

These two characteristics were complementary: the organization made the intolerance effective; the intolerance did much to build up the organization. And this organization could be useful to the state. In due time, Christians were favored in appointments, benefactions, petitions, and appeals. The upper state administration became largely Christian, and in A.D. 395 Emperor Theodosius recognized Christianity as the sole and official religion of the state.

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PHILOSOPHY - RELIGION

## THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

Pre-Christian Judaism (From 586 B.C. to the Birth of Christ)

The year 586 B.C. marked the beginning of the second captivity for the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the remaining tribes of the ancient kingdom of Israel. Deported from Jerusalem to Babylon, they were to wait fifty years before being given the opportunity to return. Isaiah depicted them as pitiful captives and envisioned only a remnant returning to Jerusalem. But a second Isaiah (it is generally agreed that there were three) sounded a new note, a new tone: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem; and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned."

In Deutero ("second")-Isaiah, the outlook is bright with hope and confidence that Yahweh will redeem his people. But it is a hope based on something more than the old colloquial Yahweh. In Deutero-Isaiah's vision Yahweh has become the God of the universe, creator of all things, and omnipresent ruler:

*Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with a span. . . ? (Isaiah 40:12)*

*Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: . . . (Isaiah 40:15)*

*Thus saith the Lord . . . ; I am the first and I am the last; and beside me there is no God. (Isaiah 44:6)*

*He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young. (Isaiah 40:11)*

In this is the hope of Judah:

*Fear thou not; for I am with thee; be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. (Isaiah 41:10)*

In the vision of Isaiah II, Israel is the Servant of the eternal, universal and only God. The concept of Servant in Isaiah--and especially

the Suffering Servant--presents difficulties for interpretation. At one point the prophet specifically names Cyrus, the rising military figure in the Middle East, as Servant. This is suggested in Isaiah 41:25, and he is named the "anointed" in Isaiah 45:1. The passages have also been applied to Jesus, and by analogy at least, the image certainly applies. But it was characteristic of the prophets that they dealt only with immediate, foreseeable futures and not remote ones. It is more commonly believed that the Servant in Isaiah is Israel itself, except where it is clearly a reference to Cyrus, and that the service that Israel is to render to God is to be a light to the nations:

*Thou art my servant O Israel, in whom I will be glorified.*  
(Isaiah 49:3)

*Behold my servant whom I uphold; mine elect in whom my soul delighteth. . . . He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.* (Isaiah 42:1)

Furthermore, this Servant of God is assured of return to Jerusalem, not just as some remnant, but as a nation:

*I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back; bring my sons from far and my daughters from the ends of the earth.* (Isaiah 43:5-6)

This hope, to be sure, was never wholly fulfilled. Although all of the captives were permitted to return, only a small remnant actually did. But the real significance and glory of Deutero-Isaiah was the new and exciting understanding of God. God still dealt with Israel as his special people and his special concern, and the day of judgment--the captivity--was past; but he was now also the one God of the universe, and he stood to Israel as a tender, loving redeemer and guarantor of happier days.

It was the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus in 538 B.C. that was the saving circumstance for the captives. In 537 B.C. Cyrus decreed that all who wished to return to Jerusalem could do so. Not many went, however. It was sixty years since the first captivity. Most who had known Jerusalem had died; many who still lived had known it only as children. Many had never known anything but the captivity and had followed the advice of Jeremiah to make a place for themselves in the new land and to marry its people. Many had probably adopted the new religion. Those who actually returned would have been the very devout or a few pioneers.

In Jerusalem the city and the temple were still in ruins, and both had to be rebuilt, while food and shelter remained the fundamental priority. Spiritually and psychologically, the temple was of crucial importance; yet it was seventeen years before the prophet Haggai, backed by Zechariah, was able to get the temple rebuilt.

