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The Story of Christianity Volume 1

Chapters One and Two

I

Introduction

> In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.
>
> LUKE 2:1

From its very beginning, the Christian message was grafted onto human history. The Good News Christians have proclaimed through the ages is that in Jesus Christ, and for our salvation, God has entered human history in a unique way. History is crucial for understanding not only the life of Jesus, but also the entire biblical message. A good deal of the Old Testament is historical narrative. The Bible tells the story of God's revelation in the life and history of the people of God. Without that story, it is impossible to know that revelation.

The New Testament writers are quite clear about this. The Gospel of Luke tells us that the birth of Jesus took place during the reign of Augustus Caesar, "when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (2:2). Shortly before, the same Gospel places the narrative within the context of Palestinian history, recording that it took place "in the days of Herod, king of Judaea" (1:5). The Gospel of Matthew opens with a genealogy that places Jesus within the framework of the history and hopes of Israel, and then goes on to date the birth of Jesus "in the days of Herod the king" (2:1). Mark gives less chronological detail, but still does affirm that Jesus began his ministry "in those days"—that is, the days of John the Baptist (1:9). The fourth gospel wishes to make clear that the significance of these events is not transitory, and therefore begins by stating that the Word who was made flesh in human history (1:14) is the same Word who "was in the beginning with God" (1:2). Finally, a similar note is sounded in the First Epistle of John, the opening lines of which declare that "that which was from the beginning" is also that "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands" (1:1).

After completing his gospel, Luke continued the story of the Christian church in the book of Acts. He did not do this out of mere antiquarian curiosity, but rather out of some important theological considerations. According to

Luke and to the entire New Testament, the presence of God among us did not end with the ascension of Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus himself promised his followers that he would not leave them alone, but would send another counselor (John 14:16-26). At the beginning of Acts, immediately before the ascension, Jesus tells his disciples that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, by which they will be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Then follow the events of Pentecost, which mark the beginning of the witnessing life of the church. Thus, the theme of the book commonly called *Acts of the Apostles* is not so much the deeds of the apostles, as the deeds of the Holy Spirit through the apostles (and others). Luke has left us two books, the first on the deeds of Jesus, and the second on the deeds of the Spirit.

But Luke's second book does not seem to have a conclusion. At the end, Paul is still preaching in Rome, and the book does not tell us what becomes of him or of the other leaders of the church. Luke had a theological reason for this, for in his view the story he was telling shall not come to an end before the end of all history.

What this means for those who share in Luke's faith is that the history of the church, while showing all the characteristics of human history, is much more than the history of an institution or of a movement. It is a history of the deeds of the Spirit in and through the men and women who have gone before them in the faith.

There are episodes in the course of that history in which it is difficult to see the action of the Holy Spirit. As our narrative unfolds, we shall find those who have used the faith of the church for their financial gain, or to increase their personal power. There will be others who will forget or twist the commandment of love, or will persecute their enemies with a vindictiveness unworthy of the name of Jesus. At other times, it will appear to many of us that the church has forsaken the biblical faith, and some will even doubt that such a church can truly be called *Christian.* At such points in our narrative, it may do well to remember two things.

The first of these is that, while this narrative is the history of the deeds of the Spirit, it is the history of those deeds through sinners such as we are. This is clear as early as New Testament times, when Peter, Paul, and the rest are depicted both as people of faith and as sinners. And, if that example is not sufficiently stark, it should suffice to take another look at the "saints" to whom Paul addresses his First Epistle to the Corinthians!

The second is that it has been through those sinners and that church—and only through them—that the biblical message has come to us. Even in the darkest times in the life of the church, there were those Christians who loved, studied, kept, and copied the scriptures, and thus bequeathed them to us.

What those earlier Christians have bequeathed to us, however, is more than the text of scriptures. They have also left the illuminating record of their striving to be faithful witnesses under the most diverse of circumstances. In times of persecution, some witnessed with their blood, others with their writings, and still others with their loving acceptance of those who had weakened and later repented. In times when the church was powerful, some sought to witness by employing that power, while others questioned the use of it. In times of invasions, chaos, and famine, there were those who witnessed to their Lord by seeking to restore order, so that the homeless might find shelter, and the hungry might have food. When vast lands until then unknown were opened to European Christians, there were those who rushed to those lands to preach the message of their faith. Throughout the centuries, some sought to witness by the Word spoken and written, others by prayer and renunciation, and still others by the force of arms and the threat of inquisitorial fires.

