

Worship in the Early Church

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A Word to the Reader

The present book is the outcome of two parallel but different paths that each of its two authors has followed. Originally, Catherine's interest centered on liturgy and worship, which slowly led her to the study of theology and history. While she focused on worship, Justo was particularly interested in theology. That interest led him to the study of history—particularly the history of theology—and to the slow but continuous discovery of the indissoluble relationship between worship and its practices on one hand, and doctrine on another. These two different paths have converged to the point that now we both consider the history of worship as absolutely necessary if we are to understand the development of theology as well as the history of the church.

Given that background, it is important to note that the book has been written jointly; but not in the sense that each of us wrote certain sections and the other the rest, but rather in the sense of a full collaboration in which we have jointly discussed and outlined what the book should include, and conducted the necessary research in ancient writings and other resources available to us.

Although this book deals with the history of Christian worship, it is not a history of worship. The field itself of the history of worship is enormous, and it includes a vast number of questions that specialists are still discussing. While there are many histories of Christian worship, such histories, precisely because they need to deal with so many debatable issues, are not readily available or interesting to the common reader. They certainly are helpful in understanding details as to various practices, or regarding the evolution of a hymn or ancient formula, and this is of great value. Our goal here is both more modest and more urgent. We are not seeking to give our readers a detailed discussion of each of the elements in worship. What we wish is simply to help worship leaders and believers in general relate their worship with that of the ancient church, not because one is better than the other, but rather because that dialogue between generations and centuries will lead to insights that will enrich today's worship—and it is out of its worship that the church lives and has lived over the ages.

This is why in this book we say little or nothing about several ceremonies, practices, and contexts that are certainly important, but are not directly related to the weekly worship in most of our churches today. This includes matters such as the manner in which pastors and leaders were chosen and ordained or commissioned, the history of marriage ceremonies, details about the monastic hours of worship, the origin of various liturgical formulae, and much more. When it has seemed significant, we have referred to some of these issues and practices, but they have not been the focus of this study.

That focus is those elements of worship in the ancient church that are most closely related to worship in most Protestant churches, usually on Sundays. These common essential elements in worship are basically three: preaching, baptism, and Communion. Therefore, in each section of the present book we shall be studying those three subjects—usually in the same order. Our interest is not so much what was done and said, but rather why such things were said and done—in other words, not so much the practice of worship itself as the theology—or theologies—expressed in that practice and shaped by it. Thus we hope to move beyond our present and mostly fruitless debates on worship and into a deeper exploration of the understanding of the church and of the gospel that shapes worship itself. In brief, our purpose is not to let the history of worship be known, but rather to help readers have access to valuable elements of ancient Christian worship that may help us in our reflection and in our present debates about our own worship and our mission as the church. If this book makes a contribution along those lines, we shall be more than amply rewarded.

Abbreviations

ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
BAC	Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos
FoC	Fathers of the Church
Mansi	Sacrorum conciliorum amplissima collectio
NPNF1	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1
NPNF2	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2
PG	Patrologia Graeca, Migne
PL	Patrologia Latina, Migne

Note: In quotations from ANF, NPNF1, and NPNF2, changes have been introduced to conform with more modern usage.

Introduction

Scope, Limits, and General Parameters of This Study

Before moving into the subject of ancient Christian worship itself, it will be helpful to give the reader a general idea of what is to follow, how it is organized, and to what goal it is directed.

First of all, a word about worship as a general theme. Both authors have devoted long years to the study of the history of doctrine and of Christian thought, as well as of the history of the life and organization of the church, its impact in the world, and several other similar subjects. But another subject has captivated our interest, and is in fact the bond joining these various aspects of Christian history. That subject is worship—meaning by that specifically the time in which a congregation jointly worships God, and the various practices that this entails.

In order to understand any religion, it is not enough to know its doctrines, or to know how it is organized or how it impacts society. The expression of faith in worship must also be taken into account. For instance, in order to understand the religion of ancient Aztecs it is not enough to know what they said about their gods, the origins of things, or the birth of their own people. Nor is it enough to take into account the manner in which those ancient myths were expressed in the social order. One must also take into account Aztec worship—its sacrifices, rites, and prayers. The same is true of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or any other religion. It is through its worship—public, within the household, or in private—that a religion makes its greatest impact on the lives of its followers.

This means that in order to understand Christianity, it is not enough to know its doctrines, or even to know the history of the various ways in which the church has been organized and has related to the surrounding society. One also has to understand Christian worship—worship in its widest sense,

meaning all that Christian people do jointly in their devotion to their God. Therefore, while we have both written abundantly on the history of Christian thought and the history of the church itself, we now feel that it is necessary to address Christian worship itself.

This book is limited to the ancient church, by which we understand the church during classical antiquity. Since it is commonly thought that this particular period of history ended with the Germanic invasions, especially beginning in the fifth century, our study closes with those invasions and their most immediate consequences in Western worship. This may seem arbitrary, and in a way it is. But we are also attempting to show throughout the whole of this study that we have much to learn from those first centuries in the life of the church—particularly how that church expressed and shaped its faith through its worship.

If we thus begin our study focusing on the first century—the time during which Jesus and his first disciples lived—and end it with the Germanic invasions and their consequences, we must still divide the time between into a series of periods that allow us to follow the story we are telling.

In reviewing the history of the church, we frequently see the great turning point as the reign of Constantine and its consequences, when persecution ended and the state began supporting the church. This dividing line is important, and we shall use it here. But before doing so, it is important to mention another turning point whose changes were at least as important as those that followed Constantine's policies. This first dividing point, which is often passed over lightly, is the beginning of the church as an institution apart from the synagogue, and of Christianity as a religion apart from Judaism. During a period that lasted more than a generation, the church was seen by Jews and by society at large, as well as by itself, as simply one more sect within a Judaism whose inner vitality was shown in various movements and sects. During that time, most believers in Christ were either people of Jewish descent or Gentiles who for a long time had accepted many of the doctrines and practices of Judaism—the “God-fearers” to whom we shall return later. One could then speak of a “Judeo-Christianity.” Such was the state at least until the end of the first century, and in some cases for much longer.

As we study that first period, we must acknowledge that Israel's faith was undergoing a process of deep transformation that led to what today we know as Judaism, and that in many ways differed from the religion of its ancestors. Since it was within that developing faith of Israel that Judeo-Christianity was born and developed, in order to understand the evolution of ancient Christian worship—as well as in order to understand the origins of the church itself—one must take into account the vicissitudes and transformations of the faith of Israel during that first century, and their consequences. Likewise another

important matter is that at that time Judaism was not limited to those who descended from Abraham, but was quite attractive to many who, disillusioned by their traditional religions, sought a way to understand the world and to organize their life that was more adequate than the ancient pagan proposals.

Within that evolving Judaism, Judeo-Christians—at that time practically all Christians—sought to remain within the synagogue as long as this was allowed, while at the same time developing their own practices of worship and devotion parallel to those of the synagogue. These practices were profoundly shaped by the traditions of Israel, but also by faith in Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the ancient promises made to Abraham and his descendants.

Particularly after the end of the first century, the church became increasingly Gentile, and Christianity and Judaism continued diverging. At that point we have to begin taking into account a different worship, still deeply rooted in the faith of Israel and its Scriptures, but also understanding itself as a religion different from Judaism, with which practically all bonds were broken. From the very beginning Judeo-Christians had differed with those who held to a more traditional form of Israel's faith, but now those conflicts increased, and even became actual enmity. Thus, we are now in the second period within our story, which takes us from the beginning of a mostly Gentile form of Christianity to the enormous impact of the new policies established by Constantine and his successors.

During this second period the church developed a form of worship that on the one hand distinguished it from Judaism, but on the other—insisting always on the validity of the history and ancient religion of Israel—gave it a sense of identity vis-à-vis the surrounding society. This was a church marginalized in society, repeatedly threatened by persecution, within a political atmosphere that showed its increasing hostility in ever more severe and cruel persecutions. The documents of that time attest to a double polemic addressed on the one hand against Judaism and on the other against paganism. Within that context, the church found it necessary to develop worship and devotional practices that, while based on the Scriptures of Israel, would also uphold the identity of Christianity as different from Judaism.

