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The Story of Christianity
Volume 1

Chapter 3

The Church in Jerusalem

And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

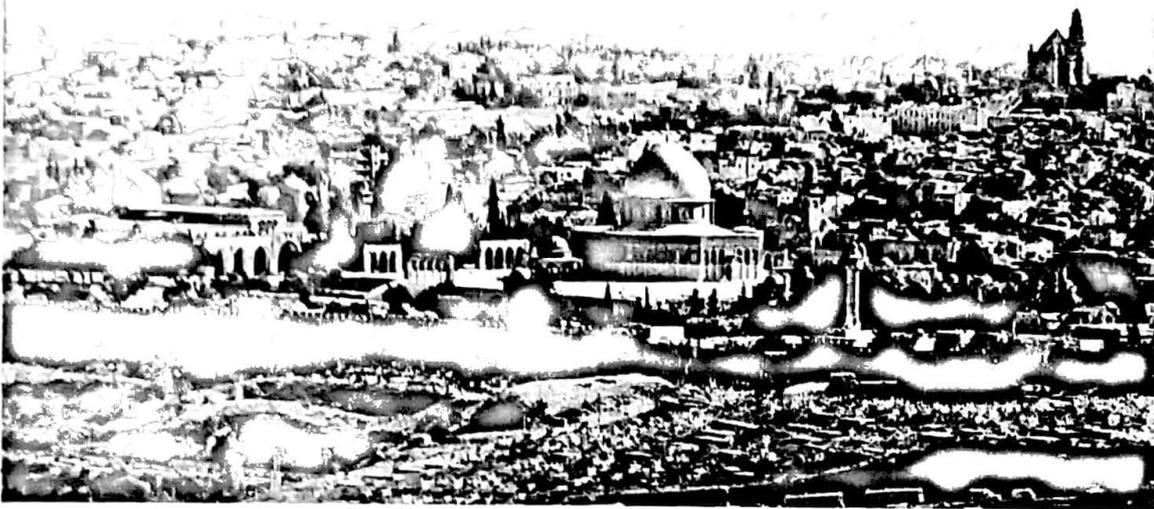
ACTS 4:33

The Book of Acts affirms that from the very beginning there was a strong church in Jerusalem. But then that very book moves on to other matters, and tells us very little about the later history of that Christian community. The rest of the New Testament offers a few other bits of information. But it, too, deals mostly with the life of the church in other parts of the empire. Yet, by piecing together what the New Testament tells us with information gathered from other authors, one can come to a general idea of the life of that earliest Christian community and its later history.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY

The earliest Christian community is often idealized. Peter's firmness and eloquence at Pentecost tend to eclipse his wavering on what ought to be done with the Gentiles who wished to join the church. The possession of all things in common, commendable as it may be, did not abolish all tensions between various groups, for "the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution" (Acts 6:1).

These last words do not refer to a conflict between Jews and Gentiles, for Acts makes clear that at that time there were still no Gentiles in the church. It was rather a conflict between two groups of Jews: those who kept the customs and language of their ancestors, and those who were more open to Hellenistic influences. In Acts, the people in the first group are called "Hebrews," and the others are the "Hellenists." In response to this crisis, the twelve called an assembly that appointed seven men "to serve tables." Exactly what this meant is not altogether clear, although there is no doubt that the idea was that the seven would have administrative tasks, and that the twelve would continue preaching and teaching. In any case, it would seem that all seven were Hellenists, for



In Jerusalem, shortly after Pentecost, Christians had to deal with the diversity in their midst.

they had Greek names. Thus, the naming of the seven appears as an attempt to give greater voice in the affairs of the church to the Hellenistic party, while the twelve, all “Hebrews,” would continue being the main teachers and preachers.

The seventh chapter of Acts tells the story of Stephen, one of the seven. There is a hint (Acts 7:47-48) that his attitude toward the Temple was not entirely positive. In any case, the Jewish Council—the Sanhedrin—composed mostly of anti-Hellenistic Jews, refuses to listen to him and condemns him to death. This contrasts with the treatment given by the same council to Peter and John, who were released after being beaten and told to stop preaching (Acts 5:40). Furthermore, when persecution finally broke out and Christians had to flee Jerusalem, the apostles were able to remain. When Saul left for Damascus to seek out Christians who had taken refuge there, the apostles were still in Jerusalem, and Saul seemed to ignore them. All of this would seem to indicate that the earliest persecution was aimed mostly at what were called *Hellenistic Christians*, and that the Hebrews had much less difficulty. It is later, in chapter 12, that we are told of Herod (not the council) ordering the death of James, and the arrest of Peter.

