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The Early Church

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PENGUIN BOOKS

I

From Jerusalem to Rome

THE JEWISH BACKGROUND

THE first Christians were Jews. They differed from their fellow-countrymen by their faith that in Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah of the nation's expectation had now come. They took it for granted that his coming, being a fulfilment, must be continuous with the past revelation of God to his people and could not mean a break either with the old covenant made with Abraham, symbolized by circumcision, or with the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. If something new had happened, it was the action of one and the same God, Creator of the world, Lord of history, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve patriarchs. His new word to his people must be consistent with that spoken in the past by the prophets.

Because of this deep sense of continuity, various ideas and attitudes characteristic of traditional Judaism became and have largely remained integral to the structure of Christian thought. The Jews believed in God's election: God had chosen Israel to be an exclusive society, uncorrupted by heathen influences, yet with the two qualifications that this particularity of providence was not grounded upon any merit in the people chosen but in the sovereign, inscrutable will of God, and that Israel was called to exercise a priestly function in relation to mankind as a whole. Intensely tenacious of their Law, which they held to have been given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Jews adopted a negative attitude towards pagan religion, which they regarded as the cult of evil spirits. In Graeco-Roman society they were a race apart, the object of some degree of vulgar distrust and at times hostile prejudice. They refused to participate in the

imperial cult, though they offered daily sacrifice on behalf of the emperor in the temple at Jerusalem and were ready to dedicate synagogues 'to God in honour of the emperor'. They were socially distinctive, marked out by circumcision and notorious for their abstinence from pork and other unclean food. In the second century B.C. the Maccabean martyrs had preferred to die rather than eat pork. Jews could not eat with Gentiles and could not compromise with any recognition of pagan deities in official ceremonial.

Foreign domination and the poor economy of Palestine had led to a general emigration of Jews all over the Mediterranean world, the 'Dispersion', so that Jewish colonies could be found almost anywhere from Cadiz to the Crimea. At Rome in the first century A.D. they had eleven or twelve synagogues. At Alexandria they formed a particularly large proportion of the population; there were a million Jews in Alexandria and Egypt altogether, and they were always a factor in municipal politics, even though their social exclusiveness prevented them from becoming a pressure-group for the acquisition of power. Everywhere they refused to be merged with the Gentile inhabitants, but adhered to their own beliefs and practices, meeting each Saturday for psalms, readings from their Scriptures followed by an exegetical sermon, and prayers. Users of the Latin Breviary or the English Prayer Book are in important respects legatees of this way of worship. Though dispersed far afield, they retained their sense of unity with the land of their fathers by frequent pilgrimage to the holy city of Zion and by sending annual contributions for the upkeep of the temple. Sometimes this export of currency from provinces where Jews were numerous caused difficulty for the Roman fiscal authorities; but in this as in other matters it was always easier to let the Jews have their own way when a principle of their religion was at stake. There was no area of public life from which the Jews were excluded except by their own choice. But of course not all Jews were as strict as their own religious authorities would have liked; and there were not a few who felt the pressure to conform to the manners of surrounding society.

Nevertheless, the pull was not all in one direction. Although circumcision was repellent to Greeks and Romans, there were many Gentiles attracted by monotheism, by the purity of Jewish morality, and by the antiquity (if not by the style) of their sacred books. Without being ascetic, except in some deviationist groups,[1] Judaism stood for chastity and stable family life; and among themselves the Jews practised works of charity, visiting the sick, caring for the dead, showing hospitality to strangers, giving alms for the poor. Round many synagogues of the Dispersion there gathered a penumbra of devout Gentiles commonly called 'God-fearers' (the term applied to *any* good synagogue member). A Gentile might undergo circumcision and, more commonly, the baptism required of would-be proselytes, but this was rare and the hellenized Jews of the Dispersion, to the regret of the stricter Palestinian authorities, were normally content to welcome Gentile adherents without insisting on circumcision as generally necessary to salvation. Among these Gentile groups the Christian missionaries found their first converts outside the number of the circumcised. They were indeed ripe fruit, for they had the advantage not only of high moral education, but also of instruction in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Judaism was the religion of a book in a way that no other ancient religion was. The reconstruction of Israelite society after the catastrophe of the Babylonian deportation had been firmly based on the Law of Moses. There were no more prophets to proclaim the immediate word of God. God's revelation to his people was in writing, and needed to be interpreted by learned scribes and 'lawyers', so that the original documents were supplemented by exegetical tradition in the rabbinical schools. (The status of this tradition became a matter of sharp controversy between church and synagogue in the first century.) As the Jews outside Palestine needed the Bible in Greek, a number of translations came into existence. One of these, the Septuagint, or version of the Seventy translators, became the authorized version of the

1. According to Philo and Josephus, the Essenes of the Dead Sea region held celibacy in high regard. The documents of the community at Qumran say nothing of this subject.

early Gentile churches. This version had been produced at Alexandria in the third century B.C., according to the tradition (which there is no very good reason to doubt) under the sponsorship of king Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt. For the Alexandrian Jews the translation became surrounded by an aura. They had an annual liturgical festival to commemorate its production; and some told wonderful tales of its origin, notably that Ptolemy had appointed seventy-two translators and that they produced their version in seventy-two days. Philo believed that the version had been granted divine assistance. The legend of the seventy-two was widely credited and, even where it was not, the Septuagint often ranked as an inspired version enjoying an authority that no other translation possessed. Only after the Christian appeals to its text became embarrassing to the Jews were alternative, more literal translations favoured by the Greek synagogue (below, p. 101); and some Rabbis, almost as hostile to liberal or hellenized Judaism as to Christianity, regretted that the Bible had ever been translated into Greek and denounced the making of the Septuagint as a sin like the worship of the golden calf.

