

New Testament Apocrypha: Letters

This is the fourth in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on the so-called New Testament Apocrypha, books that dealt with Jesus and His Apostles which are not included in the New Testament canon. Previous installments have been an Introduction (ET&N 34), Gospels (39), Orthodox Acts (65), and Non-Orthodox Acts (69). Future topics will include Apocalypses and a Summary. I also plan to do a special edition on the Gospel of Judas, which will then be incorporated into the Gospel issue. The purpose of the series is to examine what these works tell us about the diversity of belief in the early church. Some apocryphal works are considered heretical, while others were valued but failed to meet the test of apostolicity required for the canon. The series will conclude with Apocalypses.

Then and **Now** (commentary integrated)

In this issue of *ET&N*, we'll look at a number of non-canonical letters that are part of early church history or legend. Some of these are genuine but not apostolic; others are fakes. Some represent orthodox faith; others Gnostic doctrine. The letters we will review, in general chronological order based on their period are:

- Jesus' letter to King Abgarus of Edessa - one of the more interesting legends of the early church
- Jesus' Iconium letter - a clear forgery, probably from the fourth century
- Peter to Philip - a Gnostic invention from the late second or early third century
- Paul's letter to the Laodiceans - a forgery, probably from the third century
- The Epistle of the Apostles - a forgery, probably from the mid-second century
- The Epistle of Barnabas - an esteemed document from the late first or early second century
- Pliny the Younger - correspondence with the Emperor Trajan in 111 or 112 A.D.
- The Letter of Gaul to Asia - an account of persecutions from about 180 A.D.
- The Letter to Diognetus - an orthodox communication from the second or third century

[Note: this issue of *ET&N* is quite lengthy, so I have placed anchors at the beginning of each letter. You may want to read this in more than one sitting and, if so, you can click on the titles above to go to specific sections. Unfortunately, readers of text-only or PDF version can't do that.]

Jesus and Abgarus [Link to full text at <http://www.pseudepigrapha.com/LostBooks/lettersJesusAbgarus.htm>]

One of the more charming legends of the early church involves correspondence between Jesus and Abgarus, king of the independent Mesopotamian city of Edessa (now Sanliurfa, in southeastern Turkey). An important city to Muslims, according to

the Koran, Edessa was the birthplace of Abraham. The Pool of Abraham there celebrates the Muslim legend that God turned a huge fire into water to save Abraham from the murderous actions of King Nimrod. Historically, Edessa (so named by Greek settlers) was an early center of Christianity, adopting it as the state religion in about A.D. 200. Many early Syriac Christian documents were produced in Edessa.

The Christian legend of Jesus and Abgarus is preserved by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (Book I, Chapter 13), written in about 328. Eusebius claims to translate directly from ancient documents from the city archives. Abgarus was apparently afflicted with a serious disease, which his doctors were powerless to cure. When he heard of the miraculous healing power of Jesus, he asked Jesus for a favor. "I have heard the reports of thee and of thy cures..." he writes. From the reports, he concludes that "either thou art God...or else thou, who doest these things, art the Son of God." In asking Jesus to come to Edessa, he not only seeks His healing hand, he also takes note of the plots against Jesus and invites Him to take refuge in his city which, he notes rather presumptuously, "is great enough for us both." He sent his letter by courier to Jesus in Jerusalem, apparently during the Passion Week.

Jesus, having a pressing appointment with the cross, sends a message back to Abgarus, blessing him for believing in Whom he had not seen. He tells Abgarus he cannot come because "it is necessary for me to fulfill all things here for which I have been sent." Jesus says, instead, that He will send one of His disciples after His ascension. According to Eusebius, Thomas sent Thaddeus, one of the seventy(-two) (see Luke 10), who then cured Abgarus.

While Abgarus's request is not found in Scripture, the interaction rings true. We know that Jesus' fame had extended beyond the borders of Judea and Samaria to Syria, and that many sought Him out for healing (Matthew 4:24). It would certainly be natural for a diseased king to appeal to Jesus, and to offer Him refuge. Jesus' response also fits the biblical accounts. He had enormous compassion for all the afflicted, but he could not be diverted from His primary mission. To promise to send a disciple after His resurrection, appearances, and ascension into heaven fits with Jesus' call for His disciples to go into all the world (Matthew 28:19-20), and those closest to Him were given gifts of healing. Furthermore, his blessing of Abgarus jibes with his comment in John 20:29 immediately following Thomas's confession "*My Lord and my God*": "*Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'*"

This Thaddeus may or may not be Thaddaeus, the disciple of Jesus who is often identified as the same person as Judas the son of James, but the fourth or fifth century *Acts of Thaddeus* includes the Abgarus story, embellished with the legend of the **Mandyllion** ("little handkerchief"), also known by the Greek term **Archieropoietos**, which means "not made by human hands.". According to these apocryphal Acts, Abgarus directed the courier, Ananias (or Hannan) to return with a painting of Jesus, but Ananias was unable to do so because he couldn't get a clear view. Jesus, however, wipes his face on a cloth, imprinting his image. In this version of the Abgarus legend, his disease is leprosy, and he is cured when he sees Jesus' face on the cloth. Thaddeus' later visit removes the king's remaining scars, after which he is baptized into Christ.

The Face of Jesus?



Copy of the Edessa Mandyllion, supposedly an image of Christ, made before the disappearance of the original. This version comes from the Pope's Chapel in the Vatican

Edessa subsequently came under Muslim rule, but the Byzantines allegedly recovered the Mandyllion in 944 and took it to Constantinople, an event still celebrated in the Orthodox liturgical calendar on August 16. When crusaders sacked Constantinople in 1204, the Mandyllion disappeared.