The rebuilding of the temple, however, seems to have done little to inspire the residents to any sustained effort at rebuilding the city or



improving the conditions within it. In 458 B.C., therefore, with the express permission of the Persian emperor, Artaxerxes I, Ezra led a group of 1,500 people to try to improve what, according to report, were sad conditions. Ezra was the first great scribe of the new era, and in his capacity as a scribe, he was to interpret the law for each person in his daily place so that each individual would know precisely what he must do to be a true Israelite. This had become a very important matter in captivity, for if Israel was not to lose its identity or fail in its loyalty to Yahweh, it was imperative that each person know what the law prescribed for him. Thus the class of scribes had developed in Babylon and had elaborated a considerable body of such laws and interpretations. (The priests had also done the same thing for the ritual law.)

For some unknown reason, however, while Ezra seems to have been a hard worker in Jerusalem, he did not advance the cause of scribal law. Word finally reached Nehemiah, an Israelite who had won a high place in the court of the emperor, of the unsuccessful work of Ezra, and in 444 B.C. he obtained permission from the emperor to go to Jerusalem to put matters in order. Under his leadership, people from all walks of life and from all over the dispersion rallied enthusiastically to join the local citizens in Jerusalem in rebuilding the city walls. The walls completed and the life of the city much improved, Nehemiah returned to Persia to give account of his work. Without his leadership, however, the life of the people again went into decline and scribal law was ignored, requiring his return to take command once more in 433 B.C.

During this period the new interpretations of the law, given in what is now referred to as the P (priestly) document, were introduced to replace the older Deuteronomic Code. These new interpretations, together with the restoration of Jerusalem, laid the foundation for the Jewish community of Jesus' day. The kind of law contained in the P document is found substantially in the books of Leviticus and the Chronicles, although many sections in other books also seem to be extracts from it, imposed on or intruded into other traditions. It represents the most thorough and extensive development of the priestly function, the law, and the sacrificial system that Israel ever achieved. We have already indicated the basic reason for its development--the minute specification of what was involved in being an Israelite in an alien land. It was a practical necessity as the only alternative to cultural and religious extinction. The unhappy and tragic cost was the submersion of the insight of the great eighth century moral prophets--that what God wanted was not sacrifice and ritual, but justice, righteous behavior, and spiritual fellowship. It would have to wait for the ministry of Jesus four hundred years later to renew the prophetic message.

### First Century Christianity

From the naturalistic point of view, Jesus' appearance and work as a Jewish prophet is in itself a very simple and unpretentious story. It is found in the Synoptic Gospels--Matthew, Mark, and Luke (called *Synoptic* because they have a large body of common material and, in this sense,

present a common view of Jesus as compared to the later Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, which gives a philosophical rather than historical picture of Jesus.)

According to this Synoptic tradition, Jesus was born into a peasant family living in Nazareth during the Roman occupation of Palestine. As a boy of about twelve years, he seems to have had a very strong religious interest and sensitivity and impressed the religious leaders of his day with his questions. As a young man, he worked at the trade of a carpenter until around the age of thirty, when he began a career as a prophet-teacher, preaching a message of "the Kingdom of God" as imminent. His contemporaries quickly came to think of him as a savior from Roman occupation and seem to have responded to him in large numbers.

The substance of his concept of the Kingdom of God was that the reign of God on earth was achieved by people living by the law of love (summed up in the first two Deuteronomic laws: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself) rather than by ritual and sacrifice or the old "eye for an eye." Such a life, he taught, would be fulfilling to the individual and through him would produce the good society. The law of love in individual life involved the simple but radical principles of doing the good to others that we would have them do to us, of returning good for evil, of turning the other cheek, and of going the second mile. It included all people--especially in terms of personal need which we could individually minister to--regardless of their race, nationality, or creed (even the despised Samaritans). Society would not be redeemed by direct social action or violent revolution, but by loving individuals who would act like leaven in the bread dough, like the grain of wheat yielding a hundred more, and like the trustee producing a good return on the estate within his trust.