THE EARLIEST CHURCH

From the first the Church was deeply conscious of its solidarity with Israel, and of the continuity of God's action in the past with his present activity in Jesus of Nazareth and in his followers. In St Matthew's Gospel Christ is the new Moses, with a stormy nativity prefigured by that of Moses in Egypt, and in his teaching laying down ethical principles that were in line with the highest traditions of the best Judaism. The Lord had come not to destroy but to fulfil; and the mission of the Christians was to bring their fellow-Jews to acknowledge as God's anointed or 'Messiah' him whom in ignorance the authorities had brought to a shameful judicial murder under Pilate the Roman governor. By raising him from the dead, God had vindicated him as 'Lord and Christ', the Messiah of expectation. To the objection that the prophets had expected the Messiah to come in glory and power, not

in the weakness of crucifixion, the reply was that Jesus' sufferings, like those of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah's prophecy, were redemptive. His death inaugurated a 'new covenant' between God and his people, in accordance with the hope of Jeremiah (xxxi, 31–34).

At first Christianity must certainly have appeared only as one more sect or group within a Judaism that was already accustomed to considerable diversity in religious expression. Judaism was not monolithic. There were differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees that could become sharp. The Pharisees were the party most anxious to preserve the distinctively religious and theocratic character of Jewish life in defiance of hellenistic influences and Roman domination; they were strict in their observance not only of the Mosaic law but also of the scribal tradition of interpreting the law. The Sadducees, who tended to be drawn from the leading aristocratic families, held only to the Mosaic law and did not feel bound by scribal tradition; moreover, they rejected belief in the resurrection of the dead as a doctrine only found in writings like the book of Daniel, composed long after Moses' time, which in their view lacked authority. The disagreement of the Pharisees and Sadducees concerning the after-life enabled St Paul on one occasion to extricate himself from an awkward situation (Acts xxiii, 6–10). Despite the apparently violent conflict with the Pharisees reflected in passages like Matt. xxiii, a number of Pharisees, of whom St Paul was to be the most famous, became Christians.

In addition to the Pharisees and Sadducees there was also a group, perhaps a number of related groups, to whom the title 'Essene' was given. A description of their life is given in Pliny the elder, Philo, and Josephus, of whom the last had some direct contact with them. They were a rigidly separatist society, whose principal settlement lay near the western shores of the Dead Sea, though adherents could be found elsewhere in Judaea. It is probable, but not certain, that the Essenes were, or rather included, the community for whom the Dead Sea Scrolls were written and who had their house at Qumran near the western shores of the Dead Sea. This community rejected the sacrifices and priesthood of the

officially recognized worship in the temple at Jerusalem, and looked back to their founder-hero, 'the Teacher of Righteousness', who had been harried by a 'wicked priest' who ruled over Israel. In certain respects the Essenes resembled the early church. They were a close-knit body which practised property-sharing and distributed money to each according to his need. Their life was frugal, and any member who had two coats gave one away to his needy brother and wore his remaining coat until it was threadbare. They appear to have been divided among themselves about the question of passive resistance. Most of them rejected the carrying of arms, but some of them were Zealots dedicated to the nationalist cause of resistance to the occupying Roman power. The site at Qumran became the scene of bloody fighting in the Jewish war of 66–70. The Essenes rejected slavery in principle as incompatible with the equality of all men before their Creator; and though they did not condemn marriage as wrong, they expected full members of the community to be celibate. Entrance to the community was hedged about with tests and solemn vows preceded by a novitiate, and any delinquency led to expulsion. They practised very frequent ritual washings, and had a sacred common meal to which the uninitiated were not admitted. They rejected the use of oaths.

