Planting the Proper Seeds in the Proper Garden: Christian Growth in Ancient Antioch

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In the first half of the first century AD, twelve apostles began to spread new religious and intellectual ideas in Roman Judea, or modern-day Israel and Palestine.[1] Their work followed the inspiration of a Jewish holy man named Jesus Christ, a figure deemed dangerous by religious and secular authorities.[2] After his death circa AD 30–33, his followers or apostles were forced to flee Judea and seek religious growth elsewhere. A few of them looked toward the northeastern region of the Mediterranean Sea, where the Levant meets Anatolia or modern-day Turkey. Antioch-on-the-Orontes was the largest city in that area and their eventual abode. In it, the religion of the followers of Christ would mature and eventually be given the name Christianity.[3]

Christianity is a monotheistic religion that was born in the ancient Near East in the first century AD. Descended from an older monotheistic religion, Judaism, Christianity grew from a small cult in the backwaters of Roman Judea to the state religion of the Roman Empire by the late fourth century. Although Christianity's influence is pervasive today, its eventual dominance was anything but assured. As the religion began to spread across the empire, secular and religious authorities resisted the growth of what they saw as a dangerous cult. This led to various instances of official and unofficial persecutions during the second and third centuries. In AD 313, Emperor Constantine (r. 303–337) issued the Edict of Milan, which legalized the religion in the Roman Empire. Later, Christianity became the state religion under Emperor Theodosius I (r. 379–395).

Christianity's organic growth was singular to Antioch and could not be replicated in other ancient cities. This project investigates Antioch's social, intellectual, political, and religious factors to argue that Christianity, like a seedling in a garden, outgrew all

1 In this work, AD refers to *anno domini*, a shortened part of the phrase "In the Year of our Lord Jesus Christ." If the term BC is used, this means "Before Christ." These two terms are used in accordance with the Gregorian calendar.

2 Matthew 26–27 (New American Standard Bible). All biblical citations reference the New American Standard Bible, a commonly used edition of biblical scripture recommended by an academic cohort. The New Revised Standard version is also frequently used by academics.

3 Acts 11:19–29.



Figure 1: Cultural centers for Christian growth during the early empire. Antioch is labeled as the triangle, which is the focus of this paper. This map was created with a map asset from Adobe Stock. https://stock.adobe.com/images/mediterranean-sea-map/108277640 November 21, 2024.

the other religions around it. These competing religions included Judaism, traditional polytheism, and various mystery cults. Before Christianity arrived, Antioch was a diverse Hellenized fortress city. Antioch's geographic position between Persian and Hellenistic territories filled the city with over two dozen ethnic groups.[4] Antioch's reputation was founded on financial stability, but modern scholarship also describes the city as a military fortress and academic center. Scholars specializing in Antioch agree that the city was religiously diverse before Christianity grew.[5] As the Christian movement

4 Rodney Stark, "Urban Chaos and Crisis: The Case of Antioch," in *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 158.

5 "This province is ennobled by Antioch, a city known over the whole world, with which no other can vie in respect of its riches, whether imported or natural…" Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus*, trans. C.D. Yonge. (George Bell & Sons, 1894), 28;

settled in, local pagans resisted. Christianity grew gradually, facing several obstacles that disrupted daily operations from the first to fourth centuries.

A plethora of primary sources tell the story of Christianity in Antioch. Letters from early Christian leaders provide textual evidence for conversions in the city.[6] New Testament scripture highlights the importance of Antioch in the growing Christian faith of the firstand second centuries. Coins show material evidence of the extent of Christianity's influence. These sources further reveal the social and political struggles faced by Christians. Non-Christian historians provide an alternative viewpoint on the growth of the religion, which adds nuance to my analysis. Secondary literature on Christianity and Antioch support my arguments on the methods that Christians used to support the growth of their religion in Antioch.[7]

Stark, "Urban Chaos and Crisis," 149; A. Asa Eger, "Memory and the City," in *Antioch on the Orontes: History, Society, Ecology, and Visual Culture*, ed. Andrea U. De Giorgi (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 490; Carson Bay, "The First Christians in Antioch," in *Antioch on the Orontes*, ed. De Giorgi, 22, 361.

6 In this paper, Christian fathers refer to the generation of Christian church figures that helped defend, expand, and define the religion after the Apostles.

