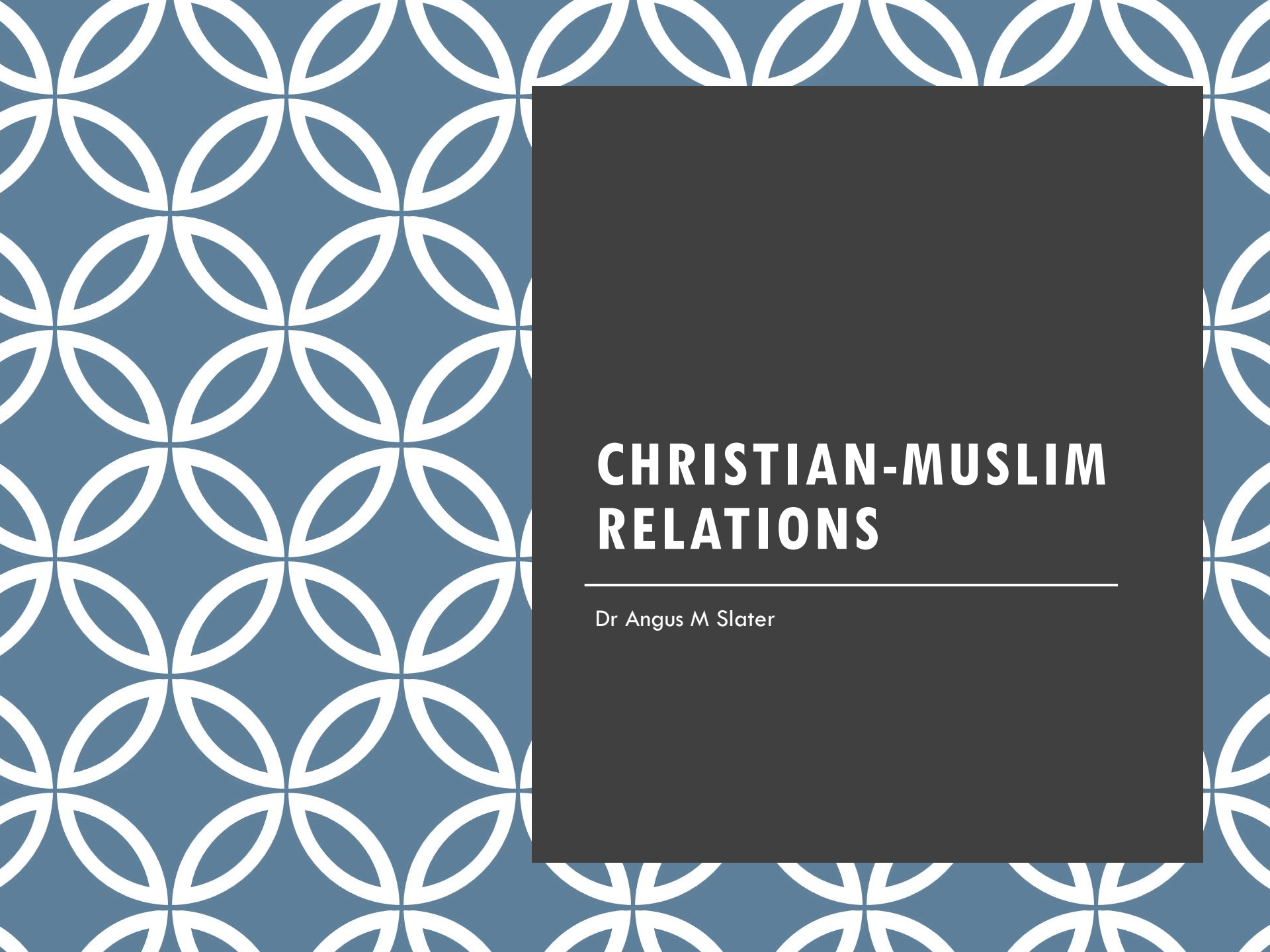




CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Dr Angus M Slater

HISTORICAL THEMES

We begin this section of the course by seeking to understand the historical bases of the relationship between the traditions of Christianity and Islam – the various ways in which their historical interactions have occurred and how they have continued to influence their ongoing relationship today.

