



Christian Theologies of Power and Resistance



January - February 2025
Matthew D. Taylor

For Our Interactive Portions or to Ask Questions

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Where we are at this moment?



- We just inaugurated (for the 2nd time) Donald Trump, an authoritarian who promised vengeance on “the enemy within.” He was elected both times overwhelmingly on Christian support. He said on Monday, “my life was saved for a reason. I was saved by God to make America great again.”
- There are influential Christian advisors around Trump and some of his own Cabinet nominees who carry extreme theologies of Christian supremacy, antisemitism, and anti-Muslim hatred.
- These same theologies — some of which we’ll look at in this course — are currently bolstering a quasi-messianic fervor around Trump and radicalizing millions of American Christians with visions of creating (or restoring) a United States where there is no separation of church and state and where all non-Christians are second-class citizens.
- In early 2017, progressive, liberal, and centrist Christians mobilized to resist Trump’s promised policy agenda. I am pretty dialed in, and I don’t hear any similar mobilization right now. Where is the Christian resistance?

Two Word Clouds

What are the most beautiful things about Christianity in your view?

What are the ugliest things about Christianity in your view?

How can we hold together Christianity's beauty and its aggressions and abuses?



Popular Options

Christianity itself is problematic and intrinsically abusive. So we just need to get rid of it.

- A) Christianity contains ~2.4 billion people (and that's either holding steady or growing). It ain't going anywhere.
- B) These abuses and harms are issues in basically every global religious tradition.
- C) You're not accounting for the many goods Christianity brings to the world.

The abusers and militant Christians are not real Christians. They just use Christianity for other ends.

- A) If it walks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it's probably a duck. (a.k.a., "Christian" is as Christians do.)
- B) If you bother to study or get to know them, many of these Christian supremacists and abusers in the name of Christianity are actually quite sincere and deeply knowledgeable about Christianity.

The Blob

Christianity (the same data)

“Religious

outside the blob

- **APPROACH:** analyze the changes over time, the surroundings & elements of blobness
- **GOAL:** understand the blob, where it came from, how it might impact the world



“Theology”

- **PERSPECTIVE:** inside the blob
- **APPROACH:** has a stake in blobness and pushing the blob in certain directions
- **GOAL:** has an agenda for how best to direct and move the blob

Two Lenses

How has the Christian tradition reckoned with having political power and resisting political power?

Religious Studies

Deals in analysis, comparison, and contextualization

How has Christianity changed over time (leadership, social settings, interpretations)?
How is this similar to / different from other religious traditions?

What cultural, social, and contextual factors have helped give rise to the various expressions of Christianity in the world?

“Christianity” is defined by what professed Christians do or believe.

vs.

Theology

Deals in essences and truth claims

What was the *meaning* of Jesus’s message — and/or the Bible — and how do we get to that meaning?
(study scripture, learn the tradition,

Is _____ (behavior, belief) in line with *true* Christian faith?

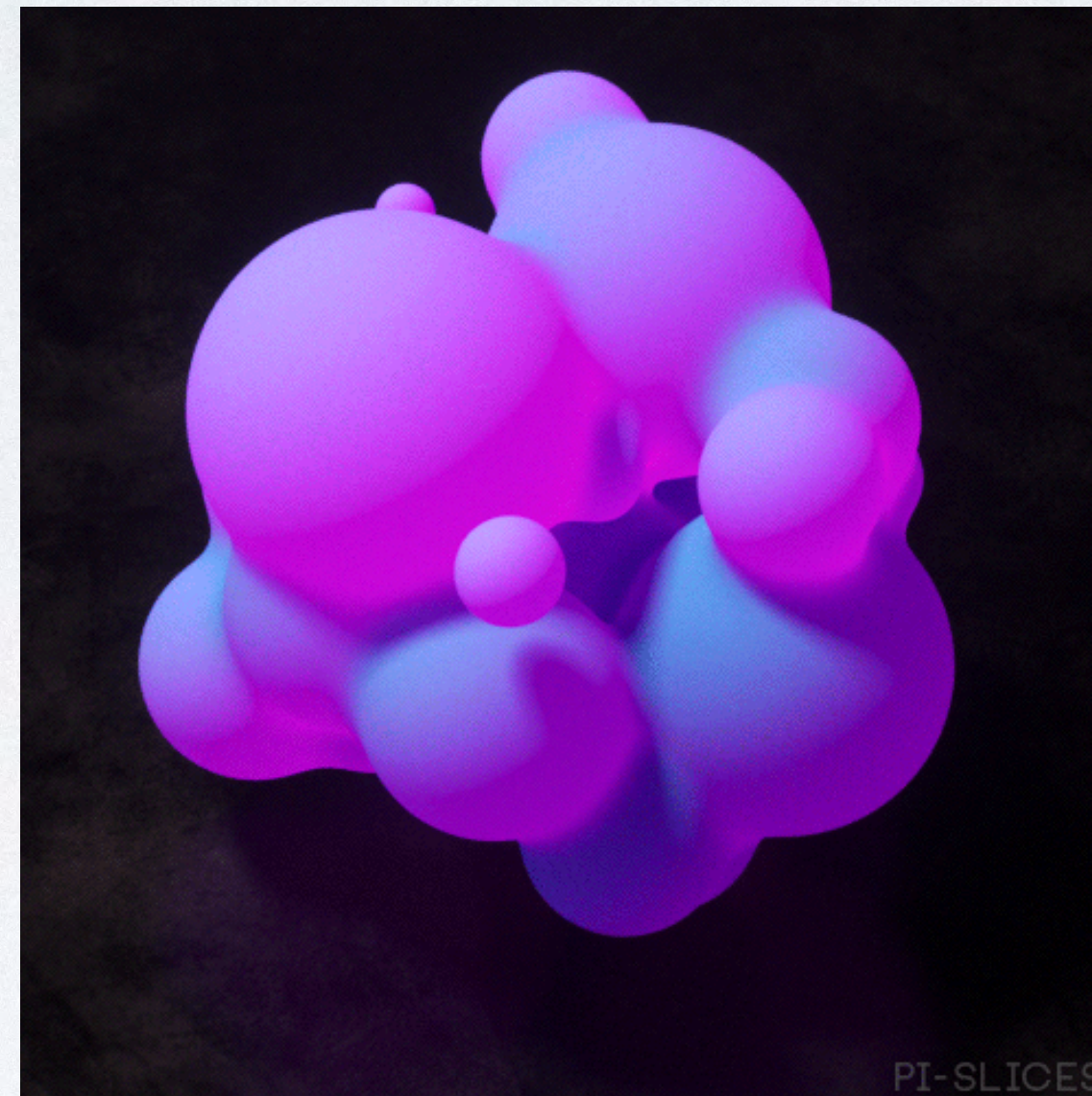
How should Christians *faithfully* live now in light of the tradition?