Like it or not, we are heirs to this host of diverse and even contradictory witnesses. Some of their actions we may find revolting, and others inspiring. But all of them form part of our history. All of them, those whose actions we admire as well as those whose actions we despise, brought us to where we are now.

Without understanding that past, we are unable to understand ourselves, for in a sense the past still lives in us and influences who we are and how we understand the Christian message. When we read, for instance, that "the just shall live by faith," Martin Luther is whispering at our ear how we are to interpret those words—and this is true even for those of us who have never even heard of Martin Luther. When we hear that "Christ died for our sins," Anselm of Canterbury sits in the pew with us, even though we may not have the slightest idea who Anselm was. When we stand, sit, or kneel in church; when we sing a hymn, recite a creed (or refuse to recite one); when we build a church or preach a sermon, a past of which we may not be aware is one of the factors influencing our actions. The notion that we read the New Testament exactly as the early Christians did, without any weight of tradition coloring our interpretation, is an illusion. It is also a dangerous illusion, for it tends to absolutize our interpretation, confusing it with the Word of God.

One way we can avoid this danger is to know the past that colors our vision. A person wearing tinted glasses can avoid the conclusion that the entire world is tinted only by being conscious of the glasses themselves. Likewise, if we are to break free from an undue bondage to tradition, we must begin by understanding what that tradition is, how we came to be where we are, and how particular elements in our past color our view of the present. It is then that we are free to choose which elements in the past—and in the present—we wish to reject, and which we will affirm.

The opposite is also true. Not only is our view of the present colored by our history, but our view of history is also colored by the present and by the future we envision. Were the reader to compare this *Story* with earlier histories of the church, some differences would immediately become apparent. For one thing, this *Story* seeks to acknowledge the role of women throughout the life of the church in a way that most earlier histories did not. This is not because the author has any particular insight that others do not. It is simply because our age has become much more aware of the significant contribution of women to every era, and particularly to the life of the church. Likewise, it will become apparent that the way I tell the story here, it does not make the church of the North Atlantic its culmination. Again, this is not due to some particular insight of the author, but simply to the astonishing events of the last two centuries, when Christianity first became a truly universal religion, and then became more and more a religion no longer dominated by the North Atlantic. It is rather the obvious conclusion of anyone looking at the statistics of the last few decades, as will be seen in Volume 2. At a time when there are more Christians in the former "mission fields" than in the "mother churches," we must tell the story in a global way that was not necessary—and perhaps not even possible—in earlier generations. Thus, there are elements in the story that today seem most important to us, but were quite secondary to historians fifty years ago.

It is at this point that the *doing* of history converges with the *making* of it. When we study the life and work of past generations, and when we interpret it, we are *doing* history. But we must remember that we are reading the past in the light of our present, and also that future generations will read about our times as past history. In that sense, like it or not, both by our action and by our inaction, we are *making* history. This is both an exhilarating opportunity and an awesome responsibility, and it demands that we *do* history in order to be able to *make* it more faithfully. Every renewal of the church, every great age in its history, has been grounded on a renewed reading of history. The same will be true as we move ahead into the twenty-first century.

In this new century, as in every age, Christians face new and unexpected challenges. In seeking to be obedient in our response to such challenges, we have the resources of past times when other believers found themselves in similar situations. The response of the early church to a culture that often saw it with indifference or even contempt may provide guidance at a time when similar attitudes prevail in much of Western society. The manner in which the church in the fourth and fifth centuries responded to the migration of entire nations may provide insight into possible ways to interpret and to respond to the demographic upheavals of our time. The devotion of medieval scholastics and of Protestant Reformers may be an inspiration to budding scholars and

theologians. The history of missions in the nineteenth century may well warn us of the pitfalls the church faces when it crosses cultural and social boundaries. In all of this, the past will illumine the present.

But the opposite is always true: As we look at those and other past times and events, we do so through the lens of our own time, our own concerns, our own hopes. History is not the pure past; history is a past interpreted from the present of the historian. Thus, our understanding of the early martyrs and heretics, of monastics, pastors, crusaders and scholars, as well as our understanding of everyday Christian life in the past, will be both marked and enriched by our present-day lenses.

It is into this dialogue that we now enter.

