

Introduction

1. Preface

By the fourth century CE Christianity had grown throughout the Roman Empire to rival paganism and was about to finally replace it. The Roman Senator, Symmachus, when he was Prefect of Rome in 384 CE, wrote a plea to Emperor Valentinian II on behalf of the Senators who still clung to their pagan heritage for tolerance of the old pagan Roman state religion. This was an appeal for the restoration of the Altar of Victory in the Senate, which had become a symbol of the official state cults. He wrote:

It is reasonable that whatever each of us worships is really to be considered one and the same. We gaze up at the same stars, the sky covers us all, the same universe compasses us. What does it matter what practical system we adopt in our search for the truth? Not by one avenue only can we arrive at so tremendous a secret. But this is the kind of case for men to put with time on their hands; at the moment it is prayers that we present to you, not debating arguments. *Symmachi Relationes* 3.10.¹

In a sense it is a plea that the Emperor regard each of the religions of his empire as worthy of practice, not just the new political force of Christianity. In this thesis I take Symmachus' plea seriously and present the prayer forms in earliest Christianity in the Graeco-Roman context, investigating how they have been influenced by religions and their associated prayer forms, that were present in the Roman Empire prior to the time of Symmachus' plea, and how they differ from them. By influence I mean how the practices of the prayer forms of other religions at the time of earliest Christianity set a pattern. They set a pattern with regard to types of prayer, forms of prayer, attitude and posture of prayer, places and times of prayer, community prayer and public and private prayer and certain customs practised before during and after prayer, and were a guide for the development of some of the prayer forms in earliest Christianity. Underlying the physical forms, influence also relates to ideas about the deities, ideas about humans and ideas about how communication can be held between humans and deities.

2. Definition

What is prayer? Prayer is one part of humankind's efforts to communicate with a perceived supernatural power. Prayer is an affirmation that one is not in control of everything and a reaching outside of oneself to a higher being. Prayer usually stems from a religious belief and doctrine and is addressed to some outside entity. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines prayer as 'a solemn request to God or an object of worship, or as an action such as the practice of praying to God'.² Both the Greek and the Latin words for prayer (Greek *euchesthai*, Latin *precari*, ... to

¹ R. H. Barrow, *Prefect and Emperor: The Relationes of Symmachus A.D. 384*, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, pp. 40-41.

² H.W. Fowler & F. G. Fowler (eds), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1964 (1911), p. 956.

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plead, to beg, to ask earnestly)³ refer to an action of communication. In ancient times, as now, people were often at the mercy of their environment and this vulnerability was interpreted to indicate a greater power or powers, which the ancients supposed that they could influence with their prayers.

How does one pray? Prayers can take many different forms such as petition, thanksgiving or praise. Prayers can be formulaic and read, prepared or extempore, ecstatic or calm, formal or informal, personal and private or public, be silent or vocal, spoken, sung, chanted, shouted or whispered, recited by one or many, standing, kneeling, dancing, sitting or lying prostrate. Forms of prayer and positions for praying may be passed on from one generation to another or improvised by the person praying to suit the occasion.

When one compares the prayer forms used in the religions or belief systems of ancient cultures the similarities far outweigh the differences. There are many examples from early Christian times throughout the New Testament and Early Christian Fathers' writings on how to pray and on different prayer forms. There is not so much evidence of the actual prayers of other religions in the time of early Christianity but a great deal of evidence that prayer played a part in most worship.

3. Research Problem

Numerous scholars have dealt with prayer forms, prayer texts, places and times of prayer and rituals of the religions that existed in the time of Early Christianity, but most have included this material as part of a larger work about specific religions or otherwise concentrated on specific prayers. In this thesis I will investigate those religions, which existed at the time of early Christianity in the Graeco-Roman context, outlining their prayer types and some texts considering posture, places and times of prayer and some rituals. I will then consider early Christian prayer and spirituality in the context of the pagan society and culture of the day. I will investigate the similarities and differences in prayer forms and external expressions of prayer, but in doing so I will not compare the larger context of the belief systems of each of the religions.

4. Review of Literature

There have been many scholarly works on prayer in different ancient religions.⁴ Due to the variety of religions that I analysed I have divided the literature review into categories such as:

³ John J. Wynne, 'Prayer' in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XII, eds Charles Herbermann et al., Robert Appleton Company 1907, The Encyclopedia Press, New York., 1913, p. 345.

⁴ D. Carmody & J. Carmody, *Prayer in World Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York., 1990, makes a comparison of contemporary religions rather than ancient religions.

(a) General Works

Of the general works, *Prayers from Alexander to Constantine: A critical anthology*, (Kiley (1997)) proved a valuable resource with examples of prayer texts from different traditions and also critical analysis of the individual prayers. This work examines more than forty-five prayer texts covering a period over 650 years. The team of contributors provided background and critical analysis of each of their contributions. The prayer texts were from the specific traditions that I cover, Jewish, Greek, Roman and Christian however there was no comparison of the prayer forms over the traditions. *The Lord's Prayer and other prayer texts from the Graeco-Roman Era*, (Charlesworth (1994)) contains analysis of some prayers and a most valuable and extensive bibliography compiled by Mark Harding to which I am indebted in my search for sources of information.

The religiousness of the Roman Empire within aspects of Greek culture, religion and mythology is a major theme in *Gods and One God: Christian Theology in the Graeco-Roman World*, (Grant (1986)) and shows the social milieu and attitudes of other religions to Christianity. General material for the Graeco-Roman World included *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, (Kloppenborg 1996), which contains many contributors who look at the voluntary ancient associations that were still part of the communal life in the Roman Empire in the time of early Christianity. Both *The Social World of the First Christians*, (Stambaugh & Balch (1986)), and *The Moral World of the First Christians*, (Meeks (1986)), give a clear picture of the social influences people experienced in the first century CE in the Roman Empire. Meeks covers the social setting with regard to the background to the 'Great Traditions' of Rome, Greece, Israel, and Christian communities. Wayne Meeks states his objective in his book is 'to understand ...the social process by which the character of the Christian communities of the first two centuries took form'.⁵ For both Greek and Jewish background to Christianity as well as the conversion of the gentiles to Christianity, a classic book *Jew and Greek: A Study in the Primitive Church*, (Dix (1953)) thoroughly covers the Jewish and Greek influence on the spread of early Christianity and the Graeco-Roman social setting

(b) Greek Religion

There is much evidence of prayer and spirituality in the early heritage of the Greeks and Romans. In Greek literature (especially in the Homeric epics) Greek drama and Greek philosophy the need for acknowledgment of and praying to the gods is everywhere apparent and the authors provided information on prayer forms in Greek religion. Among the primary sources Homer's *Iliad* has many examples of prayer and sacrifice and of interaction between the

⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians*, Library of Early Christianity, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1986, p. 12.

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Greeks and their gods. The plays of Aeschylus, such as *The Oresteia*, Aristophanes' plays, *The Knights*, *Peace*, *The Birds*, *The Assembly Women*, and Euripides' *Medea*, to mention just a few, provided examples of Greek prayers. In *Xenophon, Oeconomicus: V .18-20. VI. 1. A Social and Historical Commentary*, (Pomeroy (1994)), Xenophon outlines reasons why people should pray to the gods. Socrates' prayer, the so-called 'Pan Prayer' in Plato's play '*Phaedrus*', illustrates Plato's regard for prayer to the gods. In *Faith Hope and Worship*, (Versnel (1981)), Meijer's chapter titled 'Philosophers, Intellectuals and Religion in Hellas', (Meijer (1981))⁶ includes, as well an outline of Plato's attitudes to prayer and the gods, other philosopher's reactions to religion and worship and the different attitudes of intellectuals to religion. In the same book the chapters on 'Greek Hymns', (Bremer (1981)),⁷ and 'Gifts for the Gods', (Van-Straten (1981))⁸ are excellent essays on prayer and worship with regard to prayer forms, postures and attitudes of the Greeks to their worship of their gods. *Political and Social Life in the Great Age of Athens*, (eds. Ferguson & Chisolm (1978)), has many primary sources for both Greek society and prayers. For the background for Greek prayer, *Prayer in Greek Religion*, (Pulleyne (1997)), included aspects of Greek prayer and context in relation to ancient Greek literature and inscriptions, it is an excellent background but not contemporary to the era although relevant to the context.

For Greek religion a most thorough exposition is *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, (Burkert (1985)), it covers traditional as well as mystery religions and rituals and has a short section on prayer in Greek religion⁹. 'Prayer in the Greek World' by Greeven, in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Kittel (1964))¹⁰ outlines Greek prayer from Homeric epic to New Testament times. There are also many primary examples of Greek prayer forms and religion, as well as brief backgrounds on each, in Grant's classic exposition of Greek Religion, *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism*, (Grant (1953)). Primary documents of the ancient Greek world up to the time of Socrates (c. 800 – 399BC), with regard to Greek culture, politics and religion, are examined in *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Socrates*, (Dillon & Garland (1994)). They use both social and historical primary documents and include many authentic details and background material about ancient Greece. There is a detailed chapter on religion in the Greek world with sections on the Eleusinian Mysteries, Asklepios the Healer, the Olympian religion and its critics, Heroes, Festivals, Sanctuaries and Cult Regulations, Women and their Religious Role, with many useful primary documents about Greek religion. It does not have any primary sources of actual Greek prayer forms and because it is specifically about Greek

⁶ P.A. Meijer, 'Philosophers, Intellectuals and Religion in Hellas', in *Faith, Hope and Worship*, ed. H. S. Versnel, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1981, pp. 216-262.