Religious Studies

Religious traditions (like Christianity) contain multitudes and are multivocal.

The same source texts and traditions that can bolster abusive Christian imperialism and supremacy can also provide inspiration to Christian resistance movements and the pursuit of justice and equality.

Our Theses vs.



Theology

Jesus and the early church lived a disempowered, colonized existence and many in the early church had a radical anti-imperial vision of the equalizing kingdom of God.

But as Christians have gained political and cultural power, they have frequently distorted Jesus's teaching and developed theologies to justify domination, greed, and other behaviors that were



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Christendom

(noun) — from *christen* (Christian or to name Christian) and *dom* (domain, as in fiefdom, kingdom)

—The geographical realm or set of governing entities that is ruled over by Christian political authorities

Session 1 - The Early Christian Church Resisting the Roman Empire

Session 2 - Christian Imperialism and Its Many Abuses (Christendom - roughly 4th to 19th centuries)

Session 3 - Can We Ever Be Post-Christendom? (Theologies of Power and Resistance in the 20th to 21st centuries)

Early Church Context: The Roman Empire

The “Pax Romana” (Peace of Rome)
27 BCE - 180 CE

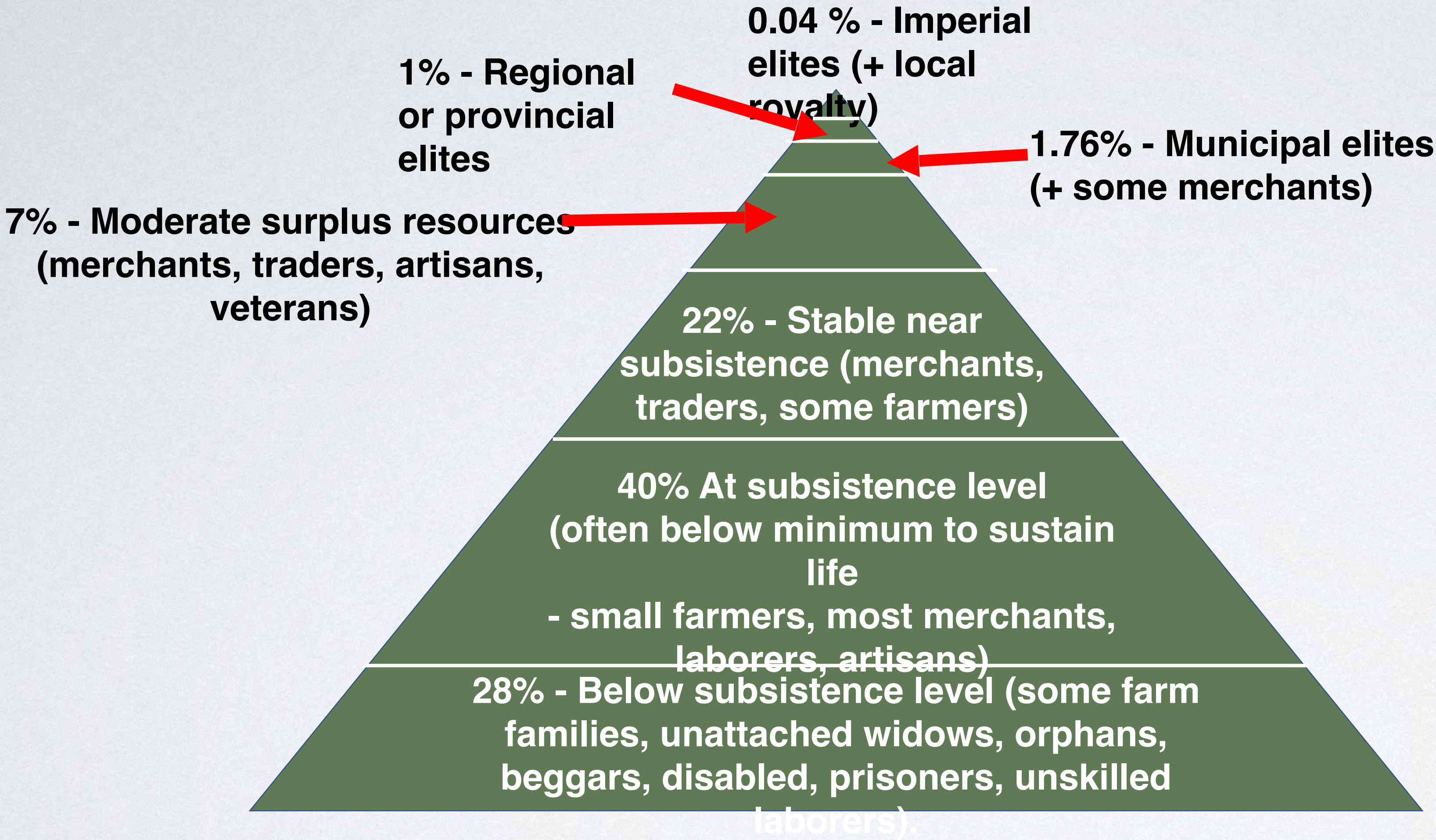


- All empires use force and brutality to maintain and expand their power, but, even by the standards of the ancient world, Rome was particularly brutal and violent.
- Rome was a “slave society” — as many as 35% of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were slaves. All members of the society “*grew up, were socialized by, married, reared children, worked, invested in, and conceived of the idea of property, and honed their most basic habits and values under the influence of a system that said it was just to own people as property.*” (David Blight)
