

Contrast in Early Christian Communities:
A Comparison of Antioch, Corinth and Ephesus

Senior Seminar
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Early Christianity spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire, gaining traction in major cities in the Mediterranean region. Converts carried word of Jesus of Nazareth, and acceptance of their message birthed Christian communities, each in a unique environment. How did the local religious, political, and geographical backgrounds found in different cities influence the formation of their early Christian churches? Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus were major provincial capitals in the first century Roman Empire that housed important Christian communities. Questions about how preexisting conditions affected the development of Christianity can be explored via a comparative study of these three urban environments.

Historians of early Christianity have tended to ignore the surroundings of the early growth of Christianity and pretended that it blossomed into dominance throughout the Roman Empire in a vacuum, unaffected by the world in which the new religion grew. Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), a prominent German church historian, conceived of early Christianity in triumphant terms as a movement rising above and easily replacing the old and stale Roman, Greek, and Jewish religious cults that surrounded it.¹ In recent years, however, historical treatments of early Christianity have started to point towards a more nuanced understanding of Christianity's emergence from Judaism and its interaction with Roman, Greek, and Egyptian religious cults.² Arguments by authors such as Judith Lieu, professor at Cambridge and author of

¹ A. von Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (ET Williams & Norgate: London, 1904-5)

² This religious group is often labeled "pagans." Historians have found it difficult to find a term which easily describes all those who engaged in polytheistic religious activity, but the term "pagan" functions only as a non-label, describing everyone who is not a Jew or a Christian, rather than describing what those who worshiped Roman, Greek, or Egyptian gods actually did. In this paper, they will be referred to as worshipers in Roman, Greek, and Egyptian cults or polytheists.

Neither Jew nor Greek?,³ and Diarmaid MacCulloch, church historian at Oxford and author of *Christianity*,⁴ find Christianity's departure from surrounding religious movements to be less quick and abrupt and more lingering and gradual. The more recent historiographical school is convincing, and this paper contributes to it by providing a comparison of three Christian communities and a discussion of how local religious, political, and geographical factors effected their development. This technique of observing three different early Christian settings at the same time has not yet been used by historians of early Christianity and will show the importance of varying local environments. This paper will serve as an introduction to such a study, contributing several examples of how this methodology can be used in the investigation of early Christian history.

The model of Christianity slowly rising to prominence in the Empire and holding on to elements of its predecessors as it did so is persuasive, as the first generation of Christian converts came directly from competing religions and would have brought elements of their past with them. As opposition from surrounding religious groups arose, the converts who had arrived in the Christian community from those groups were forced to separate further from their pasts. The Christian communities in the first century were newcomers to the religious scene in Corinth, Ephesus, and Antioch. Each of these cities had strong religious communities representing all of the major faiths in the Empire – Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Jewish – yet each city emphasized the worship of some deities over others. Of these religious communities,

³ T&T Clark: New York, 2002.

⁴ Penguin: London, 2009

the Jewish group had the greatest effect on Christianity's development in each city, as Christianity originated as a Jewish sect.

The religious context of each location was not the only factor in the development of Christianity. To understand fully the environment in each city, other elements must be explored, especially political history and geography.⁵ Imperial and municipal policies concerning the Jewish community were especially important in early Christian development. The geographical location of each city relative to the original Christian community in Jerusalem determined when it was evangelized, and more importantly, who the evangelists were, which influenced the theology of each Christian community. After discussing the backgrounds of Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus in turn, contrasts among the Christian communities will be examined in light of each city's background, to see if valid explanation for some of the variances can be found in the specific religious, political, or geographical settings of each urban environment.

Antioch

At the onset of Christianity, Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria, reaching at its peak a population between 400,000 and 600,000.⁶ Founded in 300 BCE, Antioch had long served as the capital of the Hellenistic kingdom of Seleucid and as the city of greatest influence in the Syrian region. Roman expansion reached

⁵ An excellent work utilizing a similar methodology to this thesis is *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* by Bruce Winter (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). Winter attempts to understand Paul's letters to the Corinthians in context of cultural and religious changes that occurred after Paul left the city.

⁶ Glanville Downey, *Ancient Antioch* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 81, 123.