⁷ J. M. Bremer, 'Greek Hymns', in *Faith, Hope and Worship*, ed. H. S. Versnel, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1981, pp. 193-215.

⁸ F.T. Van-Straten, 'Gifts for the Gods', in *Faith, Hope and Worship*, ed. H. S. Versnel, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1981, pp. 65-151.

⁹ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, trans. John Raffan, Basil Blackwell Publisher and Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1985(1977), pp. 73-5.

¹⁰ Gerhard Kittel, (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1964, pp. 778-794.

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religion has no comparison with regard to other religions and their prayer forms. One excerpt from Aristophanes' *Frogs* has the chorus call on 'Iakchos'¹¹ during a procession to Eleusis, which could be construed as a prayer calling on the god to be with the initiates. In so far as the background to Greek religion is concerned the documents provide ample material on Ancient Greece.

(c) Mystery Religions

For primary texts of prayer forms from mystery religions *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, (Meyer (1987)) was most useful in that Meyer draws upon and defines the similarities between mystery religions and certain aspects of Judaism and Christianity. In *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, (Turcan (1996)), Turcan covers different cults that spread throughout the Roman Empire. He examines the cults' origins, the means of their spread into the Roman Empire and their popularity and finally their rivalry with Christianity. Burkert also describes the background of the main mystery religions from Greece to influence Rome in *Ancient Mystery Cults*, (Burkert (1987)). For examples of worship of Isis including some prayer used in the worship *Apuleius' Metamorphoses*, (ed. Hanson (1989)) is an excellent source. *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Ancient Greece*, (Dillon (1997)), is a useful book citing much evidence for mystery religions and Greek festivals to which people from all over the Roman Empire journeyed to Greece to participate in. There are many rituals referred to in Dillon's book with emphasis placed on pilgrimage to the sacred sites as well as regulations and organisation of the rituals. Chapter 6, 'Cult regulations at sanctuaries',¹² describes the strict observances for participation in Greek rituals and provides good background material to the religious attitudes in mystery and Greek religions. These rituals and pilgrimages continued throughout early Christian times.

(d) Roman Religion

Background and prayer forms for Roman Religion can be found in such primary sources as Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Livy's *The Early History of Rome*. The chapter 'Prayer in Greco-Roman Religions', (Alderink (1997)) in *Prayer from Alexander to Constantine: A Critical Anthology*,¹³ (eds. Mark Kiley et al), describes prayer forms, formulae, and posture for Greek and Roman prayers. *As The Romans Did: A Source Book in Roman Social History*, (Shelton (1988)), provides many extracts of primary sources. Two in particular, Cato the Elder, *On Agriculture* 139 14, and Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 28.2(3) 10, clearly illustrate the formalism required in Roman prayer. *The Romans And Their Gods*, (Ogilvie (1988)) and *Ancient Roman Religion*, (Grant (1957)), provided

¹¹ Matthew Dillon & Lynda Garland, *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Socrates*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 348.

¹² Matthew Dillon, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Ancient Greece*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, pp. 149-182.

¹³ Mark Kiley et al, (eds.) *Prayer From Alexander to Constantine: A critical anthology*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, pp. 123-127.

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history and prayer forms to include in my analysis. In his journal article 'The Competition, (Rivals to Christianity in the ancient world)¹⁴ (Ferguson (1998)), outlines the rivals to Christianity by noting the many places of worship for different religions and cults that were present in the ancient Roman garrison town of Dura Europos around 240 CE. The social background and Greek influences on the Roman Empire, although deeply embedded in his style of story telling, are well documented in the early chapters of *Pagans and Christians*, (Lane-Fox (1986)).

(e) Judaism

Psalms and blessings, which were a major part of Judaic prayer in early Christian times, had a profound influence on Christian prayer forms. Charlesworth's chapter 'Jewish Hymns, Odes, and Prayers (ca. 167 B.C.E.-135 C.E.)',¹⁵ in *Early Judaism and its Modern Interpreters*, (eds. Kraft & Nickelsburg (1986)) has a comprehensive listing of many Jewish prayers. The *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 10, (eds. Hastings & Selbie et al. (1918)), supplied background for Jewish prayers. A classic, *The Jewish Background of the Christian Liturgy*, (Osterley (1965)), looks at the pre-Christian elements in the Jewish liturgy and many Jewish prayer forms that influenced Christian prayer. The finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls provided much evidence for Jewish customs and prayer forms and *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls: The History of Judaism, the Background of Christianity, the Lost Library of Qumran*, (Schiffman (1994)), covers many aspects of the significance of the evidence.

(f) Christianity

New Testament prayers are taken mainly from the primary text *The Holy Bible*.¹⁶ *Prayer in the New Testament: Make Your Requests Known to God*, (Doohan (1992)) has selections of prayer types taken from the New Testament but the approach is of a confessional nature. The text however does thoroughly cover references to prayer in the New Testament writings. *Teach us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World*, (Carson (1990)), looks at specific prayers and the background to Christian prayer in the Old Testament as well as prayer in the New Testament. Part 1 concentrates on the Biblical theology of prayer and, as Carson says in the first article 'Learning to Pray', it has 'some close study of certain prayers'.¹⁷ *Daily Prayer in the Early Church*, (Bradshaw (1982)) looks at the Jewish background to Christian daily prayer and the history and development of the Christian church's daily office. Bradshaw takes into account evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls in

¹⁴ Everett Ferguson, 'The Competition, (Rivals to Christianity in the ancient world)', in *Christianity Today, Inc* February, 1998, p. 34.

¹⁵ James H. Charlesworth, 'Jewish Hymns, Odes, and Prayers (ca. 167 B.C.E.-135 C.E.)', in *Early Judaism and its Modern Interpreters*, eds. Robert A Kraft and George W E Nickelsburg, Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1986, pp 411 - 436.

¹⁶ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition*, Catholic Bible Press, a Division of Thomas Nelson, Inc, Tennessee, 1993.

¹⁷ D.A. Carson, (ed.), *Teach Us To Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World*, Paternoster Press, Bookhouse Australia Ltd, Sydney, 1990, p. 13.

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providing detail for the Jewish customs of daily prayer, which could shed light on the daily practice of the early Christians. *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction Through Paul's Rhetoric*, (Clark Wire (1990)), looks at the technical background to biblical criticism. Clark Wire looks behind the text of 1 Corinthians and dissects Paul's words as an argument for the social situation in Corinth, specifically with regard to women's behavior in the early Corinthian church. Another very detailed commentary on early Christian writing is Witherington's *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Witherington (1998)). This book also examines and draws from the text a detailed social analysis of the early Christian movement and provides insight into the construction of some prayers of the first Christians.

For the study of prayer in the writings of the early Church Fathers, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vols. 1-7 (eds. Roberts & Donaldson (1995)) and *Early Christian Fathers*, (Richardson (1970)) were the main texts used. These provided the information about prayer and the prayer forms used in that Christian era. Early Christian writers such as Justin and Hippolytus document the organization of early Church liturgy. In his journal article, 'Daily Prayer in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus',¹⁸ Phillips (1989) explores Hippolytus' recommendations on times for prayer. Other primary sources for the history and background to the social setting for Christianity were found in *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine – Eusebius*, (ed. Louth (1989)). The pagan perspective is presented in *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, (Wilken (1984)) and *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*, (Benko (1986)). *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, (Meeks (1983)), also illustrates the setting for Christian worship. *The Shape of the Liturgy*, (Dix (1945)) provides many insights into early Christian attitudes and the development of Christian liturgy.

Also when one looks at prayer in early Christianity in the Graeco-Roman context, one cannot exclude the relevance of inscriptions, papyri and early Christian images to illustrate the setting. The series *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, in particular the volumes 1 and 4, (Horsley (1981 & 1987)) and volume 6, (Llewelyn (1992)) contain some prayer forms and primary evidence in the form of papyri and inscriptions, for the social setting for early Christian times. There is also much evidence of the popularity of some Roman hero gods in early Christian times especially the healing god Asclepius. Inscriptions outside his temples and other writings attest to this and many are recorded in *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, (Edelstein & Edelstein (1988 (1945))). Although Christian art did not develop until the second century CE some early Christian prayer postures and rituals are portrayed in illustrations in *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, (Beckwith (1970)) and *The Catacombs: Rediscovered monuments of early Christianity*,

¹⁸ L. Edward Phillips, 'Daily Prayer in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus' in *The Journal of Theological Studies* Vol. 40, 1989, pp. 389-400.

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(Stevenson (1978)); these images shed light on some postures and rituals which were part of worship in early Christianity.

5. Research Method

My objective, when looking at prayer forms in earliest Christianity in the Graeco-Roman context, is to achieve a comparative exposition of the external expressions of prayer including types of prayer, how the prayers were prayed, people's attitudes and postures when praying, and times and places of prayer. The method I use is text critical combined with an historical – critical method. By this method I examine the historical background of the various religious groups contemporaneous with earliest Christianity. From within all the groups, including Christianity, I analyse the text of some primary sources which either discussed prayer or were prayer forms. To achieve this I constructed a database with the following fields:

- Source of prayer or text about prayer
- Author of the prayer
- The type of prayer
- Deity prayed to
- Attitude and posture when praying
- The place of the prayer
- Times for the prayer
- Individual or community prayer
- Whether it was a private or public prayer
- Any specific custom that accompanied the prayer either before during or after.