- The Romans constantly used mass slaughter, crucifixion, and torture to maintain their dominance over all conquered peoples under their “peace.”
- The “Pax Romana” also entailed a rigidly hierarchical social order: from Caesar, a self-proclaimed god incarnate, through the Roman elites (the top 3%) who controlled all positions of power, down to the *pater familias*, who generally ran his household as a dictatorship, to the lowest strata — the roughly 1/3 of the population that was enslaved.



Roman Empire — Economics

Average life expectancy in the Greco-Roman world: 20-30 years



The Super-wealthy

The “Wealthy”

Possibly a few NT characters (Philemon, Cornelius, Lydia, Barnabas)

The “Poor”

Almost everyone in the early Christian churches would be considered poor by our modern standards.

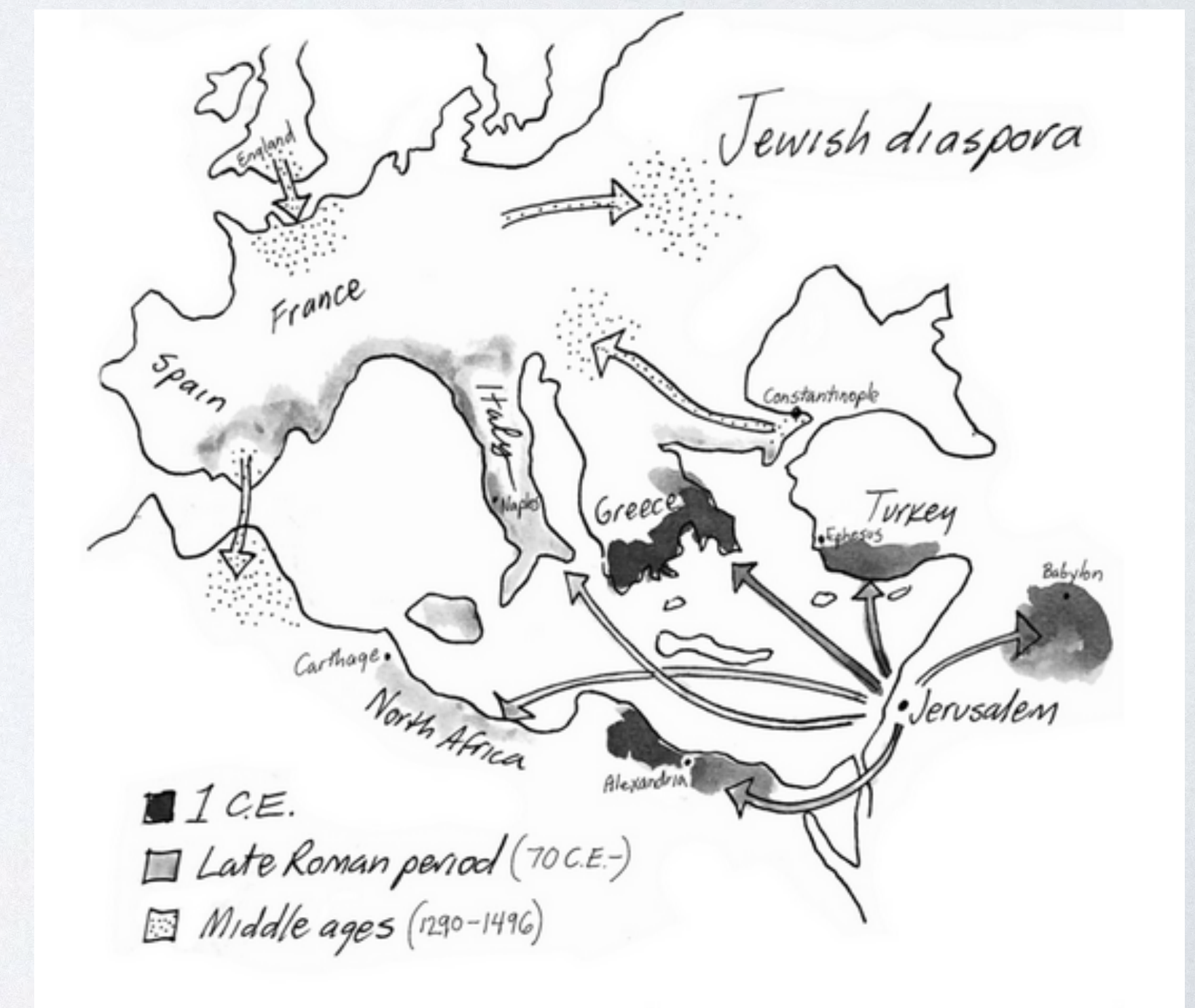
*Adapted from Stephen J. Friesen, “Poverty in Pauline Studies”

Religious “Tolerance” in the Roman Empire



- The Romans practiced a flexible, additive form of polytheism — gods of conquered people & local gods could join the pantheon.
- This was relatively pluralistic, as long as people played by the rules — civic duty to the *polis* & fealty to Rome demonstrated through participation in rituals, rites, and festivals.
- The “imperial cult” (worship of Caesar) was introduced during Jesus’ lifetime, fully blending civic/religious life

- The “cults” Rome couldn’t accommodate were: (a) new, i.e., rootless, (b) held secretive — non-public — rites, (c) disrupted the social order & hierarchy, and (d) rejected the imperial cult. The Romans called these cults “*superstitio*” (disloyal and undignified serving of foreign deities).
- Judaism was special — 10% of the empire’s population, diasporic, an ancient tradition — so Jews were generally exempted from *polis* rituals and military service. But the Romans kept a wary eye on Judean/Galilean revolutionaries and episodic messianic movements.



