

Early Christianity: A Meeting of the Minds

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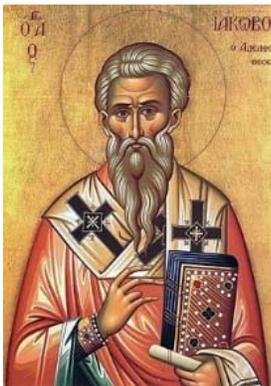
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Interviewer (*played by Mel Aanerud*): Steve Allen began a program on Public Television called the “Meeting of the Minds.” Therein he gathered historical personalities and had a discussion with them using as much as possible their own words, or at least the beliefs their writings indicate that they had.

We will try that today.

Jesus has died, and his apostles went off in many directions spreading the word of his ministry. We don’t know where they all went. Peter went to Rome; it is believed that Andrew went to Greece; Thomas to India; Philip to Carthage; Matthew and Bartholomew to Ethiopia; Simon to Persia; and Mathias to Syria. James remained in Jerusalem

We have gathered here some of the more influential people in the first three hundred years of this movement which became the Christian church.

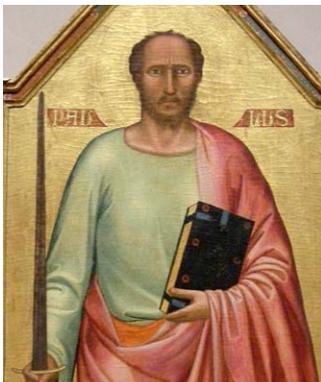


James the Just (2 – ca 69)

Played by David Conradi–Jones

Most scholars and Christians believe that James was a full blood brother of Jesus; other Christians such as Catholics, Eastern Christians, and some Protestants, holding to the belief of the perpetual virginity of Mary, teach that James along with others named as “brothers” of Jesus were not the biological children of Mary. Most scholars say that James the brother of the Lord, surnamed the Just, was made head of the Jesus movement at Jerusalem. It is believed that he wrote many letters, but only one is retained in most Bibles, near the back after the letters of Paul and Jude. It is not normally included in

everyday teachings of the Christian churches.



Paul of Tarsus (5 – ca 67)

Played by John Landretti

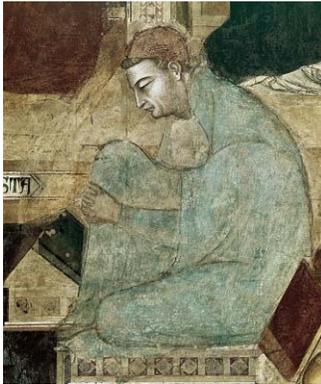
He is very likely the most influential early leader of the church. He claimed to have talked with Jesus on the road to Damascus. This was after the death of Jesus. He traveled much of the northeastern side of the Roman Empire, spreading the word to non-Jewish communities and writing letters to congregations he began. These are an integral part of today’s Bibles and have become part of the religious teaching at every day’s service in most Christian Churches.



Origen of Alexandria (184–253)

Played by Les Rogers

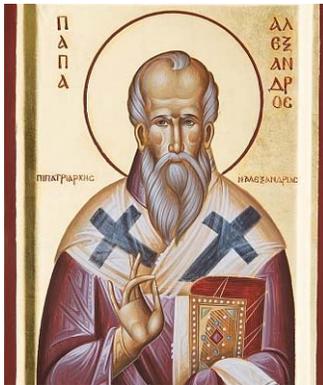
He was a scholar and early Christian theologian who was born and spent the first half of his career in Alexandria. He was a prolific writer about multiple branches of theology. Origen's father, who was martyred in the outbreak of the persecution, exposed him to early Christian writings. Unlike many church fathers, Origen was never canonized as a saint because some of his teachings directly contradicted the teachings attributed to the Apostles Paul and John.