On the other hand, there are important differences between the Essenes and the early Church. The Essenes were particularly precise about keeping the sabbath day, and exercised extreme care to avoid any ceremonial pollution. According to our Greek sources, they rose before dawn to offer prayer to the rising sun, and had esoteric teachings about the properties of roots and stones and about the secret names of the angels. They devoted much attention to the exegesis of the inner meaning of scripture, and made predictions of the future. The Qumran texts and the Greek sources are not in complete harmony in their accounts; but perhaps the Greek documents present a portrait of the Essenes that reshapes their likeness to resemble Pythagorean ascetics of the hellenistic world. The material from the Dead Sea Scrolls provides relatively little evidence for the immediate background of the early Church except in the broad sense that it reveals the existence of a group fervently studying Old Testament prophecy, especially Messianic prophecy, and expecting a great divine intervention in world history. There is a kinship in atmosphere; as for example in the so-called 'War Scroll' describing a final battle between the sons of light and the sons of darkness which is reminiscent of the Armageddon of the Apocalypse and perhaps also of Ephesians vi. But it is fair to say that in points of detail the number of analogies and parallels between the Qumran documents and the New Testament is not very numerous or impressive; and 'The Teacher of Righteousness' does not play a role in the thought of the Qumran community which is closely comparable to that of Jesus in the faith of the early Church. In short, the New Testament writings and the Qumran Scrolls mutually illuminate one another, but neither group of documents can be said to 'explain' the other. That individual Essenes became Christians is probable enough, but it is most unlikely that there was any institutional continuity. Surprisingly the first Christians appear to have adopted a much more positive attitude than the Qumran community towards the temple worship at Jerusalem (cf. Acts vi, 7). At the same time there is much to suggest that the Christians would have been very impatient with a community so obsessed by the need for ceremonial purity that their day was punctuated at frequent intervals by ritual lustrations.

The initial impact of Christianity on the Jewish people seems to have been fairly considerable. The church probably drew its membership from most of the diverse elements within the heterogeneous society of first century Judaism, apart from the Sadducees. It appealed both to the Pharisees' sense that the revealed will of God was a matter demanding to be taken with the most intense seriousness and also to the ordinary Jew's feeling that too much of the Pharisaic scrupulousness about the law had ended in niggling ceremonial niceties that missed the central point of religion. Before long there were substantial groups of Christian Jews not only in Jerusalem but also in the surrounding countryside of Judaea. That there were also important groups in the

north in Galilee is probable enough, but of their relation to the Judaean churches and of their later history we can only guess. They were rural communities in a backward area, and disappear from history. We know, however, that the faith rapidly reached not only Damascus but Antioch, the capital of Syria and third city of the Roman Empire, where the pagans soon gave them the nickname 'Christians', which quickly spread as the popular term. (The Jewish term for them remained 'Nazarenes'; below, p. 21.) Even some of the strictest adherents of the Mosaic Law and of its traditional interpretation, the Pharisees, were associated with the movement. Nevertheless, neither the authorities nor the people as a whole came to follow 'the Way'. On the one hand Christianity offered no encouragement to the nationalistic Zealots, awaiting the hour for revolt against Rome; on the other hand, it was far too revolutionary for the Jewish 'Establishment', which pursued a compromising policy of political collaboration and religious conservatism. Above all, there was the delicate problem of the Christian attitude towards the Gentiles. This was an issue of principle causing deep division of opinion within the Church itself, the beginnings of which may be traced in the story of the 'Hellenists' and Stephen told by Luke in Acts vi–vii.

The spread of Christianity northwards into Syria and Cilicia caused such acute anxiety to the synagogues that a counter-movement was provoked, armed with authority from Jerusalem and led by a Cilician Jew who had been a pupil of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel at Jerusalem – Saul or Paul of Tarsus, a Pharisee convinced of the finality and perfection of the Mosaic Law and accordingly a zealous persecutor of the infant church. Travelling to Damascus he was suddenly confronted by the risen Christ, and thenceforth was an equally convinced Christian – and once again a man of zeal: he had a burning sense of mission to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. Paul was probably not the first to conceive of a Christian mission to the non-Jewish world. But from the start he was undoubtedly the dominant figure in the work, and believed himself to be called in a particular and unique degree as the apostle of the Gentiles, exercising authority

over the Gentile churches by visits and especially by letters (he found that he was more effective on paper than when speaking), and representing their interests in his negotiations with the mother-church at Jerusalem.

While the Pauline letters and the Acts of the Apostles tell us something of the development of the Gentile communities, we know relatively little of the mother-church in Judaea. Most of the twelve disciples disappear from history. Only Peter, John, and James the Lord's brother are more than names. By the third century romantic legends began, describing the missionary travels of the twelve, Thomas in Persia and India, Andrew to the Scythians of South Russia, and so on. But these stories are like the medieval legends which associate James the Apostle with Compostela or Joseph of Arimathea with Glastonbury. They are derived from the apocryphal romances about the apostles which became widespread popular reading in the latter half of the second century.[1] Second century traditions with more claim to respect relate that John the son of Zebedee lived in his old age at Ephesus, and that Philip the evangelist with his four prophetess-daughters (Acts xxi, 9) died in Phrygia. This exodus of the Jerusalem church to Asia Minor may have been caused by the Jewish War of 66–70. The fourth Gospel comes from a group of St John's disciples for whom it enshrined the beloved disciple's teaching. About 200 we find the churches of Asia Minor looking back to St John as their founder and treasuring his tomb at Ephesus.[2]

The Ephesians seem to have supposed that the Virgin Mary had lived in St John's house there (see John xix, 27), and in the fifth century were the first to dedicate a church in her honour. But according to another view, first formulated in 375 by Epiphanius, who speaks of it as a highly esoteric

1. These are translated in M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 2nd edn., 1955). See also E. Hennecke's *New Testament Apocrypha* (ed. W. Schneemelcher, transl. R. M. Wilson, 2 vols., London, 2nd edn., 1991).