The Romans' Christian Problem

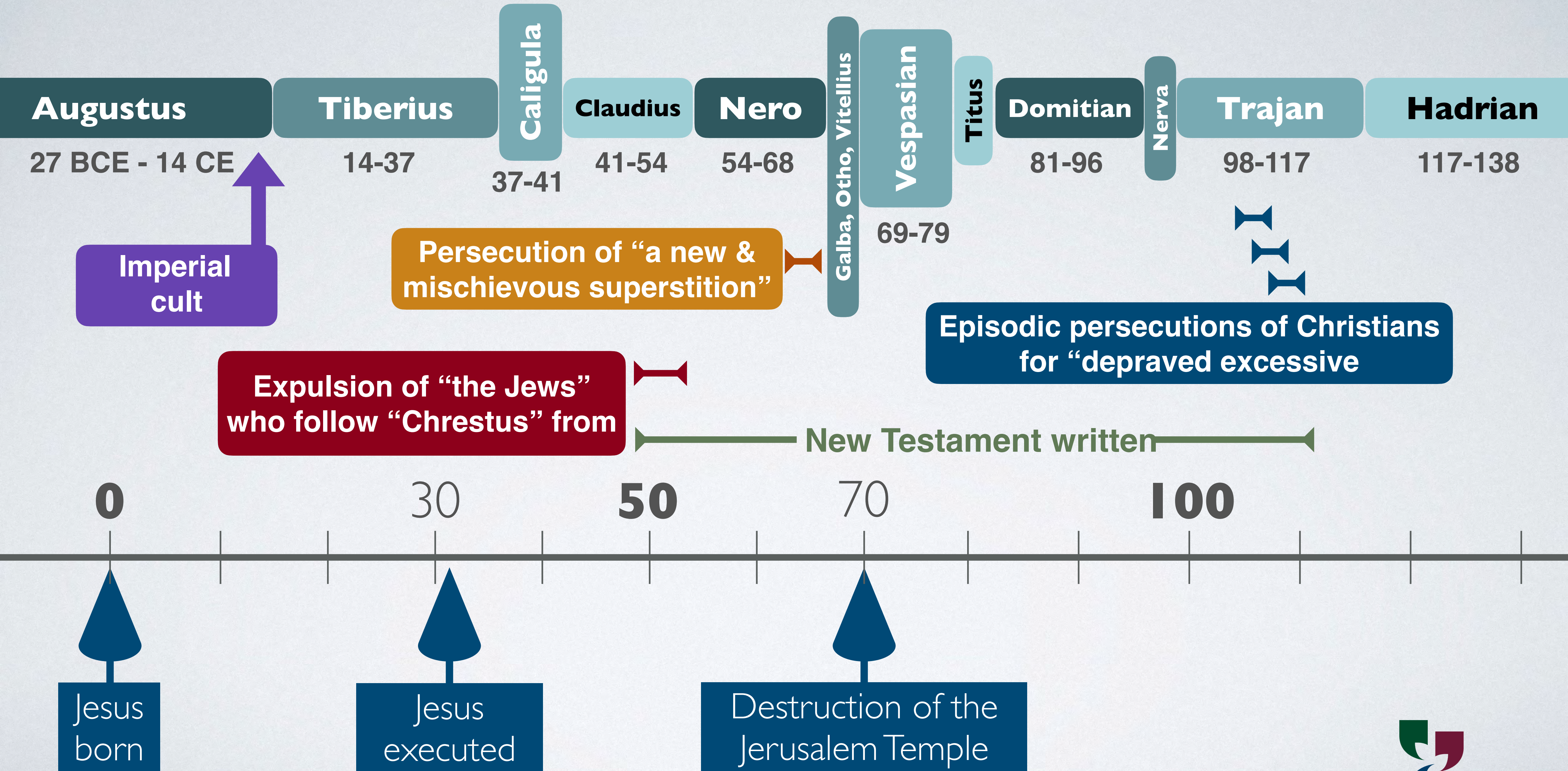
- The Romans' main frustration with Christian communities was more “political” than “religious” in our contemporary vocabulary (they didn't distinguish these categories).
- If Christians had remained within Judaism, they probably could've stayed under the tenuous protections (*religio licita* - Tertullian) afforded to Jews. If Christians had (publicly & even insincerely) participated in the imperial cult, they probably would have been an object of suspicion, but suffered less persecution.



Instead...

- 1) Christians were converting Gentiles (i.e., pagans) away from their civic rituals and the imperial cult to a *new* religion.
- 2) Christians were disrupting the social order: slaves and masters worshiping together as “brother and sister.” In fact, Roman polemics accused Christians of incest, because everyone was called “brothers and sisters”.
- 3) Christians practiced strange, non-public rites (baptism and communion).

