

*THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS:  
POLYCARP, JUSTIN, IRENAEUS, & TERTULLIAN*

A Research Paper

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## Introduction

The modern church is reluctant to acknowledge the existence of the supernatural in regard to Christian faith. Christianity is a religion that boasts a resurrected Savior, a virgin who became pregnant, and many other supernatural acts yet miracles and paranormal occurrences are dismissed as hokey or as folklore. To the detriment of the faith, the supernatural aspects of the faith are all but ignored in the modern church. The practice of the church throughout its history does not support such neglect.

Christianity is in itself a statement of belief in the supernatural. W. R. Cassels wrote, “At the very outset of inquiry into the origin and true character of Christianity we are brought face to face with the Supernatural.”<sup>1</sup> The Christian faith is guided by the study of the Bible which is professed to be the word of God supernaturally communicated to humanity by the process of divine revelation. The Apostle Paul reminded his readers throughout his epistles that the message of the Gospel is not of man, but of God (1 Cor. 2:4–5; Gal. 1:11–12). The tenets of the Christian faith are beyond reason and the works described in the Bible are beyond explanation.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Christianity is a declaration of the supernatural and the extraordinary God that accomplishes such wonders.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Richard Cassels, *Supernatural Religion: An Inquiry into the Reality of Divine Revelation Vol. 1* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1879), 1.

<sup>2</sup> “In all points, Christianity is emphatically a Supernatural Religion claiming to be divine in its origin, superhuman in its essence and miraculous in its evidence. It cannot be accepted without absolute belief in Miracles, and those who profess to hold the religion whilst they discredit its Supernatural elements—and they are many at the present day—have widely seceded from ecclesiastical Christianity.” Cassels, 7.

At various points in history, including the Reformation and in modernity, the church has experienced a trend of getting back to the basics, of imitating the early church. In regard to miracles and the supernatural, the early church provides the modern church with a testament to the treatment of such beliefs. The most reliable source of knowledge concerning the practices of the early church is gleaned from the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, a review of the treatment of the supernatural in the writings of the Fathers could provide a witness to the early church's understanding of miracles and magic.

This paper will assert that the Apostolic Fathers did not shy away from the supernatural traits of the accounts of the Old Testament (OT) or New Testament (NT), but rather embraced said traits with awe and wonder. Entrenched in a culture which fancied the mystical, the Church Fathers shared a common optimism for the miraculous with their social context. Through the examination of the writings of four selected early church theologians, this paper will propose that the Apostolic Fathers regarded the supernatural as possible and credible.

Delimitations have been placed on this survey regarding the breadth of the Church Fathers to be studied. For the purpose of observing the view of miracles and the supernatural in the Apostolic Fathers, four have been chosen from the first and second centuries, representing the earliest known tradition of the Christian church: Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. This collection of Fathers have been chosen for their considerable impact on the early church, the period of their ministry in the early second to third centuries, and the geographical

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Wilson, "The Miracles We Forgot: Have gifts of language, prophecy, and healing disappeared? The Church Fathers didn't think so," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 62, No. 4, May 2018, p. 26.

location of their influence.<sup>4</sup> To understand the positions of Church Fathers on the supernatural, one must define what constitutes a supernatural phenomena.

### **The Supernatural: Miracles and Magic**

The use of words such as *supernatural*, *miracles*, and *magic* in this essay are in reference to any occurrence which can not be explained as natural phenomena. The miraculous deeds of Christ and the apostles as well as Old Testament events such as the Passover (Exodus 12:1–30) or Elijah calling down fire from the sky (1 Kings 18:38) are considered supernatural for the purpose of this study.<sup>5</sup> The term *paranormal* will also be used as synonymous with *supernatural*. In a modern context, these terms are met with heavy amounts of skepticism and yet adequately describe the accounts of Scripture. Perhaps, then, the church should consider these terms more seriously as suitable descriptors for the miraculous events in the Bible.

Though both *miracles* and *magic* fall under the category of the supernatural, there is a delineation between the two. *Miracles* refer to the works of God through Christ, through prophets or apostles, or through nature, and *magic* will refer to the efforts of man to act in the place of God or in opposition to God.<sup>6</sup> The account of the Pharaoh’s sorcerers in Exodus 7:8–8:19, who attempted to replicate God’s miracles performed through Moses and Aaron, serves as a

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<sup>4</sup> View Appendix A & Appendix B.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Martyr wrote *I Apology 30* in defense of Jesus’ works against being labeled as “magical.”

<sup>6</sup> David Aune contested that the miraculous aspects of the life and ministry of Jesus can and should be categorized as magical. According to Aune, the term “magic” has been used as a red herring in the theological sphere to place the magical at odds with the miraculous. David E. Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity”, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity: Collected Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 368–420.

microcosm of this approach. Magic is represented as the antithesis of miracles as man’s attempt to recreate the acts of God by their own ability.<sup>7</sup>

The practice of magic is forbidden throughout the Bible. In the OT, magic is often referred to as *divination*. The Hebrew word for divination is *מִיִּסְאָם* (*miqsām*) which is defined as “a pagan form of foretelling or declaring secret or obscure knowledge through signs, omens, or supernatural powers.”<sup>8</sup> Divination is often associated with witchcraft, as described in Ezekiel 12:24 as “flattering” and “false.” The practice of divination was condemned as sin in 2 Kings 17:17 and 1 Samuel 15:23 and listed as a force against Israel in Numbers 23:23. The NT Greek equivalent of *miqsām* is *πύθων* (*pythōn*) which is similarly described in Acts 16:16. The Greek term *φάρμακεία* (*pharmakeia*), meaning sorcery, was condemned in Galatian 5:20.<sup>9</sup> Leviticus 20:27 commanded that someone who practiced divination should be condemned and stoned. Scriptural evidence suggests that the biblical authors treated divination, condemned as witchcraft, sorcery, or magic, with concern.

