesus the Messiah. This is not how Psalms 110:1, wherein YHVH spoke to David, was understood in its Hebraic context. Bagatti says that the "methods by which the early Judeo-Christian writers succeeded in seeing Jesus in so many texts were many, and for us, often unthinkable" (Bagatti 1971a:138).

The disciples of Jesus of Nazareth possessed a distinct advantage over later generations of Christians. They had the opportunity of learning directly from Jesus. In his post-resurrection appearance to the eleven and those with them, Jesus "opened their minds to understand the [Hebrew] Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Luke's gospel reports that the day after his resurrection Jesus of Nazareth appeared to two dismayed people, likely a man and a woman, walking the seven mile trek to Emmaus. He took that Sunday afternoon occasion to call their attention to the things concerning himself in the Hebrew Scriptures (Luke 24:25-27, cf. 24:32). The situation was one where Jesus made clear to the couple various Messianic prophecies and the symbolism imbedded in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning himself. Writing in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Liefeld explains the importance of these verses:

With great clarity they show that the sufferings of Christ, as well as his glory, were predicted in the OT and that all the OT Scriptures are important. They also show that the way the writers of the NT used the OT had its origin, not in their own creativity, but in the post

resurrection teachings of Jesus, of which this passage is a paradigm. The passage also exemplifies the role of the OT in Luke's own theology. Although he does not directly quote the OT Scriptures as many times as Matthew does, nevertheless he alludes frequently to the OT, demonstrating that what God has promised must take place and employing a "proof-from-prophecy" apologetic for the truth of the gospel. (Liefeld 1984:1053.)

Although the apostles utilized ways of interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures foreign to us, derived in the post-resurrection teachings of Jesus, God led them to create the wonderful compendium we call the New Testament. The New Testament portrays the apostles' relationship with God as one of trust, faith, and divine guidance and there is no reason their writings should not so reflect. For us Christians, the ancient apostolic interpretation they attached to the Hebrew Scriptures we now consider fact and truth, stands well proven as such over the last 19 centuries.

Jude argues passionately for his readers to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). Later he says "But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life" (Jude 1:20-21). The books that follow show how!

The Hebrew Scriptures and the apostolic complement to them, later known as the New Testament, were to assist Christian believers in bringing about godly change in their lives by informing them of who they are in relation to God and of how they should live their lives. Matthew recorded in his gospel that Jesus said "Man shall live by every word of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Writing to the brethren at Rome ca. 56 CE the Apostle Paul, in reference to the Hebrew Scriptures, said "For whatever was written [in the Hebrew Scriptures] in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). A decade later he wrote to the evangelist Timothy that "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

### Formation of the Canon

As strange as it may seem, the apostles did not leave to a future generation the task of determining the canon of the New Testament. The authority to set aside writings of the apostles as Scripture did not reside with the Latin Western church centered at Rome nor with the Greek Byzantine church in the East. The task of selecting their writings for inclusion in this apostolic compendium was not left to chance, custom, or tradition, but undertaken by the apostles themselves.

New Testament Writings at Peter's Death			
Book	Year Probably Written	Authorship	Origin
Matthew	Proto-Matthew in late 30s & canonical Greek edition in the early 40s	Matthew	Judea
James	Before 43	James, a half-brother of Jesus	Jerusalem
Galatians	49 Fall	Paul	Antioch of Syria
1 Thessalonians	50 Summer	Paul, Silvanus, & Timothy	Corinth
2 Thessalonians	51	Paul, Silvanus, & Timothy	Corinth
1 Corinthians	56 Spring	Paul & Sosthenes	Ephesus
2 Corinthians	56 Summer	Paul & Timothy	On route to Corinth
Romans	57 Winter	Paul	Corinth
Luke	58	Luke	Caesarea
Ephesians	61 After the Days of Unleavened Bread	Paul	Rome
Colossians	61 After the Days of Unleavened Bread	Paul & Timothy	Rome
Philemon	61 After the Days of Unleavened Bread	Paul & Timothy	Caesarea
Acts	62	Luke	Rome
Philippians	62 Spring	Paul & Timothy	Rome
1 Timothy	62 Summer	Paul	Rome
Titus	62 Summer	Paul	Philippi
Hebrews	67 Summer	Paul	Corinth
2 Timothy	67 early Fall	Paul	Rome
Mark	69 in Antioch of Syria, some editing and re-penning of pages in Aun, Egypt in 73.	John Mark	Ephesus
1 Peter	68	Peter	Babylon of Mesopotamia
2 Peter	ca. 68	Peter	probably Judea

The Apostles Peter, John, and Paul assumed the burden of responsibility for sanctioning specific writings of the apostles and their associates, such as John Mark, Luke, James, and Jude, as scripture for the Church and its assembling into a recognized set of sanctioned writings. When the Apostle

John finalized the twenty-seven writings of the New Testament they constituted, together with the Hebrew Scriptures, the complete set of scriptures for the Church of God. These writings provided the people of God a means of knowing or recalling the teachings of Jesus and the apostles for all time.