I included in the database many prayers from the major religions that were current at the time of the emergence of Christianity, and from the database I was able to compare the prayer forms of the individual religious groups with the Christian prayer forms that developed, so that the similarities and differences could be analysed.

There were many forms of worship and religions in the Graeco-Roman Empire when Christianity emerged and a variety of types of prayer. In looking at the forms of prayer in use in the Graeco-Roman era, as well as Christian prayers, I discuss older Greek, Roman and Jewish prayers that were examples of contemporaneous types and examine such features as:

- What was the style of prayer? e.g. style can refer to 'manner of writing, speaking or doing ...'¹⁹
- How was the text constructed?

¹⁹ According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, p. 1282.

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- What was the type of prayer? e.g. petition, praise, or other type.
- In what manner is the deity addressed? e.g. formal or familiar.
- What are the titles of the deity?

6. Structure

In Chapter 2, I first examine briefly the background to the religions still practised at the time of early Christianity such as the Greek, Roman, Mystery and Judaic religions. Then in Chapter 3, I briefly review the Graeco-Roman setting and its influence on the prayer forms reflected in two early Christian writings, *The Acts of the Apostles* and the *First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*. The prayers in these writings were obviously included for the specific purposes of the writers and do not necessarily cover all types of Christian prayer however they provided examples of and information on some types of prayer in the growing Christian communities. From Chapter 4 to Chapter 9, I compare prayer forms, taking for my model the second half of Tertullian's treatise *On Prayer*, written c. 200 CE. I used this as a standard for prayer in the Christianity of his era. Tertullian in his treatise outlines certain Christian types of prayer, and how to pray, including attitude and posture, places and times for prayer, references to public and private prayer, community involvement in prayer and certain customs for Christian prayer. I present each aspect that Tertullian describes and then compare that same aspect in the other religions of the Graeco-Roman world.

Background

1. Introduction

Throughout the Roman Empire at the time of early Christianity there were many different influences on society. In order to look at the religious aspect of the society through which Christianity spread and the many prayer forms in the society, I present a brief background to the Greek, Roman, Mystery and Judaic religions separately and then examine the background to the influences affecting Christianity. The special areas such as types, places, times and posture of prayer, where the religions had a major influence on Christianity, are examined separately in the chapters concerning these special areas.

2. Greek Religion

Ancient Greek religion had been influenced by many religions around the Mediterranean. The two main influences had come from the Minoan and Mycenaen cultures.²⁰ The Minoan Period extended from ancient times to c. 1450 BCE in Greece and Crete, the Mycenaen to c. 1150 BCE in Sparta and Phaestos. Influences on Greek religion also came from Indo-European cultures, Asia Minor, Egypt and Phoenicia, Syria, the Near East and from the Hittites.

Greek religion was polytheistic, and the gods were known through a series of myths. The myths represented concepts of the divine world and the Greeks understood the divine world through these myths. For the Greeks myths were true stories and they believed them. They understood the world around them in terms of myths, which informed them about gods such as the earth goddess, the sky god, the ocean god and river gods. The Greeks led their lives according to their perception of the will of the gods. Gods were considered part of their lives and the Greeks believed that the gods decreed what happened in peace and in wars. They also believed that the gods caused problems and solved them, and that the gods were present at festivals and cultic worship. Part of cultic worship was prayer.

Mythological literature, hymns, drama, poetry, histories and philosophical works passed down theological concepts and associated prayer forms in Greek religion. The early Greek poets Homer and Hesiod were the most important influences in setting out a Greek theology. Homer wrote between 750 - 700 BCE and Hesiod about 700 BCE. Through their poetry, which contained stories about the gods, Homer and Hesiod illustrated Greek religion. Their poetry also tried to explain what humans had to do to remain in a harmonious relationship with the gods.

²⁰ Frederick C. Grant, (ed.), *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism*, The Library of Religion, The Liberal Arts Press, New York., 1953, p. xxi.

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Herodotus in his *Histories* stated that, 'Homer and Hesiod are the poets who composed our theogonies and described the gods for us, giving them all their appropriate titles, offices and powers'.²¹ An example of religion as part of Greek heritage and honour of the Greeks for their gods is also shown in Hdt VIII, 144, when the Athenians tell the Spartans that they will not make peace with the Persians due to their destruction of Greek statues and temples of their gods.²²

Poetry was considered to be an art inspired by the muses and by Apollo, the god of poetry and music. Hesiod talks about the importance of poetry in his *Theogony* and states that muses from Mt Helicon had inspired him and that he writes only the truth. Poetry had an important role to play in relaying the will of the gods. The prophesies of the chief priestess, the Pythia, at the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi were always relayed in verse (hexameter). However the poetry and stories showed that the gods were not always beneficial to humankind. Greek literature was rife:

with stories of the conduct of the gods so scandalous that some Greeks indignantly rejected them, gods whose favour to individual men or cities might be presumed in general or secured in particular by the correct sacrifices, but whose attitude to mankind as such was by no means unequivocally friendly.²³

Ancient Greek religion had no organized institution or body of dogma; it was 'a composite of many cults'.²⁴ The 'cults aimed to honour the multitude of gods and avert the misfortunes which might result from the gods' own anger at their neglect'.²⁵

In the literature of Homer and Hesiod there were twelve important gods for the Greeks, known as the Olympians. These were portrayed as extra large, immortal, anthropomorphic beings. They ate, drank and fought like human beings but were super-human. They could also take the forms of animals, as for example, when Zeus took the form of a bull or of a swan to disguise himself, and Demeter took the form of a horse to get away from Poseidon. Old local deities were linked with the Olympian gods. Zeus Trophonios was the combination of a local god Trophonios with his own cult and rites linked with Zeus. There were also stories about other beings such as the Satyrs who were half man and half goat. There were also nymphs of the rivers, mountains, woods and the ocean. These were not immortal but lived a long time. There were also demi-gods such as Heracles, the Dioskouroi and Asklepios, whose fathers were gods.

Despite literature depicting many malevolent acts of the gods, the Olympian gods were generally considered to be protectors of humankind and the Greeks communicated with them in various

²¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 11, 53, trans. by Aubrey de Selincourt, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1972 (1954), p. 151.

²² Dillon & Garland, op. cit., p. 372.

²³ Antony Andrewes, *Greek Society*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1967, p. 254.

²⁴ F. Grant, op. cit., p. xiv.

²⁵ Robin Lane-Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1986, p.38.

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ways. In *The Iliad* Homer points out that 'burnt offerings, courteous prayer, libation, smoke of sacrifice, with all of these, men can placate the gods when someone oversteps and errs'.²⁶ Homer uses prayers as 'stylistic devices'²⁷ in his epics but they are also the first written examples of prayer forms in Greek religion.

During the fifth century Aeschylus (c. 524 – 456 BCE), Sophocles (c. 496 – 406 BCE) and Euripides (c. 484 – 406 BCE), wrote many dramas depicting the Greeks' interaction with the gods. They give 'a rich picture of the prayer of the Greeks in the classical period'.²⁸ The place of prayer in Greek society and religion is also illustrated in the works of other ancient writers such as Solon, Xenophon and Plato. In the Hellenistic period Greek prayer came under the influence of the oriental mystery religions and Greek philosophy.²⁹ Many of the philosophers e.g. Xenophanes 'challenged traditional notions about the gods'³⁰ and the efficacy of prayer and worship of the gods. Some postulated that there was only one supreme god or first cause. Other intellectuals doubted the gods existed at all. Despite the philosophical point of view one cannot ignore the evidence of Greek religiousness, prayer and worship, provided by literature as well as archaeological evidence in Greek art and architecture, temples, statues, votive figures, sacrificial vessels and pottery.

3. Roman Religion

With the mingling of Etruscans and other tribes that made up early Rome, ancient Roman religion evolved. What developed was a 'religion centred in various cult practices, many of them so old that their original meaning had been long forgotten'.³¹ These cult practices were developed to enable the early tribes to come to terms with natural phenomena and under the influence of Greek literature and legend over the centuries the religion 'developed into an anthropomorphic religion on the Greek pattern'.³² The Roman gods were identified with Greek gods, Jupiter took the place of Zeus, Juno of Hera and Minerva of Athena, and other gods were gradually assimilated.³³

In his *Early History of Rome*, Livy (59 BCE - 17 CE) stated that King Numa was, according to tradition, responsible for a renewal of religion and ritual. According to Livy, it was after the emerging city of Rome was at peace following the reign of Romulus, traditionally c. 750 BCE,

²⁶ Homer. *The Iliad*, 1, 502, trans. by Robert Fitzgerald, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984 (1974), p. 157.

²⁷ Greeven. 'Prayer in the Greek World', p. 778 in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Vol. 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1964, pp. 778-784.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 780.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 781.

³⁰ See Dillon and Garland, op. cit., p. 355.

³¹ Frederick C. Grant, *Ancient Roman Religion*, The Library of Religion, The Liberal Arts Press, New York, 1957, p. xiii.

³² R.M. Ogilvie in his introduction to Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. by Aubrey de Selincourt, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1971, pp. 19-20.

³³ Pamela Bradley, *Ancient Rome: Using Evidence*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1990, p. 44.