A supernatural event is constituted by an occurrence that can not be explained through natural causes. A miracle is defined as “an act or event that occurs outside the bounds of the normal or natural order.”<sup>10</sup> Miracles are in and of themselves supernatural occurrences. Miracles

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<sup>7</sup> The struggle to differentiate between the miraculous works of God and magical works of man was present in the lives of first-century Christians. Jan N. Bremmer, *Maidens, Magic, and Martyrs in Early Christianity: Collected Essays I*, (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 216–17.

<sup>8</sup> *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020); James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 5758.

<sup>10</sup> Faithlife, LLC. “Miracle.” Logos Bible Software, Computer software. *Logos Bible Software Factbook*. Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, LLC, October 27, 2022. <https://ref.ly/logos4/Factbook?ref=bk.%25miracle>.

differ from magic in that they are attributed to the work of God rather than to the effort of man. In the NT, the miracles of Jesus were performed by the power of the Holy Spirit as described in Matthew 12:28 and Acts 10:38. The miracles of Christ were not intended to bring glory to Jesus but to God, the Father. The same can be said of any biblical miracle, that its purpose was to bring glory to God. Miracles are inherently imbued with the providence of God, to do the will of God. Therefore, miracles are set apart from magic in that they occur *by* God and *for* God.

Miracles appear in various forms in the Bible including disembodied voices and limbs, unexplainable healing, otherworldly creatures, and unnatural power. For the purpose of this study, the following have been chosen as four categories of paranormal events in the Bible: communication from God, supernatural healing, mystical beings, and superhuman abilities. These four categories do not encapsulate all supernatural biblical occurrences, but each type of event occurs numerous times throughout Scripture.

Communication from God to man is recorded multiple times in both the OT and NT, observed in the book of Genesis as God communicated directly with the first man, Adam (Gen. 1:27–28). The OT also recorded God’s communication to Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and both major and minor prophets such as Jeremiah and Hosea. The further miraculous aspect of God’s communication is that mankind is also able to respond and commune with God, illustrated in each of the aforementioned examples.<sup>11</sup> A more haunting account of communication from God is found in Daniel 5:5-12 in which a disembodied hand scripted a message on the wall of King Belshazzar’s palace. The Gospel of Christ was shared with the world via Jesus, the Son, through

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<sup>11</sup> Adam Harwood purported that the most amazing aspect of the Christian faith is not only the participation of the divine with humanity, but the that of humanity in participation with the divine. Adam Harwood, *Christian Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Systematic*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 608.



the incarnation, in which case God spoke to man by becoming man (Phil. 2:5–8). And, after his ascension, Christ appeared to the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus and spoke to him (Acts 9:1–18). As aforementioned, the composition of the books of the Bible are themselves a testament to God’s communication with man (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21).

Some of the most memorable miracles recorded in the Bible involve healing.<sup>12</sup> Jesus’ acts of healing include the restoration of the blind man (Mark 8:22–25), the curing of the paralytic (Luke 5:17–26), and the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:38–44). The apostles also performed healing miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter and John cured a blind man (Acts 3:1–10) and Paul resurrected a young man who had fallen to his death (Acts 20:7–12). In 2 Kings, Naaman was cured of leprosy after following the guidance of Elijah (2 Kings 5:1–14). On multiple occasions, God released a woman from barrenness (Genesis 20:1–21:7; 1 Samuel 1:9–20). In the OT, God is often extolled as the “healer,” including Exodus 15:26, Job 5:17–18, and Psalm 103:3. The miracle of healing is present throughout the Bible in the ministry of Jesus, the acts of the apostles, and in the record of God’s people, the Israelites.

Scripture abounds with the presence of creatures that are not God but also not human. The Bible referred to these creatures as angels and demons. Angels are described as beings created to serve God while demons are the antagonists of God and his purposes.<sup>13</sup> The number of angels was counted in “multitudes” (1 Kings 22:19) and “thousands upon thousands” (Rev. 5:11). Psalm 82:1 and Job 38:6–7 reported the presence of eternal beings with which God interacted and commanded. Angels are recorded in Scripture as messengers who provide God’s

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<sup>12</sup> “The gift of healing refers to instances of immediate physical healing that are best explained as acts of God rather than by common means such as medicine or therapy.” Harwood, 550.

<sup>13</sup> Harwood, 257–74.

guidance to his people (Gen. 31:11–13; Acts 1:10–11) and as deliverers of God’s judgment (2 Sam. 24:1–17; Matt. 13:41–42). Two angels are mentioned by name in the Bible: Gabriel (Luke 1:19) and Michael (Daniel 10:13). Two demons are named as well: Satan (John 8:44) and Legion (Luke 8:26–39).

The evidence of Scripture implies the existence of beings that are heavenly whom also interact with the natural world. On multiple accounts, angels appeared to humans in the Bible. Three angels visited Abraham (Gen. 18:1–22), Elijah was nurtured by an angel (1 Kings 9:8), and two angels appeared to Mary at Jesus’ tomb after his resurrection (John 20:12).<sup>14</sup> Regarding demons, Satan appeared before Jesus while being tempted in the desert (Matt. 4:1–11). Demons are described as influencing humans as evidenced in the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20).