As I stated earlier, the basic Abgarus legend rings true and probably has some basis in fact, but the Mandyllion undoubtedly belongs in the realm of myth. Eusebius, who devoted the last section of Book I of his *Ecclesiastical History* to the Abgarus story, makes no mention whatsoever of any image of Christ, an inexplicable omission if it existed. Furthermore, it seems very unlike Jesus to deliberately create an image, knowing that people would focus worship such a physical relic rather than the divine ideas he represented. The extent to which things like the Shroud of Turin and the Holy Grail tend to capture human imagination is ample evidence of our gravitation to things we can see and touch.

The Iconium Letter [Link to full text at http://www.silcom.com/~barnowl/chain-letter/archive/he1915_jesus_sab.htm]

The only other letter purported to have been written by Jesus is clearly a hoax. The copy I found claims that it dates from no later than the sixth century, but that it was found in Iconium at the very end of the first century, having originally been left by Jesus at the foot of the cross under a rock with the inscription "Blessed is he that turneth me over!" According to this legend, the adults were afraid to touch the rock, so a small child simply did so.

The letter itself contains legalistic comments about the Sabbath: "Whosoever worketh on the Sabbath day shall be cursed; I command you to go to Church..." where they are to "receive the Sacrament, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper." From a biblical perspective, "church" is not somewhere anyone can **go**. Instead, the church (**ekklesia**) is a group of believers (universal or local) that gather together. There is also a command to fast "five Fridays in every year, beginning with good-Friday" (a term obviously unlikely for Jesus to use).

The letter contains a few other commands and concludes with a section imbuing the letter itself and copies of it with magical powers. Anyone who has a copy and keeps

it to him or herself "shall not prosper." Anyone who believes in the letter "shall be pardoned." To anyone who does not believe in it Jesus "will send many plagues upon him, and consume...his children." Nothing will hurt those who have a copy in their house, and they shall experience prosperity. Finally, a copy of the letter ensures safe child-birth.

Besides its *prima facie* silliness, this letter also contains a mark typical of non-genuine documents. Like apocryphal documents that overtly claim apostolic authorship (which the canonical books do not), the Iconium Letter attempts internal validation. In this case, the letter contains several insinuations that it was "written with my own (Jesus') hands." Genuine works do not need such internal claims - they come to be recognized as such by the acclamation of the church.

Laodiceans [Link to full text at <http://www.peculiarpress.com/ekklesia/resources/Laodiceans.htm>]

When Paul wrote his second letter to the church in Thessalonica, he was apparently aware of a fake letter in his name, and he warns the Thessalonians about it:

"Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

Paul's usual practice was to employ an amanuensis, but in the case of 2 Thessalonians, he closes with, "*I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write*" (2 Thessalonians 3:17). Some have used these verses to challenge the genuineness of 2 Thessalonians, but even when Paul used an amanuensis, he signed the letter or appended personal greetings in his own hand (see 1 Corinthians 16:21 and Colossians 4:18) as a precaution against false letters. Perhaps that is why only one false letter of Paul has survived.

The *Letter to the Laodiceans* represents someone's probably-innocent attempt to fill a gap left in Scripture. Laodicea (*ET&N* 33) was one of three closely neighboring cities (along with Colossae and Hierapolis) in the fertile Lycus Valley about one hundred miles east of Ephesus. In his canonical letter to the church in Colossae, Paul closes with the comment, "*And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea*" (Colossians 4:16), but the genuine *Laodiceans* has not survived. What is perplexing about this forgery is that it held persistent respect in the Roman church for a millennium. Despite that fact that it is nothing more than a very short (just 359 words in its English translation, compared to 473 in *Philemon*) simplistic compilation of phrases from authentic Pauline letters. It adds absolutely nothing to the canonical books, yet it was included in the Latin Vulgate, as well as numerous other Bible translations. Officially, it was not excluded from the New Testament until the Council of Florence (1439-43).

The **Muratorian Fragment** (see [ET&N](#) 25) mentions a Laodicean letter which, the writer says, "cannot be received in the catholic Church; for it will not do to mix gall with honey." He notes, however, that this Laodiceans was "forged in Paul's name for the sect of Marcion." There is nothing in this Laodiceans that is particularly

Marcionite, so most scholars believe that the Laodiceans cited in the Muratorian Fragment and the one that survives are not the same. This Laodiceans is evidence of the human tendency to want to fill gaps. There was undoubtedly a forgery of Paul's "earlier letter" to Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:9), and the Muratorian Fragment refers to a forged Pauline letter to Alexandria "and several others."

The Epistle of the Apostles [Link to full text at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/apostolorum.html>]

This lengthy text, also known as the *Apostolorum*, purports to be the combined effort of the eleven surviving original apostles. After a condemnation of the heretics Simon (Magnus) and Cerinthus, it begins, "We, John, Thomas, Peter, Andrew, James, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Nathaniel, Judas Zelotes, and Cephas, write unto the churches of the east and the west, of the north and the south..." Many apocryphal works attempted to bolster their credibility by claims of apostolic authorship. Clearly, the *Apostolorum* took that to the extreme. There are two striking things about this list: first, that John is placed first and second, that the list does not match that of the canonical Gospels (even the harmonized versions). If this work is supposed to represent the collective teaching of Jesus' primary disciples, the names matter.

Our lists of the apostles are based on Matthew 10:2-4, Mark 3:14-19, Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:13; and assorted passages in John.

Name(s)	Matt	Mk	Lk	Acts	John	Comments
Simon Peter (Cephas)	1	1	1	1	1:42	Brother of Andrew
Andrew	2	4	2	4	1:40	Brother of Simon Peter
James (the elder), son of Zebedee	3	2	3	3	21:2	Brother of John
John, son of Zebedee	4	3	4	2	21:2	Brother of James
Philip	5	5	5	5	1:43	Close friend of Philip
Bartholomew (Nathaniel)	6	6	6	7	1:45	
Thomas	7	8	8	6	20:24	aka Didymus in later works
Matthew	8	7	7	8		A tax collector
James (the lesser or younger), son of Alphaeus	9	9	9	9		
Thaddaeus (Judas, son of James)	10	10	11	11	14:22	
Simon the Cananean (Zealot)	11	11	10	10		
Judas Iscariot	12	12	12		6:71	The reluctant traitor?