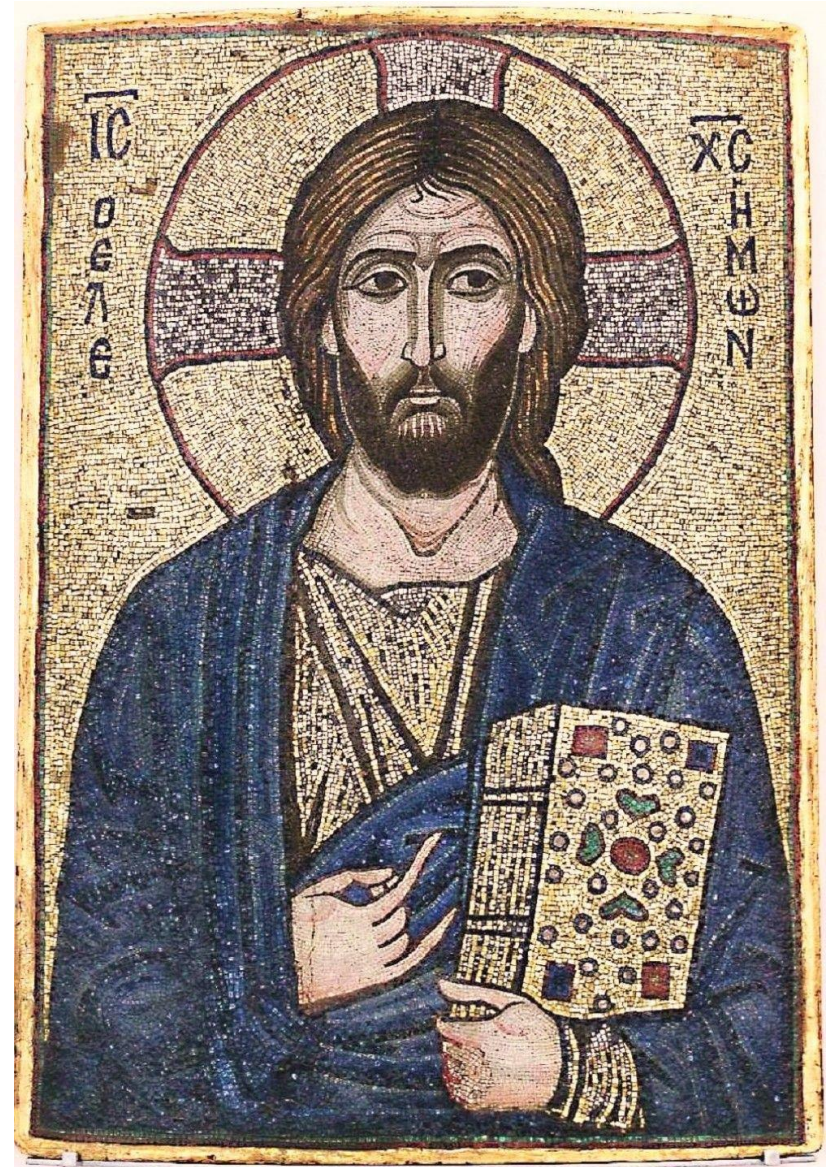
Obviously, this historical preview can only be shallow, hitting only the key aspects of a long and incredibly geographically and culturally diverse history.



HISTORICAL THEMES

This section undertakes to examine five key historical time periods:

1. The period of time between the birth of Christianity and the birth of Islam
2. The beginning of Islam and its relationship with Christianity
3. The period of Islamic Expansion and sustained contact
4. The Crusades and Medieval transmission of knowledge
5. The impact of Empire and colonialism



THE CHRISTIANITY
BEFORE ISLAM
(33AD-622AD)

CHRISTIANITY BEFORE ISLAM

As ever, when beginning to look at the relationship between two things, it is difficult to know where to begin – where can we learn the most about the later relationship of Christianity and Islam from?

In this section, we begin before Christianity and Islam have a relationship, in order to give us a sufficient grounding in the precursor state that forms the initial structure of inter-religious relations between these two traditions.

We begin in the years between the beginning of Christianity (30/33AD) and the beginning of Islam (622AD) – a span of almost 600 years.