The Bible featured individuals whom were granted with physical powers beyond natural human ability. Samson was granted super human strength and was able to perform amazing feats. He defeated an entire army using only the jawbone of a donkey (Judges 15:14–15), killed a lion with his bare hands (Judges 14:5–6), and single-handedly brought down a temple to the pagan god Dagon in Gaza (Judges 16:21–30). Supernatural abilities are not limited to super human strength. Jesus is remembered for his ability to walk on water, turn water into wine, and both resurrect others and be resurrected himself. In Acts, Ananias was given the ability to heal Paul’s blindness after Paul had encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:17–19). Jesus granted his disciples the ability to heal and to perform exorcisms (Mark 6:7; Luke 9:1–2). Like Moses commanding the Red Sea to split for the purpose of allowing the Israelites to escape from

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<sup>14</sup> Harwood, 257–74.

the Pharaoh and his armies (Ex. 14:21), biblical evidence confirms that God granted people with extraordinary abilities. With this understanding of the supernatural, it is necessary to consider the supernatural in the context of the first to second century Roman Empire.

### **The Greco-Roman Culture Context of the Early Church**

Christianity was born into a first-century context rife with polytheism and politics. The ever-expanding conquests of Rome led to the melding of various cultures, religions, and peoples resulting in a melting-pot of religions practices.<sup>15</sup> The complex systems of localized gods and various forms of pagan religions resulted in an appeal for the simplified, monotheistic message of Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Christianity proposed an explanation for the supernatural and a means of interacting with the divine.<sup>17</sup> Robert Knapp stated, “Christianity was a vision of how the supernatural operates in human lives.”<sup>18</sup> Both Jews and polytheists alike were primed for the gospel in that each shared a common interest in the paranormal. During that period, daily life was viewed as an exchange between the natural and the supernatural; an interaction which was unpredictable in its outcome.

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<sup>15</sup> Merrill Chapin Tenney, *New Testament Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 67; 124.

<sup>16</sup> “The combination of social and religious forces under one political rule produced a unique setting for the birth of Christianity. Although the gospel is essentially independent of any human origin, the media through which it was expressed and the influences that affected its interpretation can be traced back to the philosophies and theologies of the contemporary period.” Tenney, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Knapp, *The Dawn of Christianity: People and Gods in a Time of Magic and Miracles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

The natural world and that of the supernatural are viewed in modernity as separate realms that intersect at specific moments, in certain locations, and for particular reasons. The first-century culture did not view the supernatural in such a way. For the Greco-Roman culture circa 100 A.D., the natural and the supernatural existed in tandem and consistently influenced one another. The mundane, predictable world of the natural could, at any moment, be influenced by the paranormal, unpredictable realm.<sup>19</sup>

The dissemination of the ideas that promulgated a cultural belief in the supernatural were shared through myth and folklore. The folktales of that period served as explanations for the creation of the world and sought to give purpose to life: the natural world was beget by the supernatural world. Useful elements such as fire were viewed as gifts from the gods.<sup>20</sup> The origins of magic were widely considered to be given to man from the supernatural world, originating from the Egyptian god Isis or the Persian god Zarathustra.<sup>21</sup>

The stories of the OT were not unusual to the first-century audience though unique in their focus on one God, Yahweh. Therefore, the creation account in Genesis was not a wholly uncommon concept but the idea of one God being responsible was indeed unique. The story of the gospel became one of many that were told in the common areas of the Greco-Roman world and it fit in with the cultural habits of storytelling.

No matter the religious affiliation, the Roman Empire was united under the practice of emperor worship. Pagan religions permitted their followers to worship of the emperor as “the

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<sup>19</sup> Knapp, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Bremmer, 198.

visible guardian of their peace and prosperity.”<sup>22</sup> Christianity differed in its characteristic of forbidding the worship of any thing other than God, which contributed to the rise of persecution in the first through third centuries.

The practice of philosophy gained popularity in the first-century. Philosophy was, in part, an attempt to explain the unexplainable using reason. While the poets and folklorists relied on tradition and myths, philosophers focused on the natural order as an explanation for being.<sup>23</sup> Despite the popularity of philosophical inquiry during this period, the practice was for the few. The vast majority of the masses relied on the religions of their heritage, political affiliations, and the mystery of the cults.<sup>24</sup>

Rome served as the home of various mystic cults. Of these, Mithraism, Manichaeism, Isis-worship, Orphism, and Bacchism were prominent.<sup>25</sup> Mithraism was a secretive order that mirrored Christianity in its practice and ceremony yet differed greatly in its lack of concern for dogma. Their central god-figure, Mithras, was believed to have been born from a rock and was hailed as the conqueror of evil which was envisaged as a bull.<sup>26</sup> Manichaeism was founded on the proclamation of a man called Mani who claimed to have been visited by a *syzygos* (heavenly

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<sup>22</sup> Tenney, 113–16.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Meredith, *Christian Philosophy in the Early Church* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 20–21.

<sup>24</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1982), 12.

<sup>25</sup> John Anthony McGuckin, *The Path of Christianity: The First Thousand Years* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 169; Frend, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Mithraism was open to and even encouraged its own melding with other similar faiths. McGuckin, 169.

twin) whom charged him with leading the battle between light and darkness (good and evil).<sup>27</sup> The god Isis was worshipped as the goddess of love and the “queen of magic.”<sup>28</sup> Orphism and Bacchism were similar practices of the worship of pagan gods.<sup>29</sup> As evidenced by these examples, the mystic cults featured supernatural elements at the center of their mythology.

