

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar, Term 2

### Opening Comments II.4 a\*

**Justin Martyr** was born around AD 100 at Flavia Neapolis (today Nablus) in Samaria into a pagan family, and defined himself as a Gentile.

In the opening of the *Dialogue with Trypho, the Jew*, Justin describes his early education, stating that his initial studies left him unsatisfied due to their failure to provide a belief system that would afford theological and metaphysical inspiration to their young pupil, including Stoic, Peripatetic, and Pythagorean philosophy. Subsequently, he adopted [Platonism](#) after encountering a Platonist thinker who had recently settled in his city, which he thought would make it possible for him to look upon God.

Some time afterwards, he chanced upon an old man, possibly a Syrian Christian, in the vicinity of the seashore, who engaged him in a dialogue about God and spoke of the testimony of the prophets as being more reliable than the reasoning of philosophers.

There existed, long before this time, certain men more ancient than all those who are esteemed philosophers, both righteous and beloved by God, who spoke by the Divine Spirit, and foretold events which would take place, and which are now taking place. They are called prophets. These alone both saw and announced the truth to men, neither reverencing nor fearing any man, not influenced by a desire for glory, but speaking those things alone which they saw and which they heard, being filled with the Holy Spirit. [T]hey both glorified the Creator, the God and Father of all things, and proclaimed His Son, the Christ [sent] by Him: But pray that, above all things, the gates of light may be opened to you; for these things cannot be perceived or understood by all, but only by the man to whom God and His Christ have imparted wisdom.

As a result, he thenceforth decided that the only option for him was to travel throughout the land, spreading the knowledge of Christianity as the "true philosophy." He then adopted the dress of a

philosopher himself and traveled about teaching. During the reign of **Antoninus Pius** (138–161), he arrived in **Rome** and started his own school. He was martyred in Rome in the 160's CE.

The *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* takes the form of a discussion Justin has with a Jew about philosophy. He describes Trypho as having escaped the Second Jewish War around 135 CE, so Justin assumes the exile of the Jews from Jerusalem and the land of Judea. When Justin tells Trypho about the philosophy of Christ, based on the prophets, Justin says this about Trypho's response:

“I approve of your other remarks, and admire the eagerness with which you study divine things; but it were better for you still to abide in the philosophy of Plato, or of some other man, cultivating endurance, self-control, and moderation, rather than be deceived by false words, and follow the opinions of men of no reputation. For if you remain in that mode of philosophy, and live blamelessly, a hope of a better destiny were left to you; but when you have forsaken God, and reposed confidence in man, what safety still awaits you? **If, then, you are willing to listen to me (for I have already considered you a friend), first be circumcised, then observe what ordinances have been enacted with respect to the Sabbath, and the feasts, and the new moons of God; and, in a word, do all things which have been written in the law: and then perhaps you shall obtain mercy from God.** But Christ—if He has indeed been born, and exists anywhere—is unknown, and does not even know Himself, and has no power until Elias come to anoint Him and make Him manifest to all. **And you, having accepted a groundless report, invent a Christ for yourselves, and for his sake are inconsiderately perishing.**”

Whether or not there was an actual dialogue with a Jew is a matter of much debate. Many scholars believe that the whole episode was constructed by Justin. But it is significant to see the way Justin describes the Jews in the *Dialogue*, as it gives his reading of why the Jews make themselves distinctive with the practice of circumcision.

**Tertullian** was raised in Carthage, in North Africa, and was thought to be the son of a Roman centurion; Tertullian has been claimed to have been a trained lawyer and an ordained priest. It is not clear that he was either of these things. He dedicated two works to his wife, so we know he was married. **His conversion to Christianity perhaps took place about 197–198.** He writes that he could not imagine a truly Christian life without such a conscious breach, a radical act of conversion: "Christians are made, not born" (*Apol.*, xviii).

In middle life (about 207), he was attracted to the "New Prophecy" of [Montanism](#), though today most scholars reject the assertion that Tertullian left the mainstream Church or was excommunicated. He died around 240 CE.

His writings were quite influential, especially in the western church, as he directly influenced first Cyprian and then Augustine of Hippo, so his description of the Jews would have a very large impact on the tradition after him. His work *Against Praxeas* gave the western church its technical language about the Trinity.

The latter two authors write after the conversion of Constantine to Christianity, though they write before Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 CE. The first of these authors is a representative of non-imperial Christianity, as he spoke and wrote in Syriac, and not in Greek or Latin.

**Aphrahat** was born in current Iran during the rule of emperor [Shapur II](#) on the border with [Roman Syria](#) around 280. The author was known as "the Persian sage."

From the internal evidence of Aphrahat's works he must have witnessed the beginning of the [persecution of Christians](#) in the early 340s by Shapur II. The persecutions arose out of political tensions between Rome and Persia, particularly the declaration of [Constantine the Great](#) that Rome should be a Christian empire. Shapur perhaps grew anxious that the largely Syriac and Armenian Christians within his Empire might secretly support Rome.

Aphrahat's works are collectively called the *Demonstrations*, from the identical first word in each of their titles. They are sometimes also known as "the homilies". There are twenty-three *Demonstrations* in all.

