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Christian Spirituality  
*God's Presence through the Ages*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Jesus and His Followers

## *God's Abiding Presence*

One day a man appeared from nowhere—an itinerant preacher and healer. He was neither a fanatic nor a member of any priestly caste or professional prophetic fraternity. A craftsman by trade and inheritance, his schooling seemed to be meager, his financial resources minimal. Lacking influence among the religious and civil authorities, he addressed his message of reliance on God and love of neighbor mainly to the lower classes. Something of a mystic and miracle worker, he healed the sick, the blind, the lame, and those afflicted with mental and spiritual disorders. His preaching of love, peace, forgiveness, and justice eventually earned him the suspicion and enmity of the ruling class, who for a variety of reasons seem to have engineered his condemnation and execution as a religious heretic and social revolutionary.

Although his immediate circle of followers was completely cowed by this catastrophe, shortly after his burial they regrouped under the unshakable belief that their former leader had in fact risen from the dead. Gradually the numbers of those who accepted the story grew into a sizable sect. Some claimed that God had been uniquely present in him, others that he was himself somehow divine. Ritual meals and rites of ablution were held to honor his memory and initiate new members into the growing body of believers. Through these ceremonies the mysterious founder was said to be somehow present himself.

Measures were taken by the religious and civil authorities first to discourage and then to suppress the new sect. But despite even the draconian efforts of state officials, the cult of the young Immortal spread throughout the known world. His teachings were recalled, passed on by word of mouth, and finally committed to writing, which with letters

and other writings of his earliest disciples were widely circulated. Similar writings by later disciples were also collected and preserved. Eventually under the influence of creative and charismatic leaders, structures and procedures developed which slowly, sometimes painfully, integrated the growing mass of disciples into a network of communities that they called *ekklesia*, the “Convocation” or “Assembly.” Today, they call it the Church.

After twenty centuries, one out of three people on earth professes to be a Christian.<sup>1</sup> Almost half of those—one out of every eight persons on the planet—belong to a single denomination, called for approximately the last four hundred years the Roman Catholic Church. Christianity is apparently the fastest growing religious body in the world today, particularly in the Third World—Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> It is also the second youngest of the major world religions, next only to Islam. With the exception of Japan, the most highly developed nations on earth are historically and sometimes nominally associated with Christianity. Roman Catholicism in particular is politically the most influential religious body on the planet. Economically, it is also the richest, demographically the most widespread, linguistically and culturally the most diversified.

Any of these characteristics would provide a point of departure for an extensive and fascinating investigation. All of them rest, however, on the persistence of belief in the meaning of the life and teaching, death, and risen presence of that itinerant preacher and healer, the man named Jesus. More particularly, they point to a few fundamental assertions attributed to the mendicant teacher—that it is possible not only to draw close to God, but to become one with God, sharing in the divine being, life, and consciousness itself and so to follow a way of living based on hope-filled faith, effective and universal love, and compassionate justice.

### *The Spirituality of Jesus*

To the extent that “spirituality” refers to the “interior life,” one’s self-awareness of presence-to-God, we know very little about the spirituality of Jesus himself. That is not surprising, not only because Jesus left no direct writings, but also because the memory of his teachings was committed to writing only after a generation had passed.

Attempts to reconstruct the life and self-understanding of Jesus have met with little success, largely because those who knew him and propagated his memory and teaching did so in the light of faith in his resurrection and future return in glory. The historical figure was eclipsed

by the Christ of faith. “Gospels” are not histories, but proclamations of faith. Nevertheless, many of the details of his life preserved in the four canonical gospels undoubtedly point to a number of characteristic features of his personality and ministry.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these characteristics is his tender and intimate relationship with God, whom Jesus addressed in prayer and exhortation as “Father,” sometimes in the familiar Aramaic form *Abba*. (Mark 14:36 and Rom 8:15–17 are the only two instances of this use preserved in scripture. But see Gal. 4:6 for an early use by St. Paul.) The fatherhood of God was by no means alien to Jewish spirituality before him, but Jesus added a dimension of proximity and awareness that struck his contemporaries as novel and even unsettling. Even the sense of dejection Jesus experienced during his execution was couched in terms of a prayer, Psalm 22, which begins “why have you forsaken me?” but ends with a declaration of trust and joyful vindication:

I will tell of your name to my brethren;  
 in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: . . .  
 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
 my vows I will pay before those who fear him.  
 The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;  
 those who seek him shall praise the LORD!  
 May your hearts live for ever!  
 All the ends of the earth shall remember  
 and turn to the LORD;  
 and all the families of the nations  
 shall worship before him.  
 For dominion belongs to the LORD,  
 and he rules over the nations.  
 Yea, to him shall all the proud of the earth bow down;  
 before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
 and he who cannot keep himself alive.  
 Posterity shall serve him;  
 men shall tell of the Lord to the coming generation,  
 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
 that he has wrought it. [Psalm 22:22, 25–31]

Secondly, compassion for the poor, oppressed, and suffering stand out strongly in Jesus’ teaching and ministry. Negatively, he attacked the forces and structures of injustice that led to such evils, not least those that arose from religious hypocrisy. Positively, he proclaimed the overriding priority of what he called “the Kingdom of God,” the

rule of God over the hearts, minds, and actions of people everywhere. Unlike earthly kingdoms, God's reign would be one of truth, justice, peace, love, and freedom, the "land of promise" preached by the ancient prophets. It would be, moreover, *Jesus'* kingdom insofar as he sensed that in his life and ministry the rule of God had broken through the barriers of moral darkness and evil erected by human pride and jealousy.