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that Numa decided Rome needed to have a 'solid basis of law and religious observance'. Livy 1.19, writes that the Romans, a 'rough and ignorant' mob at that time, were now at peace and Numa felt that if they were inspired with the fear of the gods, the relaxation from the constant rigour of military discipline would not have an adverse effect on the nation's moral fibre.³⁴ An elaborate set of rules including a religious calendar governing all religious observances and duties was set up to keep the people occupied. Numa also established various priesthoods. Livy also states that the public involvement and state control of ritual gave the Romans a reputation of being 'a community dedicated wholly to worship'.³⁵ Possibly Livy was romanticising about the past and Roman *pietas* in comparison to the rationalism in his own days. However, the Greek historian, Polybius (c. 200 - 118 BCE), writing about a century before Livy, also attests to the Romans' serious attitude to religion saying that the religious belief of the Romans 'is actually the element which holds the Roman State together.' Polybius claims that: 'These matters [i.e. religious practices] are treated with such solemnity and introduced so frequently both into public and into private life that nothing could exceed them in importance'.³⁶

The Roman state 'religion was subordinated to the interests of the state and played a very important part in political decision.'³⁷ 'The state religion represented a special branch of administration and the priests who were nominated ... were usually active politicians such as magistrates or senators'.³⁸

There were a number of colleges ... who looked after specific areas of the state religion, the most important being the Pontiffs, the Augers, the Fetiales, the Flamens and the Vestal Virgins. The head of all the state priests was the *pontifex maximus* who unlike the other priests, was elected for life by the people.³⁹

Each college had a specific sphere of responsibility. The College of Pontiffs was the chief college; it was responsible for guarding the divine law by arranging the calendar, fixing dates for religious festivals and announcing when there was to be no business. The augers interpreted the *auspicia* (events such as flights of birds, flashes of lightning, earthquakes or eclipses or physical things such as vital organs of birds or animals) to decide 'divine' the god's will. The Fetiales interpreted laws governing international relations, they were in charge of rituals for declaring war and concluding treaties. The Flamens sacrificed to the major gods, Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus. The Vestal Virgins cared for the sacred fire of Vesta, the goddess of the hearth. The hearth or

³⁴ J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 5, and Livy. *The Early History of Rome*, trans. by Aubrey de Selincourt, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth., 1971, p. 54.

³⁵ Livy. 1.21, p. 56.

³⁶ Polybius. *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 4.56, trans. by Ian Scot-Kilvert, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1979, p. 349.

³⁷ Bradley, op. cit., p. 44.

³⁸ Ibid.,

³⁹ Ibid.,

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home was most important to the Romans.⁴⁰ The *pater*, i.e. father, was the priest in the home who performed daily or annual domestic rituals to ensure right relationships with the gods.

Following Polybius' time, ancient Roman religion was gradually neglected. This was due to Rome's involvement in continual wars and conquest on her borders, and also the Hellenistic influences gradually being assimilated with the conquest and the resulting influx of foreign slaves. The political and religious changes in Roman society first supported the ancient religions and then supported the emerging Christian religion.

Due to Roman conquest of the East, Hellenistic cults, Egyptian Religion and Mithraism were some of the many religions competing for existence in Rome as well as the Imperial Cult.⁴¹ One of the mystery religions was the 'Cult of the Great Mother' (Magna Mater). The wild rites associated with this cult caused the Senate to forbid Roman citizens to take part in it however it was finally accepted in Rome in 204 BC. The popularity of Dionysian rituals among the poorer classes and slaves also increased and the Senate became alarmed and held an inquiry into the rites, which led to the suppression of Bacchic Societies in 186 BC. Roman religious and social attitudes are evidenced in Pompeii, Herculaneum and Ostia as revealed by archaeological evidence of this time. There were many temples to Roman deities and 'collegiate temples' as well as household shrines. Also present in Pompeii, Herculaneum and Ostia is evidence that worship in Hellenistic religions had increased by the first century CE with art and artifacts representing Dionysian, Eleusinian, and Orphic mysteries and the cults of Cybele, Isis, Osiris and Mithras.⁴²

By the time of Augustus (63 BCE - 14 CE) although 'the peasants worshipped the old traditional gods of the land' the immigrants, 'slave and free', worshipped their own ancestral gods and there was a mixture of cults in Rome.⁴³ 'The upper classes had since the early second century B.C. been tending to become more and more agnostic'.⁴⁴ In an attempt to stimulate religion Augustus revived the ancient Roman religious cults and rituals and repaired ancient temples, which had been allowed to fall into disrepair during the civil and political strife of the late republic.⁴⁵ Augustus tried with his reforms to bring about a revival of the old religious practices in the hope of mitigating the fears that the political strife Rome had been experiencing was occasioned by the neglect of the gods. The revitalised ancient Roman religion remained the state religion until Christianity overwhelmed paganism and became the official religion in the fourth century CE.

⁴⁰ Bradley, op. cit. pp. 44-47.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 581.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 580-588.

⁴³ A. H. M. Jones, *Augustus*, Chatto & Windus Ltd, London, 1970, p. 144.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 144.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 147.

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Many prominent Roman citizens became interested in and accepted some of the eastern religions that had found their way into the Roman Empire through conquest, slavery and trade. Augustus was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries but he was not so favourable towards other foreign cults such as those of the Egyptian gods. The Jews were allowed freedom of their religion and were even allowed to send money back to Jerusalem in Augustus' time.⁴⁶ Also during Augustus' time, in spite of Augustus' resistance to being worshipped as a god, an imperial cult emerged in the provinces coupled with worship of Roma (the divine spirit of Rome). 'The worship of Rome and Augustus spread among the provincials in the east, and after 12 BCE provincials in the west also adopted the cult'.⁴⁷

An example of the reverence given to the Roman emperor just before Christian times was an inscription used to honour Augustus, as a god. Inscribed prayers and dedications were common in antiquity. Inscriptions are engravings or marks carved or written for different purposes, such as a prayer of dedication. The inscriptions in antiquity were made up of writings for a permanent or semi-permanent record and were usually inscribed on stone (on buildings or stele), metal or clay. Inscriptions were used for dedications and prayers, captions, rules, lists, laws, deeds of individuals, information from government to society or messages from person to person or from persons to gods. The inscription following was found at Halicarnassus and was written 2 BCE, while Augustus was still alive:

Since the eternal and deathless nature of the universe has perfected its immense benefits to mankind in granting us as a supreme benefit, for our happiness and welfare, Caesar Augustus, Father of his own Fatherland, divine Rome, Zeus Paternal, and Saviour of the whole human race, in whom Providence has not only fulfilled but even surpassed the prayers of all men: land and sea are at peace, cities flourish under the reign of law, in mutual harmony and prosperity; each is at the very acme of fortune and abounding in wealth; all mankind is filled with glad hopes for the future, and with contentment over the present; [it is fitting to honour the god] with public games and with statues, with sacrifices and with hymns. (British Museum Inscription 894)⁴⁸

4. Mystery Religions.

By the time of Nero (37 – 68 CE) Tacitus denounced 'Rome as the meeting point of every sort of horror,'⁴⁹ 'where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular'.⁵⁰ On that particular occasion he was referring in part to Christians who with their 'mischievous superstition', had spread from Judea to Rome and had been blamed for burning the city and 'hatred against mankind'. These 'things from every part of the world'

⁴⁶ Jones, op. cit. p. 148.

⁴⁷ Bradley, op. cit. p. 440.

⁴⁸ Frederick C. Grant, *Ancient Roman Religion*, p. 174-5.

⁴⁹ Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, trans. Antonia Nevill, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 1996, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Tacitus. *Annals* XV, 44-5 in *Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. by Alfred John Church & William Jackson Brodribb, ed. Moses Hadas, Random House Inc, New York, 1942, pp. 380-81.

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would also have referred to some of the mystery religions that had taken a considerable hold on different parts of the Graeco-Roman world after developing from various ancient mythical traditions and cults. 'The mysteries were secret religious groups composed of individuals who decided, through personal choice, to be initiated into the profound realities of one deity or another'.⁵¹ The mysteries were popular with everyone because of the promise of protection in life with salvation and rebirth after death. Some of the mysteries that found acceptance in the Graeco-Roman world were the Eleusinian mysteries, the Dionysian (or Bacchic) Cult, the Magna Mater Cult, the Cult of Isis, and Mithraism. They had various prayer forms, from hymns and chants to 'meaningless word-sounds, which accompany specific dances or processions each of which is associated with a particular god'.⁵²

Eleusinian Mysteries. The most famous of Greek mystery rituals were the Eleusinian Mysteries which were very popular around the Mediterranean world in 'Classical, Hellenistic and Roman times'.⁵³ The Mysteries were probably based on ancient agrarian rituals and had developed by the time of the Classical period into a cult, which promised many benefits in life as well as a happy afterlife.⁵⁴ The ceremonies were held annually in honour of Demeter and Persephone. Worshippers from all over Greece and other parts of the Roman Empire gathered to make the pilgrimage from Athens to Eleusis.⁵⁵ In the first century many prominent Romans became initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries and travelled to Greece for the ceremonies. The secret mysteries performed at the ceremonies apparently reflected the mythical background of the two goddesses of grain as explained in full in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* composed about 7th Century BCE.⁵⁶ The lines 479 – 82 also declare benefits in the after-life derived from being an initiate in the sacred mysteries,

Blessed among men on earth is he who has seen these things.
But he who is uninitiate in the holy rites, who has no lot in them,
Does not enjoy a like fate when he lies in death beneath broad spreading
darkness.⁵⁷

There were several stages of the mysteries held in different places and separate times of year. The first stage was the preparation stage or 'Little Mysteries' held in Spring. This was a preliminary initiation prior to participation in the 'Great Mysteries'. The second stage or Great Mysteries took place six months later in the month of Boedromion.⁵⁸ This stage lasted ten days and involved fasting, purification and processions. Similar to other mysteries which had secret

⁵¹ Marvin W. Meyer, (ed.) *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook, Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Harper, San Francisco, 1987, p. 4.