On two very important issues, however, his contemporaries soon became disillusioned. First, Jesus came into conflict with the hopes of the masses when he made it clear that he came in the tradition of the moral prophets, calling for a moral-spiritual religion, and not in the later tradition of a political-military liberator. Second, he came into conflict with the Jewish officialdom by the same view, inasmuch as it constituted a denunciation and rejection of the ritualistic-sacrificial-legalistic system of the official religion represented by the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees. Matthew reports that Jesus called the Pharisees and scribes "hypocrites," "whited sepulchers full of dead men's bones," "unmarked graves" on which people walked and so defiled themselves, and a "breed of snakes." The violent reaction of the scribes and Pharisees to Jesus--they demanded his crucifixion--certainly seems to support the accuracy of Matthew's report.

In the meantime, Jesus had built around himself a cell of twelve men, ranging in vocation from fisherman to banker and tax-collector, and a group of close followers of somewhat over one hundred persons who remained more or less loyal as the popular support dwindled and the opposition became more intense. The leaders of the Jews finally pressed the



issue of political treason against him, and Pilate, the Roman governor, finally had him executed by crucifixion.

At the time of his crucifixion his disciples seem to have been convinced that the cause was dead and went back to their old jobs. But on the third day after the execution, some of them began reporting having seen him in a resurrected form, and when some 120 of them were gathered together to discuss these exciting reports, he is said to have appeared to all of them.

Jesus brought nothing radically new to the religion of the Jews. As we have said, he revived the message of the eighth century prophets. His idea of God was essentially the same as theirs: God was king, judge, and father. While the fatherhood of God may be said to be new in emphasis, it was not a new concept. The psalmist had said, "Thou art my father, my God" (Psalms 89:26) and "Like as a father pitieth his children so the Lord pitieth them that fear him" (Psalms 103:13), and in Jesus' own teachings the term is not used any more than any other term. Yet with him there was a larger place for the concept, and it did take on a much more personal and intimate character. God, in Jesus' teachings, became a father of providential care: "Your father knoweth that ye have need of all these things." He was a father of forgiving grace: The prodigal son was forgiven amidst great feasting and rejoicing; the harlot was forgiven because she showed true faith in, and devotion to, Jesus.

Beyond this new, richer emphasis on the fatherhood of God, the freshness and force of Jesus' teachings lay in the revived issue of devotional-moral religion made to work in personal relations in everyday life (as opposed to the formal ritualism of the priests and the establishment) and in the vivid analogies and parables drawn from the routine events in the lives of common people. Such freshness and vitality of teaching could have sprung only from a vital and commanding personality.

Convinced of the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples reorganized their fellowship and began preaching a risen Lord who, within their lifetime, would return to establish an earthly kingdom and sit in judgment on all people. In the course of a few years, Saul of Tarsus, later to be called Paul, a learned and very devout Jew who probably had never known Jesus but who had been active in persecuting the early Christians throughout Palestine and Asia Minor, was converted to Christianity in a mystical experience of confrontation with Jesus. He became one of its chief evangelists, and his teaching represented a new phase of Christian thought.

In Paul's letters to the churches, Jesus was no longer the carpenter of Nazareth with a moral-religious message. He was understood by Paul as an eternal being, co-existent with God, by whose word the creation of the world was performed, and in whom in his earthly form God himself was incarnate. The death of Jesus--now the eternal Son of God--became the central event, because it was here that God provided the atonement for all people, not just for the Jews. The moral emphasis of Jesus' teachings was not lost, but it was displaced by this new view that salvation was a mystical experience in the believer brought about by his acknowl-

edgment of the incarnation of the pre-existent Lord as the divine and therefore universally efficacious sacrifice for sin, and as expressing the unqualified love of God. The "grace" of God was to be accepted by faith. It could not be earned by keeping the law or performing the rituals. But it was more than intellectual belief in the idea of the whole thing; to Paul, faith involved an existential stepping into the mystical relation with the crucified and risen Son of God and thus into the relation of grace with God himself. The moral life followed in consequence.

In the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist) Christians took the bread and the wine as participants in the body and the blood of Christ, the dying-rising god, and so participated in fact in his life, death, and resurrection. Whether this was a purely symbolic or a mystical reality is not clear in the New Testament, but the language certainly carries a realistic tone.