### *A Sense of Presence*

Central to the meaning and message of Jesus as cherished and developed by generations of followers is the notion of *presence*—God's presence in Jesus himself, God's presence in the body of believers who unite in Jesus' name and teaching, and God's presence in each person not only as a Christian, but indeed as a human being. Thus, the goal and meaning of human existence is the recognition and enhancement of the sense of Divine Presence, which in all three forms—the person of Jesus as the risen Christ, the community of believers, and the individual human creature as a child of God—is at once both hidden and manifest, which in religious terms is to say a *mystery*.

The subsequent development of Christian spirituality may therefore be best understood in terms of the particular forms in which the abiding presence of God was brought to ever fuller manifestation in the consciousness and activity both of individual persons and collectively.

### *The Inheritance from Israel*

Long before the Christian centuries, the history of the Jewish people and the language of the scriptures already testified to the centrality of Presence both as belief and experience.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, early Christian spirituality itself did not arise full-blown on the day of Pentecost or even from the teachings of the first generation of disciples. It emerged in conflict and confusion from a mustard seed of faith and stamina and grew slowly over decades and centuries. Both seed and soil were Jewish. Other cultural and even religious traditions influenced its growth—Greek, Syrian, Roman, even Egyptian. None, however, could imaginably approach the determinative force of Judaism. In form and content, Christian spirituality arose within the Jewish spiritual tradition with its heritage of covenant, remembrance, and blessing, but above all, Presence. It cannot be understood outside the context of that ancestry and that sense of intimate communion.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the religions of the peoples surrounding ancient Israel, her

faith habitually resided in a divine Presence immune from confinement to sacred places and times. Nor was the cultic worship of God restricted to a priestly caste who alone possessed the secret knowledge of expiation, propitiation, and intercession. These elements slowly and perhaps inevitably infiltrated Israelite cult and culture after the monarchy was established in the tenth century. But it had been otherwise “in the beginning,” and the heart of biblical spirituality always tended towards freedom from institutional containment and hierarchical control.

### *The Abode of God*

The God who spoke to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets professed to dwell among the people chosen to perform a priestly ministry for the nations. In that abiding presence, God was revealed from the beginning as the origin and destiny of all humankind: “by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen. 12:3). God was also held to be present through all of nature, yet fully transcending the very creation which yielded obediently as a medium of that presence. Neither cave nor mountaintop, desert sanctuary, nor sacred grove could contain the spirit of the living God. The Spirit blew freely where it would, hallowing the site of its manifestations during a moment of revelation, but leaving it afterwards as it had been before.

Nor could time and history limit the everlasting presence that passed effortlessly through the veils of nature: “The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob . . . this is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (Ex. 3:15). God ruled all times and all seasons with sovereign freedom, eluding with ease the nets of festal celebration and the episodes of solar and lunar crisis that dominated the calendars and consciousness of the “gentiles.” Although beyond history, the same God nevertheless freely entered history, shaping it to ends far above all human reckoning and control. Every day was the Day of the Lord.

Thus, Israel’s faith primarily lay in a God who would be with her on her journey through history, going before her, following after, bringing her back when she wandered from the path. Israel’s spirituality came to embody a host of concrete elements that served to remind her collectively and individually of that presence and the saving acts of “God-with-us” — *Emmanuel*.

Great feasts commemorated historical events such as the Passover, Esther’s selfless deliverance of the Jews, and the cleansing of the Temple, as well as the peoples’ continuing dependence upon God during the yearly agricultural cycle. The living word of God present in the scriptures

was constantly before the eyes of faithful Jews, as it is today, enshrined in scrolls which are read and chanted in synagogue service. From about the third century before the Common Era,<sup>6</sup> select passages tucked into *tefillin* or phylacteries were worn on the forehead and arms. The *mezuzah*, a small box containing miniature scrolls, is still tacked to the jambs of doorways by many Jews and even some Christians.

Restrictions regarding food, clothing, and sexual practices such as circumcision, the Sabbath rest, and other observances similarly brought God's abiding presence to mind during the round of everyday life. Daily prayer was a continual dialogue with God in the mind and heart. Standards of high ethical behavior were enjoined on all the people so that through works of justice and mercy they would become and remain a living sign to the nations of what God intended for all: "Be whole as I am whole" (Lev. 11:44). For the perfection of wholeness is and ever shall be holiness.

Jewish spirituality was always fraught with the desire to see the face of God, to experience the beatifying ecstasy of knowing God's inner being, the *kabod Yahweh*—the splendor or Glory of the Lord. Yet, as Isaiah protested, "Truly you are a God who hides yourself!" (Is. 45:15). The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Moses and the prophets, dwells in heights and depths inaccessible to human abilities of comprehension or portrayal. Thus, the prohibition against making images of God protected Israel from objectification, the religious expedient that ends in idolatry, rendering the divine Presence external, defined, but psychologically opaque.