Christianity was unique among the pagan religions of the first-century in that the God it preached was accessible and present in the lives of believers. The pagan beliefs shared the trait of worshipping gods whom were inaccessible and aloof. Moreover, the pagan religions offered no trustworthy concept of sin nor salvation.<sup>30</sup> The Christian faith offered answers and accessibility that was not found in other religions of the day; answers and accessibility that were rooted in the supernatural and in interaction with God.

The use of magic was a common part of the lives of people in the Greco-Roman culture.<sup>31</sup> David Aune observed that the prevalence of magic in first-century Mediterranean region is supported by both historical and “literary-folkloristic” evidence.<sup>32</sup> The historical evidence is gleaned from magical papyri, charms and amulets, and literature. The literary-

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<sup>27</sup> John Anthony McGuckin described Manichaeism as a cosmogony: “an explanation of how the world originated and why it works as it does.” Manichaeism was similar to Christianity in that it was centered upon the teaching of a singular patriarch who was publicly and brutally executed. McGuckin, 169.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>29</sup> Larry J. Alderink, “Orphism,” David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 48; Faithlife, LLC. “Bacchus,” Logos Bible Software, Computer software, *Logos Bible Software Factbook* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, LLC.), accessed October 31, 2022, [https://ref.ly/logos4/Factbook?ref=bk.%25Bacchus\\_Deity](https://ref.ly/logos4/Factbook?ref=bk.%25Bacchus_Deity).

<sup>30</sup> Tenney, 107–08.

<sup>31</sup> Bremmer noted that magic was largely condemned in the Greco-Roman culture and yet still remained popular with the poor and the elite. Magicians were publicly condemned while privately solicited. Interestingly, the condemnation of magic in the culture increased as Rome became Christian in the fourth century. Bremmer, 201–202.

<sup>32</sup> Aune, 378.

folkloristic evidence is drawn from the magical motifs and imagery in Greco-Roman folklore. According to Aune, the goals of magic in this era were to seek “protection, healing, success, or knowledge”; goals which are similar to a person’s reasoning for practicing any given religion. Therefore, if religion did not bring the desired results, magic served as an alternative.<sup>33</sup> A magician would make their living by performing magical acts in exchange for payment, a practice which was viewed by many in negative way.<sup>34</sup>

Supernatural elements were not only represented by unseen influences but were also known to be physical inhabitants of the natural world. Creatures such as nymphs and demigods ranged from the helpful and benevolent to the mischievous and violent.<sup>35</sup> The most striking aspect of these ethereal beings, however, was that their physiology and actions were similar to those of humans. Even those which were believed to feature a combination of animal and human parts were known for behaving in a very human manner.<sup>36</sup> The understanding of these beings contained both similarities and dissimilarities to the biblical teaching concerning angels and demons.

Evidence of the supernatural milieu of the first century can be found in the catacombs of Rome. Both pagans and Christians alike were buried in tombs that are located throughout the ancient ruins of the city which serve as a testament of the beliefs of those who were buried there and their families. The catacombs feature art on the walls that depict various miraculous biblical events such as Jesus healing the blind man, the resurrection of Lazarus, Moses’ reception of the

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<sup>33</sup> Aune, 379.

<sup>34</sup> Bremmer, 200–01.

<sup>35</sup> Knapp, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 12.

Law, and the Fall.<sup>37</sup> Most tellingly, the inscriptions of the tombs express the supernatural beliefs of both pagans and Christians alike. One pagan tomb read, “I, Procope, lift up my hands against the god who snatched me away innocent.” And another, “To a very sweet child whom the angry gods gave to eternal sleep.” An observed Christian’s tomb read, “Refrain from tears, my sweet daughters and husband, and believe it is forbidden to weep for one who lives in Christ.” Another Christian tomb read, “Here reposes Laurentius who believed in the resurrection.”<sup>38</sup> Whether pagan or Christian, the tombs of the deceased tell of belief in the supernatural.

The combination of these factors, from the political and philosophical to the mystical and ceremonial, created an environment that both served as the means of Christianity’s expansion while paradoxically serving as its most formidable opposition.<sup>39</sup> Merrill Chapin Tenney summarized the first-century environment eloquently:

Into such a superstitious and materialistic world Christianity was born. Fate, demons, and gods of every description haunted the atmosphere; spells, incantations, and magic were the means by which the individual could fend off the dangers that encircled him. Security was obtained by bribing the deities, or by ascertaining from horoscopes what course of action to pursue, or by discovering some potent charm to keep the threatening powers of darkness at bay. The uncertainty of the future held the masses of mankind in mental and spiritual bondage. Not until the light of the gospel of Christ penetrated to the Gentiles did men begin to lose their dread of the unseen powers and to achieve a true freedom.<sup>40</sup>

Upon this set of circumstances, political positions, beliefs, and religions the stage was set for the birth and expansion of Christianity. The second generation of Christians — the Apostolic Fathers

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<sup>37</sup> Henry Thorne Sell, *Studies in Early Church History* (Willow Grove, PA: Woodlawn Electronic Publishing, 1998), Study 5.

<sup>38</sup> Sell, Study 5.

<sup>39</sup> Tenney, 67–8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 124.



— served as the documentarians whom recorded the history of the church, explained the practice of the church, and defended the theology of the church.

