

*Neither Jewish nor Pagan?***1.1 A Tremendous Step: Baptism**

The risen Jesus gave his disciples an important mission, as the Gospel of Matthew reports:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (28.16–20)

These verses are still used for baptism today – and yet much about them is disputed, including details such as how to translate the Greek imperative *matheteúsate*: the New Standard Version renders it as 'make disciples of them', perhaps a little too expressly; the King James Version had the simple 'teach'.<sup>1</sup> Determining what function these verses have is equally difficult. Are they the end point of this entire Gospel or a later addition? Were the Jews – to whom the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel addressed his message during his lifetime – included in 'all nations'? Did the mission targeting the pagans supplement or actually replace that aimed at the Jews? Did the passage tacitly censure the Apostle Paul who was not one of the disciples but claimed that Jesus had asked him to proselytise? It appears likely that the Gospel of Matthew, written perhaps around 90 CE (or a later redaction), was meant to counteract a proliferation of different modes of baptism, by insisting on deriving the practice of baptism from those apostles who had encountered Jesus in person.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of any difficulties, these verses set out some important points that would come to define the life of most Christian groups from very early on: the inherently universal claim of the Christian message as

one addressed to all people, as well as the call to every single individual to choose this one faith, which being baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit made manifest. The intellectual component is noteworthy: instruction is crucial for those receiving baptism to change their ways. They were expected to do as Jesus had instructed, meaning – as other scriptures demanded – a radical conversion, a turning away from their life to date, repenting previous sins. And one more point: whoever performed the baptism gained authority, one of the main foundations on which Christian communities came to be built.

Baptism defined Christian identity.<sup>3</sup> However, baptismal rites were not unknown in antiquity. A number of Jewish Baptist movements had emerged, such as that led by John the Baptist, said to have baptised none other than Jesus. Such rites were assumed to have a cleansing effect. Pagan contemporaries may have been reminded of initiations into mystery cults or that of Isis which featured ritual cleansing with water. Occasionally in such contexts there was mention of rebirth, as is the case in Christian baptism. However, in all these other cases, the new convert might decide to revere Isis as the supreme divinity, to make her their personal favourite goddess, even (perhaps) to ignore the other gods. Yet none of these decisions meant denying the existence of other divinities.

Christian baptism held yet another radical message, as shown by verses recorded by Paul in his Letter to the Galatians, which may in fact represent an early baptismal formula: 'For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3.26–8).<sup>4</sup>

These claims must have struck many as verging on the bizarre: one's membership of social groups was now said to be dissolved in Christ. Ethnic and religious differences were to be of as little consequence as those of social status or between the sexes. None of the existing social structures were to remain valid; instead everyone was to be one in Christ. This is rather remarkable, as in the ancient world religion was closely interlinked with social identity. Most religious practices were specific to certain cities or peoples. One was born into these practices of worship: whoever grew up as a citizen of Athens participated in the cult of Athena; Ephesians venerated Artemis, a Corinthian Apollo; Jewish children learned about ancestral customs by participating in them. Some mystery cults incorporated equality in their rituals, yet this did not lead to any new communities being formed beyond that of the *polis*.

Their belief in the existence of a single true God led Christians to conclude that they ought no longer to practise any other cults – a tremendous prospect and by no means uncontroversial. By renouncing the old for good by being baptised, Christians lost many social connections, as cults formed part of the fabric of both family and civic life. Some Christians asked themselves if it might not be sufficient to remain emotionally aloof while participating in these pagan rituals, given that they had no real value in any case. So why endanger one's life by taking a stance of active rejection?

Cyprian, a convert from a well-off Carthaginian family, gives to his friend Donatus a vivid account of his experience and mood when he was being baptised. He describes succinctly his dissatisfaction with the world of riches and ambition in which he grew up, to then celebrate the effects of baptism:

But afterwards, when the stain of my past life had been washed away by the aid of the water of regeneration, a light from above poured itself upon my chastened and pure heart; afterwards when I had drunk of the Spirit from heaven a second birth restored me into a new man. Immediately in a marvelous manner doubtful matters clarified themselves, the closed lay open, the shadowy shone with light, what had previously seemed difficult appeared possible, and what had previously seemed unmanageable became feasible. (*Cypr. Don. 4*, adapted from Deferrari)

Despite all the rhetorical flair, such feelings could be real. Indeed, they are understandable as Roman society was characterised by compulsion, distinction by status, social pressure which those who joined this strange religion of the Christians could escape. Many who experienced the turning point of baptism must have felt similarly though interpreting their experience in different ways: Cyprian speaks of his second birth. Others saw baptism as a kind of exorcism, a casting-out of evil spirits, of Satan, while the central concern for yet others was to follow in the example of Christ; some likened baptism to being imprinted with a seal. Indeed, individual experiences may have combined a number of different interpretations.

The decision to be baptised was down to the individual, even if we often hear that the first Christians let themselves be baptised together with their entire household. Baptism represented acceptance into a community that was connected by its faith yet threatened to become estranged from many other groups. This communality was all the more important the clearer it became that the end of the world was not as imminent as the first followers of Christ had expected. From very early on only those who had been baptised were allowed to partake in the Eucharist.

Extensive rituals developed around the act of baptism: in his *First Apology*, Justin, who died a martyr's death in 166, describes a rite as presumably used in the city of Rome. The same as many similar rites, this one ended in a solemn Eucharist (61–5), a kind of first communion. Justin makes it clear throughout that the baptisand is not alone but is always surrounded by other Christians. At times he uses expressions that may have been familiar to contemporaries from initiations into mystery cults: he speaks of *anagénnesis*, 'rebirth', as well as of *photismós*, 'enlightenment' (61.3, 61.12). In doing so, Justin presumably intended to frame the event in a way that would be familiar to outsiders. Surprisingly he is silent about who performed the baptism. He prefers to use the passive voice or emphasises the 'we'; it is only in describing the Eucharist that Justin reveals that this community had a leader.

Baptism gave control over who was admitted to the community. While originally any Christian had been able to baptise others, increasingly groups emerged who made that the bishop's prerogative: Ignatius of Antioch (considered a bishop and someone who accorded great importance to that office) stresses that no one must perform a baptism without the bishop (Ign. *Smyrn.* 8.2). Tertullian, an intellectual from Carthage, wrote in detail about baptism around 200 CE, dedicating an entire work to it, *De baptismo*. He calls for baptisands to prepare themselves in a suitable fashion, such as fasting which was held to have cleansing power. Asking for such preparation most likely was to ensure that the person in question was taking their decision seriously; establishing this was even more important because Christians did not consider circumcision to be necessary – one definitely did not want to appear to be offering 'Judaism light'.

Tertullian mentions two further rituals after baptism: an anointing and an imposition of hands (7f.); he hints at the existence of godparents (18). He recommends Easter and Pentecost, the most significant dates in the Christian calendar, for being baptised, thus linking celebrating baptism with the high points of the liturgical year. He discusses the question of who could perform baptisms at length, in an unusually convoluted manner:

The highest priest has the right to confer baptism, if there is one: the bishop: in the next place, the presbyters and deacons, yet not without the bishop's authority, on account of the honour of the Church, if it is preserved, peace is preserved. Beside these, even laymen have the right; for what is equally received can be equally given unless the Lord's disciples were already called bishops or priests or deacons. The word of the Lord ought not to be hidden by any: in like manner, too, baptism, which is

equally God's property, can be administered by all. But how much more is the rule of reverence and modesty incumbent on laymen – seeing that these powers belong to their superiors – lest they assume to themselves the specific function of the bishop! Emulation of the episcopal office is the mother of schisms. . . . Let it suffice assuredly, in cases of necessity, to avail yourself of that rule, if at any time circumstance either of place, or of time, or of person compels you so to do. (Tert. *Bapt.* 17.1–3, adapted from Thelwall)

Tertullian patently aims to strengthen the role of the bishop with his work, but intimates that traditionally performing baptisms was by no means the sole prerogative of the clergy. He therefore asks laymen simply to forego their right to baptise except in emergency situations, so as not to jeopardise the stability of church structures as a whole. His text clearly evidences the trend towards sacerdotalisation in some Christian communities, that is to strengthen the role of 'priests' (*sacerdotes*). Christian life increasingly came to be governed by clerics, and baptismal rites increasingly followed a set order.

The educational aspect remained important. Confessions of the true faith and prayers, among them eventually the Lord's Prayer, were part of baptisms from early on. Initially, confessing one's faith took the form of responses to questions put by the person performing the baptism. From these responses, coherent texts then developed; in the end it fell specifically to ecclesiastical councils to agree mandatory wordings for creeds affirming one's faith such as are still said in services today. Increasingly, an intermediate stage emerged, that of the catechumens, meaning those awaiting baptism who still required instruction.<sup>5</sup> Linking baptism and confession of faith in this way is an indication of how closely Christians across much of the Mediterranean equated orthodoxy with orthopraxy.

Baptismal rites could vary: in some cases women, deaconesses, helped by anointing female baptisands, yet the proceedings were directed by a male cleric (*Did. Apost.* 16.173.2–17V = 85.7–22Fl). In this way men avoided touching women's bodies that had been bared for baptism.

Where water was used for baptisms, we probably must imagine the entire body being submerged three times, rather than just sprinkling some on the head. In and around Syria anointing took centre stage, before the baptism with water. According to the Greek *Acts of Thomas* a woman could be initiated into Christianity simply by being anointed with oil (27), yet the supplemented Syrian version of the same text mentions water. Such a textual revision bears witness to ongoing debate about this ritual. In the Syrian accounts of baptism confession of one's faith also plays no role.<sup>6</sup>

We have relatively good evidence for what form baptism took among a group of Valentinians from the Gnostic spectrum.<sup>7</sup> They appear to have preferred the word *apolytrosis*, ‘redemption’ (also used of ransom payments), to the *báptisma*, ‘washing’, otherwise used – both from the New Testament. According to Irenaeus of Lyon (c.180 CE), considered an exponent of orthodoxy by later generations, the Valentinians held a dim view of baptism as practised by others, since it only resulted in remission of sin whereas their version afforded perfection (Iren. *Haer.* 1.21.2). Their ritual resembled that of other Christians in part: they baptised, with water, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Yet it appears that their version culminated in the anointing. We have a telling statement, which appears credible even though it comes from one of the group’s enemies:

But it is not only the washing that is liberating, but the knowledge (*gnósis*) of who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we were placed, whither we hasten, what we are purified from, what birth is and what rebirth. (Clem. *Exc. Theod.* 78.2, adapted from Casey)

The ritual of baptism came to be endowed with such significance that it was even celebrated in an inscription in the city of Rome, written in Greek, which used the image of entering a bridal chamber to represent baptism:

You yearn for the light of the Father, my sister, my spouse, Sophe, by letting yourself be anointed in the bath of Christ, with an imperishable, holy myron [‘anointing oil’]. You have hastened to behold the divine countenances of the aeons, the great angel of the great plan, the true Son, when you did enter the bridal chamber and raise yourself, imperishable one, to the dwelling of the Father. (*SEG* 51.1437, transl. HL)

The remainder of the inscription has broken off. On the back the husband speaks of their hopes for eternal life.

This inscription has been written with great skill. The Greek forms an acrostic, meaning that the initial letters at the start of each verse spell another word, in this case *Phlabilia*, the gentile name ‘Flavia’, so that any reader in the know would be aware of Sophe’s full name. This account of baptism resembles those of the Valentinians. The inscription was certainly recognisably Christian. That fact does not preclude it being of an early date since it might have been affixed in a safe area.<sup>8</sup>

Very rarely do we hear of baptism being rejected per se: in *De baptismo*, Tertullian explains that he was writing against those taking that view, namely the Cainites. Some writings from within the Gnostic spectrum

such as the *Paraphrase of Shem* (NHC 7.1, 37f.) derided belief in baptism by water. But others considered this rite of initiation to be especially important and appear to have developed varied rituals. We often hear that believers underwent a sequence of baptisms, each associated with more profound insight – to what extent this evolved the notion of universal salvation held by other Christians remains unclear. Yet it is possible that many did not in fact perform any physical rite of baptism at all. Given that baptism was of central importance – for each individual believer but also for the emergence of church structures, such diverse practices both created and highlighted differences between Christians.

The question of second baptisms was one of great schismatic potential. Rebaptism devalued the first baptism and the authority of whoever had performed it. Yet the problem could be that very authority: what, for example, if the baptiser proved to be unfit for the task in retrospect? Or even strayed from the faith? Tertullian could not but consider such an eventuality. He emphatically rejected the validity of baptisms by heretical bishops and thus called for rebaptism (Tert. *Bapt.* 15). The problem was exacerbated when some bishops yielded to the requirement to sacrifice to the gods under Decius (249–51 CE) and the question arose whether baptism by them were valid. The Bishop of Rome, Stephanus (254–7 CE), held the view that an imposition of hands after a penitential period for the baptisand sufficed. Cyprian, of whose joy at his baptism we have heard, firmly contradicted the Bishop of Rome. He stressed that salvation could be found only in the orthodox church itself. His response here shows no trace of the respect due to the Bishop of Rome by whom he set such great store at other times.

At its heart this was a question of whether the crucial element was the baptiser or the rite being performed correctly. It was too profound to be dismissed as a squabble between bishops: it was a question about the relationship between ritual and person, and more generally the correct interpretation of the sacraments. Effectively, the issue was to what extent believers could trust in their baptism. Did they have to be prepared that it might still be invalid, even if they had been duly baptised? Prepared for their sins not to have been forgiven? For their passage to heaven remaining barred, through no fault of their own? But also vice versa: was a sinner, someone straying from the true faith, really able to impart what was most holy? And finally, it was also an institutional question: what did it mean for an organisation such as the emerging church if there was any doubt about something as fundamental as baptism?

This debate might easily have ended in schism if yet another persecution of Christians had not united the two combative bishops in the glory of

martyrdom. Yet the problem did not go away, flaring up again in the so-called Donatist controversy at the beginning of the fourth century. This time the argument was triggered by a disputed episcopal election but the issue of rebaptism, which the Council of Arles attempted to repress, played a crucial role (Conc. Elv. *Can.* 9). Later the church would come to decide that the correct ritual was key and that, if the baptiser turned out to be unfit in retrospect, the most that might be required were a few acts of cleansing; it complied with the imperative of institutional dependability and official authority.

But even a correctly performed baptism was a risky affair. What happened if one sinned again after what should have been a truly radical departure? Did eternal damnation loom? Perhaps a second baptism might help. Yet this practice did not prevail but instead a different custom emerged early on, that of penitence. By doing penance one could cleanse oneself of sins, at least certain ones. Penitence and baptism were therefore closely related.

Faithful Christians must have felt that baptism put tremendous pressure on them in terms of how they lived their lives ever after. The nerviness shown by the author of *The Shepherd of Hermas* illustrates this vividly. It is little surprising to find him mentioning that some hoping to be baptised suddenly ‘backed out’ when they understood ‘the purity of the truth’ (Herm. *Vis.* 3.7.3). This expression surely has to do with the challenging demands made of Christians, whatever it may have actually meant.

Most of the time the baptisands were adults, but baptism of infants – widespread today – also took place. If baptism was essential to salvation it seemed reasonable to perform it as early as possible. Origen defended baptising infants, noting that everyone was stained by sin from birth (Orig. *Comm. Rom.* 5.9). However, it appears that most continued to consider it desirable that baptisands were fully aware of the step they were about to take. Tertullian feared that it might be asking too much of children and in fact advises against baptising anyone not yet married because they were exposed to too many temptations (Tert. *Bapt.* 18.4–6).

Moreover, there was the question of what should happen if there was simply no time to be baptised. Tertullian had already listed emergency baptism as a special case. While being martyred in the circus of Antioch, Thecla is said to have thrown herself into a pool of water while pronouncing the baptismal formula. The seals that were already swimming in the water to eat (!) her had been struck by lightning.<sup>9</sup> This story introduces a kind of self-baptism, but it is from a text that is highly disputed; also unusual is the fact that it was a woman performing this baptism for herself.



But the underlying issue of martyrs who had not been baptised was one that could not be avoided. Even the *Traditio Apostolica*, otherwise so strict when it came to formalities, stated that martyrdom could serve as substitute for baptism for catechumens: 'For he received baptism in his own blood' (19, transl. HL).

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The act of baptism was interpreted in very different ways. And yet almost all Christians considered baptism to be essential, a crucial step that changed one's life and marked one's belonging to a Christian community. Baptism quickly turned into a rite of visible acceptance into their church, and thus into a means of demarcation from those who had not been, or must not be, accepted. But Christians practised baptism in a number of ways; not even the use of water was universal, so that baptismal rites also served as a differentiator from other Christians.

What was an irritant from the point of view of contemporaries was most likely not the ritual of Christian baptism as such but rather the individual, exclusionary decision for the Christian faith, the explicit break with one's past. Today baptism often is little more than a cherished, harmless family ritual, so we have to remind ourselves of how tremendous a step it is. The Christians of the first centuries renounced their previous lives, which frequently meant breaking with their family and civic traditions. Not only that but they also had to prove themselves, for example by fasting, and allow themselves to be educated about the core tenets of their faith. From the day of their baptism onwards they had to live and act in a Christian manner, as the community of those baptised required. That was not without risk. Baptism was very different from many other ritual ablutions in antiquity in that it was a one-off event. At least, anyone who sinned again afterwards could do penance, as long as they were able to gain permission to do so.

When it came to the issue of authority, who performed the baptism was crucial: in many places the bishops succeeded in controlling this ritual, so that it became a means of increasing their power, even more so as penance increasingly came under episcopal oversight. The dialectic of Christianisation is very evident: baptism embodies the freedom of a Christian to renounce all other things and devote themselves completely to their faith; it represents the care that the Christian community as a whole took of believers; but it also represents conforming to strict norms and, frequently, submitting to a powerful authority. As so often, for Christians, freedom and acquiescing to a higher power, worldly or otherwise, did not lie far apart.

## 1.2 Celebrating Together in New Times

Anyone who attends a traditional church service encounters much that appears out of place today: the antiphonal chants of the liturgy, communal hymns and prayers; people sometimes sitting down, then standing up or walking up to the altar to receive a wafer, perhaps a sip of wine. In part these rituals go back to when the followers of Christ, few in number, congregated. They held a communal meal and in doing so also commemorated the last supper of Jesus and his disciples, before he was taken prisoner.

Doing so drew little attention: in antiquity meals and cults often intersected. Many civic cults involved offering meals; followers of Isis and Mithras had similar customs. In urban areas many who could afford it liked to form associations that put on celebrations with cultic elements, frequently dedicated to specific deities. It was therefore unremarkable, in the eyes of contemporaries, if the followers of Christ met regularly, or if they held communal meals or religious celebrations – that was to be expected from a group like theirs. Neither was it unusual that this was done in remembrance of a founder.

Contemporaries might have seen Christian congregations as associations which, like others, involved regular communal meals. Yet that does not say very much since such associations were incredibly varied in a world whose members may have had very different views on what their group was all about.<sup>10</sup> Some were formed by devotees of a particular deity, some by members of certain occupations such as carpenters, porters or mimes (whose communal celebrations, as always in antiquity, had a religious element as well). Some of these groups took on civic responsibilities such as fighting fires. For others their primary purpose was to ensure a decent burial for members, by purchasing property, and also seeing to it that a proper funeral celebration was held for any member who had passed away, obliging all remaining members to attend. There was no register of these associations, although some official regulations existed, so that it is likely that forms of organisation were varied and differed from place to place. Yet these early followers of Christ surely were not interested in finding a particular legal form, let alone one that would suit the wide spectrum of Christian communities. What they needed was a way of coming together to help assure themselves of their faith. So, while they may have taken inspiration from associations given they were well known, they had their own agenda.

Christian groups faced the challenge that they did not have anything concrete or tangible that would have facilitated 'standard' ways of

remembrance. They were not bound to any particular place; they did not have any altar, temple, grave, not even scriptures, a cultural tradition or priests of their own. What they did have, what brought them together and made them different, was the remembrance of Jesus. They lived indistinguishably amongst everyone else but still were something unique. But their communal meals allowed them to meet others of the same conviction. There, they were also able to pray, sing, to speak and hear about their faith, albeit only in private homes. Making any animal sacrifices was the one thing they eschewed, even if they frequently used the semantic frame of sacrifice for their divine service. This was what set them apart from everyone else. The Jews still kept the memory of their sacrifices alive and hoped to be offering them again one day, even after the destruction of their Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

The Christian communal meal had two aspects: first and foremost, to give thanks God with bread and wine, the Eucharist (from the Greek word *eucharistein*, 'to thank'); but also to sate themselves, in the *agápe*, literally the 'meal of love'. Initially these aspects overlapped, and it is often almost impossible in certain places to be sure if our sources refer simply to a meal or specifically to the Eucharist.<sup>12</sup> Both men and women took part in Christian meals, in line with their baptismal practice. This was by no means a regular occurrence in ancient times and probably one reason for the accusation that Christians engaged in debaucheries. These meals also brought together Jews and non-Jews which led to dicey situations and conflict.

The Eucharist was the starting point of all other Christian celebrations. The faithful were expected to arrive in a conciliatory mood: 'Let no one quarreling with his neighbor join you until they are reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled' (*Did.* 14.1, transl. Ehrman).

Communal chanting of psalms formed part of such occasions, as noted already in the earliest sources and probably also the custom in synagogues. Such broad and active participation by the religious community was unusual by pagan standards; particular groups normally chanted in temple-based cults. We also have reports of Gnostic hymns but do not know how these were performed, whether by a single voice or in parts, and practices may well have differed depending on the group in question. It seems that no instruments were used, probably so as to create a point of difference from performances of the kind taking place, for example, in the theatre.<sup>13</sup> The *Acts of John* relate that Jesus had danced after the last supper to alternating chants, joining hands with the disciples (94–7). Similar types of dances probably featured in services – especially perhaps amongst

Gnostic groups, whose members may have experienced getting close to God in this way, dancing so to speak into the Divine.<sup>14</sup>

It was mutual exchange about, and proclaiming, one's faith that mattered, again also part of proceedings in the synagogue. Paul takes a wide range of charismatic expressions as a given in Corinth, including prophetic interventions and speaking in tongues, that is an unintelligible language, inspired by the Holy Spirit. We hear of such phenomena less frequently in later times though they still occurred. The faithful often entered into a dialogue with each other, and in fact might end up squabbling. Congregating in this way also allowed Christian precepts to be inculcated:

There is, besides, exhortation in our gatherings, rebuke, divine censure. For judgement is passed, and it carries great weight, as it must among men certain that God sees them; and it is a notable foretaste of judgement to come, if any man has so sinned as to be banished from all share in our prayer, our assembly, and all holy intercourse. (Tert. *Apol.* 39.3f., transl. Glover and Rendall)<sup>15</sup>

Once more caring and disciplining go hand in hand.