PART I

THE EARLY CHURCH

Chronology

Emperors	Bishops of Rome*	Authors and Documents**	Events
Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE)		(Philo)	Jesus
Tiberius (14–37)			
Caligula (37–41)			
Claudius (41–54)		Paul's Epistles (Flavius Josephus)	Jews expelled from Rome
Nero (54–68)	Linus (?)	Mark	Persecution Jerusalem Christians flee to Pella (66)
Galba (68–69)			
Otho (69)			
Vitellius (69)			
Vespasian (69–79)		Matthew (?)	Fall of Jerusalem (70)
	Anacletus (?)	Luke—Acts (?)	
Titus (79–81)			
Domitian (81–96)		John (?)	
	Clement	Revelation	Persecution
Nerva (96–98)			
Trajan (98–117)			
	Evaristus Alexander Sixtus	Ignatius	Persecution

* Bishops whom the Roman Church does not recognize are in italics.
** Non-Christian authors are in parentheses.

Emperors	Bishops of Rome*	Authors and Documents**	Events
Hadrian (117–138)		Quadratus	Persecution
		Aristides	
	Telesphorus	Papias	
		(Epictetus)	Surge of Gnosticism
		Didache (?)	
		Gospel of the Hebrews	Marcion in Rome
	Hyginius	Psuedo-Barnabas (?)	
Antoninus Pius (138–161)	Pius	Basilides	
		Aristo of Pella (130)	
		Hermas (c. 150)	
		Martyrdom of Polycarp	
		Roman Symbol	
		Valentinus	
	Anicetus	Gospel of Peter	
		Muratorian Fragment (160)	Montanism
		Fronto of Cirta	
		Epitaph of Pectorius (?)	
		Ascension of Isaiah (?)	
		Odes of Solomon (?)	
Marcus Aurelius (161–180)	Justin (165)		Persecution
Lucius Verus co-emperor (161–169)	Soter	Hegesippus (154–166)	
		Lucian of Samosata	
		Tatian	
		II Enoch (?)	
	Eleuterus (?–189)	Athenagoras	Martyrs of Gaul (177)
Commodus	Theophilus of Antioch (Celus)		
		Irenaeus (c. 180)	
		Pantenus	Scillitan martyrs
	Victor (189–199)	Melito of Sardis (189)	Debate over date of Easter
Pertinax (193)		Tertullian (195–220)	
Didius Julian (193)			
Septimus Severus		Minucius Felix (?)	
	Zephyrinus (199–217)	Epitaph of Abercius	Persecution
		Perpetua and Felicitas	Syncretistic policy
		Clement of Alexandria (200–215)	Tertullian Montanist (207)

Emperors	Bishops of Rome*	Authors and Documents**	Events
Caracalla (211–217)			
		Origen (215–253)	
Macrinus (217–218)	Calixtus (217–222)	(Plotinus)	
Elagabalus (218–222)			
Alexander Severus (222–235)	Urban (222–230)	Pseudo-Clementime	
	Hippolytus (222–235)	(?)	Two bishops in Rome
	Pontian (230–235)		Origen in Palestine
Maximi (235–238)	Anterus (235–236)		
	Fabian (236–250)		
Gordian I (238)			
Gordian II (238)			
Pupienus (238)	Sextus Julius Africanus		
Balbinus (238)			
Gordian III (238–244)	Gospel of Thomas (?)	Manicheism founded	
	Methodius		
Philip the Arabian (244–249)	Heraclas		
Decius (249–251)		Cyprian	Persecution
Hostilian (251)			
Gallus (251–253)	Cornelius (251–253)		Two bishops in Rome
	Novatian (251–258?)		
Aemilian (253)	Lucius (253–254)	Didascalia (?)	
Valerian (253–259)	Stephen (254–257)		
	Sixtus II (257–258)		
Gallienus (259–268)			
	Dionysius (260–268)	Dionysius of Alexandria	Paul of Samosata bishop of Antioch
		Lucian of Antioch	
	Felix (269–274)	Gregory the Wonderworker	
		Firmilian of Caesarea	
Claudius II (268–270)		Theognost	
Quintillus (270)		Gnostic papyri (?)	
Aurelian (270–275)		Gospel of Bartholomew	
Tacitus (275–276)	Eutychian (275–283)		
Florian (276)			