### **Polycarp**

Polycarp lived from around 60 to 155 A.D. and served as the Bishop of Smyrna. He is known for possessing a triad of apostolic relationships as a student of the apostle John, a fellow of Ignatius, and as a mentor to Irenaeus.<sup>41</sup> Polycarp's influential writings include his letter to the Philippians and *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, a popular hagiographic work.<sup>42</sup> The account of Polycarp's execution is the earliest known record of Christian martyrdom.<sup>43</sup>

The account of Polycarp's arrest and trial described him and others in attendance hearing a disembodied voice which said, "Be strong, Polycarp, and be a man."<sup>44</sup> This account suggests that he both affirmed the communication of God to man and also that God communicated directly to Polycarp and other believers. This passage specified that those who were able to hear the voice from heaven were other Christians present at the time of Polycarp's trial.<sup>45</sup>

Further into the letter, Polycarp's prayer was recorded in which the martyr spoke to God aloud as he looked to the heavens. Polycarp prayed, "O Lord God Almighty, Father of your

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<sup>41</sup> Mike Aquilina, *The Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Teachers Expanded Edition* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2006), 67.

<sup>42</sup> Jimmy Akin, *The Fathers Know Best: Your Essential Guide to the Teachings of the Early Church* (San Diego, CA: Catholic Answers, 2010), 70.

<sup>43</sup> Pope Clement I et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, Vol. 2, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1912–1913), 308–309.

<sup>44</sup> "Martyrdom of Polycarp 9.1–4" in *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, ed. Rick Brannan (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

beloved and blessed child Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and all of creation, and the whole race of the righteous, who live in your presence.”<sup>46</sup> This portion of the record of his execution not only confirmed Polycarp speaking to God but also expressed his belief in angels and supernatural powers.

The testament of Polycarp regarding healing and supernatural abilities can be gleaned not from his writings but from what was written of his martyrdom. This first-century account is the first of its kind to be circulated by the church.<sup>47</sup> *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* recorded the following description of Polycarp’s execution:

Now when he had uttered his Amen and finished his prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit it, and a great flame blazed up and we, to whom it was given to see, saw a marvel. And we have been preserved to report to others what befell. For the fire made the likeness of a room, like the sail of a vessel filled with wind, and surrounded the body of the martyr as with a wall, and he was within it not as burning flesh, but as bread that is being baked, or as gold and silver being refined in a furnace. And we perceived such a fragrant smell as the scent of incense or other costly spices... At length the lawless men, seeing that his body could not be consumed by the fire, commanded an executioner to go up and stab him with a dagger, and when he did this, there came out a dove, and much blood, so that the fire was quenched and all the crowd marveled that there was such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect. And of the elect was he indeed one, the wonderful martyr, Polycarp, who in our days was an apostolic and prophetic teacher, bishop of the Catholic Church in Smyrna. For every word which he uttered from his mouth both was fulfilled and will be fulfilled.<sup>48</sup>

This amazing event is a testament to the belief of the early church as to the physical endurance that was possible by means of the Holy Spirit. Additionally, this record is an account of

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<sup>46</sup> “Martyrdom of Polycarp 14.1” in *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, ed. Rick Brannan (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Aquilina, 68.

<sup>48</sup> “Martyrdom of Polycarp 15.1–16.2,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1912–1913), 333–335.

miraculous healing that took place in the midst of an execution by burning at the stake; Polycarp's skin was incapable of being burned which involves instantaneous healing.

Though the expression of the supernatural is limited in the writings of Polycarp it is no doubt present. Polycarp regarded communication with God as not only possible but common. The events of his execution exemplified both supernatural healing and strength that served to glorify God, not the martyr. A mere ten years later in Rome, Justin displayed similar fortitude when threatened with death.

### **Justin Martyr**

Justin was born around 110 A.D. in the Roman city Flavia Neapolis in Samaria. He was raised by pagan parents and is assumed to have been well educated in his early years. Justin's further education is famously defined by the pursuit of truth which drew him into the study of philosophy.<sup>49</sup> According to his writings, Justin was converted to Christianity both by the fortitude of persecuted Christians and the witness of a wise man.<sup>50</sup> Lauded as the first apologist and the earliest known Christian-philosopher, Justin founded a school in Rome and developed a following.<sup>51</sup> He earned his surname in 165 A.D. when he and a group of his students were beheaded for their refusal to recant.

Bryan Litfin suggested that a proper understanding of Justin's approach to Christianity is discovered within Platonic philosophy. Plato taught that there is a separation between the

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<sup>49</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, Alexander Roberts, et al., eds. (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), 419–20.

<sup>50</sup> Emily J. Hunt, *Christianity in the Second Century: The Case of Tatian* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 57.

<sup>51</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1984), 54.

material world and the immaterial world of “forms” or “ideas.”<sup>52</sup> The term *Logos* became associated with a divine, governing being whom served as the connection between the material and the immaterial. Justin’s pursuit of truth aimed to discover how the *Logos* might be found and communed with. The answer, for Justin, was found in the first chapter of the Gospel of John; the answer was Jesus Christ. Justin taught that the connection between the natural and supernatural realms was through communion with Jesus Christ.<sup>53</sup> Communication from God was represented, then, in Christ, who was sent to exemplify and teach truth. Justin wrote:

For next to God, we worship and love the Word who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since also He became man for our sakes, that becoming a partaker of our sufferings, He might also bring us healing. For all the writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them. For the seed and imitation imparted according to capacity is one thing, and quite another is the thing itself, of which there is the participation and imitation according to the grace which is from Him.<sup>54</sup>

Justin’s regard for Christ as the communicated, living Word of God serves to affirm his understanding that God communes with mankind.