Antioch in 64 BCE, when the Roman general Pompey defeated the last Seleucid king and declared it to be “free,” Antioch did not offer further resistance, however, and maintained its position of prominence under Roman control. In the aftermath of the Roman civil war between Augustus and Marc Antony, Augustus visited Antioch twice and made it the capital of the imperial province of Syria. Building projects begun under Augustus were continued when Tiberius and local leaders King Herod and Agrippa came to power. These improvements transformed Antioch from a Hellenistic city to a Graeco-Roman city, at least physically.⁷

Local Syrian religion worshiped a pantheon of gods who were in time assimilated to Greek and Roman gods. When the Greeks gained control of the area, Zeus and Athena began to replace the dominant Syrian god Hadad and the goddess Atargatis. Inscriptions at Syrian archeological sites show a similar process for lesser gods: Reshef becoming Apollo, Atha becoming Venus, and Nabu becoming Mercury.⁸ When the Romans took over Antioch, they encouraged the worship of the Greek/Roman gods. There was within Antioch a special emphasis on Zeus and Apollo, who were considered the protectors of the Seleucid dynasty. Emperors consistently funded both the new construction and repair of temples to both Roman and Greek gods.⁹

Unlike the assimilation among Syrian, Greek, and Roman cults, Judaism in Antioch presented a distinct religious entity. Likely some of the city’s original inhabitants, the Jewish

⁷ Glanville Downey, *Ancient Antioch*, 80-89.

⁸ DS Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 15.

⁹ Downey, *Ancient Antioch*, 179-180.

community in Antioch was, according to Josephus, the largest community of Jews outside of Jerusalem.¹⁰ In the late 30s CE, when Christianity first appeared in the city, tensions between Jews and the rest of the population in Antioch were high. News of a pogrom in Alexandria in 38 CE stirred the Jews, who became even more restless when the emperor, Gaius (Caligula), decreed that a statue of himself was to be placed in the temple at Jerusalem. In 40 CE, conflict between opposing political factions at the circus, the Greens and the Blues, somehow led to an anti-Semitic riot. The chronicler Malalas describes a scene of great discord in the city, with crowds killing Jews and burning their synagogues. Malalas claims that the Jewish high priest in Jerusalem named Phineas brought thirty thousand men to Antioch and killed many people in retaliation. Gaius responded by deposing the rulers of the city, beheading Phineas, and providing funds to rebuild damage done during the upheaval.¹¹ Malalas' claim that Phineas led such an expedition is surely false, and indicates his sources were not trustworthy.¹² However, some form of upheaval centered on the Jews is entirely possible, and the parallel events in Alexandria make a pogrom likely. Continuing tension between the Jews and their neighbors dominated the next few decades of Antiochene life.

A partial resolution of the Jewish problem appeared when the new emperor Claudius confirmed the privileges of the Jews of Alexandria to observe their distinct customs in 41 CE.

¹⁰ BJ 7.43. Also, see Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in its Diaspora Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 128.

¹¹ Malalas, *Chronographia* 10.20. For discussion, see Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts*, 131-133; Downey, *Ancient Antioch*, 193.

¹² Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts*, 132.

This edict was sent to Antioch to benefit the Jews there as well.¹³ Claudius' attempt to soothe relations failed in 66 CE when pogroms in Caesarea and Jerusalem, followed by smaller events in other Syrian and Palestinian cities, caused a national Jewish uprising. When a rumor in Antioch spread that the Jews intended to burn down the city, large mobs attacked the Jewish community and compelled them to offer sacrifices to the imperial cult, killing those who refused.¹⁴ Anti-Semitic sentiment in Antioch during this period was connected with the Roman effort to subdue the ongoing Judean uprising of the 60s CE, as the general Vespasian, soon to become emperor, had based his army in Antioch before laying siege to and destroying Jerusalem in 70 CE.

Amidst the turmoil in Antioch caused by rampant anti-Semitism, the Christian movement arrived in the late 30s CE. The first persecution of the Christians had begun, driving many Christians out of Jerusalem to neighboring cities.¹⁵ The believers who arrived in Antioch began to tell the Antiochene Jews about Jesus, and soon the message of Jesus was shared with the Gentiles of Antioch as well.¹⁶ For the new Christian community in Antioch and others throughout the Greco-Roman world, the relationship among the Jews, authorities, and surrounding cults played a key role in figuring out how they fit in the religious scene. In a short

¹³ Josephus *Ant.* 19.279-285.

¹⁴ Downey, *Ancient Antioch*, 199-200.

¹⁵ Acts 8:1, 4. See John P. Meir, "Antioch" in *Antioch & Rome* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 32.