Arius of Alexandria (256–336)

Played by Dick Shelton

He was a Christian of Libyan birth, possibly of Berber extraction. He studied in Antioch, and was a priest in Alexandria. Arius was also accused of being too liberal and loose in his theology, engaging in heresy. However, historians argue that Arius was actually quite conservative, and that he deplored how, in his view, Christian theology was being too freely mixed with Greek paganism. He ran afoul of most teachers by declaring that there was only one God; or Unitarianism



Pope Alexander I of Alexandria (254–328)

Played by Allan Carstens

Alexander was the Patriarch or Bishop of Alexandria, not of Rome. He is considered a Coptic Pope. During his time as a priest he experienced the bloody persecutions by the Romans. He was instrumental in establishing a working relationship with the Roman Caesar Constantine, curtailing those persecutions. He established the date for Easter. Alexander called a general council of the entire church of the world at Nicaea, from which the church developed its Nicene creed and the first canons or laws for the church.

(We are told that:

James was slow to speak and very non-confrontational in attitude but obviously not in word.

Paul was fast of speech; he was driven with a message that he thought was his job to profess.

Origen was also reflective and slow to speak and contemplative.

Arius was intellectual but argumentative and absolutely sure of his positions.

Pope Alexander was a politician who saw opportunities and tried to capitalize on them.

All were men of faith and fervently believed their own point of view.)

Interviewer: We will begin with James. The most complete description of James the Just is found in Saint Jerome. After the death of Jesus, the Apostles made James the brother of Jesus, surnamed the Just, the head of the Church at Jerusalem. He drank neither wine nor strong drink, ate no flesh, never shaved or anointed himself with ointment or bathed. He alone had the privilege of entering the Holy of Holies, since indeed he did not use woolen vestments but linen and went alone into the temple and prayed on behalf of the people, insomuch that his knees were reputed to have acquired the hardness of camels' knees. As one of the original apostles and brother of Jesus, what did you see as Jesus' contribution?

James: We regard ourselves as Jews. We believe in one God. But the faith had been corrupted. God had chosen those who are poor to be rich in faith and heir to the Kingdom which he promised to those who love him. But the faith had dishonored the poor man. The rich man oppresses us. The man with the gold ring and the fine clothes sat at the best place in temple and the poor stood or sat on footstools. This was wrong. The scripture commands that you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus taught that if you show partiality, you commit sin. Whoever keeps all the laws but stumble on this one point breaks them all.

Interviewer: Paul, you spread the religion of Jesus Christ to non-Jews. According to the description of Titus, you were a man small in size, bald-headed, crooked thighs or bow-legged, well-built, with eyebrows meeting, rather long-nosed, full of grace. For sometimes, it is said, you seemed like a man, and sometimes you had the countenance of an angel. But you fell into some conflict with James.

Paul: Yes, as one of the apostles.

James: I have said "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man doesn't produce the righteousness of God." But you were not one of the apostles. You never met my brother.

Paul: On the road to Damascus the resurrected Jesus appeared to me in a great light. I was struck blind, but after three days my sight was restored. Jesus made me an apostle and instructed me to spread the good word that he was the son of God and that by his death he eliminated our original sin.

James: On the road to Damascus you had a dream; and Jesus never said he was the son of God.

Paul: He said so to me. And I took his instructions and began to convert non-Jews to his new faith

James: And that is the problem.

Paul: Thomas asked Jesus, "Who shall be our leader after you depart from us?" And Jesus said that no matter where you come from, it is James the Just that you shall go to. Therefore I went to James. Many non-Jews were willing and excited to join this new religion, but they had trouble with some aspects of the Jewish law. I spent twelve days with James explaining that these non-Jews were willing but did not want to be circumcised.

James: And I listened with calmness and concern. I told him "God said that I shall return and rebuild the booth of David that is fallen down; and I shall rebuild its ruins and erect it again, in order that those who remain of the men may earnestly seek God, together with people of all the nations, who is doing these things, known from of old." Hence my decision is not to trouble those from the nations who are turning to God with the need for circumcision, but I said they must abstain from things polluted by idols

and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. I finally agreed that they could come into our faith and not be circumcised.

Paul: We came away from that meeting with James, and I called him “the pillar of the church.”