Prayer and sacred texts were other important elements, both reading the latter as well as offering guidance on them, by giving sermons, increasingly the prerogative of office-holders. Indeed, some of the texts from the Gnostic spectrum also strongly resemble sermons. But did this mean that they necessarily had a designated preacher? Perhaps different individuals alternated in taking on this role.

Liturgical vestments – also marking out certain individuals – initially were less important. It is likely that bishops and other clerics began to wear special tunics as part of their professionalisation, especially from the third century onwards; but any evidence we have of more sumptuous vestments dates to the fourth century.<sup>16</sup> In fact, we should not think too much of magnificent, colourful Catholic ceremonies when picturing the services of these early days: the spaces were modest, the furnishings and decorations partly improvised, the rituals not very elaborate.

We may imagine how intensely prayers were said during difficult times, yet there were also issues of discipline: the third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* describes a church community – well ordered at first sight – in which the different groups, clerics, men, women, virgins, children, all had their assigned places and none were allowed to claim special privileges. But one deacon had to see to it that everyone occupied the correct place, no one hummed, fell asleep, laughed or gestured; another was placed at the entrance to ensure no one entered who ought not to (12.143.20–146.12V = 68.9–69.18Fl).

Justin the Martyr describes what an ideal service held by a hierarchically structured community around the mid-second century would have looked like:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when we have finished our prayer, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation in what has been blessed. (Iust. *1st Apol.* 67.3–5, adapted from Dods)

This is far removed from the assemblies described by Paul, with their spontaneous expressions, and reminds us of services that would become characteristic later on; it is not certain whether the kind of service that Justin describes was already predominant at time he was writing. Yet it is beyond doubt that Christians also knew other types of communitisation.

Justin hints at two developments: the evolution of a hierarchy and the establishment of Sunday as a weekly holiday, as the Eucharist came to be connected with feast days that were crucial to Christian identity, such as the annual celebration of Easter and indeed Sunday.<sup>17</sup>

For the Romans weeks were of little importance, even if they had a kind of eight-day week, the *nundinae*, to organise their market days. This schedule also affected whether judicial proceedings took place or not; some sacrifices followed the same pattern. But it seems that the seven-day week became more popular that had originated in the East and whose days were named after the planets (Cass. Dio 37.18f.). The same held for the followers of Christ, in particular because many of them were familiar with the Jewish seven-day week.

However, Christians started to celebrate what was the first day of the Jewish week early on, a day when – according to their tradition – Jesus had risen from the dead, that is the day following the Jewish Sabbath. Doing so moreover allowed them to draw a connection to the idea of creation since God had commenced his own work on the first day of the week. Anyone who did make that link set themselves apart from groups within the Gnostic spectrum who rejected the created world. This ‘day of the Lord’ would come to be the one when, every week, Christians would come to commemorate Christ’s resurrection, the events of Easter. Even the Roman governor Pliny had heard of a – not further specified – day whose early hours were devoted to divine services (Plin. *Ep.* 10.96.7).

Followers of Christ likely also celebrated the Sabbath, certainly for as long as they remained in a Jewish environment. Yet they were frequently expelled from the synagogues. Some Christians rejected the Sabbath, for example in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, written probably in Alexandria in the 130s and likely influenced by the Bar Kokhba Revolt, a bloody rebellion of many Jews against Rome, when followers of Christ were the more concerned to distance themselves from the (other) Jews. It is characteristic of Christian rhetoric that this text employs internal Jewish criticism of the practice of the Sabbath, as expressed by the prophets, in order to turn it against the Jews in general:

Moreover God says to them, 'I cannot stand your new moons and Sabbaths' (Is. 1.13). You see what he means: It is not the Sabbaths of the present time that are acceptable to me, but the one I have made, in which I will give rest to all things and make a beginning of an eighth day, which is the beginning of another world. Therefore also we celebrate the eighth day with gladness, for on it Jesus arose from the dead, and appeared, and ascended into heaven. (*Barn.* 15.8f., adapted from Ehrman)

For the Epistle's author the day of the Lord as such clearly references the resurrection but also the end of this world. In the middle of the second century Ignatius of Antioch sharply rebukes Christians who observe the Sabbath (Ign. *Magn.* 9.1). Yet customs had not yet come to be fixed around 200 CE: Origen warns against attending both the synagogue and Christian services (Origen *Hom. Lev.* 5.8; *GCS* 9.349). Tertullian knows of Christians who said their prayers not only on the Lord's Day but also the Sabbath, so in this respect considering both days equally holy (Tert. *Or.* 23.1f.). Some therefore decided to – perhaps one ought to add continue to – observe both feast days.

Hardly any Christians observed the rules for the Jewish Sabbath. For them, joyfulness was a key requirement, as the *Epistle of Barnabas* already states. Accordingly, the *Didascalia* forbade Christians to fast on Sundays (21.208.3f. V = 107.1–14f.). Tertullian suggests not to pray humbly on one's knees – which would smack too much of the Sabbath, but upright, and to postpone matters of business because these could prompt uneasy emotions (Tert. *Or.* 23.1f.). Justin also calls the Christian day of the Lord 'Sun-day', perhaps in order to make it seem more acceptable to pagans (Just. *1st Apol.* 67.3), since many of them also liked to celebrate this day – in contrast to the day of Saturn, the Sabbath, which was considered unlucky.

When Tertullian recommends postponing business matters, he is not suggesting a general period of rest such as is obligatory during the Sabbath.

Doing so would have been impossible in an environment which was generally unaware of this Christian feast day, in contrast to the Sabbath. In fact, some Christians were afraid that one might be able to smell the wine on them following their morning celebrations (Cypr. *Ep.* 63.15). It became obligatory only gradually to come to church, although the *Didascalia* appealed to Christians to attend worship (13.14910–12V = 71.10f. Fl). An edict, attributed to an ecclesiastical synod in Spanish Elvira around 300 CE, required nothing more than that the faithful attend every third Sunday (Conc. Elv. *Can.* 21). Therefore, we ought not to overestimate the importance of the day of the Lord for the first Christians.

When the emperor decided to support the Christian faith, this had consequences for the Sunday: Constantine the Great (r.306–37 CE) decreed that it would be free from judicial disputes though permitting slaves to be emancipated on that day (*CTh.* 2.8.1). He also ordered rest on Sundays, which however applied only to governors, urban residents and those engaged in business whereas those living in rural areas were expected to work if the weather was propitious for agriculture (*Clust.* 3.12.2). This put paid to resting for the great majority of the working population, which was predominantly rural. But remarkably the emperor does not call this day ‘the day of the Lord’ but ‘Sun-day’. He did not introduce an explicitly Christian weekly schedule, just made it easier to follow one. The Christian week started to become a feature of everyday life early on, as we can see from a court protocol of 325 CE from the province of Egypt which mentions the Day of the Lord (*POxy.* 54.3759, 38f.). Despite this, bishops felt compelled to remind their flocks not to celebrate the Sabbath even in later times.

The pagan calendar was determined less by a weekly rhythm and more by annual celebrations, often connected to public games. Additionally, there were feast days in remembrance of victors or significant events related to the imperial family, such as assuming office or birthdays. Jews also had annual feasts. That of Pesach would become Easter as the most important annual Christian feast by far – Pentecost emerged only after Easter; Christmas gained significance later on. In fact, we also have no reliable evidence of Easter being celebrated before the second century. There are some indications that many followers of Christ continued to participate in the Pesach celebrations in the Temple, for as long as that remained possible.<sup>18</sup>

Easter served as a reminder of Christ’s passion and the disappearance of his body – the defining moment for his first followers, which had taken place around the time of Pesach. Perhaps it commenced with celebrations

of the Easter night, leading from pain to joy. A key feature that was universal was moving from privation to a communal meal. The *Didascalia* exhorts the faithful to fast from Monday to Saturday during the week leading up to Easter, in order to break their fast around the third hour of an Easter night celebrated with communal rites (2I, 2I4.5–I5V = I1I.29–I12.3Fl). The finer details of the series of celebrations marking the Easter season, however, developed only later.

But there was conflict about how to determine the date of Easter: one group of Christians, particularly prevalent in Asia Minor, picked the fourteenth day of the Jewish spring month Nisan; they are also called Quartodecimans after the Latin term for fourteen. It was on the fourteenth that the Jews had been offered the sacrifice of the lamb, which Christians interpreted as representing Jesus. Accordingly, the Quartodecimans celebrated their Easter regardless of which day of the week it fell on, the same as we do Christmas today.

Other Christians focused on the resurrection and thus it made sense for them to celebrate Easter on a Sunday, the day of the Lord when the Eucharist was already being held. This was not a superficial question of dates; it was a matter of Christian identity. The religious rhythm of life for these Christian groups was set by their Easter calendars; and the date of Easter served to differentiate groups from each other:<sup>19</sup> the Montanists, for example, had their own particular way of calculating this date. Whoever determined the date of the Easter feast was able to structure the Christian calendar and thus life more generally. It was also, therefore, a question of authority, an authority which bishops liked to assume.

Deliberate attempts to standardise Christian practice in setting the date of Easter that we can still make out illustrate how important this matter was. Victor (c.190–c.200 CE), a Bishop of Rome, failed in his attempts; for the time being those prevailed who thought that diversity might be tolerated as long as it was based on tradition. Yet many did not agree with tolerating such plurality, which is precisely why this feast, which set Christians apart from Jews and also pagans, threatened to split Christians themselves.

Constantine the Great strongly requested that the fathers of the imperial council of 325 agree on a single date; it was imperative to set oneself clearly apart from the Jews and avoid that on the same day some Christians fasted while others feasted (Eus. *VC* 3.18.1–3; 6). A decree to that effect was passed but not everyone fell in line. Once Christianity had been organised politically, it proved difficult to accept plurality even if in some places diverse traditions continued to be practiced.



Communal celebrations were not always without tension. The satiating meal was a social act that could be sensitive, against the backdrop of Christian notions of equality. In many ancient associations members brought their own provisions to communal meals. It suggested itself to organise Christian celebrations in the same way but this might result in unpleasantness, for example if those with greater means ate amply while others wanted. Paul strongly criticised instances when this happened.<sup>20</sup> The *Epistle of James* explicitly warns against according special treatment to those in the community who were rich – which clearly happened regardless (2.2–4).

Decent behaviour was expected: Christian communities distinguished themselves by the very fact that they did neither drink nor feast to excess, that there was no fracas, at least according to Tertullian (Tert. *Apol.* 39.6). But he takes a strongly polemical stance against Christians whose fasts were less strict than his and who abused the nourishing meal of *agápe*: ‘With you *agápe* shows its fervour in saucepans, faith its warmth in kitchens, hope lies on the dishes’ (Tert. *Ieiun.* 17.2; adapted from Thelwall). Social differences could become apparent at mealtimes, as could greed. Such factors probably played their part in the actual Eucharist and communal meals coming to be separated more clearly.

Christians would not have been Christians if they had not been able to find cause to argue about the Eucharist too. Should one receive the bread with one’s mouth or fingers? Ought one to eat only bread or also other foods? Choose cheese instead of bread? Drink water or wine?<sup>21</sup>

The latter was debated even in the remotest of imperial provinces, in Phrygia in Asia Minor. Deep inland, in what is now Afyon, a hardly legible inscription appears on a third-century tomb above a false door (Figure 1.1): ‘Meirus, Son of A(v)entinus, of the Encratites, erected [the tomb] for himself and his niece Tatis and his brother Paulos and his sister Pribis in remembrance, while still alive and fully conscious. And if any of the winebibbers puts [a corpse] inside, they will have to deal with God and Jesus Christ.’<sup>22</sup>

Meirus, about whom we otherwise know nothing, describes himself as of the Encratites, literally those who ‘controlled themselves’. It was possible to publicly proclaim oneself a Christian in many parts of Asia Minor. Belonging to one particular group, Meirus does not want to come into contact with wine-drinkers even in the grave. He was certainly no prohibitionist but specifically refers to those who drank wine instead of water (which is what the Encratites taught) at the Eucharist. It seems that others preferring water also lived around Syria (*A. Thom.* 121) as well as amongst the Marcionites, while elsewhere wine was the main choice. Justin did actually mention water in his description of the Eucharist; some scholars



Figure 1.1 The tomb of Meirus who opposed the winebibbers.

assume that the word for wine has been added retrospectively.<sup>23</sup> In that case textual history would once more provide evidence of a disagreement.

Not even the Eucharist itself was above all criticism: the *Gospel of Judas*, written largely before 180 CE, shows Jesus laughing at the Eucharist held by his disciples (33f.). When, embarrassed, they asked why, he explained that he wasn't laughing at them but the notion that their God would be celebrated in such a way and denied that he was the son of their God.<sup>24</sup> This voice too is part of the choir of Christianity.

Nowadays the term 'Sunday Christian' is often used disparagingly. For ancient Christians the Sunday service was usually the high point of their religious lives, but service to God was meant to be an integral part of everyday life. Services to God were held not only on Sunday but also others. Wednesday and Friday soon emerged as days of fasting and services. In fact, the faith demanded even more: 'pray without ceasing' we read in 1 Thessalonians (5.17), and the *Gospel of Thomas* asks, perhaps along similar lines, to turn the entire week into a Sabbath (27). We may perhaps imagine this to be intended along the lines of Clement's depiction of the 'true' Christian around 200 CE:

And his whole life is a holy festival. His sacrifices are prayers, and praises, and readings in the Scriptures before meals, and psalms and hymns during meals and before bed, and prayers also again during night. (Clem. *Strom.* 7.49.3f; transl. Wilson)

Tertullian pictures Christian married couples singing psalms and hymns together (Tert. *Ux.* 2.8.8) and expects believers to make the sign of the cross on their forehead as part of everyday tasks, even when putting on their shoes (Tert. *Cor.* 3.4).

Any leftovers from the consecrated bread and wine could be taken back home and consumed there. Individual prayer held great significance, indeed for some were what mattered most (Clem. *Strom.* 7.35). For Christians texts rather than simply practices were the foundation of their faith, as they had already been for Jews. Individuals were able to engage with texts, reading them or choosing certain passages and carrying them as amulets. Some Christians lived their faith in solitude and forewent its communal aspects (Iren. *Haer.* 1.21.4). Later, that kind of life was led specifically by a certain kind of monk, hermits, who remained solitary. However important church services were, Christian forms of life emerged which did not require them.

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Processions with magnificent sacrificial animals, accompanied by urban residents, organised neatly according to social status, were a regular occurrence in ancient cities. The animals were slaughtered on altars in front of the temple. The smoke rose, the smell spread. The meat was distributed (or preferably sold) to the cult community, so that the celebrations ended in feasting. Sacrifices remained a living tradition in imperial times, different from what was thought previously.<sup>25</sup>

The plain Christian services will have disappointed those who appreciated these sumptuous pagan rituals of divine worship: they took place inside homes, were limited in the main to words and modest rituals; there were no sacrifices, no splendour – and yet their significance should not be underestimated. In general Christians did not stand out among their neighbours. But at their services they met each other and celebrated, in song, prayer, conversation and with their communal meal. The liturgy gained in importance in the second and third centuries; the correct ritual mattered as much as the true faith. Christian feast days, namely Sunday and Easter, gave a rhythm to their calendars in a way that was unique to their community.

In view of the many afflictions that Christians faced in their everyday lives, these celebrations very likely were a moving experience for many. Although community was celebrated in song and during communion, a Christian hierarchy started to emerge in the services of some communities. Other Christian groups appear to have been organised more loosely and to have retained the notion that everyone could contribute their charisma equally. Yet there is little more that we know about such communities.

As Christianity became the religion of emperors, edicts were issued to forbid bloody pagan sacrifices. While their sumptuous displays did not disappear immediately, over time they would do so. Sunday became protected; the date of Easter set by edict. Christian services became more sumptuous and soon it was their processions making their way through the cities. This represented a change, for pagans as much as for Christians, that could be heard, felt, even smelled.<sup>26</sup>

### 1.3 Jewish Tradition and Christian Appropriation

Peter and Paul are closely linked in the Christian tradition. Rome's authority was founded on these two apostles; they are venerated jointly in churches and pictured together in images. And yet they each represent something quite different: one the Galilean fisherman called by Jesus himself who for a time headed up the community in Jerusalem, the other

the man from the Hellenistic *polis* Tarsus who earlier had himself persecuted Christians. In fact, they were on opposite sides in a dispute about fundamentals about which Paul agitatedly writes to Christians in Galatia in Asia Minor, calling Peter by his Aramaic name, Cephas:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?' (Gal. 2.11–14)

It seems that the dispute had been triggered by associates of James, Jesus' brother, who presented himself as upholding Jewish ritual traditions in the Temple of Jerusalem. What exercised them was key to everyday life and also had significant theological implications: how should followers of Christ who came from a Jewish background and those from a pagan one relate to each other? Should they all observe Jewish laws? Let themselves be circumcised? Keep to the dietary laws? If not, then how else should these groups with their different practices interact with each other?

Communal meals proved to be a particular focal point for this latent conflict between different followers of Christ, especially where the Eucharist and repast were one and the same. Many Jews were convinced that they must not eat with others; dietary laws and circumcision took precedence. Non-Jews apparently felt rejected that they were expected to change while the Jews would simply continue to live as they always had. Yet Jewish Christians must also have felt a degree of vexation. From their point of view, it surely represented a major concession simply to welcome uncircumcised others into their circle. Such close proximity was not at all a matter of course – many considered visiting the home of a non-Jew objectionable. Now, not even their ancient and venerable dietary laws were to remain in force.

These problems arose because followers of Christ, and not only Paul, began to promote their faith to non-Jews early on, spreading the remarkable notion that anyone could choose Jesus, regardless of where they came from. It was said that Jesus himself had already addressed his message to non-Jews too – though it was of course beyond doubt that he himself had been Jewish. Peter too reportedly had converted pagans.

Paul dared to disregard Jewish traditions: he justified his stance to the Galatians with the words of baptism that dissolved the differences between Greeks and Jews. In the very same passage, he inscribed the Christians into a Jewish tradition: they too are descendants of Abraham (3.29) who was thought to have introduced the practice of circumcision, but also to have received the promise that entire nations would descend from him. To Paul, this promise to the progenitor of Israel was the reason for making do without Jewish customs.

Such debates about Jewish customs as the Christians now engaged in were by no means new, seeing that at the time no single Jewry existed.<sup>27</sup> Rather, a variety of communities saw themselves as Jewish or Hebrew, each interpreting the laws set out in the Holy Scriptures in different ways. The Samaritans who had their own temple on Mount Gerizim believed themselves to be Jewish yet were ostracised by others. Many synagogue communities, particularly those in the diaspora, faced the question what they should require of any potential new supporters. They talked, for example, of the so-called God-fearing (*theosebeis*) who were drawn to the Jewish God without (yet) being ready to observe all his laws. Communities worked on compromises that in, all likelihood, were different in different places. Followers of Christ might make use of such precedents, but if they went too far with any concessions lost credibility among the (other) Jews.

Paul cut an unusual figure among the early apostles. He had received a strict education by the Pharisees, indeed had even persecuted the followers of Christ until Jesus appeared to him in his famous Damascene conversion. This enemy of the faith became its missionary. Yet the point of difference remained: he had not met Jesus in this world, in contrast to the others who were termed apostles, instead basing his claim to legitimacy on a spiritual experience. He felt impelled to promote his faith among the uncircumcised, as a result concluding that one might dispense with circumcision and allow dining together. He believed that the others, including Peter, had accepted this too.

The finer points of this dispute, of which different accounts have come down to us, are themselves disputed. It is highly likely that misunderstandings were involved, but also that one or the other changed their views, as Paul claims Peter had done. Only a minority required those non-Jews who joined the followers of Christ to be circumcised. The question of dietary laws was more complicated – especially as the communal meal was crucial to forming real communities. We even hear of the apostles and elders assembling in Jerusalem to listen to Paul and Barnabas, and of a joint document, the so-called *Apostolic Decree*, which suggested a

compromise: 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell'. Even if this decree is original, it did not prevail.<sup>28</sup>

The destruction of the Temple surely weakened the position of those followers of Christ who advocated retaining Jewish traditions, as the temple-based cult that formed a large part of their customary laws had become obsolete; apparently the Christian community in Jerusalem had not taken part in the fighting but had fled early on. However, Christian community leaders 'from the circumcision' were once again active in Jerusalem until Hadrian banned the circumcised from their holy city following yet another war in 135/6 CE.<sup>29</sup> It did, however, not become illegal to practice the Jewish faith, notwithstanding these wars.

The rabbinic scholars demonstrated in their teachings and writings that it was still possible to follow the spirit of the Jewish laws, even if the temple-based cult had ceased.<sup>30</sup> This must have led to animated debates in the synagogues. Christians increasingly felt excluded. Modern scholars had assumed that the Rabbis had agreed to expel Christians at a 'Council of Jamnia' in 72 CE, and also incorporated a curse against them – called *birkat ha-minim* (literally: 'blessing on the heretics') – into the Amidah, a prayer of the Jewish liturgy. Current scholarship assumes that approaches in fact differed in different places – Jewish diversity means it is hard to imagine any joint, blanket decision to expel Christians. The very definition of who these 'heretics' is already uncertain: followers of Christ who considered themselves to be Jews? Christians in general? Or a broader group? Most likely the phrase was interpreted differently in different periods.<sup>31</sup>

Individual followers of Christ were forced to make up their minds about their Jewishness or otherwise by a completely different matter: the  *Fiscus Judaicus* introduced a special Roman tax for Jews following the first Jewish War (66–73 CE).<sup>32</sup> It was now an official requirement to decide if one wished to be considered a Jew or not. Indeed, it was financially advantageous if one did not – though it meant living the precarious life of a Christian instead. In any case Christians increasingly started to differentiate themselves from others: for example, Sunday emerged as the day of communal celebration among followers of Christ rather than the Sabbath; on these occasions those of Jewish and pagan origins sat around the same table.

And there was more: ‘it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians”’ (Acts 11.26). It was perhaps not by accident that this happened in a metropolis where believers of non-Jewish and Jewish origins interacted particularly closely. The Greek word *Christianós* used in this context has the suffix *-ianós*, which is in turn based on the Latin *-ianus*. The suffix could refer to clients or former members of a Roman *familia*, so was an indicator of an internal cohesion. The Greek expression *chrematísai*, translated in Acts 11.26 with ‘were called’, leaves open whether *Christianós* was a designation first used by others or the group themselves. The suffix *-ianós* makes the term sound rather formal, so one might perhaps say: ‘they came to be publicly known as Christians for the first time’.

In fact, Christians do not use this term to describe themselves in the Acts, nor in the Revelation of John. The First Epistle of Peter, probably composed in the late first century, perhaps even before the Acts, is different. It speaks of the sufferings a *Christianós* might experience (4.15f.). Although the author is proud to own the name *Christianós*, he implies that it was initially used by their enemies: being a Christian means suffering. Perhaps this passage allows us to witness that change from exonym to autonym. But it does not allow us to conclude that Christians at the time possessed a coherent identity qua Christians.