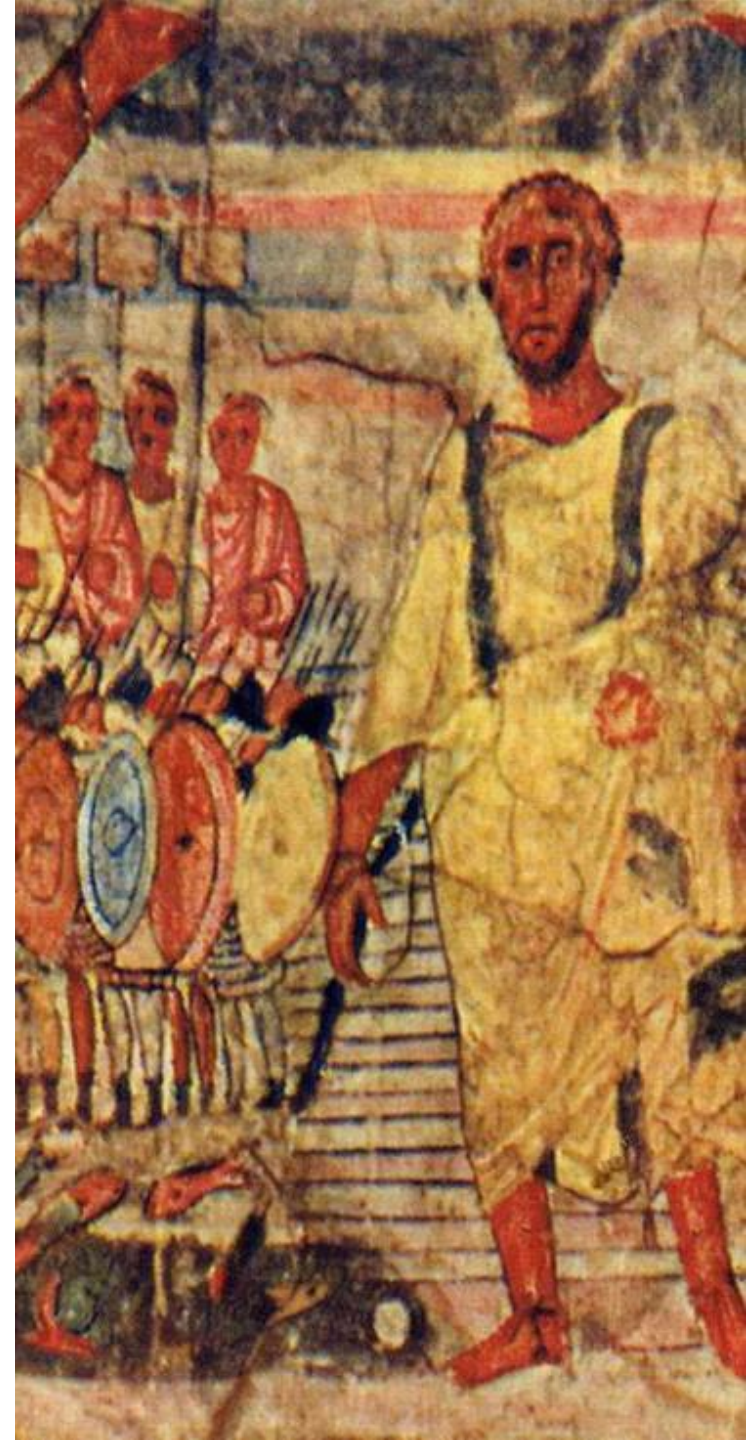


THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH BEFORE ISLAM

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH BEFORE ISLAM

Following the death of Christ in 30/33AD, the fledgling Christian community had experienced a number of decades of exceptional turmoil, as they began a process of differentiation from the Jewish tradition from which it had emerged.

This process resulted in a complicated relationship not only with the Jewish tradition (to which we will return later) but also with the main governing state present around the Mediterranean at the time – the Roman Empire.



EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The roots of what will come to be known as the Christian tradition lie in Judaism, with additions from the teachings of John the Baptist, the teachings of Jesus, and the recording of these teachings by the apostles.

The earliest converts to the nascent Christianity community came from within the Jewish community, and those converts largely saw themselves as continuing to be members of that Jewish community.

These earliest Christians wished to be considered Jews, as by doing so, they maintained a religious position in the Jewish community, and a state position within the Roman Empire, where Judaism was officially recognised and brought with it certain privileges.



A NEW DIRECTION

After Jewish revolts of 66-70AD and during the reigns of the Emperors Trajan and Hadrian, Christians began to emphasize their separateness from the Jewish community from which they had emerged.

This arose because Christian leaders, prominently supported by St Paul, had decided that Gentiles (non-Jews) who converted to Christianity did not have to become Jews first, in order to become Christians later.

This was a significant departure on the part of the early Christian community from the Jewish tradition, as that community abided by the strict dietary and social laws of the mosaic code – any divergence from this separated oneself from the Jewish community.

While the Christian community rapidly grew with this decision, particularly among the urban poor and women in the Near East, there were dangers for the community with its relationship with the Roman State being one of persecution.