When Peter wrote the epistle of 2 Peter, he knew his death was near. As to the time and manner of his death, Peter said it would be “just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me” (2 Peter 1:14). Peter then went on to disclose his intent to bequeath the Church a legacy far greater than his two short epistles. “Moreover,” he wrote, “I will see to it that after I am gone you will have means of remembering these things at all times” (2 Peter 1:15 NEB).

By the sixties CE the apostles had come to understand that the resurrection of the righteous dead and Christ’s return at the end of the age were many centuries future (2 Peter 3:8). This led to their recognition of the need to preserve the basic teachings of the apostles themselves for future generations. This led Peter to initiate the selection of additional apostolic writings as Scripture. His personal intent is seen in his use of the first person in 2 Peter 1:15. This inaugurated the process of assembling a set of authoritative apostolic writings.

The apostles did not set out to compose new writings for a complement to the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather, in initiating assembling the documents they limited themselves to extant apostolic writings. Apparently the Apostle Paul, the scholar of the group, was made responsible to assemble pertinent doctrinal material either from or based upon his writings for inclusion.

Paul elected to select pertinent epistles from his own collection of papyrus letters and scroll manuscripts, he had to deal with the question of the order of presentation of his selected writings. The Scriptural order of his works rests on the nature of their subject matter, for Paul did not place his writings in chronological order. Instead he chose to order them according to doctrinal topic, as he as their author and editor understood their design, into three divisions. Paul chose fourteen epistles to encompass these three divisions.

The first division consisted of nine epistles addressed to seven specifically named church congregations—Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians. He arranged the

order of these epistles commencing with the first principles of the apostles' doctrines of repentance, faith, baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. Paul selected the epistle to the Romans to be first, as this letter sets forth these basic doctrines in detail. Each successive epistle presupposes the previous material. Each epistle successively builds upon the material proceeding it.

### Placement of the Pauline Epistles

#### First Division: Letters to Seven Churches

**Romans**—The great problem of human sin and reconciliation with God.

**1 and 2 Corinthians**—Concerning all sinful practices and pertaining to the true way of God.

**Galatians**—Spiritual weakness and the error of reversion.

**Ephesians**—Unity of the Jews and Gentiles in the true temple of Christ (the Church).

**Philippians**—Love, knowledge and wisdom, and serving without vanity.

**Colossians**—Overcoming and dealing with false teachings.

**1 and 2 Thessalonians**—Warning of the mystery of iniquity (lawlessness), the Second Coming, Resurrection, and Judgment

#### Second Division: Letter to the Church-at-Large

**Hebrews**—Superiority of the Priesthood under the New Covenant and Christ's return and millennial rule.

#### Third Division: Letters to Individuals

**1 and 2 Timothy**—Pastoral administration, warnings of apostasy, and remaining steadfast.

**Titus**—Church government and organization, and a warning concerning Jewish fables and the commandments of men (presumably a reference to the Ebionites).

**Philemon**—Handling a problem in the Church with love, tact, and diplomacy.

The second division contains no address, which distinguishes it from the material addressed to the seven named Churches, thereby extending it to be an epistle to the whole Church at large. This division, concentrating on the priesthood of Jesus Christ as superior to that of the Levites and his resurrection and millennial rule, consisted solely of the book of Hebrews.

The third division comprised letters to the ministry addressed to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, replete with instruction on caring for the people of God.

Moffatt held that the "position of Hebrews within the Pauline body of letters was usually between the ecclesiastical and the private epistles" as practiced by the Eastern Church "or after the latter" as by the Western church.<sup>1</sup> The awkward late fourth-century placement of Hebrews by the Western church as the last of the Pauline letters was a deliberate attempt by Latin Christianized Gentiles to put down what was derisively considered

“Jewish Christianity” and a not too subtle effort to elevate Rome as the seat of the Western church.

The myth of the execution of Peter on Vatican Hill and his aggrandizement as the first pope and bishop of Rome was another effort to promote supremacy for the Latin Church at Rome. In this bid to exalt Rome, Western church leaders alleged that the epistle to the Romans was first in the canon because Paul wrote it to the church in the world’s most eminent city. Corinthians followed because Corinth was inferior to Rome, of course, but as a Roman colonial city more important than any of the other cities addressed in Paul’s epistles. Hebrews was last as it was not only the least important but the most inferior of the fourteen Pauline epistles and not addressed to anyone.