Confirmed by his fragmental writings on the resurrection, Justin affirmed God’s concern for the importance of the physical body.<sup>55</sup> Justin suggested that, were the physical body of man of no consequence, God would not have went to such lengths to secure the resurrection. Justin

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<sup>52</sup> Bryan M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 86–7.

<sup>53</sup> Litfin, 86–7.

<sup>54</sup> Justin Martyr, “Second Apology XIII,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 516.

<sup>55</sup> “But that the flesh is with God a precious possession is manifest, first from its being formed by Him, if at least the image is valuable to the former and artist; and besides, its value can be gathered from the creation of the rest of the world. For that on account of which the rest is made, is the most precious of all to the maker.” Justin Martyr, “On the Resurrection 11,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 801.

viewed the resurrection as the ultimate healing of the physical body; the human being in its perfected form existing in eternity. Justin wrote:

The resurrection is a resurrection of the flesh which died. For the spirit dies not; the soul is in the body, and without a soul it cannot live. The body, when the soul forsakes it, is not. For the body is the house of the soul; and the soul the house of the spirit. These three, in all those who cherish a sincere hope and unquestioning faith in God, will be saved.<sup>56</sup>

The resurrection serves as the transition for the body from the natural world into the perfected, supernatural realm, a permanent state of healing. Additionally, Justin recorded in *2 Apology 6*, in a description of the practice of exorcism, that men of the faith “have healed and do heal” in cases when traditional medicine had no effect.<sup>57</sup>

Justin’s regard toward angels has been questioned based on *1 Apology 6* in which he seemingly listed angels as persons to be worshipped alongside the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>58</sup> Philip Schaff suggested that Justin’s intention was not to suggest the worship of angels, but to declare that angels worship the Trinity as man should.<sup>59</sup> *2 Apology 5* also referenced angels in the description of the transgression of the fallen.<sup>60</sup> Everett Ferguson noted that Justin

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<sup>56</sup> Justin Martyr, “On the Resurrection X,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 805.

<sup>57</sup> Justin Martyr, “Second Apology VI,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 509.

<sup>58</sup> “Hence are we called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is free from all impurity. But both Him, and the Son (who came forth from Him and taught us these things, and the host of the other good angels who follow and are made like to Him), and the prophetic Spirit, we worship and adore, knowing them in reason and truth, and declaring without grudging to every one who wishes to learn, as we have been taught.” Justin Martyr, “1 Apology 6,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 429.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Justin Martyr, “Second Apology V,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 508.

was the earliest known Church Father to present a comprehensive doctrine of demons.<sup>61</sup> Justin explained the origin of demons, described the work of demons, and declared the victory of Christ over the demonic thus giving Christians power to resist. Regarding the work of demons, Justin named Simon Magnus, Menander, and Marcion as working under the influence of demons.<sup>62</sup>

Justin's *Dialogue With the Jew Trypho* is an account of a philosophical conversation that took place over the course of three days with a Jewish man named Trypho. In chapter 82, Justin convinced Trypho that the spiritual gift of prophecy that was evidenced by the Israelites in the OT was transferred to Christians.<sup>63</sup> This chapter serves to confirm that Justin accepted the supernatural ability of prophecy as described in the OT and also that he believed that this ability was granted to the apostles and the believers of the early church. In chapter 39, Justin listed various gifts granted to the saints including strength, healing, and foreknowledge.<sup>64</sup>

Justin's regard for spiritual gifts, supernatural beings, and communication with God was often at the forefront of his writing. He did not write of angels or abilities in a mystical manner but in a practical, matter-of-fact fashion. In sync with the culture that surrounded him, Justin considered the supernatural to be commonplace in Christian tradition and belief. While Justin represented the understanding of Christianity in second-century Rome, Irenaeus wrote and ministered in Gaul, another center of church growth in that period.

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<sup>61</sup> Everett Ferguson, *The Early Church and Today Volume 1: Ministry, Initiation, and Worship* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 183.

<sup>62</sup> Ferguson, 186; Justin Martyr, "First Apology XXVI; LVI; LVIII," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 451–86.

<sup>63</sup> Justin Martyr, "Dialogue With Trypho LXXXII," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 641.

<sup>64</sup> "For one receives the spirit of understanding, another of counsel, another of strength, another of healing, another of foreknowledge, another of teaching, and another of the fear of God." Justin Martyr, "Dialogue With Trypho XXXIX" in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 573.

## Irenaeus

Irenaeus was born in Smyrna around the year 125 A.D. He spent his early years in the presence of men who had known the apostles and was a student of Polycarp.<sup>65</sup> Often considered both a theologian and an apologist, Irenaeus' writings often concerned the teachings of the Gnostics. Irenaeus viewed the sect as heretical and schismatic and unrelated in his criticism of Gnostic practices. Irenaeus wrote volumes of doctrinal works and led the Church of Lyons in Gaul.<sup>66</sup> The details of his death are uncertain but Irenaeus is believed to have died around 202 A.D.