¹⁶ Acts 11:20.

time, the community grew large enough and distinct enough from the Jews that, according to the book of Acts, Antioch was where the Jesus followers were first called “Christians.”¹⁷

Corinth

When the Apostle Paul arrived in Corinth in 52 CE during his second missionary journey, he entered a city with a much different political history than Antioch. In the third century BCE, Corinth rivaled Athens as a great city of commerce in the Greek world. By 222 BCE, however, Corinth along with the rest of Greece was subjected to the Macedonians. Under the weight of Macedonian rule, the Corinthians were pleased when Roman armies defeated the Macedonians and proclaimed the cities of Greece to be free (*libertas*). Rome’s definition of free did not match that of the Greeks, however, and in 146 BCE Corinth led a league of cities in opposition to the Romans. Outnumbered and poorly trained, the Greek cities were defeated completely by the Roman general Mummius, who completed the rout by sacking the city of Corinth. Roman soldiers killed the Corinthian men and sold the women and children into slavery. Corinth was declared a political non-entity, and the site remained desolate for one hundred years. In 44 BCE, Julius Caesar ordered the rebirth of Corinth as a Roman colony and sent colonists to establish a new city. The colonists brought Roman political structures, religion, and culture. Corinth swiftly regained its earlier prominence and by the time of Paul’s arrival in the city one

¹⁷ Acts 11:26. For discussion of the use of *Christianoī*, see Meir, “Antioch,” 35; Downey, *History*, 275, n. 19. Other uses of “Christian” in the first and early second centuries can be found in Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16; *Did.* 12:4; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15:44; Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96-97; Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2; as well as frequently in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch.

hundred years later, Corinth had become the most important city in Greece and the capital of the Roman province of Achaëa.¹⁸

Corinth's strategic importance came from its position on the Isthmus of Greece that made it a regular stop for merchants traveling from Rome to the Aegean and Asia. The source of Corinth's prosperity was identified by the ancient historian Strabo – "Corinth is called wealthy, because of its commerce, since it is located on the Isthmus and is master of two harbors, one which leads straight to Asia and the other to Italy."¹⁹ Ships from Italy would stop at the western harbor of Lechaion and either ferry their goods or the entire ship across the Isthmus via the *diolkos*, a paved road that led to the eastern harbor of Cenchrea. Dangerous seas below the Peloponnese made a route across the Isthmus necessary for prudent sailors who wanted avoid the risk found near Cape Malea.²⁰ Corinth's role as a vital commercial link in the middle of the Roman Empire brought great wealth and variety of people to the city. Donald Engels argues that by the end of the first century, the urban center of Corinth had a population of about 80,000, with an additional 20,000 in the surrounding rural areas.²¹

Corinth's heritage as an ancient Greek city included special prominence in several Greek cults, especially those of Aphrodite and Poseidon. The worship of these two gods took special

¹⁸ For a nice summary of these events, see Donald Engels, *Roman Corinth*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 1990), 14-19. Ancient sources, Polybius, 38.9.2-18.12; Pausanias, 7.14.1-7.16.10; Strabo, 8.6.23.

¹⁹ Strabo 8.6.20.

²⁰ Ibid. 8.2.1; Polybius 5.101.4.

²¹ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 33; 79-84; see Appendix 2 for his use of Corinth's water supply as a means for estimating the population. As Engels notes, Aresteides wrote of Corinth as the largest city in Roman Greece. Engel's guesses at the size of Corinth's population are done without census data, making them tentative at best.

significance in Corinth and drew tourists from all over the Empire. Corinthian coins featured these gods extensively, most likely as a way to advertise religious services connected with worshipping them. Corinth's role as a merchant city was emphasized in the worship of Poseidon, the god of the sea and earthquakes, and his sanctuary at Isthmia just outside the city was a famous center for Poseidon worship.²² Aphrodite functioned as the defender of the city and several frescoes in Corinth portray her looking at her reflection in the shield of Ares the god of war. Another facet of Aphrodite worship is evidenced by pictures of her naked to the waist while bathing, indicating that some who worshiped her did so for domestic reasons, including those of a sexual nature.²³

According to Luke, upon Paul's arrival in Corinth, he began evangelizing in the Jewish synagogue. After most of the Jews rejected him, he left the synagogue to evangelize the the Gentiles. An unknown amount of time after Paul moved his ministry from the synagogue, the Jews "made a united attack on Paul"²⁴ and took him before the Roman proconsul L. Junius Gallio, older brother of the philosopher Seneca.²⁵ The Jews claimed Paul was "persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law."²⁶ The passage does not make clear whether they were referring to Roman imperial law or Jewish religious law, but Gallio decided

²² Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 96.

²³ Charles K Williams II, "Roman Corinth: The Final Years of Pagan Cult Facilities along East Theater Street" in *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth*, 243-247. Also, see Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 98.