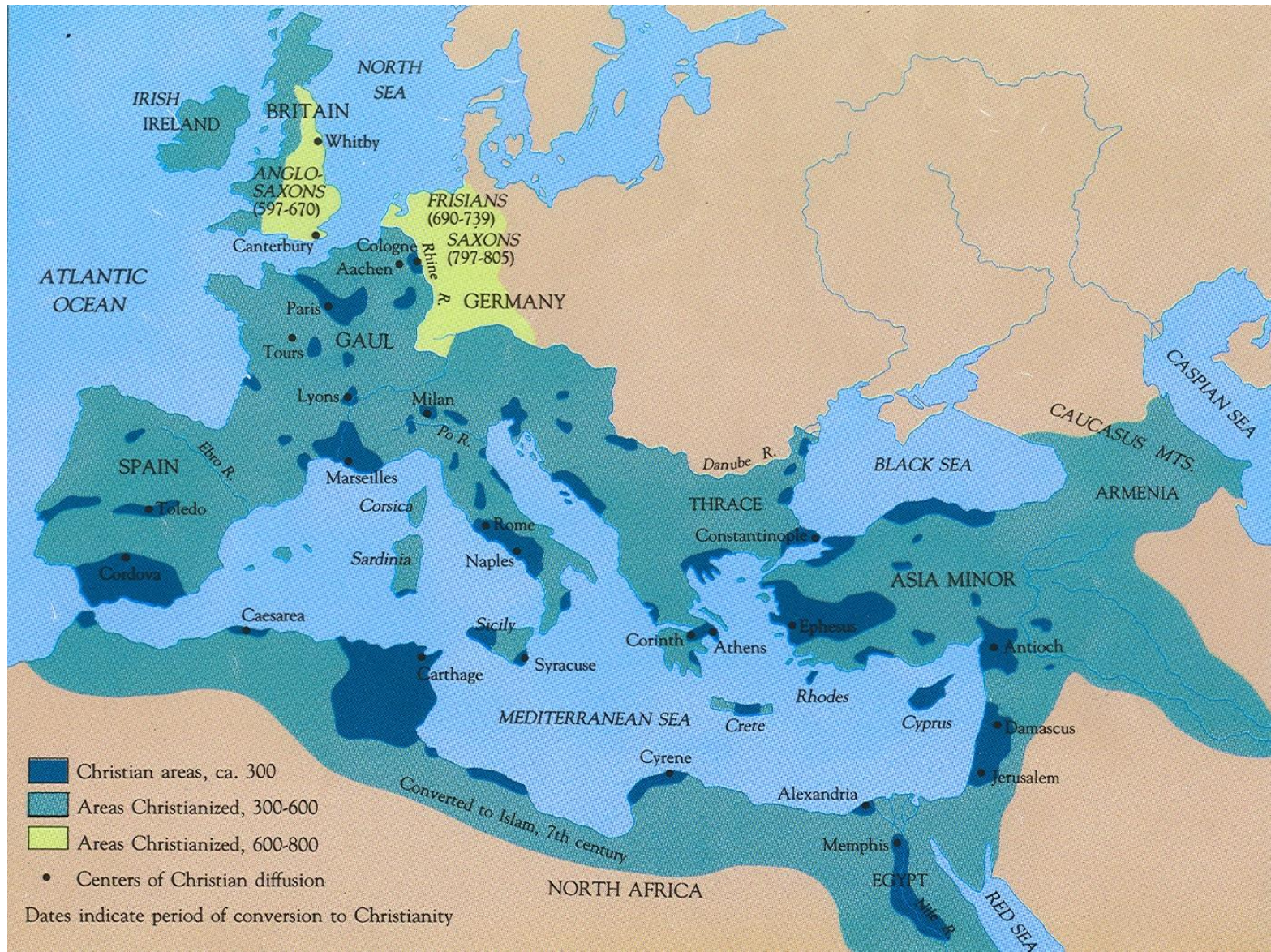
GROWTH

The initial centuries of the Christian community is one of exceptional growth and significant geographical spread throughout the Roman Empire. This was particularly true in Asia Minor and Greece, but later on, western portions of the Empire saw significant Christian communities.

This growth has a number of contributing factors, including the prevalence of similar Hellenistic religious practices in the Mediterranean world at the time e.g. the Cult of Isis, the association of Christianity with an already prevalent religious community, and the style and immediacy of early Christian writings.

In addition, the spread of the early Christian community is strongly influenced by trade across the Mediterranean sea and its attractiveness to those generally marginalized within Roman society – women, urban poor, artisans, and traders.





CULTURAL TENSIONS

This rapid spread of the early Christian community within marginalized communities undoubtedly contributed to its numerical growth, however, it also exposed a number of cultural difficulties for the young religious tradition.

These included a prevailing opinion among the Roman ruling classes that Christianity was a disruptive and lower-class pursuit – Christian writings at this time were largely vernacular in tone and, while attractive to marginalized people, they could not aesthetically compare to the philosophical classics which educated people valorized. An example of this is St Jerome, who confessed that he was at first repelled by Christian writings when compared to Cicero!

In addition, the early Christian community found itself at odds with much of the Roman world – issues like sexual morality, obscenity, materialism, and hedonism were beginning to drive a wedge between the growing Christian community and the pagan Roman world.



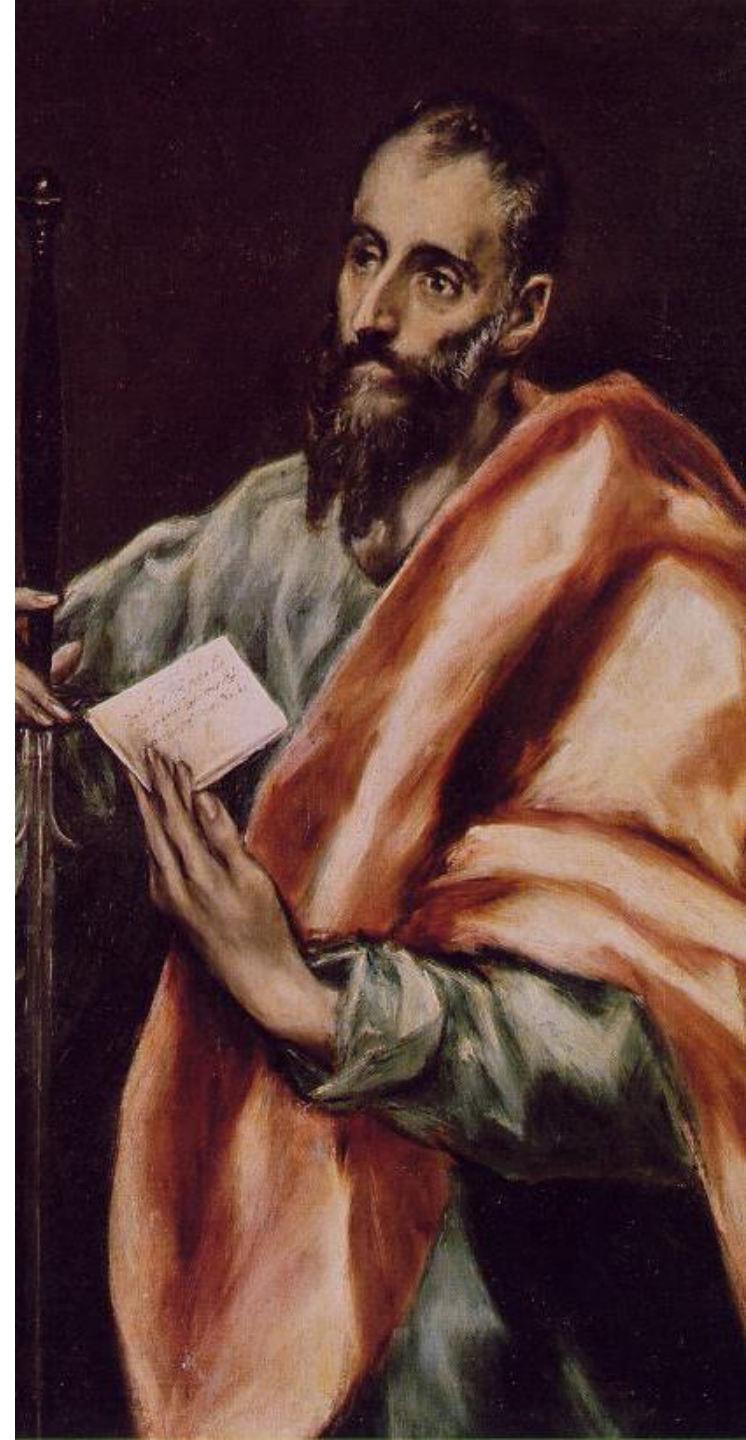
CULTURAL TENSIONS

For many Christian communities, this tension between the Roman world and the Christian life could only be resolved by a retreat into social isolation, or the building of dedicated Christian communities.