This changed radically with the new policies established by Constantine early in the fourth century, so that by the end of that century Christianity had become the official religion of the empire. Now began a third period, a time in which Christian identity was increasingly confused and combined with Greco-Roman identity. It therefore became necessary to teach at least the rudiments of Christian faith to the burgeoning multitudes of followers. Equally necessary was making sure that the people found their identity, not only in their Greco-Roman heritage, but also and above all in the gospel of Jesus Christ and therefore in the Scriptures and faith of the people of

Israel. This resulted in a form of worship that became increasingly elaborate, as seemed to behoove a church that enjoyed imperial support. At the same time, it also resulted in repeated attempts of many church leaders to reaffirm the church's identity within an empire in which the church's interests were increasingly confused with those of the state.

Then the empire itself unraveled. During the fourth and fifth centuries, in a series of successive invasions, various Germanic peoples—as well as others of non-Germanic origin—crossed the frontiers marked by the Rhine and Danube rivers in order to settle in the western reaches of the old Roman Empire. There they established relatively independent kingdoms, even though for some time they theoretically considered themselves subjects of the empire. In the Greek-speaking East, the old Roman Empire now became the Byzantine Empire—which soon would lose much of its territory to Islamic invasions. For these reasons, particularly following the Germanic invasions, Christianity in the West followed a different course than its counterpart in the East.

In the West, these events brought about new circumstances that put an end to classical antiquity and opened the way to the Middle Ages. In the field of worship and devotion, this also led to multiple changes that are briefly mentioned at the end of the present study but are not discussed fully since they would carry us beyond the chronological limits of the present project.

Having said this, several elements and dimensions of worship must be underscored. Possibly the most important is the bidirectional relationship that worship establishes with God. Worship is the praise the people of God render to the sovereign God. But it is also the word that this sovereign God addresses to the people. Worship involves praise, and it also involves listening. In it we not only bring before God our faith, feelings, sinfulness, joy, and hope. We also listen to what God wishes to say to God's people, which is why preaching has a central place in Christian worship. It is there that the church hears the Word of God, both in the Old and in the New Testaments. It is there that this Word of God is heard, interpreted, and applied to present circumstances—which makes it a word from God not only for past times, but also for those who hear it today.

In the pages that follow we also see that the ancient church listened to God not only in preaching and in the reading of Scripture, but also in actions such as baptism and Communion. For that church, baptism and Communion were not foremost actions of the church, but rather divine actions blessing God's people. In those early times there was no emphasis on trying to explain how this was so. Debates on this matter, which eventually led to serious divisions within the church, would come later. But what the church did affirm in those early times was that something did happen in baptism and in Communion, not primarily by human agency, but rather by divine action. Therefore, the

people of God were to hear the divine message not only in the reading of Scripture and in preaching, but also in baptism and Communion—as well as in private prayer, mutual love among believers, service to humanity, and so on. In all of this the church is not acting alone, for God is also actively involved, carrying forth the divine design and leading the community of faith to be the people of God as God wishes.

Second, in the pages that follow, we find that the church never believed that it was alone in worshipping God. What the church does in its worship is join the heavenly host that eternally and constantly worships God. And the church does this also as practice and preparation for the day in which it itself will join the eternal choir of angels, archangels, and redeemed saints who lay down their crowns before the throne and the glassy sea.

Finally, in the pages that follow, we shall also see that worship is not merely an individual, private matter. Even though in worship believers address God personally, we do it as part of the people, a people that is also properly called the body of Christ. We address God not as separate individuals but as members grafted into the body of the risen One in whom we also shall rise again. God addresses this community that worships not primarily as a series of isolated individuals, each with their own hopes, problems, and divine calling, but also particularly as a community that God is shaping to be the people of God.

Therefore, in reading these pages and seeking in them inspiration and direction for today's worship, try to think not as separate individuals but rather as a body listening jointly to what God is telling the people of God, to what God expects of this people, and to what God has promised to it.

PART I

Judeo-Christianity

The Background

Jewish Worship

JEWISH WORSHIP: THE CRADLE OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

It is astonishing that the people of Israel has survived through the centuries. Israel was a nomadic people that finally found a land to call its own and took possession of it. There it eventually founded a kingdom that had a time of glory, but was soon divided into two. Then the people were conquered, and their leaders taken into exile in Babylon, while others remained in the desolate land. They saw their Temple, the very center of their faith, destroyed. Eventually the exiles returned to the land in order to rebuild both their Temple and their society, only to be conquered again, first by the Macedonians, then by the Egyptians, followed by the Syrians. They were able to rebuild their Temple only to see it destroyed again, now by the Romans. They were a people that rebelled against the Roman invaders and found itself expelled from its own land, with its capital supplanted by a pagan city. Surprisingly, this repeatedly persecuted and exiled people did manage to keep its identity throughout the vicissitudes and tragedies of its history.

What made it possible for this people to retain its unity and identity amid such a turbulent history? Without any doubt, it was its worship. Israel's worship repeatedly recalled and celebrated God's covenant with this particular people. This covenant and its history were one of the main themes of the Scriptures of Israel, and therefore also of its worship. At the heart of this covenant was the Law, which governed all of life—work and leisure, feasts and fasts, family and trade. It was a combination of a daily life ruled by Scripture and the worship of the God who had commanded such a life that enabled Israel to retain its identity through all the changes in its circumstances.

Something similar is true of the church, even though we often do not realize it. The church has lived through times of persecution. It has also known times of outward prosperity, when it enjoyed the support of rulers. It lives scattered throughout the face of the earth, sometimes supported in one area and persecuted in another. It has lived through clashes with political power, conflicts with secular culture, and divisions within itself. It has survived through wars and plagues. And, throughout all of this, it has lived thanks to its worship. In some of its best times, its worship has reflected worship in Israel, which originally shaped it. Like the worship of the Hebrews, Christian worship is based on Scripture, although now including both the sacred books of Israel and others of Christian origin.

Since the church was born within the people of Israel, and its worship was born out of Israel's worship, it is important that Christians understand some elements of that worship in order to understand their own. However, it is not a matter of simply imitating the worship of Israel during the first century. Today many people promote a superficial imitation of first-century Jewish worship, apparently believing that by repeating a particular prayer or words, by imitating certain gestures and actions, by praying in Hebrew, or by other similar means they will bring about a renewal of the power of worship.

However, the truth is that we know little about Israel's worship in the first century. Almost all such details that we know are drawn from much later documents. These may well reflect what was done in the first century, but they probably also include much that reflects later developments. There is no doubt that early Christian worship bears the imprint of Hebrew worship. Later we shall see various elements of that imprint. But it is impossible to reconstruct a detailed description of Israel's worship at the time of Jesus and the apostles.

A further difficulty—and certainly much more significant than the first—is that the easy solution of apparently returning to Hebrew worship misses the core of our problem today. As we write these lines, today's church is deeply divided on how worship is to be conducted. Some prefer a more "traditional" service, while others prefer what they call "contemporary worship." Some prefer to sing the hymns that were popular a hundred years ago, and others insist that all music and songs should reflect the tastes of today's younger generations. Some seem to believe that the only musical instrument acceptable in church is the organ, while others wish to have drum batteries, electric guitars, and tambourines. In the midst of what some call "worship wars," we ignore what really stands between most of our worship and the best of Christian and Jewish worship.

The problem is not what we do in worship as much as what we think worship is. For most of us, no matter on what side of the current worship divide

we stand, the purpose of worship is to relate the individual believer with God. Such relationship with God is doubtlessly important and even necessary. But just as important is the need for worship to remind us that, like ancient Israel, we are a *people* of God; that worship is not for me or for you, but for us; that what is important is not that I like worship, or that it expresses my feelings, but that it reminds us that we are God's people. Such worship somehow makes us and remakes us as the people of God.