²⁴ Acts 18:12.

²⁵ Gallio was proconsul in Corinth around 52 CE. His proconsulship is the method by which Paul's mission in Corinth is dated to the early 50s CE.

²⁶ Acts 18:13.

that the dispute was an internal Jewish matter and outside his jurisdiction. He told them to “see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters,”²⁷ and the Jews were dismissed from the tribunal.²⁸ The Christian community continued as it had before, with Paul leaving after he had been in the city for eighteen months.

Ephesus

Ephesus, located on the coast of the Roman province of Asia, experienced a more peaceful transition to Roman rule than Corinth, though the Mithridatic war period created turmoil for the city. Ephesus became a Roman city when Attalos II, the king of Pergamum, granted his kingdom to the Romans in 133 BCE. During the first war between Rome and Mithridates, Ephesus became Mithridates’ headquarters and Romans and Italians in the city were killed.²⁹ The Roman general Sulla defeated Mithradates in 84 BCE and deprived Ephesus of its freedom. In 47 BCE, Ephesus regained self-governance under Roman patronage, and after Octavian defeated Marc Antony at Actium in 31 BCE, the city remained free and was named the new capital of the province of Asia in place of Pergamum by Octavian, perhaps because of its strategic location on sea routes through the Aegean Sea.

²⁷ Acts 18:15.

²⁸ After being dismissed, Luke records that Sosthenes was then publicly beaten by onlookers. For further discussion of this incident, see Moyer Hubbard, “Urban Uprisings in the Roman World: The Social Setting of the Mobbing of Sosthenes.” *New Test. Stud.* 51, pp 416-428. Church tradition claims that Paul refers to the same Sosthenes as a brother in 1 Cor. 1:1, but the name was a common one and there is no way to know for sure. Other traditions name him the second leader of the Corinthian church.

²⁹ Appian, *Mith.* 23.

Becoming the capital city was hugely beneficial for Ephesus, which prospered under Octavian's rule. The city was named "the first and greatest metropolis in Asia,"³⁰ and noted to be the "largest emporium in Asia this side of the Taurus."³¹ Though population estimates are always difficult, the population of Ephesus in the Roman period was most likely between 200,000 and 250,000.³² Ephesus also benefited from its geographical position as a shipping harbor as it was located on trade routes through the Aegean to and from the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Additionally, land routes from Ephesus headed east to Galatia and Persia.

Ephesus possessed many of the cults found throughout the Roman Empire, but the cult of Artemis of Ephesus dominated its religious climate. Artemis, the daughter of Zeus and twin sister of Apollo, received her name "from the fact that she makes people ἀρτεμέας (*artemeas* – *safe and sound*)."³³ Her divine attributes were primarily related to her benevolence and helpfulness to her followers, not to fertility as is often assumed.³⁴ Though Artemis was worshiped in other cities, Ephesus was regarded as the most prominent site, much as Corinth was seen as the special home of Aphrodite and Poseidon.³⁵ The Temple of Artemis, or Artemisium, was the focal point of the city and the grandest structure in Ephesus. Included on

³⁰ Paul Treblico, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 14.

³¹ Strabo, *Geog.* 14.1.24.

³² See Treblico, *The Early Christians*, 17 for discussion.

³³ Strabo *Geog.* 14.1.23.

³⁴ See Treblico, *The Early Christians*, 23 for discussion about the common misconception about Artemis as a fertility goddess.

³⁵ Cf. the town clerk's remarks in Acts 19:35 – "who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper (νεωκόπος) of the great Artemis?"

many lists of wonders of the ancient world,³⁶ crowds came from throughout the Empire to visit the temple. An inscription dated to 44 CE states, “the temple of Artemis herself, which is the ornament of the whole province.”³⁷ Two annual festivals were held to honor Artemis, one in the month of Artemision (March-April; named for Artemis), called the Artemisia, and another on the 6th of Thargelion (May-June) to commemorate Artemis’ birth. Both of these festivals brought visitors, producing a source of income for the city. The economic impact of Artemis was large, and the Temple itself functioned as a storage vault for Imperial funds and held one of the largest financial estates in Asia.³⁸ The Temple used the funds it gained through religious gifts to become “the biggest bank in Asia,”³⁹ lending money at interest and servicing mortgages. The worship of Artemis effected every Ephesian in the first century in some way.