James: We agreed on three commandments:

1. Love our God, and love thy neighbor as thyself.
2. Prohibition against murder, adultery, corrupting boys, sexual promiscuity, theft, magic, sorcery, abortion, infanticide, converting, perjury, false witness, speaking evil, holding grudges, being double minded, not acting as you speak, greed, avarice, hypocrisy, maliciousness, arrogance, plotting evil against neighbors, hate, narcissism.
3. No worship of idols, no fornication, and no eating of meat containing blood or not properly slain.

Paul: I came away from the meeting saying that I had “the right hand of fellowship from the pillars of the faith” and that I had been successful on the major portion of my mission to allow people to join the faith and not be circumcised.

James: But he was not satisfied with my allowing the breaking *one* of the laws of the faith: circumcision. He came back a second time and wanted to be excused from the rules of meat preparation. His non-Jews wanted to eat blooded meat and the meat of pigs.

Paul: Those were outdated rules that were discouraging my ministry.

James: Those are not outdated rules. They were handed down by Moses and are true then, now, and forever. It should be pointed out that within the Roman Empire the Jewish faith was the largest organized faith. There were Jewish temples in every major city. What Jesus wanted was to insure that that faith remained true to its teachings. I said to Paul, bring them to the temple.

Paul: But there were still more pagans than there were Jews. And Jesus said to Peter that “you are the rock upon which my church will be established.” Obviously he intended for his teachings to be a *new* church.

James: I say that Christians, Christian Jews, Jews – whatever you call them – they need to keep the code given to Moses. It is necessary for them to keep abstaining from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled [unbled meat] and from fornication. The original apostles were not presenting a mere ritual or dietary ordinance. The decree set out fundamental ethical norms, which early followers of Jesus complied with.

Paul: I could get nowhere with James so I went to Peter in Rome. He was understanding and gave me permission to continue in my ministry among the non-Jewish peoples. Jesus’ word would never have spread as far and would have been kept only among the Jews if James got his way. The church of Peter and Paul became the great Christian Church.

Interviewer: Many Christian churches were established; few had exactly the same set of beliefs. But the concept of the one god who sent his son to die for the sins of the people grew to the point where

the Roman empire felt it needed to act, and began persecuting those who followed Peter and Paul's teachings. Both of them were killed in Rome. James was stoned to death in Jerusalem. Origen was called the man of stone, he was tall and strong, but one of the most intellectual men of his day. You were an early teacher during the persecution.

Origen: Yes I revived the Catechetical School of Alexandria that had been driven out of existence during the persecution and became its headmaster at the age of 17. As the persecution raged, I visited imprisoned Christians, attended the courts, and comforted the condemned. The number of my pupils increased rapidly. I could read and write. And I wrote prolifically.

Interviewer: What was the condition of the Christian Church as you saw it?

Origen: The church did not have a doctrinal consensus. There was a wide variety of opinions regarding the faith, and there were various sects, each claiming to possess the truth of the Christian faith.

Interviewer: And you wrote two great treatises to explain your position.

Origen: I composed many sermons and biblical commentaries, but the basis of my beliefs was found in my systematic treatise "On the First Principles", and my "Against Celsus", which was an answer to the pagan philosopher Celsus and his attack on Christianity. I believe that the number of rational beings is necessarily limited, since infinite creation would be incomprehensible and unworthy of God. These souls were originally created in close proximity to God, with the intention that they would explore the divine mysteries in a state of endless contemplation. I believe first and foremost in the conception of men's souls, of men's free will. I do not believe in eternal suffering of sinners in hell. All souls, even the devil himself, will eventually achieve salvation.

Interviewer: This most certainly did not conform to some of the teaching of Paul.

Paul: The concept of heaven and hell are an inescapable precept of the church. One must strive for heaven but will most certainly burn in hell if one does not eventually believe that the lord Jesus Christ is our savior.

Origen: Because God is a God of love and his love is so powerful as to soften even the hardest of hearts. Regardless how they may get there, there would be a universal restoration of all the souls to God. This is accomplished through education of the souls, and that education could be gained in any number of ways – but this would lead to the, maybe gradual, but always eventual reunion with God. This reunion could not be forced, for God would never undermine, nor would he allow his true disciples to undermine, the free will of his creations.