2. Latin writers follow Tertullian and Jerome in relating that St John was cast into boiling oil at Rome and escaped unhurt; in the seventh century this scene was located at the Latin Gate and commemorated on 6 May. The legend is not known to Greek writers.

mystery of which he is not at all confident, Mary did not go to Ephesus and indeed did not taste death at all.

James the Just, 'the Lord's brother', was president of the Jerusalem Church until his martyrdom in 62 (an event which gave many non-Christian Jews a very bad conscience), when he was succeeded by a cousin of the Lord. The exact relation between James and Peter, the leading apostle to whom the Lord had specially entrusted the church's mission, is obscure. In the Pauline letters and the Acts the Holy Family and the Apostles appear as distinguished authorities side by side; if there was at any time tension between them (as Mark iii, 31–5 may imply) it was quickly ironed out. According to one strand of tradition (Matt. xvi, 18) the Lord nominated Peter as the rock on which the Church was to be built; perhaps there were some Christians who believed Peter rather than James to be the supreme authority in the Church after the Ascension. The eirenic account of the earliest Church in Acts, probably written a generation or more later, does not allow us to do more than ask unanswerable questions.

Peter's relation to Paul is also ambiguous. The battle royal between them at Antioch was evidently exceptional or it would not have been recorded in the way it is (Gal. ii, 11ff.); and at least in their death they were not divided – both died at Rome as martyrs in the persecution under Nero.[1] No doubt Peter's presence in Rome in the sixties must indicate a concern for Gentile Christianity, but we have no information whatever about his activity or of the length of his stay there. That he was in Rome for twenty-five years is third-century legend.

THE GENTILE CHURCH

In the ancient world everyone knew at least three things about the Jews: they would not be associated either directly

1. The martyrdom of St Peter is alluded to in St John's Gospel (xiii, 36; xxi, 18). That it took place at Rome is highly probable from the epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, Ignatius' letter to the Romans and the unanimous tradition of second century writers, besides the memorial monument at the cemetery on the Vatican hill, built about A.D. 160–70 and recently excavated (below, p. 162).

or indirectly with any pagan cult (which seemed antisocial), they refused to eat not only meat that had been offered in sacrifice to the gods but also all pork (which seemed ridiculous), and they circumcised their male infants (which seemed repulsive).

If the Church was to undertake a mission to the Gentiles, a ruling on these questions was necessary: Were the same prohibitions to apply to Gentile converts to Christianity? A conservative group thought that Gentile converts must not merely keep clear of food defiled by idolatrous associations but also accept circumcision as the covenant sign of admission to the people of God. Other Christian Jews who believed that the Gospel must be preached to all the world absolutely rejected this conservative view. Circumcision together with the entire ceremonial law of the Pentateuch was limited to the Jewish people, whereas in Christ God had acted for the reconciliation of humanity, to break down the barriers not only between sinful man and his Creator but between one man and another.

The cleavage between conservatives and universalists led to an acute and at times passionate controversy, resulting in a general conference in Jerusalem (Acts xv). The outcome was in some respects a compromise but one which in all decisive points was bound to favour the universalists. The Gentile converts were recognized as truly within the covenant by the mother-church at Jerusalem even if they were uncircumcised; but they must be careful not to eat food with idolatrous associations (it was customary for Greek dinner-parties to be held in temples, the god himself being considered as the host) and not to allow sexual relations outside marriage, this being a matter on which Jewish ethic was much stricter than pagan. St Paul's Corinthian correspondence casts a vivid light on the social background of these conditions.

The controversy turned on the continued validity of the Mosaic Law. Paul saw that at bottom the question was whether a man attains to heaven on the ground of his merit achieved by obedience to God's commandments. To this idea of Law Paul opposes the idea of divine mercy and

forgiveness, which are freely offered to us in Christ: by baptism the believer is united with Christ and is 'justified'; we are put into a right relationship with God on the ground of which we do 'good works' and advance in holiness. From the law of Moses the Christian is therefore free. Its status is not fixed but provisional: it was a 'childminder to bring us to Christ'.

It was Paul's achievement to vindicate the freedom and equal status of Gentile Christians and to win from the Jerusalem leaders the recognition of his converts as full members of the Church. He understood this also to imply recognition of his own standing as the apostle of the Gentiles. The claim involved him in painful controversy, in which his most potent argument was the concrete fact of the existence of numerous Gentile converts. Perhaps the chief reason for Paul's success was his extraordinary versatility and capacity for adapting himself to the situation of his audience: he had the power to translate the Palestinian Gospel into language intelligible to the Greek world, and thereby became the first Christian apologist. The first generation of Palestinian Christians expected the Lord to return with glory very shortly. Paul perceived that the doctrine of the imminent end of the world was a liability rather than an asset in evangelizing the Greek world where the dominant speculative interest was in the beginning of things. He transferred the emphasis from Christ as the end to Christ as the Wisdom of God in creation, pre-existent from eternity and the immanent power by which the manifold diversity of the cosmos is saved from disintegration. In particular (he taught) the Lord is immanent within his Church, as the soul in the body, which is therefore ever growing until the final consummation when it is to be coterminous with the human race itself. In these terms the epistle to the Ephesians formulates the idea of the universal Church, one, holy, catholic and apostolic. For according to this full Pauline doctrine all Christians are united to one another through union with the Lord in faith and baptism; by him the Church is made a holy society, called out of the world to exercise a priestly function, mediating the Gospel to humanity, universally extended in space