7 Andrea U. De Giorgi, ed., *Antioch on the Orontes: History, Society, Ecology, and Visual Culture*, (Cambridge University Press, 2024); Glanville Downey, *Ancient Antioch*, (Princeton University Press, 1963); Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, three vols. (The Modern Library, 1906); Richard Mansfield Haywood, *The Myth of Rome's Fall* (Forgotten Books, 2012); Olivier Hekster and Nicholas Zair, "Christianity and Religious Change," in *Rome and Its Empire, AD 193–284* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 69–81; Dayna S. Kallares, *City of Demons: Violence, Ritual, and Christian Power in Late Antiquity*, (University of California Press, 2015); J. H. W. G. Liebeschutz, *Antioch: City and Imperial Administration in the Later Roman Empire*, (Clarendon Press, 1972); Wayne A. Meeks, Robert Louis Wilken, and Libanius, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era*, (Scholars Press, 1978); Charles R. Morey, "The Excavation of Antioch-on-the-Orontes," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 76, no. 5 (1936); Isabella Sandwell, "Christian Self-Definition in the Fourth Century AD: John Chrysostom on Christianity, Imperial Rule and the City," in *Culture and Society in Later Roman Antioch*, eds. Isabella Sandwell and Janet Huskinson (Oxbow Books, 2004); Celia E. Schultz, Allen M. Ward, F. M. Heichelheim, and C. A. Yeo, *A History of the Roman People*, 7th ed., (Routledge, 2019); Christine Shepardson, *Controlling Contested Places: Late Antique Antioch and the Spatial Politics of Religious Controversy* (University of California Press,

For the seeds of Christianity to grow in the Antiochene garden, early Christian leaders had to learn how to be good "gardeners" of their religion. In other words, for Antioch's nascent Christian movement to succeed, its followers had to attract the local Antiochenes, socially and intellectually. The latter is based on the notion of intellectual inspiration, or the attractiveness of Christian ideals of salvation, mercy, and the human-divine nature of Jesus Christ. While Christianity was not alone in offering such concepts, the ease with which it did so was unparalleled, especially compared to mystery cults of the time, many of which required higher rites of initiation.[8] The former, meanwhile, was seen in how early Christians socially integrated themselves into the urban environment of Antioch. Said integration involved not only maintaining close ties to the greater urban community, but also providing it with material and spiritual support. These allowed Christians to maintain close ties with nonbelievers in their community and eventually convert many of them, enabling Christianity to grow as a faith.[9]

Recent scholarship has also treated pre-Christian Antioch as an academic center prior to the first century AD.[10] As a metaphorical plot of soil, Antioch welcomed the "seeds" of new philosophies to be planted and take root.[11] Rodney Stark attributes Christianity's success to multiple factors, including not only attractive ideals and philosophies, but also material aid in the form of charity and healing for Antioch's poor.[12] This is reflected in the Book of Acts, which

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2014); Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton University Press, 2020); D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch: A Study of Early Christian Thought in the East*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Magnus Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation Between Judaism and Christianity*, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2003).

8 A mystery cult is a religious group or organization from around the Classical and Late Antiquity periods. These groups would often focus on and worship one deity (like Mithras, Isis, or Despoina, for example). Some of these groups were exclusive, preferring to keep their invitations, rituals, and worshipping methods a secret from the general public. Christianity was not exclusive with their converts.

9 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 193.

10 Bay, "The First Christians in Antioch," 22, 361.

11 Downey, *Ancient Antioch*, 122; Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 35.

12 Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 19, 38, 54; Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch*, 125.

records apostles interacting with Antioch's residents.[13] However, what did local Antiochenes learn from these Christian apostles that was relevant to them? The answer was simple: local Antiochenes were told that they would gain far more favorable circumstances in this life and the next if they followed Christ and his mission.[14] As early Christian figures presented their message of salvation to the Antiochenes, the challenge was to remind locals of what Christianity offered.

If Antiochenes expressed dissatisfaction with their lives, this stemmed from their living conditions and the city's susceptibility to disaster. Antioch had the fourth-highest population in the Mediterranean, but its topography was small and its population density great. Local Antiochenes resided in close quarters. This close contact, in turn, led to elevated mortality rates from diseases, famine, and natural disasters.[15] Antioch also experienced periodic earthquakes that required rebuilding.[16] Although secular authorities could address these issues, it was often left to local groups, such as the budding Christian faith, to provide aid. For example, they provided medical care in the city during this period.[17] The Book of Acts even records the Apostles in Antioch providing treatment to groups outside Antioch.[18] Christians also gave support to those affected by disasters in the city, giving these locals a sense of emotional or intellectual satisfaction.[19] Moreover, Christianity became famous as a refugee-loving religion, mirroring the reason the Apostles traveled to Antioch initially. For those living in cramped conditions, suffering from disease, or defenseless against famine and disasters, Christians offered social assurances of what Jesus Christ could provide them. Without the deleterious conditions that most residents in Antioch faced, Christianity might not have grown as steadily between the first and fourth centuries.

