

CHAPTER I

THE CHURCH OF JERUSALEM

AT the close of the year 35 A.D.¹ the Christian community in Jerusalem, at that date the only organized body of disciples of Jesus of Nazareth², was enjoying an immunity from persecution which had lasted for several years. The martyrdom of the Founder of the new sect had been rendered possible by a temporary and unnatural alliance between the Pharisees and the sacerdotal party³; but the former had refused to continue the policy of persecution after His removal. The reason for the change in their attitude was the fact that His successors showed no tendency to continue that insistence on the radical opposition between the spirit of the new movement and their own devotion to the most scrupulous observance of the minutest details of the letter of Jewish tradition, which had been characteristic of the teaching of the prophet of Nazareth⁴: and it was therefore natural that they should revert to the policy of tolerance which was traditional in their party⁵. It was even to their interest to pursue a policy of patronizing benevolence towards the comparatively small body of "Nazarenes." They shared the Pharisaic belief in the Resurrection of the dead, and the coming of the Messianic kingdom in a spiritual rather than a purely temporal sense⁶. Further their ethical teaching as derived from Jesus Himself closely resembled, and was to a large extent modelled on, that of the greatest Pharisaic teachers⁷. They included in their number at least one or two persons who were actually themselves Pharisees in their devotion to the Jewish system as well as Christians; and it was not to be expected that the Pharisees would tolerate a persecution which might involve the surrender of their brethren to the hatred of the Sadducean faction⁸. Thus, although the identification of the crucified dreamer of Nazareth with the Messiah might appear ridiculous in the eyes of the learned, yet there was nothing in it to call for persecution; while the distinctive religious practices of the new sect contained nothing which could be regarded as blasphemy or idolatry. As soon as the first outbreak of enthusiasm, which followed the public proclamation of the Resurrection of Jesus on the Pentecost after the Crucifixion, had shown that the successors of Jesus were harmless devotees and not dangerous fanatics, clamouring for vengeance for the blood of their Master⁹, and leading their followers into dangerous adventures for the deliverance of Israel, the Pharisees had no motive for persecution and many for toleration¹⁰. If their beliefs were wrong, in so far as they differed from those of Pharisaism, it was best to leave

them to die out under the influence of time and disappointed hope. Meanwhile their devotion must commend them to the religious sympathies of the Pharisees; even from a political point of view it was obvious that the new movement furnished a counter-attraction to the dangerous lures of nationalist agitators. And it was always possible that their teaching was of God. In any case it was best left alone.

To this attitude, advocated in the Sanhedrin by Gamaliel, the Pharisaic leader, the adherents of the Sadducean party, the immediate personal friends and relatives of the High Priest Joseph Caiaphas, had no alternative to offer¹¹. Their opponents carried too much weight with the nation to make an independent policy possible¹². They had every reason for disliking the new movement, which by its other-worldly piety discredited their own laxity and worldliness¹³. Its insistence on the virtue of poverty was liable to express itself in language calculated to increase the unrest of the time¹⁴; while its very existence was a silent condemnation of the ruling class which had been legally responsible for the judicial murder of Jesus. None the less so long as there was no open demand for vengeance, and so long as the new sect did not openly proclaim its hostility to the whole system of Temple-management on which the revenues of the chiefs of the priestly class depended, there was no urgent necessity for action¹⁵. Nor was it easy to devise an effective method of persecution. Even with the aid of the Pharisees the task was difficult; for no death-sentence could be inflicted without the authority of the Roman procurator. Pontius Pilate would certainly not consent to such sentences on purely religious grounds; his contemptuous dislike of the nation which he had been sent to rule was more likely to lead him to welcome any movement which offended their religious susceptibilities¹⁶. Even the combination of circumstances which had enabled the Sanhedrin to secure the Crucifixion of Jesus had almost failed to extort his consent; and in the absence of any danger of a Passover-riot¹⁷ and of a prisoner who could be speciously charged with stirring up political disaffection¹⁸, it was certain that he would refuse to listen to any charge which the Sanhedrin might bring. And so long as the Pharisees in that body refused to agree to persecution, it was impossible to contemplate any appeal to the procurator or to carry on any minor form of legal persecution¹⁹. On the other hand the position of the Jewish government was too weak to allow them to make use of illegal methods. An appeal to violence could only lead to the withdrawal of the support of the Imperial authorities,