Two of the twelve names involve some difficulties that can only be resolved by assuming that some people were known by more than one name. From Scripture, we know this is true of at least three disciples. Jesus dubbed Simon "Peter" (Greek) or "Cephas" (Syriac), while he called James and John, "Boanerges," Sons of Thunder. Yet another New Testament example of a dual name is "Jesus Justus" (Colossians 4:11). It was also not uncommon for Hellenized Jews to have both Hebrew and Roman names, such as Saul Paulus. While it is reasonable to suggest that the differences in the lists of apostles results from multiple names, it is conjecture in the

case of Bartholomew/Nathaniel and Thaddaeus/Judas. The identification of Thaddaeus and Judas, son of James, is less problematic. The tenth name on both Matthew's and Mark's list is Thaddaeus, while the eleventh name on Luke's is Judas, son of James. It is not a large stretch to believe that a follower of Jesus with the name Judas who want to change it after the events of the Passion. If so, Matthew and Mark may have projected back Judas' new name (Thaddaeus), while Luke, like his penchant for accuracy (see Luke 1:3) may have retained the name Judas that the disciple had at the time of which Luke was writing.

Bartholomew/Nathaniel, however, is more problematic and the association of the names is circumstantial, primarily based on Nathaniel's friendship with Philip vis-à-vis the close proximity the names in the synoptic lists. John never mentions Bartholomew, while Matthew, Mark and Luke don't mention Nathaniel, but John doesn't mention Matthew, James the lesser, or Simon the Cananean either. Tradition generally holds that Nathaniel and Bartholomew are the same person, but we can't be certain of that.

The *Apostolorum* lists Bartholomew and Nathaniel separately, but it also distinguishes between Peter and Cephas, who we know to be one and the same. Consequently, it appears that the author(s) of the *Apostolorum* simply got it wrong. In addition to Bartholomew/Nathaniel and Peter/Cephas, the name Judas Zelotes is also listed. Is this Thaddaeus (Judas, son of James) or Simon the Zealot (Cananean) or another person altogether? These differences suggest a possibility that might be surprising: a precise list of the twelve Apostles (including Matthias, Judas Iscariot's replacement - see Acts 1:15-26) may have been less important to the early church than it seems today. Until Eusebius, no one seems to have bothered to harmonize the canonical lists.

The text of the *Apostolorum* exists in both a complete Ethiopic version and a partial earlier Coptic one, but there are differences in the two. The Coptic, for example, has Martha reporting Jesus' resurrection to the disciples, while the Ethiopic has Mary (the canonical account has Mary Magdalene, see Mark 16:9-11). The version I read and is available through the link attempts to harmonize the two. The document is a lengthy conversation between the apostles and Jesus, some of it shortly before His crucifixion, much of it after.

The first twelve chapters primarily summarize Jesus' actions on Earth and his death and resurrection, and there is nothing therein that adds to the Gospels, although there is the startling revelation that it was Jesus, disguised as Gabriel, who appeared to Mary (see Luke 1:26-27). "I formed myself and entered her body," the *Apostolorum* Jesus says. "I became flesh, for I alone was a minister unto myself" (14).

Thereafter, the conversation is entirely fabricated, but there are a few quotes from the canonical Gospels. The apostles are mainly concerned with finding out more about the Jesus' second coming (when it will come and what will happen?) and the afterlife (who will be there and what it will be like?) On a couple of occasions, Jesus tires of their questions asking, "How long will ye inquire and doubt?" (24) But they object that they need to know everything they can in order to be "profitable teachers" of the gospel.

In the context of His teaching, Jesus reveals or confirms that:

- He will reappear one hundred fifty (Coptic) or one hundred twenty (Ethiopic) years after the Resurrection (17).
- Those who obey His commands will receive rest in the kingdom (26).
- Those who only believe and do not act will have run "a vain race" (27).
- Smack in the midst of this conversation, Jesus foretells the commission of Paul. He tells the Apostles to "do unto him all that I have done unto you...Instruct him and bring to his mind that which is spoken of me in the Scripture and is fulfilled..." (31).

Note: this is one compelling piece of evidence of the *Apostolorum's* lack of credibility. Had Jesus really foretold Paul's conversion, he would have received a very different initial response from the church. The New Testament portrays Saul's sudden change as a source of substantial suspicion.

- In an apocalyptic vision worthy of the *Left Behind* series, Jesus describes the Tribulation. It shall be a time, Jesus says, when there will be "a trumpet in the heaven, a vision of great stars which shall be seen in the day, wonderful sights in heaven..., stars which fall upon the earth like fire and a great and mighty hail of fire. The sun and the moon fighting one with the other, a continual rolling and noise of thunders and lightnings, thunder and earthquake; cities falling and men perishing in their overthrow, a continual dearth for lack of rain, a terrible pestilence..." (34).
- When the Apostles ask if the elect will suffer pain during this period, Jesus answers, "Nay, but if they suffer such affliction, it will be a proving of them, whether they have faith and remember my sayings, and fulfil my commandments" (36). Those that persevere will arise to heaven, but others will experience further upheaval, when "war (shall) be kindled upon war; the four ends of the earth shall be in commotion and fight against each other..." There will be "clouds of locusts, darkness, and dearth..." (37).

The bulk of the *Apostolorum* focuses on the rewards and punishments meted out in the afterlife. Then, and too often now, Christians seem to focus on these things, forgetting the example of Jesus' life was one of selfless service to humanity. It is that kind of "This World is not my Home" mentality that often prevents Christianity from making much of a difference in our world. Not much seems to have changed, but the time the *Apostolorum* was written (mid- to late-second century) was not a time of peace and security in the church. There will justifiable concerns about Christian commitment in the face of severe persecution. We may not be burned at the stake or fed to hungry lions, but subtle forms of persecution against genuine Christianity are rising in our country. Perhaps the years ahead will be a proving of us.