Josephus documented the Jewish community in Ephesus with a number of decrees by governing authorities granting the Jews of Ephesus various rights, such as exemption from military service and the allowance for Sabbath observance. In 2/3 CE, Augustus issued an edict granting the Jews the right to follow their own customs, gather a Temple tax and send it to Jerusalem, and be exempt from appearing in court on the Sabbath.⁴⁰ The existence of such an edict indicates that enough controversy existed between the Jews and the city authorities that

³⁶ R. E. Oster, “Ephesus as a religious Center under the Principate, I. Paganism before Constantine,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.18.3, 1713.

³⁷ Treblico, *The Early Christians*, 23.

³⁸ T. R. S. Broughton, “Roman Asia Minor,” in *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, edited by T. Frank (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1938), 645.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 890.

⁴⁰ Treblico, *The Early Christians*, 39.

the imperial authorities had step in to ensure the Jews were protected. The causes for the mistreatment are unknown. After 2 CE, however, no further evidence suggests conflict between the clearly prominent Jewish community and the city of Ephesus, unlike Antioch and Corinth.

When Paul arrived in Ephesus, the Jewish community was the first place he brought the message of Christianity. Acts records that Paul stopped in Ephesus on his way back to Antioch from Corinth and that the Jews asked him to remain. He declined, but promised to return “if God wills.”⁴¹ Continuing on his journey, Paul left his missionary partners Aquila and Priscilla there to begin evangelism. The success of Aquila and Priscilla is unclear but seems to have been minimal, as the Jewish community remained friendly to Christianity until after Paul returned.⁴² Paul came back to Ephesus on his third missionary journey and spent the first three months in the synagogue preaching until some “stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation.”⁴³ Paul then left the synagogue to teach at a lecture hall, teaching for two more years in Ephesus and experiencing significant success among the Gentile population in Ephesus.

⁴¹ Acts 18:19-21.

⁴² Acts 19:8. It could be that Aquila and Priscilla did not choose to minister in the synagogue, but this change of tactics seems unlikely because they were most likely first exposed to the gospel in Corinth through Paul’s method of first seeking out the Jews (cf. Acts 18:2-4). Why then did they not cause a stir like Paul? The most likely explanations are either that not enough Jews were convinced by them to cause a problem, or that Aquila and Priscilla had a theology less offensive to the Jews than Paul did. The first is more persuasive, but cannot be confirmed. See Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Ephesus: Texts and Archaeology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 207. For Murohy O’Connor’s discussion of Aquila and Prisca as founders of the community, see pages 187, 223.

⁴³ Acts 19:9. “Congregation” most likely means the Jewish assembly.

Analysis

Just as the three cities of Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus shared many commonalities, the early Christian communities they contained did as well. Though there were significant differences in how Christianity developed in different locations, the connections between early Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean region appear to have been strong, as evidenced by Paul's request of the Corinthians to send monetary aid to other Christian communities in need⁴⁴ and by the extensive travel of Paul and other missionaries between communities throughout the region. The different Christian communities "were made aware that they belonged to a larger movement, 'with all who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place.'"⁴⁵ An appreciation of the relatively strong trans-locality of early Christianity must temper the contrasts among local Christian communities noted below.

The first cause for contrast among the three Christian communities examined here is geography. The location of Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus, especially in relation to Jerusalem, was vital in determining when each city was evangelized, who the evangelists were, and how conservative the Jewish Christians in each community were. Since Antioch was much closer to Jerusalem than either Corinth or Ephesus, conservative Jewish Christians from Jerusalem influenced its Christians more strongly than the Christians of Corinth or Ephesus. According to

⁴⁴ 2 Corinthians 9.

⁴⁵ Wayne Meeks quoting 1 Corinthians 1:2 in *Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 107. See Meeks' section, 107-110, on the universal identity of early Christians, as well as Judith Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 173, for a slightly contrasting view on the topic.

Luke, as Jews from Jerusalem began spreading the news of Jesus to Jews and Gentiles in Antioch, the church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas, a well-known member of the Jerusalem church, to oversee the development of the Christian congregation at Antioch and bring the Antiochene church under its authority.⁴⁶ Thus, Antiochene Christianity was strongly connected to the Christianity of Jerusalem and its leadership was not Pauline, although Barnabas brought Paul to the city some time later.⁴⁷ Because of the strong conservative influence from nearby Jerusalem, Antioch became the primary place of conflict over whether Christians should require that Gentile converts undergo the Jewish rite of circumcision and uphold Jewish dietary restrictions. Luke records a confrontation between Paul and some “individuals” from Jerusalem who advocated circumcision as a requirement for salvation. A council of Christian leaders in Jerusalem resolved the conflict and declared circumcision not to be a requirement for non-Jewish believers. To emphasize the conservative nature of the circumcision party, Luke mentions that those who opposed Paul in Jerusalem “belonged to the sect of the Pharisees.”⁴⁸ The opposition to Paul on the issue of circumcision and dietary laws was not only a minor faction of the church at Jerusalem, however. In Galatians, Paul recounts an episode at Antioch in which Peter himself drew back and kept himself separate from the Gentile believers “for fear