To ensure the survival of the faith, Antioch's Christian leaders decided to act in the manner of the biblical apostles. They continued

13 Acts 11:19–26; 13; 15:36–41; 18:22–23.

14 Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, 164. I make this point to emphasize salvation, life after death in heaven, and other factors that made Christianity attractive.

15 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 131, 150.

16 Jordan Pickett, "Earthquakes and State Response at Antioch," in *Antioch on the Orontes*, ed. De Giorgi, 438–40.

17 Zetterholm, *Formation of Christianity*, 125; Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 91.

18 Acts 11:27–30.

19 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 81.

to preach, socially reassuring the crowds of believers and nonbelievers of the teachings Jesus Christ once offered when he was a prophet.[20] This, in turn, led to conflict with their non-Christian neighbors, many of whom feared the growing faith and what it meant for their own traditions. The conflict resulted in the killing or martyrdom of many Christians. Primary sources apart from the New Testament portrayed martyrdom as an essential aspect of Christianity's presence in Antioch. One figure who became famous as a martyr was St. Ignatius, Antioch's bishop. Although scholars do not know exactly why he was martyred, Christians were frequently the target of religiously motivated violence as early as Emperor Nero's reign (r. AD 54–68).[21]Ignatius was not the first Christian to die for his religion, but his letters exemplify early themes of Christian perseverance in the face of hardship and official persecution. For example, in his Epistle to the Romans he expresses a desire for death as part of his religious journey. In Chapter VI of his Epistle, Ignatius demands suffering to attain the goal of salvation:

> Suffer me to obtain pure light: when I have gone thither, I shall indeed be a man of God. Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God. If any one has Him within himself, let him consider what I desire, and let him have sympathy with me, as knowing how I am straitened.

Another section in his Epistle to the Romans openly asks other churches to allow his death to proceed as politically ordered:

> I write to all the Churches, and impress on them all, that I shall willingly die for God, unless ye hinder me. I beseech of you not to show an unseasonable goodwill towards me. Suffer me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God.[22]

The statements in St. Ignatius's letters must be treated as a declaration: use my death to strengthen our religion and social circles. Roman or pagan crowds inflicted violence on Christians like Igna-

20 Matthew 5–7. The start of Chapter 5: "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them."
21 Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, eds. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, trans. Sara Bryant, (Perseus Tufts, 1942), 15.44.
22 Ignatius of Antioch, *The Letters of Ignatius*, trans. Roberts-Donaldson (Roman Roads Media, 2015), 18–22.

tius because Christians preached counter-cultural messages such as personal faith, salvation, mercy, charity, and disobedience to the state in pursuance of the former. The agony inflicted on Christians for faithfully following their beliefs became a central part of their new belief system, which exemplified suffering like Jesus Christ as noble and just. If Antioch was the plot of soil, then the deaths of Christian martyrs like St. Ignatius were the seeds its Christian community used to inspire their followers and attract new believers. Furthermore, Christian martyrdom as a religious feature was not unique or singular to Antioch: martyrdom existed outside the city and long after the Roman Empire.[23] The objects and desecrated remains of past martyrs inspired Christians to protect Christianity, no differently than St. Stephen in Jerusalem or Jesus Christ on the Cross.[24]

Martyrdom inflicted violence on Christians dedicated to the values of Jesus Christ and the intellectual inspiration of his religious doctrine. To resist the pagan majority meant drawing on the stories of Christian martyrs like St. Ignatius, which were constantly retold to Christian Antiochenes. The inspirational attraction of these stories was critical, but so too were inclusive social networks in helping Christianity grow. Reinforcing this growth meant drawing upon a densely populated city with pre-existing social networks, including among its poor.[25] Christians were more likely to support those that lacked resources, since they valued acts of grace. Therefore, from a broader perspective, Christianity won on the intellectual and social fronts. Antioch was a city filled with disaster and disease, and Christianity provided support. Christians' openness and desire to help became an advantage.[26]

For Christianity to grow and mature, two additional factors played a role: political sympathy and religious differentiation. Political sympathy refers to Christians being allowed to worship

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23 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. F. Cruse (Hendrickson Publication, 1998), 97, 122, 130, 148, 225, 250, 304, 337. Eusebius recorded different examples of martyrs from the Roman Empire period, including former bishop Simeon, bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, Vettius Epagathus, Quinta, Priscus, Malchus, and Alexander of Caesarea. These Christians and countless others, whose voices are lost, were persecuted and tortured for their faith in Jesus Christ.