Paul: But your teachings were wrong and you fell out of favor

Origen: As I said, these souls were originally created in close proximity to God, with the intention that they would explore the divine mysteries in a state of endless contemplation. People grew weary of this intense contemplation, however, and lapsed into an existence of their own terms. It was the teacher; it was I who was weak.

Interviewer: And what did you do to reestablish yourself?

Origen: I believed that those basic urges of man were keeping me from continuing my search for the truth.

Interviewer: And you ...

Origen: I eliminated one of those human urges by castration. In Matthew 19:12 it reads, "there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven."

Alexander: And if anything would drive you from the minds and hearts of the church and of Lord Jesus Christ himself, it would be this. The very first canon law is prohibition of self-castration

Interviewer: This was passed at Nicaea, and is getting ahead of our story; we will get back to that later. Origen lived, taught and wrote for nearly 70 years and your thoughts were the basis for future Universalist belief.

Origen: I don't recognize that terminology

Interviewer: Universalism says that there is no one way to salvation, and any way a man chooses, as long as he is true to it, will get him there.

Origen: If you mean that all will eventually will be saved and will be reunited with God; yes then I am a Universalist.

Interviewer: Arias – he was described as "tall and lean, of distinguished appearance and polished address. Women doted on him, charmed by his beautiful manners and men were impressed by his aura of intellectual superiority." You were a great reader of the gospels.

Arias: I was fortunate to live in Alexandria. It was the first great city of the empire in many minds, second of course to Rome itself to the Romans themselves. But in this city of Cleopatra, and Alexander the Great, there was the great library. It held more documents on medicine, philosophy, history, science, and theology than any place else on earth. I read there incessantly. There were over 300 gospels in its collection

Interviewer: You mean over 300 writing dealing with the life of Jesus?

Arias: Yes.

Interviewer: And yet the modern bible only contains four such books ...

Arias: All the more the loss to you. The followers of the faith dictated by Paul and Peter is one depicted in those four. But there were hundreds more, and many contradictory to the faith espoused by the leaders of the faith at the time.

Interviewer: When were the four books we know in the Bible written?

Arias: Mark was written about 70 years after the death of Jesus, Luke about 80, Mathew about 85, and John between 90 and 100 year after the death of Jesus. None were written by anyone who actually knew Jesus. It should be pointed out that the gospel by Jude was written about the same time as John, and it was the first written book that said Jesus was the son of God – and that he ought to be worshipped, and if he were, it would guarantee life after death. But there were gospels that were written by people who actually lived at the time of Jesus by some who knew him. It is a great loss that we do not have them.

Interviewer: Pope Alexander has been described as “handsome, with a very cheerful countenance and genial bearing. He was gifted with the quality of being a smooth talker and of choice eloquence. Beautiful women were attracted to him and excited by him in quite a remarkable way, more strongly than how ‘iron is drawn to a magnet’.” He was a very important early leader of this new faith. Why was your reign so important?

Alexander: The Emperor Constantine saw a vision during a battle and decided that the Christian faith should no longer be persecuted – but actually should be declared the faith of the empire. However, there were many who had their own ways to practice this faith of the Lord Jesus, and they appealed directly to Constantine. They did not understand what a momentous step it would be for this faith if it became the recognized faith of the empire. Armenia was the first principality to declare Christianity its state religion, in 301, but here was the opportunity to make it the world religion. Constantine would only agree if we could arrive on one set of beliefs.

Interviewer: What were some of the differences between the many Christian communities?

Alexander: Dates of birth and death of Jesus – celebration days. What books ought to be in the Bible? Should there be a creed that all could believe? And what should it say? The church’s position on eunuchs? How to gain membership? How clergy become clergy? Last rites? On and on.

Arias: And most importantly: was Jesus a God?

Alexander: Yes, was Jesus God? Do we accept the ideas of a few who said Jesus was not God, or do we agree with the majority that there was a trinity of God the Father and Son and the Holy Spirit.

Arias: It should be pointed out – again – that few gospels of Jesus’ life proclaim him a God. Jude was the first, and that was written over 100 years after his death.