⁴⁶ Acts 11:22-23. See Meeks and Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 13-15, who claim that Barnabas was not sent by the church at Jerusalem at all, but functioned as an independent missionary. They hold that Luke desired to imply that the decision to evangelize the Gentiles of Antioch was sanctioned by the leaders in Jerusalem, not merely the actions of a rogue missionary. As Meier states, seeing Barnabas as a rogue Hellenist evangelizing Gentiles on his own initiative is possible but does not explain Barnabas’ “submission to the Jerusalem authorities and his abandonment of Paul” in Galatians 2:11-14. Luke’s portrayal is bolstered by the supporting evidence from Galatians. Meier, “Antioch” 34.

⁴⁷ Acts 11:25-26.

⁴⁸ Acts 15:1, 5. The legalism of the Pharisees was clearly established throughout all four Gospels, including Luke’s.

of the circumcision faction.”⁴⁹ In contrast to Antioch, Paul founded Corinth’s Christian community on one of his missionary journeys, and Paul’s friends Aquila and Priscilla planted the church at Ephesus.⁵⁰ Paul held both churches under his authority and lived at both communities for significant periods of time. Though Diaspora Jewish communities were present in both locations, these cities were much further removed from the authority of Jerusalem, and Paul spent most of his efforts fighting against polytheistic influences rather than the “Judaizers” from Jerusalem who advocated circumcision in Antioch.⁵¹ Though the conflict concerning circumcision was present at all three locations, Antioch’s proximity to Jerusalem made it a flashpoint in the struggle between the Judaizing and Pauline elements of early Christianity.

A second reason Antioch was the main theater of conflict over the requirement of circumcision was the anti-Semitic violence noted above, which was contemporary to the initial movement of Christians to the city. If Malalas’ pogrom has some historical basis, the first Gentile converts to Christianity knew that undergoing circumcision and observing Jewish dietary restrictions would have marked them as a part of the Jewish community and targets for violence. The edict of Claudius in 41 CE may have protected the Jews from official discrimination, but the fact Claudius felt the need to issue such an edict implies that there was

⁴⁹ Galatians 2:12.

⁵⁰ Acts 18:18, 26. See Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Ephesus*, 187, 223. Murphy-O’Connor gives Prisca and Aquila all the credit for planting the church at Ephesus. However, the community was not strongly established enough to cause separation from the Jews until Paul arrived to speak in the synagogue, which casts doubt on Murphy-O’Connor’s thesis. Cf. note 42 above.

⁵¹ Paul’s focus on combating influence from the mainstream polytheistic community is illustrated throughout Paul’s letters from Ephesus to Corinth. He urges the Corinthians to flee from idols, stop practicing sexual immorality, and to stop eating meals in idolatrous temples. 1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 6:9-10; 10:14-16; 12:2. Paul references circumcision once in the Corinthian letters in a short section, 1 Corinthians 7:18-19.

ongoing persecution of the Jewish population. The social and political ramifications of requiring all Gentile converts to cross the Jewish boundary of circumcision would have been significant, and Paul fought desperately to avoid the circumcision requirement in Antioch.⁵² As hostilities between the Roman authorities and the Jews heated up, the Christians in Antioch would have had even further reasons to distinguish themselves from the Jews. The label they earned, “Christianos,” indicates the success of the Christians of Antioch in doing so, as the title clearly marked them as a separate group from the Jews.⁵³

Under the leadership of Paul, the communities in Corinth and Ephesus were told from the beginning that Paul’s “rule in all the churches” was “circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but obeying the commandments of God is everything.”⁵⁴ Paul also instructed the Corinthians to “eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for ‘the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s’”⁵⁵ Paul, quoting Psalm 24:1, which the Jews often used as a blessing over their meals, meant that the Corinthians were to disregard Jewish dietary restrictions.⁵⁶

Whereas proximity to Jerusalem and the identity of local leadership played a large role in determining each Christian community’s response to the internal problem of circumcision,

⁵² The entire premise of Galatians is that those who taught the requirement of circumcision to maintain salvation was a false gospel and that those who believed in the need of circumcision were themselves “cut off from Christ.” Cf. Galatians 1:6-9; 5:4-5.