and looking back in time to its apostolic founders. The mother-church of this universal society is Jerusalem. But already in Paul's mind there is formed the westward look towards the capital of the Gentile world as the potential focus of Gentile Christendom, and as a centre for a mission to Spain (which perhaps he may have succeeded in reaching).

Paul thought of the Church as a society where the barrier between Jew and Gentile is broken down but which retains a quasi-dual character. But Jewish Christianity failed to convert the Jewish people. Jerusalem was terribly damaged in A.D. 70 and especially in 135, when by Hadrian's edict all Jews were henceforth excluded by law from Judaea, and Jerusalem became a Greek city, renamed Aelia Capitolina, with pagan temples and theatres. This meant an emancipation of Gentile Christendom from its Jewish Christian roots; its sheer weight of numbers and geographic extent over the Mediterranean world ensured its self-confidence and sense of catholicity, while it could look for continuity with the apostles not only to the churches of the East but also to Rome, the scene of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. Paul's concept of the quasi-independent status of Gentile Christendom standing over against Jerusalem, existing side by side with Jewish Christendom within the one Church, was in time developed into the idea of the independence (and potential rivalry) of the West over against the East.

Although persecuted by the Jews (1 Thess. ii, 14) the Christians in Palestine long remained a group within Judaism. But the break became inevitable. A sentence in Suetonius' *Life of Claudius*[1] could mean that as early as 50 rioting between Jews and Christians had broken out at Rome. In Judaea the Jewish Christians kept the bridges open as long as they could, but they were severely harried and about 85, to make sure of their exclusion, a formal anathema was incorporated in the synagogue liturgy: 'May the Nazarenes and the heretics be suddenly destroyed and removed from the Book of Life.' The existence of the Gentile mission was an embarrassment in the mission of the Jewish Christians

1. 'Since the Jews continually made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, Claudius expelled them from Rome.' (Cf. Acts xviii, 2.)

to their own countrymen (Rom. xi, 28 illustrates this point); and their position was not helped by the attitude of some of their Gentile brethren who had no desire to stress their debt to Judaism and were inclined to the unconciliatory view that the destruction of Jerusalem by the hated Romans in A.D. 70 was nothing but the merited judgement of providence for the murder of Jesus, which was itself only the last of a long line of stiff-necked refusals of God's word in the prophets. The Jewish nation's rejection of the Messiah was discovered to be the subject of Old Testament prophecy just as much as the world-wide mission of the Church as the people of the Messiah. Accordingly, there came into being a tradition of interpretation of the Old Testament which concentrated upon prophetic denunciations of mere externalism in religion and upon the observance of feasts and ceremonies. The Old Testament was seen as the history of a people with an ineradicable capacity for apostasy, despite the continual warnings of the prophets. The Mosaic Law was not God's permanent will, but a temporary and provisional measure given by God to a hard-hearted people to prevent lapses into worse things, perhaps even an actual punishment for the worship of the golden calf. In short, the Old Testament itself was seen to imply a negative judgement on Judaism.

The Jewish Christians, excluded by their fellow-countrymen, continued to observe sabbaths, circumcision, and other Jewish feasts. As this distressed many Gentile Christians, they became lonely, unsupported groups. In the fourth century and later there were small Jewish churches in Syria. Jerome translated into Latin their *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, preserving traditions slightly diverging from the canonical Greek gospels, and magnifying the position of James the Lord's brother. But the orthodox Jews could not forgive them for being Christians, and the Gentile majority in the Church could not comprehend their continued observance of the traditional customs and rites of Judaism. Slowly the communities lost importance. In Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* (below, p. 75) written about 160 it appears that they were still a force. Justin believed that a Jewish Christian was quite free to keep the Mosaic law without in any way compromising his Christian faith, and even that a Gentile Christian might keep Jewish customs if a Jewish Christian had influenced him to do so; only it must be held that such observances were matters of indifference and of individual conscience. But Justin had to admit that other Gentile Christians did not take so liberal a view and believed that those who observed the Mosaic law could not be saved. From Irenaeus onwards Jewish Christianity is treated as a deviationist sect rather than as a form of Christianity with the best claims to continuity with the practice of the primitive church at Jerusalem. The Jewish Christians called themselves Ebionites, a name derived from the Hebrew word meaning 'the poor'; it was probably a conscious reminiscence of a very early term which is attested by St Paul's letters as an almost technical name for the Christians in Jerusalem and Judaea. Since some of them had never accepted the tradition of the virgin birth of Christ, Irenaeus classified the Ebionites with other heresies that denied this; soon Tertullian was supposing that they originated with a person named Ebion, and later anti-heretical writers even felt able to quote from Ebion's alleged writings.