The order adopted by the Apostle Paul for his epistles was the same as they appear in the King James Version except he placed Hebrews immediately after II Thessalonians and before I Timothy. The first-century order of the Pauline corpus has been confirmed by the extant early codex manuscripts of the New Testament including the Codex Vaticanus (dating from the middle of the fourth century and which stops at Hebrews 9:13), Codex Sinaiticus (from the middle of the fourth century), Codex Alexandrinus (from the beginning of the fifth century), and Codex Ephraemi (of the fifth century). These manuscripts were written on vellum and constitute hard evidence of the early order of the Pauline corpus.<sup>2</sup>

This official set of selected writings, collectively referred to in this work as “apostolic writings” even though Luke and John Mark are not in fact identified in the New Testament as apostles, was to ensure that a reliable record of the life and teachings of Jesus and the apostles’ doctrines would be available no matter what heresies, fables, lies, and fabrications would arise later. Perhaps he took courage in his task from the haunting charge of Isaiah: “Bind up the testimony,” wrote Isaiah, “seal the law among my disciples” (Isaiah 8:16).

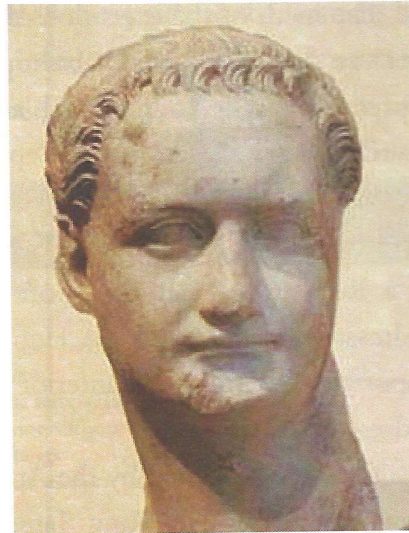
The collection of apostolic writings would serve to protect the Church by ensuring that future generations would have an accurate account of “The Way” (Hebrews 13:7; II Peter 1:15; John 14:6).<sup>3</sup> God’s people were to rely on this set of apostolic writings as authentic and apostolic. As scripture these

writings were to shield and protect the Church from false letters and spurious documents and to preserve the apostles' doctrine for all ages.

Around 95 CE, at the time of Domitian, the Romans exiled the Apostle John to a Roman penal colony on the Isle of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). Roman authorities were then beginning to enforce the cult of emperor worship. God's people held that Christ Jesus, not Caesar, was Lord. "There is ample evidence" according to Eusebius, "that at that time [during Domitian's reign] the apostle and evangelist John was still alive, and because of his testimony to the word of God [John] was sentenced to confinement on the island of Patmos" (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 3.18).

Upon Domitian's death, ca. 96 CE, the Romans permitted the Apostle John to return to Ephesus where John Mark joined him. "After fifteen years of Domitian's rule," says Eusebius, "Nerva succeeded to the throne. By vote of the Roman senate, Domitian's honors were removed and those unjustly banished returned to their homes and had their property restored to them. This is noted by the chronicles of the period. At that time too, [ca. 96 CE] the Apostle John, after his exile on the island of Patmos, resumed residence at Ephesus, as early Christian tradition records" (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 3.20).

Returning to Ephesus, John completed the book of Revelation and published it to the Church. The use of the past tense "was" in Patmos at Revelation 1:9 suggests that John saw the vision in Patmos, but that it was after his release and return to Ephesus ca. 96 CE that he finished writing the book of Revelation thereby completing the New Testament canon. At the point of the writing of Revelation Christians were free from the time of persecution under Domitian (81-96 CE).



Domitian (Latin: Titus Flavius Caesar Domitianus Augustus) was Roman Emperor from 81 to 96 CE. Domitian was the third and last emperor of the Flavian dynasty. Domitian's reign came to an end in 96 when he was assassinated by court officials. The same day he was succeeded by his advisor Nerva. After his death, Domitian's memory was condemned to oblivion by the Roman Senate

