

## History is His Story

**In the aftermath of Pentecost**, The Way was intensely feared by traditional Jews. Peter and John, then all the apostles were hauled into Jewish high court (Sanhedrin). Jews feared the loss of Temple and the Law. This erupted when Stephen, a young follower of The Way disputed with several arch-traditional Hellenistic synagogues and gave a fiery speech to the Council in Acts 7. They stoned Stephen, a proscribed execution for unbelief, but this instance seems to have been an act of pure rage. Stephen's martyrdom sparked a "great persecution" directed against mostly Hellenists of The Way. Many fled Jerusalem. But the Apostles remained and the Aramaic followers continued to flourish. Chief persecutor of Christ's followers was another highly learned Hellenistic Jew, Saul Paulus of Tarsus. When Jesus struck him blind near Damascus, it did not change his unstinting service to God's Will, but his understanding of that Will had been completely changed. He thereupon began to proclaim Jesus in Damascus, but traditional Jews sought to kill him. He went into hiding in Arabia (Nabatea). Some who fled the Great Persecution went to Antioch, 3<sup>rd</sup> largest city of the empire with 300,000 people. Their witnessing of the Gospel among Gentiles came to the attention of the Apostles who sent Joseph Barnabus, a bilingual Hellenist to investigate. Barnabus found Saul in nearby Tarsus and together, they ministered to the group who was now calling themselves Christians, *little Christs*.

Romans originally had two co-rulers, the consuls, (Roman version of balance of power) which replaced the role of a king in their republic. Julius Caesar seized total control in 46 BC, causing his assassination in 44 BC. At his funeral, priests saw his ghost rise up from the pyre, and proclaimed him to have been a god. When his popular nephew, Augustus (ruled 27BC-14AD) took power 17 years later, he was declared a god by Roman priests by succession. But Tiberius (14-37AD) was not (The coin with Augustus Caesar's "divine" image that Jesus asked for when he proclaimed, "Render unto Caesar [a false god], what is Caesar's, and to God that which is God's." -- left everyone shaking their heads at such a clever answer.) The succeeding emperor, Tiberius' great-nephew Gaius "Caligula" was a promising young man who went insane (venereal disease?). In his insanity he became obsessed with being an immortal and demanded he be worshipped before all other gods everywhere. Rome's religious tolerance had done much to obtain a peaceful empire, but this was a violation and it inflamed Jewish resentment. Caligula ruled only 4 years but appointed Herod Agrippa I as puppet king of Galilee and other areas after an uncle Phillip had died. (Herod I, the Great, ruler when Jesus was born, died soon thereafter.) Herod I's lands were divided between his sons Antipas and Phillip. Antipas was the Roman puppet ruler when Jesus was crucified. Then came Agrippa I who favored Pharisees, distrusted the Sadducees, and vehemently hated The Way whom the Pharisees hated. He beheaded James the Apostle and imprisoned Peter (released by an "angel of the Lord", Acts 12) Agrippa I died 44 AD ( Acts 12) not long after Caligula was assassinated by his guards in Rome.

Rome, thereafter under new emperor Claudius took over direct rule of Palestine. Emplaced was Fadus as governor who had low regard for Jews and thus incited revolt. In Rome, 47 AD, Claudius threw all the Jews out of the city; some were converts to Christianity. The Christian faith was reaching a crisis. Some traditional Jewish followers insisted on circumcision and other Jewish practices before one could come to faith. In 50 AD, Paul and Titus traveled to Jerusalem to meet with the Apostles, Peter and especially James, the brother of Jesus who had assumed headship of the church there. James was a very devout Jew in practice and had kept peace between the Jewish religious authorities and The Way. At this first church council all agreed with Paul that grace and faith alone make one a Christian eligible for baptism and the Lord's supper (called Eucharist, *giving thanks*, by Greeks). No circumcision, no kosher, no Jewish holidays. And Torah's sacrifices had been fulfilled in Christ's death and resurrection. Though the Romans still thought of this faith as part of Judaism, it had truly split from the Jews at this point.