Timeline - Rome and the New Testament Church

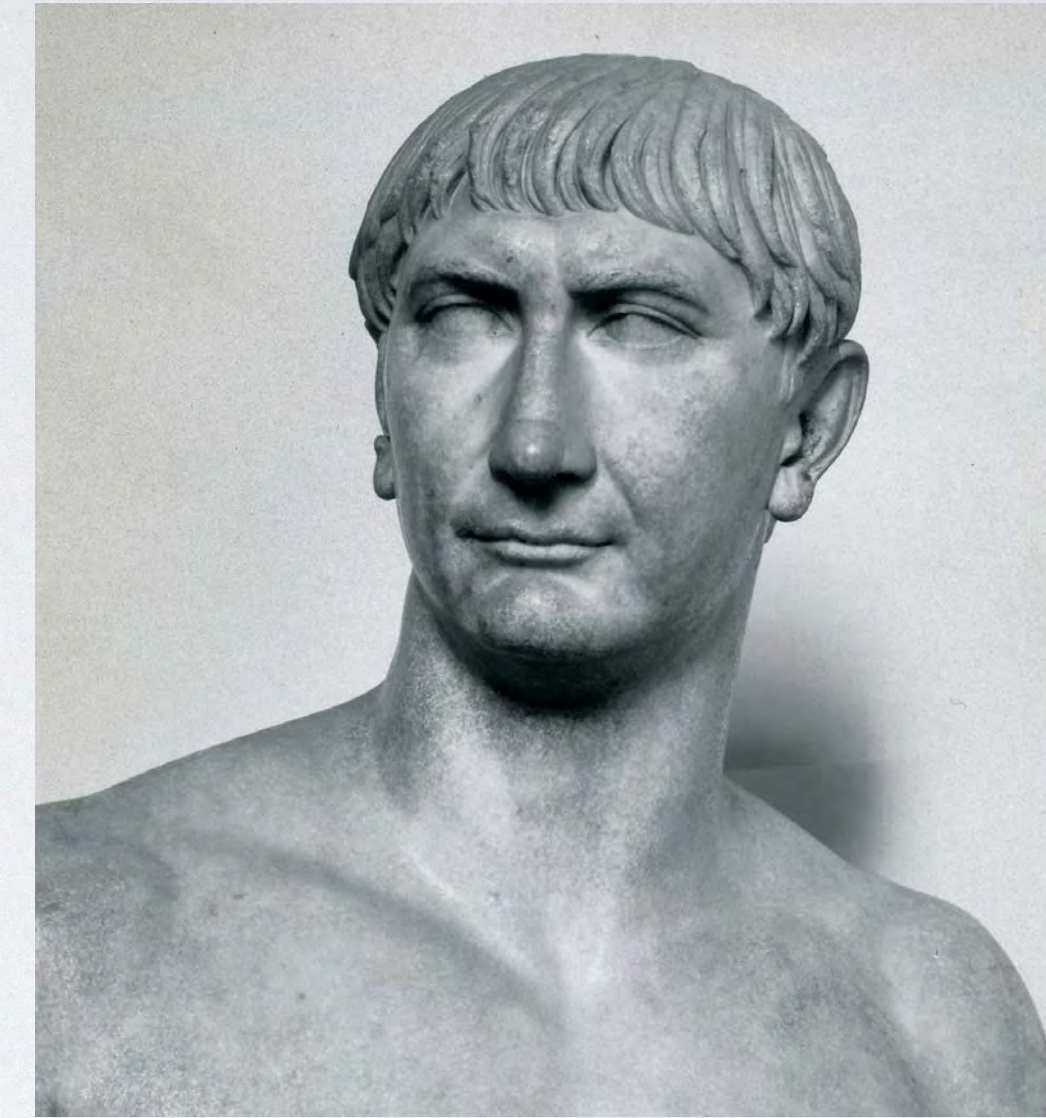


Pliny the Younger and Emperor Trajan



Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus
(61-113 CE)

- Governor of Bythnia-Pontus
- Writes letter to Trajan about persecuting Christians (circa 112 CE — the tail end of the composition of the New Testament)



Marcus Ulpius Traianus
(53-117 CE)

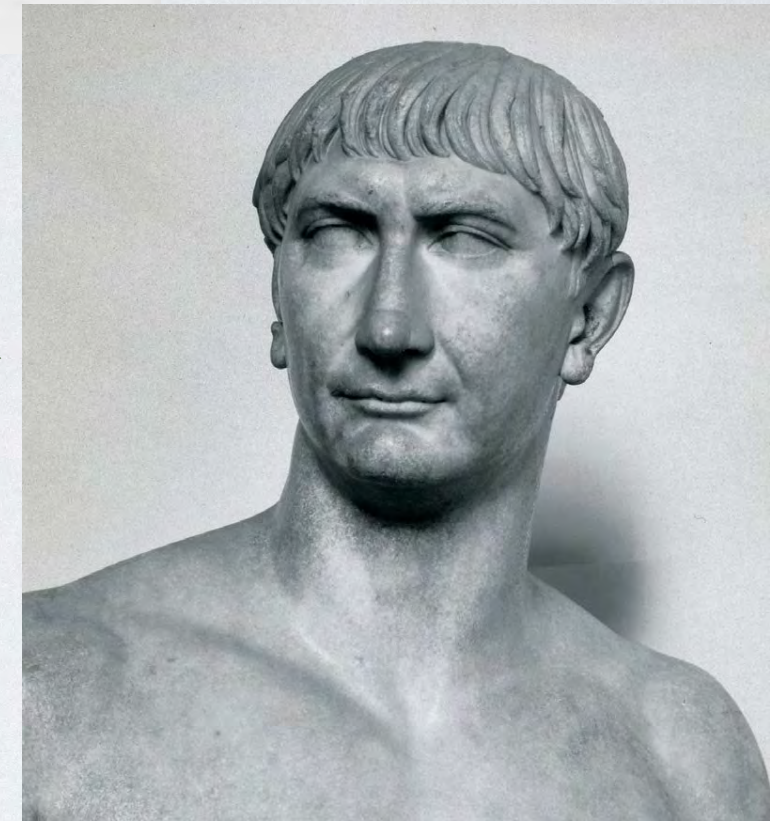
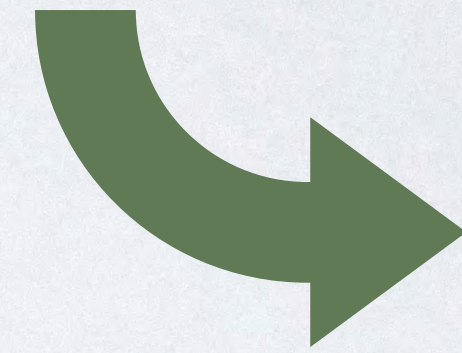
- Caesar from 98-117 CE
- His correspondence with Pliny is one of our best sources on how he implemented his policy toward Christians