ENCOUNTER WITH THE ROMAN EMPIRE

A Roman procurator had condemned the Lord to crucifixion like a common criminal. But he had done it to placate the Jews, not because he actually believed Jesus to be guilty of crime against the Roman State. There was still hope of a rapprochement. The Lord himself had said it was possible to render loyal service to Caesar while still being loyal to God. The primitive Church refused to identify itself with the nationalist Jewish 'zealots'. The Jerusalem community had left the city when the resistance started the war in 66, and they were again harried as potential traitors during the Hadrianic war under Bar-Cochba in 133–5. Committed to the approval of the Gentile mission, they were not disposed to quarrel with the Gentile authorities for whose conversion they prayed. Paul, who possessed dual citizenship both of Tarsus and of Rome, regarded the magistrates as the ministers

of divine justice in restraining crime; and on the express authority of the Lord himself, Christians faithfully paid their taxes. The Gentile mission had every interest in the maintenance of public order, and none whatever in adopting an attitude of disaffection towards the State. In the Acts of the Apostles it is already implied that the Empire, under the providence of God, could be the instrument for the furtherance of the Gospel. By the middle of the second century Christians were discerning the hand of God in the fact that Augustus had established the Roman Peace at the very time when Christ's gospel of universal peace and goodwill was given to mankind. What was wrong with the State was its old paganism. Change its religion and all would be well.

The Empire, however, was not disposed to abandon the old gods by whose favour the legions had conquered the world. Philosophic criticism might have destroyed the faith of many; Epicureans like Lucretius could denounce religion as based on the fear of non-existent bogies after death. But no one proposed to act on his scepticism and to initiate a social revolution. To refuse to participate in the pagan emperor-cult was a political as well as a religious act, and could easily be construed as dangerous disaffection.

Side by side with the official cults of the deified emperor and of the old local deities, the priesthoods of which were held by ordinary citizens, there flourished the eastern mystery religions, which normally possessed a professional priesthood. The most important of these were the cults of Isis (the Egyptian mother-goddess), Mithras (the Persian god of light), and the grim Anatolian cult of Attis and Cybele. These cults had some popular appeal. The profound emotions evoked by initiation into the exotic mysteries of Isis, the mother nursing her holy child like the Madonna, may be seen in the last book of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius. Mithraism, an ascetic religion for men only, appealed especially (but not exclusively) to officers in the army; it had sacred meals not unlike the Christian eucharist and offered souls a way through the seven planetary spirits which bar the ascent to the Milky Way after death. But it was not a religion of the people. The cult of Cybele was well known for its flagellant, mendicant priests

and for the public ceremonies of 15–27 March when, after fasting and the Day of Blood (22 March) on which Attis was mourned, sorrow was turned into joy with the Hilaria celebrating his resurrection on 25 March (a striking parallel to the Christian Holy Week and Easter).[1]

No pagan cult was exclusive of any other and the only restriction on initiation into many cults was the expense. By supposing that the various deities were either the same god under different names or local administrators for a supreme deity it was possible to give all cults a loose unity.

The Roman government was in practice tolerant of any cult provided that it did not encourage sedition or weaken morality. Indeed, one reason for Roman military success was believed to be the fact that, while other peoples worshipped only their own local deities, the Romans worshipped all deities without exclusiveness and had therefore been rewarded for their piety. The God of the Jews, who had no images and no sacrifices except at Jerusalem, was harder for the Romans to assimilate. Although the Jews were monotheists and in theory understood that belief to invalidate all forms of religion other than their own, until the revolt of 66–70 they were treated with marked toleration and under Augustus were granted privileges which, after an awkward crisis with Caligula who wanted to set up his statue in the temple at Jerusalem,[2] were renewed by Claudius. There seemed no necessary reason why the Christians should not also achieve toleration. They came into conflict with the State in the first instance by accident, not on any fundamental point of principle. In 64 a great fire destroyed much of Rome. Nero had made himself sufficiently unpopular to be suspected of arson, and turned to the Christians to find a scapegoat. The historian Tacitus, writing about fifty years later, did not believe that the Christians were justly accused of the arson, though he saw no harm in the execution of a contemptible, anti-social group 'hated for their vices' – for by his

1. In the fourth century pagan critics accused the Church of plagiarism on this count. Both festivals had an all-night vigil with lights.

2. For the reverberations of this crisis in the New Testament see Mark xiii, 14; II Thess. ii, 3–4.

time, if not by Nero's, the Christians were vulgarly thought to practise incest and cannibalism at their nocturnal meetings. (These charges probably arose from language about universal love and the eucharist.) The Neronian persecution was confined to Rome and was not due to any sense of deep ideological conflict between Church and State; it was simply that the emperor had to blame somebody for the fire. Nevertheless, it was a precedent that magistrates had condemned Christians to death because they were Christians and on no other charge.