24 Shephardson, *Controlling Places*, 78; Ignatius of Antioch, *The Letters of Ignatius*, 21.

25 Andrea Pelizzari, "The Middle Classes in Fourth-Century CE Antioch: Tradesmen and Craftsmen in the Testimonies of Libanius and John Chrysostom," in *Antioch on the Orontes*, ed. De Giorgi, 261–68.

26 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 193, 200.

freely without persecution in Antioch. Religious differentiation, meanwhile, meant the development of Christianity's religious identity, which needed to distinguish itself from similar ideas as sociated with Judaism and pagan mystery cults. Early Christianity faced pressure from both religious and secular authorities within Antioch. For the religion to succeed long term, its members needed to distinguish themselves from the Jewish "superstition" and separate themselves from the rest of the religious landscape.

The social network in Antioch and its connection to Christians must be dissected here. As previously mentioned, Antioch was densely populated. When Christianity's intellectual inspiration—the doctrines and lessons of Jesus Christ—first attracted Antiochenes, they initially gathered in synagogues before building their own structures.[27] In the first century AD, Christianity remained connected to Judaism before breaking off and spreading across the Roman Empire as a multi-ethnic religion. The Christian movement began in Judea and the surrounding region, as attested by the Book of Matthew and the Book of Acts. As mentioned, the Apostles' rapid departure from Jerusalem occurred after Jewish authorities executed fellow apostle St. Stephen over their differences in doctrine. Because of this conflict, Christianity as a movement could not survive with only Jewish participants. If the Christian tradition was to continue in Antioch, it had to be open to ethnic groups beyond Jewish converts. The Apostles had to offer intellectual inspiration and social assurance to Gentile groups to ensure Christianity's survival. The Apostles debated converting Gentiles in the Book of Acts:

> Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.[28]

Again, seeking other ethnic groups besides Jews was necessary for the religion to form a strong foundation. By the conclusion of the first century AD, "Jesus-believing Jews" and "Jesus-believing Gentiles" made up the Christian Antioch crowd.[29]

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27 Zetterholm, *Formation of Christianity*, 64, 91.
28 Acts 1:12, 15:6–10.
29 Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity*, 6; Bay, "The First Christians in Antioch," 359.

Christian religious differentiation meant distancing from Judaism early on. A general concern about Christianity religiously differentiating itself connects to a problem that existed around the Mediterranean: Roman authorities heavily distrusted ethnic Jews and Judaism. To the Roman people, according to the writings of Cornelius Tacitus, the Jewish tradition was profane, immoral, sinister, and wicked.[30] As an extension of Judaism, Christianity was distrusted. In Antioch, some Christians perceived Jews and Jewish culture cautiously. St. Ignatius warned new Christian converts to resist Judaism as a religion: "Be not deceived with strange doctrines, nor with old fables…if we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace."[31] In this passage and other Epistles, Ignatius warned Christians of religious deception. However, as the quote points to Jewish law, we must infer that he sees rejecting Judaism as one of the essential steps toward being a better Christian. Rejecting Judaism outright perhaps also meant Ignatius shared a distaste of Jews in his lifetime (circa AD 50–107).[32] Many scholars support the claim that Antioch locals distrusted Jews, especially during the first century AD.[33] However, others suggest that some Christians in Antioch were infatuated with Judaism.[34] The struggle for growth with Christianity seeds involved Judaism and the struggle to be recognized as an entirely unique religion.

For Christianity to grow in Antioch, its seeds had to outgrow the mature polytheistic religions around it. The religious struggle between monotheism and polytheism has existed since the earliest days of Judea and the Jewish tradition.[35] In Antioch and other cities around the Mediterranean, Christians struggled to find acceptance from imperial and civic authorities that preferred their own traditions over monotheism. Tacitus painted a vivid picture in his *Annals* of Emperor Nero, blaming Christians for the Great Fire in Rome because of their obvious "hatred against mankind." Suetonius expressed similar

30 Cornelius Tacitus, *The Histories,* trans. Kenneth Wellesley (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1964), 273. "Among the Jews all things are profane that we hold sacred; on the other hand, they regard as permissible what seems to us immoral… Whatever their origin, these observances are sanctioned by their antiquity. The other practices of the Jews are sinister and revolting and have entrenched themselves by their very wickedness."