While Christians also selected other names to refer to themselves, Greek *Christianós*, or Latin *Christianus*, was unsurpassed in its clarity to express what marked them apart. The term became an accepted part of the Roman legal language around 100 CE, as evidenced by Tacitus, or at the latest Pliny – once more the state unintentionally accelerated the differentiation of Christians from Jews. The former had already set themselves apart as a group early on through baptism, while in some cases remaining closely connected to their Jewish community, in others less so. But now there was a common, unifying term to describe them, suggesting a clear distinction from the (other) Jews. When asked if they were *Christiani* in court, every single defendant had to ask themselves if they wanted to be seen to deny Christ. Those who made the term their own chose death, winning fame among their fellow believers. At that point, if not before, the word had turned into a badge of honour.<sup>33</sup>

Ignatius of Antioch travelled, so he reports, to Rome in order to seek martyrdom there. Along the way he wrote epistles to various communities, in the first or second third of the second century. By emphasising the unity of the followers of Christ, he underlined their separation from other groups that were related in name, such as the Jews. He is the first to use the word pair *Christianismós* and *Ioudaismós* – albeit not in the sense of ‘Christianity’



and 'Judaism'. Rather, these terms described certain ways of life, along either Christian or Jewish lines; he simply viewed the Christian as being the right one.<sup>34</sup>

Increasingly downright hostility towards the Jews, such as can already be glimpsed in Ignatius, gained ground. This ill feeling may well have increased further during the Jewish-Roman wars that were conducted without mercy. After the war of 66–73 CE there was the so-called Rebellion of the Diaspora (115–17 CE), which degenerated into massacres; even bloodier was the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–5/6 CE). The followers of Christ had not participated in either of these. Indeed, some saw themselves as victims: 'For in the Jewish war which lately raged, Bar Kokhba, the leader of the revolt of the Jews, gave orders that Christians alone should be led to cruel punishments, unless they would deny Jesus Christ and utter blasphemy' (Iust. *1st Apol.* 31.6, transl. Dods).

This suggests that the Christians sided with Rome – even though the Romans did not permit them to confess their faith, in contrast to the Jews. The interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion is a good indicator: Jewish elites are blamed for his death to a greater or lesser degree in the accounts of the Passion given by different gospels (likely to have been composed as early as after the first war). The Romans in fact play only a minor role in the *Gospel of Peter* which later became apocryphal.<sup>35</sup> In a similar way Melito of Sardis held the Jews responsible for Jesus' death (Mel. *Pasch.* 72–99). Christians could draw on strong anti-Jewish sentiments among pagans, in spite of respect for such an ancient religion, in their polemics and thus stress their affinity with the majority.

Moreover, the long-standing Jewish tradition of self-criticism – particularly strong in the prophets who castigated their people for abandoning God – made it easier for the Christians to argue against the Jews. For instance, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, whose author strongly argues against the Sabbath, quotes Isaiah's criticism of malpractice.

The *Dialogue with Trypho* from the mid-second century shows a strong desire to set Christians apart from the Jews, indeed, to surpass them. Taking on the role of a philosopher, its author Justin imagines a dialogue between himself and a Jew by the name of Trypho. Other Jews make up their audience, together with pagans who sympathised with Jewish notions and whom Justin wants to prevail upon to become Christian instead. His dialogue is in fact predominantly composed of long expositions by the first-person narrator in response to cues provided by Trypho. Justin offers readings of many passages from the Old Testament as prophesying the coming of Christ, also referencing Jewish dietary laws and the question of

circumcision. According to Justin these are not just means of keeping the Jews on the side of God, as Paul had still held, but rather punishments for the stubborn Jewish people of which Christians might consider themselves absolved. He uses strong words to describe their affliction:

Indeed the custom of circumcising the flesh, handed down from Abraham, was given to you as a distinguishing mark, to set you off from other nations and from us Christians. The purpose of this was that only you might suffer the afflictions that are now justly yours; that 'your land be desolate, and your cities ruined by fire; that the fruits of your land be eaten by strangers before your very eyes' (Is. 1.7); that not one of you be permitted to enter Jerusalem. (Iust. *Dial.* 16.2; adapted from Reith)

To Jewish ears it must have sounded like mockery to hear a Christian argue that Isaiah's prophecies had been fulfilled by the devastating consequences of losing to the Romans.

Justin in effect posits a hierarchy between Christians and Jews. There is no evidence of Justin himself having committed any anti-Jewish act. In the *Dialogue with Trypho* he remains conciliatory in his direct interactions with his interlocutor, however strongly he argues against and generalises about the Jews. Nonetheless Justin's polarising attitude towards Jews and his apparent claim to surpass them contributed his part to a tradition justifying Christian disdain of Jews. He turned Jewish self-criticism into a general critique of 'the' Jews; the anti-Judaism latent in earlier texts became generalised. Justin's *Apology* also shows that Jews and Christians not only argued with each other but competed for the attention of pagans.<sup>36</sup>

In Justin, Christianity and Jewry are seen as two different, mutually exclusive religions – which can be viewed as the first time a modern notion of religion emerged. Certainly, some fundamental changes had occurred since the times of Paul: for example, Jewish and Christian institutions had come to be mostly separate; followers of Christ were no longer to be found preaching in the synagogues. The priesthood in Jerusalem had long ceased to exist; Jewish groups had formed themselves anew, in particular influenced by the Rabbinic movement. For many, its members now were the main authorities, and their teachings were to become dominant for centuries, in part to this day. The Holy Scriptures now had to be made relevant to the changed circumstances, and they were highly skilled in interpreting them – similar to how the Christians read the very same texts from a changed perspective. That increased the tensions: two interpretations of Israel's Holy Scriptures, in a new environment, stood side by side, also divided more and more by language. While the Rabbis returned to

their own linguistic traditions and wrote in Hebrew or Aramaic, Christians continued to use Greek.

How one ought to engage with the manifold Jewish tradition in detail remained a bone of great contention among Christians. This dispute came to a crisis when a new group arose that aimed to dispense with any and every Jewish tradition. This movement takes its name from Marcion who had become rich as a shipowner in Asia Minor, appearing in Rome around 140 CE. He may have regarded himself as the true apostle who returned the Holy Scriptures to their original purity. A God of wrath, that of the Jews, was juxtaposed with a God of grace, the father of Jesus Christ. Marcion founded his own community for which he created a special collection of authoritative and redacted texts, consisting of one Gospel (the revised Gospel of Luke) and ten of Paul's epistles.<sup>37</sup>

It very much seems as if Marcion drew his own conclusions from the slow process of separation of Christians from Jews. Initially Christians like James and indeed also Paul had attempted to remain within a Jewish context, but Marcion considered this a mistake and thought that he had been chosen to lead the Christians back to the right path. In doing so he employed a radicalised interpretation of passages of Paul, taking his statements out of their – from Paul's perspective self-evident – Jewish context. Marcion had not been socialised in a Jewish environment, in contrast to Paul, but very possibly a set view of 'the' Jews.

Memories of the Bar Kokhba Revolt when Jews and Romans had torn each other apart were still fresh when Marcion was active. Had he been swept up in wider anti-Jewish sentiments? Did he want to protect his Gospel from acquiring a reputation of being Judeophile in order to smooth the path for his missionary activity? We can but speculate as we have only the polemics of his enemies. Consequently, scholarly views on Marcion's teachings differ widely including on fundamental questions such as how far his rejection of the Jewish Holy Scriptures went, or whether the genre of the Gospels existed before Marcion or was, in fact, developed by him. There is much greater convergence of views, however, when it comes to the impact of his activity: of lesser importance was the community he founded, although there is evidence of his followers up into the fifth century. But of great consequence was something he had not intended, which was how Christian writings were treated:

The written word had been important among followers of Christ early on; communities reverently kept the epistles Paul had sent them, and other texts that came to be considered authoritative were also written. It is likely that individuals or communities soon started collecting such key

texts. We still have a few Christian papyri dating back as far as the second century (Figure 1.2). These already feature special abbreviations for holy names such as *Iesous* or *Christos* for the staurogram.<sup>38</sup> Marcion's call to put a limit on the number of scriptures considered authoritative may have led

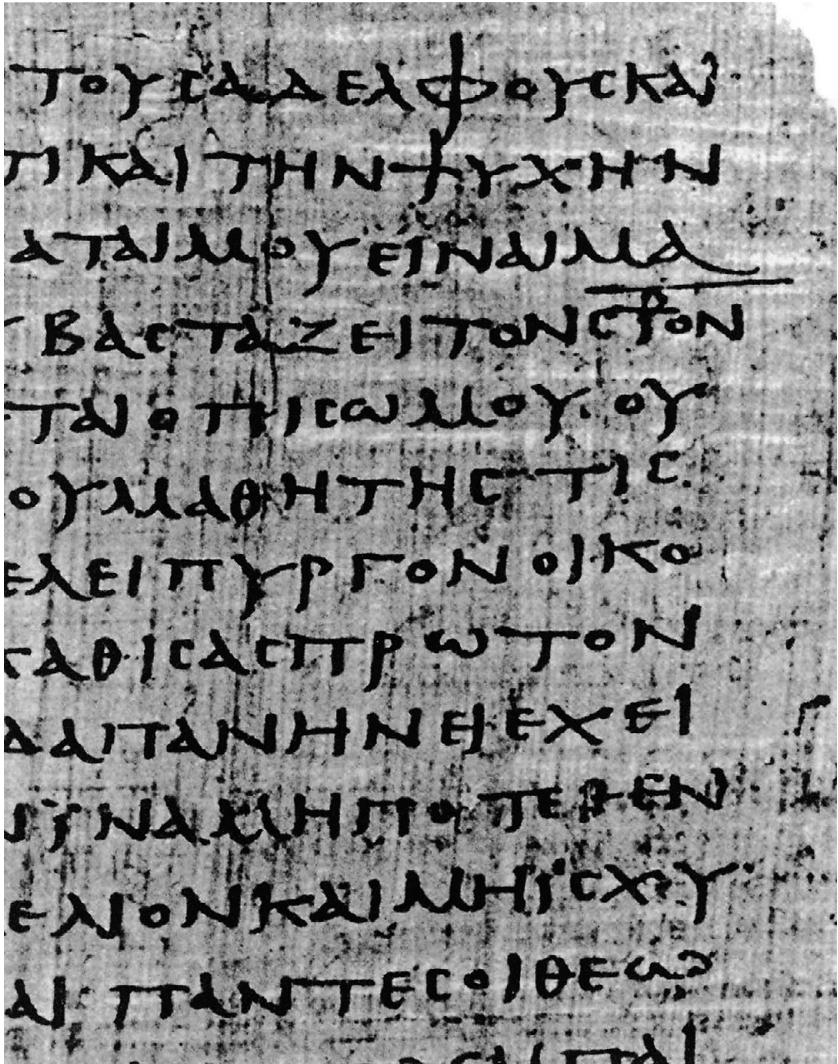


Figure 1.2 Papyrus Bodmer 14, usually dated to the early third century, is probably one of the first we have from the New Testament. This section shows Lk 14.27 'Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple' (second line from the top, right-hand side), with a staurogram visible as part of the word 'cross' (Greek *staurós*).

other Christians to exchange what they considered authoritative texts, starting to create a textual foundation going beyond the individual community. Key to that was to first define their relationship to the Jewish tradition more clearly, and that meant striving for a shared, Christian set of writings.

A decision that would be crucial for future relations between Christians and Jews was the former appropriating almost all of the latter's Holy Scriptures, with a few exceptions, as the so-called Old Testament – or one might say from a Jewish perspective: usurping them. Christians like Justin took the *Septuagint*, a certain collection of authoritative Jewish writings translated into Greek, as their basis; tellingly among Jews, other Greek versions of the *Tanach* were also current which claimed to be more literal, especially that of Aquila. And many Jews knew Hebrew, different from most Christians: Justin may have vaunted his linguistic skills but on closer inspection these prove to be sketchy (Iust. *Dial.* 43.8).

Where there is an Old Testament there also has to be a New one: the *Fragmentum Muratori*, a Latin manuscript from the early Middle Ages that goes back to a Greek text probably from around 200 CE, offers – and at times justifies – a selection of books that resembles modern editions of the New Testament. This, however, was only one of a range of authoritative texts. For example, the Valentinians and Montanists appear to have had their own collections, which very likely overlapped to some extent with those of other groups. When Serapion, Bishop of Antioch, visited the town Rhossus in his diocese around 200 CE, he heard the Gospel of Peter being read there, prompting him to write in a special treatise condemning it (Eus. *HE* 6.12). The canonical nature of certain books remained contested for some time. For instance, the *Fragmentum Muratori* includes the *Shepherd of Hermas* (although it was meant to be read only in private), yet not the *Epistle to the Hebrews*.

Some felt they could be quite free in how they approached these texts. Tatian wrote a work based on the four Gospels of the New Testament, described in Greek as *Diatessaron*, or 'Harmony of Four'. It remained in use in and around Syria for centuries, while also exerting much wider, and significant, influence through translations. Groups in the Gnostic spectrum are said to have been revising biblical texts continually.<sup>39</sup> They too, however, held the books of the New Testament in high regard; they appealed to a wide range of Christians.

Bishops increasingly, and definitely from the fourth century, assumed the power to decide which texts ought to be considered canonical when it came to Christians belonging to the institutionalised churches.<sup>40</sup> The core of the Christian Bible as we still know it today, comprising the Old and New Testament, had been agreed in late antiquity, confirmed by decrees

of various ecclesiastical councils. That said, the Ethiopian Church has retained a very different canon all of its own; moreover, there are differences between Protestant and Catholic Bibles.

Christians such as Justin discovered prophecies in the ancient Jewish texts which they saw fulfilled in Christ. It meant they felt entitled to refer the Jews to their own, Christian, set of texts, which superseded – while also preserving – these Jewish writings. If his activity had indeed triggered this process, Marcion would have achieved precisely the opposite of what he had intended.

Christians read these texts in whichever language was familiar to them. Pagans tended to consider cultic texts as untranslatable; Christians, however, already used a prayer which they believed went back to Jesus, although he must have said it in Aramaic. Translations were part of their tradition; they helped make their faith accessible to all. Latin translations are attested from the late second century. They were initially based on the Greek *Septuagint*; Coptic versions going back to at least the third century for the most part were also based on Greek originals. Aramaic Christians, on the other hand, appear to have translated Jewish texts directly from the Hebrew or to have read versions produced by Aramaic-speaking Jews; it is not the only example of an especially intense exchange between Jews and Christians in and around Syria.

The seemingly unbridgeable gap between Jewish and Christian notions of self, ritual and text is therefore just that. The two communities remained in close contact not only in the Syriac area: we hear of Christians who sided with the Jews at times of persecution.<sup>41</sup> It was considered necessary to forbid the faithful, even clerics, to dine with Jews as late as the early fourth century (Conc. Elv. *Can.* 50). The church historian Sozomen is not alone in attesting to the religious plurality in the grove at Mamre, where God had promised Abraham an heir, according to biblical tradition. Christians, Jews and even pagans all peacefully practised their own particular rituals there, side by side – until Constantine the Great intervened to prohibit it (2.4).

Jews and Christians were in constant mutual exchange, both in everyday life and intellectually. From this interconnected world come texts which to this day cannot be attributed with any certainty to one or the other religion. Some Jewish texts underwent Christian revisions; Jewish erudition informed texts that were considered Christian.<sup>42</sup> Groups from the Gnostic spectrum wove further references to Jewish stories into their own myths. It is important not to lose sight of such grey areas just because of how pervasive the polemics between Christians and Jews were.

Moreover, some – sometimes termed rather too broadly ‘Judaeo-Christians’ – wished to continue to observe certain Jewish laws while avowing themselves to be Christians.<sup>43</sup> Justin considered such practices acceptable as long as those in question did not try to spread them – though he is aware that other Christians thought this too conciliatory (*Dial.* 47). We know of these Christians who followed Jewish traditions primarily through polemics. For example, Eusebius voices his contempt of one such community:

They [the Ebionites] held him to be a plain and ordinary man who had achieved righteousness merely by the progress of his character and had been born naturally from Mary and her husband. They insisted on the complete observation of the Law, and did not think that they would be saved by faith in Christ alone and by a life in accordance with it. . . . They thought that the letters of the Apostle ought to be wholly rejected and called him an apostate from the Law. They used only the Gospel called according to the Hebrews and made little account of the rest. Like the former they used to observe the sabbath and the rest of the Jewish ceremonial, but on Sundays celebrated rites like ours in commemoration of the Saviour’s resurrection. Wherefore from these practices they have obtained their name, for the name of Ebionites indicates the poverty of their intelligence, for this name means ‘poor’ in Hebrew. (Eus. *HE* 3.27; transl. Lake)

The crucial theological question was that difficult one regarding Jesus himself, and to what extent he was divine, which has come to the fore so often in the history of Christianity. The Ebionites stressed his human nature. Their dismissal of Paul is characteristic, and only logical; regardless of the importance Paul is accorded today, one should always remember the strong anti-Pauline currents in ancient Christianity. And of course practices varied. While Eusebius’ etymology of the term ‘Ebionites’ is indeed correct, it most certainly did not refer to spiritual poverty but probably to a life of renunciation.

Yet elsewhere, a Hebrew Gospel is sometimes mentioned. The first followers of Christ undoubtedly spoke Aramaic, perhaps also Hebrew. But not many of them are likely to have survived the Jewish Wars, particularly the end of Jerusalem as a Jewish city. Such Christian groups seldom appear in our extant sources; many probably eventually ceased to exist, caught between Christians and Jews. There are indications, however, that they exerted a considerable influence on the teachings of Mani, who appears to have seen himself as the one coming to fulfil Christianity. Perhaps they were, in part, also absorbed into early Islam which developed in a Judaean-Christian context.

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Paul was of the opinion that followers of Christ were excused from Jewish dietary laws and circumcision. This certainly played a part in the lasting success of his mission, since it enabled communities to be more open and accessible, but also led to heated disputes; a number of Christians continued to observe Jewish laws for centuries. Paradoxically, however, virtually all Christians were eager to appropriate the ancient, venerable writings of the Jews even though large sections of them dealt with those very laws that many no longer observed. Christians read many of the old prophecies as promises referring to Christ. For this reason those Jewish texts that prevailed were able to form what from a Christian perspective would become the Old Testament.

Paul's way of justifying breaking with Jewish tradition proved to be particularly influential: Jesus' sacrificial death had rendered the Law obsolete. He developed this idea from within the Jewish context that had moulded him and yet it could easily be turned into an anti-Jewish one, in the sense that Jews deserved contempt because they were in need of their Laws. Indeed, this increasingly happened, especially in disputes over this Jewish heritage. Official anti-Jewish sanctions increased the pressure. As a result, Christians, *Christiani*, defined themselves more and more as a group in their own right, one that sharply set itself apart from the Jews while still remaining connected and indebted to them. Anti-Judaism went hand in hand with cultivating Jewish traditions.

#### 1.4 Feeding Religious Strife

For ordinary inhabitants of the Roman empire meat was not a staple part of their diet. Occasionally the flesh from animal sacrifices was distributed to those participating in the cult. Generous benefactors donated meat to citizens of their town, often linked to religious festivals or public games involving animals. Those with lesser means had few other opportunities to source meat; markets supplied those who could afford it. Yet much of the meat for sale came from sacrificial animals that had been offered to the very gods that the Christians considered idols – no more than mere representations, bereft of any sanctity. Was it permissible to eat this meat despite it coming from a pagan cult? In fact, what did Christ's teachings suggest his followers might eat, in a world where dietary laws often had religious connotations, not only among Jews?

The Christians in Corinth, who were definitely a pugnacious bunch, were already debating this question at the time of Paul. Their concern was different from the tensions that had arisen among followers of Christ from



different backgrounds in Antioch about communal meals. That argument had been about whether traditional ritual precepts were important enough to force followers of Christ of Jewish origins to eat separately from those with a pagan background. The debate in Corinth, on the other hand, was about what was right to eat in the first place – it was not about eating meat as such but that from sacrifices made to idols. Paul takes a nuanced stance:

Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 'Food will not bring us close to God.' We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? (1 Cor. 8.7–10)<sup>44</sup>

Paul's solution is diplomatic: in theory it is allowed to eat meat offered to idols because its provenance does not matter to Christians, especially as those gods do not actually exist.<sup>45</sup> But strong people enjoying this kind of food may cause the weak who trust their knowledge less to waver, so everyone ought to forego such meat out of consideration for the weak. The so-called Apostolic decree of the Council of Jerusalem forbade eating meat from sacrifices to idols as a matter of principle – if we trust the Acts of the Apostles (15.29). The Revelation of John calls followers of Christ from Pergamon who ate such sacrificial meat sinners, putting such dietary practice on a par with sexual offences (2.14).

Indeed, Paul presumes that a 'strong' person would even be so confident as to dine in a temple as it was common in antiquity to dine within a sacred precinct, if one wanted a share of this meat. Clearly some followers of Christ had no qualms about being seen at a pagan sacred site on the occasion of such meals. Again, Paul does not condemn this practice either but cautions against overestimating one's strength: 'Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols' (1 Cor. 10.14), is his message. 'You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons' (10.21).

Paul's standard of correct Christian behaviour was set by reference to being aware of one's own weakness and even more that of others. In that sense there was in fact no specifically Christian way of living, only a Christian frame of mind. In many respects, Paul was very tolerant in many respects, not issuing any strict prohibitions against meat from sacrifices to idols. Nonetheless he did provide his readers with a few practical rules of thumb for their everyday lives, for example about

shopping in a *macellum* – the term Paul uses here is borrowed from the Latin and denotes a covered building where the perishable meat was more or less protected from the Mediterranean sun. If followers of Christ went to shop there, they had to assume that sacrificial meat would be part of the offer. Was that dangerous? Paul offers reassurance: ‘Eat whatever is sold in the *macellum* without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for “the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s” (1 Cor. 10.25–6, quoting Ps. 24.1). Since meat was one of God’s gifts there was no need to worry about its provenance.

Being invited to dinner by non-Christians, however, could lead to tricky situations:

If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice’, then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience – I mean the other’s conscience, not your own. For why should my liberty be subject to the judgement of someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks? (1 Cor. 10.27–30)

Paul’s reasoning here is significant: Christians did not have to worry about whether they ate meat from sacrificial animals or not, the same as with shopping in the *macellum*. But others, non-Christians, might find it problematic. Interestingly, the Greek word he chooses here (*hieróthyton*), translated as ‘has been offered in sacrifice’, is what non-Christians used to call such meat, whereas elsewhere Paul uses a more polemical Jewish-Christian term (*eidolóthyton*, ‘offered to idols’). The passage clearly assumes that there were non-Christians who knew of Christian sensitivities and made their Christian dinner guests aware of the sacrificial meat, be it out of consideration to test them. If that happened, Christians should excuse themselves, not because they were embarrassed themselves but to avoid embarrassing the others.