Probably pressure against the Church continued intermittently, and no doubt many wavered. Jews and Gentiles who after peaceful adherence to the synagogue had passed over to the Church must have felt tempted to retrace their steps. To some such situation the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews is addressed; the author, who is evidently a member of the Pauline circle, exhorts the hesitating Roman community to remain confident of the inferiority of Judaism and of the finality of Christianity on the ground that Christ is the unique Son of God; to be mindful of the example of its past leaders and loyal to those now occupying their position; to continue its care for imprisoned brethren; and to take heart from the lull in actual executions.

Under Domitian (81–96) the situation seems again to have become grave. Except for Caligula and Nero the emperors had traditionally discouraged over-enthusiastic subjects from offering them divine honours. Domitian took the opposite view, styling himself 'Master and God', and inclined to suspect of treachery those who looked askance at his cult. The customary oath 'by the genius of the emperor' became officially obligatory. There is good evidence that this created a crisis for the Jews. It is probable (though not quite certain) that the Church was no less embarrassed. According to the third-century historian Dio, several eminent Romans with Jewish sympathies were accused of 'atheism', and on this charge action was taken against Titus Flavius Clemens, consul in 95, and his wife Domitilla. Fourth century Christian tradition counted Domitilla a Christian, and perhaps the phrase 'atheism and Jewish sympathies' is

Dio's polite circumlocution for Christianity.[1] The Revelation of St John, with its denunciations of idolatrous, persecuting Rome as the scarlet woman drunk with the blood of saints, may reflect the tension in the churches of Asia Minor at this time.

The emperor Trajan (98–117) did not like his cult being made a compulsory loyalty-test, and the crisis passed. Nevertheless, about 112 the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, Pliny the younger, asked Trajan for guidance about the procedure for dealing with Christians. His letter is very revealing. In his province, it appears, Christianity had spread widely not only in towns but also in the countryside; the pagan temples had become empty and the meat of sacrificial animals practically unsaleable. Local interests had been affected and representations were made to Pliny, who executed some Christians who were not Roman citizens while keeping others who possessed citizenship to be sent to Rome for trial. Pliny was aware that by precedent Christians were executed and had acted without hesitation; but he was puzzled about the exact nature of their crime. He asked Trajan whether the mere profession of Christianity was in itself culpable, or if they were charged with the vices associated with the name; whether some mitigation of the punishment was appropriate in the case of the young or infirm; whether if a man was proved to be a Christian he could purge his crime by recanting. Pliny had no conscience about the executions since the accused had been contumacious in refusing to recant which was much worse than being a Christian. But the sequel had been a tiresome increase in accusations, not merely from an informer, but also from an anonymous pamphlet. On examination, those now accused had either denied that they were Christians at all or, admitting that they had been so in the past (in some cases twenty years previously), denied that they were any longer, and proved

1. Another personage of high rank, Acilius Glabrio, consul in 91, was also executed on this charge – but also on that of fighting as a gladiator. The cruelty and murder of gladiatorial combats were anathema to the Church; but it is conceivable that he was interested in Christianity enough to open himself to Domitian's attack.

their point by offering incense and wine before images of the emperor and the gods and by cursing Christ. These inquiries of lapsed Christians, however, elicited the disconcerting information that no enormities were practised. The accused declared that their normal practice had been to attend a meeting before daybreak on a particular day (no doubt Sunday is meant) at which they sang a hymn to Christ as a god, and took an oath (i.e. the baptismal promise?) to abstain from crime rather than to commit it; thereafter they dispersed, but met again later to eat, not a murdered infant, but ordinary food. This common meal they had suspended of their own accord when Pliny published an imperial edict forbidding secret societies. Disturbed by the discovery that Christianity could appear so innocuous Pliny had examined under torture two deaconesses; he found only 'squalid superstition', nothing vicious. But at least, he felt, his severity had been justified by the result: the population had returned to the temples.

Trajan's reply to Pliny shows a reluctance to take the matter too seriously. Pliny, he thought, had proceeded sensibly, but should pay no heed to anonymous accusations and was not to organize any general inquisition himself. If a proper charge was brought by a responsible individual (who under Roman law had the tables turned on him if his accusations were found to be slanderous, which made people chary of bringing a capital charge), then the person accused of Christianity could be tried and, if found guilty, punished. Only, Trajan added, he might be pardoned if he showed that he was not a Christian by offering prayers to the gods, whatever he might have done in the past. Pliny's principal question Trajan left unanswered. But at least it was clear that the emperor did not regard the Christians as dangerous. The essentials of his reply were reaffirmed by Hadrian about 123 in a letter to Minucius Fundanus, proconsul at Ephesus.