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which alone enabled the High Priest to maintain his own position and the peace and prosperity of the Jewish nation. At the same time it would involve him in complicity with the Jewish factions, already numerous, which advocated open rebellion against the Gentile oppressor. At present it was necessary to make every effort to maintain that harmony with the Imperial government which enabled the priestly rulers of the nation both to protect the people from the excesses of Roman officials and to keep in check the popular movements in favour of open rebellion. Illegal persecution of the Christian community could only result in an alliance of the High Priest and his followers with the extremists and a war with Rome, in which the wealth and position of the Sadducean rulers would be irretrievably lost²⁰.

The Christian body was thus enabled for several years to enjoy comparative security, and to make a steady increase in numbers²¹. It possessed a double character, since it was for the present both a religious sect and a social organization. In its former character it was a sect of Judaism. Its members accepted alike the obligations of the Law and the worship of the Temple²², but added to these certain specific doctrines and practices. In doctrine they were distinguished from the rest of the nation by the belief that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact the Messiah, the Righteous Servant of God appointed to suffer for the redemption of Israel, that He had risen from the dead after His Crucifixion²³, and that He would shortly return to establish a kingdom in which all who had believed in Him would be rewarded by deliverance from the punishment that awaited the wicked and admission to a state of everlasting happiness. The exact form of the Messianic kingdom was vaguely conceived. The sayings of Jesus had much in common with the current apocalyptic literature of the time, and they were naturally amplified by His followers with elements borrowed from such writings or the ideas of the circles from which they emanated²⁴. It was however certain that admission to the eternal happiness of the kingdom could only be obtained by repentance from past sin and belief in Jesus as the risen Saviour and future judge of all mankind. Those who satisfied these conditions were admitted to the new society by a ceremonial baptism in which the recipient was delivered from the sins of the past and enabled to receive that salvation which was the portion of the believer²⁵. How far that salvation consisted in the present deliverance from sin, and how far in the prospect of the eternal reward of the coming Messianic kingdom, was not, in view of the assumed imminence of the kingdom,

a matter of immediate interest²⁶. The death and Resurrection of the Saviour were further commemorated in the solemn rite of the “breaking of bread” instituted by the Master Himself on the night of His Passion, and preserved as a continual memorial of His death, and a means whereby the benefits of His triumph over it were conveyed to all His faithful followers²⁷.

This rite was however closely associated with the social organization of the Christian body. Its members accepted in the most literal sense the ethical principles laid down by their Founder. All possessors of any considerable amount of property were expected to sell it for the benefit of the whole community; and from the proceeds of such sales and the labour of the able-bodied members of the community, provision was made in the shape of a common daily meal for the needs of all, including those who were unable to support themselves²⁸. The daily meal was however a religious rite as well. It naturally recalled to mind the common life which the first disciples had shared with the Lord before His death, and particularly the climax of that life, the supper on the eve of His Crucifixion. Consequently it culminated in a repetition of the rite which He had on that occasion instituted as the specific observance which was to distinguish His followers from the rest of the world. This rite, known as the “breaking of bread,” gave both a name and a special character to the daily meal, since each day brought with it a re-enactment of the closing scene of the ministry of the Master, and emphasized the unity of all members of the Christian body both with one another and with the Lord Whose return they awaited²⁹.

For its appeal to the general public the new movement did not simply depend on the witness of its leaders to the fact of the Resurrection of Jesus, and their capacities to lead their hearers to a sense of sin and the need of redemption as a means of sharing in the Messianic kingdom. They were able to enforce their words by signs and wonders, ascribed directly to supernatural intervention. Such signs were indeed necessarily expected of those who claimed to exercise a divine commission, and without them the claims of the followers of Jesus would have fallen on deaf ears³⁰. Of such signs the most impressive were naturally those which took the form of the miraculous healing of diseases; for such signs marked the ministry of the disciples of Jesus no less than they had marked that of their Master. Almost equally impressive was the power of speaking under the influence of a state of ecstasy which was attributed to the direct inspiration of the Spirit of God. This power was manifested first on