Israel's God was present to her imagination, rather, in the interior space of spiritual companionship and communion. Nature was only God's servant, architecture and ritual merely convenient occasions for remembrance and worship. Like the burning bush and Horeb's flaming crest, the ancient shrines, the Tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, even the Temple itself were only temporary vehicles of God's presence. Each was lost or destroyed without injury to Israel's inner faith. On the contrary, God's "retreat" from such local and physical associations served to heighten Israel's awareness of the interior mode of presence.

Even so, God's self-disclosure to Israel and the world was mediated not so much by strange prophetic visions such as those of Isaiah and Ezekiel as it was by the intimacy of the inner word and dreams. Israel's God chose to inhabit the interior recesses of the human spirit—consciousness, memory, and the attunement of wills. The pinnacle of religious observance thus came to be neither pilgrimage nor sacrifice but recollection—the sharpening of inner and loving attentiveness, the practice of the presence of God.

Thus the great heroes of Israel's history were men and women who knew God in the intimacy of elect companionship, such as Abraham and Sarah, who entertained Divinity under the oaks at Mamre, or Jacob and Joseph, who heard voices in the night and dreamed strange dreams. Moses conversed with Omnipotence face to face and even glimpsed the backside of God's glory. Judges like Deborah, Jael, and Gideon haggled and argued with God like fishwives. Samuel and Elijah heard the whisper of Infinity in the utter silence of the midnight desert. David loved his Lord passionately, singing and dancing and making music on the harp for his Divine Friend. The great prophets and champions were pursued and penetrated by the ardor of that Lover—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Judith, Esther, and the Maccabees. Therefore when Israel wished to remember God, she also recalled God's friends, those who had *known* God in the immediacy of present experience, an intimacy ultimately meant for all.

Thus, when in 587 BCE and again in 70 CE, the nations destroyed the first and second Temples and led the Jews into exile, the faith of Israel was not destabilized. Rather it was universalized, as the Jewish people were forced to recover the older, deeper sense of the transcendent presence of God among the community of believers and within the heart of the individual believer wherever he or she might be. Ezekiel's vision of the departure of God's glory before the destruction of the Temple had been as much a promise of the availability of that presence to the exiles in Babylon as it was a protest against the introduction of pagan practices in the sanctuary at Jerusalem. The exiled Jews—the *diaspora*—were human seeds of faith and divine consciousness dispersed among the nations of the world. In the subsequent development of the synagogue, “the house of intercession” (*beth tephillah*), and the lay rabbinate, Israel retained what she had learned with the loss of the Temple and the priesthood. The chosen abode of God is the human heart attuned by justice and compassion to the divine Presence.

The story of the Chosen or Elect People is thus an epic chronicle of the discovery, forgetting, and often painful recollection of the transcendent presence of a God immanent in natural, social, and temporal events. Even more it is the progressive record of the *interiorization* of the human race, not only of Israel or of the West, but universally. For the same divine power that eludes time, space, and matter revealed itself as an indwelling presence accessible to conscious communion in love and mindfulness. Israel's spirituality was, as the Christian era neared, a true but qualified mysticism, a quest to see the face of God and live. Not in ecstatic rapture, but in the world of everyday affairs, in the midst of natural beauty and national destiny. True vision was deferred in faith until

the mystery of death removed the final veil of human inadequacy, just as the Day of the Lord was eventually deferred until the Last Times, the end and transformation of cosmic and social history. “Thereafter,” the psalmist sang, “you will lead me into glory” (Ps. 73:24b).<sup>7</sup>

### *God’s Presence in Christ*

As God’s presence was the heart of Jewish spirituality, so also it formed the heart of early Christian spirituality. The theme is as equally and richly manifest in both early Christian and rabbinic writings of the same period. For example, the gnomic statement of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20), finds its parallel in the *Mishnah*—“Two who sit together and occupy themselves with the words of the Torah have the *Shekinah* (the divine presence)” (*Pirqe Aboth* 3:3). In this light, the Christian text even more clearly proclaims that God was uniquely present in Jesus. For in later Judaism, the term *Shekinah* (from *shaken*, “to dwell or abide”) had taken on all the richness of earlier references to the glorious manifestation of God in the Pillar of Cloud and Fire, over the Ark, and in the Temple. The question for Christians, ultimately, was not whether but *how* God was present in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

For the Jews in exile and later in Judea, after the departure of God’s presence from the Temple (Ezek. 9:3–11:23), God did not merely disappear from history, but became even more present in a mysterious manner in the cosmos, in the midst of the devout, and especially in the fullness of time, on the Day of the Lord. Similarly for early Christians, the bodily disappearance of Jesus with his Ascension did not mean his sheer absence from history but the expansion of his presence into the very structure of time and space, even to the “End Time,” when he would return in the clouds of heaven to judge the living and the dead. Like the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, the Ascension expressed Jesus’ identification with the “hidden God” of ancient Jewish tradition—a God universally present in that very hiddenness.