Many early Christians, including St. Paul, advocated obedience to imperial and local authorities, however as the Christian community grew and developed its own internal governance, the alienation of the Christian community from the Roman world increased.

This produced a situation where Christians were aliens in an intellectual, cultural, and social sense as they generally came to reject the entire social and cultural foundation of the empire

This rejection of the Empire, from the perspective of the Imperial authorities, was a significant threats to the existing cultural, social, and religious order.



PERSECUTION

The great persecutions of Christians begin in the 3rd century AD, with the Emperor Decius and continued until the death of Emperor Galerius in 311.

The Christian intolerance of pagan beliefs bred powerful retaliatory hatred of Christians – where they were accused of cannibalism, atheism, and of being the source of conflicted loyalties to the Empire.

Pagan intellectuals, such as Celsus and Porphyry, also began to attack Christianity, pointing out inconsistencies, contradictions, and impossibilities.

Christian intellectuals, such as Origen of Alexandria, responded in kind, however this discourse had little impact on Christian growth – people adopted Christianity because they accepted its relatively simple message on an emotional, not an intellectual, level.



PERSECUTION

Emperors like Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelian deplored the ignorance and stubbornness of Christians – and many of the poorer pagan classes associated with presence of Christians with natural disasters, eg. the massacre at Lugdunum

Many of the later military emperors came from the lower classes and believed that the ongoing social and military disasters of the age reflected the anger of the pagan gods at the Christian community.

Beginning with Decius, they felt duty-bound to free the state of what they saw as a sacrilegious, blasphemous, and dangerous group.



CHRISTIAN TOLERATION

However, this period of persecution did not succeed in blunting the growth of the Christian communities across the Roman world – by the time it had an impact, simply too many people from across the social classes had become Christian and were in positions to protect each other.

The period of persecution came to an end at the death of Galerius in 311AD, with Christianity becoming a protected religious tradition with the Edicts of Serdica and Milan.

Constantine, Galerius' successor, is credited with being the first Christian emperor – converting on his deathbed in 337AD, but central to the convocation of the Council of Nicaea in 325AD, where the Nicene Creed was formulated.



CHRISTIAN EMPIRE

In 379AD, Theodosius became the Roman Emperor and proclaimed Christianity as the sole official state religion of the Empire – he hoped to provide a unifying and solid foundation for the increasingly turbulent Empire.

However, the Christian community immediately began to persecute pagans, destroying temples or converted them into churches, and persecuting those who would not convert.

The Church firmed up its organization and settled theological disputes with a powerful intellectual vigor – much early Christian writing stems from this period of intellectual victory.

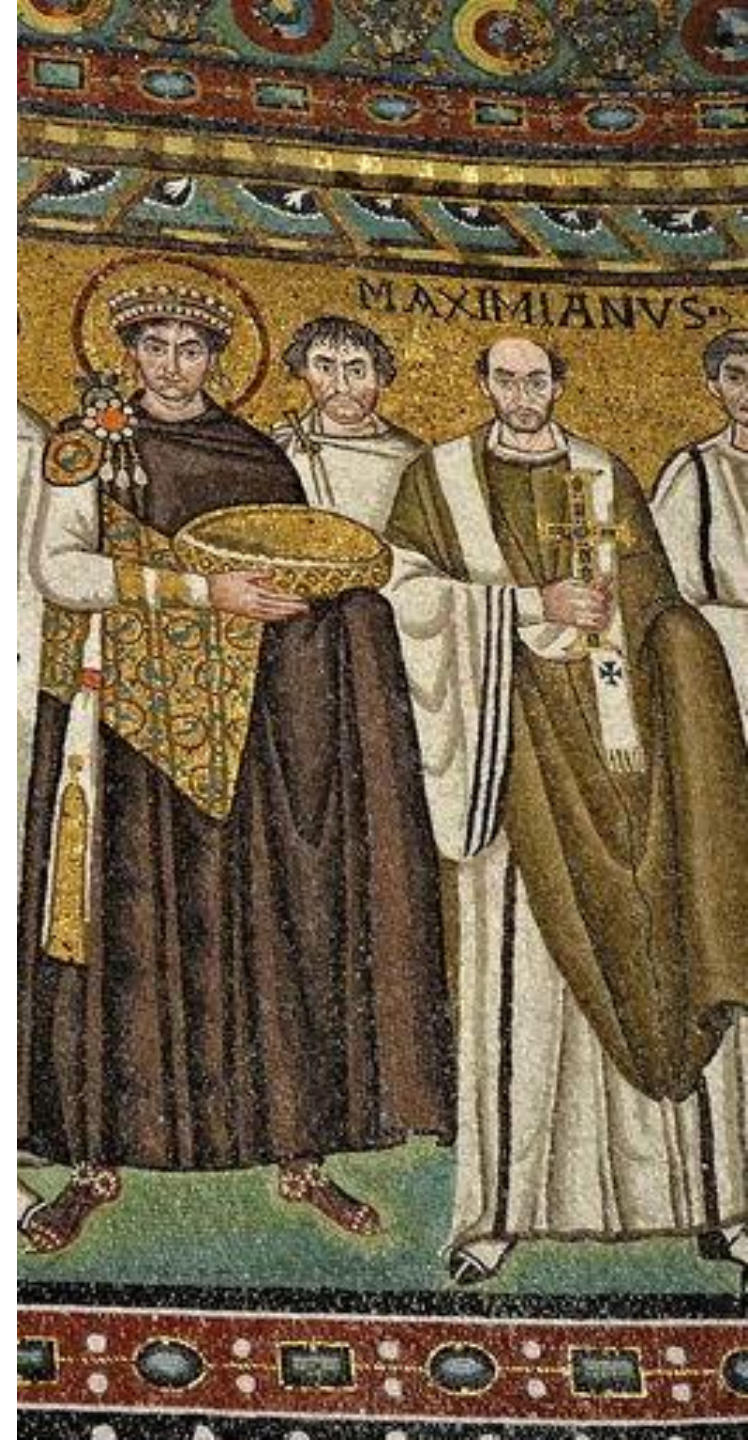
However, on the death of Theodosius, the Roman Empire was split between his sons into the Eastern and Western halves