The great enemy of our worship today is not the repetition of what we deem traditional, or the facile option of what seems to be more up-to-date; it is not one sort of music or another; it is not the tranquil passivity of some or the noisy rejoicing of others. The great enemy of our worship today is a sort of individualism that makes us think that if worship does not satisfy me, it is not true worship; that if I do not like worship, it is not true worship; that if the music is not what I like, worship is not for me. Imbued in this attitude, we forget that when his disciples asked the Lord to teach them to pray he did not tell them to say, "My Father, who art in heaven," but rather, "Our Father, who art in heaven." The individualism permeating much of today's Christian worship, be it "traditional" or "contemporary," is not a recent innovation. It already became common during the Middle Ages, when faith centered on individual salvation, leaving aside other elements of the biblical witness. The great reformers of the sixteenth century offered some alternative insights, but these were soon forgotten—in part because of the growing individualism of modernity, and in part because of the endless debates about the process of salvation itself.

TROUBLED TIMES: THE CONTEXT OF ANCIENT JEWISH WORSHIP

At the time of Jesus and the apostles, life and worship in Judea and the surrounding areas did not take place within a context of peace and tranquility. That land had long been swept by conquest and unrest. It was conquered in 332 BCE by Alexander the Great, whose generals clashed and divided his territories after his death. At first, the ancient land of Israel was ruled from Egypt by General Ptolemy and his successors. But then in 158 BCE the area was conquered by the Seleucids—descendants of Alexander's general Seleucus—who ruled in Syria. Most of these foreign rulers gave Israel a measure of autonomy, even allowing the people to govern their own lives following the Law of Moses. But the political situation also led to a process of Hellenization that the more religious Jews considered an abomination. Such was the case of Joshua ben Sirach, whose *Wisdom* is now included among the

deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament, and who was strongly pressured by the authorities to silence his protests. Still, in spite of the resistance of the more devout among the people, some 170 years before Christ the high priests of the people of Israel became champions of the Hellenization of Jewish traditions, and even in several ways agents of Syrian interests.

Eventually, in 167 BCE, the Jews rebelled under the direction of the Hasmonean family. The most distinguished among them, whose name was Judas, was given the title of “Maccabeus,” which means “hammer,” for he was seen as a hammer beating on the foreign invader. Apparently, while most of the rural population and the impoverished urban masses supported the rebellion, the high classes, being more Hellenized than the rest of the population, saw it as a threat—or at least feared the possible consequences of a failed rebellion. When the Hasmoneans won the nation’s independence, at first they opposed all Hellenistic influence, going to the extreme of forcibly circumcising Jews who had not been circumcised. Some members of the family that until then had produced most of the recent high priests fled to Egypt, where in 145 BCE they built a Jewish temple—apparently as a replacement for the one in Jerusalem. That temple continued existing until 73 CE—that is, three years after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem—when Emperor Vespasian ordered it closed. Meanwhile, in Palestine the Hasmonean rulers themselves began yielding to the unavoidable Hellenizing pressure, and for that reason began losing the support of many among the people.

While these last events were taking place, the growing power of Rome began to turn its attention eastward. In 63 BCE Roman general Pompey, who was in the region for other reasons, took advantage of the struggle among the Hasmoneans to invade the land, take Jerusalem, and profane the Temple by entering it on horseback. Roman rule was then established over the area.

Roman rule did not bring order immediately, for internecine struggles continued until 39 BCE, when Roman authorities named Herod as king of Judea. Later known as “Herod the Great,” this man based his claim to rule in Judea on a distant kinship with the Hasmoneans, but he attained to the throne thanks to Rome’s support, with which he was able to conquer the areas of Galilee, Idumaea (Edom), and Samaria, and then march on Jerusalem. There, by promising a pardon for those who had fought against him, he was finally able to become an actual king—a position he held until his death in 4 BCE. In his will, Herod divided his territory among his three children, Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip. Judea fell to the lot of Archelaus, whose cruelties and misdemeanors led Rome to depose him and name a Roman “procurator” in his place. (It is Herod Antipas whom Jesus calls “that fox” [Luke 13:32], and who appears in chapter 14 of Matthew and elsewhere in the Gospels. The “King Herod” in Acts 12 is Herod Agrippa, a grandson of Herod the Great.)

Reacting to Roman rule, Jewish nationalism grew rapidly. Apparently those called “Herodians” even claimed that Herod the Great had been the promised messiah, and on this basis sought to create an independent kingdom under the leadership of his descendants, but this proposal did not go far. Other, more radical groups, generally known as “Zealots,” grew rapidly, particularly among the impoverished masses in the countryside. When, in the last decade before Christ, under the direction of Quirinius, governor of Syria, a census was proclaimed that would be the basis for more oppressive taxation, there was a rebellion led by Judas of Gamala, also known as “the Galilean” (Acts 5:37). Its suppression led to increasing bitterness among the people and to the growth of the Zealot party. The history of the Maccabees, now written and presented as a great liberating struggle that had succeeded thanks to the powerful arm of God, prompted many to believe that God would intervene in favor of an armed rebellion, leading to a situation similar to that of the early Hasmoneans. Among the most radical were the “Sicarii,” so named after the *sica*, a dagger that they carried as they mixed with the multitudes and killed those supporting Roman rule. (These are the Sicarii with whom the Roman tribune in Jerusalem believed Paul to be connected when he said, “Then you are not the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?” [Acts 21:38, where what the NRSV translates as “assassins” is actually “Sicarii”].)

Finally rebellion broke out in 66 CE, when the Zealots overthrew the government established by Rome and took possession of Jerusalem and much of Judea. Rome was quick to respond. Emperor Nero sent Vespasian to quell the rebellion. Vespasian began by taking possession of the areas around Jerusalem before attacking it. This strategy, and disorder in Rome, took place in the same year there were three successive emperors, which encouraged the rebels and gave them a chance to gain strength. In 69, when Vespasian left the campaign to become emperor in Rome, he put his son Titus in charge of military operations in Judea. Titus, who would later become emperor, was able to take part of the city of Jerusalem and besieged the rest, so that eventually the city surrendered. In the Temple itself there was a massacre, and much of the city was sacked and burned. In another memorable siege, the Zealots defending the fortress in Masada chose suicide over surrender to the Romans. This put an end to the rebellion, whose cost was enormous. All of Judea was impoverished, and the Temple disappeared. As we shall see, this had enormous consequences for both Judaism and Christianity.

Even this bloodbath was not enough to put an end to the people’s dream to become once again an independent nation where they could fully obey the laws that God had given. The spirit of rebellion finally exploded in 115, and then again in 132. In a way, the first of these two rebellions was the most

dangerous for Roman rule, for Jews also rebelled in the Roman territories of North Africa and Egypt, as well as in Mesopotamia and Judea. The rebels were crushed by the Roman army under the leadership of Quietus, and therefore that episode is commonly known as “the war of Quietus.” Responding to the continued unrest in Judea, Emperor Hadrian based an entire legion at Caesarea, the seaport serving Jerusalem. When the Romans began building on the ruins of Jerusalem a new city, which they called Aelia Capitolina, and building a temple to Jupiter on the mound where the Jewish Temple once stood, the Jews rebelled again and were able to expel the Romans from much of Judea. Emperor Hadrian responded by sending six legions and several auxiliary units to retake the area and punish the rebels severely. Many of those who did not die in the war or in the ensuing famine were sold into slavery. Furthermore, with very few exceptions, Jews were forbidden access to Jerusalem.

These events and their consequences were the context of the parting of ways between Jews and Christians, and therefore also the context within which each of the two groups developed its own identity and worship.

THE TEMPLE

At the time of Jesus, the Temple of Jerusalem, at the highest point in the city, was the center of Jewish religious life, and to a certain degree also a center of political power in Judea. At that point the Temple was the one built by Zerubbabel (Ezra 3), but this had been restored and amplified to such a degree by Herod the Great that it is usually known as Herod’s Temple. That restoration began some twenty years BCE, and continued for long after Herod’s death. In John 2:20, when Jesus has been speaking about the destruction of the Temple, those who hear him say, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” The work on the Temple continued until about the year 63—that is, only some seven years before the Temple itself was destroyed by the Romans.