Just as Ezekiel believed in the eventual return of the Glory of God to the Temple, early Christians likewise believed that Christ’s return in glory would restore the Reign of God, set things right. The Greek word they used for that was *parousia*, which means not only “coming” but “presence.” Before that Day, they also believed, Jesus would be present in Spirit among us—not only in the community of disciples in Jerusalem or Galilee, but throughout the world. The Jewish feast of Pentecost, too, celebrates the universal presence of Christ’s Spirit.

Thus, for the poet-theologians of the early Church, the transcendent Christ of cosmic presence is no less the immanent Christ whose Spirit lives among and within us—the Jesus for whom the apostles and martyrs searched the wide world and found wherever they looked. He is present in the mysteries of baptism and eucharist, but also in the need of the suffering, oppressed, and poor: “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to *me*” (Matt. 25:40). He is present also in the hearts of those who profess faith in the mystery of God’s presence in Christ’s body, the Church, for the Holy Spirit is poured out in our hearts and prays within us with inexpressible longing when we do not even know what to say (Rom. 8:26). Christ’s spirit is present, too, among those who pray and work for the coming of God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven. Finally, with the words Matthew uses to conclude his gospel, Jesus promised, “Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the world” (Matt. 28:20).

### *The Legacy of Judaism*

Christianity was divorced from its Jewish identity by the end of the eighth decade of the common era, but not from its Jewish ancestry. The infant Church had fully inherited the spirituality of a divine Presence forever and fully free from sacred precincts, rites, or caste yet also fully free to manifest itself through any chosen medium, including sanctuary, sacrament, and sacerdotal ministry. Thus the history of Christian spirituality only continued in a new and universal way the line of development begun with Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. In faithful hope during centuries of exile and wandering, Judaism also continued her development of God-consciousness along a different but related way.<sup>9</sup>

Christian belief maintains that in the fullness of time, these divergent but interconnected paths of holiness will finally and forever intersect. In the meantime, it is well to remember their common origin and destiny, their witness to the oneness of God, and their confident, expectant devotion to God’s abiding presence. The true Israel remains the sacrament of humankind’s encounter with God, the anvil on which divine Presence forges human consciousness into ever increasing measure with the twin hammers of natural and social revelation.

## CHAPTER TWO

# The First Christians

### *Religious Rivalry and the Quest for Wisdom*

Early Christian spirituality was given characteristic shape by the reciprocal impact of powerful personalities among Jesus' leading disciples on the strong social and religious forces that moved among the currents of daily life in first-century Palestine. Very early in the life of the Church, local communities developed around apostles and evangelists who preached a distinctive understanding of the teachings of Jesus and the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection.<sup>1</sup> There were significant variations in their accounts, many of which are reflected in the writings of the New Testament—itsself containing only a fraction of the gospels, acts, apocalypses, and letters written in the apostolic age. Central to all versions later recognized as authentic by the Church as a whole, however, is the message of a spiritual teacher whose life uniquely and definitively revealed the presence of the living God.

Among the outstanding preachers of that message and that Presence as they encountered the array of Jewish traditions in the middle of the first century, two have always been of particular interest to the Christian people—Simon bar Jonah and Saul of Tarsus. In their lives and writings and those of their circles can be found signs of the nascent spiritualities of the first Christian communities. This dual “Petrine” and “Pauline” character of the early Church would leave a permanent imprint on Christianity.

#### *The Fisher of Sheep*

Blunt, often impetuous, sometimes vacillating and inconsistent, Simon Peter was perhaps surprisingly selected to be the rock on which Jesus would base his infant community of love, the shepherd who would

protect and defend the “little lambs” as well as the sheep. Strengthened after his cowardly denial by Jesus’ love and forgiveness and the abiding gift of his Spirit, Peter fulfilled that charge throughout his days, if often in his characteristically erratic fashion. He boldly proclaimed Jesus as Lord and Redeemer before throngs of Jewish pilgrims and state officials. He preached loudly in the Temple and suffered for it at the hands of the priests. But he also hesitated to admit gentiles to full fellowship without their adopting Jewish ceremonial practices as demanded by ultraconservative Jewish Christians, the “Judaizers.”

Caught up at Joppa in a mystical vision, Peter immediately changed his mind and thenceforth defended the reception of gentiles (Acts 10:9–48). Never as radical, however, as the Greek-speaking Christians like Stephen or even the more moderate Paul, Peter attempted to mediate between the Hellenists and Judaizers. He was accordingly attacked by both sides. But slowly Peter’s moderation prevailed. Moreover, after years of apostolic fence-mending his apostolic pre-eminence in the churches as a whole seems to have been generally accepted. Paul, however, could still confront him angrily when Peter seemed to be wavering in his commitment to the freedom of the gentiles.

Tension between Jewish and gentile Christians was particularly acute in Rome, where the local church appears to have been founded by missionaries from the conservative Jerusalem community. So heated did the arguments become that in one case the Emperor Claudius banished a large number of Jewish Christians from the city—including Paul’s friends Priscilla and Aquila. Eventually both Peter and Paul were drawn into the quarrel. Having largely overcome the differences between themselves at the great council of Jerusalem in 49, they were probably attempting to reconcile various factions when the great catastrophe of 64 struck the city.<sup>2</sup>

A fire of unknown origin swept through most of Rome in July of that year. To divert public blame away from himself, the Emperor Nero accused the Christians of arson and unleashed a fierce persecution against them. Popular opinion, already hostile because of dissension between Jewish and gentile Christians, at first supported the emperor. In the frenzied attack on the defenseless if unruly “sheep,” the two great shepherds were themselves swept up and executed, Peter on the Vatican Hill, according to tradition, and Paul on the Ostian Way.