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians....

I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome....

Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ — none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do — these I thought should be discharged....

I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.... For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages



Pliny to Trajan

Try to Write a Sentence

How was the situation of the early church different from the Christian situation in the United States today?

New Testament

Traditional Divisions

Gospels

Matthew

Mark

Luke

John

History

Acts

Pauline Epistles

Romans

1 & 2 Corinthians

Galatians

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1&2 Thessalonians

1&2 Timothy

Titus

Philemon

Other Epistles

Hebrews

James

1&2 Peter

Jude

1,2,3 John

Apocalypse

Revelation

New Testament More Recent Critical Scholarship

Johannine Literature

John
1, 2, 3 John
Revelation

Synoptic Gospels

Matthew
Mark
Luke
Acts

Genuine Pauline Epistles

Romans
1 & 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Philippians
1 Thessalonians
Philemon

Disputed

Colossians
2 Thessalonians

Pseudepigrapha (written by someone else) Pauline Epistles

Ephesians
1 & 2 Timothy
Titus

“More” Jewish NT Literature

Hebrews
James
1 & 2 Peter
Jude
Revelation

Claudius

Nero

Trajan

Persecution of “a new & mischievous superstition”

Expulsion of “the Jews” who follow “Chrestus” from

Episodic persecutions of Christians for “depraved excessive

Galatians

1 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

Romans

Philippians

Philemon

Colossians

James

Titus

1 & 2 Timothy

Ephesians

Mark

Hebrews

Matthew

Luke-Acts

Jude

1, 2, & 3 John

John

Revelation

30

50

70

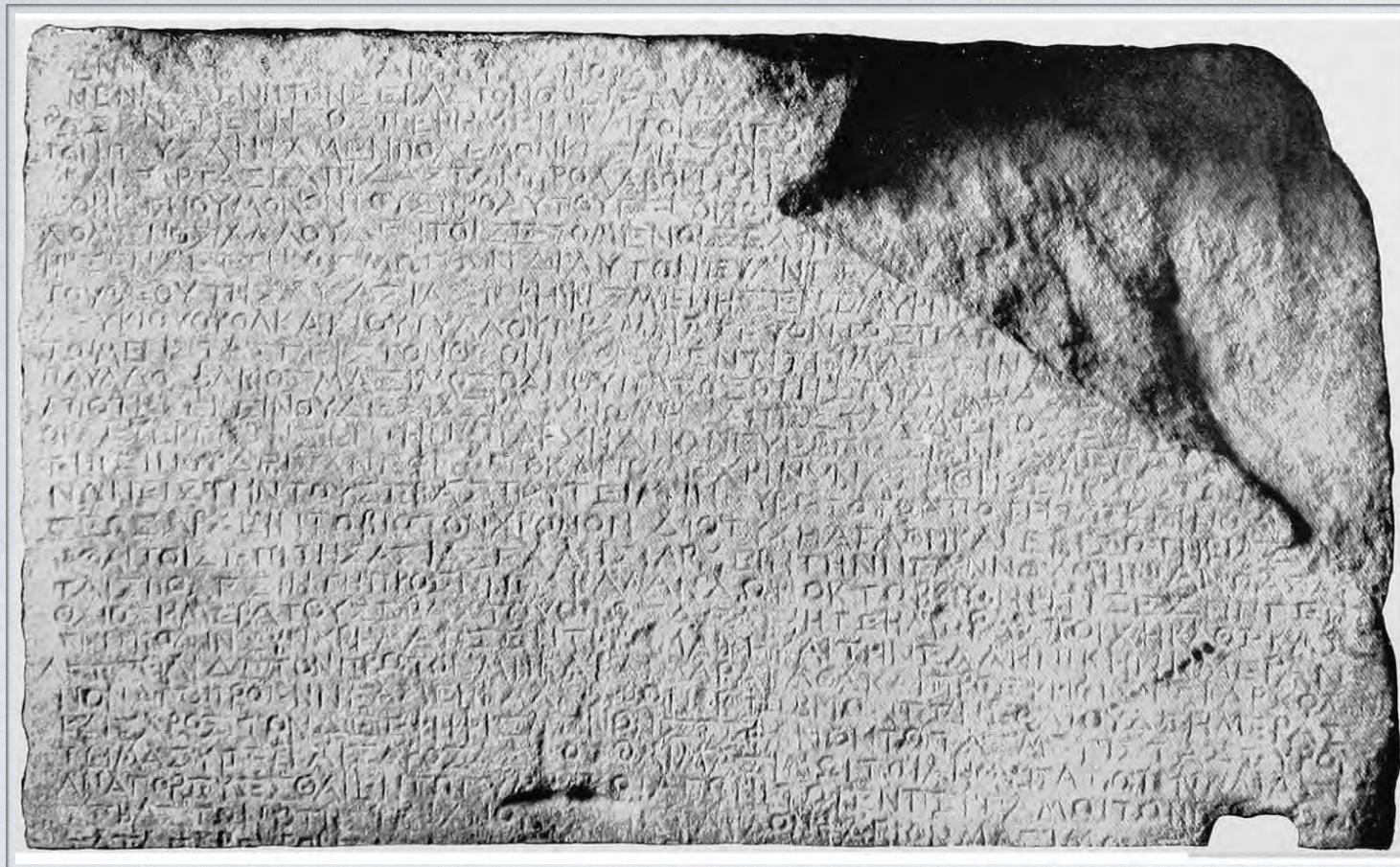
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Jesus
executed