It is possible to know something about the construction of the Temple, as well as its physical appearance, thanks to the writings of Flavius Josephus, who lived in the first century. One also finds some data in later Hebrew literature—particularly in the Mishnah. As frequently happens in such cases, these sources do not agree on all the details. Scholars generally seem to accept the data of Josephus above the rest, although also acknowledging it is quite possible that Josephus may have exaggerated both the splendor and the dimensions of the Temple. There is no doubt that Josephus himself knew the Temple well, for he was part of an elite within the Jewish priesthood. During the rebellion that eventually led to the Temple’s destruction, he served

as a general of the rebels defending Galilee, and in the year 67 surrendered to the troops of Vespasian. After serving Vespasian for some time as a slave, he was granted freedom. At that time Josephus took the name of “Flavius,” which was the name of Vespasian’s family. He eventually became a Roman citizen and served Titus as a translator at the siege of Jerusalem in the year 70. For these reasons, many Jews considered him a traitor. His works, apparently written partly in order to regain the goodwill of the Jewish people, and partly so that the Romans could understand the greatness and wisdom of his own people, are one of the main sources we have for the story of the rebellion itself and for our knowledge of the Temple.

When Herod began the process of rebuilding the Temple he had to be careful not to offend the Jewish people, who did not trust him and feared that he would destroy the existing Temple and not build another. Therefore, before beginning to demolish the sections that had to be rebuilt, he had most of the material needed for the entire project brought to Jerusalem and stored near the Temple. Only then did construction actually begin. Also, since the project required some laborers to enter parts of the Temple that were reserved for priests, Herod collected a core of a thousand priests who were also stonemasons or carpenters, for the specific purpose of working in those sections of the building. The project itself occupied some ten thousand other workers. Thanks to this enormous number of builders, it took only a year and a half to finish most of the work, although minor projects occupied another eighty years.

The main building was surrounded by a wall around a yard that was slightly under two hundred meters wide and four hundred in length. Inside that wall was a roofed walkway held by two rows of columns on three of its sides, and three rows on the fourth side. This space within this outer wall was the “court of the Gentiles,” for they were admitted into it. Inside this wall was another surrounding a smaller court. Part of this court—separated from the rest by another wall—was the “women’s court.” The rest was the “court of the men of Israel.” Still further in was a smaller court for the priests. It was within this court that the actual Temple stood, with an altar for burnt offerings in front of it. To the north of this altar there was a space where animals to be sacrificed were killed, skinned, and prepared for burning. The Temple itself had a porch some fifteen meters wide and ten meters deep. Its eastern façade was covered with gold and would shine at sunrise. Beyond this area one finally came to the “holy place,” a space of some twenty meters by ten meters. This is where the breads of propitiation were kept and renewed every Sabbath. In the same room were the menorah and an altar for burning incense. Finally one would come to the “holy of holies,” which was empty and where only the high priest was allowed to enter once a year for the Day of Atonement. (The Ark of the Covenant had disappeared when Solomon’s Temple was destroyed.)

This was the annual day of fasting and sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus 16. Besides the sacrifices offered on that day, there was also a ceremony in which two rams played a special role. One was sacrificed and the other was cast out into the desert, taking with itself all the guilt and sins of the people. As this ram was led to the desert, people would spit at it as a sign of rejection. (Hence our word “scapegoat.”) After the destruction of the Temple, when it was no longer possible to offer sacrifices, the Day of Atonement took the form of Yom Kippur, which the Jewish people still observe. The Day of Atonement was influential in Christian interpretations of the sacrifice of Jesus, as may be seen in several books of the New Testament, particularly Hebrews. Other feast days are discussed later in this chapter.

An establishment as large as the Temple required a vast number of people to care for it. Among them was the Temple guard, whose chief was one of the most important priests. It was he who managed all physical and administrative matters having to do with the Temple. Under his leadership, the Temple guard kept order and made sure that each person remained in the proper court or area within the Temple compound. We have an example of their work in Acts 4:1.

In brief, Israel’s religion until the time of the Temple’s destruction in the year 70 was essentially a religion of sacrifice. In the strict sense, sacrifices could only be offered in the Temple at Jerusalem, and the manner in which they were to be performed was under strict regulation, as prescribed by the Law. What was to be sacrificed must be of top quality, for sacrificing an imperfect animal was an abomination. If the person offering the sacrifice had a physical defect, or if it was a slave or a woman, they were not allowed to place their hands on their own sacrifices as a sign of dedication. There was also a careful classification of various sorts and motives for sacrifice, for while some of them were offered in expiation, others were simply offerings of gratitude in which one returned to God part of what God had given.

Despite its enormous size, the Temple and its courts were not enough to hold all the population of Jerusalem—and even less all the Jewish people. The Temple was not, as we would think today, a place where all the faithful gathered to worship, but rather the center of a worship life that reached not only throughout Judea but wherever the people of Israel found themselves. Wherever they were, be it in Jerusalem itself or in faraway lands, Jews should turn toward the Temple when they prayed. If at all possible, their hours of prayer should be the same as those at the Temple. Every male Jew over twenty years of age, no matter where they lived, must send every year half a shekel—approximately a fourth of an ounce of silver—as a substitute for the sacrifices that he could not present personally.

Even though the Temple was dear to Jews throughout the world, and even though they considered it the center of their worship, the place where most Jews gathered regularly to worship God and study Scripture was the synagogue, to which we shall return later.

SCRIPTURE

While the Temple was the heart of Jewish religion, Scripture was the means by which most Jews were able to relate more directly to God and to the worship that took place in the Temple. Except for those who lived in Jerusalem or nearby, the Temple was a venerated but distant reality. Although all sought to visit it whenever this was possible and to offer there the sacrifices that the Law required, and although many dreamed of such visits, the majority of the Jewish people, scattered as they were throughout the Roman Empire, could only visit the Temple in their imagination. But Scripture was at hand, not only in its original Hebrew, but also in translations into Aramaic, the language of most Jews in the Holy Land, in Syria, and further east—translations known as “Targums”—and also into Greek, the lingua franca of a large part of the Roman Empire—a translation known as the “Septuagint.” However, exactly which books were to be considered Scripture had not yet been decided among Jews. There was general agreement regarding “the Law and the Prophets” (see, for instance, Matt. 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16). The books that came to be known as “the Writings” (Job, Proverbs, etc.) were usually held in high regard but were not normally included among the inspired books of Scripture. The main exception to this was the book of Psalms, which—particularly since they were often employed in worship—were also believed to be divinely inspired. This may be seen in the manner the New Testament presents Jesus as well as others citing the Psalms and using them to support their views and arguments. It was somewhat later, in the city of Jamnia, that Jewish authorities set the exact limits of the canon, including the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Even then, however, some Jews who preferred Greek and therefore used the Septuagint still employed the books that today are called “deuterocanonical” (that is, books of a second canon) or, less precisely, “apocryphal”—Maccabees, Judith, Tobias, and so on.

Scripture was at the very heart of Jewish religion, built on the Law of God that had been delivered to Moses. This Law was both the foundation and the highest expression of the covenant that God had made with the people on Sinai. Therefore, it was not just a set of instructions regarding what God had commanded the people to do, but also the very foundation of Israel’s identity

as a people. To study and obey it was part of the covenant. Thus, the study of the Law served not only to tell Israel how to behave, but also to remind it of its own identity. The Law, and worship around it, reminded Israel of who they were as God's people.

This dimension of the Law as a reminder was of paramount importance, for the covenant was based on the great acts of God for God's people, and therefore following the Law was a statement of who they were and of their dependence on God's will and grace. This is why the Law itself repeatedly shows that its foundation is the memory of what God has done for Israel. A few examples should suffice. In the introduction to the Decalogue, before giving the Commandments, God reminds Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2; see also Deut. 5, where the introduction regarding God's actions is much more detailed).

A similar example refers to the commandment regarding the Sabbath:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut. 5:12–15)

Later in the same book, now referring to the Feast of Weeks, God declares,

Rejoice before the LORD your God—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you—at the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes. (Deut. 16:11–12)

As a final example, further in the same book God commands,

You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. (Deut. 24:17–18)

In summary, the Law, rather than a series of precepts, was an instrument for the people of Israel to remember its own history and how God had acted in it.

In studying it, each generation saw in it not only a guide and direction for life, but also a witness to their own identity as part of the people of God.

As to its content, the Law included instructions about sacrifices and the worship that the people should render to God, about how Israel was to remain pure and free of all that was unclean, and about the social order that God demanded among the people. Much later, a distinction would be made between laws having to do with rites and purity on the one hand, and those having to do with moral, social, and justice issues on the other. On the basis of this distinction, Ephesians 2:15 says about Jesus, “He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity.”