Peter to Philip [Link to full text at <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/letpet.html>]

This document is really a letter, but it opens with a chiding correspondence from Simon Peter to his fellow apostle, Philip. In it, Peter pointedly tells Philip that the apostles have "received orders from our Lord" on how to organize their evangelistic efforts. Peter comments that Philip "did not desire us to come together," but he gives no hints for the reason. The New Testament doesn't give us much of a picture of Philip. We know that he readily answered Christ's call and that he was enthusiastic enough to immediately invite his friend, Nathanael (John 1:43-46). From his interaction with Nathanael, we get the impression of a mild-mannered, plain-spoken man. When Nathanael reveals his prejudice by asking, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" Philip does not take exception or argue, he simply says, "*Come and see*" (John 1:46).

We encounter Philip again at the feeding of the large crowd in John 6. Jesus asks Philip, "*Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?*" (v. 5). Philip reveals a practical side by answering, "*two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little*" (v. 7). Presumably, Philip felt a bit foolish a short time later as he witnessed Jesus feeding thousands on five barley loaves and two fish. Later, early in the Passion week in Jerusalem, a group of Greeks approaches Philip with the request to meet Jesus. Philip does not question what Greeks would want with Jesus (remember, this is before the apostles understood that the gospel was for both Jews and Gentiles); he simply relays the request to Andrew and together they approach Jesus (John 12:20-22). Our final glimpse of Philip comes during the Passover meal. Jesus has dispatched Judas Iscariot, and the confused disciples ask him a series of questions. In an answer to Thomas, Jesus has just said, "*If you had known me, you would have known my Father also*" (John 14:7), and Philip displays a startling lack of comprehension (or maybe he just wasn't listening carefully). "*Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us*", he says (14:8). You can almost see Jesus shaking his head sadly at Philip's comment. "*Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?*" Jesus laments. "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'*"

None of this, however, gives us any insight into why a later writer would so disparage Philip as to portray him as uncooperative with the other apostles. In fact, it seems entirely out of character. But I suppose that's the way it is with careless fiction. At any rate, Philip apparently had a change of heart since the *Letter of Peter to Philip* reports that "he went to Peter rejoicing with gladness."

The remainder of this work is pure Gnostic nonsense describing yet another post-resurrection conversation between Jesus and his followers in which Jesus reveals the hidden secrets of the universe. They ask, "How are we detained in this dwelling place?" referring to the Gnostic belief that our true natures as spirit, godlike beings, is currently entrapped in the flesh by the evil creator god. Jesus, the representative of the great supreme God, is the purveyor of teaching that allows us to escape this prison through self-knowledge. At the end of the book, Peter reveals a docetic truth, saying that "Jesus is a stranger to this suffering (experienced at the crucifixion)". In other words, Jesus only *seemed* to suffer, the classic docetic (Greek, "*to seem*") argument. Finally, he says "we are the ones who have suffered through the transgression of the mother," an incomprehensible comment until one understands that the Gnostics believed in a naive goddess who separated from the supreme God and sought to reproduce, only to create the evil creator god who enslaved humanity.

The Epistle of Barnabas [Link to full text at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/barnabas-roberts.html>]

[Quotes in this section are from "The Epistle of Barnabas" in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Michael W. Holmes (ed), Baker Books, 1999]

The *Epistle of Barnabas* isn't really apocryphal (hidden) since it has long occupied a place of considerable veneration in the church, and some considered it canonical. Given his close association with Paul, and his own role as an apostle (Acts 14:14), in fact, it is somewhat surprising that it isn't part of our New Testament. It was accepted by such early church leaders as Clement of Alexandria and Didymus the Blind, but Eusebius lists the *Epistle of Barnabas*, along with the *Acts of Paul*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and the *Didache* (all very popular in their day) as "rejected writings" (III.25); that is, they are not part of the New

Testament. Apparently, there were those who disagreed since the *Epistle of Barnabas* is included in the Codex Sinaiticus, one of the oldest Bible manuscripts. I commend a full reading (although the linked text is somewhat dated) since *Barnabas* is one of the few non-canonical works that approaches the beauty of the New Testament books, although some of the allegorical conclusions stretch the imagination.

The *Epistle of Barnabas* is a letter in form only, being primarily an essay employing an allegorical interpretation of Scripture (the Old Testament). Because of this, many scholars believe *Barnabas* was written in Alexandria (*ET&N* 60), when allegory flourished throughout the early centuries of the church. The association with the New Testament *Barnabas* is a tradition that is highly unlikely since the interpretations it advances come from the post-apostolic period. Furthermore, it seems to have been written at a time when Christian-Jewish tensions were high. Scholars generally date the work to sometime in the very late first century or the first third of the second century.

The contents of the letter, after the brief greetings to unnamed "sons and daughters," serves primarily to demonstrate that Christians are now the rightful heirs of God's covenant, the Jews having lost it through idolatry (4:8), disobedience (14:1), and ignorance of the true (allegorical) meaning of Scripture. The writer of *Barnabas* says, "...they (the Jews) were not worthy to receive (the covenant) because of their sins" (14:1).

The author opens his (or her) instruction by saying "there are three basic doctrines of the Lord: the hope of life..., righteousness..., and love shown in gladness and rejoicing..." (1:6). He sprinkles in concerns about working out one's salvation (see also Philippians 2:12). He says, for example, "we ought to give very careful attention to our salvation..." (2:10), "do not be like certain people (he's referring to the Jews)...(who claim) that your covenant is irrevocably yours" (4:6), and "Let us never fall asleep in our sins, as if being 'called' was an excuse to rest" (4:13) He is also concerned with Christianity as community, warning, "Do not withdraw within yourselves and live alone, as though you were already justified, but gather together and seek out together the common good" (4:10).

