

CHAPTER III

THE CHURCH AND THE SYNAGOGUE

Alexander the Great had seen in the Jews an instrument nicely adapted to the furtherance of his cherished scheme of drawing East and West together. The rise of Christianity confronted the Jews with an even greater opportunity of uniting the civilized world. Had they accepted Jesus as their Messiah and gladly shared Him with the Gentiles, the history of the Church, and of mankind, would have been immeasurably different. Even as it was, Christianity would owe an immense debt, in thought and organization alike, to the religion from which it sprang.

It was under the protecting care of Judaism that Christianity came to birth, and all through its earliest years Judaism continued to serve as a kind of breakwater against the sea of alien influences which threatened to overwhelm it. But Christianity, in order to fulfil its universal mission, had to leave its moorings and set out on its voyage into the Gentile world. Harnack, after contrasting the different part played by the Arabs in the spread of Islam (he claims that for centuries they continued to be "the main trunk of the new religion"), goes on to say that "the brief history of the Gospel within the bounds of Palestinian Judaism is a palaeontological epoch" (*Hist. of Dogma*, p. 11 f.). On both these points, however, Harnack is open to criticism; for the whole tendency of recent scholarship has been to attach much greater importance to the Palestinian period; whilst the Arabs, although they provided much of the energy and military skill which enabled the sword of Islam to achieve its conquests, made little contribution to its intellectual development. Arabic philosophy, in particular, was the work of other races.¹

If Christianity soon outgrew its Jewish childhood, the task of propagating the Gospel had been made infinitely lighter by the preparatory work of the Jewish people. War and commerce had combined to scatter them from one end of the Roman world to the other. Josephus could claim that their law and customs had taken root in every city and tribe (*Contra Apion.*, II, 39) and quotes Strabo's testimony that the Jews dominated almost

¹ The only Arab philosopher of standing was Al-Khindi. Neither Avicenna (Ibn Sina) nor Averroes (Ibn Rushd) was an Arab, and Maimonides (Ibn Maymun) was a Jew. See, further, my *Decline and Fall of the Medieval Papacy*, p. 80 ff.

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every place in the known world (*Antiq.*, XIV, vii, 2). This wide dispersion provided a network of centres from which the new faith might radiate. Before the breach between the Church and the Synagogue, the synagogue was the natural starting-point for the Christian missionary, for there he would not only have the opportunity of delivering his message to fellow Jews, but would, not infrequently, find among his audience men of Gentile race; for Gentiles often attended the synagogues, perhaps regarding them, from the absence of ritual and sacrifice, as philosophical rather than religious assemblies. Some of them became proselytes. Our Lord accused the Pharisees of striving to obtain such (Matt. 23 : 15), and as late as the third century Rabbi Eleazar held that it was for this that the Jews had been scattered among the nations (*Pesachim*, 87, b). The proselytizing efforts of the Jews did not pass unnoticed and Horace refers to their persuasive and compelling ways (*Satires*, I, iv, 142).

It was not only in the approach to individuals that the Jews had prepared the way; they had also made easier the approach to the Gentile world as a whole. In Alexandria, where Jews were numerous and influential, some kind of synthesis with Gentile thought had already been achieved. The Old Testament, for example, had been translated into Greek,¹ and Philo had attempted to present its teaching in a form which would appeal to non-Semites. The knowledge of the Old Testament with its monotheistic faith, its condemnation of idols, and its noble ethical teaching, was an important step towards faith in the Gospel.

The allegorical methods by which Philo had commended Jewish ideas and history to Gentile minds could easily be extended, and old forms spiritualized, until they could be quietly abandoned or transformed into Christian conceptions. This process furnishes a valuable illustration of the principle that allegorical interpretation seldom or never inaugurates new ideas; it is merely used to discover such ideas, and by so doing obtain valuable support for them, in passages which would not disclose their presence to stricter methods of interpretation. Even before the coming of Christ the allegorizing or spiritualizing of the Law had been carried so far by the Jews themselves that even Philo was moved to protest (*De Migr. Abr.*, XVI). By the use of such methods room was found for accommodation to Gentile customs and a way opened for considerable laxity of life among the Dispersion. There is much evidence for such laxity. The fact that the mother of Timothy was married to a Gentile (Acts 16 : 1) was a breach of the Law (Deut. 7 : 3); as was the marriage of Felix

¹ The fact that the Old Testament was not translated into Latin shows that the Jews were less numerous in the West.

and Drusilla recorded by Josephus (*Antiq.*, XX, vii, 2). So far had relaxation been carried that the moral standards and daily lives of the Jews of the Dispersion had in many cases fallen grievously below the demands of their religion. Amongst other things, the Jews had managed to acquire a most unenviable reputation for magic and sorcery.¹