Peter’s enduring legacy to the Church can probably best be described as a spirit of reconciliation. He struggled to prevent schism, attempting to bridge differences between factions suspicious of each other’s orthodoxy by the precarious art of compromise. At times an unsteady

one, he was nonetheless a prophet of the whole Christ, sovereign above all national and ethnic diversity. In this, Kephias—“the Rock”—will always remain, as he was perceived from the beginning, the model of leadership in the Church, the good shepherd of the whole flock.

### *The Thirteenth Apostle*

Among the first generation of Christians, the personality and spirituality of Paul of Tarsus stand out even more boldly than those of Peter, James, and John, the pillars of the Church in Jerusalem—or “so-called pillars,” as he would bristle in a moment of sarcastic impatience (Gal. 2:9). As profoundly sensitive as he was explosive, the mercurial ex-Pharisee left his stamp forever upon the whole Church.

Reared a strict Pharisee of the diaspora, he studied under Gamaliel the Great in Jerusalem. But Paul’s famous conversion on the road to Damascus was total and final. While not the most extreme of the radical Hellenists, he nevertheless staunchly resisted the efforts of the Judaizers, and even those of moderates such as Peter and James, to impose Jewish customs on gentile converts. In the long haul, he succeeded, but only after decades of controversy.

Because of the number of surviving letters he left the local churches he had founded or supported, it is easy to overestimate Paul’s influence in the early Church. On the other hand, fixing the liberal, inclusive character of that Church was his undoubted legacy. By the second century, together with Peter, Paul was reckoned by writers such as Clement of Rome and all early historians as one of the two pillars of the Church universal.

Paul’s spirituality focused on the presence of the risen Christ in the body of his disciples, both socially and individually. The dramatic event that led to his complete reversal of belief and conduct was nothing less than a direct and immediate encounter with the glorified Christ, who unmistakably identified himself with his followers: “Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?” (Acts 9:4).

Paul in turn so completely identified himself with Christ that he not only claimed to bear the marks of Jesus’ crucifixion in his body (Gal. 6:17), but longed more than anything to die in order to be one forever with his Lord (Phil. 1:21–23). Some commentators have wondered over the years whether like Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, and other known stigmatics, Paul was speaking literally about the wounds he bore. We cannot tell. But Paul clearly felt that his sufferings, and those of all who were persecuted or experienced hardships for the sake of

Christ, were in fact crucified with Jesus. He no less insisted that all who had been baptized into Christ had died with him and were now risen to a wholly new life, one that would eventually flower in immortal glory (1 Cor. 15:20–28).

### *James the Just*

The third “pillar” of the early Church was the enigmatic figure of James, known as “the brother of the Lord.” Emerging in the post-Pentecostal period as the leader of the Jerusalem disciples, James was apparently a close relative of Jesus. (Neither Aramaic nor Greek distinguish sharply between blood brothers—or sisters—and cousins, and despite Mark 6:3 James is not in fact identified as the son of either Mary, Jesus’ mother, or Joseph, his reputed father.<sup>3</sup>) James was not one of the Twelve, however. In any case, he came to represent the most strenuous form of Jewish Christianity, opposing both Peter and Paul in regard to the strict imposition of Mosaic Law on those who followed Jesus.

This first and disruptive conflict among Christians was resolved in favor of lenience by the Council of Jerusalem in the year 49, but the tension between “Hellenists” and “Judaizers” was not resolved until the final destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of Jewish Christians by Hadrian in the year 135.

### *The Human Milieu*

Daily life in the Palestine of Christian origins was as diverse and complex as that of any people caught up in the throes of political oppression, military occupation, and religious turmoil. After a century of resistance against the efforts of Greek-speaking Syrian overlords to eradicate Jewish national and religious distinctiveness, the country fell gradually under the control of Rome—originally for purposes of mutual defense. Generally tolerant, even respectful of cultural differences, the Romans declared official Judaism a *religio licita*—a legal and therefore protected form of worship. But military governors and lackey kinglets kept a wary eye out for deviations, which could mean anything that threatened to upset the religious balance of power.

For some time before the time of Christ, Jewish religion had in fact been a mixture of often wildly disparate elements rather than the monolithic body of belief and practice portrayed in popular films and novels. Christianity itself began as one of a host of competing factions or *chaburoth*, and in a short time demonstrated the same tendency to pluralism, one which has persisted to the present.