The authorities had now discovered that the Christians were virtuous folk, but inexplicably hostile to the old religious tradition and so obstinate in their dissent as to forfeit sympathy and preclude toleration. Christianity remained a capital offence, and several in the second century suffered

martyrdom: Ignatius bishop of Antioch, Telesphorus bishop of Rome, Polycarp bishop of Smyrna, Justin 'the Christian philosopher' at Rome some time between 162 and 168. In 177 an ugly persecution broke out with savage violence against the Christians at Lyons and Vienne in the Rhône valley; the emperor Marcus Aurelius had directed that they should be tortured to death, and no refinement of cruelty was spared. The mob was always ready to believe that catastrophes like floods or bad harvests or barbarian invasions were a sign of the gods' displeasure at their neglect under the influence of Christian 'atheism'. Tertullian sarcastically commented: 'If the Tiber rises too high or the Nile too low, the cry is "The Christians to the lion". All of them to a single lion?' The vulgar charges of incest and cannibalism died slowly. Even as late as the middle of the third century, by which time the main teachings of Christianity were a matter of universal knowledge and discussion, it was possible to meet virtuous pagans who still believed in the stories of secret vice. But persecution was far from being continuous or systematic. Both Trajan and Hadrian had discouraged governors from taking any personal initiative. Much was left to private informers, and action remained in the discretion of individual governors, which some exercised in the manner of Gallio who 'cared for none of these things' (Acts xviii, 15). A few provincial governors actually protected the church, and grateful Christians believed that despite their paganism they might be rewarded hereafter. By the end of the second century Christianity was penetrating the upper classes of society, and more than one highly placed personage might wake up to find his wife embarrassing him by disappearing to nocturnal vigils and prayers. Marcia, the concubine of the emperor Commodus (180–92), was a Christian, and was able to gain for the church in Rome a considerable measure of relief (below, p. 88). Because the early persecutions were limited they did not seriously slow down the expansion of Christianity, but on the contrary tended to give the church the maximum of publicity. Tertullian observed that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'. Many of the records of the early martyrs have a heroic quality about them. At the

same time they reveal the temptations of peculiar subtlety to which the martyrs were exposed. Not all were able to rise to the Christ-like simplicity of Stephen who followed his Lord's example in praying for the forgiveness of his murderers. Judicial murder is never an easy thing to bear, and the martyrs were at times inclined to seek satisfaction in the thought that they would be avenged in the world to come, or even that it would be an element in the felicity of heaven to contemplate the appropriateness of punishments justly meted out to those responsible for acts of gross injustice in this present life. Moreover, the conviction that martyrdom granted immediate admission to paradise and conferred a victor's crown, combined with a sombre evaluation of the Roman empire as a political institution, led to a tendency towards acts of provocation on the part of over-enthusiastic believers, especially among the Montanists (below p. 52) who were especially prone to identify reticence with cowardice and moral compromise. Hotheads who provoked the authorities were soon censured by the church as mere suicides deserving no recognition. As, from the middle of the third century onwards, the private commemorations of the martyrs began to pass into the official and public liturgy of the church, control had to be exercised and the claims of an individual martyr were subjected to examination and scrutiny. Even so there were difficulties, mainly because there were different interpretations of what constituted provocation. Ignatius of Antioch, martyred at Rome before A.D. 117, was a man of intense devotion; his warnings that the influential Roman Christians should not try to obtain his release so as to deprive him of suffering in union with his Lord, could easily pass into an attitude that would appear provocative to a magistrate. His friend Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who was martyred at the age of 86 not long after the middle of the century (the evidence regarding the date is conflicting)[1]

1. Eusebius of Caesarea places it in 167–8. A late note appended to the account of the martyrdom dates it 'in the proconsulship of Statius Quadratus', i.e. probably 155–6. This earlier date, though attested by inferior evidence, better coheres with Polycarp's extant correspondence with Ignatius of Antioch and with Irenaeus's statement that Polycarp had known St John at Ephesus.

was held up as a model on the specific ground that he did nothing to provoke the authorities but quietly waited for them to come and arrest him. The Stoic emperor, Marcus Aurelius, who regarded suicide as ethically unobjectionable, felt that it must be done in good style 'not, like the Christians, in a spirit of theatricality'.

But there were also temptations in the opposite direction. Some who were influenced by the radically spiritualizing tendencies of Gnostic dualism (below, p. 36) argued that pagan gods were not devils, but simply non-existent; so it was a matter of complete indifference whether one ate meat that had been offered in sacrifice to idols (cf. 1 Corinthians, viii) or if one offered incense in honour of the emperor. It was a mere formality, and merely external acts did not affect the inner devotion of the mind. One's conscience could not be held to be polluted by a mere act of respect and loyalty. In the second century most of those who thus argued belonged to gnostic sects. But in Spain by A.D. 300 there were Christians happily holding the distinguished office of *flamen* in the cult of the emperor. They greatly distressed more puritan brethren. At times even the most serious-minded among the orthodox believers were tempted to doubt whether perhaps they were not cranks dying for trivialities, and to ask themselves at what point they could no longer compromise. Between the two extremes of provocation and compromise there were many, such as the twelve simple Christians of Scilli in North Africa condemned at Carthage on 17 July 180, the record of whose trial leaves a deep impression of moral protest and integrity. The same may be said of the Acta Proconsularia of Cyprian, or the minutes of Justin's trial at Rome.

The sporadic nature of persecution, which often depended on local attitudes, and the fact that before the third century the government did not take Christianity seriously, gave the Church breathing space to expand and to deal with critical internal problems.