⁵² Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, p. 74.

⁵³ Matthew Dillon, op. cit. 1997, p. 61.

⁵⁴ Ibid.,

⁵⁵ Walter Burkert, op. cit. p. 285.

⁵⁶ G. S. Kirk, *Nature of Greek Myth*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1974, p. 250.

⁵⁷ John Ferguson & Kitty Chisholm, (eds.) *Political and Social Life in the Great Age of Athens*, The Open University Press, London, 1978, p. 193.

⁵⁸ Louise Bruit Zaidman & Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, trans. Paul Cartledge, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989 p. 137.

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worship, the ceremonies consisted of *legomena* (things recited), *deiknymena* (things shown) and *dromena* (things performed). The *legomena* expressed deep truths about the gods and were sometimes sung or chanted.⁵⁹ One had to be an initiate to gain access to the ceremonies. Due to the commitment of the initiates to their secrecy not much is known about the nature of the secret ceremonies and only conjecture from ancient sources is available. Of what is known of the initiation, the initiates had to speak Greek but could be anyone, women, slaves or foreigners and they had to have 'pure hands' that is not have committed a serious crime, especially murder.⁶⁰ The initiates had to first perform a purification ritual by bathing in the sea, then they had to sacrifice a pig, followed by another purification ceremony by fire and apparently a fast and other rites. During a public procession from Athens to Eleusis, a thirty-kilometre march, the shout *Iakch' o Iakche* is called out again and again. This shout is believed to be a call to Iakchos, a *daemon* of Demeter, or a call to Dionysus.⁶¹ On reaching the Eleusinian sanctuary at night the initiates broke their fast and were given a special drink, *kykeon*, made from barley, mint and water to drink. It was in the *Telesterion*, a building that held several thousand people at a time that the main part of the ceremonies took place. Although his report is disputed by many scholars as being untrustworthy,⁶² Clement of Alexandria in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, 2.21 states that the initiates had to pronounce a formula, *synthema*, in the ceremony, saying

I have fasted;
I have drunk the *kykeon*;
I have taken from the chest (*kiste*);
having done the work,
I have placed in the basket (*kalathos*),
and from the basket into the chest.⁶³

'Covered containers, *kiste*, whose contents were known only to the initiate, were carried around in connection with the Mysteries.⁶⁴ Nothing else is known for certain of the secret ceremony except that the significance of the ceremony to the initiate was a pledge from the goddess of a happy afterlife. The experience of the initiates at the main ceremony is reported to be 'an emotional experience of a direct encounter with the divine' based on an 'internal transformation',⁶⁵ probably brought about by the intense preparation and rituals of the previous days. The secret revelations were an individual experience however they were a shared experience of the whole community of initiates.⁶⁶ The community aspect was further

⁵⁹ Meyer, op. cit. p. 10.

⁶⁰ Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, p. 286.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 74.

⁶² Dillon, 1997 referring to Mylonas (1961) pp. 300-01, Burkert 1987 p. 37, 147 n. 44.

⁶³ Meyer, op. cit. p. 18.

⁶⁴ Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, p. 99.

⁶⁵ Zaidman & Pantel, op.cit. p. 139

⁶⁶ Zaidman & Pantel, op. cit., p. 140.

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enhanced by the 'Athenians [who] administered the Eleusinian Mysteries ... as a state cult'.
The Eleusinian Mysteries remained popular until the end of paganism.

The Dionysian or Bacchic Cult was another famous cult that had been embraced by the Greeks and became popular with Romans. This Cult honoured the god of wine, Dionysus. Slaves and refugees fleeing from Hannibal hastened the spread to Rome of the Dionysian mysteries.

The Cult of Magna Mater, or Cybele, was officially introduced into Rome in 204 BCE when the Second Punic War was not going well for the Romans. At that time strange portents were observed as well, so the Romans consulted the Sibylline oracle. Following the oracle's prediction that the Carthaginians would only leave Rome after the 'Idaeian Mother of Pessinus' was brought to Rome, the Romans requested that the king of Pergamum hand over the sacred stone, 'the dwelling place', of 'the Mother' to them.⁶⁸ Eventually in 191 BCE the cult stone was placed in a temple in Rome 'specially pledged to Cybele'.

The Cult of Isis was an ancient cult that had originated in Egypt and appealed to the people of the Graeco-Roman world because of her care for humankind. Knowledge of Isis and her consort Osiris was passed from Egypt into the Graeco-Roman world through trade and military campaigns and reached Rome early in the first century BC. Isis became identified with many goddesses and was eventually accepted as the 'queen of goddesses'.

Mithraism was one of the mystery religions in the Roman Empire that only became popular in the second century CE. The biographer Plutarch (46 - 125 CE) in his *Life of Pompey*, states that pirates from Cilicia (southeast Turkey) practised secret Mithraic mysteries. According to Plutarch, these pirates performed strange sacrifices on Mount Olympus and 'celebrated secret rites or mysteries'. Plutarch says that the 'Mithraic rites, first celebrated by the pirates, are still celebrated today'.⁶⁹ Mithras was known to have been worshipped among ancient Indo-Iranian peoples and was also worshipped throughout the Persian realm in close association with Ahura Mazda.⁷⁰ Under the influences of north Iranian traditions and Greek culture Mithras became the god of the Roman legions. The mystery rites of worship to Mithras were for men only and because the mysteries promised salvation they suited the soldiers, sailors and imperial officials who were away from their homes in various military engagements and in fear of death. Mithraism

⁶⁷ Dillon & Garland, op. cit., p. 347.

⁶⁸ Jo-Ann Shelton, *As The Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*, Oxford University Press, New York., 1988, p. 4

⁶⁹ Plutarch. *Fall of the Roman Republic*, Ch. 24, 7, trans. Rex Warner, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1972 (1958), p. 182.

⁷⁰ Meyer, op. cit., p. 199.

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was seen as a warrior god of light, truth and justice, and devotion to him was evident in the large number of *Mithraea* (sanctuaries of Mithras) discovered on Roman frontiers, ports and cities⁷¹.

At the time of early Christianity one could be involved in many mystery religions at the same time. The following inscription, written *c.* 384 CE, (the same year that Symmachus presented his pleas to the emperor) was a funerary dedication which included references to each of the mysteries that the deceased was involved in and the hope that the afterlife would be better. The words stressed the secrecy of initiation and rewards and promises of being a full initiate and priestess, then it referred to involvement in other mysteries:

....As priestess of the Mother of the Gods
And Attis; so thou honoredst me as spouse)
Through the red sacrament, the blood of bull,
And taught me that deep threefold mystery
Of Hecat, yea, and made me worthy e'en
To share Demeter's blessed age-old rites. (*Carmina Latin Epigraphica*. No 111)⁷²

The inscription refers to the deceased being a priestess of the cult of Magna Mater, Cybele being the great mother, and Attis was Cybele's escort. The ritual included the slaying of bulls and pouring of their blood on the altar. Then Demeter's age-old rites are referred to so obviously the deceased was an initiate of the Eleusinian mysteries as well.

5. Judaism

According to the Judaic history of the beginning of humankind, the first recorded sacrifices to the God of the Hebrews were those of Cain and Abel in Gen. 4:3-4. These started a chain of events that led to the commencement of cultic worship; the writer of Genesis declared that 'at that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord' (Gen. 4:26b).⁷³ The biblical version of the commencement of civilisation highlights the need for people to acknowledge a higher power, and this theme is carried through to the emergence of the Hebrew nation. The nation was dependent on the acceptance of the one God depicted in the Pentateuch, which showed a clear guide to the ways of living required by this God and the ways of communicating with him. Biblical history has the Hebrew nation initiated by a covenant between their God and Abraham and carried on through Abraham's son Isaac to his son Jacob who had twelve sons who became founders of the tribes of Israel. To acknowledge or invoke the Lord, using different prayer forms, was a prominent theme essential to these patriarchs of Judaism.

Following the patriarchal period, the history of Judaism, according to tradition, covers a series of tribal wanderings. These include: slavery and settlement in Egypt of various tribes of Israel, the exodus from Egypt of the Israelites led by Moses, their wandering in a desert, a renewed

⁷¹ Meyer, loc. cit.

⁷² F. Bucheler, 'Carmina Latin Epigraphica' in F. C. Grant, *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism*, p. 149.

⁷³ All scriptural references are taken from *The Holy Bible*, NRSV, 1993.