Soon, when speaking of Scripture as “the Law and the Prophets,” the latter were given an authority similar to the Law itself. Those prophets had repeatedly spoken of justice among the people and insisted on the need to obey the Law not only in matters referring to worship, sacrifice, and religious festivals, but also in those having to do with justice—particularly justice for those whom no one protected, such as widows, orphans, the poor, and strangers.

The prophets had also spoken about God’s promises. These included on the one hand a new order of peace and justice (see, for instance, Isa. 11 and Mic. 4:1–4), and on the other the advent of an anointed One or God’s Messiah, who would bring about that new order. That messianic expectation and what it should imply for present life were understood in various ways, but they were always part of the faith of any good Jew.

DIVERSITY AMONG THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Despite their unity around the Temple, Scripture, and to a certain degree messianic expectations, in Judea itself Jews did not agree as to the place of each of these in the life of the people. Frequently the various groups resulting from such differences are called “sects,” for this is the name given them by the main ancient source dealing with them. That source is the writings of Flavius Josephus, who has already been mentioned. Josephus refers to these “sects” in various places, but the passage in which he most clearly discusses and compares them is in his *Jewish Antiquities*:

For some time, the Jews have had three philosophical sects of their own: the Essenes, the Sadducees, and a third set of opinions belonging to the Pharisees. . . . The Pharisees live in austerity, rejecting pleasures in their diet. They follow the path of reason, and whatever it tells them to do, this they do. They are convinced that they should follow this path. They also pay special respect to the elderly, and will

not contradict them. . . . They believe that souls have an inherent immortal force, and that there will be rewards below the earth as well as punishment. They think that those who are to be rewarded will rise to live again. These views make them popular among the masses. Whatever they do in divine worship, in prayers and in sacrifices, follows the same foundation. As a result, urban people speak highly of them for their clearly virtuous conduct in all that they do as well as in what they say.

But the doctrine of the Sadducees is that souls die with their bodies. They also hold that it suffices to do whatever the Law commands. . . . But few follow their teachings, and those are only people of high status. They cannot achieve what they intend, since when they attain to power and could attempt somehow to lead others, they have to follow what the Pharisees say, for otherwise the people would reject them.

What the Essenes teach is that everything should be ascribed to God. They believe in the immortality of souls and therefore they also hold that the rewards of virtue are to be sought above anything else. . . . They do not offer sacrifice in the Temple, for they have their own ritual washings. For that reason they are excluded from the common court of the Temple. But they perform their own sacrifices. Their style of life is better than the rest. . . . They are to be highly admired because they excel all others in virtue. In this they surpass whatever others have done, be they Greeks or barbarians. (*Antiquities* 18.1.2–5)

When these Jewish sects are discussed, the impression is often given that the Jewish people were distributed among these three—and perhaps others. However, Josephus himself seems to imply that actually it was only the Essenes who constituted a sect in the sense that they withdrew from the rest of the population. As to the Sadducees, Josephus shows clearly that there were a minority of aristocratic tendencies staunchly opposing what they took to be innovations, such as belief in life after death and other similar matters.

It is clear from both Josephus and other sources that the high levels of the priesthood were held by the Sadducees, who represented the higher classes of society and collaborated openly with Roman authorities. The high priesthood, which had been traditionally hereditary and lifelong, had ceased to be such at the time of the Maccabees, and ever since had lost much of its prestige among the general population. Herod as well as later Roman authorities would name and depose high priests at their whim. This is why Josephus claims that no matter what the Sadducees believed and preferred, they frequently found that they were not able to impose their views on the people, who sympathized mostly with the Pharisees.

The Pharisees deserve some attention and clarification, for they are frequently said to have been hypocrites—this, to such an extent that in common parlance to call somebody “pharisaic” is an insult, an accusation of hypocrisy.

Naturally, this is due to the conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees that appear repeatedly in the Gospels—even though in the Gospels themselves there are also cases of Pharisees who listened respectfully to what Jesus said. In order to understand the true nature of the Pharisees, it is crucial to understand that the reason why Jesus attacked them repeatedly, and practically ignored the Sadducees, was not that he preferred the latter, but rather that it was the Pharisees who were closer to his own teachings. The Pharisees were not content with merely obeying the letter of the Law, but rather sought to understand what the Law implied for daily life. In contrast, the Sadducees were content with their power and the control they had over Temple worship. At the same time, while the Sadducees collaborated with the Roman government, and even represented it on occasion, the Pharisees, without openly opposing that government, kept their distance from it.

This last point leads us to bring up another group that Josephus does not mention in the above-quoted passage—although he goes on to speak of Judas the Galilean—but which was also of enormous significance for the history of Palestine in the times immediately following Jesus' death and resurrection. These are the Zealots, already introduced when discussing the process leading to the Jewish rebellions and eventual destruction first of the Temple and then of Jerusalem itself.

THE SYNAGOGUES AND THE DIASPORA

The origins of the synagogue are lost in the shadows of history. While it is impossible to determine when the synagogues emerged, there is no doubt about their purpose. The people of Israel, first taken into exile in Babylon and then scattered throughout the Mediterranean world, still looked to Jerusalem and its Temple as the center of their faith; there they found their own identity. However, they could not limit their worship of God and their religious formation to the rare occasions when some of them could visit the Temple. Even in Palestine itself, most people were able to visit the Temple only occasionally, for such visits often had to overcome long distances and many difficulties.

Thus, at a time that is impossible to determine, the people of Israel began the custom of gathering periodically—particularly on the seventh day of the week, the Sabbath—to study Scripture, to pray, and to affirm their identity as God's people. The word "synagogue," which is Greek in origin, simply means "gathering" or "assembly"—and thus it is very similar to the word "church," whose original meaning was precisely that of an assembly or gathering. "Synagogue" was the Greek word by which the Septuagint translated Hebrew Bible references to the assembly of the people. Actually it is quite

possible that before the term “synagogue” came to have its present meaning, the name that was most commonly given to the meetings that the Jews held in order to pray and study Scripture was *proseuchē*, which simply meant “prayer.” This is the word that the NRSV translates as “a place of prayer” in Acts 16:13. At any rate, although both words were employed in antiquity to refer to the group that gathered in order to pray and study Scripture, eventually these terms were also used to designate the place in which those groups gathered—just as today we speak of a “church” referring sometimes to the congregation itself, and at other times to the building where it meets. From the first century on, the word “synagogue” became the most commonly used both for those meeting and for the place where the gathering took place. This change may be seen both in the writings of Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria—a contemporary of Jesus—and in the New Testament. Another name that sometimes was given to the synagogue during the first century is *sabbateion*, for the synagogues usually gathered on the Sabbath. The synagogue was both a center of study and teaching and a place of worship. It was led by a rabbi or teacher—a man who was a careful student of Scripture and who therefore could both teach and interpret it in study as well as in worship.

Leaving aside the still-ongoing controversy regarding the origins of the synagogue, one can at least affirm that at the time of Jesus, the synagogue was an important element in the religious life of the Jewish people. In the Temple itself there was a space devoted to the reading and study of the Law. Some suggest that Luke 2:46 refers to this when telling the story of Mary and Joseph finding Jesus “in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.” Acts 6:9 also has a reference to other synagogues in Jerusalem, although the text itself is not clear as to the number of synagogues listed: “some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia.” Furthermore, according to an ancient rabbinic tradition, when the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem. Synagogues have a very important place in the Gospels, which reference them frequently. For instance, in Luke 4:15 we are told that Jesus “began to teach in their synagogues.” Unfortunately, although excavations in Judea have unearthed ruins of several synagogues, it is impossible to affirm with absolute certainty that any of them date from the first century. (The famous synagogue in Capernaum, which pilgrims often visit because of its place in the stories of the life of Jesus, probably dates from the third century—although it is quite possible that under it may be the ruins of the synagogue at the time of Jesus.)

The buildings themselves varied in their size and architecture. Some ancient texts declare that a synagogue should be built so that, while praying,

people would be facing the Temple in Jerusalem. Frequently in the ruins of ancient synagogues one finds stone benches built against some of the walls. Perhaps other seats made out of wood were also within the room itself, but if they existed, archaeology has not been able to find any sign of them. We know there was a special area for women, apart from men, and that women were not strictly considered members of the synagogue, nor could they be counted in order to attain the necessary number to hold a service. Yet some texts say that women could be among the seven people who were to read Scripture aloud—although the reading of the Law was reserved to men.