From chapters two through seventeen, the author outlines the case for Christianity (and against Judaism), offering the Christian interpretation of major Jewish beliefs and practices. He focuses on Isaiah 58:6-10 in Septuagint (LXX) version to explain true **fasting**: "'Behold, this is the fast I have chosen,' says the Lord: 'Break every unjust bond, untie the knots of forced agreements, set free those who are oppressed, and tear up every unjust contract. Share you bread with the hungry, and if you see someone naked, clothe him, bring the homeless into your house, and if you see someone of lowly status, do not despise him..." (3:3-4).

He presents the Jewish **sacrificial system** as a foreshadowing or type of Christ, perhaps the first to do so overtly. For example, he compares Jesus to a sacrificial heifer:

"Now what type do you think was intended, when he commanded Israel that the men whose sins are complete should offer a heifer, and slaughter and burn it, and then the children should take the ashes and place them in containers, and tie the scarlet wool around a tree (observe again the type of the cross and the scarlet wool), and the hyssop, and then the children should sprinkle the people

one by one, in order that they may be purified from their sins? Grasp how plainly he is speaking to you: the calf is Jesus, the sinful men who offer it are those who brought him to the slaughter. Then the men are no more; no more is the glory of sinners. The children who sprinkle are those who preached to us the good news about the forgiveness of sins and the purification of the heart, those to whom he gave the authority to proclaim the gospel; there were twelve of them as a witness to the tribes, because there are twelve tribes of Israel. And why are three children who sprinkle? As a witness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because these men were great in God's sight. And then there is the matter of the wool on the tree: this signifies that the kingdom of Jesus is on the tree, and that those who hope in him will live forever" (8:1-5)

Interestingly, the *Barnabas* author describes **circumcision** as being of the ears, through which God touches our hearts. He cites a number of passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah that mentions ears or hearing (e.g., Isaiah 1:10; 33:13; Jeremiah 4:4; [7:2-3](#)) and concludes, "In short, he circumcised our ears in order that when we hear the word we might believe" (9:4a). He then announces that circumcision of the foreskin "has been abolished" because it was "not a matter of the flesh (9:4b)," but according to this writer, the Jews were deceived (he writes, sarcastically, "enlightened") by "an evil angel." He portrays circumcision as a foreshadow of Jesus in a strange "Bible code," combining Genesis 14:14 and Genesis 17:23 to conclude that Abraham circumcised 318 men. He then extracts the components parts of that number - 8, 10, and 300 - and applies the numeric values of each - I, H, and T, respectively. In IH, he says, "you have 'Jesus' because IH are the first two letters of the Greek form of Jesus (IHΣΟΥΣ). The T is the shape of the cross. "So," the author writes, "(God) reveals Jesus in the two letters, and the cross in the other one..." (9:8), adding, "No one has ever learned from me a more reliable word..." (9:9). When it comes to imaginative interpretations of spiritual texts, Dan Brown has nothing on this guy!

In the strangest allegory, the *Barnabas* writer claims that "it is not God's commandment that they should not eat (forbidden foods)" (10:2). Instead, the Jewish **food laws** were also meant allegorically - men like swine, eagles, eels, hares, or hyenas (the source for that is unknown, perhaps an LXX translation error). The Jews, who misunderstood the meaning, and now the Christians to whom he is revealing it, are not to associate with men who, "when they are well off, forget the Lord, but when they are in need, they acknowledge the Lord, just as the swine ignores its owner when it is not feeding, but when it is hungry it starts to squeal..." (10:3). The eagle, hawk, kite, and crow represent men who don't provide for themselves by labor but "lawlessly plunder other people's property" (10:4). The sea eel, octopus, or cuttlefish (bottom-dwellers) represent "men who are utterly wicked and are already condemned to death, just as these fish alone are cursed and swim in the depths..." (10:5). The hare represents men "who corrupt boys," claiming that the hare "grows another opening every year" (10:6). The hyena represents adulterers or seducers. While the *Epistle of Barnabas* includes some wonderful scripture-like passages, it's probably become easy for you see to why it failed the test of canonicity! Furthermore, in a rather haughty statement more than a little reminiscent of many modern theologians absolutely certain of their personal interpretations of Scripture, the *Barnabas* writer concludes, "How could those people (the Jews again) grasp or understand these things? But we, however, having rightly understood the commandments, explain them as the Lord intended" (10:12)

In closing the first part of the book, the author eloquently explains the indwelling nature of God's **temple**, concluding, "God truly dwells in our dwelling-place - that is, in us" (16:8).

The final section of the *Epistle of Barnabas* (chapter 18 through 20) turns to instructions for living, echoing the teachings of both Jesus and Paul, emphasizing love of God, fear of God, and glorifying God. There follow a number of admonitions: don't exalt yourself, but be humble; don't claim glory; don't "hatch evil plots;" don't be arrogant, sexually promiscuous, adulterous, double-minded, divisive, or partial. He also includes admonitions against corrupting boys (but doesn't mention girls), abortion, and infanticide. He warns against associating "with the lofty." Finally, he commends cheerful charity, good stewardship, and confession. It is important to note, however, that the author appears to have a grasp of grace that escaped the legalists then, as it does now: "...the new law of our Lord Jesus Christ," he writes early in the letter, "...is free from the yoke of compulsion" (2:6). The behavior he commends springs not from Law, but from gratitude.

One final feature of the letter is worth mentioning. While the author aims primarily at the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, he also appears to counter the Gnostic thought that was beginning to infiltrate Christianity in his time. Whereas the Gnostics claimed Jesus revealed "secret knowledge" (gnosis), for example, this writer states boldly that Jesus "has both made known to us the past and given us wisdom in the present circumstance, and with regard to the future events we are not without understanding" (5:3). He also opposes docetic thought: "For if (Jesus) had not come in the flesh, men could in no way have been saved by looking at him" (5:10).