Much of Irenaeus' writing was an apologetic response to the false teachings of the Gnostics who claimed to have knowledge beyond that of Jesus and God. Irenaeus would not have considered himself an original Christian thinker, according to Dennis Minns, but as a keeper of Christian tradition.<sup>67</sup> The Gnostics were the "original thinkers," and they were getting it wrong.<sup>68</sup> Gnostics claimed to have special knowledge that explained where God came from and answered the question, "What was God doing before he created the world?"<sup>69</sup> In his most famous work, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus rebuked the Gnostics and proclaimed that the knowledge of God is granted by God alone, communicated to man through his Word and through

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<sup>65</sup> Aquilina, 85.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 84–5; Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

<sup>67</sup> "Irenaeus, a gifted father writing in the second century, also emphasized the importance of apostolic teaching and tradition in the propagation of the gospel and particularly stressed the important role bishops played in preserving and protecting apostolic truth." Christopher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2002), 29.

<sup>68</sup> Dennis Minns O.P., *Irenaeus* (London: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 132–133.

<sup>69</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies 1.8.1; 2.28.3–4" in *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 65–118.

the Son, Jesus.<sup>70</sup> Irenaeus' confession of communication from God and with God lies in his desire to preserve and continue the tradition of a biblical understanding of communion with God.

The Gnostics also claimed “miracles” which Irenaeus contested as false and detrimental. In his defense, Irenaeus described the acts of Christians that had been performed by the power of God including sight restored the blind, hearing to the deaf, cures for the weak and the lame, and the exorcism of demons. Moreover, he claimed that the dead had been raised in the name of the Lord, a feat which Gnostics could not boast despite any so-called knowledge.<sup>71</sup> Irenaeus contested that these abilities were granted by God to individuals to perform acts of healing and of the exorcism of demons. In this short passage, Irenaeus affirmed the performance of healing miracles, the granting of supernatural abilities, and the existence of supernatural beings.

Concerning angels, Irenaeus purported that they were created, rational beings who shared the privilege of choice with man.<sup>72</sup> As was common among the Church Fathers, Irenaeus considered angels to be the “sons of God” that commingled with human women (Gen. 6:1-3).<sup>73</sup> In a fragmentary writing of Irenaeus, he described angels as helpful, ministering beings.<sup>74</sup> Contrarily, he described demons as devious spirits who provide apostates with the power to perform false “wonders.”<sup>75</sup>

As a representative of a student of Polycarp and a second-generation Church Father, Irenaeus carried on the tradition of treating the supernatural as truthful and ongoing. Irenaeus

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<sup>70</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies 1.10.1–2; 4.14.1” in *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 70–147.

<sup>71</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies 2.31.2–32.3” in *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 120–21.

<sup>72</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies IV.XXXVII.1,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 1283.

<sup>73</sup> Schaff, 1278.

<sup>74</sup> Irenaeus, “Fragment LV,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 1450.

<sup>75</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies V.XXVIII.2,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1*, 1371.



referred to miraculous acts, supernatural beings, and communication with God as continued occurrences rather than a by-gone era. At the turn of 3rd century, the burden of the history and tradition of Christendom fell to the next generation of Christians such as Tertullian.

### **Tertullian**

Tertullian was born in Carthage around 155 A.D., the son of a Roman centurion.<sup>76</sup> He moved to Rome to study law and developed a reputation as a lawyer and is believed to have written two law textbooks.<sup>77</sup> Tertullian's education primed him to form compelling and well-constructed apologetic arguments.<sup>78</sup> After his conversion to Christianity in his mid-thirties, Tertullian wrote over thirty theological works.<sup>79</sup> Around the time of his conversion, Tertullian returned to North Africa where he was ordained as a priest. His dissatisfaction with immorality in the church led him to join the Montanist sect which he later abandoned to form his own sect called the Tertullianistae, or Tertullianists.<sup>80</sup> Tertullian lived a long life and died around 230 A.D.<sup>81</sup>

Tertullian was known for the brashness of his arguments. He did not shy away from the supernatural aspects of the Christian faith. Mike Aquilina observed, "His [writing] style was

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<sup>76</sup> Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 1–2.

<sup>77</sup> Aquilina, 92–93; Barnes, 1–2.

<sup>78</sup> Eric Osborn, *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West*, (Cambridge University Press, 1997), xiv–xv.

<sup>79</sup> Jeremy Thompson, *Lists from Church History*, Faithlife Biblical and Theological Lists (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2022).

<sup>80</sup> Aquilina, 93; Barnes, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Barnes, 1–2.

explosive and confrontational.” Tertullian wrote, “It is to be believed because it is absurd.”<sup>82</sup>

Similar to Irenaeus, Tertullian was irritated with the Gnostics’ inappropriate use of the teachings of Jesus he declared that truth is found in God’s word alone.<sup>83</sup> He wrote, “My first principle is this: Christ laid down on definite system of truth, which the world must believe without qualification, and which we must seek precisely in order to believe it when we find it.”<sup>84</sup> In agreement with Justin, Tertullian asserted that the communication of God was personified in Jesus Christ.

Tertullian affirmed the healing ministry of Christ as a means of displaying his power to forgive sin in *Against Marcion*, Book IV.<sup>85</sup> In his defense of keeping the Sabbath, Tertullian declared that a healing act is performed *by* the power of God *for* the glory of God.<sup>86</sup> In Book V, Tertullian proclaimed the Holy Spirit as the distributor of spiritual gifts. Among these gifts he listed wisdom, prophecy, might, miracles, and healing.<sup>87</sup> Tertullian communicated that the purpose of healing, whether performed by Christ or another, was to do the will of God whom receives the glory for the act.