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covenant made in receipt of laws given from their God to Moses as leader of the Israelites, then conquest of and settlement in Canaan by these various wandering tribes. It was in Canaan that the loose federation of the tribes developed into a united, centralised monarchy for protection against the threat of invasion by other tribes and nations. At this time King Solomon built a temple at Jerusalem for worship of the one God. Following Solomon's death and internal strife the united kingdom of the Israelites was eventually split into a northern kingdom, Israel, and a southern kingdom, Judah. Israel was soon incorporated into Assyria and Judah was eventually taken over by the Babylonians. The temple King Solomon had built in Jerusalem was destroyed. The Jews were again in exile until the Persians under King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to return to Palestine. King Cyrus also allowed the centre of ancestral worship, the Temple in Jerusalem, to be rebuilt; this occurred c. 520 –515 BCE. 'Worship was carried out in the Temple under the leadership of the priests and Levites. The three traditional feasts and the Day of Atonement were the high points of the year'.⁷⁴ Throughout their exiles and settlements the Jews clung to their belief in the covenant made by their ancestors, for support of their God if they obeyed his commandments. They retained their prayer forms and strict 'religious practices, e.g., circumcision and Sabbath observances, [which] became their source of unity'.⁷⁵ Prayer was an important part of their religious practices. Also during their exile the traditions and laws of the Israelites 'were gathered and committed to writing'.⁷⁶

6. Hellenistic Influences

The Greeks under the leadership of Alexander finally defeated the Persians and Greek culture soon spread throughout the empire. Alexander's empire was split into four after his death and Palestine came under the Ptolemaic dynasty. During this period there was conflict between the Ptolemaic kingdom and Seleucids for rule of Palestine with the Seleucids finally dominating. The Jewish community remained 'primarily a religious association headed by a high priest, who combined civil and religious authority'.⁷⁷ Also at this time the Hellenistic influence was felt in Jerusalem and many Jews embraced 'Greek fashions and ways'.⁷⁸ This resulted in civil and religious insurrection against oppressive leaders by different Jewish factions followed by a period of independence and rule by Jewish leaders until Roman domination.

7. The Political and Social Setting for Christianity

By the time of early Christianity Hellenism had been a force in Palestine for three centuries. The Maccabees achieved Jewish independence for the first time. In 60 BCE Pompey had annexed

⁷⁴ Addison G. Wright, Roland E Murphy & Joseph A Fitzmyer, 'A History of Israel', in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary - 2nd Edition*, eds. Raymond E Brown, Joseph A Fitzmyer & Roland E Murphy, Prentice Hall Inc, New Jersey, 1990, pp. 1219-1252.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1237.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1239.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*,

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Jerusalem and it came under Roman rule. The Romans used vassal kings and Herod the Great was appointed king of the Jews in 37 BCE and ruled until his death in 4 BCE. At Herod's death succession was disputed but Emperor Augustus put Archelaus as Ethnarch in charge of Judea, Samaria and Idumea, Antipas was made Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, and Philip Tetrarch of the areas north and east of the Sea of Galilee. It was in the territory of Antipas, whom the New Testament calls Herod, that Jesus Christ lived and taught and where the disciples first spread his teachings. Herod Antipas died in 39 CE. The Romans appointed governors of their provinces and Pontius Pilate had been appointed Prefect of Judea in 26 CE. The Prefect came to be referred to as a procurator and his authority was considerable, but for the most part he left the administration of the country to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body. The procurator's only real concern was with political crimes. The president of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, the high priest, held Jewish authority and he exercised substantial influence. Despite Roman domination of Palestine the Jewish high priests held a certain amount of autonomy in religious and state affairs as Josephus reports 'the constitution became an aristocracy and High Priests were entrusted with the leadership of the nation'.⁷⁹ By the first century CE the Jewish community was split up into various groups with varying attitudes to the law and Temple observances. Of these the main sects were the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes.⁸⁰

It was out of this political and social mix that Christianity emerged. It arose from within Judaism as a result of the followers of Jesus Christ spreading his teachings first in Jerusalem then throughout the Graeco-Roman world. Jesus was born a Jew in Palestine in the reign of Augustus and because his teachings conflicted with the strict Jewish observance of the law the Jewish authorities had him executed. Jesus and his apostles had been teaching that God had not forsaken his people and that they were to follow the commandments of their ancestral heritage, but also that they had to realise that people were more important than the law. It seemed that some Jews, particularly the Pharisees, had come to place the Jewish law before love and humanity and were suspicious of the teachings of Jesus. After Jesus was put to death his followers claimed that he had risen from the dead. The apostles were devout Jews and claimed that Jesus said he was sent by God to deliver his people and he was the Messiah foretold in the Jewish scriptures. They spread his teachings, converting many to follow what they called 'the way' (Jn. 14:6a) throughout the Graeco-Roman world.

To the Roman authorities, at first, the Christians were considered to be a harmless sect of the Jewish religion, except for a few instances when they were blamed for other crimes. In the first

⁷⁹ Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, eds. Geza Vermes & Fergus Millar, T. & T. Clark Ltd, Edinburgh., 1973, p. 377 & Josephus *Ant.* XX,10, 5.

⁸⁰ Wright, Murphy & Fitzmyer, op. cit., p. 1243 & Josephus *Ant.* XIII, 5, 9.

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century CE, according to Tacitus *Annals* 15.44, Nero blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome and persecuted them as scapegoats.⁸¹ Persecution in a mild form took place under Domitian about 81 CE and later at different times in the second and third centuries because of Christians' refusal to worship the emperor and other gods of the Romans. Also because of the exclusivity of their meetings, the Christians came to be regarded with suspicion. During the persecution of Christians many Christian texts were written by the Apostles and early Church Fathers encouraging and exhorting perseverance and prayer at times of persecution.

The first surviving pagan report of meetings of Christians was by Pliny (62 - 113 CE) in his letter to Trajan in 112 CE. Pliny was responding to a complaint by local citizens against a Christian group in a city in Pontus. After investigation he regarded the Christians gathering as a *superstitio*, a foreign cult, and wrote that they appeared to be harmless in that:

they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, 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. (Pliny Ep. 10.96)⁸²

Trajan advised Pliny not to seek out Christians but only to prosecute those who had been indicated as Christians and if they, when questioned, refused to sacrifice to the Emperor as prescribed by the emperor cult. The persecution of Christians at times was due to accusations of other crimes such as incest, cannibalism and assembling into *collegia* without permission and the threat of political uprising. In 177 CE in Gaul many Christians were martyred because of mob hatred of their exclusivity of worship. At different times during the second century certain communities suffered persecution. Emperor Hadrian wrote to the Pro-Consul in Asia forbidding persecution of Christians without a trial and in Marcus Aurelius' reign persecution also occurred but the numbers of adherents to the new sect was too small for them to be regarded as a significant threat. At the beginning of the third century, however, the tempo of persecution changed. The numbers of Christians were significant in Alexandria, Carthage, Rome, Corinth and Antioch. As Christianity was growing it was distancing itself from Judaism. It also had stronger spokespersons e.g. Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Origen. By the third century CE Christianity was having an influence on the rather frail structure upon which the Roman society depended. There was also an upheaval within the imperial system. In 235 CE Emperor Alexander Severus was assassinated. Emperor Maximinus who replaced him hated everything the Severan dynasty had started and stood for, including tolerating Christianity, and there was persecution of Christian leaders until Maximinus' death in 238 CE after which there

⁸¹ Tacitus. op. cit., p. 380.

⁸² Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1984, p.22.

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was peace for a time. Then followed the persecution of Christians by Decius (emperor 249 - 251 CE) when he issued a general edict requiring people to have a certificate to prove they had sacrificed to the emperor. Valerian (emperor 253 - 60 CE) at first was friendly towards Christians then, according to Eusebius, was induced by a palace magician to get rid of them and Valerian confiscated property belonging to Christians and allowed the mob to persecute them. His successor, Gallienus (emperor 260 - 268 CE), however, was tolerant towards Christians and issued an edict stating 'they were officially allowed to meet for worship and to own buildings and cemeteries'.⁸³ There was toleration of Christianity for the remaining part of the third century and 'Christians could meet for worship without fear'.⁸⁴ In 302 CE Emperor Diocletian, encouraged by Galerius, brought about full-scale persecution throughout the empire. An edict outlawing Christianity and ordering the destruction of their property and Scriptures was issued. It was not until 311 CE persecution of Christians was brought to an end by Galerius when on his death bed he issued his 'Edict of Toleration' which allowed Christians freedom to worship their God but did not restore their property. In 313 CE the 'Edict of Milan' issued by Emperor Licinius gave everyone in the empire religious freedom of worship and the Christians restitution of their property. This edict was issued in the names of both co-rulers of the Roman Empire, Licinius and Constantine, and persecution ended and toleration of all religions ensued for a time.

8. Church Fathers

During these times of persecution the early Church Fathers wrote to encourage the assemblies to remain faithful and prayerful. As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire the leaders of Christian communities wrote to other communities of Christians with instructions on Christian living to be shared at their gatherings. The writings of these early Church Fathers urged constant prayer of petition for the community and the society in which they lived. The writings of the early Church Fathers also detailed prayer as regards places, types, times and content. *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* or the *Didache* and other ancient writings show that the 'primitive 'Breaking of Bread' was the first distinctively Christian form of symbolic worship.'⁸⁵ and various prayers became part of their liturgies. These writings included an anonymous letter from 'The Church of Rome to the Church of Corinth', commonly called *Clement's First Letter*, which is thought to be the earliest Christian document outside the New Testament.⁸⁶ Other early church leaders such as Ignatius of Antioch, Barnabas, Polycarp, Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian and Origen wrote about prayer and Christian living. These post-New Testament writings span the second and third centuries CE, and are important because they were written for the instruction and encouragement of the Christian assemblies and their

⁸³ M. A. Smith, *From Christ to Constantine*, Inter-Varsity Press, p. 140, (Edict in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, pp. 267-68.)

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁸⁵ J.V. Bartlet, 'Christian Worship as reflected in Ancient Liturgies', in *Christian Worship*, ed. Nathaniel Micklem, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, London, 1936, pp. 83-99.