31 Ignatius of Antioch, *The Letters of Ignatius*, 11.

32 Schultz et al., *A History of the Roman People*, 488–89.

33 Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, 5.

34 Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity*, 119.

35 Numbers 25:3–13.

sentiments, calling Christianity "harmful."[36] During the reign of the five "Good Emperors" from the end of the first into the second century AD, a Christian's survival meant either renouncing their intellectual inspiration and religious beliefs or losing their life. Emperor Decius (r. AD 249–251) instituted the first system-wide Christian persecution in the third century AD. Emperor Diocletian ordered a ten-year empire-wide Christian persecution.[37] In a matter of three centuries, Christians went from a simple religious movement to a target of imperial and regional Roman authorities. In Antioch and many other cities, Christians lacked the needed political sympathy to worship freely before the Edict of Milan. Glanville Downey describes Antioch as "politically sound" when the Christian movement arrived in the first century AD.[38] Ignatius' Epistle to the Philadelphians mentioned Christians in Antioch finally achieving peace, perhaps after religious persecution. However, Ignatius asked them to send replacements for the church in Antioch, suggesting that some members were either tortured or killed.[39] In this way, Christianity's growth often involved regression. The religion experienced setbacks but was not thoroughly wiped out. Violence shaped the importance and significance of Christianity as old Christians were killed and new members were converted. Surviving sources from Christian writers like Eusebius of Caesarea and John Chrysostom from the fourth century AD confirm that Christianity survived past the phase of violence detailed by St. Ignatius.

Without the religious differentiation of its own identity, Christianity as a monotheistic cult would be branded as too similar to Judaism. Without political sympathy, Christians were targets of political demonstrations. Ultimately, the Roman Empire as a state determined the fate of Christianity. Emperor Constantine delivered the cult's fate. His reign ushered in the Edict of Milan's protection for Christianity, with Theodosius I later instituting Christianity as the Roman Empire's official religion. In the late fourth and fifth centuries AD, Christians were allowed to worship freely by imperial decree. On the city level, Christians in Antioch still fought for control against polytheistic worshipers. A total Christian triumph over polytheism was time-consuming and short-lived.[40]

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36 Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, 15.44; Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. A. S. Kline (Poetry in Translation, 2010), 283.
37 Schultz, *A History of the Roman People*, 493–94, 532, 576–78.
38 Downey, *Ancient Antioch*, 122.
39 Ignatius of Antioch, *The Letters of Ignatius*, 26.
40 Shepherdson, *Controlling Contested Places*, 253.

For Christianity to survive in Antioch, Christians had to control spaces that held religious significance. Controlling and defending these spaces meant displaying an "intolerant zeal" toward other religions.[41] The writings of St. Ignatius offer an example, warning Christians about "strange doctrines" and "old fables" that must not be followed.[42] The idea of Christianity controlling spatial environments unfolded a new strategy of religious manifestation; freedom to worship turned into violence inflicted upon pagans.[43] Even with violence, however, paganism continued in Antioch long after the fall of the Roman Empire.[44] Christians could topple a temple, thinking that the gods would be destroyed, but if polytheism was seen as a weed in the Antioch soil, the gardener could not fully destroy the weed until he ripped all of it out. Even a tiny portion of the root could regrow, returning to upset Christianity in Antioch.

A small note must be made on the importance of Christian structures and materialism. Earthquakes and natural disasters in the Antioch region contributed to the destruction of polytheistic temples and religious centers. Antioch and its citizens (Christians, too) were forced to rebuild, but if the reconstruction proved too costly, Christians would ultimately abandon their destroyed religious sites.[45] But as sites were destroyed, more became built, especially during Emperor Constantine's reign and in later ones from the Late Antiquity period and onward.[46] Celebrating the growth of Christianity's history became essential, similar to Christians celebrating martyrdom.