The most important place in the building was the niche where the scrolls of Scripture—made out of leather—were kept. This niche was protected by a cloth or veil behind which the scrolls were rewound after being read. The reading itself was done from a platform. After the reading of the sacred text there was an opportunity for a teacher or distinguished visitor to comment on it. This was sometimes done sitting and sometimes standing. Thus we must understand the episode described in Luke where we are told that Jesus “rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him” (Luke 4:20). This does not mean, as we might think today, that he went back and sat in his place amid the congregation, but rather that he sat before it, in a seat of authority from which he would comment on what he had just read. Apparently in other cases the teacher invited to comment on what had been read did so standing. Such is the case in the episode in Antioch of Pisidia, where “after the reading of the law and the prophets,” Paul and Barnabas are invited to speak, and “Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak” (Acts 13:15–16).

Just as when discussing the Temple we did not attempt to describe in detail what took place in it, we do not offer much here about worship in the synagogue. Whatever may be said has to be carefully nuanced because—as in the case of the Temple—little is known about synagogue worship in the first century. All existing documents are the product of a much later date, and it is impossible to know to what extent they describe synagogue worship in the first century or to what extent they reflect later conditions—perhaps even in some cases practices resulting from the conflict between Judaism and Christianity, or local practices that should not be taken as general.

We do know that the reading of the Law was divided into 155 sections, each to be read on a Sabbath, so that the entire Law would be heard and studied in a cycle of three years. We also know that certain prayers and blessings were repeated at particular moments in worship. In Palestine and other areas where Aramaic was spoken, it was customary to read the text in Hebrew first and then translate what had been read into Aramaic. Although professional translators specialized on this task, occasionally someone else was invited to

perform it—sometimes even a child, who was to take this opportunity to show their own knowledge of Hebrew. This latter detail fits with the traditional function of synagogues as the place where children learned the traditions, history, and identity of Israel.

We also know that there was singing, sometimes antiphonal, although it is impossible to say much about the music that was used. Most probably there was a single melodic line, and when the singing took place antiphonally a cantor or a choir would do most of the singing, with the congregation responding periodically by singing a simple line. Apparently in some other cases the cantor sang the psalm itself while the choir responded with a brief word or phrase. Quite possibly other music and texts were employed besides the Psalms of the Bible. According to Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish sect that he calls the “Therapeutae,” whose base was in Egypt, “only spend their time in meditation, but they also compose songs and hymns to God. These are done in every variety of meter and melody, but they divide them into measures of more than common solemnity” (quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History* 2.17.13; NPNF2 1:118). Some scholars also suggest that quite probably in Jewish worship, both at the Temple and in the synagogues, there were several brief melodic formulae for benedictions, hallelujahs, and so on. But, once again, one must remember that the most ancient samples we have that say much about music in the synagogues are no earlier than the seventh century CE.

It is clear that, although the synagogues claimed to follow the same religion that was practiced in the Temple, differences and tensions soon emerged between the two institutions. Some complained that there were synagogues whose building seemed to imitate the Temple and declared this to be a usurpation. Some criticized an invitation in which people were not told to “come and pray” but rather to “come and offer.” According to these critics, the only place where sacrifices were to be offered to God was the Temple, and by inviting the people with a formula that should be reserved for sacrifice, the synagogue was usurping the Temple’s function. Some refuted such views by quoting Psalm 141:2—“Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, / and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice”—where prayer itself is a sacrifice.

But there were other reasons for the conflict between the Temple and the synagogues. The Temple was mostly in the hands of the Sadducees, and synagogues generally leaned toward the more popular religion, which was more like that of the Pharisees. These tensions were made worse because most of the Jewish people did not live in Judea, but in the Diaspora. In such places, the distance between them and the Temple led the majority of Jews to center their faith in the practices and teachings of the synagogue and to relate to the Temple only in an ideal manner, and by sending their annual offering.

THE JEWS OF THE DIASPORA

The Diaspora or dispersion of the Jews had begun long before the time of Jesus, back at least to the Babylonian exile, in the sixth century BCE. One consequence of that period of exile was the presence of a vast number of Jews in Mesopotamia, Babylonia, and Media. Later, as first the Macedonians, then the Syrians, the Egyptians, and finally the Romans conquered the ancient lands of Israel, Jews were scattered throughout the Mediterranean basin. At the time of Jesus, there were Jews and synagogues in almost all the provinces of the Roman Empire and beyond. Particularly in the areas of Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, and Rome itself, the Jewish population was most numerous. Although knowing their exact numbers is impossible, some data may help us understand the magnitude of that dispersion.

Josephus claims that during the time of the Jewish wars there was a massacre of Jews in the city of Damascus in Syria in which between ten thousand and eighteen thousand Jews were killed. (Josephus himself offers these two different numbers in different places.) In the great city of Alexandria, which was the second largest in the Roman Empire, there were five sections, two of them occupied by Jews, according to Philo of Alexandria. There were also more Jews in the interior of Egypt, such that Philo claims a million Jews inhabited the land. In the region of Cyrene, in North Africa, Josephus says that the population was divided into four groups, one of which was the Jews. In the same area, when the great Jewish rebellion to which we have already referred took place early in the second century, the rebels were so many that they were able to kill more than two hundred thousand Gentiles. On the island of Cyprus, during the same rebellion, the number of the dead was almost a quarter of a million. In Syria there were almost a million Jews. Rome itself considered them a bad influence, and repeatedly thousands of Jews were expelled or deported to other areas, although quite likely many of them eventually returned to the capital. During the reign of Emperor Tiberius (14–37 CE), the Jewish population in the capital approached 7 percent of the total population. In summary, even the most conservative numbers would seem to suggest that about 7 percent of the entire population in the empire were Jews—and others suggest higher percentages.

The impact of this Jewish presence on the rest of society and its customs was significant. Josephus, probably exaggerating, declared,

For quite some time Gentiles have become very interested in our religious customs, to such a point that there is no longer even a single city among the Greeks, nor a people among the barbarians, where our name is not known or where they do not follow our custom of resting once a week, our fasts, the festivals of lights, and many other things

having to do with our diet. Just as God is to be found everywhere, so has the Law traveled among humans. Let each one look at their own land and in their own family and they will corroborate the truth of my words. (*Ag. Apion* 2.39.282)

The impact of Judaism on the surrounding society was partly due to the efforts of the Jews themselves. Several of them wrote in defense of their faith, trying to show that it agreed with the best of Greek philosophy. The best known among these Jewish apologists is Philo of Alexandria, but there were many others. Such seems to be the clear purpose of the fourth book of *Maccabees*, as well as of the *Sibylline Oracles*, written to show that the ancient Sybil announced the truth of Judaism—and later interpolated by Christians with a similar aim. One of those oracles makes a claim similar to that of Josephus: “You have filled the sea and the land” (*Sibylline Oracles*, 3.27).

The expansion and impact of Judaism were such that Strabo, who had traveled far and wide, said that in the first century BCE the Jews “are to be found in every city, and it is difficult to find a corner of the world where they have not entered and of which they have not taken possession” (quoted by Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.7.2). And much later, Augustine quoted what Seneca wrote in the first century about Jews: “The style of life of these horrible people, however, has gained such impulse that it is now accepted everywhere. The conquered have given their laws to the conquerors” (*City of God* 6.11).

Notably, in most of these testimonies one sees at once suspicion and hatred toward Jews and an admiration for their style of life and their perseverance.

THE CALENDAR, THE TIMES, AND JEWISH IDENTITY

One of the main elements binding Jews together even as they were scattered throughout the Roman Empire and beyond was the calendar. From one extreme to the other of their vast dispersion, Jews could express and experience their unity by sharing a single calendar with similar activities.