Pliny the Younger [Link to full text at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/pliny.html>]

Caius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (62-ca 115) was a Roman senator who served as governor of Bithynia (northwestern Turkey) during the reign of Emperor Trajan (98-117). Usually referred to as Pliny the Younger to distinguish him from his uncle, Pliny the elder (a natural philosopher who wrote an early encyclopedias), he is best known for a collection of letters. His letters are not Christian documents, but one of them is one of the earliest non-Christian evidences on the beliefs and practices of ancient Christianity and, more importantly, the official Roman attitude toward its adherents. When Pliny went to Bithynia, he confronted a problem he had encountered apparently only peripherally in the past - the legal status of Christians - and wrote to Trajan to confirm his process.



Pliny the Younger

Pliny, a reasonable man attempting to act justly within the Roman definition of justice, admits to Trajan that he is unfamiliar with the standard procedures in examining Christians, so he solicits the emperor, writing "no one is better able to resolve my doubts and to inform my ignorance." About forty years later, Justin Martyr (*ET&N* 73) challenged the prevalent Roman notion that being a Christian merited punishment, but Pliny asks Trajan "whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime."

Apparently, there was a lot of name-calling going on in Bithynia, including anonymous charges of being Christian. Wanting to give the people ample opportunity to clear themselves, Pliny personally interrogated the accused and would ask three times if he or she was indeed a Christian, the last time accompanied by the threat of punishment. Those who maintained their profession of faith in Christ were deemed to be convicted of this crime and were "led away for execution." Pliny admits that he could usually find no other crime associated with being Christian, but insists that he is "convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished."

Pliny's letter also gives us a glimpse of early Christian practices, for he writes that recanting Christians "declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god [clear evidence of the early belief in Jesus' divinity], and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind [a reference either to the Eucharist (*ET&N* 76) or the "agape meal"]..." It is interesting that Pliny labels Christianity a "political society," probably because, like genuinely seditious gatherings, Christians met secretly at night.

Seeking more information, Pliny tells Trajan that he tortured "two slave-women, whom they call deaconesses." He does not report anything specific that he learned from these women but labels Christianity "a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths." In his reply, Trajan affirms Pliny's actions, although he prohibits active hunting for Christians and decries anonymous accusations as "quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age."

What is most remarkable about this correspondence is the matter-of-fact tone that presumes Christian guilt and maintains the punishment, even execution, of Christians is a just and reasonable response, even if no specific criminal behavior is identified. Being a Christian was simply a crime against society. Obviously, the execution of Christians would be contrary to the "spirit of *our* age," but conservative Christians are now sometimes accused of violating the social "law" of tolerance because we believe, in opposition to rampant relativism, that absolute truth exists. This insistence, with its rejection of any validity in non-Christian religions is increasingly approaching criminal, or at least anti-social, status. There is ample reason to believe that this trend will continue.

Gaul to Asia [Link to full text at http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-08/anf08-176.htm#P12550_3649698]

No names of the victims of Pliny's trials have come down to us, but the veneration of martyrs became a significant feature of early church lore. Such stories as Nero's tortures following the Great Fire of Rome (64) and the executions of Ignatius (Rome, ca 115), Polycarp (Smyrna, 155) - both subjects of future installments in the *ET&N* Early Church Fathers series -, Justin Martyr (Rome, ca 165), and Perpetua and Felicitas (*ET&N* 65) in Carthage (202) may create the impression that persecution of Christians was a common event throughout the Roman Empire, but this was not really the case. Rather, persecutions were generally sporadic and localized, at least until Emperor Decius in 250. The Romans generally had a tendency to believe that

killing off leaders would destroy a group, so they focused primarily on bishops. Yet there were isolated outbreaks of severe persecution, and one in 177 in the Roman province of Gaul (modern France) is fully described in a letter preserved by Eusebius.

The letter, composed by unnamed Lyons survivors is addressed to "brethren throughout Asia and Phrygia," presumably as a testament to the steadfast faith of the martyrs, a source of encouragement to other Christians, and a report on the fate of an Asian and a Phrygian in Gaul. It describes in considerable details, even though the writer(s) say all the persecutions could not possibly be recorded. The letter gives no hint of the source of this sudden, violent incident but testifies to the fury of lawless mobs. Trajan's ban on seeking out Christians (see Pliny above) was obviously no longer the spirit of this time under Marcus Aurelius since Christians were hunted and seized. Even the servants of Christians were jailed under orders from the governor. The rights of Roman citizens to execution by beheading, while acknowledged, were violated in at least one case.

These servants falsely accused their Christian masters of horrendous crimes that may relate to the antecedent cause of the persecution. Christian practices such as the Eucharist and brotherly love were sometimes misconstrued as cannibalism and incest. This seems to be the case here, as the Christians are accused of "Thyestean banquets and Oedipodean connections." A Thyestean banquet refers to the Greek legend of Thyestes, whose brother killed his sons and served them to him, while Oedipodean connections refers to incest. Whatever the cause, the persecutions began as exclusions of Christians from public places, proceeded to a "universal prohibition...against any one of us appearing in any place whatsoever, then to "clamors and blows and draggings and robberies and stonings." Finally, Christians were hauled in to the local forum, perfunctorily examined, and imprisoned, to await the judgment of the governor.

Beside these general descriptions of the events, the names of a number of noteworthy saints are preserved in the letter:

Vettius Epagathus, a "man of distinction" (apparently a leading citizen, probably a lawyer) who, indignant at the false charges, insisted on personally representing Christians. In a scene identical to Pliny's procedures, the governor refused to hear him and "merely asked if he also were a Christian." When Vettius confessed, he was arrested and apparently executed.