Immediately after the death of Stephen, Acts turns to Philip, another of the seven, who founded a church in Samaria. Peter and John are then sent to supervise the life of that new community. Thus, a church is being born beyond the

confines of Judea, and that church, although not founded by the apostles, still acknowledges their authority. This is a pattern that would often be repeated as the church extended to new areas.

By its ninth chapter, Acts becomes increasingly interested in Paul, and we hear less and less of the church in Jerusalem. What was happening was that the Hellenistic Jewish Christians were serving as a bridge to the gentile world, and that Gentiles were joining the church in such numbers that they soon overshadowed the earlier Jewish Christian community. For this reason most of our story will deal with Gentile Christianity. And yet, we should not forget that earliest of churches, of which we have only fragmentary glimpses.

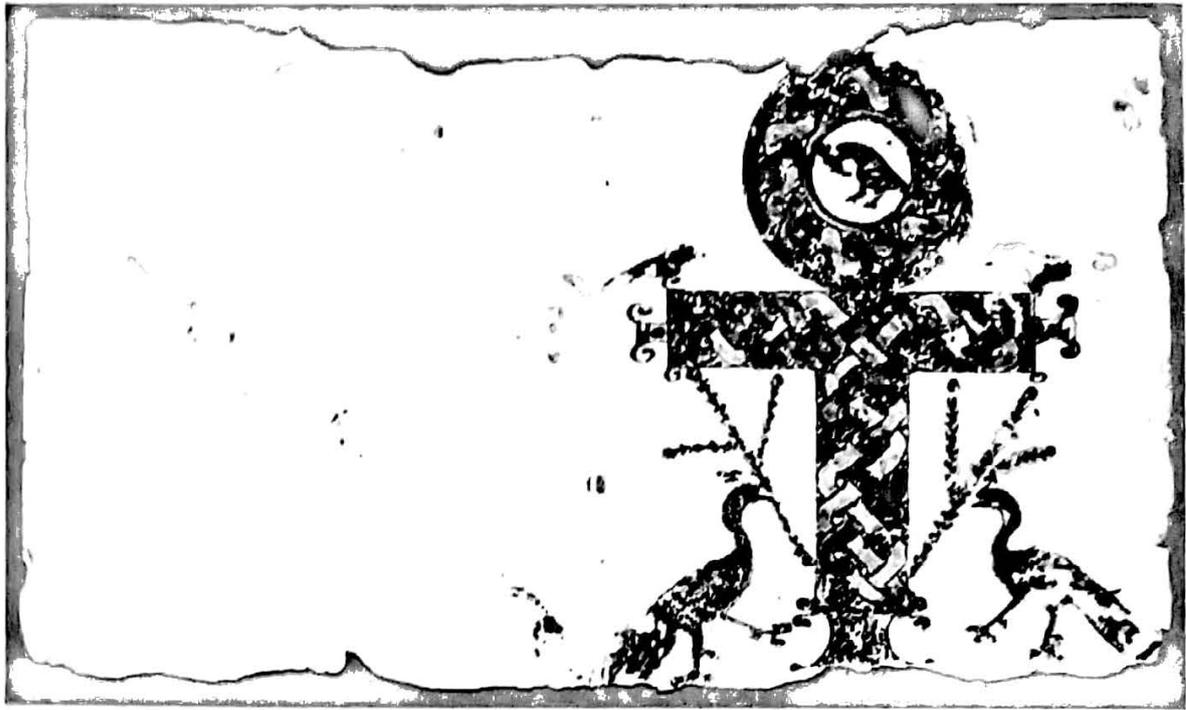
RELIGIOUS LIFE

The earliest Christians did not consider themselves followers of a new religion. All of their lives they had been Jews and they still were. This was true of Peter and the twelve, of the seven, and of Paul. Their faith was not a denial of Judaism but was rather the conviction that the messianic age had finally arrived. According to Acts, Paul would say that he was persecuted “because of the hope of Israel” (Acts 28:20)—meaning the coming of the Messiah. The earliest Christians did not reject Judaism, but were convinced that their faith was the fulfillment of the Messiah whom Jews over the ages had been anticipating.