Christians lived in a world where they might be presented with meat from sacrifices made to idols at any and every turn. In theory, that was not a problem because this meat too was a gift from God. But it became a problem if, by accepting it, Christians gave someone else the impression that they had overstepped a religious boundary. In Paul’s view this boundary was one set by non-Christians: from their point of view, sacrificial meat had been sanctified by ritual and in that sense would be offensive to Christians, although it was not for Christians themselves who saw such

meat as a part of God's creation. Such a diversity of perspectives proved to be an obstacle to communication both within and outside the Christian community.

Indeed, there were contrasting voices: Christians would continue to be attracted to the pagan feasts that went hand in hand with cultic acts for some time to come. Accordingly, the question of eating meat offered to idols arose time and again. Most of the better-known authors came down on the side of a clear 'no', so that abstaining from this particular food could become a mark of separation – as late as around 300 CE we still hear of Christians choosing not to attend meals at which sacrificial meat was served whose behaviour was considered provocative, indeed a reason to persecute them (Lact. *Mort.* 11). With disapproval, Eusebius preserves a dissenting voice: Basilides had thought it unimportant whether one tasted meat from sacrifices made to idols (Eus. *HE* 4.7.7 = Test. 1 Löhr (1996)).

The Eucharist celebrated by Christian groups offered simple sustenance, bread and wine, to be consumed communally – but this was not plain enough for some. Encratites who demanded abstinence at times caused disagreements in other communities, especially if the aspect of satiation – rather than religious remembrance – had become too pronounced in such communal meals.

Christians had other concerns in relation to food: unsurprisingly they objected to excessive consumption. Clement of Alexandria, who liked giving advice on any and every eventuality, explains his views in some detail around 200 CE:

Our food should be plain and ungarnished, in keeping with the truth, suitable to children who are plain and unpretentious, adapted to maintaining life, not self-indulgence. Viewed in this sense, life depends upon two things only: health and strength. To satisfy these needs, all that is required is a disposition easily satisfied with any sort of food; it aids digestion and restricts the weight of the body. Thus, growth and health and strength will be fostered; not the unbalanced and unhealthy and miserable state of men such as athletes fed on an enforced diet. Surely, excessive variety in food must be avoided, for it gives rise to every kind of bad effect: indisposition of body, upset stomach, perversion of taste due to some misguided culinary adventure or foolish experiment in pastry cooking. Men have the nerve to style such self-indulgence nourishment, even though it degenerates into pleasures that only inflict harm. Antiphanes, the Delian physician, has said that rich variety in food is one of the causes of disease. Yet, there are those who grow dissatisfied with the truth in their restless ostentation, and reject simplicity of diet to engage in a frantic search for expensive menus that must be imported from across the seas. (Clem. *Paed.* 2.1.2, transl. Wood)

If invited to dine with pagans, one ought to be courteous and tactful; if the meal on offer was especially sumptuous, one should keep one's contempt to oneself; one should bear in mind that in principle it was better for humans not to eat meat.<sup>46</sup>

This passage, not uncharacteristic for Clement, combines theological and dietary arguments. Refraining from overindulgence improves one's well-being. Meat should be eaten in moderation if at all. Likewise, he cautions against drinking too much wine. His argument also shows that a certain restraint was by no means unusual in the antiquity of this time or unique to Christians: after all, Clement specifically references a non-Christian authority to support his position. Such a stance very likely made sense to both Christians and pagans.

Some Christians of Jewish origin had to be encouraged to eat pork, and a significant number probably resisted.<sup>47</sup> Authors from the second century such as Justin or Clement of Alexandria discussed dietary laws they found in their Old Testament and which some of their fellow believers observed. Their approach was to interpret them allegorically or as no longer relevant because of Jesus' coming. They rejected the notion that certain foodstuffs might be unclean in and of themselves and considered this view a part of their Christian identity.<sup>48</sup>

Some Christians were vegetarians as a matter of principle, including James, Jesus' brother. A few of them were rather uneasy that John the Baptist allegedly had eaten locusts; they emended the text, putting wild fruits in his mouth instead.<sup>49</sup> But Paul already took a sceptical view of these vegetarians: 'Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables' (Rom. 14.2). Accordingly, believers really had no need to attend to any such precepts. In the third century Hippolytus is equally disapprovingly:

Still others, calling themselves 'Encratites', confess the same things about God and Christ as the church. Nevertheless, in regard to their lifestyle, they stay arrogant. Thinking to glorify themselves through foods, they keep away from the meat of ensouled animals and drink only water. They forbid marriage and dedicate the rest of their lives to harsh austerity – proving to be more like Cynics than Christians. (Hippol. *Ref.* 8.20.1; adapted from Litwa)

Evidently Hippolytus imputes to them the desire to distinguish themselves by their special practices, a desire of which he disapproves.

Even arguments between Christian prisoners eagerly anticipating their martyrdom might be prompted by differing views on correct dietary practice: during the persecutions of 177 CE in Lugdunum (Lyon), a certain

Alcibiades who ate only of water and bread was put into jail. But he was persuaded not to forego God's gifts – whatever that may have meant in prison – by a fellow prisoner called Attalus who had already given proof of his bravery in the amphitheatre and thus had some authority (Eus. *HE* 5.3.2f.).

Vegetarianism was not unknown in antiquity – the Pythagoreans, for instance, did not eat anything animated, nor did the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyrius in the third century. However, other pagans regarded such abstinence as essentially vainglorious (Luc. *Gall.* 18.). In ancient society food was very much about the image one wished to project, whether as a luxury item or an act of denial.

It is only to be expected that specific dietary instructions would come about, given the plurality of Christian groups. The *Pistis Sophia*, a text from the Gnostic spectrum, condemns those who ate menstrual blood and seeds, mixed with lentils (147), which may be the product of an inimical imagination, although it does not seem entirely beyond the realms of possibility, even if such a dish probably was on the menu only on very few, select occasions.

However, abstaining from certain foods was not a matter of 'all-or-nothing'. Abstinence might be temporary, fasting only on certain days – usually meaning eating no more than necessary for survival, or indeed fasting completely.<sup>50</sup> If possible, the food saved that way was given to the poor. Such practices were familiar to non-Christians: Jews had detailed provisions for fasting, as did many other religious groups including the followers of Isis or the Orphics, and certain civic cults. Some magic papyri recommended observing a period of fasting before casting a spell. And physicians often advised fasting for health reasons.

The *Didaché* mentions two days of fasting a week (around 100 CE): 'And do not keep your fasts with the hypocrites. For they fast on Monday and Thursday; but you should fast on Wednesday and Friday' (8.1, transl. Ehrman). The appellation 'your' suggests that the author seeks standardisation and objects to days being chosen at will, specifically as a point of difference from the Jews whom he denounces as hypocrites, one and all. Such days of fasting were widespread, with religious services also usually held then. But the specifics varied greatly from one church community to the other. For instance, fasts often lasted only until the ninth hour for many Christians, that is until the early afternoon, and observance was not strictly required everywhere. Sometimes the day chosen for fasting was Saturday, once more suggesting a clear differentiation from the Jews and their celebrations. The possibilities were numerous.

Periods of fasting were also often connected to Christian feasts. Preparing for baptism included a time of fasting, and there was fasting before Easter – though before the fourth century not necessarily forty days. Such fasts must have been important, both as something these communities shared and as something that set them apart from others, in a world where Christians otherwise had little that marked them out as such, given they had no specific dress or special processions. Then there were individual reasons to fast, such as to pay penance or to deepen one's faith, vividly described by Tertullian:

What, therefore, is the business of Patience in the body? In the first place, it is the affliction of the flesh – a victim able to appease the Lord by means of the sacrifice of humiliation – in making a libation to the Lord of sordid raiment, together with scantiness of food, content with simple diet and the pure drink of water in conjoining fasts to all this; in inuring herself to sackcloth and ashes. This bodily patience adds a grace to our prayers for good, a strength to our prayers against evil; this opens the ears of Christ our God, dissipates severity, elicits clemency. (Tert. *Pat.* 13.2f., transl. Thelwall)

Fasting is numbered among other privations attesting to a Christian's willingness to show *patientia*, the ability to suffer – all aimed to draw God's grace to that individual.

Another reason to fast was more generally in response to times of need:

For instance, when prolonged summer delays winter's rain and the crops cause anxiety, you, well fed every day, and soon to eat again – baths, taverns, brothels all at work – you sacrifice rain-offerings to Jove, enjoin the bare-foot procession on the people, seek heaven at the Capitol, look for rain from the temple ceilings, with your backs turned to God Himself and to heaven. We, parched with fasting, pinched with every austerity, abstaining from all food that sustains life, wallowing in sackcloth and ashes, importune heaven with reproach, we touch God; and then, when we have wrung mercy from Him, – Jupiter has all the glory! (Tert. *Apol.* 40.14f., transl. Glover and Rendall)

Tertullian evidently wishes to make it clear that the Christians did act not only in their own interests but those of all Romans suffering from drought where they lived (even if the others did not appreciate their efforts). After all, while pagans of course had their own rituals of humiliation – Tertullian mentions processions in bare feet, life otherwise continued as usual for them, whereas Christians devoted themselves completely to their penance, at least if they met Tertullian's – surely higher-than-average – standards.

Not everyone considered communal fasting to be the ideal solution. In the second century Ptolemy, a pupil of the important thinker Valentin, writes in his *Letter to Flora* transmitted by Epiphanius, which discusses the Mosaic Laws:

We do observe outward fasting however, since this can be of some use to the soul as well when done with reason – not in mimicry of someone or by custom, or for the sake of a day, as though a day were set aside [for] it. (Epiph. *Pan.* 33.5.13, transl. Williams)

For this author, often considered part of the Gnostic spectrum, true fasting is an inner, much more strongly individualised process.

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The question of how to eat correctly exercised many in Imperial Rome. It was examined from a number of angles, taking into account health, ethical and cultic considerations. Christians clearly faced a variety of challenges in any attempts to define a position all their own, as they had to make ever new choices. If they attributed religious significance to meat from sacrifices, they made themselves dependent on pagan practices; yet if they ate it, they had to fear appearing hypocritical. Religious motivations were the key factor even if someone like Clement supported his way of reasoning by referring to health implications. Unsurprisingly, Christians evince an affinity to ascetism right from the start, which led some to call for abstaining from meat and other foodstuffs. Such a desire was not unique to Christians; they must have been concerned all the more to prove the potency of their faith by surpassing rivals in their acts of denial. Particular Christian groups defined themselves through their own specific dietary practices, surprisingly including wholesale rejection of wine, even as part of the Eucharist.

Groups that required temporary abstinence, or fasting, took different paths: fasting could be an individual action, such as before baptism or as penance, but also a communal one, such as in preparing for feast days. The life of many Christians was governed by a temporal rhythm set by fasts, in a way that was familiar from the Jewish tradition. Communal observance of periodical fasts before major feasts expressed their togetherness and came to acquire great and long-lasting significance. Consequently, abstaining from food was not a matter of individual virtuosity but subject to clear rules which increasingly came under episcopal oversight, as did so much else in the Christian universe.

### 1.5 The Everyday Nature of Miracles

The many miracles Jesus and his apostles performed gained them faithful followers, according to the New Testament. But miracles could also go wrong, as Barnabas and Paul found when they reached Lystra, on one of their missionary journeys through southern Asia Minor. It was still inhabited by an indigenous population who spoke Lycaonian, an Anatolian language, who may have lived separate from the Roman citizens Augustus had settled there. Paul successfully healed a lame person, with the reaction this prompted described in the Acts of the Apostles:

When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have come down to us in human form!' Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. (Acts 14.11–13)

The residents of Lystra make a categorical mistake in their interpretation of this miraculous deed. The apostles initially do not realise this because the others speak in Lycaonian. Nonetheless, the author of the Acts refers to these gods by their Greek names: Zeus and Hermes, with Hermes the gods' messenger, which is why Paul seemed to resemble him. It was commonly accepted in antiquity that the gods might appear on earth, and that they might work miracles there. The Lycaonians interpreted the deeds of the apostles within such a horizon of understanding. This brings the pair into great danger:

When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, 'Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.' (Acts 14.14f.)

The apostles indicate their dismay by a universally understood gesture, and immediately give a brief sermon, probably in Greek, surely known in Lystra. They speak only of the Creator God, not even mentioning Jesus, yet to no avail:

Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them. But Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds. Then they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples surrounded him, he got



up and went into the city. The next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. (Acts 14.18–20)<sup>51</sup>

Having just been fêted, Paul is almost lynched; as so often, the Acts of the Apostles ascribe a dastardly role to the Jews although, from a narrative point of view, in this case their intervention would not in fact have been necessary. One thing is clear: however much the Christians liked to vaunt that Jesus and his followers impressed others with miracles, such acts were by no means exclusive to them. Indeed, a miracle worked by these followers of Christ might easily be attributed to Zeus.

Miracles were an integral part of how the vast majority of ancients experienced reality: many of the Old Testament prophets were regarded as miracle workers. Healing miracles occurred all the time, for example when people observed a traditional ritual, sleeping in the Asclepius sanctuary in Epidaurus in order to be cured, excitedly documenting positive outcomes in inscriptions. Travelling miracle workers, Jewish as well as pagan, were encountered frequently and knew how to impress spectators with their skills in performing healings or exorcisms.<sup>52</sup>

This phenomenon was not limited to the lower classes: Emperor Vespasian (r.69–79 CE) is said to have worked miracles on a visit to Alexandria early in his reign, to his own surprise. He himself doubted his abilities and, reasonably from a modern point of view, first asked the doctors who conceded that a miracle might be one possibility. And lo and behold, the imperial saliva had healing properties when it touched eyelids and cheeks. Tacitus, a Roman historian, a famously sober younger contemporary of the emperor, writes about the episode in great detail concluding with a telling observation: ‘Both facts are told by eye-witnesses even now when falsehood brings no reward’ (Tac. *Hist.* 4.81, transl. Moore and Jackson).<sup>53</sup> Tacitus obviously expects his audience to evince a certain degree of scepticism when it comes to miracle stories, doubts which a modern reader is likely to share. His account illustrates the fragility, as much as the existence, of the notion of miracles during the Principate.

The scepticism evident in this story is less about whether a miracle might happen in principle but rather if it would prove possible to make one happen in a particular situation, such when it was expected of the august emperor by his subjects.

Reading this passage, it is striking that Jesus had likewise healed a blind man by putting saliva on his eyes, according to the Gospel of Mark (8.22–6) – perhaps the Evangelist wanted to affirm Jesus’ position as true

ruler, echoing the reports about Vespasian, or perhaps it was simply a widespread way of working miracles. This is just one of a series of miracles performed by Jesus, which the faithful recounted to each other and which many sought to emulate: we hear of demons being expelled, of healings and resurrections from the dead, but also miracles involving the natural world: water being turned into wine, bread and fish being multiplied or walking on water are still (almost) proverbial today. While usually Jesus' miracles helped others, he also worked miracles of judgment.

In the eyes of the gospel writers his miraculous activity seems to have been an important factor. It illustrated his powers though is not assigned any value in terms of proving Jesus' divine nature; rather, his miracles are a no more than a sign of that nature and are often called precisely that, a sign. The Greek of the New Testament does not have a single word corresponding precisely to the English 'miracle'; instead, the range of expressions used all denote something out of the ordinary – be it an action, power or indeed sign.

Jesus' followers partly interpreted his miracles as a sign of the impending end of the world, partly as an indication that he really possessed higher powers. Some of his early followers appear to have seen him primarily as a miracle worker, yet this view would not prevail. The world of those believing in miracles was clearly open to instantiations of God's omnipotence, attested – in their eyes – not least by the resurrection. Reports of people becoming Christians because of miracles are legion. Many an apostle's story is full of varied accounts of miracles. When Christians successfully outdid other miracle workers this was considered a particular proof of their God's power (*Iust. 2nd Apol.* 6.4–6).

But still Jesus and his supporters were no more than just one group among the many miracle workers. Even a sceptic like Vespasian could perform miracles – and miracle workers easily acquired a reputation of being charlatans. Enemies of the Christians such as Celsus, writing in the late second century, whose polemics Origen transmits, used this opportunity to denounce this new community as followers of demons and Jesus himself as a wizard (*Orig. Cels.* 1.6). That fitted with the idea that the Christian faith appealed especially to the naïve. The episode of the apostles in Lystra may be read as a response to such, very likely already older, notions, emphasising that what these missionaries cared about was in fact not manipulation at all but professing the truth, however dangerous that might be. Presenting Jesus as a miracle worker made him liable to be mistaken for a charlatan – very different from taking him to be the saviour of all people.

Modern readers object to the reports of miracles per se, because they stand in such stark contrast to our notion of reality which posits that the world can, in principle, be explained entirely by science. Against such a backdrop, reports of healing people with saliva, resurrecting the dead or multiplying food sound like sheer humbug. Some ancient contemporaries took a similar stance; but for many miracles were a sign of divine influence that did not conflict with 'scientific' methods. Trusting in the healing power of miracles by no means implied rejecting regular medical practice: miracles offered a different means of healing, one also recognised by physicians such as those whom Vespasian consulted in Alexandria. As a historian my concern is not whether miracles did in fact take place. What is crucial is that many people at the time thought they might and responded as if they had, meaning that miracles were a *social* fact. From a contemporary point of view, it would probably have been regrettable if Jesus had been unable to work miracles but it was not a gift that was unique to him.

The question at issue was less whether a miracle was possible but rather whether it was effected by the right power. One tried hard not to be confused with professional miracle workers. The Acts of the Apostles tell of a certain Simon of Samaria: he had possessed miraculous powers that he ascribed to himself – not God as the apostles did. Still, he converted to the Christian faith but then attempted to buy their power from the apostles, so that he too would be able to pass on the Holy Spirit by the imposition of hands. Peter condemned him for doing so, while Simon for his part then had asked the apostle to intercede for him with God (8.9–24). It is not recorded what happened next. To later generations the hapless Simon, later called Simon Magus, would be a proverbial magician and heretic, as well as standing for venality in the church, the 'simony' named after him.<sup>54</sup>

Christian theologians insisted that one could not force God into performing miracles, meaning one must not engage in 'magic'. In practice, however, drawing this kind of distinction remained problematic, as illustrated by the fact that Jesus himself was considered a magician by some. Despite trusting in the possibility of miracles, second-century reports about contemporary miracles already sound rather vague; Irenaeus of Lyon, for example, invokes miracles in his fights against his enemies, without naming names (Iren. *Haer.* 2.32.4). Many Christians felt that there were fewer miracles, if in fact they still occurred at all. Origen did discerned vestiges of earlier miraculous powers (Orig. *Cels.* 1.46). Eusebius writes that water had been turned miraculously into oil in Jerusalem around 200 CE, while stating that such phenomena belonged to the times

of Jesus and the apostles (Eus. *HE* 6.9.1–3; cf. 3.37.3). As mere events miracles were in any case of little import to groups from the Gnostic spectrum whose focus was on knowledge of the truth. The reality of miracles apparently did not matter to most of them, even if they are still mentioned on occasion.<sup>55</sup>

And those who favoured communities structured according to hierarchical offices distanced themselves strongly from such, in their eyes heretical, miracles:

Moreover, those also will be thus confuted who belong to Simon and Carpocrates, and if there be any others who are said to perform miracles – who do not perform what they do either through the power of God, or in connection with the truth, nor for the well-being of men, but for the sake of destroying and misleading mankind, by means of magical deceptions, and with universal deceit, thus entailing greater harm than good on those who believe them, with respect to the point on which they lead them astray. For they can neither confer sight on the blind, nor hearing on the deaf, nor chase away all sorts of demons – [none, indeed,] except those that are sent into others by themselves, if they can even do so much as this. Nor can they cure the weak, or the lame, or the paralytic, or those who are distressed in any other part of the body, as has often been done in regard to bodily infirmity. Nor can they furnish effective remedies for those external accidents which may occur. And so far are they from being able to raise the dead, as the Lord raised them, and the apostles did by means of prayer, and as has been frequently done in the brotherhood on account of some necessity – the entire Church in that particular locality entreating [the boon] with much fasting and prayer, the spirit of the dead man has returned, and he has been bestowed in answer to the prayers of the saints – that they do not even believe this can be possibly be done, [and hold] that the resurrection from the dead is simply an acquaintance with that truth which they proclaim. (Iren. *Haer.* 2.31.2, transl. Roberts and Rambaut)

Irenaeus' way of reasoning is telling: he did not deny that even his enemies could effect certain miracles, yet they did so with entirely the wrong intentions and without God's support. They were unable to work healing miracles. Next, Irenaeus looks back to the past and reclaims the apostles – also revered by some of his enemies – for his own church, though prudently avoiding naming a single contemporary miracle worker, but rather referring to the power of the congregation.

Interestingly, one of the most famous miracles of the time was claimed by both Christians and non-Christians: rain came down all of a sudden when the troops of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (r.161–80 CE) were thirsting in enemy territory. This miracle was even portrayed on the



Figure 1.3 The rain miracle as seen from a non-Christian perspective, portrayed on the column of Marcus Aurelius

so-called column of Marcus Aurelius (Figure 1.3). The Greek historian Cassius Dio who lived around that time explained that the rain was due to the prayers of an Egyptian magician. But the Byzantine monk Xiphilinus, who summarised Cassius' work in the eleventh century, suggested that the historian had been lying deliberately (Cass. Dio. 71.8–10), because the Christian tradition attributes it to the prayers of pious soldiers. Like Xiphilinus, Dio's contemporary Tertullian moreover holds that a letter by Marcus Aurelius himself had confirmed the special role played by the Christians (Tert. *Apol.* 5.6). Such a nationally important, militarily significant miracle naturally held a special significance for Christians who were always suspected of lacking loyalty to the state. After all, miracles were easy to communicate. To what extent non-Christians were convinced by these claims is a moot point.<sup>56</sup>

The language of miracles also lent itself to describing sudden events that do not appear supernatural to the modern observer, with different ways of categorising: Constantine the Great's surprising conversion to Christianity was attributed to his miraculous victory in battle which God had presaged in

a vision or dream. Saints and their relics were also credited with miraculous powers; their succour was sought in times of illness or personal difficulties.

Miracles potentially threw up issues for the ecclesiastical hierarchy which was in the process of establishing itself: miracles endowed the person who effected them with a special personal authority, in the same way as their respective individual achievements did in the case of prophets, intellectuals, confessors or ascetics. Not much is written about such miracle workers, however, in contrast to the well-reported disruptive activity of many confessors in particular, perhaps because miracles were regarded with a certain ambivalence. But it is remarkable that, in the passage quoted, Irenaeus turns the congregation as a collective into a miracle worker. No single individual could lay claim to such power. Sometimes miracles were integrated into the church organisation: presbyters, entrusted with caring for the sick, were also credited with powers to facilitate healing by anointing the patient with oil in the name of the Lord. Any success they might have was therefore associated not with the individual person but their office; the forgiveness of sins that was meant to be the crucial factor in this anointing of the sick.<sup>57</sup>

Yet enemies suggested that the presbyters employed magic practices with foreign incantations.<sup>58</sup> Athanasius transmits many miracles for the monk Antonius, whose bishop he was and who became famous for his humility and ascetism (*Athan. Ant.* 57–64). Indirectly, however, the monk's deeds increased his bishop's glory since readers are told of the ascetic's exemplary obedience. This is another indication not to overestimate the importance of miracles to the early Christians. They might occur; the reports about Jesus' miracles generally found credence; miracles confirmed that God's grace rested on the Christians, but they were not uniquely Christian *per se* and might be worked by others too. At least the Christians, as far as we know, did not take any money for them.