The center of this calendar was the seven-day week, culminating on the Sabbath with its observances and celebrations. Each day began at sundown and ended at the next sundown. Much has been said about the endless discussions regarding what was legitimate to do on the seventh day of the week. There certainly were cases in which Hebrew piety carried its obedience to Sabbath laws to such a point that the Sabbath ceased to be a day of joy celebrating the love of the Creator God. We find in the Gospels frequent cases in which Jesus collided with synagogue leaders on matters related to Sabbath observance. But such cases should not eclipse the reality of the Sabbath as

a day of celebrating the providential gifts of God, and therefore also as a time of love and sharing among the people of God. Furthermore, the Jews themselves disagreed on what was legal to do on the Sabbath. The two great rabbinic schools of the first century BCE, usually called the schools of Hillel and of Shammai, differed on such matters. The followers of Hillel were more liberal in their understanding of the Sabbath, while Shammai's were more conservative and stricter. It was actually in the time of Jesus that Rabbi Akiba decided—and gaining wide agreement among the people—that all that could be done any other day must not be done on the Sabbath, but that what could not be done at another time and was necessary could licitly be done even on a Sabbath. That seems also to be Jesus' lesson, as we see in the Gospels. As a result, the sixth day of the week came to be known the "day of preparation," for on this day one was to prepare food and do all that was necessary to be able to keep the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was celebrated in the Temple with special sacrifices, and also by renewing the loaves of propitiation. Both the beginning and the end of the Sabbath were signaled by the sound of a trumpet—one at sunset of the sixth day, and the other on the next sunset. Also, at least from a time five centuries BCE, synagogues throughout the world gathered on the Sabbath. It is impossible to know the details of the Sabbath worship that took place in the synagogues in Jesus' time. Most probably, before the destruction of the Temple, what was done in the synagogue would reflect the opinions and inclinations of various schools, groups, or "sects" into which the people were divided. But after the destruction of the Temple there seems to have been a movement toward unity, so that worship became increasingly uniform. Even though the details are not known, from the New Testament and from the witness of Josephus there were clearly readings of the Law as well as of the Prophets. When there was a distinguished visitor, he was invited to comment on the passages that had been read—or if not, a member of the synagogue would offer the commentary. Certain prayers were also included, some of them prescribed. There was also reading—or more likely singing—of some selected psalms. We also know that, for reasons not entirely understood, it was customary to fast on the second and fifth days of the week. At any rate, Sabbath observance became such a marked characteristic of Judaism that, as Josephus says, the Gentile population in various areas soon imitated it.

Besides the weekly calendar that formed the base of the Hebrew calendar, there was also an annual calendar including several important dates. Beyond that was a calendar lasting several years that, like the week, was based on the number seven. Each seventh year was a sabbatical year, and after seven sabbatical years there was a year of Jubilee or "pentecostal year"—the fiftieth year. During each year itself there were particular feasts and observances. Some of

them, such as the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) and that of Purim, celebrated relatively recent episodes in the history of Israel. The first of these two commemorated the deeds of Judas Maccabeus and his victories over the Syrians, culminating in the dedication of the Temple. Purim celebrated the story of Esther and Mordecai against the machinations of Israel's enemies. The Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Weeks celebrated the completion of the harvest. We have already spoken of the Day of Atonement. However, the most important among all the feasts of Israel was Passover, which celebrated the liberation of Israel from the yoke of Egypt when the people received instructions to mark their doors with the blood of a lamb, and the angel of destruction passed over the houses that bore that sign, but entered those of the Egyptians and slew their firstborn. Among all Jewish festivities, Passover was not only the most important but also the one that most influenced Christian worship.

According to the book of Exodus, the celebration of Passover was ordered by God even before the liberation that it celebrates had taken place:

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. For the LORD will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down. You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this observance?' you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" (Exod. 12:21–27)

The word "paschal" is an adjective derived from "pascha," which in turn comes from the Hebrew word meaning to go by or to leave aside—therefore, "pass over." Although Passover originally referred specifically to the commemoration of the sacrifice of the lamb and the ensuing liberation, beginning in the second century its meaning widened, now to include the various services surrounding that date. In that sense, Passover became practically synonymous with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But in the first century the distinction was still made between that feast and Passover. Passover was specifically the celebration that took place on the fourteenth day of Nisan, and it signaled the opening of the seven days of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

According to Josephus, each year some one hundred thousand pilgrims went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

Much of what is known today about that celebration in Jerusalem during the first century is based on what the New Testament says, as well as on the witness of the Mishnah. The celebration began by disposing of old leaven, in remembrance of the day when, fleeing Egypt, the children of Israel ate unleavened bread. Then, at the ninth hour (approximately 3 p.m.), the sacrifice began of the many lambs to be used for the feast. All Jews should partake of the paschal feast jointly with others, because the paschal lamb had to be consumed in its entirety. Therefore, those who were not part of a large family would plan to join others for the feast. The Levites sang Psalms 113 to 118 while the lambs were killed and bled. Their blood was collected and later poured over the altar, where part of the fat was also burned. The lamb was then returned to those who had brought it to take home and roast it. As all the generations of a particular family gathered for this special celebration, one of the youngest was to ask, "How is this night different from all others?" The answer was given in songs and narratives regarding the day in which God freed Israel from slavery in Egypt, and then went on to speak of God's other great redeeming acts. Usually, the last petition was that God would free the land from Roman occupation. (Later, this last prayer was substituted by another asking God to allow Israel to return to Jerusalem.) This celebration clearly served to cement Israel's identity as the people of God, and to raise new generations to see themselves as heirs of the great feats of God that were commemorated in the feast itself.

Notably, the Passover celebration did not take place mostly at the Temple or the synagogue, but rather in the homes—although in Jerusalem the Temple was assigned the task of preparing the lambs, and in the synagogues there were particular Passover observations. The Law, in commanding that Passover be celebrated annually and giving instructions for that celebration, commanded that the lamb had to be entirely eaten. This meant that a small family would have to join others. It also implied that any Jew who was living alone or for some reason did not have a family with whom to celebrate must join others for the celebration, so that no Jew was to spend Passover alone. This was a great festival of the people, not an individual matter or even a purely family matter—even though the family itself had an important place in the celebration. Since the celebration took place in the home, the strict separation between men and women that existed in the Temple and in the synagogue did not apply in the same manner. It was normally the women who prepared the food for the celebration, but besides this traditional role they also had a part in the religious rites that took place around the paschal supper.

At the time of Jesus, Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread were practically a single public celebration attracting numerous pilgrims from foreign lands. After the destruction of the Temple, this was no longer possible, and the paschal feast became a rite celebrated mostly within the family. Without the Temple, there was no place to sacrifice the fat of the lamb, but the supper continued following the earlier practices. This paschal supper became known as the “Seder,” a word meaning “order.” Since this way of referring to the Passover meal appears only in documents after 70 CE—that is, just after the destruction of the Temple—this is an indication that the supper itself was being more tightly regulated. Now that the Passover could no longer be observed by means of pilgrimage to the Temple and ceremonies in it, the family’s role in the celebration became even more prominent.

The rules that were set late in the first century and afterward certainly kept intact many of the ancient traditions of Israel regarding the paschal feast. However, some scholars argue that this meal was now influenced by the Hellenistic tradition of a “symposium,” which was a banquet often devoted to discussing matters of philosophy. One detail pointing in this direction was the custom of lying prone when eating the meal, as was done in Greek symposia. But even so, the center of the meal was—and still is—the narrative of the great saving acts of God that are the foundation of Jewish identity. Thus, while in a traditional Greek symposium there would be a discussion on philosophy or ethics, what was discussed and told in the Seder was the story of the liberation of Israel when it was enslaved in Egypt—and then other similar divine interventions. Another difference between a Greek symposium and the Seder meal is that, while the former was elitist, limited to those who were able to discuss certain profound questions, the Hebrew Seder was an intergenerational celebration, including all present, from the oldest to youngest, in which one of those very young participants was to open the path of the narrative by asking, “How is this night different from all others?”