⁵³ Meier, “Antioch,” 35. See especially n. 81. As Meier argues, the label is best as a Latin title given by Gentiles (perhaps the Roman authorities) who mistook *Christus* to be Jesus’ proper name, not a title.

⁵⁴ 1 Corinthians 7:17-20.

⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:25-26.

⁵⁶ For discussion see Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 287-301.

religious and political factors present within each city helped to determine how exterior opposition to each local Christian community looked in each location. As noted above, the Corinthian Jews sued Corinthian Christian community, though unsuccessfully. What was the political explanation for the Jewish legal attack? Donald Engels has argued that Gallio's ruling allowed the Christian community to continue to enjoy the legal immunities Roman law granted to the Jews that allowed them to meet weekly and granted them access to kosher foods in the market.⁵⁷ According to Engels, the Jews were concerned that allowing the Christians to coexist with them would violate the terms of this immunity the Emperor Claudius had given them, as the exemption only remained valid if the Jews refrained from introducing any new or irregular religious customs.⁵⁸ Therefore the political situation of the Jews in Corinth was an important factor in persuading the Jews to openly oppose the local Christian community. The Corinthian Jewish leadership's move to bring Paul to court no doubt furthered the separation between the Christian and Jewish groups in Corinth and forced members of the Corinthian Christian community who came from the Jews to further detach from their roots.⁵⁹

Whereas the Ephesian Christian community was spared blatant hostility from the Jews, other opposition to Christianity was distinctly present. According to Acts, the Christian community in Corinth grew tremendously, so that "all the residents of Asia, both Jews and

⁵⁷ The removal of the allowance for kosher foods may have been the impetus for Paul's commands concerning eating meat in the market above. See Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 287-301.

⁵⁸ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 108-109.

⁵⁹ For example Crispus, the former president of the Jewish synagogue. Acts 18:8.

Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.”⁶⁰ Luke’s use of hyperbole was clear, but his intention was to show that Paul’s message was successful. He continued with a description of Paul’s ability to do miracles in contrast to some Jewish exorcists who were unable to mimic Paul’s talent in utilizing the name of Jesus to control evil spirits. This story was again “known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jew and Greek”⁶¹ and convinced many of the believers to publicly burn their incredibly valuable books about magic, as “the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.”⁶² Luke used these success stories to lead into the Ephesian riot in opposition to Paul. Luke described a silversmith Demetrius who made “silver shrines of Artemis”⁶³ and persuaded his fellow artisans that Paul’s success in persuading people throughout Ephesus and Asia that “gods made with hands are not gods”⁶⁴ threatened their business and brought scorn upon the goddess Artemis and her temple. A riot ensued, with crowds chanting, “great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” No one was able to control the mob until two hours later, when the city clerk reassured the crowd that Ephesus’ position as keeper (νεώκοπος – *neokoros*) of Artemis was not threatened and that Demetrius and the silversmiths should bring Paul to court if they had a valid complaint, as the imperial authorities could punished the city for rioting without cause if they did not stop.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Acts 19:10.

⁶¹ Acts 19:17.

⁶² Acts 19:20. See Treblico, *The Early Christians*, 134-154 for his discussion of Paul’s success in Ephesus.

⁶³ Acts 19:24.

⁶⁴ Acts 19:26.

⁶⁵ Acts 19:35-41.

What is the historicity of this episode? Clearly, Luke presents a one-sided view of Paul's success in Ephesus, as Paul himself records in his letters that he had opponents, suffered trials, and possibly spent time in prison while at Ephesus. Luke chose not to include those facts while describing Paul's beginnings in Ephesus,⁶⁶ however, Luke's choice to focus on the success of the Christian mission does not mean that his record of an Ephesian riot in opposition to Christianity is necessarily faulty. Luke shows accurate knowledge of Ephesus, the silversmiths, the importance of Artemis, the proper term (νεόκοπος) to describe Ephesus' role in honoring Artemis, the presence of the Asiarchs,⁶⁷ and the role of the town clerk among other examples.⁶⁸ Further, what motivation did Luke have to create this tale? The strongest themes in Acts are Christian-Jewish antagonism⁶⁹ and the acceptability of Christianity to the Roman world. Neither of those are present in the riot story, as the upheaval shows that though the city clerk and Roman law had no problem with Paul's Christianity, the silversmiths and those they influenced most definitely did.⁷⁰ Though there is no guarantee that everything Luke recorded happened exactly as Luke said, none of the objections to a riot of some kind occurring are persuasive.⁷¹

⁶⁶ He does refer to them in Acts 20:19, when Paul says that while at Ephesus he "served in the Lord with all humility and tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews."