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The miracle stories of the early Christian texts are an irritant for modern readers. Our temptation to regard belief in miracles as no more than a polar opposite to our own enlightened worldview is simply too great. From the point of view of many ancients, however, a lack of miracles would have been surprising given the claims of the first Christians to be close to God. Consequently, miracles played a major role in the stories about Jesus and the apostles, as a sign that God was active through them. Miracles were useful evidence of the power of those representing the Christian faith and, in that respect, surely were the catalyst for conversions.

On the other hand, Christian authors for the most part were concerned to emphasise that miracles did not represent an indispensable element of Christian teaching; indeed many did not attach any importance to them at all. Others viewed miracles as primarily a phenomenon of the early days of Christianity. The entire matter did, however, exercise contemporaries, Christians as well as non-Christians, far less than modern critics of Christianity. After all miracles as such were nothing out of the ordinary, including in the eyes of pagans. Christians easily made sense of this, given that most of them continued to believe that the pagan gods still existed and – as demons – had miraculous powers. Christians did of course consider it a point of pride that their God had greater powers – but the uniqueness of their faith lay in something else, such as their God's role as the saviour of humanity. Miracles were too common.

### 1.6 Festivals for All Citizens – and Some Christians

A novel by Xenophon of Ephesus, composed at the height of the Empire, demonstrates the power of Eros through the love story of Habrocomes and Anthia. The two meet for the first time at a festival in Ephesus dedicated to the virgin goddess Artemis. Xenophon's account of this episode illustrates key features of such a religious festival in Imperial Rome:

The local festival of Artemis was in progress, with its procession from the city to the temple nearly a mile away. All the local girls had to march in procession, richly dressed, as well as all the young men of Habrocomes' age – he was around sixteen, already a member of the Ephebes, and took first place in the procession. There was a great crowd of Ephesians and visitors alike to see the festival, for it was the custom at this festival to find husbands for the girls and wives for the young men. So the procession filed past – first the sacred objects, the torches, the baskets, and the incense; then horses, dogs, hunting equipment – some for war, most for peace.

After a lacuna in the extant text it continues with a description of the young women in the procession:

And each of the girls was dressed as if to receive a lover. Anthia led the line of girls. . . . Anthia's beauty was an object of wonder, far surpassing the other girls'. She was fourteen; her beauty was burgeoning, still more enhanced by the adornment of her dress. Her hair was golden – a little of it plaited, but most hanging loose and blowing in the wind. Her eyes were quick; she had the bright glance of a young girl, and yet the austere look of a virgin. She wore a purple tunic down to the knee, fastened with a girdle and falling loose over her arms, with a fawnskin over it, a quiver attached, and

arrows for weapons; she carried javelins and was followed by dogs [that was how Artemis usually appeared whom Anthia was copying]. Often as they saw her in the sacred enclosure the Ephesians would worship her as Artemis. And so on this occasion too the crowd gave a cheer when they saw her, and there was a whole clamour of exclamations from the spectators: some were amazed and said it was the goddess in person; some that it was someone else made by the goddess in her own image. But all prayed and prostrated themselves and congratulated her parents. . . . But when Habrocomes came in turn with the Ephebes, then, although the spectacle of the women had been a lovely sight, everyone forgot about them and transferred their gaze to him and were smitten at the sight. And so when the procession was over, the whole crowd went into the temple for the sacrifice, and the files broke up; men and women and girls and boys came together. (Xen. *Ephes.* I 2, transl. Anderson)

Thus commenced the love of Anthia and Habrocomes, which we will, however, not follow any further.

Xenophon's description of the event is very informative: everyone took part in the celebrations; local residents and visitors were mingling happily; the mood was joyous; the beautiful displays were a delight to watch, and white garb signalled gladness, though surely various colours must have gleamed in the light of the Mediterranean sun; and it seems all too understandable that this setting also served as a marriage market. Beauty was celebrated and erotic tension pervaded the air.<sup>59</sup>

Novels are not standard historical source material. But it seems legitimate to consult Xenophon here, given our concern is not his narrative as such, but the everyday environment that the author wanted to set it in and, so had to paint as authentically as possible. Inscriptions confirm the nature of such celebrations including providing information about festival regulations which are very close to what the novelist describes. Often residents would cover their houses in wreaths, clearly showing that they considered themselves part of the festival community. But it seems not everyone was equally keen: a number of civic regulations stress that *all* citizens, or certain age groups, had to take part in the celebrations without exception.<sup>60</sup>

Some probably simply lacked interest, others may have had fundamental reservations – in view of the indecent aspects involved. The Carthaginian Tertullian disgustedly reports on boisterous urban street celebrations for the emperor:

Splendid service, I assure you! to bring braziers and couches out into the open air, street by street to dine together, to make the city look like nothing



but a tavern, to make mud with wine, to rush about in droves for outrage, impudence and the incitements to lust. Is it thus that a people's joy is expressed in public shame? (Tert. *Apol.* 35.2, transl. Glover and Rendall)

Distinguished Romans must have been offended by such excesses as much as were the adherents of philosophical school calling for a more restrained way of life, and indeed Christians such as Tertullian.

Pagan religious festivals often encompassed elements that were characteristic of everyday contemporary culture and which remain well known to this day: theatrical performances, chariot races, gladiatorial combat and animal fights. They were all staged as part of religious occasions, accompanied by processions and prayers.<sup>61</sup>

Such games were incredibly popular and those of high status virtually competed to put on events that were as sumptuous as possible – along the lines of ancient euergetism, that is individuals taking on public responsibilities, and the emperor surpassed them all. Roman society was (ideally) shown to be a well-ordered one at such games, as during other festivities. Seats in the theatre were allocated to the different ranks in society: senators and members of the elite sat on thrones by the orchestra, that is the platform in front of the stage in the shape of a half-circle; slaves and women of lower status had to content themselves with seats right at the top of the stadium – everyone knew their place. So an occasion that, at first glance, looked like pure entertainment – even if some of the more educated did have their reservations – also reminded everyone taking part how their society was structured.

The modern observer is aghast at the thought that human beings had to lose their lives in animal fights and gladiatorial battles in the cause of public entertainment. Such occasions sometimes provided the setting for Christian martyrdoms, for public delectation, such as the death of Polycarp of Smyrna. The same applied to criminals or prisoners of war. Another purposes served by these games was that of publicly demonstrating the superior might of the state over criminals, while gladiator fights celebrated the spirit of victory and combat. Games were far more than mere entertainment: they also manifested the Roman order in its full power, which included demanding sacrifices.

We cannot assume that most ancients would agree with the notion that human life is to be valued in and of itself. After all, they grew up with the institution of slavery and were used to regard foreigners as barbarians. Only a few, such as those engaging with the philosophy of the Stoa, pleaded to respect each and every single life. Such circles voiced criticism

of gladiatorial battles. Other members of the elites who saw self-control as a virtue disapproved of the audience's enthusiasm, passion, the 'fan culture' surrounding crowd favourites who, legally, were *infames* ('infamous') thus lacking many civic rights, and much else besides. The erotic nature of some dramatic performances might also present a concern.

Tertullian adopts this type of approach dedicating an entire book, *De spectaculis*, to games of this kind. He appropriates the arguments of those pagans who criticised their own practices, as many other Christian apologists did. Games were immoral, aroused too much passion, led to desensitisation and distracted from matters of faith – this a specifically Christian perspective. In any case, the Last Judgment would be the greatest spectacle of all: 'And the magistrates who persecuted the name of Jesus, liquefying in fiercer flames than they kindled in their rage against the Christians!' (Tert. *Spec.* 30.3, transl. Glover and Rendall).

All this is part of a polemic to discredit the Roman way of life, of which Tertullian was a true master. For Christians something else was crucial: the religious dimension that Tertullian emphasised in other passages of his treatise. These occasions were not just about enjoyment, savouring power or civic community spirit: at their heart was honouring the ancient, pagan gods. To join in the Ephesian procession meant honouring Artemis. We cannot say how strongly pagan bystanders were aware of that aspect; it may even be wrong to ask that question, considering the deep interconnection of politics and religion at time. But many undoubtedly were serious about the notion that cults had to be observed correctly, as otherwise one risked incurring divine anger against the community. The actions of any citizens objecting to taking part would have consequences not only for them but everyone.

Yet what were Christians meant to do when some authorities such as Tertullian thought these occasions so objectionable? Many will have simply made themselves scarce. Naturally there are few reports of this, since after all those in question did not want to be noticed. Some offered resistance and thus became martyrs. Tertullian presupposes that others simply joined in, be it because they enjoyed the occasion or were afraid to attract (negative) attention (Tert. *Idol.* 13.1).

Another empire-wide cult blossomed besides the civic ones: that of the emperor himself, though it was not a centrally organised cult coercing the entire population to participate. Rather, it was a natural desire for many to honour the emperor like a god. Indisputably his superior power conveyed divine forces; the emperor appeared like a saviour when he intervened to give assistance. Many towns actively sought to observe the emperor cult,

indeed to receive official permission to introduce it, given that it contributed significantly to civic prestige.<sup>62</sup>

Naturally this cult was not without political implications. Those who observed it proved their loyalty to the emperor; those who objected came under suspicion of the opposite. This is what Christians faced. Their prayers at home and during their assemblies might give proof of their loyalty to the emperor, but in everyday life and the public eye they refused to participate in this cult. Festivals took place without them, in spite of their importance to the entire city and of bringing those living in the empire closer together. Such absence fuelled suspicion of Christians.

Tertullian by no means represents 'the' Christian position as such in his rejection; on the contrary, he attacks those of his fellow believers with his writings who attended games and indeed justified their participation.<sup>63</sup> If any works were written by them on this subject then they have been lost though Tertullian's polemics give an idea of their line of reasoning:

And are we to wait now for a scriptural condemnation of the amphitheatre? If we can plead that cruelty is allowed us, if impiety, if brute savagery, by all means let us go to the amphitheatre. If we are what people say we are, let us take our delight in the blood of men.

Tertullian alludes to the fact that Christians were accused of cannibalism in performing the Eucharist. He continues to take apart the next argument:

'It is a good thing when the guilty are punished.' Who will deny that, unless he is one of the guilty? And yet the innocent cannot take pleasure in the punishment of another, when it better befits the innocent to lament that a man like himself has become so guilty that a punishment so cruel must be awarded him. But who will pledge himself to me that it is always the guilty who are condemned to the beasts, or whatever the punishment, and that it is never inflicted on innocence too, through the vindictiveness of the judge it may be, the weakness of the advocate, the severity of torture? (Tert. *Apol.* 19.1–3, transl. Glover and Rendall)

Others who supported the games adduced reasons based on the theology of creation: anything God had created could not be wholly bad; moreover, no specific prohibition had been made (2). Some even adduced passages from the scriptures, for example "To rejoice with the rejoicing, and grieve with the grieving", is said about brethren by the apostle when exhorting to unanimity' (Tert. *Idol.* 13.2, transl. Thelwall, after Rom. 12.15). Those keen to celebrate read this as an exhortation to take part in communal civic events. Tertullian, on the other hand, interprets

the passage as referring solely to the Christian community. Certain opponents, in turn, adduced a tactical argument: 'But, however, many Christians have by this time induced the belief in their mind that it is pardonable if at any time they do what the heathen do, for fear "the Name be blasphemed"' (14.1, transl. Thelwall). In Tertullian's eyes this is nothing but pure opportunism despite alluding to another verse from the Bible (1 Tim. 6.1). For him, there is only one option, namely, to stay away, even if doing so was disadvantageous.

His tone of voice does not give the impression, however, that those Christians who wanted to be enjoy the celebrations constituted a small minority. What proportion they really represented is impossible to say. Every individual Christian continually had to rethink their choice anew, as religious festivals punctuated the rhythm of everyday life. Many will have decided to live with the raised eyebrows of strict Christians, so that they could celebrate joyfully with their friends; indeed, one could adduce verses from the Bible in support.

But there also were private celebrations which customarily involved sacrifices as well. Not even Tertullian could avoid recognising the dilemma this presented for Christians: 'Would we could escape seeing what is unlawful for us to do.' He words his recommendations accordingly:

But since the evil one has so surrounded the world with idolatry, it will be lawful for us to be present at some ceremonies which see us doing service to a man, not to an idol. . . . Regarding the ceremonies, however, of private and social solemnities – as those of the white toga [taken by boys coming of age; HL], of espousals, of nuptials, of name-givings – I should think no danger need be guarded against from the breath of the idolatry which is mixed up with them. For the causes are to be considered to which the ceremony is due. Those above-named I take to be clean in themselves, because neither manly garb, nor the marital ring or union, descends from honours done to any idol. . . . God no more prohibits nuptials to be celebrated than a name to be given. 'But there are sacrifices appropriate to these occasions.' Let me be invited, and let not the title of the ceremony be 'assistance at a sacrifice', and discharge my good offices seeing what is lawful for me. (Tert. *Idol.* 16, adapted from Thelwall)

Compared to Tertullian's usual style, this line of reasoning is rather tortuous.<sup>64</sup> He is aware that guests at private celebrations will witness sacrifices, but they may attend as long as they do not have to participate in them and have not been invited for this express purpose. At the same time this passage shows that Christians were part of non-Christian networks, regardless of their idiosyncrasies. In the same way that more Christians

took part in public celebrations than a Tertullian would have wished, we may imagine Christians being present at many a private occasion that called for mutual consideration.

But the *Acts of John* illustrate that there were other ways. A novelistic description of the life and works of the Apostle John, it too refers to Ephesus and its Temple of Artemis. Like the other texts mentioned here, it probably also originated in the second century, or more likely the early third.<sup>65</sup> What this story is concerned with is not just Christians not joining in, but in fact acting provocatively: 'After two days, then, was the birthday of the idol temple. John therefore, when all were clad in white, alone put on black raiment and went up into the temple. And they took him and essayed to kill him' (*A. Joh.* 38, transl. James). In these dire straits John, who had already come to prominence through miraculous healings in the theatre, is said to have held a splendid sermon, converting the assembled throng. The story ended with the collective destruction of the temple – a temple that all contemporaries, every reader who happened to be in Ephesus might still see standing there, intact.

The *Acts of John* is a documentary text as little as are Xenophon's writings. No Christian mob would have dared to destroy a temple at this time, least of all that of Artemis, one of the ancient wonders of the world. The *Acts of John* do, however, bear witness to Christian aspirations even if them razing this temple is no more than a product of the imagination. Their John intentionally indulges in acts of provocation that – as expected – bring him in mortal danger, and thus closer to the martyrdom he sought. The imagination of many embattled Christians must have been stirred by the idea of collectively destroying a pagan temple.

What we have here is a group looking for confrontation. Other passages in the *Acts of John* set out strict ideas of Christian practice, for instance in matters of self-control. Such groups remained marginal, though clearly not without influence, given that the text circulated in many copies and a number of translations and was quoted frequently. Indeed, at times Christians may well have dared instigate religious provocations. Certainly, church representatives in Spain at the beginning of the fourth century considered it necessary to criticise the destruction of cult images: anyone dying in the course of such actions was not be considered a martyr (Conc. Elv. *Can.* 60). But this type of action remained the exception, as did Callistus' interruption of a service in a synagogue.

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Sumptuous celebrations enriched the everyday life of Roman cities. In the eyes of many pagans they were harmless entertainment. Many Christians agreed, even if the majority of Christian voices that have come down to us are those of – generally moderate – opponents. They allow us to also make out the outlines of the arguments used by supporters which should be taken seriously.

The establishment of Christianity would not put a complete stop to such traditional festivities. After Constantine the Great had turned to Christianity, the games did not stop. While gladiatorial battles slowly came to an end in the fourth century, theatrical performances and chariot races continued to take place for much longer, freed from their previous religious context, even if accompanied by moralising criticism on the part of some Christian authorities. The glamour of the chariot races provided Christian emperors with an opportunity to appear in all their majesty and show themselves as being close to the people.

Change was gradual and slow: temples remained standing, cults continued albeit with diminishing influence and decreasing resources – before Constantine financial pressures had already started to place constraints on pagan festivals whose sumptuousness after all came at some cost. Little by little cults came to be prohibited; such prohibitions came to be tightened up especially under Theodosius I (r.379–95) and were increasingly followed through. Yet it is difficult to pinpoint precisely when such festivals ended entirely, especially since the Christians made many traditional celebrations their own. Reports of temples being destroyed become more frequent from the end of the fourth century. ‘The old tumbled, . . . yet new life grew from the ruins’,<sup>66</sup> with churches taking the place of temples. Religious communal rituals also continued to blossom: now, Christian processions passed through cities, on occasion even the countryside. The world did not have to make do without festive pomp.

### 1.7 Living among Demons

Christians not only lived every day in fear of those with other beliefs and of Roman officials: they were also assailed by evil spirits. These spirits might be concealed anywhere, in temples and statues, trees and mountains. Their power could be invoked by songs or oaths as long as their names were mentioned, and they could enter and possess a person through orifices. Pagans considered some of these spirits to be divinities. Although Christians did not venerate the ancient gods most still believed they existed and called them *daimones*. The ancient term had a far more comprehensive

meaning than the English word 'demon' derived from it. In pagan eyes *daimones* could also be forces of good.

While pagans venerated their gods they also believed that a range of other spirits existed, some evil, others benign – some hybrid beings, some dead that had returned, others low-ranking divinities. Some humans claimed to be experts promising to ward off evil and win the favour of benign, spirits. The beliefs of Syrians and Egyptians, Romans and Greeks varied considerably in this respect. Jews also had their own, in turn diverse, traditions about spirits and angels. However much those of higher standing and the educated might insist that they were not being fooled by common spirits, such beings did indeed form an integral part of everyday existence in antiquity.<sup>67</sup>

Christians had to be prepared: the Jesus of whom the evangelists tell had warned against the devil, Satan, and his army of demons; he had exorcised demons from the possessed. This battle continued. Satan stood for what is evil although ultimately he was subject to God. Demons were thought to be responsible for human sins, but also for natural disasters, possessions and illnesses, and not least for Christians being persecuted. Again and again demons attacked the true faith and sought to lead even ascetics astray. Antony's battles against the demons are said to have been particularly spectacular and gave later artists inspiration for graphic depictions.<sup>68</sup>

Such dangerous beings called for theological reflection: were they to be conceived of as physical or purely spiritual? Could they be seen? Or was that afforded only to a chosen few? Where did they come from? Did they feel pain? Question after question all of which are far from modern minds yet exercised those of the ancients. And these spirits cannot be dismissed as purely a matter of popular beliefs or superstitions. Origen, to name but one eminent theologian, is evidently convinced that demons, these divinities, were definitely in need of sacrifices. He clearly knew himself to be in agreement with his pagan adversary Celsus, but as a Christian drew a different conclusion: anyone who sacrificed to them did not only act against God's law but in fact even strengthened these malicious spirits. Later Christians were more inclined to think of demons as incorporeal beings.<sup>69</sup>

In a work by Minucius Felix, a contemporary of Origen, the character Octavius explains to a pagan interlocutor how Christians saw the work of demons:

There exist unclean and wandering spirits, whose heavenly vigour has been overlaid by earthly soils and lusts. These spirits, burdened and steeped in vices, have lost the simplicity of their original substance; as some

consolation for their own calamity, these lost spirits cease not to conspire for others' loss, to deprave them with their own depravity, and under the alienation of depraved and heathen superstitions to separate them from God. Such spirits are recognized as 'demons' by the poets, are discussed by philosophers, and were known to Socrates who, at the instigation and will of his attendant demon, declined or pursued certain courses of action. The Magi not only know of the demons, but by their aid perform their magical tricks; by their suggestion and connivance they produce their feats of conjuring, making things visible that are not, or things that are invisible. (Min. Fel. *Oct.* 26, transl. Glover and Rendall)

This passage demonstrates clearly how much the demons' power left Christians ill at ease. Fellow believers saw these very forces at work in the ubiquitous official cults:

These unclean spirits, or demons, as revealed to Magi and philosophers, find a lurking place under statues and consecrated images, and by their breath exercise influence as of a present God: at one while they inspire prophets, at another haunt temples, at another animate the fibres of entrails, govern the flight of birds, determine lots, and are the authors of oracles mostly wrapped in falsehood. Deceived as well as deceivers, they know not essential truth, and what they know they confess not to their own undoing. Thus they drag men downwards from Heaven, call them away from the true God to material things, perturb their life, disquiet their slumbers, creep into their bodies covertly, as impalpable spirits, produce diseases, strike terror into minds, distort the limbs, thus driving men to do them worship, in order that, when glutted with the reek of altars or with victim beasts, they may loosen the tightened bonds and claim to have effected a cure. From them too come the maniacs whom you see running into the street, soothsayers without a temple, raving, possessed, and whirling round. There is the same demoniac possession, though the guise of frenzy is different. (Min. Fel. *Oct.* 27, transl. Glover and Rendall)

Minucius Felix describes dangerous, agile, seemingly compelling forces that might threaten Christians at every turn. Of course, Christians heard and surely for the most part believed that Jesus had broken the demons' power. Indeed, some may have seen him first and foremost as a successful exorcist. His enemies, on the other hand, reviled him as leader of the demons (Mark 3.22). Indeed, some of them explained Jesus' success as a healer in this way, which in turn meant other Christians found themselves in a tight spot: what, then, was so unique about their Jesus, if others were able to work similar miracles? After all, belief in the miraculous abilities of religious experts crossed religious divides.



However, characteristically many Christians did in fact not consider themselves in need of specialists in their fight against the forces of evil. Rather, every believer had been empowered to tackle demons, as Origen emphasised. He views this ability as a sure sign of the power of the Christian faith: 'For generally speaking it is uneducated people who do this kind of work. The power in the word of Christ shows the worthlessness and weakness of the demons; for it is not necessary to have a wise man who is competent in the rational proofs of the faith in order that they should be defeated and yield to expulsion from the soul and body of a man' (Orig. *Cels.* 7.4, transl. Chadwick). Simply making the sign of the cross could suffice. This gesture became part of the ritual of baptism at the latest from the third century onwards, and in making it one rejected Satan. Still, gradually the office of exorcist emerged which is securely attested from the fourth century.