Emperors	Bishops of Rome*	Authors and Documents**	Events
Probus (276–282)			
Carus (282–283)	Caius (283–296)		
Numerian (283–284)		Arnobius	
Carinus (283–285)			
Diocletian (284–305)			
Maximian (285–305)	Marcellinus (296–304)		
Constant Chlorus (292–306)		Pierius	Great Persecution
Galerius (292–311)			Edict of Toleration (311)
Maximinus Daia (305–313)	Marcellus (308–309)		
Constantine (306–337)	Eusebius (309–310)		
Severus (306–307)			
Maxentius (306–312)	Miltiades (311–314)		Battle of Milvian Bridge
Licinius (307–323)			Edict of Milan (313)
	Sylvester (314–335)		

2

The Fullness of Time

> But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the Law.
>
> GALATIANS 4:4

The early Christians did not believe that the time and place of the birth of Jesus had been left to chance. On the contrary, they saw the hand of God preparing the advent of Jesus in all events prior to the birth, and in all the historical circumstances around it. The same could be said about the birth of the church, which resulted from the work of Jesus. God had prepared the way so that the disciples, after receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, could be witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Therefore, the church was never disconnected from the world around it. The first Christians were first-century Jews, and it was as such that they heard and received the message. Then the faith spread, first among other Jews, and eventually among Gentiles both within and beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. In order to understand the history of Christianity in its early centuries, we must begin by looking at the world in which it evolved.

JUDAISM IN PALESTINE

Palestine, the land in which Christianity first appeared, has long been a land of strife and suffering. In ancient times, this was due mostly to its geographical position, at the crossroads of the great trade routes that joined Egypt with Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor with Arabia. As we read the Old Testament, we see that, as empires came and went, they cast a covetous eye on that narrow strip of land. For this reason, its inhabitants repeatedly suffered invasion, bondage, and exile. In the fourth century BCE, with Alexander and his Macedonian armies, a new contender entered the arena. Upon defeating the Persians, Alexander became master of Palestine. But his death followed shortly thereafter, and his vast empire was dismembered. For a long time, two of the resulting dynasties,

one in Egypt and one in Syria, fought for possession of Palestine. The result was another period of unrest and political instability.

The conquests of Alexander—like most imperialist enterprises—sought to justify themselves on an ideological basis. He did not wish simply to conquer the world, but to unite and enrich it by spreading the insights of Greek civilization. The result, in which some elements of Greek origin combined with other elements taken from conquered civilizations in various forms and degrees, is known as *Hellenism.* Although the precise nature of Hellenism varied from place to place, it did provide the eastern Mediterranean basin with a unity that opened the way first to Roman conquest, and later to the preaching of the gospel.

But there were many Jews who did not regard Hellenism as a blessing. Since part of the Hellenistic ideology consisted of equating and mixing the gods of different nations, they saw in it a threat to Israel's faith in the One God. In a way, the history of Palestine from the time of Alexander's conquest to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE may be seen as the constant struggle between Hellenizing pressures on the one hand and Jewish faithfulness to their God and their traditions on the other.

The high point of that struggle was the Jewish rebellion led by the family known as the Maccabees, in the second century BCE. For a while the Maccabees were able to gain a measure of religious and political independence. But eventually their successors gave way to the Hellenizing pressures of the Seleucids, who had succeeded Alexander in the rule of Syria. When some of the stricter Jews protested, they were persecuted. Partially as a result of all this, Rome eventually intervened. In 63 BCE, Pompey conquered the land and deposed the last of the Maccabees, Aristobulus II.

As Alexander had earlier, the Romans justified their imperial conquests by means of an ideology. Their calling was to civilize the world around them—which to them meant building and beautifying cities similar to Rome, and placing all of them under Roman rule and guidance. (Note that etymologically the word "civilization" may be understood as "cityfication".) Where there were no cities, they built new ones. And where there were ancient cities, they embellished them and erected public buildings in the style of Rome itself.

In general, Roman policies toward the religion and customs of conquered people were rather tolerant. Shortly after the conquest, the Roman government gave the descendants of the Maccabees a measure of authority, and used them in governing the land, giving them the titles of *high priest* and *ethnarch*. Herod the Great, appointed king of Judea by the Romans in 40 BCE, had a distant Maccabean claim, for he had married a woman of that lineage.

But the Roman brand of tolerance could not reconcile what appeared to be the obstinacy of the Jews, who insisted on worshiping only their God, and who threatened rebellion at the smallest challenge to their faith. Following general Roman policy, Herod built the city of Caesarea in honor of the emperor, and he

had temples built in Samaria devoted to the worship of Roma and Augustus. But when he dared place a Roman eagle at the entrance of the Temple in Jerusalem there was an uprising, which he suppressed by force. His successors followed a similar policy, building new cities and encouraging the immigration of Gentiles.