*Demonstrations* 11–22 were composed at the height of the persecution, in 344. Some of this group deal with matters as before, others focus on [apocalyptic](#) themes. **However, four *Demonstrations* are concerned with [Judaism](#). It appears that there was a movement within the Persian church by some either to become Jews or return to Judaism, or to incorporate Jewish elements into Christianity.**

**Aphrahat makes his stand by explaining the meaning of the symbols**

**of [circumcision](#), [Passover](#) and [Shabbat](#).** This may explain why he is so concerned to deny that Jerusalem will ever be rebuilt by the Jews.

**John Chrysostom** was born in [Antioch](#) in 347 to Greek parents from [Syria](#). He was **baptised in 368 or 373** and [tonsured](#) as a [reader](#) (one of the [minor orders](#) of the Church).

As a result of his mother's influential connections in the city, John began his education under the pagan teacher [Libanius](#). From Libanius, John acquired the skills for a career in [rhetoric](#), as well as a love of the Greek language and [literature](#).

As he grew older, however, John became more deeply committed to Christianity and went on to study [theology](#) under [Diodore of Tarsus](#), founder of the re-constituted [School of Antioch](#). According to the Christian historian [Sozomen](#), Libanius was supposed to have said on his deathbed that John would have been his successor "if the Christians had not taken him from us".

**John lived in extreme [asceticism](#) and became a [hermit](#) in about 375**; he spent the next two years continually standing, scarcely sleeping, and **committing the [Bible](#) to memory**.

Diaconate and service in Antioch

**John was ordained as a [deacon](#) in 381.**

**He was ordained a [presbyter](#) (priest) in 386.**

In Antioch, over the course of twelve years (386–397), John gained popularity because of the eloquence of his public speaking at the Golden Church, Antioch's cathedral, especially his insightful expositions of Bible passages and moral teaching. The most valuable of his works from this period are his [Homilies](#) on various books of the Bible. He emphasized charitable giving and was concerned with the spiritual and temporal needs of the poor. He spoke against abuse of wealth and personal property:

What good is it if the [Eucharistic](#) table is overloaded with golden chalices when your brother is dying of hunger? Start by satisfying his hunger and then with what is left you may adorn the altar as well.

His straightforward understanding of the meant that the themes of his talks were practical, explaining the Bible's application to everyday life. Such straightforward preaching helped Chrysostom to garner popular support, and made him an influential voice throughout the Christian tradition. We read a homily

in Matthew's gospel from this period of his career. He was the favorite biblical interpreter of Desiderius Erasmus and John Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Archbishop of Constantinople

**In the autumn of 397, John was appointed Archbishop of Constantinople,**

During his time as Archbishop he adamantly refused to host lavish social gatherings, which made him popular with the common people, but unpopular with wealthy citizens and the clergy. His reforms of the clergy were also unpopular. He told visiting regional preachers to return to the churches they were meant to be serving—without any payout.

He is the source of the primary liturgy still used in the Greek Orthodox Church, as this was the liturgy used by John in the main church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. His time in Constantinople was more tumultuous than his time in Antioch, resulting in his deposition and banishment. He was restored again, but only for a short time. He was exiled from Constantinople from 404 until 407, and died in 407

**Homilies against Jews and Judaizing Christians**

During his first two years as a presbyter in Antioch (386–387), John denounced **Jews** and **Judaizing Christians** in a series of eight homilies delivered to Christians in his congregation who were taking part in **Jewish festivals** and other Jewish observances. It is disputed whether the main target were specifically Judaizers or Jews in general.

One of the purposes of these homilies was to prevent Christians from participating in Jewish customs, and thus prevent the perceived erosion of Chrysostom's flock. In his homilies, John criticized those "Judaizing Christians", who were participating in Jewish festivals and taking part in other Jewish observances, such as the **shabbat**, submitted to **circumcision** and made pilgrimage to Jewish holy places. There had been a revival of Jewish faith and tolerance in Antioch in 361, so Chrysostom's followers and the greater Christian community were in contact with Jews frequently, and Chrysostom was concerned that this interaction would draw Christians away from their faith identity.

John claimed that **synagogues** were full of Christians, especially Christian women, on the shabbats and Jewish festivals, because they loved the solemnity of the Jewish liturgy and enjoyed listening to the **shofar** on **Rosh Hashanah**, and applauded famous preachers in accordance with the contemporary custom. A more recent theory is that he instead tried to persuade **Jewish Christians**, who for centuries

had kept connections with Jews and **Judaism**, to choose between Judaism and Christianity. He promoted the proselytization of Jews, and many of these sermons highlighted their need to be “saved” from their corrupt faith. He also refers to Jews as outsiders, illnesses, idolaters, lewd, and beast-like.

Due to Chrysostom’s stature in the Christian church, both locally and within the greater church hierarchy, **his sermons were fairly successful in spreading anti-Jewish sentiment. This prompted the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation and social regulations, increasing the separation between the two communities.**

\* NB: These reflections are indebted to public domain biographies of these theologians.