How could Christian growth be measured in everyday objects such as Roman coins, cups, and even mosaics? Much like the churches reconstructed after natural disasters, the answer was political as much as religious. One artifact that exemplifies Christian

41 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1 (The Modern Library, 1906), 383.
42 Ignatius of Antioch, *The Letters of Ignatius*, 11.
43 Shephardson, *Controlling Contested Places*, 1, 141.
44 Schultz, *A History of the Roman People*, 648.
45 Wendy Mayer, "The Churches of Antioch in the Life of the City," in *Antioch on the Orontes*, ed. De Giorgi, 415. In her essay, Mayer notes that restoring a church was as much a religious decision as a political one. For construction to happen, the church needed funding. For more, see Mayer in De Giorgi.
46 Wendy Mayer, "The Churches of Antioch in the Life of the City," 413–14, 418. In her article, Mayer creates a table of the number of Antioch churches built from fourth century to the thirteenth century AD. While many churches were rebuilt, many were also left unrepaired or damaged for a variety of circumstances. For more, see Mayer in De Giorgi.

influence in Antioch is the Chalice of Antioch. The chalice, which portrays Jesus Christ and his Apostles, was found in 1916 and originated between the fourth and fifth centuries AD.[47] This artifact is a significant example of representing the importance of Christianity with a visual aid. Although the true purpose of this cup is unclear, it shows that portraying a scene like the Last Supper was desirable for Christians in Antioch.[48]

Another everyday object that made manifest Christian religious influence was the Roman coin. Consider two coins from the third and fourth centuries AD, respectively. The coin of Phillip I originates in the third century AD and exhibits Hellenistic themes with several Greek phrases (Fig. 2). No Christian symbols or crosses can be found on the coin. However, on a coin of Valens I from the late fourth century AD (Fig. 3), a chi-rho cross is imprinted next to the image of Valens I. The chi-rho symbolizes the first two letters of Jesus Christ's name in Greek. This symbol gained immense significance after Emperor Constantine drew it on the shields of his soldiers before his victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.[49] Other clues on the coin include a staff featuring a cross, another Christian symbol. Although modern scholarship supports the argument of an instance of Christian motifs featured on a coin from the time of Emperor Constantine, there is little doubt that Christianity's intellectual inspiration and religious manifestation reached physical objects such as coins. Antioch had its own mint, but was required to follow Rome's instructions on every new coin's presentation.[50] Before Emperor Constantine, all emperors portrayed themselves and other Greco-Roman symbols. Changing each coin's design was a political decision from Rome. To show any specific religious symbolism on a Roman coin required legislation. For Christianity to influence materialistic objects like coins, Emperors had to be heavily attracted to the religion. By allowing Christian motifs on coins, the Emperor encouraged his citizens, including those of Antioch, to follow Christianity. But not all material objects displayed Christian motifs. Mosaics on the floors of bathhouses and homes in Antioch, for example, did not show evidence of Christian influence between the first and fourth centuries AD.[51]

47 G. Ernest Wright, "XIV. The Church in the World," in *Biblical Archaeology* (The Westminster Press, 1962), 252.
48 Luke 22.
49 Schultz, *A History of the Roman People*, 583–84.
50 Alan M. Stahl, "Coinage of and in Antioch in the Late Antique and Early Byzantine Periods," in *Antioch on the Orontes*, ed. De Giorgi, 225–26.
51 Charles R. Morey, "The Excavation of Antioch-on-the-Orontes,"



Figure 2. Greek letters are located all around the back of the coin, while the front shows Emperor Phillip I with a laurel wreath on his head. No Christian motifs are evident, even though Christianity as a religion exists. Copper alloy coin of Philip I. Roman Provincial, AD 244–49. Minted in Antiochia ad Orontem. British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_2003-0612-1.



Figure 3. On the front side of the coin, Latin letters surround Emperor Valens I, who wears a headpiece. The back of the coin shows Valens I holding a labarum with a cross on it. On the left side of Valens I is the chi-rho cross, symbolizing the first two letters of Jesus Christ's name in Greek. Gold coin of Valens I. Roman Imperial, AD 364–75. Minted in Antioch. British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1983-0543-2.

Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 76, no. 5 (1936) 652–62; Nicole L. Berlin, "The Antioch Mosaics: History, Chronology, and Theory," in *Antioch on the Orontes*, ed. De Giorgi, 207; *Emblema of Actors Performing a Greek Tragedy*, 2nd century AD, floor mosaic, Princeton University Art Museum, https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.13886122; *Megalopsychia Hunt: Det.: Personification of Magnanimity*, 5th century AD, floor mosaic, Museum of Antiquities, Antioch, Turkey, https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.13903694.