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the day of Pentecost, following the Crucifixion, with the result of an immediate accession of a large number of new converts to the Christian society³¹, and continued to mark the meetings of the new body. The words spoken by the person thus inspired were not in general intelligible to the speaker or to his hearers, and often the speaker could not, when the ecstasy had passed, give any coherent account of his experiences while under the influence of the Spirit. None the less the phenomenon impressed those present with a sense of divine power present in the speaker, even where no intelligible account of his utterances was possible. In certain cases however the speaker could, when the ecstasy had passed, give a coherent account of visions seen or mysteries revealed to him. In other cases he uttered intelligible messages to those present. The differences in the manifestation were naturally due to the temperament of the speaker and the extent to which he was controlled by some power external to his normal consciousness during the time of utterance³². In cases where the speaker retained his normal consciousness and delivered his message in normal language, though appearing to be inspired by an external spiritual force, his utterances were regarded not as "speaking with tongues," but as prophecy. Such messages naturally were couched very largely in the language of the prophets of the Old Testament, and their successors and imitators, the apocalyptic writers of the Judaism of the time. Their utterances took the form of solemn warnings of the imminence of the day of the Lord, and the consequent necessity of repentance and holiness.

These phenomena were all recognized accompaniments of the past history of Judaism, though at the time when Christianity first appeared as a definite sect within the Jewish nation they were largely discredited. The ancient revelations to the prophets were regarded as having come to an end, and such abnormal phenomena were mostly confined to the more eccentric sects of Judaism and to the Messianic impostors who found them a valuable means for stirring up the fanaticism of the ignorant. Naturally they were of equal value to the preachers of Christianity in their utterance of a message which was essentially apocalyptic, even though it refused to put forward any scheme for the political deliverance of Israel or to ally itself with the schemes of others. Although they were not as a rule employed for the purpose of impressing the general public, yet they were of the utmost value as a means of fostering and stimulating the loyalty of the faithful and in convincing the serious inquirer that the new movement, in spite of the ignorance and obscurity of its leaders, had

in fact the authority of God for the claim which it made to be the true fulfilment of the hopes and history of Israel.

These leaders were in the first place the eleven survivors of the band of twelve chosen by Jesus of Nazareth as his immediate personal followers. Their number was made up to twelve by the inclusion of Matthias, one of the persons who had known Jesus in the flesh, and seen Him after His Resurrection. Of these twelve the recognized chiefs were Peter and John, two of the three disciples who had been most intimately associated with Him during His earthly life. Their authority rested on the pre-eminence given to them by Him, Peter being clearly the leader of the two³³. The general pre-eminence of the Twelve was undisputed, and was confirmed both by the vigour and confidence of their preaching, and by its visible success in producing the healing of diseases. The exact nature of their authority was entirely undefined; and in the absence of any opposition or question it was natural that it should be so. To the outer world they represented a new school of thought in Judaism, and, as the recognized teachers and leaders of it, they were able, apart from the early and ineffective attempts at suppression, to conduct a regular mission in its favour, which had its centre in the portion of the Temple known as "Solomon's Porch." Within the community their functions included the charge of the common funds and the supervision of the common meals, which needed as their president one who possessed the spiritual authority which gave him the right to celebrate the solemn eucharistic mystery of the "breaking of bread"³⁴. They also conducted the public prayers and instructions of the Church, and regulated its spiritual exercises, and held the authority to decide as to the admission of new members, and the punishment of offenders against the society³⁵.

Below them stood a body of believers who, although they held no definite position of authority, were none the less marked out as possessing certain claims to eminence over the rest of the community. The main element in this body consisted of those who had seen the Lord both before and after His Resurrection, notably those who had been present at one of the appearances of the Risen Lord, at which He had commanded His followers to preach the message of His kingdom to the world at large³⁶. To these were added some, who, though not actually witnesses of the Resurrection, were none the less in virtue of their personal character or their benefactions to the Church recognized as standing out above the rank and file of the Christian society, and possessing a special claim to be heard in all deliberations as to the actions of the whole body³⁷.