⁶⁷ Acts 19:31. The Asiarchs were city officials, who Luke claims were "friendly to Paul."

⁶⁸ Treblico, *The Early Christians*, 157.

⁶⁹ See J. T. Sanders, *Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants: The First One Hundred Years of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1993) 1-4. Also, see Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 124-128 and included bibliography for further discussion.

⁷⁰ Treblico argues that the town clerk represents the reasonable side here, and that Luke presents the silversmiths as irrational. But the town clerk does not defend Christianity necessarily, nor does he prove that Paul was not harming the sale of merchandise related to Artemis. See *Early Christians*, 162-165.

⁷¹ For a systematic examination and response to objections raised against the riot story's historicity, see Treblico, *Early Christians*, 157-170.

The implications of the uproar in Ephesus are many. The riot is the longest and most important episode in Luke's account of the Ephesian mission. The presence of opposition from the polytheistic community would have affected the Christians who had converted from worshiping idols by causing them to separate further from their religious roots, or perhaps by convincing them to return to idol worship due to strong animosity from the general population. What made Ephesus different than Corinth, where only the Jews were in opposition to the Christians, or Antioch, where the greatest struggle was against Jewish influence within the Christian community? The tale of Christianity throughout the book of Acts and as related through Paul's letters nearly always implicated the Jews as the primary opponents of Christianity.⁷² What made the setting of Ephesus different? First, the success of the Christian mission in Ephesus was such that at least a portion of the Ephesian population noticed their presence. Second, Paul's success was so upsetting because of the undeniable economic importance of Artemis to the city of Ephesus. Paul's ability to gain converts in Ephesus threatened more than polytheistic theology. Since the economy in Ephesus was centered in many ways on tourist services related to the worship of Artemis, the growing Christian community's success in convincing some Ephesians to stop regarding "gods made with hands" as gods at all upset at least some of the non-Jewish Ephesian population.⁷³ In contrast, the lack of opposition from non-Jews in Corinth may indicate that Paul did not succeed enough to upset

⁷² Even the persecution under Herod Agrippa I was done at the behest of Jewish authorities. Acts 12:1-25.

⁷³ Christianity's success in Ephesus did not necessarily lead to the downfall of Artemis. On the contrary, there is significant evidence of the worship of Artemis thriving for centuries more. Treblico, *The Early Christians*, 164-165. Also, see Guy Maclean Rogers, *The Mysteries of Artemis of Ephesos: Cult, Polis, and Change in the Graco-Roman World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) for a systematic account of Artemis worship.

an important aspect of their lives. Only the Jews opposed the Christians because they feared the Christians would threaten their advantageous political situation. In Antioch, animosity from the polytheistic population was reserved for the Jews, and the Christians were effective enough in distinguishing themselves from the Jews that they avoided discrimination.

This paper serves as the introduction to a comparison of Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus and their early Christian communities, offering a few examples of how the cities and their Christian communities were different from one another. Many more points of interest could be examined by future studies, notably the importance of the imperial cult and the role of linguistic backgrounds in the development of local flavors of Christianity. Further, this study could be expanded to include other urban centers that contained Christian communities, as long as primary sources exist to make such an examination possible.

Local Christian communities shared many commonalities. The trans-local nature of Christianity enabled a sense of unity, especially in the common use of Scriptural authority and creeds.⁷⁴ Urban backgrounds throughout the Roman Empire were similar in many ways and the context of broader Christianity helped shape local Christian communities. However, a clear comparison of Christian communities in Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus shows that the religious, political, and geographical backgrounds of each urban environment explain some of the contrasts that did exist among these first century churches. Geography played an important role in the theological development of local Christian communities, because each city's proximity to Jerusalem determined how strongly they were influenced by the conservative

⁷⁴ Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 107.

Jewish Christian elements of Christianity, and because each city's location helped to determine whether or not its Christian community had Pauline leadership. Political considerations strongly influenced religious groups, especially the Diaspora Jews, and the early Christians either distanced themselves from the Jews as in Antioch or were pushed away by the Jews themselves as in Corinth because of political factors. Finally, the commercial dominance of Artemis of Ephesus combined with early Christian growth in the city led to opposition from the polytheistic community, causing Paul to leave the city. These differences and their causes demonstrate that religious, political, and geographical factors were strongly influential in the development of early Christian communities.

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