Accounting for Christianity's growth in the areas of religious differentiation and material culture is more complicated than with its social and intellectual aspects. The cult manifested its own religious identity separate from Judaism, but its unique identity made it a target for the polytheistic and pagan populations of Antioch and Rome. Because Emperor Constantine allowed Christian worship, his political sympathy enabled Christians to embrace long-term continuity. The material aspects of the city also indicate the influence of Christianity, which has long surpassed polytheism and continues to spread globally today. In Antioch, the conflict between both sides proved futile. Magnus Zetterholm presents a social model on the assimilation of religions, and one of the most challenging factors to achieve was an "absence of prejudice."[52] For Christianity to succeed in Antioch, the religious landscape had to overcome its distrust toward Christians. No challenge was more difficult for Christians in Antioch than being accepted by a polytheistic religious tradition. Without religious toleration, Christianity was forced to resist the religious landscape.

In the centuries after Christianity settled, Persians captured Antioch in the sixth century AD, and Arabs later conquered the city. Although the Byzantine Empire would recapture Antioch, the main force there today is not Christianity but Islam, which dominates Turkey and Syria.[53] Like any plant in a plot of soil, there may be a limit to how long Christianity could last in Antioch. The most significant aspect of any religion, not just Christianity, arguably involves spreading its ideals to other parts of the world. The seeds of Christianity have moved to different plots of soil and had different gardeners tend the seeds, but the city of Antioch first manifested the new religion and allowed it to survive.

As demonstrated, Christianity's growth in Antioch depended on intellectual inspiration, social engagement, political sympathy, and religious differentiation. As one of the four largest cities in the Mediterranean, Antioch's large population drove success for Christians looking to convert others and grow their churches. Yet the journey extended beyond Antioch's borders. In addition to Antioch and Jerusalem, Alexandria and Rome were two other populous urban centers crucial to the monotheistic religion's growth in the Roman Empire.[54] Could the Antiochene experiment be replicated in Alexandria or Rome? If so, perhaps Antioch was just one point of religious

52 Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch*, 68.

53 Catherine Saliou, "The History of Antioch, Written Sources: A Survey," in *Antioch on the Orontes*, ed. De Giorgi, 18.

54 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 131–33.

interest for Christian continuity. If not, Antioch was the focal point of Christian history—the "Cradle of Christianity."

Alexandria, the second largest city in the Roman Empire, was located on the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, west of Egypt. The ancient city was famous as a center of intellectual inspiration due to the Library of Alexandria. Like Antioch, Alexandria hosted diverse ethnic groups (Hellenistic Greek, African, and Egyptian). In examining what made Alexandria favorable for Christianity, the population size, its ethnic mix, and the guarantee of establishing a church should be considered. Alexandria was estimated to have the second-largest population in the Roman Mediterranean, while Antioch was fourth. Scholarship indicates that Alexandria would have likely established a church by both the end of the first and second centuries, much like Antioch.[55] Finally, Alexandria had a very ethnically-mixed population, but probably not as mixed as Antioch in the first few centuries AD.

If the Christian apostles decided to travel west from Jerusalem to Alexandria instead of north to Antioch, their Christian movement might have experienced lethal early setbacks. Around AD 38, according to historian Philo of Alexandria, a mob of Alexandrians attacked Jewish people and engaged in violence that gravely affected the survival of Alexandrian Jews. Two years later, further tensions arose over religious differences.[56] In Philo's account of the Alexandrian Riots, the Alexandrians were filled with "envy and ill-will" toward the Jewish people. Jealousy over the privileges of the Jews in Alexandria extended to violence, with many "treacherously put to death," "dragged along and trampled," and later "completely destroyed" with little remains for burial. Flaccus, a Roman official who claimed that Philo allowed the brutality to occur, arrested the Jewish government council and showed little to no political sympathy for Jews in Alexandria.[57] For the Christian movement, the problems in Alexandria were concerns of political and ethnic boundaries. Should the Christian movement have found itself in Alexandria during the riots before the religion fully separated its identity from Judaism, its growth could have been detrimentally, if not lethally, set back. Philo's accounts contain enough graphic language to make clear that the early Christian movement was far from safe enough to grow in Alexandria. Philo's account showed no sign of Jews earning political sympathy in Alexandria amid the city's complex

55 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 131–33.