This led to almost continuous rebellion. When Jesus was a child there was an uprising against Archelaus, Herod's son, who had to call in the Roman army. The Romans then destroyed a city in Galilee near Nazareth, and crucified two thousand Jews. It is to this rebellion that Gamaliel refers in Acts 5:37, as an example of useless revolt. The radical or Zealot party, tenaciously opposed to Roman rule, continued unabated in spite of such atrocities—and perhaps because of them—and played an important role in the great rebellion that broke out in 66 CE. Once again the Roman legions were called in, and in the year 70 they took Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. Several years later the last stronghold of Jewish resistance, the rock fortress of Massada, was conquered after a heroic defense.

In the midst of such suffering and so many vicissitudes, Jewish religion took different shapes, and several parties appeared. The best known, both because the gospels refer to it repeatedly and because later Judaism evolved from it, is the party of the Pharisees. They were the party of the populace, who did not enjoy the material benefits of Roman rule and Hellenistic civilization. To them, it was important to be faithful to the Law, and for that reason they studied and debated how the Law was to be applied in every conceivable situation. This has led to the charge that they were legalistic. That may be true to a degree. But one must remember that by their emphasis on the Law they sought to make the faith of Israel relevant to everyday situations, and to new circumstances under Roman rule and Hellenizing threats. Besides this, they held some doctrines, such as the final Resurrection and the existence of angels, which the more conservative Jews declared to be mere innovations.

Those more conservative Jews were the Sadducees. By and large, they belonged to the Jewish aristocracy, and they were conservative in both politics and religion. In matters of religion, their interest centered on the Temple, which they held with the support of the Romans, who in turn found the political conservatism of the Sadducees much to their liking. The Sadducees rejected many of the doctrines of the Pharisees as unwarranted innovations.

This means that one must take care not to exaggerate the opposition of Jesus and the early Christians to the Pharisees. A great deal of the friction between Christians and Pharisees was due to the similarity of their views, rather than to their difference. Moving among the common people, Jesus and his followers had more opportunities to rub shoulders with the Pharisees than with the Sadducees.

There were many other sects and groups within first-century Judaism. The Zealots have already been mentioned. Another important group was the Essenes, an ascetic sect to which many attribute the production of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This group, and probably others like it, sought to obey the Law by withdrawing from the rest of society, and often had a very intense expectation that the end was near.

On the other hand, this diversity of tendencies, sects, and parties should not obscure two fundamental tenets of all Jews: ethical monotheism and eschatological hope. Ethical monotheism means that there is only one God, and that this God requires, just as much as proper worship, proper relationships among human beings. The various parties might disagree as to the exact shape of such relationships, but they all agreed on the need to honor the only God with the whole of life.

Eschatological hope was another common tenet in the faith of Israel. Most kept the messianic hope, and firmly believed that the day would come when God would intervene in order to restore Israel and fulfill the promise of a Kingdom of peace and justice. Some thought that they were to speed its coming by the force of arms. Others were convinced that such matters should be left entirely in the hands of God. But all looked to a future when God's promises would be fulfilled.

Of all these, the best equipped to survive after the destruction of the Temple were the Pharisees. Their roots went back to the time of the Exile, when it was not possible to worship in Jerusalem, and religious life perforce centered on the Law. The same was true of the millions of Jews who lived in distant lands in the first century. Not being able to attend worship regularly in the Temple, they developed the synagogue, where the Law and the traditions of Israel were studied, and where the dispersed Jews experienced community and strengthened their resolve to live as the faithful people of God even in dispersion. When the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE the Sadducees received a mortal blow, while the theological tradition of the Pharisees continued to bloom into modern Judaism.

DIASPORA JUDAISM

For centuries before the birth of Jesus, the number of Jews living outside of Palestine had been increasing. Dating back to the Old Testament times there were numerous Jews in Persia and Mesopotamia. In Egypt, they had even built a temple in the seventh century BCE, and another five centuries later. By the time of Jesus, there were sizable Jewish communities in every major city in the Roman Empire. These Jews, scattered far and wide, but with strong emotional and religious connections with the land of their ancestors, are called the *Diaspora* or *Dispersion*.