The breach between Church and Synagogue came gradually, and it seems probable that it was not complete until nearly the end of the first century.² But from the earliest days there must have been much in Christian teaching to cause alarm to the strictly orthodox. Even the Sermon on the Mount, with its claim to override the Law, constituted an offence. Already in the oldest of our gospels there are signs that the Christians for their part were coming to regard the Jews as enemies; the phrase *all the Jews* (Mark 7 : 3) has something hostile about it, or at least distinctive of the difference between Jews and Christians; whilst St. Luke seems determined to shift the responsibility for the murder of Jesus from the Romans to the Jews (cf. Luke 23 : 1 ff.; Acts 2 : 23; 3 : 13 f., etc.). In the last of the gospels, composed no doubt when the breach had become permanent, there is a sinister sound in the repeated mention of "the Jews".

The first Christians, like their Lord before them, frequented the temple. Did the priests who became converts (Acts 6 : 7) continue in office? Even the attacks of St. Stephen did not compromise the apostles, who were left undisturbed in Jerusalem, evidently being regarded as less revolutionary in their outlook. The Christians seem definitely to have cherished the hope that Israel would soon follow their example and acknowledge the new Messiah (Acts 3 : 19 ff.). St. Paul normally sought out the synagogue when he came to a new city and our latest knowledge of him includes his interview with the Jewish authorities in Rome (Acts 28 : 17 ff.); an interview which makes it clear that no organized opposition to the messengers of the Gospel had as yet developed. The Jewish leaders in Rome, although they had heard of the sect as being spoken against, are willing to know more about it. We must not, however, make too much of this incident; for Judaism, when Christianity began to spread, was not itself a single system, but contained within it a number of differing elements, some of which more easily tended to be drawn to the new religion; others, by a process of reaction, to become very definite opponents.³ In the gospels it is mainly the Pharisees

¹ cf. Matt. 12 : 27; Acts 19 : 19; Pliny, *Hist. Nat.*, XXX, i, 11; Josephus, *Antiq.*, VIII, ii, 5 and XX, vii, 2. In the ancient world there was no distinct line between medicine and magic: cf. *Jubilees*, X, 10 ff., and Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V, 612.

² See J. Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue*.

³ See W. R. Arnold, "The Relation of Primitive Christianity to Jewish

who take the lead in opposing the work of Jesus;¹ in the Acts it is the Sadducees and the official priesthood who are active, no doubt because the question of the Resurrection has become prominent (cf. Acts 4 : 1 f.). In the case of St. Stephen it is the Jews of the Dispersion, who might have been expected to hold more liberal views, who initiate the persecution (Acts 6 : 9). In the early period, however, the attack is not continuous or sustained (cf. Acts 9 : 31), though some kind of persecution must have arisen almost from the first (1 Thess. 2 : 14; and cf. Matt. 10 : 17 f.); but the mission to the Gentiles was well on its way before frequent clashes occurred.

The breach was really inevitable and no possible compromise could have been reached which would have been accepted by both sides, though the inherited love of the first generation of Jewish Christians for the traditions of their fathers may have blinded them to the true state of the case. Judaism was opposed to the spirit of Jesus, and though it might contain pious and attractive elements was, in the main, according to Sanday, "a body of hard, narrow, materialized beliefs" (*Outlines of the Life of Christ*, p. 28).

The judgment of Sanday, however, probably needs considerable modification, certainly if it is to be applied to any large section of Judaism. The Jewish attitude to the Law is not easy for outsiders to grasp. The Law for many of them was no dead thing, but, by a kind of mystical conceiving, had become a "creative force expressing itself through the Holy Community to the world as a whole".² It might almost be regarded as an "incarnation" of the divine,³ and in every Jewish synagogue the most impressive object was a volume of the Torah in its sacred ark with a lamp burning before it, corresponding to the altar of the Christians, and even to Jehovah sitting above the mercy-seat in the Holy of Holies of the Temple. The Law, as interpreted by the highest minds, was no mere collection of commands, but an expression of the divine mind and will. In Taoism the idea of the Way (Tao) has, in a similar manner, almost been personified. The use of the word "Law" to translate the Hebrew *Torah* is perhaps unfortunate and misleading, for it suggests something definite and not readily changed. *Torah* really means direction or instruction, and far from being a fixed code is a way of life.

Thought", in *Harvard Theol. Rev.*, 1930, XXIII, p. 161 ff. He points out that the Talmud (edited A.D. 200-500) represents "the Judaism of the opponents of Christianity as that Judaism took shape after the conflict" (*op. cit.*, p. 166).

¹ Only in John 12:10 do the chief priests take the lead, and there the question of the raising of Lazarus comes in.

² Parkes, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

³ R. T. Herford can even say: "It is near to the truth to say that what Christ is to the Christian, Torah is to the Jew" (*Pharisaism*, p. 171).