BYZANTIUM

The split of the Roman Empire into Eastern and Western halves resulted in the significant divergence between the forms of Christianity in each half – Byzantium in the East tending towards a more mystical approach, while the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476AD furthered this split.

These differences between East and West arose from the different cultural, social, and religious contexts in which the differing parts of the Empire existed, and the differing historical events (fall vs. continued existence) that had an impact on them.





DIVISIONS IN 7TH CENTURY

The structural and geographical division of the Christian community into West and East brought about a number of characteristic differences:

Systems of Authority: singular in the West (Rome), plural in the East (Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch)

Focus of faith: In the West, a legal and redemptive framework. In the East, mysticism and deification through ritual

Relationship to the State: In the West, the Church essentially replaced the Empire, while in the East the Empire continues to exist until 1453AD.



DIVERSITY IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

In addition, even within the Eastern Roman Empire, the Christian community was not a cohesive whole – progressive councils through the initial 500 or so years of the Christian community had struggled to define the doctrine of the newly formed community.

In doing so, a great number of different forms of Christian belief were excluded from the 'orthodox' forms of belief – such as Arianism, excluded at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD, Nestorianism, excluded at the Council of Ephesus in 431AD, and Monophysitism, excluded at the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD.

Each of these exclusions further diversified the nature of the Christian community in the Near East, leading to social and religious tensions being prominent enough in the community that it forms the core of later Qur'anic critique – 5:14:

“And with those who say: ‘Lo! We are Christians,’ We made a covenant, but they forgot a part of that whereof they were admonished. Therefore we stirred up enmity and hatred among them til the Day of Resurrection, when Allah will inform them of their handiwork”





ORTHODOXY & HERESY c. 450

ARABIA AND CHRISTIANITY

We turn our attention now to the specific case of Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, in order to understand the religious and cultural milieu in which Islam emerged.

In 500 or so AD, Arabia remained somewhat of a geopolitical backwater, sandwiched between the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires, with little population of its own. Of these people, many were Jewish, Christian, or Pagan in faith, but this faith identity often served as a marker of political alignment either with, or against, the Byzantine Empire on the Arabian frontier.



ARABIA AND CHRISTIANITY

Across the Arabian frontier, differing forms of Christian belief flourished beyond the centralising influence of the Byzantine Empire.

Initial forms of early monasticism grew in the Syrian deserts, forms of monophysitism were strong within Arabia and further south in Yemen and Africa, propagated through the established Arabian trade routes, and Nestorian forms continued to flourish within the Sassanid Empire in Persia.

The forms of Christian belief and practice prevalent in the context of pre-Islamic Arabia were therefore incredibly varied in both belief and in practice, with competition, both religious and political, being the prevalent norm of intra-Christian relation at the time.



EARLY CHRISTIAN THINKING ABOUT OTHER RELIGIONS

EARLY CHRISTIAN THINKING ABOUT OTHER RELIGIONS

This historical and geographical history of the Christian church before the coming of Islam (short as this introduction has been!) is not the only area in which the pre-Islamic form of Christianity has a huge impact on the later relationship to develop between the two traditions.

The Christian tradition, emerging from within the Jewish tradition and into a period of great religious plurality and diversity, had already sought to grapple with the meaning and importance of other religious traditions, as well as how the newly formed Christian tradition should engage with them.

This laid the foundation for the way in which the Christian tradition conceived of the beginning of the Islamic tradition, and still has a distinct influence on the relationship of the Christian tradition to others until today.



EARLY JEWISH / CHRISTIAN THINKING ABOUT OTHER RELIGIONS

As the Christian tradition emerged from the Jewish tradition, it absorbed the distinctive difficulties that the Jewish tradition had had in conceiving of neighbouring religious traditions.

This was a dilemma between:

The universalist understanding of God as present everywhere and open to all, with relationships with Old Testament non-Jewish figures like Cyrus or Ruth.

The exclusivist understanding of the Jewish people as specifically chosen by God, bound by their covenant with him, being set apart from their pagan neighbours – for example, Elijah's challenge to the priests of Baal and Asherah.

Both of these attitudes continued to influence the Christian tradition as it sought to distinguish itself from the Jewish community (re: Paul and the conversion of the Gentiles) and as it sought to relate to pagan faiths and philosophy within the Empire. Each of these challenges influence the patterning of Christian thinking about the religious other.