Diaspora Judaism is of crucial importance for the history of Christianity, for it was one of the main avenues through which the new faith expanded throughout the Roman Empire. Furthermore, Diaspora Judaism unwittingly provided the church with one of the most useful tools of its missionary expansion, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

One of the common traits of Diaspora Judaism was that many of its members had forgotten the language of their ancestors. For this reason, it was necessary to translate the Hebrew scriptures into languages that the members understood—Aramaic in the Eastern wing of the Diaspora and Greek in its Western wing, within the borders of the Roman Empire. Following Alexander's conquests, Greek had become the common language of the majority of people living in the Mediterranean. Egyptians, Jews, Cypriots, and even Romans used Greek to communicate with one another. Therefore, it was natural that when the Jews of the Diaspora began losing their Hebrew they would translate the scriptures into Greek.

This translation originated in Alexandria—the main city in Egypt—and is called the *Septuagint*, or the *Version of the Seventy* (or *LXX*), named as such because of an ancient legend that told of seventy Jewish scholars commissioned to translate the scriptures. After working independently, they found that their translations agreed exactly. The obvious purpose of the legend was to legitimize the translation as divinely inspired.

In any case, the Septuagint was of enormous importance to the early church. It is the version of scripture quoted by most New Testament authors, and it profoundly influenced the formation of early Christian vocabulary—including the very name of "Christ," which was the Septuagint word for "Anointed One" or

"Messiah." When the early Christians began their missionary spread, they used the Septuagint as a ready-made means of arguing with the more traditional Jews who did not accept their teachings, and also as a means of communicating their message to the Gentiles. For this and other reasons, the Jewish community produced other versions that were not as readily suitable for Christian use, and, in effect, left the church in sole possession of the Septuagint.

Due to the Diaspora, Judaism was forced to come to terms with Hellenism in a manner that could be avoided in Palestine itself. Particularly in Alexandria, there was a movement within Judaism that sought to show the compatibility between the ancient faith and the best of Hellenistic culture. As early as the third century BCE, attempts were made to retell the history of Israel following the accepted patterns of Hellenistic historical writing. But the high point of this entire tradition was the work of Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus who sought to show that the best of pagan philosophy agreed with the Hebrew scriptures. He claimed that, since the Hebrew prophets antedated the Greek philosophers, the latter must have drawn from the wisdom of the former. According to Philo, such points of agreement are many, for ultimately the teachings of the philosophers coincide with those of scripture. The difference is that scripture speaks figuratively. This in turn means that it is to be understood by means of allegorical interpretation. Through such interpretation, Philo tried to prove that the God of scripture is the same as the One of the philosophers, and that the moral teachings of the Hebrews are basically the same as those of the best among the Greek philosophers. This sort of argument provided ample ammunition for the early Christians in their efforts to show to the pagan world that their faith was credible.

THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

The Roman Empire had brought to the Mediterranean basin an unprecedented political unity. Although each region kept some of its ancient laws and customs, the general policy of the empire was to encourage as much uniformity as possible without doing unnecessary violence to the uses of each area. In this they followed the example of Alexander. Both Alexander and the Roman Empire succeeded to a remarkable degree, and therefore Roman law and Hellenistic culture comprised the context in which the early church took shape.

The political unity wrought by the Roman Empire allowed the early Christians to travel without having to fear bandits or local wars. When reading about Paul's journeys, we see that the great threat to shipping at that time was bad weather. A few decades earlier, an encounter with pirates was much more to be feared than any storm. In the first century, well-paved and well-guarded roads ran to the most distant provinces—even though most trade and travel took

place by water. Since trade flourished, travel was constant; thus Christianity often reached a new region, not through the work of missionaries or preachers, but rather through traveling traders, slaves, and others. In that sense, the political circumstances favored the spread of Christianity.

But other aspects of those circumstances were a threat and a challenge to the early Christians. In order to achieve greater unity, imperial policy sought religious uniformity by following two routes: *syncretism* (the indiscriminate mixing of elements from various religions) and emperor worship.

Rome had a vested interest in having its subjects from different lands believe that, although their gods had different names, they were ultimately the same gods. To the Roman Pantheon (temple of all gods) were added numerous gods from different lands. The same roads and sea lanes that served Christian missionary expansion were also traveled by people of all sorts of traditions and beliefs. These traditions and beliefs mingled in the plazas and markets of the cities, to the point that their original form was barely recognizable. Syncretism became the fashion of the time. In that atmosphere, Jews and Christians were seen as unbending fanatics who insisted on the sole worship of their One God—an alien cyst that must be removed for the good of society.