For this reason, Christians in Jerusalem continued to keep the Sabbath and attend worship at the Temple. To this they added the observance of the first day of the week, in which they gathered to break bread in celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. Those early communion services did not center on the Lord’s passion, but rather on his victory through which a new age had dawned. It was much later—centuries later—that the focus of Christian worship shifted toward the death of Jesus. As a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, in the earliest Christian community the breaking of the bread took place “with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46)—the word “generous” probably referring to the sharing of food.

There were indeed times set aside for sorrow for one’s sins, in particular during the two weekly days of fasting, which the church adopted from Jewish practice. At an early date, however, at least some Christians began fasting, not on Mondays and Thursdays, like the Jews, but rather on Wednesdays and Fridays. It may be that this shift took place in commemoration of the betrayal and the crucifixion.

In that early church, authority was vested primarily in the twelve (although some scholars suggest that this emphasis on the authority of the apostles appeared slightly later, as part of an effort to tighten up the system of authority



In an illustration found in an Egyptian manuscript of Acts, circa 400 CE, the loop on the cross is shaped in the manner of an ancient hieroglyph meaning life.

within the church). Of the apostles, Peter and John seem to have been foremost, for Acts gives several indications of this, and they are two of the “pillars” to whom Paul refers in Galatians 2:9.

The third such pillar, however, was not one of the twelve. He was James, the brother of the Lord. According to Paul (1 Cor. 15:7), the risen Jesus had appeared to James. Whether because of his blood ties with Jesus, or for some other reason, James soon became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Later, when church leaders were uniformly given the title *bishop*, it was said that James was the first bishop of Jerusalem. Although the title is clearly erroneous, it is probably true that he was the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

THE WANING OF THE JEWISH CHURCH

Soon persecution grew fiercer and more general. Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, ordered the death of James the brother of John—not to be confused with James the brother of Jesus and head of the community. When this move was well received by his subjects, Herod had Peter arrested, but he escaped. In 62 CE the other James, the brother of Jesus, was killed by order of the high priest, even against the desire and advice of some of the Pharisees.

Soon thereafter, the leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem decided to move to Pella, a city beyond the Jordan River, the population of which was mostly Gentile. This move seems to have been prompted, not only by persecution at the hands of the Jews, but also by Roman suspicion regarding

the exact nature of the new religious sect. At that time, Jewish nationalism had reached the boiling point, and in 66 CE, a rebellion broke out four years later that would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies. Christians were followers of one who they said was of the line of David, and who had been crucified by Roman authorities for supposedly claiming that he was King of the Jews. They were led first by James, the brother of the crucified, and then, after the death of James, by Simeon, another relative of Jesus. To allay the suspicions that all of this created, the church decided to remove to Pella. But in spite of this such suspicions continued, and Simeon was eventually killed by the Romans, although it is not clear whether this was due to his Christian faith or to his claim to Davidic lineage. In any case, **the result of all this was that the ancient Jewish church, rejected by both Jews and Gentiles, found itself in increasing isolation.** Although by 135 CE a number of Jewish Christians had returned to Jerusalem, their relationship with the rest of Christianity had been almost entirely severed, **and leadership had passed to Gentile Christians.**

In the desolate regions beyond the Jordan, Jewish Christianity made contact with various groups that had also abandoned orthodox Judaism. Lacking contact with the rest of the church, that Jewish Christian community followed its own course, and was often influenced by the many sects among which it lived. When, in later centuries, Gentile Christians deigned to write a few words about that forgotten community, they would speak of its heretics and its strange customs, but they would have little of positive value to say about that church, which faded out of history in the fifth century. It may be to some of them that Irenaeus referred when writing in the second century about some whom he calls "Ebionites" and who "circumcise, continue obeying the prescriptions of the



A silver shekel from the first year of the Jewish War.

Law, and are so much influenced by Judaism that they worship Jerusalem as God's dwelling."¹

Meanwhile, the church—now dominated by Gentiles—continued appealing to Jews throughout the Roman Empire. It continued claiming that its faith was the fulfillment of Judaism, and that Jews should therefore accept Christianity. At the same time, there was always the inclination among some Christians—even Gentile Christians—to go back to their Jewish roots in ways that the leadership of the church considered inappropriate. Furthermore, at that time some Jewish groups were also seeking converts among the Gentiles, and were thus in direct competition with the church. As a result, the Jewish-Christian polemic continued long after the church had become mostly Gentile. Many Christians wrote treatises and preached sermons against Judaism. Many of these were not really directed against Jews themselves, but rather at Christians who might be attracted to Judaism. Yet those treatises and sermons did promote among Christians an anti-Jewish attitude that would have nefarious consequences in subsequent times.