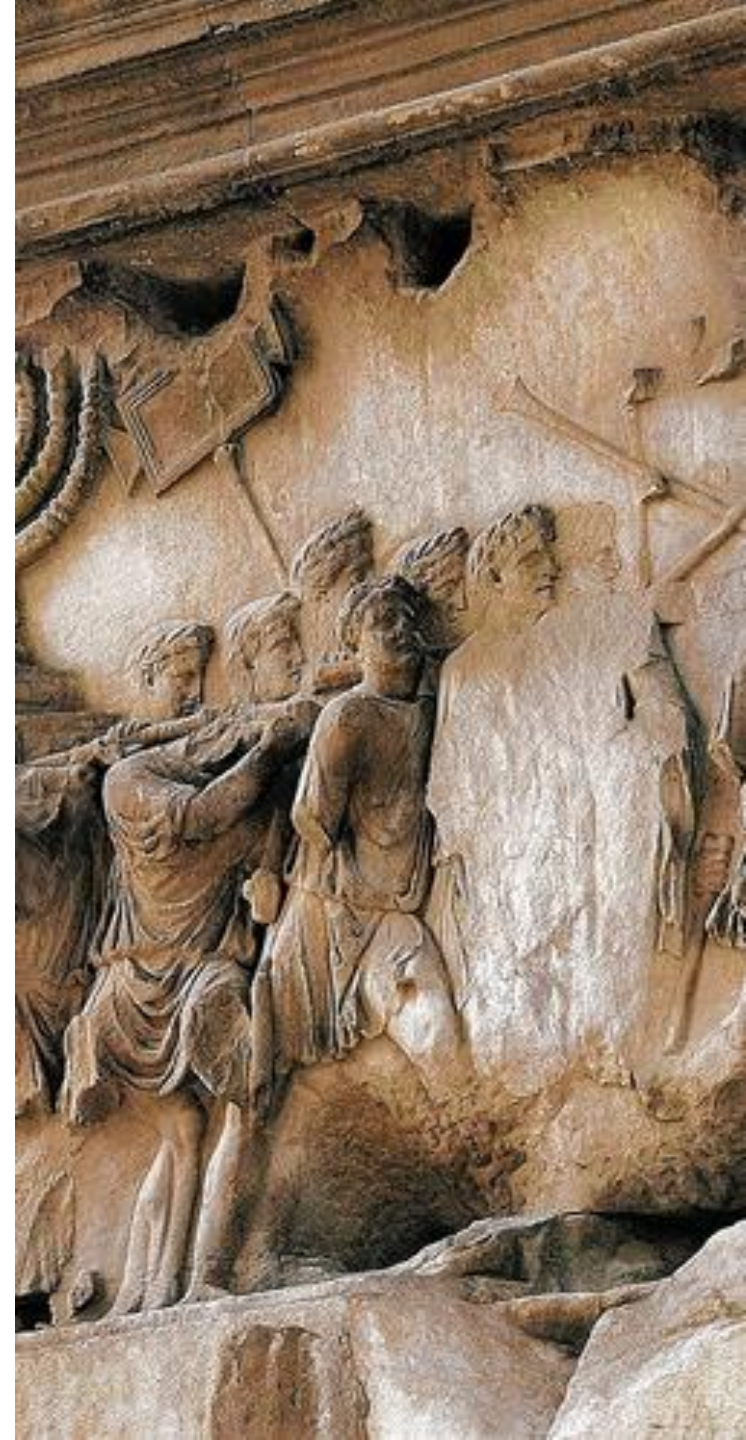
EARLY CHRISTIAN/ JEWISH RELATIONS

The early Christian community underwent a significant 'Parting of the Ways' with the Jewish community over the period of history we have so far examined.

While the early Christian community, and Jesus himself, were firmly positioned within the Jewish community, this grounding gradually lessened as political and social tensions emerged around joint worship and the conversion of non-Jews to Christianity, and were accentuated by the destruction of the Second Temple by the Roman Empire in 70AD.

At this point, following a military rebellion, the Jewish community was heavily persecuted and oppressed by the Roman state – leading the Christian community to seek greater differentiation and separation. This was accelerated by the quick growth and geographical spread of the Christian faith in comparison to the Jewish tradition and the increasing vitriol between the two communities.

This early vitriol is very apparent in passages of the Gospels such as Matthew 27:25 where the Jews accept guilt for the death of Jesus, Acts 2:23 where Peter accuses the Jewish community of killing Jesus, and throughout the Gospel of John.

