Lecture 1
Christian Origins

I. General Background: Where does Christianity come from?
   A. Historical information
      1. interpretive problems
         a) revelation and faith
         b) culture and history
            (1) limitations of sources
            (2) availability
            (3) purpose
      2. What can we learn from existing documents?
   B. A new religion in the first century world, evolving from:
      1. Judaism
      2. Roman society and culture
      3. Mediterranean Religions
   C. Christianity in first centuries
      1. Many variations—no “Christianity”
      2. Winners become “orthodox” right believers, losers become heretics “heterodox”
      3. trimming the bush story

II. Christianity as a reform movement within Judaism
   A. First 100 years, “Jesus Movement” Jewish sub-group
      1. Keeping Jewish law and customs but reinterpreting
      2. more on Judaism later in course
   B. Christianity’s Jewish elements
      1. Monotheism
         a) Only one God
         b) God is intimately involved with humanity
            (1) God acts within history
      2. Use of Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament)
         a) Text-based religion
         b) moral basis (Ten Commandments) not rest of Jewish law
         c) reinterpretation of Hebrew scriptures based on new experiences
3. **Jesus as Messiah**
   a) Jewish tradition of teachers (*rabi*) and miracle workers
   b) Jewish understanding of messiah (H. moshiach, the “anointed one”): earthly, human king to bring universal peace and righteous rule, anointed with oil
      1) Charismatic political and military leader
      2) Monotheism precludes supernatural nature
      3) Not accomplished by a dead Gallilean
   c) New interpretations: founder of new religion, Savior, Son of God, King of Heaven, divine, semi-divine, great philosopher—historically changing understanding of Jesus/Christ
   d) Greek for Messiah, “Christus” or the “anointed one”

4. **Christianizing certain rituals**
   a) Passover becoming Last Supper
   b) Circumcision becoming baptism

5. **“Chosen People” phenomena**
   a) individual groups seeing themselves as special, ordained by God, different from others
   b) arrogance of the Chosen
      1) held to high standards to which they can be called if they don’t live up to stated standards

**II. Greco-Roman Philosophy and Society**

A. Movement away from Judaism and Palestine

1. Paul, the apostle—transition character (died c. 64 CE)
   a) Jew and Roman citizen from Syria
      1) Not one of 12 disciples
      2) Persecutes; then Christ “reveals” on road to Damascus in southern Syria
      3) Bilingual (Aramaic/Heb/Greek) and bi-cultural (Hebrew/Hellenistic Greek)
      4) Religious doggerel
   b) Missionary throughout Roman world
      1) Message is universal, not local
      2) Christian messages to non-Jewish, Greek and Roman world
(3) Schooled in Greek ideas and literary styles
(4) Concern with metaphysical questions—nature of God, who is the Christ, what is reality all about?
(5) Moving following of Jesus out of Jerusalem
c) Breaking with Jewish law such as circumcision

2. Paul's letters: (Greek Epistles) 50 – 60 AD
   a) Written before the Gospels
      (1) His early letters: 1 Thessalonians; Galatians; 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon; Romans
      (2) some letters ascribed to Paul not written by Paul according to scholars
   b) Gospels— word from Middle English godspell, or "good news”—trans. from Greek euangelion "good news"
      Evangelist, evangelical)
      (1) Mathew, Mark, and Luke written 70-90 CE
      (2) Gospel of John, 80 –100 CE
         (a) After the Fall of Jerusalem and destruction of Temple
         (b) Gospel of John especially influenced by Greek philosophical traditions
         (c) Jesus as the "logos" reason, rationale
      (3) Four gospels fixed by end of 2nd century
   c) fluidity of the "canon"
      (1) Gnostic writings
      (2) not fixed in Latin-speaking countries until end of the 4th c.

B. Adoption of Roman society (not Jewish) as organizational model
   1. Early church images: "cesar," emperor, king, kingdom
   2. Layers of authority
      a) Low position of women and slaves (in spite of early involvement and support)
   3. State church supported by early rulers

III. Mediterranean Religions
   A. Mythological structures from Egypt and ancient Near East
      1. Christians adapting images and stories from what is around it—openness to non-Christian world; struggle with "purity" and "authenticity"
2. Gods (rather than monotheism) and semi-Gods (Hercules)
3. Dying and rising God (Osiris)

B. Ecstatic religions, prophecy, healing
   1. Powerful role of women (unlike in Judaism or Roman structures)
   2. anti-institutional trend (like purity/impurity problem)
   3. continual “revelation” which breaks through authority, traditions, hierarchy

IV. Early Christianity
   A. Issues from the first three hundred years:
      1. Survival
         a) Periodic persecutions by Roman government because Christians threats to Roman state
         b) Christians are "a-theistic" because they do not worship the emperor, they eat their god
         c) They distribute social order—male, female; slave, master; infanticide
      2. Who is orthodox ("pure" "true") and who is heterodox ("impure" "false") and who determines?
         a) Who is the Christ?
         b) What is the nature of the community?
         c) Which texts should we use?
         d) Who is in power around here?
      3. Many versions—internal division, no fixed norm
      4. Decisions made by councils
         a) Losers don't always go away—heterodoxy
   B. Establishment of state religion of Roman Empire
      1. Disintegration of Roman unity and competition for throne
      2. When Constantine becomes emperor 324 lets Christians worship in peace
         a) Uses Christianity as way to unify empire against pagans (siding with rival Licinius)
         b) Moves Roman capitol from Rome to Byzantium, Constantinople
         c) Back and forth between pagan and Christian
      3. Eliminating certain attitudes until “catholic” (universal) Christianity remains
V. Conclusion

A. Jewish origins with Greco-Roman overlays
B. Unclear: Who is this Christ and what should we do to follow him?
C. Close association between religion, culture, and politics