Destruction of the
Jerusalem Temple

Christian persecution by the Romans was not uniform or constant, but it shaped the anti-imperial self-conception of the

New Testament Passages: Jesus and the Gospels



**An inscription in
Eastern Turkey
(circa 8 B.C.E.)**

Mark 1:1 —The beginning of the good news [*euangelion*] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Whereas the Providence which has regulated our whole existence... has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving us the emperor Augustus, whom Providence has filled with virtue [power] for the welfare of humankind and who, being sent to us and our descendants as our Savior, has put an end to war and set all things in order; and whereas, having become god-manifest, Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times... and whereas the birthday of the god [Augustus] has been for the whole world the beginning of the gospel [euangelion] concerning him, [therefore let a new era begin from his birth].

³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹Now when the centurion who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Mark's entire gospel (the first of the genre) is built around a contrast between Jesus and Caesar. Jesus is

New Testament Passages: Jesus and the Gospels

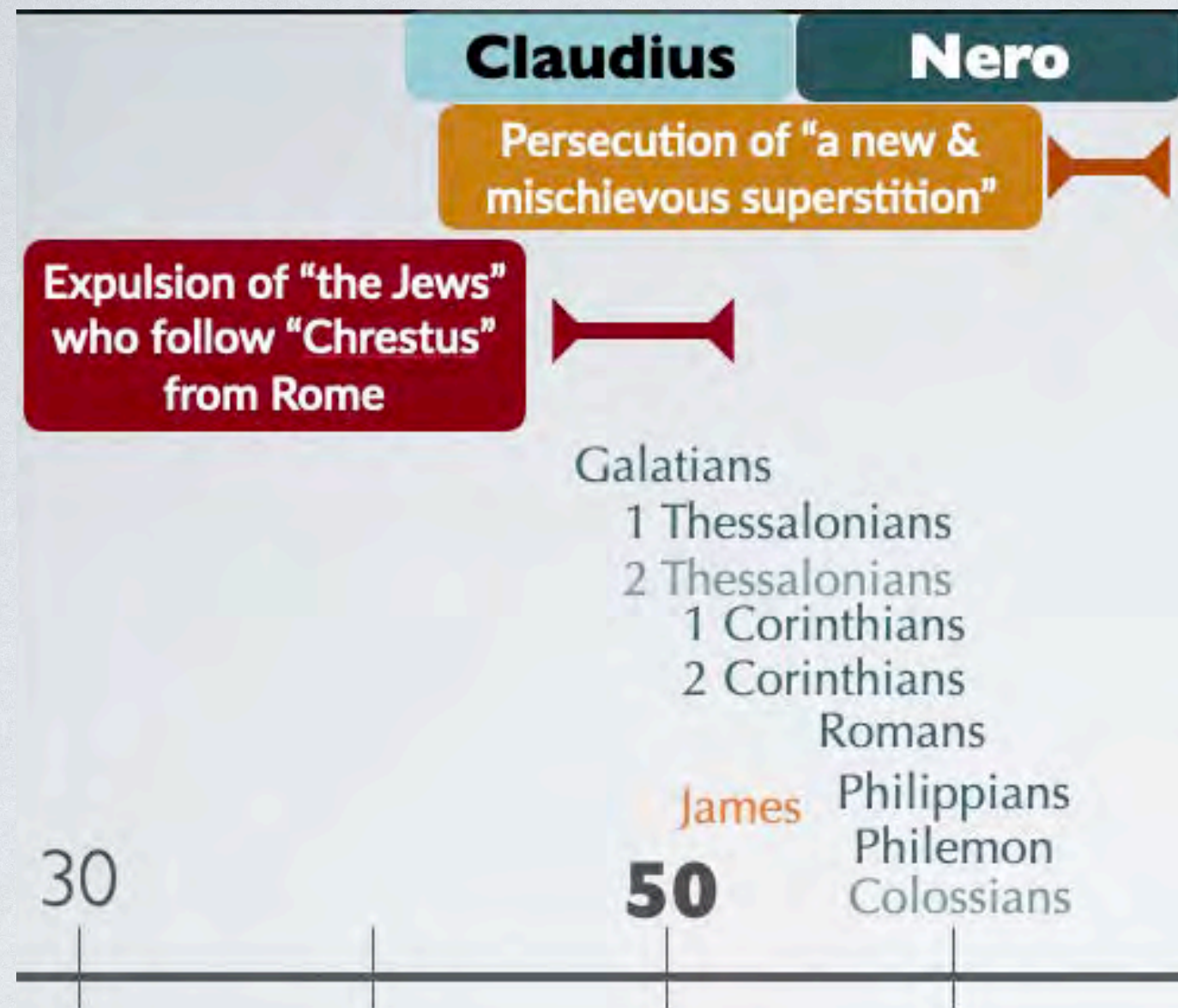
³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the



Jesus teaches a radical ethic, not of overthrowing Caesar by violence (Caesar's means) but of self-sacrifice, care for fellow humans, and living in defiance of Caesar's

New Testament Passages: Paul



Paul is almost certainly writing during Nero's reign, after the expulsion of the Jews from Rome, but before the mass persecution has begun.