Some Christians also sought protection from evil spirits by other means, for instance using sweet-smelling incense or wearing amulets.<sup>70</sup> One might carry minute fragments of text, often excerpts from Holy Scriptures, on one's person, or small artefacts, perhaps to gain protection from demons or maybe simply to have one's favourite verse to hand.<sup>71</sup> For the church hierarchy that meant that individual believers were afforded greater autonomy vis-à-vis ecclesiastical authorities – who liked to reprehend such practices – by their faith in holy objects. Indeed, from the point of view of such authorities, it might get even worse: some Christians, like pagans, put faith in other authorities, often religious freelancers, dismissed by others as magi. As a result, objections against relying on such objects became loud, although the custom also represented one entry point for individuals to practicing the Christian faith.

Despite all fears – there was no need to consider oneself at the mercy of the demons. Hermas sounds sanguine in the second century: 'You will write therefore two little books, and you will send the one to Clemens and the other to Grapte. And Clemens will send his to foreign countries, for permission has been granted to him to do so. And Grapte will admonish the widows and the orphans. But you will read the words in this city, along with the presbyters who preside over the Church' (Herm. *Mand.*, adapted from Ehrman). Elsewhere in his work he claims that each person was accompanied by two angels. At times, the angel of justice entered their heart, rendering them virtuous; at other times, the angels of injustice filled them with evil (*Mand.* 6.2.3–10). But then Hermas started having doubts after all: was the individual Christian strong enough to heed the good angel? That was far from certain, given that the power of evil over

humanity would come to an end only with the reign of God. The lives of Christians were always threatened by evil forces, even if in principle they trusted in their ability to escape them by means of their faith.

Some took a very different view of demons: might it not be possible to utilise their powers for one's own purposes? Magical practices looking to force higher beings to act in certain ways were widespread in antiquity.<sup>72</sup> Those who used such means often simply sought protection, on the assumption that others were doing the same. How else was one to retaliate and protect oneself?

Most of the Christian writings that have come down to us condemn such magical practices, including early ones such as the *Didaché* (2.2; 5.1), thus illustrating their popularity. The Acts of the Apostles already report how sudaria and handkerchiefs taken from the body of Paul proved to have healing powers – thanks to God's power, as the author is eager to stress (19.11f.). Thus it was possible to justify such practices and one should not dismiss them wholesale as heretical or superstitious; to do so would in any case be anachronistic.

The Gospels painted Jesus as a successful miracle worker and exorcist. This may have given many in this world the idea to invoke his name in protective spells without actually viewing him as the sole bearer of salvation. For example, a gem of the late second or third century (Figure 1.4) bears the image of the crucified Jesus, otherwise only used in caricatures at this time. It appears someone trusted in Jesus' power, in one way or another – it is impossible to say with any certainty if this Jesus was the sole or just one source of succour among others.<sup>73</sup> The substantial Leyden Papyrus X preserves a varied miscellany of magical spells and instructions, often connected to dreams. Some sound Egyptian, some Greek, some Jewish. One element is a request for good dreams. The one addressed to *ursa major* reads: 'Take olive oil [from] a clean [vessel?] onto the left hand and say the [names. Then] smear yourself and go to sleep having your head towards the east.'<sup>74</sup> Someone later added Jesus' name and perhaps also that of the Egyptian god Anubis. It is hard to date this collection but much points to the main text having been created in the second or third century – yet these additions are even harder to date. Whether the individual who inserted Jesus' name would have described themselves as a Christian is a moot point. Their bishop for one certainly would not have approved.

Where in God's creation should these numerous beings in between take their place? How could Christian monotheists explain that other forces, in-between God and human beings, were at work? And not only the son of God and the Holy Spirit – difficult enough, but a multiplicity of diverse



Figure 1.4 Second- or third-century gem showing Jesus on the cross. The inscription reads: *Son, Father, Jesus Christ* (all in the vocative); what follows are in all likelihood magical names

beings? Angels, generally considered forces for good, in contrast to demons, were known from the Holy Scriptures of the Jews which also spoke of fallen angels who worked evil. Pagans likewise knew of certain messenger beings. Such beings were part and parcel of people's lived experience.<sup>75</sup> Their influence might manifest itself in very concrete terms as a devotee of the god Men, popular in Asia Minor, found out, explained in one of the so-called confession inscriptions:

Great is Men Axiottenus, who is the king of Tarsi! When a sceptre was mounted in case anything was stolen from the baths and a robe was stolen, the god took revenge on the thief and prompted him to bring the robe to the god some time after and the thief confessed [what he had done]. The god then ordered through an angel to sell the robe and put this proof of his power on a stele. In the year 249 (= 164–5 CE). (*TAM* 5.1.159, transl. HL)

The inscription does not say why the robe was not returned to its former owner. But it reveals how precise a message received from an angel could be, that is if we are not dealing with a messenger here, inspired by the god – the same word is used for both in Greek. This very doubt, however, demonstrates the concern with an in-between place here.

Christians also spoke of angels at work, for example when it came to the annunciation of Jesus' birth, and the nativity story continues to proclaim this notion even today. Angels could play an important role in visions of the end of the world, as shown by the Book of Revelation which repeatedly talks of angels. The author of the Epistle to the Colossians, who stands in a Pauline tradition, however, warns against believing in angels (2.18) – another indication for the popularity of such notions, also found in Christian inscriptions where angels may appear as protectors of tombs.<sup>76</sup>

In the second century Justin explains how dangerous demons came into being in the first place:

But if this idea take possession of some one, that if we acknowledge God as our helper, we should not, as we say, be oppressed and persecuted by the wicked; this, too, I will solve. God, when He had made the whole world, and subjected things earthly to man, and arranged the heavenly elements for the increase of fruits and rotation of the seasons, and appointed this divine law – for these things also he evidently made for man – committed the care of men and of all things under heaven to angels whom He appointed over them. But the angels transgressed this appointment, and were captivated by love of women, and begat children who are those that are called demons; and besides, they afterwards subdued the human race to themselves, partly by magical writings, and partly by fears and the punishments they occasioned, and partly by teaching them to offer sacrifices, and incense, and libations, of which things they stood in need after they were enslaved by lustful passions; and among men they sowed murders, wars, adulteries, intemperate deeds, and all wickedness. Whence also the poets and mythologists, not knowing that it was the angels and those demons who had been begotten by them that did these things to men, and women, and cities, and nations, which they related, ascribed them to God Himself, and to those who were accounted to be His very offspring, and to the offspring of those who were called His brothers, Neptune and Pluto, and to

the children again of these their offspring. For whatever name each of the angels had given to himself and his children, by that name they called them.<sup>77</sup>

The very fact that, in pagan eyes, the progeny of the fallen angels were divinities makes them reprehensible. But Justin also includes a reassuring message in his work: even if the demons continued to exert their evil influence, Jesus had broken their power and they were destined to be vanquished. Once more there is the tension between fear of evil powers and trust in their God.

Conceptions of the world that reckoned with numerous types of beings were especially widespread among the Gnostic spectrum. Almost all exponents of such teachings believed in a so-called demiurge who was responsible for creation as such, including its negative aspects. This corresponded with an ancient tradition: many, Christians as well as non-Christians, were faced with the difficult task of explaining the evil of the world given a good God, as well as of reconciling the changeability of this world with the unchangeability of God. The idea of an error-prone demiurge as the creator of the world, rather than the supreme God, stems from a Platonic milieu; other schools of thought reckoned with intermediate beings, angels or demons, who established a connection between human and divine spheres, given all manner of names.

Gnostic thinkers went as far as to assume that this demiurge had come about in the first instance only as the result of an error, made by a being called Sophia when she gave birth to the creator god without thinking. Many polemically identified this demiurge with the Jewish God. Usually such notions went hand in hand with the idea that the transition from the original status to this world had come about via a number of steps, and intermediate beings could play a major role in this process.

The *Apocryphon of John*, apparently popular as transmitted in more than one version and systematising Gnostic teachings, offers a more in-depth insight into the beliefs held by some in the Gnostic spectrum. Without a doubt this text has no connection to any of the men going by the name of John mentioned in the New Testament. Still, certain elements of the passage I quote here were already known to Irenaeus of Lyon (around 180 CE), even though the text as a whole probably belongs to the third century. This section tells of a time during the creation of the universe well before that of the earth and human beings (and also before the works of Sophia):<sup>78</sup>

For from the light, which is the anointed one, and the indestructibility, through the gift of the invisible Spirit the four lights [appeared] from the

divine Autogenes. He expected that they might attend him. . . . And the four [are] understanding, grace, perception, and prudence. And grace belongs to the light-aeon Armozel, which is the first angel. And there are three other aeons with this aeon: grace, truth, and form. And the second light [is] Oriel, who has been placed over the second aeon. And there are three other aeons with him: conception, perception, and memory. And the third light is Daveithai, who has been placed over the third aeon. And there are three aeons with him: understanding, love, and idea. And the fourth aeon was placed over the fourth light Eleleth. And there are three other aeons with him: perfection, peace, and wisdom [Sophia].<sup>79</sup>

This text describes human qualities as active forces that enter the world in a miraculous fashion: four great lights with names that sounded strange to Greek ears – and this text was originally composed in Greek. On the other hand, the human features that characterised certain aeons were familiar from their everyday lives as well as philosophy – and appeared in Coptic as Greek loan words. The text refers to an anointed one who may – but does not have to – be taken to be Jesus Christ since the Greek word can be understood both ways. What is said of this figure cannot, at any rate, be explained by reference to the New Testament. In all likelihood, then, this text was given an unequivocally Christian framework only at a later date. I therefore treat it as a Christian text, in line with the broad definition set out in my introduction, but want to be clear that some theologians reject such an identification. It is highly controversial whether it can be termed ‘Christian’ and is often considered part of so-called Sethianism.

It is easy to laugh at the weird and wonderful names appearing in such cosmologies or to dismiss them as mythological imaginations, especially because the beliefs held by the different groups making up the Gnostic spectrum varied so greatly. But that would be ahistorical. Gnostic thinkers presumably saw no independent beings behind these names but considered them to be partial aspects of the Divine. They attempted to convey insights that were difficult to put in words through their mythological stories, similar to Plato’s approach. Unfortunately, these names could easily be understood as referring to independent beings, or were intentionally read as such by many opponents who took it as a reason to accuse them of paganism. What was an integral part of their faith for Christians from the Gnostic spectrum was, for others, precisely the opposite, treason. An intellectual like Irenaeus, for example, talks of the teachings quoted with contempt, which would have lasting consequences given that he would later come to be considered the epitome of orthodoxy.

Regardless of any reservations one might have concerning the old gods – it was impossible not to encounter them. In the ancient world they were

omnipresent. Any female Christian who was married to a pagan could not but participate in the family cults, given the ideal of an obedient wife, or be present at dinners where modest sacrifices took place. This is the reason why Tertullian declares it to be ultimately unworkable to lead a mixed marriage (Tert. *Ux.* 2.6) – though his very objection to the practice suggests it will often have been the reality. Only a minority found it offensive that the poems read at school were full of the gods; some liked to join in belting out traditional songs featuring them (*Did. Apost.* 21.203.15–204.2V = 104.6–10 Fl.). Many found themselves obliged to swear oaths as part of doing business. Numerous tacit processes of accommodation are likely to have taken place in everyday life, presumably often involving pangs of conscience.

Other Christians went yet further: they did not shy away from revering the traditional gods or, to be precise, from taking part in their cults and rituals. This is suggested by the missives to the ‘angels’ or ‘messengers’ of the Christian communities in Pergamon and Thyateira, transmitted as part of the Book of Revelation, even if set within a highly polemical context.<sup>80</sup>

Again others had no qualms about participating in communal, pagan events even if they involved sacrifices. This applied to civic celebrations as well as those on a smaller scale: in the third century the Carthaginian Bishop Cyprian was incensed about his Spanish (former) fellow Bishop Martial:

Martial also, besides frequenting the shameful and vile banquets of the pagans for a long time in the collegium and placing his sons in the same collegium according to the custom of the foreign pagans and burying them with foreigners in a profane sepulchre, has furthermore attested publicly in acts in the presence of the ducenarian procurator [a high-ranking provincial magistrate] that he yielded to idolatry and that he denied Christ. (Cyp. *Ep.* 67.6, adapted from Donna)

This bishop evidently had no reservations about getting close to pagans, if we trust Cyprian’s agitated words: not only did he use the same cemeteries as they did – perhaps with a clean conscience as separate Christian graves were a relatively new phenomenon, he even celebrated communal dinners with them: Martial was a member of a so-called *collegium* which people joined in order to purchase a piece of land for communal burial. However, it was also usual for members to meet while still alive, and we may safely assume that any joint meals involved sacrifices being made. That was standard practice, though not for a committed Christian, let alone a bishop. To top it all, Martial had also surreptitiously obtained a certificate of sacrifice and even spoken publicly about performing them whereas

other, lay Christians had elected to die rather than doing so. He was removed from office – but strove to be reinstated, so clearly hoped that his conduct would find sympathy among other Christians.

We get the impression that Martial's lax attitude towards the Decian edict was only logical from his point of view, as he seemingly was much less concerned about keeping his distance than most Christians we know of. He was not alone in this stance: an ecclesiastical synod, said to have met in the early fourth century in Elvira in Spain,<sup>81</sup> threatened to exclude Christians from the Eucharist if they indulged in temple cults after having been baptised, even if they were on their deathbed (Conc. Elv. *Can.* 1). Anyone participating in sacrifices on their local civic capitol – which existed not only in Rome – had to expect a period of penance lasting ten years (*Can.* 59). These provisions strongly suggest that some who considered themselves to be part of the Christian community did nonetheless not seek to eschew contact with pagan cults. Clearly the aim was to discipline such individuals.

Christian communities in turn seem to have proven attractive to functionaries of pagan cults: the ordinance of the *Traditio Apostolica* explicitly prohibited such priests from being baptised (16). And the canons attributed to the ecclesiastical synod of Elvira expressly targeted those who made sacrifices as *flamines* (Conc. Elv. *Can.* 2), which had originally been priests of a god or the emperor but had accumulated other public functions in Imperial Rome. Provisions also had to be put in place for the eventuality that a Christian held the position of *flamen* but refrained from sacrificing: this was permitted as long as they did penance before their last communion (*Can.* 3). Any *flamines* who were catechumens, that is, preparing to be baptised, had to wait three years after their last sacrifice before being ready for baptism (*Can.* 4). It seems such individuals had become *flamines* not because of any religious motive but solely to take on a – prestigious – role of civic importance. Not everything has to be viewed as, first and foremost, an indication of a confrontation between Christians and pagans.

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Ancient Christians must worship only the one God. But for the vast majority of them angels, demons and other beings existed besides, or *below*, him. The pagan gods also fitted into this world, gods whose influence might be felt at every turn; they were thought to be just such demons. But it proved to be a complicated matter how to deal with these intermediate beings. They had powers that might be beneficial though also fearsome. Many thought they had to somehow exert influence over these



beings, or invoke them in one way or another, yet in doing so ran the danger of coming into conflict with Christian religious authorities. Some, in particular believers from the Gnostic spectrum, told detailed stories about these powers and developed virtual cosmologies based on them. In turn, their opponents frowned upon many of their ideas, even if they themselves believed in angels.

In fact, most contemporaries, whether Jews or pagans, and not just ordinary people, believed in such intermediate beings. Neo-Platonic philosophers, for example, who – like Christians – posited a supreme, truly divine being, still discussed other powers. Christian success would have been unimaginable if they had denied what most people considered an integral part of their daily experience, that is the power these beings had. This is a concept foreign to modern observers, and a feature of ancient Christianity that seems an irritant today though belief in these beings must have seemed familiar and unobjectionable in antiquity, as did miracles.

### **1.8 Early Christian Burials: Between Family and Church**

Burials were not very important. ‘Let the dead bury their own dead’ is one of the most famous sayings attributed to Jesus when he asked a disciple to follow him, even though the latter wanted to bury his father.<sup>82</sup> His was said to be an urgent message, news of the impending kingdom of heaven. His second coming, the Parousia, would take place soon; in fact, his disciples would live to see it. This was the expectation in which the first followers of Christ lived, hoping it would bring about their salvation. When Christians in Thessaloniki died without Jesus having actually returned, members of their community became concerned what would happen to them on Judgment Day and whether they might be saved. Paul endeavoured to reassure them (1 Thess. 4.13–18). Christians everywhere had to learn to live with the fact that this Parousia was being delayed, with more and more of their number dying – in a world where ministering to the dead was accorded the highest importance.

Many Jews expended great effort on ensuring that the bones of their dead were preserved. In Jesus’ world it was customary to first bury a body, then to collect the bones once it had decomposed in a so-called ossuary, preserving skeletal remains. Very different ideas were current about whether life after death existed, or whether perhaps a shared resurrection would take place, a movement of peoples to the mountain Zion, or yet others. To treat the dead with respect was an important duty in any case.

That was also the view of pagan Greeks and Romans. They did not, however, all share the same beliefs about death and the afterlife: philosophers at all levels of sophistication taught that no one ought to fear death, as a natural and entirely predictable event; some drew from that the conclusion simply to enjoy life. Others, in contrast, lived in fear of punishments in the underworld and thus strove to live a decent life. Still others reckoned that a bleak afterlife awaited each and every one anyway. Yet others like the Orphics looked forward to being able to trace the right path through the underworld following a good life. Those who were well connected were buried with gold platelets in their graves that described the path of choice through this underworld, almost like a travel guide. Mystery cults promised their followers that their afterlives would not be unhappy ones. Clearly, no single uniform notion of the underworld existed, and certainly not of a bleak beyond against which Christians might have juxtaposed their message of hope. One did not have to be a Christian at all in order to harbour hopes for an afterlife.<sup>83</sup>

Virtually all ancients worried greatly about securing an appropriate burial. For many, it was a question of guaranteeing life after death. Also widespread was the belief that those who had not received the right burial posed a threat. By giving the dead a correct burial one benefited them while at the same time guarding against their return as ghosts causing grief. But the importance of graves could not be ignored even by those who did not believe in an afterlife: they perpetuated the memory of the dead and preserved their fame posthumously. Opulent funerals demonstrated a family's wealth and pride – though laws repeatedly tried to limit such funereal excesses. Inscriptions affixed in the great burial complexes recorded the careers of the departed; portraits adorned many graves. Any passer-by was meant to learn of their renown – and that was a great many since these complexes were usually situated alongside arterial routes such as the Via Appia.<sup>84</sup>

The faith of most Christians was oriented entirely towards death, or rather, towards the resurrection.<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, Aristides does not view death as an event to be lamented by believers: 'And if any righteous man among them passes from the world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God; and they escort his body as if he were setting out from one place to another near' (Arist. *Apol.* 15.9, transl. Kay). Such a statement must have sounded downright provocative considering the ear-piercing laments and very public mourning rituals of the ancient world. It is no coincidence that Christians liked to speak of the dead having found peace, continuing the Jewish tradition. Actual reality will often have been different; Christians

were not immune to feeling grief for their friends and relatives. Yet the fundamental notion that Aristides gives expression to was common to all Christians: death did not represent the end but rather marked a transitory stage. Their concern was to find rest for a while until the end of the world.

Christians gave much thought to what this looked like, that is their eschatology. Matthew has Jesus speak hauntingly of the Last Judgment that he would hold over all nations rewarding the blessed and punishing the cursed (25.31–46). The Book of Revelation paints a picture of this end of the world until the new Jerusalem is established, with scenes that are as chilling as they are hopeful (20–1). It was just one of many stories both Christians and Jews created about the apocalypse. Many an early text vividly describes the rewards and – naturally much more fascinating – the punishments in the underworld. The terrifying nature of these punishments became a popular and fruitful literary topic for church writers. Such notions appear alien to modern readers, they seem forced, to some even morbid. Yet that is an anachronistic response. They are historical phenomena that ought to be taken seriously. Many did genuinely subscribe to these ideas, were afraid of being punished and hoped to be rewarded, affecting how their entire lives were lived, right up to their deaths. The paths the first Christians took only make sense when we bear that firmly in mind.

Ancient Christians also debated ideas that are more compatible with modern notions. Clement of Alexandria hints at the existence of places of purification for souls that might yet be redeemed (Clem. *Strom.* 7.34.4). Around 200 CE, the controversial Alexandrian theologian Origen expressed a hope that God would restore everything back to its original, pure state at the end of time, which not only the faithful but also others might look forward to. Arguably all Christians thought that the world might come to an end at any time.

But an eschatology did not provide an answer to the practical question of burial. Those Christians of whom we know rejected cremation (Min. Fel. *Oct.* 34.10; Tert. *An.* 51.4). This approach made them part of the mainstream from the second century on, if not before. So what should happen with the dead? We have few reports about the graves of the first Christians apart from some contested statements about those of the apostles. Presumably many were simply buried with their families. Others probably belonged to associations for those with limited means that offered their members a burial in communal plots. It is an appealing hypothesis that some Christian communities took the form of such funerary associations, but this cannot be proven. We certainly should

not approach what evidence we have with the preconceived notion that people wished to be buried only with their own religious community. Christians had multiple identities, including belonging to their families and any associations. The archaeological evidence does not enable us to identify any Christian who was buried in those types of context as such. Therefore, it is unsurprising that we do not know of any very early Christian graves.

A few inscriptions and graves are attested from the second century onwards, in an ancient region that seldom takes centre stage: Phrygia.<sup>86</sup> Phrygia lay at the heart of Asia Minor. It was landlocked; visitors encountered only a handful of cities; villages predominated; the mountainous terrain was in large parts inaccessible. The region was fragmented, split into many individual small settlements that often did not interact very much with each other. Administratively Phrygia belonged to the province of Asia, though its capital Ephesus was far away. Perhaps this lack of accessibility and the difficulty of controlling the region were the reasons that allowed Phrygia to develop certain unusual features, including of a religious nature. Numerous texts record henotheistic beliefs, meaning acolytes unequivocally confessed their faith in the one God (*henós* is the genitive of the Greek word 'one'), without denying the existence of others. Often mentioned are *heis theós*, 'the one God', and *theós hýpsistos*, 'the highest God' – and actually not only in Phrygian inscriptions. Such expressions might be understood as referring to the Jewish god, but these phrases could also resonate with Christians. A wording like this could carry both inclusive readings, recognising other gods besides the departed worshipped, and exclusive ones, as in the case of the Christian faith. Intentional ambiguousness is likely to have been of major importance in this world of religious pluralism.

We know there were very early Phrygian converts to Christianity. Some of the first missionary journeys reached this region and an ancient church community must have existed in Colossae given that an epistle attributed to Paul is addressed to it. Notable Christian prophets continued to visit Phrygia in the second century.

Evidently it would be mistaken to conceive of Christianity as solely an urban religion. It is simply that urban Christians are better documented, given that most of the well-known authors lived in cities. The rural population, whose importance in the early days is easily underestimated, in all likelihood interacted with itinerant preachers for much longer than did urban residents whose church communities might grow more easily to

a size where stable structures could develop. For a long time there was only one city proper in Egypt: Alexandria.