Icon of Sanctus, Pothinus, and Blandina of Lyons

Sanctus, a deacon of the church in Vienne (about thirty miles south of Lyons on the Rhone River) whose practice of answering every question posed to him with "I am a Christian" in Latin, may certainly have reinforced the image that Christians were "obstinate." He suffers excruciating tortures for his faith, finally having red hot brass plates applied to the most sensitive parts of his body. A few days later, his wounds still enormously tender to the touch, his tormenters apply the plates to the same spots. The letter writers, however, testify that this second torture actually restored him. Eventually, he is taken to the amphitheater, where he is forced to run the gauntlet before being mauled by wild animals. They follow this by placing him in an iron chair heated by fire where his body is literally roasted. Finally, additional nameless tortures are

applied before he dies. Throughout this, the only words heard from him continue to be "I am a Christian."

Attalus, another "person of distinction" and "a native of Pergamum (in Asia, now northwest Turkey) where he had always been a pillar and foundation." He was taken to the amphitheater with Sanctus, but when it is revealed that he is a Roman citizen, the governor orders him back to the prison with other citizens. The governor had written to Marcus Aurelius about these citizen Christians and was awaiting a reply. We aren't told whether or not the governor got his answer, but some time later, we learn that "to please the people, the governor had ordered Attalus again to the wild beasts," in violation of Roman law. After other tortures, he is placed on the hot iron seat where, as "fumes arose from his burning body," Attalus calls out, "Lo! this which ye do is devouring men; but we do not devour men; nor do any wicked thing." When asked the name of his God, he answers, "God has not a name as man has," after which he dies.

Pothinus, the ninety-plus year old bishop of Lyons, ill and barely able to breath, is dragged to the judgment seat and condemned. He never reaches the amphitheater, however; being beaten senseless by the mob, he dies in prison two days later.

Alexander, a Phrygian physician and a man "well known to all on account of his love to God..." was not initially arrested, but when he shows up near the judgment seat, encouraging the wavering to hold to their faith, he too is arrested. The next day, he joins Attalus in the amphitheater, where he dies during the tortures having neither "groaned nor murmured in any manner."

The major hero of the story is **Blandina**, a frail, sickly servant-woman who definitively displays that courage and fortitude have no gender barriers. On the day Sanctus dies in the amphitheater, she too is led in, where she is tied to a stake to be consumed by the wild beasts. The sight of her "as if hanging on a cross," saying "earnest prayers" reminds the other Christians present of Christ's sacrifice and encourages them to remain firm in their faith. When the beasts do not touch her, she is returned to the prison where she is joined by a fifteen-year boy, Porticus. Throughout the ensuing days, they are returned to the arena and forced to witness the torture of their brothers and sisters. Finally, on the last day of the "contests," as the apparent main event, they re-enter the amphitheater, where they endure "the entire round of torture" as they are being urged to swear to idols. Mercifully, Porticus seems to have died fairly quickly, but Blandina hangs on. "After the scourging," (from which women were supposed to be exempted) "after the wild beasts, after the roasting seat," the obviously-exasperated torturers enclose her in a net and throw her to a bull that batters her to death. The letter-writers reserved their highest praise for Blandina, perhaps because she endured so much more than they thought a woman could. They refer to her as "a noble mother (who) encouraged her children and sent them before her victorious to the King."

You would think that all this torture would have satisfied the mob's bloodlust, but they denigrate the remains of the sacrificed Christians, hurling insults and preventing the remaining Christians from retrieving the bodies for burial. Thinking they are denying the dead their hoped-for resurrection, a military unit guards the remains for six days, at which time they are gathered up, burned to ashes, and swept into the Rhone.

One additional major theme of the letter concerns those who were *not* steadfast in their faith. While the letter writer(s) refer to Christians who deny their faith as "abortions," there is no evidence that the faithful condemned their weaker brethren. In the end result, this was probably important because had the faithful rejected the weak, they probably would have been further distanced. In Lyons, all of those who initially denied being Christians under the threat of punishment apparently eventually returned to the flock. Part of this was undoubtedly because the city officials still threw these lapsed Christians into jail and tortured them, hoping to "get the goods" on the obstinate, but the response of those who suffered undoubtedly played an even larger role. When the lapsed Christians began to see what they were really discarding, they were joyously welcomed back. When they then again faced torture, they held true to their confession.

It is difficult to understand how the practices of these early Christians could so infuriate what were probably otherwise-decent people. It seems that prior to this incident the local pagans got along well with their Christian colleagues. The letter suggests that before the false accusations (cannibalism and incest) of the servants, some pagan residents of Lyons had been "moderate on account of friendship." The incident in Lyons, which is believed to have resulted in the death of forty to fifty Christians, is not only a testament to religious intolerance but also to mob mentality. It shows that it may not take much to change feelings of discomfort about other people to murderous madness. The Lyons writer(s) ascribe the source of the insanity to Satan himself and perhaps he did play a direct role, but the inhumanity of Man to his fellow Man is more than sufficiently established not to be surprised by actions such as these. Such behavior neither started nor ended in Lyons in 177.

In 177, the church was still a relatively small culturally minority, and in attempting to defend Christians against an accusation in name only, Vettius Epagathus was essentially calling for amnesty from the charge, as Justin Martyr had a few years earlier. While it may be stretching a point a bit, I am mindful of the current controversy about "illegal" or "undocumented" aliens in America. I won't attempt to force the correlation here, but you might want to think about it. It seems that some of the most vociferous opponents of mercy toward people who, for the most part, are productive members of our society, also call themselves Christians. The Romans considered Christians criminals apart from any specific crime committed. Can the same be said of these aliens?

Letter to Diognetus [Link to full text at

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-roberts.html>]

[Quotes in this section are from "The Epistle to Diognetus" in Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*.]