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

New Testament Passages: Paul

¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self.
—Philemon 15-19

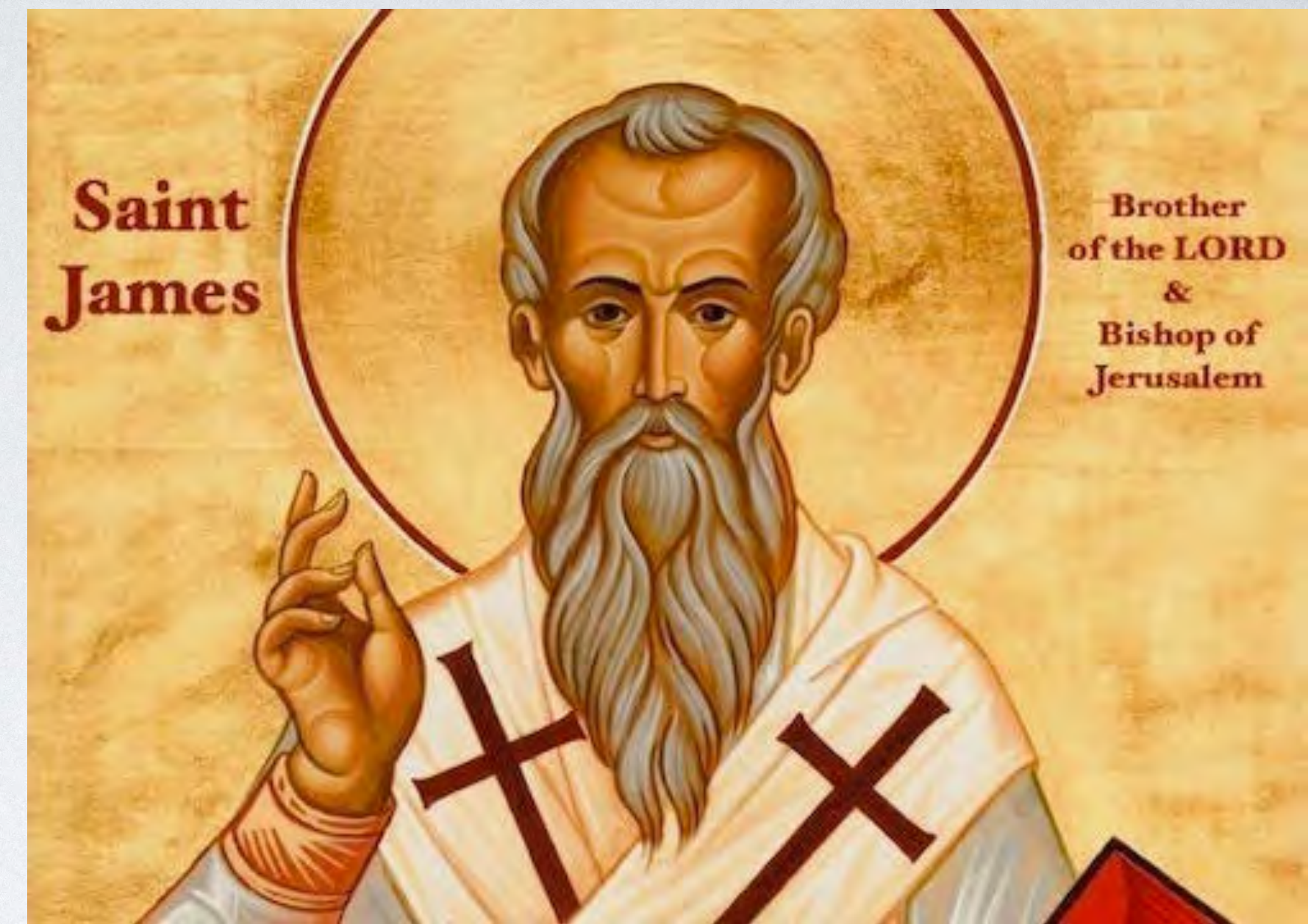
²⁶So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.
—Galatians 3:26-29

This is precisely what the Romans were worried about — upsetting the social order and hierarchy through a familial appeal.

New Testament Passages: James

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. ²Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. ⁴Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.

—James 5:1-6



James channels a righteous anger at the economic hierarchy and violent enforcement of the Pax Romana, anticipating God's judgment on

New Testament Passages: Revelation

¹¹Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. ¹²It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. ¹³And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. ¹⁴Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. ¹⁵ The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. ¹⁶It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, ¹⁷so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.

¹⁸This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.

—Revelation 13:11-18

Revelation is a piece of apocalyptic literature, a genre of trauma under imperial abuse and imagining God's order will wipe away the empires of this world.

"Neron Caesar" in Hebrew

נ	Nun	50
ך	Resh	200
ו	Waw	6
נ	Nun	50
ק	Quph	100
ס	Samekh	60
ך	Resh	200
		<hr/>
		666

Final Thoughts



- The early Christian church didn't have it all figured out. It was messy, argumentative, and locked in a troubled relationship with Judaism.
- But the early church saw society from below — across the different strands of theology and communal formation we see in the New Testament, there was agreement that about not privileging the rich or powerful and that if Jesus is Lord, Caesar isn't.
- For Christians (theology): If we are going to resist the rising tide of Christian imperialism and supremacy, we would do well to study the New Testament in its colonized context. We're in a time that calls for intensive Bible study.
- For non-Christians (religious studies): Christianity is multivocal. Sometimes one of the best gifts outsiders can give us is holding up the mirror to Christianity's abuses of power while also recognizing and supporting the resources and voices of resistance embedded within the tradition.



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The Road to Christendom — Growth of Christianity