Tertullian wrote of angels as being under the command of God, the Father, and Christ, the Son.<sup>88</sup> He also described angels as created with free will, similar to humans, and yet of a

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<sup>82</sup> Tertullian, “On the Flesh of Christ V,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3*, 1158; Aquilina, 92.

<sup>83</sup> Litfin, 132.

<sup>84</sup> Tertullian, “Prescriptions Against Heretics IX,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3*, 132.

<sup>85</sup> Tertullian, “Against Marcion IV.VIII; X,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3*, 760–68.

<sup>86</sup> Tertullian, “Against Marcion IV.XII,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3*, 779.

<sup>87</sup> Tertullian, “Against Marcion V.VIII,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3*, 960–64.

<sup>88</sup> “He to whom, had He willed it, legions of angels would at one word have presented themselves from the heavens, approved not the avenging sword of even one disciple.” Tertullian, “On Patience 3,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 3: Latin Christianity: It’s Founder, Tertullian*, eds. Philip Schaff and Allan Menzies (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), 1565.

differing spiritual substance.<sup>89</sup> Tertullian described both angels and demons as possessing wings which enabled them to be “everywhere in a single moment.”<sup>90</sup> He wrote regarding the activity of demons:

So, too, by an influence equally obscure, demons and [fallen angels] breathe into the soul, and rouse up its corruptions with furious passions and vile excesses; or with cruel lusts accompanied by various errors, of which the worst is that by which these deities are commended to the favour of deceived and deluded human beings, that they may get their proper food of flesh-fumes and blood when that is offered up to idol-images. What is daintier food to the spirit of evil, than turning men’s minds away from the true God by the illusions of a false divination?<sup>91</sup>

In this passage, Tertullian also asserted that philosophers such as Socrates were aware of evil spirits and also named Satan as “the demon chief.”<sup>92</sup>

In *Apology* 23, Tertullian condemned the work of magicians who claimed to perform miraculous works by their own power and for their own glory. He listed various feats such as making ghosts appear, communicating with the dead, and putting “dreams into people’s minds” which he all condemned as demonic. Tertullian asserted that such actions are not done for the glory of God and are therefore to be shunned. He further stated that any performance of such acts outside of the name and power of God was of demonic purpose and origin. In *Antidote for the Scorpion’s Sting* 1, Tertullian contended that the power that was given to the apostles is the same power that is granted to the Christian:

We have faith for a defense, if we are not smitten with distrust, in immediately making the sign [of the cross] and commanding and smearing the heel with the beast. Finally, we often aid even the heathen in this way, who see that we have been endowed by God with

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<sup>89</sup> Tertullian, “Against Marcion II.VIII,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3*, 644.

<sup>90</sup> Tertullian, “Apology XXII,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3*, 63.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

that power that the apostle [Paul] first used when he despised the viper's bite [Acts 28:3].<sup>93</sup>

Throughout his writings, Tertullian affirmed the existence and potential for supernatural abilities both genuinely acts of God and false acts of man or demonic influence.

Tertullian persisted in the Christian tradition and considered the miraculous works of the Bible to be not only true but ongoing. He did not write of the supernatural in the past tense but rather regarded it as possible and probable in the present and future. Tertullian confirmed the feasibility of the miraculous by the power of God and embraced the absurdity of such belief.

### **Conclusion**

This study merely scratched the surface of the evidence present in the writings of the Church Fathers. According to the observed works, the Apostolic Fathers regarded the supernatural aspects of the faith as genuine and continued. Jimmy Akin wrote, "The Church Fathers, for their part, certainly recognized the ongoing, miraculous operation of God in the world."<sup>94</sup> The four selected Fathers provided record of the existence of the supernatural beyond the first century in the form of communication, healing, power, and heavenly beings. The Church Fathers did not view the supernatural as ending with the ministry of Jesus, or with that of the apostles, but as a continuation alongside the ministry of the church. As Justin Martyr attested, the power that was present with Christ and with Paul is present in the church today.

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<sup>93</sup> Tertullian, Antidote for the Scorpion's Sting 1," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3*, 1396–98; Akin, 360–61.

<sup>94</sup> Akin, 360.

## Appendix A

Map of the geographical location of the ministries of Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian.



## Appendix B

### Timeline of Events

Note: Some dates are approximations.

- 30-33** Jesus ascends to Heaven.
- 48** Composition of parts of The Didache.
- 49-66** Paul's epistles.
- 64** Burning of Rome.
- 65** Persecution under Emperor Nero; Death of Peter in Rome.
- 67** Death of Paul in Rome.
- 70** Jerusalem falls to the Romans.
- 88-97** Reign of Pope St. Clement.
- 90-100** Death of the last apostle, John.
- 92-96** Persecution under Emperor Domitian.
- 107** Ignatius of Antioch's journey into martyrdom.
- 130** Papias writes his recollections of the apostles.
- 130s** Irenaeus studies under Polycarp.
- 140s** The heretic Marcion gains a following in Rome.
- 155** Death of Polycarp; Justin Martyr writes his *Apology*.
- 165** Death of Justin Martyr in Rome.
- Late 100s** Montanus leads his followers into schism.
- 180** Founding of the School of Alexandria.
- 190-200** Muratorian Canon lists NT books; Hippolytus reports an early creed.
- 200** Clement leads the School of Alexandria.
- 202** Death of Irenaeus; Persecution begins under Emperor Septimus Severus.
- 203** Origen succeeds Clement as rector in Alexandria.
- 222** Death of Tertullian.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Aquilina, 275–76.

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