James: And I was there, and Jesus never said he was a God; nor did he say he was the son of God.

Alexander: On the cross he said, “Father, why have you forsaken me?”

James: God is considered the father to all. He was not being specific to himself but was taking to God the father of everyone.

Arias: And this is where I so fervently disagree with Pope Alexander.

Alexander: I declared the unity of the Trinity in one.

Arias: The controversy quickly escalated and I developed ever-increasing support for my position, winning over a number of deacons, and at least one presbyter, who started to ordain presbyters of his own. I continued to draw even more attention and support, to the point that Alexander found himself having to summon two separate assemblies of his priests and deacons to discuss the matter. Neither of these assemblies, though, reached any firm conclusions, or helped to limit the spread of the true beliefs.

Interviewer: Let me make sure I understand: you were contending that the Christian church ought to be Unitarian instead of Trinitarian?

Arias: Not words I used, but I can understand that as the crux of the dispute.

Alexander: In 326, I called a general council of the entire church of the nation. The council gathered no fewer than three hundred participants. We had to agree on one set of beliefs for the Christian faith, or Constantine would not declare us the official religion of the empire. Arius took his position directly to Constantine, and Constantine chaired the meeting at Nicaea. At this council, Arius continued to argue his earlier position, that the Son could not be co-eternal with the father, and even went on to say that the Son was not similar to the Father in substance. It was put to a vote and Arius lost by a large margin.

Arias: The council was stacked – and it was still a very close vote.

Alexander: But there was other great work done and the first canons of Church law were written. The very first canon law is prohibition of self-castration.

Arias: With all the concerns, it seems strange that that should be the first canon law – it was written only to denigrate the teaching of Origen.

Interviewer: The Bible – when were the books decided on?

Alexander: All the strange stories that have developed! Constantine did *not* take the three hundred, throw them in the air, to choose the four that landed on the table to become *the* four – that decision was not made at Nicaea. But most importantly, the Nicene creed, the creed of the Christian faith, was adopted.

Arias: It should be pointed out that declaring the character of Jesus was not my only concern. I was concerned that the church was adopting pagan rituals and pagan celebrations. The date of the birth and death established at Nicaea were not church dates but dates of pagan celebrations. James had said that he would allow them not to be circumcised, but they must abstain from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. We build idols and we eat meat blooded, because that is the tradition of the pagan people. Only the belief in the Trinity and the authority of the Church seems to be left.

Alexander: You do not understand the importance to the Church of becoming the official religion of the empire. We will continue as a faith because of our willingness to be pliable. We can either become the faith of the world or we can be a backwater religion. We do believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through Him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered death and was buried. On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son He is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. This is the basis of this Christian faith.

Interviewer: It should be pointed out that Arius was banned from the empire, but some years latter was allowed to return. He died of natural causes at the age of 80, old for the times. Pope Alexander died

just a few months after the council of Nicaea at the age of 74. Constantine never became a Christian in his life, although he did make a death bed conversion. It is believed that Emperor Theodosius had the library at Alexandria burned because it held documents contrary to the state religion teachings. But in the process the world lost not only those gospels but also the knowledge of the ancient world of medicine, history, mathematics, science of all kinds – all for the sake of religious unity, which of course did not last.

In this discussion we tried to show not only the beginnings of the Christian faith and the disputes it might have had, but also the first inklings of the Unitarian and Universalist teaching which are nearly as old as the Christian faith itself.

Remember these were all spiritual men, each trying to do what they believed to be right. But they expose some of the earliest and still important divisions that mark the Western faith, which have never been completely settled.

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Information about the images

Saint James the Just: Neo-Byzantine Russian icon, 19th century.

Saint Paul of Tarsus: Altarpiece by Bernardo Daddi, Florence, ca 1333.

Origen of Alexandria: Engraving by André Thevet, Les Vrais Pourtraits et Vies Hommes Illustres, 1584.

Arias of Alexandria: Fresco by Andrea di Bonaiuto, detail from “The Triumph of Catholic Doctrine”, Church of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, ca 1368.

Pope Alexander I of Alexandria: Modern painting by Julia Bridget Hayes.