The syncretism of the times could also been seen in what historians now call "mystery religions." These were not based on the ancient Olympian deities, but on others which seemed to be much more personal. In earlier times, people generally had followed the religion of their birthplace. But now, after the conquests of Alexander and of Rome, which gods one was to serve became a matter of personal choice. Therefore, one did not belong to a mystery religion by birth, but rather by initiation. Most of these religions were based on myths regarding the origin of the world, the sustenance of life, and the life of the deity. From Egypt came the myth of Isis and Osiris, which explained the fertility of the Nile and all other fertility. Greece contributed rites that from time immemorial had been celebrated near Athens. The cult of Mithra, a god of Indo-Iranian origin, was very popular in the army. Others worshiped the Great Mother of Semitic origin. Given the syncretism of all these religions, soon they were so intermingled that today it is exceedingly difficult for historians to determine which doctrine or practice arose in which context. Since the deities of the mysteries were not exclusivistic, like the God of Jews and Christians, many people who were initiated into various of these cults borrowed elements from one to the other.

But it was another element in Roman religion that eventually became the

reason for persecution. This was the worship of the ruling emperor. Roman authorities saw this as a means of unity and a test of loyalty. To refuse to burn incense before the emperor's image was a sign of treason or at the very least of disloyalty. When Christians refused to burn incense before the emperor's image, they did so as a witness to their faith; but the authorities condemned them as disloyal and seditious people.

To communicate their faith in the midst of Hellenistic culture, Christians found two philosophical traditions particularly attractive and helpful: Platonism and Stoicism.

Socrates, Plato's teacher, had been condemned to death, as an incredulous corrupter of youth. Plato wrote several dialogues in his defense, and by the first century Socrates was considered one of the greatest sages of antiquity. Socrates, Plato, and many other philosophers had criticized the ancient gods, and had taught about a supreme being, perfect and immutable. Furthermore, both Socrates and Plato believed in the immortality of the soul. And Plato affirmed that, far above this world of fleeting things, there was a higher world of abiding truth. All of this many early Christians found attractive and useful in their attempts to respond to charges that they were ignorant and unbelieving. Although at first these philosophical traditions were used for interpreting the faith to outsiders, soon they began influencing the manner in which Christians understood their own faith—which would eventually result in bitter theological debates.

Something similar happened with Stoicism. This philosophical school, slightly younger than Platonism, held to very high moral standards. The early Stoics—in the third century BCE—were materialists who believed that all things were made out of fire, and determinists who were convinced that all they could do was to train themselves to assent to the inexorable laws that rule events. By the time Christianity appeared on the scene, however, Stoicism had evolved to the point where it had religious overtones, and some of its philosophers spoke of using their wisdom to guide the course of events. In any case, all Stoics believed that the purpose of philosophy was to understand the law of nature, and to obey and adjust to it. The wise person is not one who knows a great deal, but rather one whose mind is so attuned to the universal law that reason prevails. When this happens, passions subside, and the philosopher approaches the ideal of *apatheia*—life without passions. The virtues one must cultivate are four: moral insight, courage, self-control, and justice. These, however, are different facets of the life of wisdom, and therefore a failure in one of them is a failure in all. Stoics were also critical of the religion of their time, which many saw as a way to have the gods justify the desires of their worshipers rather than as a call to virtue. They rejected the traditional parochialism of earlier Greek culture, insisting on the universality of the law of reason and calling themselves citizens of the world.

Again, all this was very attractive to Christians, whose criticism of the religion and morals of the time was rarely well received. The church, which many Christians called a "new race" because it drew its members from all races, was living proof of the universal unity of humankind. The Stoic notion of natural law as the guide to wisdom was soon taken up by Christian apologists and moralists who argued that the Christian life was life according to that law. In response to prejudice, ridicule, and even martyrdom, the Stoic ideal of *apatheia* called believers to steadfastness. And many of the arguments that Stoic philosophers had used against the gods were now taken up by Christians.

This was the world into which Christianity was born. The presence of Judaism in various parts of the world, the order of the Roman Empire, and Hellenistic civilization provided avenues for the proclamation of the new faith; but they also provided obstacles and even dangers. In the next chapters, we shall see how the early Christians followed those avenues, attempted to overcome those obstacles, and responded to those dangers.