The final letter under consideration here is the most eloquent of the group, although the epistolary format is probably simply a device for what is really an apology. Its author and date have been the subject of some speculation. The work is sometimes referred to as "The Letter of Mathetes to Diognetus" because the writer calls himself a "disciple (Greek, μαθητής, mathetes) of the apostles" (11:1). For the sake of convenience, I'm adopting "Mathetes" as the author's name. When it was first published in 1592, it was attributed to Justin Martyr, but even a cursory comparison of his *Apology* to this work precludes that attestation. Mathetes is far more skilled in both his use of language and the logical flow of his argument. Other suggestions have included Apollos, Clement of Rome, Pantænus of Alexandria, Hippolytus of Rome, and Theophilus of Antioch, but, as Holmes notes, one plausible author is Quadratus who, according to Eusebius, wrote an apology to Emperor Hadrian (117-

138) which furnished "clear proofs of the man's understanding and of his apostolic orthodox" (Eusebius, *Church History*, IV.3). The only known text of the *Letter to Diognetus* came from the thirteenth or fourteenth century, but it was lost in 1870 when the Strasbourg library was destroyed during the Franco-Prussian War. Scholars generally date the work in the broad range of 117 to 313, but this too is speculative since no other ancient writer cites the work.

In the letter, Mathetes addresses four paramount questions about Christians related to some of the most common misconceptions pagans held

Questions (from 1:1)	Misconceptions
"What God do they believe in?"	Christians were thought to be "atheists" because they refused to worship the traditional Roman gods and the emperor.
"How do they worship him?"	The Eucharist (<i>ET&N</i> 36) was misunderstood as the literal eating of flesh, creating suspicion of cannibalism and infant sacrifices.
"What is the nature of the heartfelt love they have for one another?"	The familial relationships between Christian "brothers and sisters" led to charges of incest.
"Why has this new race of men or way of life come into the world we live in now and not before?"	Romans revered the ancient and distrusted innovation. New groups were suspected of seditious intentions.

What God do they believe in?

Mathetes first brushes aside pagan idols by pointing out that they are mere artifacts created by craftsmen out of materials that could just have easily been formed into everyday objects. He then tells Diognetus that Christians worship "the omnipotent Creator of all, the invisible Go himself..." who revealed Himself through His Son, "The Designer and Creator of the universe himself, by whom he created the heavens, by whom he enclosed the sea within it proper bounds, whose mysteries all the elements faithfully observe, from whom the sun has received the measure of the daily course to keep, whom the moon obeys as he commands it to shine by night, whom the stars obey as they follow the course of the moon, by whom all things have been ordered and determined and placed in subjection, including the heavens and the things in the heavens, the earth and the things in the earth, the sea and the things in the sea, fire, air, abyss, the things in the heights, the things in the depths, the things in between..." (7:2)

How do they worship him?

Christianity was initially viewed as, and to some degree operated as, a sect of Judaism. Beginning shortly after the apostolic period, however, many Christian writers sought to separate Christianity from Judaism, so Mathetes contrasts Christian worship with the Jewish sacrifices, feasts, Sabbath observance, circumcision, and food

laws, which he collectively calls "ridiculous." Of paganism and Judaism, he says, "(pagans) make offerings to things unable to receive the honor, while (Jews) think they offer it to the One who is in need of nothing" (3:5). He claims that both of these are the inventions of men and that Christian worship is not something anyone "can expect to be able to learn...from man" (4:6). He writes that Christian faith is the result first of "full knowledge of the Father" (10:1), which leads to devotion to Him, and then to the desire to be an "imitator of God" by taking on one's neighbor's burden, "benefit(ing) another who is worse off," and "provid(ing) to those in need."

What is the nature of the heartfelt love they have for one another?

In his most eloquent passage, Mathetes does not address the false charges against Christians, but rather describes the Christian life in contrast to the rest of the world:

(Christians) marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food, but not their wives. They are "in the flesh," but they do not live "according to the flesh." They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, indeed in their private lives they transcend the laws. They are unknown, yet they are condemned; they are put to death, yet they are brought to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in need of everything, yet they abound in everything. They are dishonored, yet they are glorified in their dishonor; they are slandered, yet they are vindicated. They are cursed, yet they bless; they are insulted, yet they offer respect. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when they are punished, they rejoice as though brought to life...In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world (5:6-16; 6:1)

Why has this new race of men or way of life come into the world we live in now and not before?

Mathetes writes that Christianity is not new; rather, it was God's plan from the beginning. In His love and patience, He allowed a "season of unrighteousness" during which "he seemed to neglect and be unconcerned about us" (8:10) to "clearly demonstrate our inability to enter the kingdom of God on our own" (9:1). Then, at the time He planned, He "revealed himself through faith" (8:6) by sending "his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, 'the just for the unjust,' the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal" (9:2). In doing so, God allowed humanity "to see and understand things which none of us ever would have expected" (8:11). Later, in a section many scholars believe to be part of a different work, the *Letter to Diognetus* concludes, "This is who he was from the beginning, who appeared as new yet proved to be old, and is always young as he is born in the hearts of saints" (11:4).

Mathetes boldly states that if Diognetus would only "clear (his) mind of all its prejudices...and become a new man" (2:1), he will see the truth revealed in Christianity. Like Tertullian, who wrote that "the blood of martyrs is seed," Mathetes notes that "the more of (Christians) are punished, the more others increase? These things do not look like the works of man; they are the power of God, they are proofs of his presence" (7:7-8).

The writer of the *Letter to Diognetus* certainly appears to be a student of Paul, and his eloquence frequently approaches that of the apostle. This simple but powerful defense of Christian belief and practice in the face of a hostile world deserves a place of honor alongside Christian Scripture, not only as a persuasive argument to a lost world, but perhaps even more as a poignant reminder to a frequently-errant church of the ancient faith that turned the world upside down (see Acts 17:6).

Discussion

Comments posted on the [ET&N](http://blog.peculiarpress.com) blog at blog.peculiarpress.com [Almost nobody is using the blog yet, but I hope that changes. The weblog is a better medium for interactive responses.]

E-Mail replies

From Janice in Ohio:

Thanks for sharing the letter about the church in Gaul. It is encouraging to see that even in a man-dominated world, the faith and bravery of Christian women was celebrated and preserved. Blandina goes on my list of heroines!



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Paul's Co-workers: Demas (July 11)

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