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For the present the community did not extend beyond Jerusalem and the suburban villages³⁸. In Galilee and even further afield there were isolated followers of “the Way,” but they formed as yet no definitely organized societies³⁹. Such followers were distinguished from their fellow-Jews by their belief that Jesus had risen from the grave and that He would shortly return in glory to judge both the quick and the dead⁴⁰; but their worship was that of the synagogue, and they had no means of following the distinctive forms of Christian worship and social organization.

The new sect consisted exclusively of those who were Jews by religion, though it numbered among its members some who had entered Judaism as proselytes and not by birth. There was no doubt of the binding character of the Mosaic Law, nor of the claim to veneration of those who not only observed the Law, but also safeguarded their observance with a scrupulous adherence to the scribal traditions with which several generations of Pharisaism had fenced about the letter of the Mosaic code. The Pharisees within the Church were indeed a small minority distinguished for their Jewish piety, as they were among the nation as a whole⁴¹. But there was no question that the general observance of the Law was binding, and many of the sayings of Jesus could be quoted in support of this view⁴².

On the other hand the counsels of perfection laid down by the Master were followed with an almost literal exactness. In matters of property the rich were expected to surrender their goods for the benefit of the whole community, which was bound to support the helpless⁴³. The produce of the labours of all members alike passed to the common store of the Church. Besides avarice, such sins as swearing, anger, quarrelling and respect for worldly position were regarded with the sternest reprobation⁴⁴. The continued expectation of the immediate return of the Lord, and the constant manifestation in external phenomena of the presence of the Spirit of God naturally fostered the constant endeavour to attain to Christian perfection.

In spite however of the harmony of the Christian body, it contained within itself three elements, which though equally recognizing the obligation of observing the Jewish Law were none the less inclined both by training and tradition to take widely different views both as to its exact scope and its claim to be permanently binding on the followers of Jesus. There were in the first place the Pharisee converts, for whom the Law was not merely the pledge of the covenant between God and His people, but the guarantee of their future glory both in this world and the next, provided that it was faithfully kept.

The Law was to the Pharisee the revelation of the nature of God Himself; for the Holy One Himself observed the Law, which He had given to Israel, and indeed to all mankind, as the greatest of all His blessings. To observe the Law in its minutest detail, and to extend its sphere over every department of human life was the pride and delight of the Pharisee; and although the more extravagant glorifications of the Law as the revelation of God could hardly survive the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah by the Christian Pharisee, yet he could not hesitate to continue the closest observance of the Mosaic system as interpreted by the great teachers of the age. Jesus Himself had indeed steadily refused to countenance the whole system of Pharisaism, and had reserved for it His fiercest denunciations: but it might be held that His condemnations extended rather to the false spirit which had animated the more recent developments of the system than to its actual attempt to multiply the occasions on which it was possible for man to observe the Law. Thus the Christian Pharisee, while recognizing the paramount importance of the virtues which the Law was intended to inculcate as against the details of outward observance—and in theory the Pharisees had always recognized this—might none the less hold that the obligation, or at least the desirability of adhering to the traditions of the Fathers remained intact. In the circumstances of the time it was inevitable that the Jewish Christians in general should regard such converts with the utmost respect and veneration. This was particularly the case in Jerusalem, where public opinion was steadily in favour of the Pharisees⁴⁵, in spite of the fact that many of the residents in the Holy City, no less than the cultivators and fishermen of Galilee, were inclined to resent the constant attempt of their religious leaders to add to the burden of the Law and had welcomed with enthusiasm the refusal of Jesus to accept their doctrines and practices⁴⁶.

As against the Pharisee converts the predominant element in the Church represented the popular standard of Judaism as observed by the people of the country. The Christians of this class were proud of their fidelity to the Law and careful in their observance of it, but at the same time they did not recognize in ordinary practice the newer developments of scribal tradition. They included the original Galileans who had followed Jesus and had welcomed His revolt against the growing pretensions of the Pharisees. For the most part those who could claim to have seen the Lord in the flesh were men of this type. In the eyes of the Pharisees their observance of the Law might seem perilously lax; but, although they might be contemptuously described

as “the people who knew not the Law,” yet so long as they did not openly fall away from it, they had to be recognized as being within the pale of the covenant⁴⁷.