This new dimension beyond the Synoptic view of Jesus' teachings obviously reflects the widespread views and practices of the mystery religions, and it must certainly be allowed as possible that Paul was at least using the mystery religions' format and language familiar to the Gentiles to interpret Christianity to them. At most, he might have in fact transformed Christianity into a competing mystery religion.

It was in Paul that Christianity escaped being just a Jewish sect and became a universal religion. The first big issue that the early Church faced was just this: Was Christ for the Jews only or for all people? Peter, the intimate of Jesus, held that to become a Christian a person had to become a Jew first. Paul held that God in Christ had brought salvation to all people. The first council of the Church held in Jerusalem faced this issue and confirmed Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.

But Pauline Christianity was not the only variant to the Synoptic Gospels. Another approach was developed by an unknown Christian whose views are found in what is entitled the Gospel of John, but which is known in modern scholarship as the Fourth Gospel because its author is, in fact, unknown. The Fourth Gospel is a tract written primarily for the conversion of the Gentiles of the Hellenistic world. It combines the philosophy of the Stoics and the motif of the mystery religions.

The point of contact with Stoic philosophy was in the doctrine of the Logos. The Stoics had held that the Logos was the divine creative Reason eternally immanent in the universe, the principle and power by which all order was and is given throughout nature and in the destinies of individuals. The Logos was immanent in people also, who were thus "fragments" or "morsels" of God. By this indwelling Reason people could know the divine truth and order of all things. The author of the Fourth Gospel took this notion and identified Jesus as the incarnate Logos: "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was divine . . . and the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us. . . ."

Thus, as the Synoptics had presented Jesus primarily as Son of Man and sometimes as the fulfillment of the national hope for a political messiah,



the Fourth Gospel presented Jesus as the eternal Son of God, in mystic union with whom people were destined to share in the life of God. The figures of speech concerning him which are put in the mouth of Jesus by "John" strongly portray an organic unity of the being of the believer with Jesus and God. "I am the vine, ye are the branches." "I am the bread of life, he that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life." "He that drinketh the water that I shall give him, it shall be in him a well of water springing up into life eternal." Thus, there is the attempt to blend Stoic rational philosophy, the pattern of mystery religions of the Hellenistic world, the Hebrew-Jewish hopes of a savior, and the events of the life of Jesus.

Because of this intimacy between early Christianity and the mystery religions, it is important to point out that there were some differences between them which might have been determinative in the final ascendancy of Christianity.

The first thing which distinguished Christianity from "paganism" was that in Christianity God was believed to have taken the initiative in matters of human salvation, and to have taken it at the level of human life and history, whereas in the mysteries there was no divine initiative toward people but only people's initiative toward the gods; the worshipers really celebrated only the eternal cycle of the seasons in nature and sought union with it.

The second difference was that the concern in Christianity was not the nature-powers of life and death but the personal, human capacity for sin and righteousness--a moral-spiritual life and death issue in confrontation with a personal God who was ultimate Lord of human life and destiny.

The third difference was that Christianity was focused in an actual historical person and not in the turn of the seasons and their mythological representations. With all of the philosophical and mystical formulations of early Christianity, it still retained as its dominant characteristic the old Hebrew-Jewish realistic, historical, personal concreteness.

#### The Apostolic Fathers, the Greek Apologists, and the Gnostics

Paul preached and wrote from about A.D. 40 to 65. Mark was the first Gospel written and is dated a little before or after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the Romans. The Fourth Gospel is dated about the end of the first century. The latter part of the first century also marked the beginning of the period of the Apostolic Fathers, which ran to about A.D. 150.

The most important of the Fathers were Ignatius and Polycarp, both of whom stressed the doctrine that Jesus was God incarnate in such a way (though a mystery to be sure) that Jesus was simultaneously fully human and fully God. They were insistent in their views against the Docetists (those who believed that the human nature and body of Jesus were an appearance only and that he was not truly human) and affirmed that Jesus