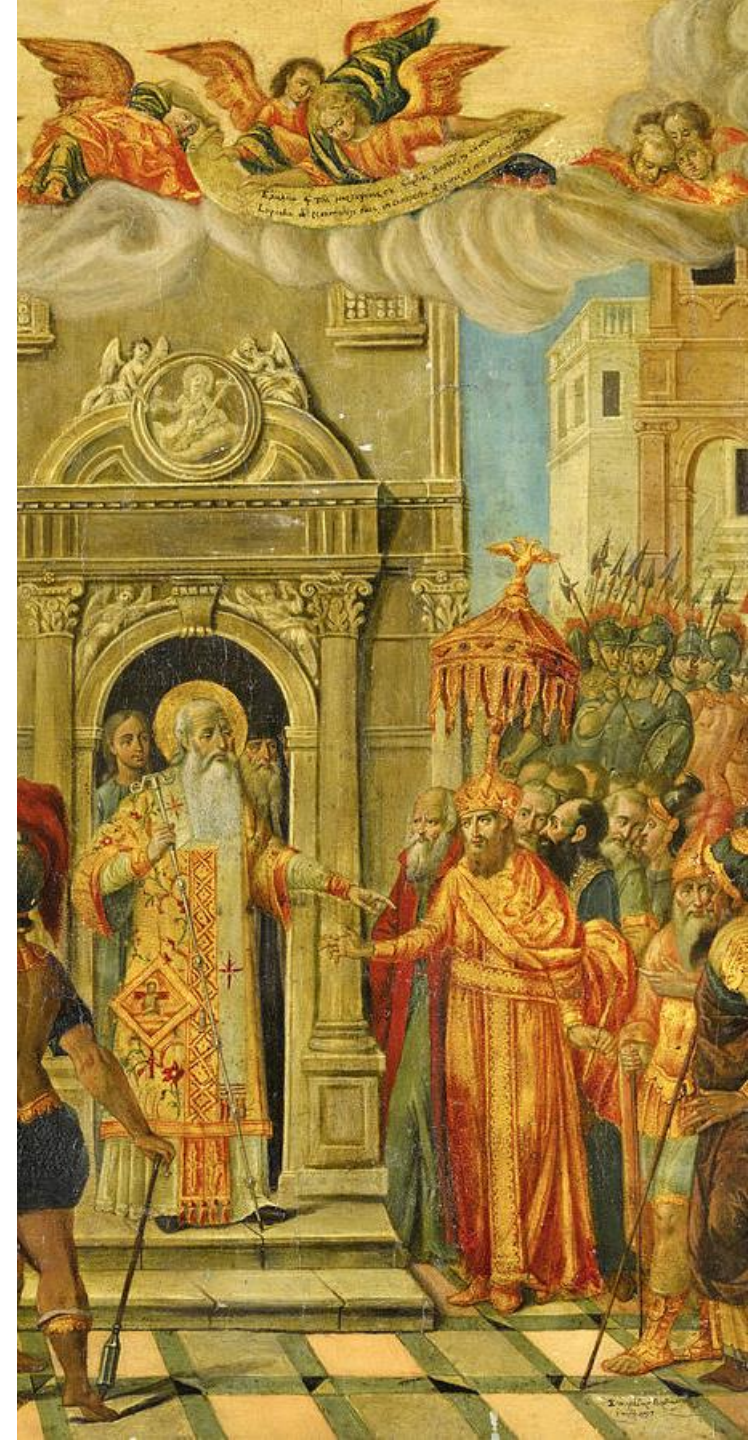


EARLY CHRISTIAN/ JEWISH RELATIONS

As a later example, we can look to the writings of John Chrysostom, a Church Father and resident of Antioch, who wrote deeply anti-Semitic homilies against the “judaisers” (those Christians who practiced Jewish rituals or remained within the Jewish community) in Antioch.

You will have a section of his work to read and discuss at the end of this lecture.

Further, as the Empire was Christianised, the interests of the increasingly powerful Christian community drove further differentiation and persecution of the Jewish community.



EARLY CHRISTIAN / HELLENIC RELATIONS

In contrast, the other key tradition prevalent in the Mediterranean world, the tradition of Hellenic philosophy, had a more varied and complicated character.

Prior to the emergence of the Christian tradition, Hellenic philosophy, stemming from the classical writers of Ancient Greece and Rome, occupied the preeminent social and cultural position, particularly for elite social groups.

As the Christian community grew and began to occupy situations of social power, the relationship between this form of philosophy became more important – early attempts at reconciliation can be seen in the travels of Paul to Corinth and Athens, and in the Hellenistic language of the Gospel of John.



EARLY CHRISTIAN / HELLENIC RELATIONS

Beyond this, thinkers such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, both based in the East, sought to meld the Christian faith with aspects of Greek philosophy in order to encourage the spread and influence of the Christian tradition in areas where Hellenic philosophy held a strong sway.

This aspect was less prominent in the West, with thinkers such as Tertullian, where a discontinuity between Christianity and Hellenic philosophy was more strongly maintained.



EARLY CHRISTIAN THINKING ABOUT OTHER RELIGIONS

As we can see from this brief overview, Christian attitudes to other religious traditions prior to the emergence of the Islamic tradition were varied and drew from number of different sources.

As ever, the distinction between exclusivism and universalism proved influential on the formation of these varied Christian responses and would continue to do so as the place of Christianity – culturally, socially, politically, and religiously – was challenged by the rise of Islam.



READINGS

READINGS

If you are more generally interested in this period, I would recommend familiarising yourself with the works of John Chrysostom, particularly the **Adversus Judaeos**, Clement of Alexandria's **Protrepticus**, and Justin Martyr's **Dialogue with Trypho the Jew**, as examples of contemporary writing on the relationship between Christianity and other religious and philosophical traditions.

I have only set a small sample of Chrysostom's writing as your recommended reading in order to get us started on the course, but their larger works are also exceptionally valuable.

READINGS

Parkes, James. *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: a Study of the Origins of Antisemitism*. E-book, Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1961 - Chapters Two and Three

This reading will flesh out the further historical background that we have covered in this section.

John Chrysostom, *Adversus Judaeos Oratio 2*
http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/chrysostom_adversus_judaeos_02_lost_portion.htm

This reading is an example of the anti-Jewish polemics current in the Early Christian community in Antioch – it is deeply anti-Semitic in tone.

Muckle, J. T. "Clement of Alexandria on Philosophy as a Divine Testament for the Greeks." *Phoenix*, vol. 5, no. 3/4, 1951, pp. 79–86.

This reading aims to introduce the work of Clement of Alexandria on aspects of Greek philosophy as an example of the way these two traditions interacted.