56 Schultz, *A History of the Roman People*, 417.

57 Philo of Alexandria, *In Flaccus*, trans. F.H. Colson, Loeb Classical Library 250 (Harvard University Press, 1930), 319, 339, 343.

social structure. Scholars have also characterized Alexandria as a city that leaned more towards philosophy than outright deity worship. Alexandria contrasted to Antioch in this regard, with Antioch's environment more inclined to intellectual pursuits related to religion and history.[58] Christianity's intellectual inspiration could have intrigued local Alexandrians, but perhaps they would have viewed the doctrine as more of an intellectual exercise than a religion. Local Alexandrians might also have found Christian ideals too similar to Judaism and reacted violently. While Christianity also faced violence in Antioch, if Philo's account is accurate, Alexandria was not ready to be the "Cradle of Christianity" with such dangerous and violent conditions toward some inhabitants.

Rome, the largest city in the empire, was located on the Italian peninsula, on the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Rome's fame was unmatched: it was the center of the known world and all of its glory. The city was host to a large Italian population, which differed slightly from the ethnic mix of Alexandria and Antioch. Rome had the largest population of the Mediterranean, but is also considered the greatest center of religious freedom in the Empire.[59]

Prior to Rome's Christianization, the city bolstered its polytheism and its people preached their biases against monotheism. If any authority or institution could have amplified rhetoric of anti-monotheism or anti-Christianity, Rome held that power. The writings of historians like Tacitus reflected common biases about the Jewish culture and religion.[60] Given that Christianity started with a Jewish foundation, the Roman imperial authority would have viewed it with distrust. Emperors Tiberius and Claudius were responsible for the expulsions of Jewish people from Rome, with the first finding Jews generally suspicious and the latter accusing Jews of causing trouble.[61] Many other Roman emperors discussed previously found Christians suspicious and allowed their persecution. As the capital of the Roman Empire, Romans rejected the intellectual inspiration generated by Christians, labeling them suspect.[62] Emperor Nero, for example, senselessly blamed

58 Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, 96.

59 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 131–33, 192.

60 Cornelius Tacitus, *The Histories*, 271–79.

61 Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 164, 256. Suetonius on the Christian movement: "Because the *Jews* constantly made trouble, which was instigated by *Chrestus*, he expelled them from the City."

62 During this period, the easiest way for polytheistic-believing Roman officials to find blame for their ills was to shift it toward Jews and Christians. Since Charistianity & Judaism were focused on worshipping one

Christians for the burning of Rome and had many torn apart by dogs. Some were nailed to a cross, and others "doomed to the flames."[63] Romans scapegoated Christians on multiple occasions. Amid this lack of political sympathy, Christianity would not have been able to grow in Rome. The political sympathy offered by Emperor Constantine I in the fourth century AD made Rome inhabitable for the Christian movement. Before then, if Rome hosted Christianity as Antioch had, the cult's history would face disaster before benefit. The fate of Christianity in Rome was secured by political sympathy alone and not from intellectual inspiration, constant social reassurance, or religious manifestation.

Alexandria and Rome would eventually host the Christian movement at different points in the religion's history. Yet Christian growth within ancient Antioch was unique within its era; evidence suggests that no other city could have nurtured and hosted Christianity like Antioch did. Any other location in the Mediterranean might have rapidly regressed Christianity's progress. For this reason, Antioch is the genuine "Cradle of Christianity" in comparison to other major ancient cities.

The religion's purpose in the city, however, was challenged in the centuries following the reign of Emperor Constantine I. Natural disasters in the sixth century and militant violence in the seventh and eighth centuries made Antioch a more challenging place for Christianity's intellectual inspiration, constant social reassurance, and religious manifestation. The plot of soil deemed favorable for Christianity's growth became too demanding to maintain.[64] Before, Antioch had been a city with the proper conditions for growing an infant religious movement. The intellectual inspiration brought by the Apostles facilitated the process of socially reassuring local Antiochenes of the value of worshipping Christianity. The garden plot required gardeners and protection, which Emperor Constantine and others after him supplied. Christianity's fate required religious differentiation from Judaism. The political and religious conditions that consumed Antioch influenced material objects and were confident signs of Christianity's growth.

In my undergraduate theology class, I studied a Christian martyr named St. Basil the Gardener, from which this article's inspiration originates. Like many other martyrs, including St.

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god instead of worshipping many, they were deemed as unusual and suspicious. Labels such as these led to stereotypes about Jews and Christians.

63 Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, 15.44.

64 Shephardson, *Controlling Contested Places*, 253.

Ignatius, he was killed for what he worshipped and embraced his persecution. Just like St. Basil tending and caring for his garden, early Christians found Antioch the proper city with the proper conditions to ensure the origins, continuity, and survival of Christianity.