### *Varieties of Jewish Spirituality*

Jewish writers of the period such as Philo and Josephus, the Christian scriptures themselves, and early Christian historians such as Eusebius all portray official Judaism in the early decades of the first century as an amalgam of schools and sects, each of which had its own beliefs, customs, traditions, and interpretations of what it meant to be a Jew. But even this picture is apparently far simpler than the actual religious situation at the time.<sup>4</sup>

Known to everyone even indirectly familiar with the gospels, the major Jewish factions at the time of Jesus were the *Pharisees*, proud and patriotic conservatives, and the more liberal-minded *Sadducees*, who practiced a political realism that led to outright collaboration with Rome. Descendants of the Maccabean *hasidim* (“the devout”) who had helped overthrow the hated yoke of the Syrian successors of Alexander the Great, the Pharisees were bitterly opposed to any such compromise. Laymen and women rather than “clergy,” they nevertheless adhered strongly to the traditional beliefs of strict Judaism. They were also more widespread and numerous. Most scribes, the interpreters of the Law, were Pharisees. The Sadducees on the other hand had come to dominate the priesthood and Temple. Rich, worldly, religiously skeptical, and unpopular, they were mainly concentrated in Jerusalem.

Catholic Christianity still bears the doctrinal and liturgical stamp of Pharisaism—belief in the reality of the soul and of spirits such as angels and demons, the resurrection of the dead, heaven and hell, the efficacy of prayer for the dead, and a tendency to accept the literal word of scripture as it stands. Nonetheless, Pharisees also accepted the authority of oral tradition. Fasting and abstinence, personal devotion, set times for prayer, almsgiving, and other ascetical practices were also features of Pharisaical tradition.

But as became clear during Paul’s struggles later in Jerusalem and elsewhere, there were divergences even within Pharisaism, particularly between the northern or Galilean variety, that of Jews like himself from the diaspora, and the southern form in Judea and especially in Jerusalem. Thus although the beliefs and spirituality of Jesus, Peter, and Paul himself as well as most of the apostles and disciples were Pharisaical, they were scorned as far less sophisticated and refined than the Pharisees of the ruling class in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> And although bitterly critical of many scribes and Pharisees there and elsewhere, as well as opposed by them, Jesus and the early disciples were often equally open

to them and were on occasion even defended by them against the rich and urbane Sadducees or other Pharisees.

Opposed to both major parties were the *Zealots*—radically and sometimes violently patriotic in their devotion to Judaism. Although more political than spiritual in their beliefs and practices, the Zealots (or Galileans, as they were sometimes called) contributed several members to the band of Jesus' immediate followers, including an apostle, Simon.

Other major movements or *chaburoth* are known to us mainly by name, but they obviously played an important part in the life of the Jewish people and the early Christian Church—the Essenes, Hemero-baptists, Masbotheans, Samaritans, and Nazorenes among them. Recent discoveries of manuscript scrolls at Qumran, near the Dead Sea, suggest that Essene doctrine may have influenced both the preaching of John the Baptist and Christian apocalyptic thinking. Jesus himself could have known Essenes, but his teaching differs on important points, particularly his openness to pagans and less orthodox Jews as well as his preference for the “little ones” of the realm of God—the poor, outcast, and persecuted members of Jewish society.

### *Jewish Monasticism*

Like the Zealots, the *Essenes* were extreme messianic nationalists, but expressed their faith in much more spiritual, even otherworldly terms. Although the language of their writings was warlike, they did not believe in armed resistance but retired to the desert to purify themselves, study scripture, pray, and await the coming of the Lord. They rejected the Temple and the official priesthood as hopelessly compromised, but seem to have developed a priestly class of their own.

Something like a religious order, the Essenes extolled celibacy, although women were evidently permitted to join the community, and some members were married. They possessed their goods in common and decided issues by vote. Like later Christian monks, they had a probationary period of three years, took vows, shared a common meal, and performed manual labor. The Damascus Document, an ancient manuscript first published in 1910, indicates that some Essenes had migrated to cities beyond the Dead Sea area, where the Qumran manuscripts were found beginning in 1947. Philo, the great Jewish scholar writing in Egypt at the time of Christ, described them as well as did the later writer and Roman collaborator Josephus. The monastic impulse in later Christian times must be interpreted in the light of such movements, including those outside of Palestine such the *Therapeutae*, whom Philo also describes and we shall encounter later on.

Another group, the *Nazorenes* or *Mandaeans*, originated in eastern Syria and Palestine. Like later “Gnostics,” they combined esoteric Judaism with elements of Persian moral dualism and the cognitive bias of later Greek philosophy. Little is known about them and other smaller Jewish movements such as the *Masbotheans* and *Hemerobaptists*, who from their name apparently practiced daily ritual baptism. The *Samaritans* on the other hand were a sizable ethnic and religious sect whom orthodox Jews traditionally despised as heretical. Nevertheless, Samaritans were present in Judea, and some Jews—including Jesus himself—violated conventional proprieties by traveling through Samaria on the way to and from Jerusalem. Insofar as the Samaritans were generally regarded as inferior even to pagans, the early Christian mission to them testifies to the triumph of the universalizing movement in the primitive Church, following the example of Jesus himself.