Finally there was an element which consisted of Jews and proselytes of the Dispersion, who out of devotion to their faith had left their homes to live in the centre of the one true religion⁴⁸. They were naturally zealous for the Law by which alone they had been preserved from falling into the hideous vices of the heathen world, vices which the Jewish writers of the age were never weary of painting in the most lurid colours⁴⁹. Their zeal could only be intensified by their personal familiarity with the moral standard of ordinary Gentile society, and by the fact that in some of their brethren that familiarity had resulted either in apostasy or a grave neglect of even the weightiest matters of the Law⁵⁰.

None the less their zeal differed profoundly from that of the native Hebrew. To the latter the faith of the Old Testament was the covenant by which God had pledged Himself at some future date to reward the sufferings of His Chosen People with a glorious triumph over the oppressor. The crimes of the latter were to be punished with eternal torments or at best with a perpetual subjection to the Jewish nation⁵¹. The Law was alike the standing guarantee of that triumph, and also the means by which it was to be obtained, since if only the Law could be thoroughly kept by the people the time of vengeance on the heathen would be fulfilled⁵². To the “Hellenist,” as Jews born outside the promised land were called, the Law was essentially different. It was the divinely appointed means for preserving him from the abominations of heathendom. But its value lay not in the external observance of its minute ritual prescriptions, but in the spiritual lessons which such regulations inculcated⁵³. The letter must indeed be observed; but such observance was only of value as a constant reminder of the necessity of striving after righteousness. Indeed it was tenable that the duty of outward observance was only necessary as an example to the weaker brethren, binding on man in his present state, but not possessing any permanent value of its own⁵⁴. More generally however the Law was regarded as the means by which the nation was enabled to attain to a knowledge of the truth and a level of righteousness which far exceeded the highest ideals of Gentile philosophers and law-givers⁵⁵. In a coming Messianic age it was indeed possible that a new Law would be given, as some of the prophets had foretold⁵⁶. Until then the old Law was the only means of attaining to righteousness, not only for the Jews but also for the

Gentiles. The latter were from this point of view to be regarded not so much as hated oppressors, to be trodden underfoot in the day of divine vengeance, but fellow-men, who might yet be saved from the iniquity of the world in general, and brought to share in the eternal reward of God's faithful servants⁵⁷. For this purpose no effort was spared both to convince them of the essential reasonableness of the Jewish system, and also to win their personal allegiance to it. To secure their general adherence to the Law of righteousness—and naturally to some extent for the lower object of securing the support of wealthy and influential Gentiles—wide concessions might be made in matters of minor observances⁵⁸.

The hope of the conversion of the Gentile world had inspired the greatest of the old prophets, and it accorded with the best beliefs of the Hebrews themselves. But oppression and the fanatical hatred evoked by oppression had hardened the views of the Hebrew against the rest of mankind. The Hellenist however, though he had left his home in order to return to the land of his fathers, was still zealous for the conversion of the Gentile. Consequently he was still zealous for the Law which was to be the means of that conversion⁵⁹. But the contact with Christianity might well produce startling results. Even the strictest observers of the Law found in the new teaching a motive for striving after holiness which the old had lacked. Belief in the Resurrection of Jesus and the imminence of His return, coupled with the new gifts placed by the Spirit at the disposal of the Church, constituted a power in the human life infinitely greater than anything which the Law had been able to supply⁶⁰. It might well prove that this power could be regarded by the Hellenist as delivering the believer from that duty of obeying the outward letter which, in spite of all concessions, remained the chief obstacle to the conversion of the Gentiles to the Jewish faith⁶¹. Further it was arguable that the new gifts implied the beginning of that Messianic era, which was to precede the final coming of God to judge the world through His anointed servant. In that age it was tenable that the old Law was to lose its binding force⁶².

In any case although the Hellenist still professed to expect the establishment of a Messianic kingdom upon earth, in which God would restore the outcasts of Israel to the home of their fathers and inaugurate for them a period of temporal triumph over their enemies before the final judgment of all mankind, his hopes in this respect were largely a matter of pious theory⁶³. In practice he looked forward to the enjoyment of personal immortality after death as the reward