## The Seven Churches in Asia Minor

<i>Spiritual State in CE 96</i>	<i>Inference</i>
<b>Church at Ephesus</b>	
Rev. 2:1-7. The brethren at Ephesus hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans but lost their first love (zeal) and became discouraged. Obviously they did not repent and did not do the works done at first. In 57 CE Paul told the Ephesian church elders at Acts 20:28-30 "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves." About 15 years after John's writing of Revelation, Ignatius wrote to the church at Ephesus and commended them for refusing to give a "home" to any heresy ( <i>To the Ephesians</i> 6.2, 9.2).	An acknowledgment that there were those who called themselves apostles and were not Nicolaitans exist and held in disrepute. It is difficult to determine exactly who the Nicolaitans were and what they taught. The group taught things, troubling many church members, resulting in wrong deeds which the church condemned.
<b>Church at Smyrna</b>	
Rev. 2:8-11. Church at Smyrna was impacted by blasphemy from those who say they are Jews (real Christians) and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan (proto-orthodox). Lived in poverty (poor people) and tribulation (trouble and persecution).	Infected by dissidents from a separate group claiming to be the Church of God but not following the apostles' teachings. The group appears to consist of Christianized Gentiles, forerunners of the orthodox, presumably largely comprised of people growing up in the church but never converted and characterized by a general drift towards lawlessness.
<b>Church at Pergamum</b>	
Rev. 2:12-17. Church at Pergamum existed in the city where Satan dwells and "some who hold the teaching of Balaam" (2:14) "You also have some who in the same way hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans" (2:15).	Infected by dissidents of two varieties—one holding to the teachings of Balaam (the same group of whom Jude wrote) and a second described as Nicolaitans.
<b>Church at Thyatira</b>	
Rev. 2:18-29. The parallel between vs. 20 and vs. 14 suggests the same movement is involved with the Church at Thyatira. The woman Jezebel appears to be Gnostic (2:20). Some involved in the deep things of Satan (2:24). Ignatius wrote unlike Ephesus, Thyatira had failed ( <i>To the Ephesians</i> 2:20ff).	It became infected by dissidents. The church was impacted by people with Gnostic overtones.
<b>Church at Sardis</b>	
Rev. 3:1-6. Lukewarm apostasy characterized the Sardis congregation. A lethargic, almost spiritually dead (3:2) congregation ready to be devoured. A few remained faithful but most did not.	It was a target for dissident movements.
<b>Church at Philadelphia</b>	
Rev. 3:7-13. Philadelphia was an active church but co-existing with a group called the Synagogue of Satan (proto-orthodox), who said they were God's people (the Church of God) but lie (as they are not).	It remained aloof from the dissident movements. The Synagogue of Satan was in operation (proto-orthodox)
<b>Church at Laodicea</b>	
Rev. 3:14-21. The members of the Church at Laodicea believed they were spiritually well equipped but were indifferent.	A target for dissident movements.

Revelation 2-3 tells of the spiritual conditions then present in seven of the congregations of the Church of God in Asia Minor, along a Roman mail route, while under the oversight of Apostle John—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. This helps illuminate the condition of the Church of God toward the end of its first (Ephesian) era (ca. 31-135 CE).

Allowing time for the circulation of the manuscript and its call for repentance and for the people of God to repent suggests that it was well into the second century when God quickly removed the Ephesian Era candlestick (Revelation 2:5) ending the first age of the Church and beginning the second one.

John remained at Ephesus until his death, ca. 98 CE, at the time of Trajan (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 3.23). After John's death many who listened to false teachers began to look for new leaders. The Church of God entered a period where local overseers, or bishops, became increasingly autonomous, and apostasy continued to develop, particularly in the West.

Nevertheless, a large Judeo-Christian population existed at Jerusalem until the time of the Bar-Kochba Rebellion (132-136 CE). In spite of the great disappointment, which presumably accompanied the failed return of Jesus of Nazareth in the 66-73 CE period, they continued to increase and flourish. Judeo-Christian bishops continued to serve the Syria Palestine Judeo-Christian community well into the fourth century. The center of their activity was Christian Sion (Jerusalem's western hill) and the Judeo-Christian synagogue that became known as The Holy Church of God and the Church of the Apostles. Their community remained on Mt. Sion until seized by the orthodox Greco-Roman Christian authorities in the fourth century.

### Close of the First Age of the Church

In Revelation 2 Jesus commended the first-century Ephesian congregation which was in fact a prophetic type of the first age of the Church of God, led by the apostles and the first and second Christian generations. He pointed out that:

- They did not put up with, bear, nor endure evil men (Revelation 2:2);
- They consistently put to the test those who deceitfully called themselves apostles and found them to be false (Revelation 2:2);

- They possessed the quality of patient endurance, for they unfailingly evidenced perseverance and endured for Christ's name's sake without growing weary (Revelation 2:3);
- They left their first love, the enthusiastic love which they had at the first, and as a result the church was not accomplishing the deeds as it had at first (Revelation 2:4-5); and
- They hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:6).

Does this description detail the defining characteristics of the Church of God of apostolic times? Considering the work and times of first Christian generations the implication is that it does. That church, as a whole, never repented of leaving its first love for the truth of God. Jesus fulfilled his warning: "I will come to you quickly, and will remove the candlestick out of its place" (Rev. 2:5). So ended the first age of the Church of God. There were diabolical forces at work which brought into being a false Christianity which deceives the world to our very day.