⁸⁶ Cyril C. Richardson, (ed.), *Early Christian Fathers*, Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1970, p. 33.

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teachers; they also showed how prayer was an essential part of the growing Christian communities in uncertain times.

Early Christian Writings

1. Introduction

In this chapter I will examine briefly two examples of early Christian writings, *The Acts of the Apostles* written by Luke and the *First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*. In so doing we can see aspects of the Graeco-Roman world that influenced how early Christianity was spread and the function of prayer in the early communities as depicted in these writings. Both authors constructed their writings for specific purposes. Luke was writing a sequel to his Gospel to continue the story of the spread of Christianity to many communities and Paul was writing for instruction of a single community to which Christianity had spread.

2. Christian Writings

As the Christian community grew the need arose to collect the sayings of Jesus and the history of the development of the community for teaching and informing new converts. By the end of the first century CE Jesus' teachings and actions were gathered together in the Gospels. The Gospels show that prayer was important to Jesus and many prayers are recorded. Another reason for the writing of the Gospels and letters was that there was a tendency in the early church for groups to emerge with their own particular type of Christianity such as the Judaizers and the Hellenists. *The Acts of the Apostles* and writings of St Paul and other disciples of the first century outlined early Christian history, and incorporated instructions on Christian living, prayer and worship.

3. *The Acts of the Apostles*

The Acts of the Apostles provided an account of the spread of Christianity following Jesus' Ascension and included the foundation of a number of Christian communities. It is an historical narrative written by Luke between 70 and 100 CE. *The Acts of the Apostles* and the letters of Paul sometimes cover the same events from different perspectives. However, these writings show prayer, spirituality and certain rituals as unifying features in the relationship between the early Christian communities and their God and sketch a picture of certain influences such as the effect that other religions and their customs of the Graeco-Roman society had on Christian worship.

The Acts of the Apostles is a sequel to the *Gospel of Luke*; not only is it similar in style and its particular interests, it is clearly presented as a continuation of his Gospel. The book begins:

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. (Acts 1:1-2)

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'the first book' is Luke's Gospel which is also addressed to Theophilus, however in the Gospel he is referred to as 'most excellent' a term usually used to address someone of a higher station. The geographical settings of *The Acts* are firstly in Jerusalem then Asia Minor and then across the Mediterranean to Rome and back to Judea and Samaria. This range of settings give a picture of the Graeco-Roman world at the time of the first Christians. At first reading *The Acts of the Apostles* presents a very simple picture spread over 30 years and relates in chronological sequence the growth of Christianity. Luke had declared in the Gospel that he had decided to write an orderly account of events that had 'been fulfilled', so he also does this in *The Acts*. He depicts Christianity reaching out from Jerusalem to the Jewish world and then when the mission meets resistance from the Jews it reaches to the Gentile world culminating with Paul's arrival in Rome. Luke does this by showing how Peter takes Jesus' message to Jews outside Jerusalem and then turns his attention to non-Jews. From chapter 12 however, Peter disappears and Paul becomes the centre of attention. Luke's intention seems to be to show that the church was firmly founded on the twelve apostles regarded as a distinct group, and their authority backed up by manifestations of the Spirit. Luke, too, was reaching out; he was concerned with presenting Christianity as a respectable religion. The opening words to Theophilus suggest that the book was aimed at the upper class. Luke presents Jewish Christians as being basically faithful to the law. It was the Jews, he argues, who had departed from the traditions of centuries. He wanted to emphasize that Christians were not an amoral sect. His attitude to the Roman state was positive, he displays sympathy to those in authority. He depicts the Roman officials as generally tolerant towards the Christians who are brought before them.

Luke depicts an idealistic lifestyle for the first Christian communities who, 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...[and] all who believed were together and had all things in common...' (Acts. 2:42 & 2:44). This lifestyle was soon shattered by the conflict within the Jewish community. Luke shows that the martyrdom of Stephen and persecution by the Jewish authorities led to the scattering of many Christian Jews. This scattering led to the transmission of the teachings throughout the Graeco-Roman Empire and thus persecution helped in the spread of Christianity.

4. Prayer in *The Acts*

Luke mentions prayer at least 24 times in *The Acts* and he relates the words of some of the prayers. His description of the apostles and 'certain women' praying in the room upstairs following the death of Jesus shows that the earliest community was a community of prayer:

When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his

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brothers. (Acts 1:13-14)

The most common prayers of Luke's early community were prayers of petition. The first prayer recorded is when the Apostles petition God for help in choosing a replacement for Judas. The prayer composition by Luke infers that the early Christians prayed extempore as:

Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' (Acts 1:24-25)

This was a communal prayer of petition, possibly said by one person on behalf of the others. The manner of address 'Lord' was an address to an all-knowing and familiar deity. The discernment of the Lord's answer was by means of drawing lots, which indicated that they placed their trust in their Lord to guide them.

The next prayer follows an incident with the Jewish authorities. The first converts (Luke says three thousand persons (Acts 2:21b)) following Peter's message, were baptised, were very devoted to the new rituals and prayers(Acts 2:42). However, as the number of followers increased the Jewish authorities became alarmed at what Peter and John were teaching. As a result of Peter healing a crippled begger, Peter and John were arrested to explain their beliefs. They were told by the Jewish authorities not to preach in Jesus' name but although they refused to agree, they were released. They then gathered together with other disciples to pray for boldness. 'The response of the apostles to persecution is prayer' according to Ben Witherington.⁸⁷ and that the apostles pray for boldness and not deliverance from the adversity is apparently what Luke wanted to convey. If Luke's description of this prayer is taken literally he says that then 'they raised their voices together to God'(Acts 4.24) indicating this was 'a corporate and audible prayer, though it is possible this prayer was spoken only by one or more of the leaders'⁸⁸praying on behalf of the community. The construction of this prayer is more formal than the previous and it clearly has the following sections: '(1) invocation, (2) quotation, (3) explanation/narration, and (4) petition'.⁸⁹ The psalm passage in the middle of the prayer is based on Ps. 2:1-2:

Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through your ancestor David, your servant:

'Why did the Gentiles rage,
And the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth took their stand,
And the rulers have gathered together
Against the Lord and against his Messiah'

⁸⁷ Ben Witherington 111, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Cambridge, 1998, p. 200.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

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For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus. (Acts 4:24-30)

Richard J. Dillon states that the invocation 'Sovereign Lord' is a Hellenistic (Jewish and Christian) prayer idiom⁹⁰ that must have been in favour at Luke's time. The invocation is followed by acclamation of the power and control of the supreme God, 'something those being persecuted naturally need to know about and affirm.'⁹¹ Luke wanted to show "That 'God speaks by means of the Holy Spirit as well as through human mouthpieces'⁹² as he uses David's words from the psalm as a prophecy to reflect on the current situation that he is describing. The apostles then request help and courage to preach in the unfavourable atmosphere that had developed with the Jewish authorities, following their preaching that Jesus was the Messiah.

The next prayer in *The Acts* is one made by Stephen before he dies as he petitions for forgiveness for his persecutors:

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died. (Acts 7:59-60)

Stephen had been preaching about Jesus being the Messiah and had aroused the anger of the Jewish authorities. Luke shows Stephen saying this public prayer kneeling down and he has Stephen continuing to preach by his example. Stephen did not pray quietly but was crying out with a loud voice (so that they would hear him) for the Lord to forgive his enemies, which was one of the teachings of Jesus: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Mt. 5:44). This is a prayer of one who was familiar with prayer to his God as he offers his spirit as he dies. Following Stephen's death the followers of Jesus, except the Apostles, left Jerusalem and Luke turns his attention to Paul.

5. Brief History of Paul

According to *The Acts*, Paul was a Jew born in Tarsus. His parents were Jews and he was a Roman citizen. His original name, Saul, was a Roman name. He was a student of Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem. He belonged to the religious sect of the Pharisees, a group with intense zeal for perfect righteousness. The pivotal event in Paul's life was his encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-19). After his conversion he met Ananias in Damascus and was baptised a Christian. Following his baptism he withdrew to Arabia, and

⁹⁰ Richard J. Dillon, 'Acts of the Apostles', pp. 722-767 in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary - 2nd Edition*, p. 737.

⁹¹ Witherington, op. cit., 201.

⁹² Ibid., p. 202.

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following his return he started his preaching in Damascus *c.* 35 CE and was there for three years, however he was forced out of Damascus by Jewish opposition. He visited Jerusalem and met Peter *c.* 38 CE then he went back to his home town of Tarsus in Cilicia.

Three or four years later Barnabas came to Tarsus to bring Paul to Antioch. Paul travelled as a missionary through Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, Crete and Italy. His base was Antioch. It is generally thought he made three missionary journeys. When he arrived in a new city he always began his preaching in the Synagogue because he was a Jew, then when the Jewish leaders became angered he would do his work elsewhere. However, there was strong following for the cult of Artemis in the city of Ephesus and the artisans who produced the cult artifacts perceived his teaching as a threat to their livelihood. Reactions against him were so fierce that he had to leave the city altogether (Acts 19:21-43).

Paul kept up his teaching of the communities he had visited by writing them pastoral letters. Paul's letters show the social pressures upon Christianity in the Graeco-Roman world. It is from *The Acts* that we find out a lot of historical detail of Paul and the circumstances that produced the literary genre of his pastoral letter writing. The letters were a substitute for Paul's presence; he had established or visited Christian communities on his missionary journeys and as he was founder of most of these he wrote letters to them to support and continue his pastoral work.