In the countryside the influence of officials may have been felt less strongly and fear of persecution was perhaps reduced, too; or so we may surmise this at least for a remote region such as Phrygia. It would explain why Christian inscriptions in full public view are to be found so early on. Stone inscriptions were among the most characteristic features of the Greco-Roman world. They were affixed in many places, in particular to buildings. A key function of theirs was to honour prominent individuals in these public spaces, but they also adorned funerary monuments, be it in full public view on graves alongside extra-urban roads, be it in burial sites open only to family members. It is also important to consider Christian inscriptions in the context of the objects that carry them, not only as texts but also as part of memorials that were intended to speak to the viewer as a single whole. And we should note that they were not intended principally as confessions of faith but served first and foremost to document familial belonging and social rank.

The tomb of Abercius of Hierapolis (*ICG* 1597), discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, is one of the first Christian epitaphs. He speaks of his travels far and wide and is not afraid to involve the Roman tax authorities when it comes to protecting his grave: anyone trying to usurp his burial plot should pay fines to them (and to the city Hierapolis). Such provisions were not out of the ordinary and demonstrate this Christian's trust in the imperial administration. However, this inscription by no means represents a specifically Christian, let alone formative, new style of epitaph – its length alone was unusual.

Not many other inscriptions can be unequivocally defined as Christian. Often the details are particularly contested.<sup>87</sup> For example, where one scholar sees a Eucharistic bread, another identifies a vine knife.<sup>88</sup> If a cross is featured that is a strong indicator but an element of doubt remains because it could also serve simply as a decorative motif. A fish and anchor were less ambiguous symbols. The fish retains its symbolic function to the present day and many are aware that the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, is an acronym, containing the first letter of each of the Greek words in the phrase: 'Jesus Christ, son of God, saviour', thus representing a brief confession of faith.<sup>89</sup>

Cases that are as open and shut as Abercius' epitaph are inscriptions that include the words: 'Christians for Christians'. This means that the individuals in question explicitly declared themselves to be Christians, albeit

not in the form of a church community but of a family. The usual practice is to give the names of the family members, followed by this phrase.<sup>90</sup>

The series of inscriptions featuring 'Christians for Christians' perplexes scholars in that it has not been possible to assign them to any specific group of Christians. It seems remarkable that this self-description could be made public in this way when it was still an indictable offence, with no care taken to keep the names secret. But were these inscriptions in fact put up in public places? Or did they perhaps belong in areas that were less easily accessible? Historians quickly reach the limits of the material evidence we have.

Some examples shed more light on the possibilities and problems: 'Apphia made this, while still living, for her husband Hermes and for herself and for the children themselves, Trophimos and Hermogas and Auxanon, sweetest children, in memoriam. Christians.'<sup>91</sup> No one mentioned in this inscription bears the name Aurelius which virtually every free person in the Empire had been allowed to adopt from 212/3 CE onwards, to perpetuate the memory of the Emperor Caracalla who had awarded Roman citizenship to almost all free individuals across the empire. This means the inscription may possibly be earlier. In that case this funerary altar would be one of the very earliest memorials for a Christian family, a family that seemingly saw their children die young. However, such an early date is not the only possibility as there may have been other reasons for not including the family name Aurelius.

Only a very few tombstones suggest an eventuality that might have been expected to be more of a norm, which is just one family member having converted. One possible example comes from Sebaste: 'Menophilus and his wife Ammia for Paithus, the brother, a Christian; and Alexandria for Paithus, her husband, and their children; they made this, in memoriam.'<sup>92</sup> Again, this interpretation is also not entirely secure as it is possible that the intention was simply just to describe the deceased in more detail. At times intra-Christian disputes spilled over into the epigraphic record: inscriptions immortalised the beliefs of Encratites who inveighed against drinking wine, revealing a rather peculiar notion of the Eucharist.

Clearly identifiable as Christian are burials of individuals who held church offices. At times the use of certain formulaic phrases allows us to deduce membership of Christian groups, as in the case of the gravestone for Paulus from Iconium, modern-day Konya (Turkey), dated to the second/third century: 'Domna, a most venerable lady, erected the gravestone for Paulus. If anybody does damage to it, he will be answerable to the one who comes to judge the quick and the dead.'<sup>93</sup> Other epitaphs speak

of the judgement of the gods; this formula certainly indicates a Christian context – though we cannot be sure whether non-Christians understood this.

Other inscriptions may be given a Christian interpretation, without it being the only reading possible: a tomb from around Laodicea Combusta, probably from the third century, depicts a couple at its the centre and bears the following inscription: ‘Lord, help your servant Matrone and your servant Timotheus. I, Timotheus, son of Meirus, have erected this gravestone while alive. Whoever opens it will have to answer to God.’<sup>94</sup> It is very much in keeping with the customs of the region; unusual is only the final phrase, that is the mention of having to answer to God. It may be endowed with a Christian meaning but Christians were, after all, not the only ones to believe in one single God.

An inscription discovered in Eumeneia, modern-day Emircik (Turkey), can be dated to the end of 246 CE:

Year 331, month 2. Aurelius Alexander, son of Seius, of the tribe Apollonis, and Aur. Zenonis, his wife, constructed the tomb (*heroon*) for themselves and for their children Ammia and Messalina and Zenonis and Alexandria, whichever of them dies without children. If anyone interts another dead body, he will have to reckon with God, both now and forever, and may he have no share in God’s promise; and whoever prevents any of them from being buried here, may he be subject to the afore-mentioned disposition.<sup>95</sup>

The phrase about any potential tampering with the grave (‘he will have to reckon with God’) is often simply called the ‘Eumenean formula’, based on its popularity across that region; it could be employed by Jews and Christians alike. But the word *epangelía*, here rendered as ‘promise’, is characteristic of Pauline theology and might have provided a clue as to Alexander’s faith to those in the know. If that is the case, then he clearly did not mind belonging to a civic subgroup that was named after a pagan god, the *phyle Apollonis*. Neither would he have been concerned about terming his grave a *heroon*, a monument for a semigod (*heros*). Both are eminently possible: *heroon* was a word commonly used by Christians; the name of the *phyle* after all an official one.

Some evidence appears to belong to neither one world nor the other, like a verse inscription also from Eumeneia, one side of which reads:

‘While he was still alive, a certain Gaius, a lawyer, and educated by the Muses, erected this gravestone for himself, and for his dear wife Tatia, and for the children mourned, so that they may possess this eternal house together with Rubes, the servant of the great God.’ But on the other side we read (Figure 1.5):



Figure 1.5 Gaius' inscription on an altar-shaped stone; the passage translated starts lower down



I did not have much wealth to live on, nor many possessions, but I successfully acquired a good education, with which I helped my friends as much as possible, while I showed the zeal I possessed to all. For I took pleasure in helping when someone needed it, just as in others wealth brings joy to the heart. But let no one who is blinded by riches think haughtily. For all there is one Hades, and the end is the same. Is there anyone who is great in possessions? They receive no greater portion of earth for their grave, but the same. Be zealous, rejoice your souls always, mortals, since a pleasant living is also the measure of life. That's it, friends. After this, what more is there? Nothing more! A stele speaks this, and a stone. Not I! Doors are here and ways to Hades, but paths to the light are closed off. Indeed the righteous always show the way to resurrection. This has God . . .<sup>96</sup>

This is where the inscription breaks off. The epitaph commemorates an educated yet not overly wealthy citizen of Phrygian Hierapolis who had lost children; in it he aims to impart his wisdom, which accords with a widespread ethics of education and readiness to help others which was unlikely to be in any way controversial. It is not clear what his relationship to Rubes (the Graecising form of the Jewish name Ruben) was. When the latter is termed 'servant of the great god' this likely refers to a Christian priesthood; at least this is what the language used in the inscription suggests.

For modern readers this text seems contradictory: on the one hand, Gaius speaks of Hades, but then also of the resurrection. However, the Greek word *hades* is a word common in the New Testament; the standard translations often render it as 'hell'. Conversely the Greek word for 'resurrection', *anastasis*, is comparatively unambiguous in referring to a Christian context. The picture of the afterlife that he paints, to distance himself from the words of the stele claiming that after death there is nothing, is certainly conventional. Gaius made clear that he lived in a Christian environment but did so in words that others might also easily understand. His was not the attitude of a missionary; rather, he professed a certain philosophy in a way that was customary across the Roman world, and his verses provide yet more evidence that Christian teachings must have appeared like a philosophy, quite different from the usual religious cults.

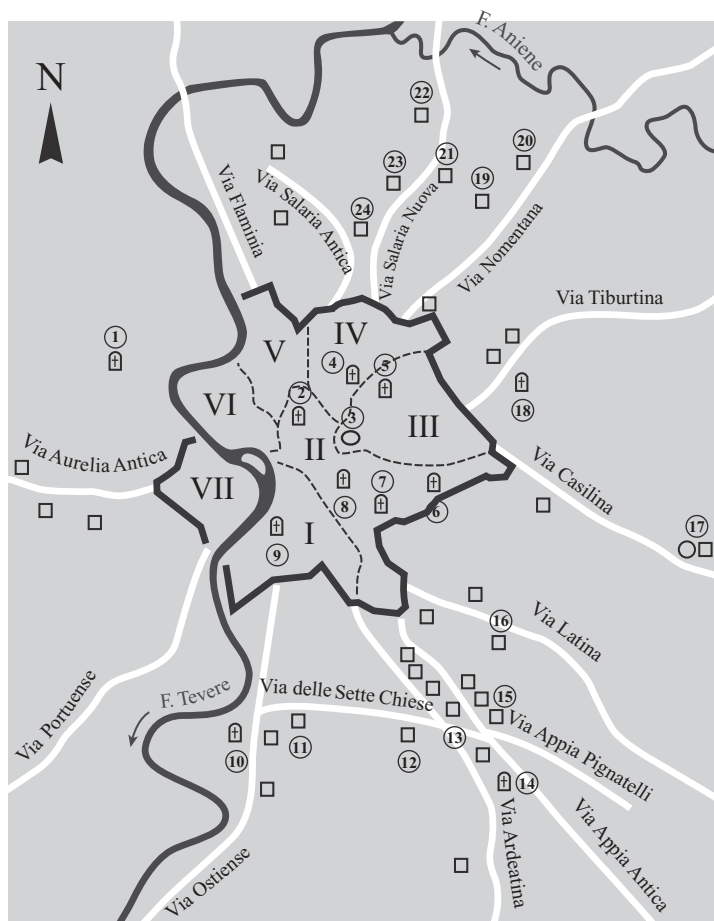
Such epitaphs illustrate the range of Christian attitudes more so than our literary sources, by showing how diverse the focus of individual Christians was. Without doubt Christians could not always be open about their faith, and there may well be clues in inscriptions that we no longer know how to pick up on. Some may simply not have wished to leave a record of their faith, be it out of fear, be it because they thought it

inappropriate. At the same time these inscriptions demonstrate how Christians gained visibility and not least how, over time, they came to develop their own epigraphic language. It may even be that some of the first Christians simply cannot be identified because, in the absence of an alternative, they employed traditional epigraphic formulae.

Moving from the provinces to larger cities, in Rome we encounter a completely different Christian world. Its catacombs (Figure 1.6) are still famous today, but these burial sites did not, as often suggested in modern films, act as places of refuge during persecutions. Subterranean burial sites were not a specifically Christian phenomenon; indeed, they became increasingly popular in Rome since burials above ground were unaffordable for the masses. Adherents of different cults were buried side by side in many catacombs, often developing from smaller burial sites underground, the *hypogea*.<sup>97</sup> But the Christians endowed the catacombs with an entirely new and different dimension.

That Christians began to establish their own burial sites as Christians at some point was remarkable, dissolving ties to the traditional networks of family and associations. Any of them who were members of one of the common associations were expected to participate in communal celebrations which invariably involved modest sacrifices to the gods. We have a report of one such incident, from as late as the mid-third century, involving no less a personage than a bishop, roundly criticised by Cyprian (*Ep.* 67).

Aristides appears to imply that Christians held a communal funeral ceremony when one of their number had passed away, in the second-century passage quoted herein. Tertullian considers taking care of burials an important obligation of Christian communities (*Apol.* 39.6). In some cities Christian burials started to occupy separate sections around 200 CE, even if not necessarily an entire cemetery of their own as such (Tert. *Scap.* 3.1). These areas were sufficiently well known for worries to arise that they might become a target of desecration (Tert. *Apol.* 37.2). Depending on each place and family, burial practices will have varied considerably, and often the first question facing each individual Christian was to decide whether they actually wished to be buried among Christians. In fact, the issue of burial places should not be viewed primarily from an administrative point of view: it was the prerogative of a well-to-do Christian if they wanted to make a parcel of land they owned available exclusively to fellow believers.<sup>98</sup> This lack in uniformity in burial practice corresponded to the plurality across Christian communities more generally. Is it actually realistic to expect a specifically Christian, let alone uniform, design for epitaphs or indeed burial sites as early as in the second century?



- Katakomben
- ⊞ Basiliken
- Mausoleen
- Aurelianische Mauer
- I-VII Kirchenbereich

- |                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1 San Pietro               | 13 Callixtus-Katakombe                  |
| 2 SS. Cosma und Damiano    | 14 San Sebastiano                       |
| 3 Kolosseum                | 15 Praetextatus-Katakombe               |
| 4 Santa Pudenziana         | 16 Katakombe der Via Latina             |
| 5 Santa Maria Maggiore     | 17 Marcellinus-Petrus-Katakombe         |
| 6 San Giovanni in Laterano | 18 San Lorenzo                          |
| 7 Santo Stefano Rotondo    | 19 Sant' Agnese fuori le Mura           |
| 8 Santi Giovanni und Paolo | 20 Coemeterium Maius                    |
| 9 Santa Sabina             | 21 Namenlose Katakombe an der Via Anapo |
| 10 San Paolo fuori le Mura | 22 Priscilla-Katakombe                  |
| 11 Commodilla-Katakombe    | 23 Jordanier-Katakombe                  |
| 12 Domitilla-Katakombe     | 24 Pamphilus-Katakombe                  |

Figure 1.6 This map illustrates the great number of Christian catacombs in Rome; the Callistus (= Calixtus) catacomb lies towards the south

Most scholars posit that the Roman Bishop Zephyrinus, in office around 200 CE, started the unbroken line of succession in which the later universal church placed itself. He is said to have appointed Callistus, an expert in financial matters, to manage a cemetery; however, the evidence is not entirely conclusive.<sup>99</sup> In any case, a grave complex developed underground, known today as the Calixtus catacomb. Its passageways extend over ten kilometres and across five stories. Individual graves are of a comparable size; the design of the *tituli* which recorded the names of the dead, and sometimes those of relatives, is also similar.<sup>100</sup> There are many indications that these catacombs were established to serve communities of believers. They enabled Christians to bury their dead together and to commemorate them, uncontaminated by pagan rites, though mythological frescoes evidently did not pose an issue. At the same time this arrangement allowed poorer Christians to receive a burial; likewise, those who had left their family because of their faith might rest among fellow believers. Members of associations that also organised burials had to be able to contribute a certain amount; Christians liked to boast that they afforded funerals even to the poorest, whose bodies would otherwise have been thrown into any old pit (Orig. *Cels.* 8.30). All that made church communities appealing and strengthened their cohesiveness.

Such a turn of events was by no means a foregone conclusion. Initially, Roman Christians were distributed across a number of communities. It was only gradually that a moniscopacy emerged in Rome; in all likelihood the period around 200 CE was formative in this process. The community's appeal must have been increased by the shared cemetery, organised by the bishop who in this way demonstrated his claim to legitimacy in his office over any rivals. Callistus himself later became Bishop of Rome and is now recognised as a pope by the Catholic Church; at the time his position was definitely not undisputed – his most significant rival was Hippolytus who formed something of a church community of the educated.

These catacombs offered a physical manifestation of the community's structure: all Bishops of Rome from Pontian (230–5 CE) to Eutychian (275–83 CE) were buried there, in a chamber of their own, the so-called *cubiculum* L, with just one exception. Their close proximity encapsulated the continuity of the line of those who had held this office, surely contributing to their legitimacy. And yet their grave niches were modest, far removed from the large tombs later erected by the popes of the Renaissance and Baroque eras. Their epitaphs likewise were succinct. The title of bishop was all that was needed while other members of the elite listed all the offices they had held in great detail. The Greek epitaph



Figure 1.7 The plain yet sophisticated epitaph of Bishop Eutyichian in the Calixtus Catacomb

for Eutyichian, for example, simply reads, albeit in very beautiful lettering, *Eutyichianós epískopos* ('bishop Eutyichianos', *ICUR* 4.10616; cf. Figure 1.7). But for those in the know an element of sophistication has been incorporated: the Greek chi that stands for our 'ch' is rendered in an unusual way, with a vertical stroke that might represent an 'i', so suggesting reading *Jesus Christos* in it. This symbol is close to the 'y', which may stand for words such as *hyiós* ('son') or *hygieía* ('health') – though this second point is disputed.<sup>101</sup> It is not unexpected that the inscription was written in Greek: the Christian community in multilingual Rome increasingly came to employ Latin only in the third century.

We have a Latin inscription from around the same time, also from the Calixtus Catacomb, containing some errors, likely by common people: 'Pastor, Titiana, Marciana and Chreste made this tomb for their well-deserving son Marcianus, in Jesus Christ, our Lord. He lived 12 years, 2 months and . . . days. He received grace on September 20 when the consuls were Marinianus and Paternus the second time. He gave up (his soul) on September 21. May you live among the saints in eternity.'<sup>102</sup>

This epitaph was put up in 268. The son of a Christian family had died young; it had been made sure that at the last he had received 'mercy', probably meaning baptism, in the hoped of him attaining eternal life. In this way, inscriptions afford a glimpse into Christian lives. It seems that in this case a child had been baptised on their deathbed, surely a comfort for believers. However, many inscriptions are more succinct, containing nothing but certain standard Christian formulae and a few dates.

As every visitor to Rome knows, there were many other catacombs besides that of Calixtus, perhaps in part paid for by private individuals.

Exploring these catacombs, one encounters very different types of graves. The frescoes are striking; they contributed to the emergence of a specifically Christian art while also illustrating Christian practices such as prayer or communal celebration. Yet many of these visual decorations illustrate something else too, as do the different dimensions of the graves: they render visible the social differences that emerge within groups, even at this locus of communality of the church community. Moreover, some Christians could afford being buried in other settings, for instance Prosenes, a freedman of the emperor, who died in 217 CE after a long career in the imperial administration and is one of the first Christians for whom we have secure epigraphic evidence in Latin (*CIL* 6, 8498). As result a range of Christian burials developed.

The catacombs were part of *necropoleis*, 'cities of the dead', that extended along the arterial routes out of Rome, as was common practice in antiquity. Many were apprehensive about visiting such places. Dubious characters frequented the cemeteries of ancient cities, as did furtive lovers, as graffiti and novels prove. Yet these places primarily served to honour the dead, although this often was associated with a sense of impurity. A corpse was regarded with some dread, and diverse rites ensured that cultic impurity was averted. Christians on the other hand did not associate these kinds of notions with the dead but rather that of hope. At least that was what their authorities tried to make others understand: they were, after all, living in expectation of the resurrection which many imagined as a bodily one.<sup>103</sup> Consequently, initially rituals – in the sense of protective measures against the power of the dead – had no place in their world.

Pagans used to commemorate the deceased with a very diverse range of rituals, while at the same time protecting themselves from them. It was popular to furnish the dead with certain objects, such as tools, guides for the underworld or money, to be on the safe side. Initially this was not Christian practice, although in the third century gold cups, coins and lockets were sometimes set into the plaster of the graves in a catacomb.<sup>104</sup>

Specifically Christian funeral rituals emerged, it seems, rather late and developed first not in a community but family context. Christians witnessed many sumptuous funerals that served to represent the families' social standing but there is no evidence of them adopting similar practices in the first centuries. It appears they cultivated a modest attitude. Without doubt many standard practices continued, like washing the dead, anointing them and laying them out. Cautious Christians dispensed with elements that might be interpreted as reflecting a cult: 'you reserve your unguents for funerals; refuse garlands even to the graves', as Minucius Felix

has an opponent of Christianity say (*Oct.* 12.6, transl. Glover and Rendall), affording us a glimpse into Christian funeral customs at the time: Christians usually appear not to have used wreaths,<sup>105</sup> though they definitely burned incense (*Tert. Idol.* 11.2).

One important function of ancient funerals was as a public representation of the family as a whole and its achievements. It would be dangerous to reduce everything relating to death to a religious dimension. Striving for renown among later generations was, it appears, an important motive. What discussions will have taken place among families when one of them turned to Christianity? Did they reach a compromise? Did those who remained pagan perhaps forego naming their gods? Did the Christian simply tolerate the traditional rituals? Or did they absent themselves? Did they fall out with each other? Each case will have been different. Many Christians clearly drew on familiar features, namely funeral banquets for the dead. Tertullian, however, rules out taking part in pagan funeral rituals (*Spec.* 13.4) – although the very fact that he mentions it implies that Christians did precisely that.

Miscellaneous sources attest which rituals Christians were allowed to employ. The first followers of Christ may have used ossuaries like (other) Jews, despite a lack of any real evidence. Different witnesses afford glimpses of practices they consider standard: priests said certain offices before the dead were laid to rest (*Tert. An.* 51.6); the dead were remembered in the service (*Cypr. Ep.* 1.2). The third day after their death was celebrated at the grave (*A. Joh.* 72), in remembrance of Jesus' resurrection. Each year relatives offered the dead 'gifts' (*oblaciones*) on their birthday, here meaning the anniversary of their death (*Tert. Cor.* 3.3). Christians often observed the cult of relics – and especially that of the martyrs – at their grave sites, which is bound to have exerted a strong influence on their cultic practices. Indeed, it was at such locations that churches would later be founded.

Numerous local variations are also more than likely. Often church authorities thought they had better intervene. A canon ascribed to a Spanish synod that allegedly assembled in Elvira in the early fourth century strictly prohibits lighting candles in cemeteries during the day, since otherwise the spirits of the dead might be disturbed (*Conc. Elv. Can.* 34) – this reveals a very tangible conception of the deceased that someone like Tertullian surely would have disapproved of. It was probably considered a pagan custom. Moreover, it seemed necessary to forbid women to stay in cemeteries overnight as a danger to their virtue (*Conc. Elv. Can.* 35). The fact that cemeteries also served as meeting points for lovers has already been mentioned.

Irenaeus claims that Christians belonging to the so-called Valentinians had poured a certain type of liquid over the deceased's head, speaking certain words. The souls of the dead had to repeat these words to attain freedom (Iren. *Haer.* 1.21.5). The core of his account is corroborated by evidence from that group itself according to which the believer had to expect the following enquiry after death: 'When he also says to you: "Where will you go?" you are to say to him: "To the place from which I have come, there shall I return."' Elsewhere the believer also had to mention Achamoth, the embodiment of the female, as well as the primal father. All these passages offer evidence of a distinct set of knowledge important to this group that was based on words Jesus had addressed to his brother James before the latter's martyrdom.<sup>106</sup> In this way the deceased will escape attacks by the so-called detainers. The Orphics were given similar objects to help them along on their journey, as noted. The Valentinians fulfilled the desires nursed by many people who sought guidance for the afterlife. Someone like Irenaeus of course frowned upon the expectation that one might be able to steer one's own journey there.