The calamities of 70 CE and 135, when the Temple was destroyed and eventually the Jewish population of Jerusalem deported, brought an end to much of the rich internal diversity of Judaism. The Sadducees disappeared utterly with the Temple and the priesthood. Similarly, the Zealots and Essenes were either destroyed or faded into history along with the Hemerobaptists and Masbotheans. Several hundred Samaritans have managed to survive up to the present in Nablus, their ancient capital on the west bank of the Jordan. The Mandaeans, joined both by followers of John the Baptist and gnostic Christians, migrated in the third century from Palestine to southern Iraq and Iran, where they have survived to the present, neither Jewish, Christian, nor Muslim but drawing on all three great religions.<sup>6</sup> Mainstream Judaism as it has come to be known in the common era descended from the faith of the Pharisees as has Christianity in many respects. Nevertheless, the radical pluralism of Jewish sects in the first century deeply affected the life and nascent spirituality of the infant Church.

### *Early Christian Pluralism*

Overall, the Jewish *chaburoth* differed from one another regarding just about everything except the unity of God and the election of Israel. Because of its deep-rootedness in Jewish faith and practice, the early Christian community was similarly and sharply divided on a score of issues. In both cases, the divisive concerns were those of conflicting spiritualities—how a shared faith could be expressed in differing ways.

Early Christian spirituality was in fact Jewish spirituality with a critical difference—one that eventually mattered more than all the affinities: the meaning and person of Jesus, especially the central matter of

God's unique presence in Jesus.<sup>7</sup> But the fundamental problem, one which nearly split the early Church into irreconcilable factions, concerned the saving will of God for all people. Could gentiles be incorporated into the Christian community without first accepting Judaism?

At least four groups struggled for spiritual and political supremacy over this issue in the infant Church. At the extreme right were the radical "Judaizers" as they were called—those who held that all Christians, whether Jews or gentiles, must adopt and practice the fullness of the Law including circumcision. At the opposite extreme were the radical "Hellenists" or Greek-speaking Christians, largely Jews from the diaspora and gentile converts like Stephen, Apollos, and the author of the Johannine writings, who urged a total break with Judaism. Between these polar opposites stood the moderate conservatives led by James and Peter on one hand and the liberals led by Paul, Barnabas, and their associates on the other.

Debates raged for years in Jerusalem, Antioch, and elsewhere between the Judaizers and the Hellenists, one of whose number, Stephen, was the first Christian martyr. Faced with schism, the infant Church achieved an uneasy compromise between the parties of James and Paul in the year 49 at the Council of Jerusalem. The issue was more decisively settled by the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman troops in the year 70 and again in 135.

The eradication of the mother church did not mean victory for the extreme Hellenists, however. Many lapsed into forms of gnosticism such as that of Marcion, who was virulently anti-Jewish. Further, daughter churches of Jerusalem survived and even flourished in Antioch, Rome, and elsewhere. But the loss of Jerusalem's paramount influence assured that the universalizing mission of the Pauline churches would determine the course of Christianity for all time to come. As shown in Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, however, the spirituality of that tradition, much like Peter's, recognized the deep bonds between Judaism and Christianity despite Christian rejection of Jewish ritual and legal obligations.

At least one remnant of radical Jewish Christianity did manage to survive the destruction of Jerusalem. Apparently influenced by the poverty and purity of the Essenes, they were called *Ebionites*, "the poor." Like a similar sect, the *Elkasites*, which sprang from the Zealot movement, the Ebionites endured for a time in the Judean countryside, cut off from the rest of the Christian communities by their unshakable Jewishness. Eventually, however, these early schismatics also vanished across the borders of historical memory, only a fragment of their writings remaining as a sad reminder of the Church's debt to the rich heritage of Judaism.

For several centuries other heterodox Christians continued to threaten the integrity—and spirituality—of the early Church. Almost at the beginning, antagonism erupted between orthodox Christians and converts from heterodox, gnostic Judaism such as Simon Magus, who attempted to insert the Christian event into an elaborate framework of cosmic emanations, speculative theology, and possibly even ritual magic.

In many cases, we know little more about these gnostic groups and their teachings than their names, such as the *Nicolaitans*. In other cases, even their writings have come down through the ages to tantalize and bewilder Christians with their charm, elegance, and sometimes even deep piety: gospels attributed to Thomas, Philip, Mary and James, the Gospel of Truth, the Secret Book of John, a Secret Gospel of Mark, and the Book of Thomas the Contender among them, as well as countless other fragments.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these wild elements, spun off by the disenchantment of the radical Hellenists, blazed for a moment, then disappeared like the Ebionites and Elkasites. Others—the Menandrianists, Marcianists, Carpocratians, Valentinians, Basilideans and Satornilians—remained vigorous for generations, amounting, as we shall see, to the first great inner threat to the Christian Church as it spread throughout the known world.

### *The Art of Life*

Several varieties of Christian spirituality arose from the complex matrix of Jewish tradition as found in the diaspora as well as in Palestine. But the main current of early Christian spirituality has its source in the Wisdom tradition of later Judaism as it developed among the Jewish faithful in Egypt, particularly as shaped and promoted by one of the most impressive figures of the period, known simply and forever as Philo the Jew.

In the two centuries before the birth of Jesus, wisdom (*hochmah*) had come to occupy a central place in the religious life of the Jews in Palestine as well as in the diaspora. Broader than *da'ath*, the knowledge of God, it meant practical knowledge—how to behave in such a manner as to enjoy the favor of both God and one's neighbor.