5. The Roman World of Paul's Time

In practical terms Paul could preach anywhere in the Roman Empire. It was a political and economic unit so its citizens could travel unhampered. Travelling had become relatively safe because the Romans built roads everywhere and had cleared the Mediterranean of pirates. Although Latin was the major language of the West, Greek was understood all over the empire so a missionary who spoke Greek had no language difficulties. The Roman legal system was the same everywhere. During Paul's life it was perfectly legal to be a Christian, although seeds of conflict were sown when Caligula, the Roman Emperor from 37 - 41 CE, claimed to be divine and demanded veneration. However, Jews were exempt from his law, which required sacrifices to the Emperor, and Christianity was looked on as a Jewish sect. During the reign of Nero (54 - 68 CE) some Christians were persecuted and possibly at this time Peter and Paul were martyred as well. This persecution was not a legal issue but one of Nero's aberrations. In fact most of the hindrance to the new church came not from the Romans but from those Jews who could not accept Jesus as Messiah.

Culturally, the spreading of Christianity was not so simple. The gentiles as a rule saw no connection between practical moral behaviours and religion as taught by the Christians. Belief in one god was a strange notion and those who had only one god were considered atheistic,

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because they refused to pay reverence to the many traditional gods of Rome. These foundation stones of Judaism and Christianity had to be taught to the Gentiles.

6. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

In his letters Paul gives instruction on prayer at least 26 times and has many prayers of petition, praise, blessing and thanksgiving. Paul's letters were similar to ordinary letters circulating in the Graeco-Roman world except Paul expanded on the content and they were specifically religious in subject matter. They were most probably the earliest New Testament writings. Some time between 52 and 55 CE Paul wrote to the Christian community at Corinth from Ephesus. Paul had visited Corinth and had established a church in Corinth a few years earlier according to Acts 18:1-11. The community at Corinth was apparently an active community but with the nature of the city they had a struggle to adhere to Christian principles. Corinth was a city with a considerable reputation; known for its double port and transient population due to the shipping trade. It was an administrative centre in the Roman Empire and had developed into a cosmopolitan centre for the arts and sports and culture of the time. Due to its location and the passing trade and population it was notorious for the sexual licence of its people.

Paul's first letter to the Church at Corinth gives us an insight into the current social situation and setting for Christianity in that part of the Graeco-Roman world, and included prayers of blessing and thanksgiving and instructions about prayer, prophesy and Christian living. Paul gives examples of the disposition required for Christian worship. His instructions about prayer in this letter relate specifically to how both men and women were to pray during community prayer and their external behaviour as well as their internal disposition. He had apparently written an earlier letter instructing them in community behaviour such as 'not to associate with sexually immoral persons' (1 Cor. 5:9), but it has been lost.⁹³

The first prayer form is included as part of his greeting, Paul includes a blessing 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' (1 Cor. 1:3). According to biblical scholarship the formal origin of such blessings was not Greek but Jewish liturgy and 'probably [would have] come to Paul as an accepted framework of Christian common life at the meal gathering (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:23-26)'.⁹⁴ The letters would have been read at an assembly, which usually included a meal.

⁹³ Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament: History and Literature of Early Christianity*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1980, p. 120.

⁹⁴ Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1990, p. 141.

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The topics in Paul's letter covered: (a) personality cults, which were causing quarrellsome factions in the community, (b) claims to wisdom by some members, which was causing division and heresy, Greeks versus the Jews, (c) the use or misuse of spiritual gifts, possibly some of the Corinthians were using their spiritual gifts for self-aggrandisement and (d) immorality within the community, - Paul sees individual morals as inseparable from community life and he holds the community responsible.

It is clear in Paul's letter to the Corinthians that there had been disunity in the church in Corinth, because he writes, 'Now I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose' (1 Cor. 1:10). Disunity is one of the general issues of the whole letter. By his statement 'for Jews demand signs, Greeks desire wisdom' (1 Cor. 1:22), he is contrasting Jewish attitudes to Greek attitudes, however, he refers to the unity of both Greek and Jew who are called as having 'Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 24b).

Then he teaches on the various problems which he had heard about and these include: a major scandal, that of incest and immorality, and problems within marriage concerning self-control. He gives directions regarding celibacy within marriage saying that only prayer would justify abstention from intercourse:

Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Cor. 7:5).

Paul gives instructions on shunning worship of idols and of not eating food offered to idols, and refers to the fact that they had been used to worshipping idols. He says they now had to forego their belief in idols as 'no idol in the world really exists,' and that 'there is no God but one' (1 Cor. 8:4).

Throughout this letter Paul encourages unity and communal prayer as he outlines practices for Christian community worship. It is clear that he had been told that some community members had behaved badly, drinking and eating in excess at the 'Lord's Supper' (1 Cor. 11:17-22). He outlines the exact ritual for them as he received it from his instructors. Paul also makes clear that what he says they are to do at their meetings for the 'Lord's Supper' is exactly what God wants, as taught by Christ. He had learnt this from the Apostles and it is now oral tradition. This statement about tradition was how Christ's teachings were spread in the early church at that time, as the gospels had not yet been written. Paul discusses spiritual gifts and describes the community members as many parts of the one body; they are members of the Body of Christ.

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He describes the gift of love (1 Cor. 13), saying if they have not love then the gifts are useless. Paul gives instructions on how one's gifts should be used; specifically, he mentions praying in tongues, (ecstatic utterances used as part of worship by some religious groups) and prophesying, which had developed as part of Christian worship:

Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive. What should I do then? I will pray with the Spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also (1 Cor. 14:13-15).

He says that their gifts should be used for the building up of the Church. In particular there should be orderly worship with restrictions on the behaviour of women who are to remain 'silent in the churches' (1 Cor. 14:34). He was referring to women teaching, as they were permitted to join in the prayers, prophesying and praise, according to 1 Cor. 11:5. By insisting this Paul indicated that teaching was his priority and that the Corinthian community should be receivers 'who should accept and practice the faith in the way he has taught it elsewhere'.⁹⁵ His description of how one should behave when praying during the community gatherings show that prayer was generally said aloud and could be extempore, but the community also had to follow the exact ritual that he had described to them for the 'Lord's Supper', so there were also formal prayer guidelines.

At the end of the letter he asks for a contribution for the church in Jerusalem and explains his travel arrangements and states his intentions to visit them for a time. The concluding instruction is to 'Greet one another with a holy kiss' (1 Cor. 16:20b) to encourage community development, followed by his final prayer 'Our Lord, come!' (1 Cor. 16:22b). The final formal blessing 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you' (1 Cor. 16:23) possibly had developed into a standard Christian farewell.

This letter shows the many pressures that the first Christians in the Graeco-Roman world were under. These pressures were from the culture in which they lived and also from other religions and that is why Paul urges prayer and strict conformity to his and the Apostles' teachings to enable them to withstand them. Each individual community could not be completely free from outside influences because the Graeco-Roman world in which they lived had been saturated with rituals and worship of many gods for centuries. The Christian teachings were passed on by itinerant preachers, and through apostolic writings and letters. Paul's letters were collected and passed around to the different communities that he had been pastor of. The early church leaders carried on this tradition of writing to Christian communities with advice and exhortations for prayer during the second and third centuries.

⁹⁵ Antoinette Clark Wire, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

7. Concluding Summary

Investigating the social contexts in which *The Acts of the Apostles*, and the *First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* were set helps us to see how the prayers were adapted and for what purpose, as well as the social and religious influences upon them.

Luke was writing for didactic purposes and *The Acts of the Apostles* developed into a history showing, among other things, prayer as a means of unifying the newly formed community. These prayers were mostly of petition and demonstrated that the first followers of Christ had faith in prayer and prayed for boldness in order to spread his message. Also demonstrated in *The Acts* are both Jewish and the Hellenistic influences that affected the community. Luke's history gives a picture of what happened after Jesus' Ascension and because his history was to be in chronological order he tells the story of some of Paul's journeys. The short history of Paul and his travels in *The Acts* also gives a picture of the Jewish influence in the Greek cities that he visited and what happened when he preached Christianity in their synagogues. After Paul had passed on his Christian message to various communities around the Graeco-Roman world he continued his teachings by letters. It was in these letters that a strong picture of prayer forms in Christianity becomes evident. Paul's writings also demonstrate how the Graeco-Roman setting influenced the early community and their prayer and rituals. The Roman Empire was open to most religions and as the language Paul preached in was Greek he was understood everywhere. There was some opposition to the early Christians, which resulted in persecution from the Jews who attacked the Hellenists and during this persecution Stephen prayed for forgiveness for his executioners. There was also persecution of the Christians in Rome by Nero when he blamed the Christians for his own destructive actions and made them scapegoats.

Paul had many prayers in his writing and instructions on Christian living. His *First Letter to the Corinthians* gives us insight to the conditions in Corinth and how they prayed as he gives instructions on how they are to behave both in the community and at home. They were still apparently clinging to their old custom of eating the meat that had been offered to idols, which was part of their pagan background. Their different attitude to particular moral behaviour was also in question. This letter shows their external behaviour such as their attitude to prayer, and prophesying. It illustrates that they were praying in tongues and singing praise, as well as their use of the 'holy kiss'. Paul accepted the inevitability of the influences of pagan religions to some degree being brought into Christian practice but he prayed for the community and encouraged trust and faith in their use of prayer. He urged them to remain united and faithful to what he had taught them.