As its name implies, the Seder meal was to follow a detailed and clearly structured order, all of which need not be discussed here. However, it is important to point out some elements that would be significant for the development of Christian worship. Possibly the most important of these is the central place of bread and wine in the Seder meal. The bread is to be unleavened, commemorating the hasty flight from Egypt, when the Hebrews were not able to take leaven with them. One of the prayers to be said over the bread is an act of thanksgiving: “We bless you, Lord, spirit of the universe, who makes the earth give us bread; we bless you, Lord, spirit of the universe, who commanded that we eat this bread.” There was also a special blessing for each cup of wine. Over the first of these, called the cup of blessing, the prayer should be, “We bless you, Lord, spirit of the universe, who has created the

fruit of the vine; we bless you, Lord, spirit of the universe, who has raised us up, raised us and brought us to this blessed time.” Upon blessing the last cup of wine the door was to be open in order to invite the prophet Elijah to join the meal. A cup of wine was placed for him at the middle of the table. The meal would then end with a proclamation of the constant hope of meeting again in Jerusalem.

As we shall see later on, the Synoptic Gospels place the last meal of Jesus with his disciples before his arrest on the day of Passover, while John (19:14) implies that the death of Jesus took place as the paschal meal was being prepared.

The other celebration within Israel that later became important for Christians was Pentecost. The name of this feast, “Pentecost,” means “fiftieth,” for it came after a week of weeks following Passover—therefore on the fiftieth day. It seems that originally Pentecost was the celebration of a completed harvest, and its observance included the sacrifice of two loaves of bread resulting from that harvest, as well as some animals (see Lev. 23:15–21). Slowly, and particularly after the destruction of the first Temple, the feast also came to be a celebration of the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai—and this was its most important meaning at the time of the New Testament.

Finally, still on the subject of the calendar and the management of time, one must mention the times set aside for prayer. Naturally, any moment was good for prayer. But there were three particular hours each day in which prayers were celebrated in the Temple, and all Jews—wherever they were—were to stop other activities in order to pray, be it at the Temple, at the synagogue, or in private. These were the third, sixth, and ninth hours—that is, approximately at nine in the morning, at noon, and in midafternoon, at about 3 p.m. Note that, even though these prayers may be said in private, they were not private prayer in the sense that their intention was to establish a bond between the individual and God, but rather a common prayer the entire people jointly addressed to God. As we shall see later, these hours of prayer also influenced Christian devotional practice.

PROSELYTES AND GOD-FEARERS

Much of the numerical growth of Judaism during the first centuries after Christ was due to proselytism. (Although today the word “proselytism” has a negative connotation, often referring to undue means of gaining disciples and followers, in this context it means simply the desire to let other people know one’s faith and invite them to follow it. It is thus that ancient texts speak of Jewish “proselytes.”) It may be difficult for us today to think of Judaism

as a proselytizing religion, for our most common experience is that almost all the Jews we know are such by birth. But when Christianity entered the scene, Judaism was a proselytizing religion, seeking followers throughout the world. In some cases, its proselytizing success was remarkable. A good example is the conversion of the entire kingdom of Adiabene, in the valley of the Tigris, at the border between the Roman and Parthian empires. This took place while Claudius reigned in Rome (41–54 CE)—the same Claudius who expelled the Jews from Rome, apparently because of the disturbances caused among Jews by teachings and conflicts about Jesus. Shortly before that time, Herod had forced the Edomites—the people of Idumaea—to become Jews, and they remained such even after Herod’s death. Even earlier, in 129 BCE, the proselytizing zeal of Jews in Rome was such that they were expelled both from the capital and from other cities in Italy. As is common in such cases, those who rejected the teachings of the Jews claimed that the latter were enemies of humankind, that they followed a barbaric superstition, that they had no visible God, and that instead of the gods they worshiped the sky and the clouds. All of this led to repeated massacres of Jews as well as to Jewish rebellions that caused numerous deaths, among Jews and Gentiles. But despite such events Judaism continued making headway among the pagan population.

One reason for the proselytizing success of Judaism was the decline of most ancient religions, whose validity many doubted. In their disillusionment with such religions, people sought after a new “philosophy” that would be more useful for life itself. (One must remember that at this time the ancient philosophies of Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Peripatos had receded in the face of the growth of philosophical currents whose interests dealt more with practical life than with metaphysics and epistemology—philosophical currents such as Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Middle Platonism. Within that context, Judaism could present itself as a philosophy competing with these other alternatives. The same would soon be true of Christianity, which many of its followers defined and announced as the “true philosophy.”)

Those pagans who approached Judaism came to be known as “God-fearers” or “proselytes.” Although there was some confusion in the use of these two names, they eventually became distinct. A “proselyte” was someone who not only accepted the faith of Israel and its Law, but also committed to follow that Law in doctrinal, moral, and dietary matters. Also, as a sign of conversion and commitment, as well as of cleansing, the proselyte was baptized. Such baptism took place no matter the gender of the convert. As to whether circumcision was necessary, the rabbis did not agree. The more traditional demanded that the entire Law be obeyed, including matters such as food, ritual cleanness, and the circumcision of every male. But others—apparently the minority—did not require more than obedience to the moral principles of the Law and

belief in a single God, Creator of all things. For most Jews, Gentiles who followed the moral commandment of the Law and believed in Israel's God but did not follow the dietary commandments and were not circumcised were not proselytes, but only "God-fearers." Thus, when Paul and others began to admit God-fearers into the church, leading to polemics among Jewish Christians as to whether they should be circumcised, Paul and those who agreed with him could appeal to a certain rabbinic tradition.

Conversion to Judaism was not a light matter. According to the rabbis, if within a Gentile marriage only one of the two became a convert, the marriage itself was dissolved, and the children became illegitimate. In theory at least, being a proselyte did not make one less Jewish than those who were such by birth. Indeed, some of the most famous Rabbis were either proselytes or descendants of proselytes.

Jesus criticized the proselytizing zeal of the Jews of his time, not because of their desire to share their faith, but apparently because while sharing that faith they also placed on the proselytes a burden that would become a new form of oppression: "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matt. 23:14–15). (At this point, some ancient manuscripts seem to imply that the reason Jesus criticized Jewish proselytizing was that it was not sufficiently interested in matters of justice. According to these manuscripts, what Jesus says is, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance you make long prayers; therefore you will receive the greater condemnation.")

No matter how many the proselytes were, the number of God-fearers was much greater. They were ready to accept Jewish monotheism and the moral principles of the Law, and they attended worship in the synagogue; but for one reason or another they did not become proselytes, and thus were not committed to obeying the entire Law. It was among such God-fearers that much of the Pauline mission had its greatest success, as we shall see in the next chapter.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE AND THE EXPULSION FROM THE SYNAGOGUES

As a consequence of Jewish rebellion, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE. This obviously had enormous consequences for the faith of Israel. From then on, it was no longer possible to obey the laws relating to sacrifices

owed to God—except in places such as the already mentioned rival Temple in Egypt, closed shortly after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Now deprived of their centers of worship and of power, the Sadducees practically disappeared. The Pharisees, whose base had always been in the synagogues, were able to shape the Judaism resulting from that catastrophe, now called rabbinic Judaism. This was more interested in the love of God and in justice than in the sacrifices that had been made in the Temple. In support of this emphasis, the words of the prophets were repeatedly quoted—for instance, Hosea 6:6, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, / the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” Judaism as we know it today is the heir of that tradition of the Pharisees and the rabbis, and of their careful study and application of the Law.

Now being unable to gather in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin was reorganized—with the approval of Emperor Vespasian—in the city of Jamnia, near the northern end of Judea. It was this Sanhedrin that at some point around 90 CE determined what would henceforth be the Hebrew canon of Scripture, comprising the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. This canon based on the Hebrew text is commonly called “the Jerusalem canon,” and most Protestant Bibles follow it today, while Catholic Bibles follow the “Alexandrian canon,” which includes the deuterocanonical books and therefore reflects the Greek translation that early Christians used—the Septuagint.

The Sanhedrin in Jamnia was headed by Gamaliel II, who took the title of “nasi” or “prince” at some point around the year 80—that is, some ten years after the fall of Jerusalem. Gamaliel had great success in reorganizing and unifying Judaism. Part of this project was defining the list of sacred books resulting in the Jerusalem canon. Also as part of his project of unity and uniformity, he codified the prayers and rites that should be followed in the synagogue. Finally, he also decreed the expulsion from the synagogues of various groups that he considered heretical or sectarian—Christians among them. This took place toward the end of his rule, around 100 CE, and therefore that date may serve as a watershed marking the decline of Judeo-Christianity and the beginning of a church composed mostly of Gentiles.

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