Jewish Wisdom was a prudential art, similar in many ways to the ethics of Confucius. As a distinctly spiritual way of life, the pursuit of Divine Wisdom developed in the scribal schools at the royal court. Its remoter ancestry can be traced to the court schools of Egypt, Edom, and Babylon, which had provided models in other respects for the Jewish monarchy. Eventually, however, the love of Wisdom came to pervade the life of the people as a whole.

The specifically Jewish origin of Wisdom literature is found in *midrash*, the interpretation of scripture. Whether *halakah*, interpretation of the Torah which provided instruction on moral conduct, or *bagadah*, narrative interpretation for purposes of spiritual insight and edification, the goal of scriptural exegesis was always the same—practical application to present situations. The central theme of such biblical instruction is that of the two paths, one of the wise person, the other of the fool. Allegories, fables, and parables as well as proverbs and riddles were used to show the ultimate value of following the path of life, the way in which Divine Wisdom instructed her children.

Early examples of the wisdom tradition are found in the story of Joseph with its significant Egyptian setting (Gen. 41:38) and that of Solomon (1 Kings 3:28–5:12). In the Book of Exodus and elsewhere, the practical and decorative arts were celebrated as wisdom (Exod. 31:2–4, 6; 1 Kings 7:14). The prophets such as Jeremiah lamented the departure of wisdom, just as Ezekiel will witness the departure of the divine presence from the temple: “Is wisdom no more in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom vanished?” (Jer. 49:7).

In post-exilic Judaism, a characteristic body of sacred literature developed around the theme of artful living, including the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), and Wisdom—the Writings. In the writings of the priestly class such as Deuteronomy, wisdom was to be found in the observance of *Torah*—the Law (Deut. 4:6). But for those authors of the books called the Writings, it was the gift of God, the manifestation of God’s own wisdom dwelling among mortals, and the key to happiness and all success.

The purpose of acquiring wisdom was much more than pragmatic—training for personal advancement or diplomatic service. Youngsters were instructed in the path of wisdom in order to develop moral character and spiritual insight into the meaning of life. Virtues of truthfulness, honesty, and simplicity were inculcated in the home. For the wise person should know how to confront the serious problems of life rather than merely to study them intellectually or solve them by wile.

Among great poets and thinkers, such concern for understanding and instruction had already led to profound meditation on the meaning and value of human existence such as found in the Books of Job, Sirach, and, above all, the Book of Wisdom itself, in which she is described as the effulgence of God’s glory, the sign of God’s living presence among humankind. (The Hebrew word *Hochmah* is feminine. From the earliest times, in Christian liturgical celebrations the attributes of Wisdom were applied to both Mary and to Jesus as well as to

the Holy Spirit, whose title in Aramaic would also have been grammatically feminine.) In Jewish mystical traditions shortly before the time of Christ, especially in the great Egyptian city of Alexandria, the figure of Wisdom became personified as a special consort of God, eventually acquiring a status far above all creatures, the very brightness of the divine presence itself.<sup>9</sup>

### *Early Christian Wisdom*

Like the Jewish spiritual tradition out of which it grew, Christian spirituality begins in the wonder of mystery and ends in the promise of glory. Two great wisdom themes run throughout the earliest writings of the followers of Jesus—first, how to live according to God’s will in accordance with Jesus’ teaching and witness, and second, the meaning of Jesus himself as God’s final revelation, a self-communication felt and interpreted as abiding presence, the brightness of divine glory: “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father” (John 1:14).

Elements of midrashic wisdom are found throughout early Christian scripture, from the gospels to the letters of Paul, Hebrews, and Jude. Wisdom themes are prominent in the infancy narratives (Matt. 2:1–12, Luke 1 and 2). As a young man, Jesus surprised his elders by possessing wisdom beyond his years and without benefit of formal schooling (Matt. 13:54, Mark 6:2). Later, following the tradition of the Book of Wisdom, Jesus himself described divine wisdom as a gift rather than an accomplishment, hidden from those who prided themselves on their learning, and given to mere children (Matt. 11:25, Luke 10:21). Wisdom proved herself in deeds, not words (Matt. 11:19, Luke 7:35).

Of all early Christian writers, Paul inherited the greatest enthusiasm for the wisdom themes of later Judaism. He, too, celebrated the connection of wisdom and God’s glory and saw in Wisdom the very presence of the hidden God made known (Rom. 16:27, Eph. 3:10). For Paul and his disciples, Wisdom was a gift of grace, not earned or acquired (Eph. 1:8; Col. 1:9; 1 Cor. 12:8). Paul also discerned the wide difference between what the world counts as wisdom and true Wisdom: “Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Cor. 1:17). He insisted, “I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:1), yet—“among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age . . .” (1 Cor. 6).

Ultimately for Paul, as for the authors of the Gospel of John and the

Epistle to the Hebrews, Wisdom was revealed most perfectly in Christ and him crucified. Before all ages, as well as in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ is the *logos*, the eternal Word and true Wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24). The cross of Jesus is a scandal only because the Wisdom of God must appear as folly to those who pit their wisdom against God's. Such merely human logic is the true and lasting folly.