Christians did hold celebrations to remember the dead at their graves, even if in all likelihood not in such a nuanced way as in other religions. Places of burial could not but become places where people congregated, and Roman public authorities identified them as such. In 258 CE the Emperor Valerian forbade setting foot in cemeteries, though it is disputed to what extent this prohibition relates to graves close to the tombs of martyrs.<sup>107</sup>

More sumptuous Christian tombs can be found from the second half of the third century onwards. In Rome we increasingly encounter longer inscriptions that focus on the community of the deceased with Christ.<sup>108</sup> More and more Christians were buried in sarcophagi. They clearly had no qualms about reusing sarcophagi with traditional motifs but appear to have liked closing them with lids depicting Jonah: this Old Testament prophet had been swallowed by a sea monster but spewed out again after three days, thus it seemed presaging Jesus' resurrection.<sup>109</sup> Gradually Christian imagery came to prevail. Peter was particularly popular in Rome.

Christian tombs became both more opulent and visible once Christianity had become the religion of emperors. But this does not mean that cemeteries included all Christians as the equals they were from that time on. At first there were no 'parish cemeteries' that would hold all members of a community. Many families held on to joint burials, even if they were of different religious persuasions. As a result, pagans and Christians often were buried next to each other as late as the fourth



century: what mattered in burials was not solely religion, but family standing and cohesion, which for many were more important than their beliefs.

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The ancients were preoccupied by concern about their burial, however vehemently some philosophers may have insisted that death did not in fact signify anything. Modern tourists think of magnificent burial complexes such as those along the Via Appia or outside the gates of Pompeii. Such opulent tombs were afforded only to the privileged few. The less well-off could ill afford their own graves, certainly not on their own, but often also not even as a family. Consequently, it was common practice to maintain a shared place of burial; special associations came to be formed for this very purpose, often holding communal celebrations at which pagan gods were honoured as a matter of course. Members of these associations had the comfort of knowing their names would be recorded and their memory thus kept alive, even if individual graves were not particularly sizeable. In a densely populated city like Rome (and, by the way, not just there) one had to go underground and catacombs developed.

The first tombs where Christians are identifiable as such date from the second century, appearing first in the countryside, in remote Phrygia, where they were still buried within a family context, then in Rome and elsewhere. It is remarkable how long it took until specifically Christian grave complexes were created. The reasons are various: many will have preferred to be laid to rest with their family, as was customary; moreover, Christian property was limited; then there was the fact that Christians accorded low importance to burials and graves in view of the imminent resurrection. But the more Christians put down roots in this world, the more important and visible their places of burial became, some of which continue to bear powerful witness to how they saw themselves.

### **1.9 ‘We Have No Shrines and Altars’: Building Community**

To this day church buildings offer physical evidence of the presence of Christianity. But the building type of a ‘church’ in its manifold manifestations represents a late development, given that initially many of its embattled believers wished to remain inconspicuous. Still, they needed meeting places where they could lead their life as a community.<sup>110</sup> But where were these followers of Christ to congregate? Where could they celebrate their baptisms and Eucharist, where proclaim their faith?

Improvisation surely was the order of the day for the first Christians, especially in the very early days when they expected the world to end imminently. The Acts of the Apostles make a few mentions of private residences as places where regular meetings were held, as do Paul's epistles. The Acts of Paul state that the apostle had leased a barn outside of Rome for his activity as a preacher (11.1). Such venues offered ample space to listen to sermons, converse and hold communal meals.

Scholarship often terms them house churches, though it should be noted that gathering in someone's home did not necessarily mean that only members of that family would join, even if the Greek word *oikos* can refer to both a house and family. Ordinarily, local followers of Christ met in these houses. It is possible that those who made their home available were its owners though by no means essential. All that was required was a space that could be shared, in that sense a church, even if this space might otherwise be used for very different purposes. That was less strange than it may seem to a modern observer: governors for example might hold their courts at improvised locations including private residences. What this shows is that the word 'house church' is a useful stopgap term that encompasses a diverse, proliferating reality the details of which we can but speculate about.<sup>111</sup>

Other spaces were also used to proclaim the good news and to pray. The followers of Christ in Jerusalem frequented the Temple. Elsewhere they met in the synagogues to proclaim Christ as the Messiah. That did not always go well; the Acts of the Apostles are full of reports of Christian missionaries being chased from the Temple and synagogues, sometimes by force.

At least there were options other than the synagogue: in Ephesus Paul used a *scholé* for his preaching (Acts 19.9), a term used for places where the associations so often found in ancient cities met. But we also hear of gymnasia and baths as spaces where Christians could proclaim their faith. Christians emulated philosophers or exponents of other groups offering instruction and guidance to live by, by rehearsing their teachings in such places. Graves increasingly turned into meeting points for Christian celebrations, be it sites commemorating martyrs, be it communal grave sites like the catacombs in Rome which were, in part, also owned by Christian communities. Church buildings as such came to be erected only later.

Received wisdom at the time was that no consecrated church building was required: the community itself, or specific individuals, were considered holy. Christian rituals could be performed in improvised locations: a baptism might be held 'where there is water' (1st *Apol.* 61.3, transl.

Dods) it says as late as the second half of the second century – the author describes that ritual with great appreciation of detail. The Christian God could show himself anywhere, so did not require a building, in contrast to the old gods, the demons. People were his real temple, as Clement of Alexandria proudly states (*Strom.* 7.29.3f.), picking up a statement expressed by Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, proclaiming his teachings at the Athenian Areopagus (17.24–9). This attitude made Christians stand out in a world where the pagan majority vied to erect the most magnificent temples, while the Jews lived in hope of their magnificent and extensive Temple being rebuilt.

Towards the end of the second century, Minucius Felix had a certain Octavius who defended the Christian faith ask a telling question in his dialogue of the same name: ‘Do you suppose we conceal our object of worship because we have no shrines and altars?’ (*Oct.* 32.1, transl. Glover and Rendall; cf. 10.2). The absence of Christian sanctuaries is taken as read. But Octavius’ question also shows that this fact led to distrust, while Christians themselves did not see it as a deficit.

It must have appeared strange to many that Christians met in enclosed spaces. They shared this practice with the Jews, as well as with the followers of Mithras and other mystery-type cults. Others must have felt uneasy when they heard rumours that Christians partook of something they referred to as a ‘body’ when they met, although this body did not come from a sacrificial animal. Perhaps these Christians did have something to hide, after all? Certainly, pagan cults did take place under the open sky, visible to everyone, in front of the temples that were entered only by the priests – as had also been the case with the Jewish Temple.

It is likely that the move towards having special spaces for Christian celebrations was a gradual one, and probably also happened in different ways in different places: perhaps communities came to meet with such regularity in a certain space that its other functions receded, and slowly came to serve only for holding services. In fact we increasingly hear of buildings of that kind, at times referred to using the Greek word *ekklesia*, which originally meant the congregation that assembled together; they may be taken to be churches (Hippol. *Comm. Dan.* 1.20). Nonetheless they were not thought of as holy spaces distinguished for example by being consecrated; rather they remained nothing more than functional – albeit important – Christian spaces. In this they resembled synagogues which, as edifices, were also not inherently holy. Although Christians evinced an increasing tendency to consider these spaces sacred, this notion was very slow to evolve, only reaching its culmination in the Middle Ages.<sup>112</sup>

Some of these buildings for holding divine services were already of a considerable size as early as 200 CE, with several rooms. When Edessa suffered from flooding in 201 CE, water entered into a building that a Syrian source calls the Christians' temple; it may have formed part of a wider complex, but certainly lay within the city walls (*Chron. Ed.* 18, 2.4). While the Syrian source dates from the sixth century, this detail very likely derives from a (near-)contemporary chronicle. At the time Edessa was not part of the Roman Empire but capital of the autonomous kingdom Osrhoëne, though dependent on Rome, where Christianity had gained a foothold early on. This account sounds credible albeit late, given that the city was one of the first Christian centres.

Also around 200 CE Origen gives the impression that his church space formed part of a wider complex. He disgruntledly observes in one of his sermons: some 'do not even know if they the scriptures are read, but are occupied with mundane stories in the furthest corners of the Lord's house' (Orig. *Hom. Ex.* 12.2, transl. Heine).

The dimensions of these buildings are surprisingly large – is this not a time when Christians continued to suffer persecution? How could those embattled Christians afford owning a communal building that incorporated multiple spaces? Was that not too conspicuous? Indeed this increased visibility presented a risk, and once more Tertullian accuses the majority of Christian churchgoers of timidity. Having explained that such persecution offered a God-given opportunity to prove themselves, he continues:

As to this I know not who can doubt, unless it be persons with frivolous and frigid faith, which seizes upon those who with trembling assemble together in the church. For you say, seeing we assemble without order, and assemble at the same time, and flock in large numbers to the church, the heathen are led to make inquiry about us, and we are alarmed lest they rage against us (Ps. 2.1). Do ye not know that God is Lord of all? And if it is God's will, then you shall suffer persecution; but if it is not, the heathen will be still. (Tert. *Fug.* 3, adapted from Thelwall)

His censorious account describes what one might expect in times of oppression: many Christians sneaked into church individually or in small numbers to avoid attracting attention. This gave attending services, this central component of a Christian way of life, a touch of the clandestine. Elsewhere Tertullian suggests that to attend church one had to enter an area of poor hovels (*Ux.* 2.4.2). In another passage he describes the lack of dedicated church buildings as characteristic of most heretics: 'Nor have the majority of them any churches: motherless, homeless, creedless, outcasts,

they wander in their own worthlessness.<sup>113</sup> This absence is taken as an indication that his religious opponents were in want of a tradition as much as a space. He seems to be referring mainly to Christians from the Gnostic spectrum who were more inclined to observe individualised forms of practicing their faith, so that they had even less need of fixed places than other Christians.

What should we imagine those spaces for holding services to have looked like? The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, likely originating from third-century Syria, presupposes a larger space that could be locked, where participants found their place depending on their position in the church community and their gender. The building was orientated towards the east; those taking part in the service accordingly stood facing in the same direction. We have little information how these churches were furnished. Wooden tables that could be moved after the service (possibly so the space could once more be used in other ways) may have served as altars; over time, they are likely to have come to occupy a fixed position. The sources mention platforms accommodating speakers, preachers, those leading prayers, as well as places reserved for the *presidents*. The bishop was allocated a seat of his own, the *kathedra*, from which he surveyed the congregation he was meant to instruct.<sup>114</sup> The word *cathedra* in fact evoked the philosophers' seat, rather than the *sella* of an official, thus emphasising the bishop's role as teacher.

Difficult questions arose: Who owned these buildings and their furnishings? Were they made available for use by private individuals? Were they gifted as was the case in other cults? If they were, what would the donor have expected in return? Had the communities constituted themselves legally as associations, thus allowing them to take on property, inherit and manage it? This seems to be indeed what happened yet details are difficult to come by. However that may be, owning a building required a community sufficiently organised to be able to discharge at least a modicum of administrative duties.

Archaeologically secure evidence of Christian edifices exists only from the mid-third century onwards,<sup>115</sup> including in Dura Europos on the Euphrates, the river bordering Persia (Figure 1.8). The house there in all likelihood was adapted in 240/1 CE for ecclesiastical purposes, yet was abandoned already in 256, and not under the pressure of persecution. Rather, it was incorporated into a defensive wall against the Persians with the building emptied and all doors and other openings bricked up. These works were undertaken with great care, apparently in the expectation of an eventual return. But Dura succumbed to the Persian siege and was abandoned.

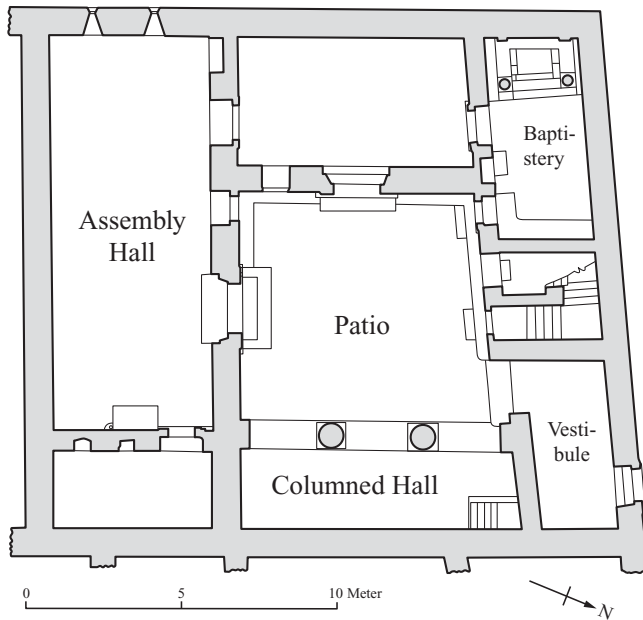


Figure 1.8 Floor plan of a Christian edifice in Dura Europos, incorporating an assembly space, in that sense a church, and a baptistry

This Christian complex consisted of a larger room where around 75 people might congregate and a few other rooms. They included a baptistry with a deep basin, adorned with impressive frescoes representing scenes from the Bible (Figure 1.9). The eastern part of the main room housed a platform, perhaps for the person leading the service. That the Christians in that city were able to erect such a building shows the resources they could command and that they enjoyed at least a modicum of tolerance.<sup>116</sup>

The complex of Dura Europos also demonstrates that Christians did not shy away from visual depictions. It seems that the Jewish prohibition against images which the rabbis insisted upon did not even apply in all Jewish communities. And yet in the eyes of many Christians images appeared to be too closely associated with paganism, if set in a cultic context. But only very few Christians seem to have been concerned about a wide range of depictions, including mythological ones, in both public and private spaces; they would have encountered these frequently in their everyday lives.<sup>117</sup>

Irenaeus polemicises against the Carpocratians because they used images of Christ in rituals, stressing it was a pagan practice (*Haer.* 1.25.6).



Figure 1.9 Fresco from the baptistery of Dura Europos showing the women at the empty grave

There are reports of a statue of Simon Magus, condemned by many as a false miracle-worker.<sup>118</sup> But others were in favour of images: the *Acts of John* make favourable mention of a painting depicting that apostle (26–9). The group associated with Hippolytus of Rome appears to have used a seated image that had originally belonged to a philosophical school. Eusebius reports, not without pride, that pagans had erected a statue for Jesus in Caesarea (*HE* 7.18.2); though little credible, this mention does show an appreciation of the fine arts. Likewise the prohibition of images in churches in Spain at the beginning of the fourth century (*Conc. Elv. Can.* 36) implies that they were present.

Early Christian art that has survived is predominantly made up of examples from the minor arts, right down to amulets, and mostly derives from a funerary context such as catacomb frescoes or sarcophagi; yet this is surely only part of the whole story. Amongst the furnishings of Christian churches were precious pieces of equipment and most crucially manuscripts of the Holy Scriptures some of which are still extant, even if sometimes only in the form of a single leaf (Figure 1.2). Christians preferred the relatively new form of the codex, equivalent to the modern

book, to the scroll, presumably for practical reasons, as did other contemporaries. Illuminated Christian manuscripts, however, are attested only from later times. The *Books of Jeu* from the Gnostic spectrum did in fact contain diagrams; these served to deepen understanding rather than having a decorative function.<sup>119</sup>

Churches could assume greater prominence in public spaces only after Gallienus (260 CE) tolerated Christian assemblies. This entailed fundamental changes to the Christian way of life: the faithful no longer had to sneak into church one by one but could proudly make their way to a respectable building. There was no one specific type of church building at that time, nor a specific set of furnishings, and it is likely that different religious groups employed the same artists and craftsmen. Perhaps most of those entering a Christian house of God would have seen nothing that struck them as out of the ordinary.

But owning property soon led to conflict: the bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata, was accused of having a podium and a raised throne in his church. He was condemned by a synod but refused to vacate his church for a successor. The dispute about the rights to this church building even reached the Emperor Aurelian (270–5 CE). It became, ultimately, a matter of civil law, although it was resolved by invoking ecclesiastical criteria: the church should be handed over to the claimant who was recognised by the bishops of Italy and Rome (Eus. *HE* 7.30.1–19). Christians could not but rely on the worldly decision maker where property was concerned.

Yet soon Christians once more faced the old experience of being under threat: at the beginning of the fourth century Diocletian brought back the persecutions. Allegedly a church, built in an elevated position, that he could see from his palace in Nicomedia had caught his eye – we do not hear how he recognised it as such (Lact. *Mort.* 12.3). Perhaps the building was simply well known as a Christian one or maybe it was after all its exterior that attracted attention.

The persecutors' henchmen confiscated church buildings and furnishing, recording diligently what they found, preferably in triplicate. They were clearly irritated when they found nothing more than some bronze materials when searching the Egyptian village Chysis on 5 February 304 CE, asking the lector Ammonius to swear an oath that this was not due to fraud.<sup>120</sup>

The authorities' distrust is understandable. For example, the situation in Circa was completely different, that is modern-day Constantine in Algeria. On 3 May 303 CE, Felix – in his position as state official – asked Bishop Paul to hand over all property from 'the house in which the Christians were accustomed to assemble'. Quite a few items were produced:



Two golden chalices, also six silver chalices, six silver pots, a silver chafing vessel, seven silver lamps, two torches, seven short brass candlesticks with their lamps, also eleven brass candle sticks with their chains, eighty-two women's garments, thirty-eight veils, sixteen men's tunics, thirteen pair of men's shoes, forty-seven pair of women's shoes, eighteen pattens for the country.<sup>121</sup>

And that was not all. Investigating further, another silver lamp was discovered as well as a small silver container for a book; when – the officials were persistent – the dining area was searched, four barrels and six jugs came to light. The inspectors also came across empty cupboards in the church: soon enough they laid their hands on codices that were found in the lectors' homes. In fact, losing them was much harder to take for devout Christians than any of the other losses, as handing over manuscripts containing the Holy Scriptures was considered nothing less than treason.

The considerable number of items of clothing in the first list is somewhat surprising; it is best explained as having been intended for the poor – clothes, even second-hand, were a valuable commodity in this society. Did the Christians in Chysis possess so much less than those in Cirta? Or were they perhaps especially cunning – after all, it looks as if their fellow believers in the West had attempted to outwit the officials but had fallen victim to their persistence? Did bribes perhaps play a part? We cannot answer these questions today; it is probable that both cleverness and poverty played a part in Chysis. The example of the church of Cirta at least illustrates what riches could be accumulated in these buildings which must have been sufficiently large to accommodate them all.

Even though sizeable early edifices existed that may be termed churches, the great Euro-Mediterranean tradition of church buildings was started only after the Diocletian persecutions had ended, namely by Constantine the Great. He founded churches himself but also encouraged governors and bishops to do the same.<sup>122</sup> A number of churches in Rome were established by him, including the Archbasilica of St John in Lateran and St Peter itself, but also elsewhere across the Empire, in particular in Jerusalem and environs. Constantine's foundations there contributed to the Holy Land becoming an important place of pilgrimage. Local personalities also played a role, such as Bishop Theodorus in the case of what is probably the oldest extant church building anywhere, in Aquileia near Venice. This complex must have been of astounding beauty. Still visible today are colourful floor mosaics likely stemming from the first quarter of the fourth century. They represented Jonah, a frequent motif in early Christian art, although most of the decorations had no specific religious significance.<sup>123</sup>

Under Constantine, erecting churches did not spell the destruction of temples. The old sanctuaries remained dominant in the cityscape, especially since most Christian churches as a rule rose up along the periphery, close to the cemeteries with the graves of the saints.

Consequently, Christians continued to pass between temples and still encountered numerous depictions of the old gods, but they now had monumental buildings of their own. They neither invented an entirely new type of building, nor did they take the ancient temples as a model. Instead, they adopted the building type of a basilica, a large hall with a number of naves, separated by rows of columns and pilasters that was used for different kinds of assemblies. Elements characteristic of ecclesiastic building – which may in part have predated Constantine – in all likelihood did not prevail everywhere immediately: the area reserved for the clergy was partitioned off by chancel screens. A raised altar was positioned in the choir, surrounded by benches for the clergy, with a more prominent seat for the bishop. An atrium was placed before the main entrance of larger churches, a large, uncovered courtyard with porticos. This was an innovation of Christian architecture, perhaps in order to visibly separate the area belonging to the church from the city by creating a transitional space.

It was in the atrium that the congregation assembled, although sinners were assigned special areas and those who had not yet been baptised had to leave the building before the celebration of the Eucharist. At the same time these buildings afforded the spaces where an increasingly rich liturgy could come to blossom. Vestments became more elaborate, the altar furniture more sumptuous, while ever more magnificent mosaics and marble made pavements and walls shine.

A basilica allowed congregations to gather in large numbers, but did not remain the only Christian building type. There were also circular edifices, usually to keep alive the memory of a specific sacred place or a martyr. In the complex in Jerusalem that today forms the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a circular building and a basilica coexisted side by side (Figure 2.3). Many of these church buildings served to commemorate saints. Christians liked to be buried in their vicinity; perhaps they might assist them on the day of resurrection. Churches were at the centre of both Christian life and death.

Constantine had his own relationship with Christian architecture: for the most part the interior and furnishings of his palace did not exhibit any religious aspects;<sup>124</sup> but the case was different when it came to his grave, located at a place commemorating the apostles that was to become the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. It contained cenotaphs,

empty graves, of the twelve apostles, set in a commanding position. It seems Constantine was hoping to be regarded as a new Christ. In the eyes of many contemporaries that was surely plausible. They were familiar with this type of apotheosis from the tradition of the emperor cult. Why should Constantine not be close to Christ, having received so much support from him, having seen so much success and himself having done so much for Christ? Strict theologians, however, did not approve; there must only be one Christ, the son of God who had come to redeem the world, not any number of similar figures. Unsurprisingly Constantine's body was soon transferred.<sup>125</sup> It became clear already early on that imperial rule and Christianity did not sit easily together.

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Minucius Felix, who is quoted in this section's title, would have been astounded if he had found himself transported in time by just a hundred years: Christians now possessed not only altars but commanded immense church buildings. Their faith had attained a visibility, a materiality that just a little earlier had still been unimaginable. It appears almost ironic that in the early fourth century the church San Sebastiano fuori le mura along the Via Appia outside Rome blocked access to an old, modest place where Peter and Paul were venerated, the so-called *triclina*. Christianity would come to display its full splendour in and with the late antique churches. Christian buildings increasingly penetrated town centres and began to dominate the cityscape. This splendour did cause unease to a not insignificant number of Christian contemporaries; they preferred ascetics in the desert. And yet, church buildings, this late achievement of Christianity, has been one of its most lasting and still continue to afford room to rituals such as baptism that helped form a Christian identity.