



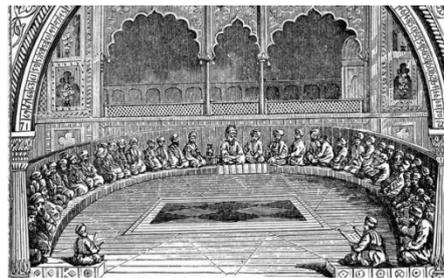
26. THE FIRST CENTURY OF CHRISTIANITY

After the Spirit took possession of their hearts, the apostles and the disciples of the Christ began to wander villages and cities performing miraculous healings¹. Often once again possessed, they spoke languages they did not know². They were not the only ones. In Palestine, that period was marked by turmoil, violence and religious fanaticism and everywhere social agitators proclaimed new prophets or Messiah, preaching the collapse of the Roman Empire, the advent of the Kingdom of Israel over the whole earth and the coming of the end of the world. They performed wonders, miracles and magic. The Jews of all the currents participated in this frantic atmosphere and riots, rebellions and acts of terrorism often broke out. This folly also influenced the many communities of Jews in the Diaspora, residing in the great cities of the Empire. This was in contrast with the general atmosphere of all the other peoples who were part of the vast Roman Empire. The restoration of the monarchy in the Imperial form had guaranteed peace and prosperity everywhere.



1. Allegory of Roman peace

The subjects of Rome recognized in the Roman peace (Pax Romana) the favor of the Gods and considered the Emperor as a divine representative of heaven on earth. This idyllic setting was considered a return to the Age of Gold³. The only exception was Palestine where the madness of the Jews and Christians overshadowed the Imperial harmony. The Romans had conquered Palestine in 63 B.C. They, however, had left the kingdom of Palestine to the Jewish dynasty of the Herodians. It was therefore a protectorate with wide autonomy.



2. The Sanhedrin

Although Herod the Great gave orders to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem, the Jews hated him and his successors because they had an open mind towards Greco-Roman culture. Also the Sadducees, the

¹ They behaved, therefore, as real Therapeuts.

² This phenomenon is still very widespread among the popular religions of Africa, South America and Australia and in the shamanic and tribal environments of Asia and North America. St. Paul reduced the importance attributed to these phenomena (I *Letter to the Corinthians*, 13).

³ In India in the same period, something similar happened with the foundation of the Kuṣāṇa kingdom, followed by the Gupta Empire.



kohanim of the Temple who constituted the *Sanhedrin*, government and parliament of the Jewish state, were under suspicion of collaborating with the Romans. Due to the continuing violence caused by Nazareans and Zealots¹, the Romans twice took direct control of Palestine in an attempt to restore order. The situation was very hard: assassins, sicarians and zealots infested cities and villages; the country was devastated by bandits who took advantage from the general chaos assaulting caravans and farms. The coast was teeming with pirate boats disguised as fishing boats². Nazareans and Pharisees attacked the priests of the Temple and their families, and fought each other. They also denounced their rivals to the Roman authority to get rid of them³. The Church of Jerusalem was structured in the image of the *Sanhedrin*; so it was inevitable that between the original *Sanhedrin* of the Temple and the new Nazarean Church a often ferocious rivalry broke out⁴.



3. Apostle preaching to the Jews

The apostles had tried to convince the Jews of the Middle East communities to recognize Jesus as Messiah. But the Jews continued to regard the Messiah as a triumphant King, so they did not accept as Messiah the defeated and executed Jesus. For this reason the apostles preferred to converge on Jerusalem which had become the seat of the first Bishopric. On the other hand St. Paul, more educated and with a deeper initiatic preparation, continued to collect consents and conversions in the circles of Jews and semi-converted (*ger-toshab*) of the Diaspora. They began to pay to the Church of Jerusalem, the tax which they previously had assigned to the Temple.



4. First Council of Jerusalem

With these numerous followers and with their financial weight, St. Paul participated to the first Christian Council in Jerusalem. During that meeting he maintained that the ancient Moses' law was

¹ Among the Nazareans, Christians were prevalent, while the Jewish current prevailed among the Zealots.

² As it happens still today in front of the coasts of Somalia, Gulf of Guinea, Kerala, Bangla Desh and Southeast Asia.

³ This happened to St. Paul and St. Peter.

⁴ For example, the first Christian martyr, St. Stephen, and the first head of the Church, St. James were executed by Jews by order of the Sanhedrin.



now to be repealed and replaced with the teaching of Jesus. Therefore, food restrictions, circumcision and the entire Jewish exterior law had to be abolished. Those who adhered to Christianity had to follow only the teachings of Jesus, the Verb of God, and let go and consider as superstitions all the previous customs and habits. Christians, the new people elected in spiritual sense, no longer had to identify with a single race or nation. His oratorical skills, his culture, the prestige of being a Roman citizen, the support of the Diaspora communities succeeded in overcoming the uncouth recalcitrant apostles. Certainly many of them did not accept to reject the Mosaic law and so a fracture grew between the Pauline Church and the Nazarean Church. The latter gradually was reabsorbed in Judaism until its disappearance.



5. Synagogue

When the newborn Christian Church split into the two Pauline and Nazarean factions, also the regular Judaism suffered the same destiny. Since the *kohens* of the Temple, the only true priests¹ of the Jewish religion, were almost all Sadducees, the few priests of the Pharisees minority decided to separate themselves by leaning on the class of scribes. They were not from the tribe of Levi, so they did not belong to the priestly caste. They were secular doctors of the law, born in the tribes of Judah and Benjamin who had studied the sacred texts and gradually became indispensable to the administration of Moses Judaism². The Pharisees, with their support, gave birth to the synagogues, meeting places that soon rivaled the Temple.



6. Jewish sacrifice of the red bull

¹ In fact, only two of twelve tribes returned to Israel from the Babylonian captivity: the royal tribe of Judah and that of Benjamin, composed of savage fighters. With them some priests born in the tribe of Levi also returned. The other ten tribes disappeared forever from Jewish history. They probably mingled with other Mesopotamian populations, thus losing their distinctive Jewish characteristics.

² Only those who were born in the priestly tribe of Levi could become *kohanim*, Temple's priests by right of birth. For this reason they dedicated themselves to rites and sacrifices, delegating to the scribes the study and administration of the Temple, considered secondary functions. Thus the scribes became servants-masters..



In the Synagogues rites and sacrifices could not be performed, so everything was limited to public prayers, readings and sermons. The scribes, however, usurped the blessing of the High Priest, which they gave at the conclusion of the assemblies. With the passing of time even in the Synagogues the Pharisees of priestly birth disappeared absorbed by the scribes who since then assumed the title of *rabbis*. Meanwhile, serious riots broke out in many cities of the Empire. In 64 d.C., Rome itself was devastated by a fire that destroyed four fifths of that city with one and a half million inhabitants. The responsibility was immediately attributed to Jews and Christians who wanted to realize a Hebrew-Egyptian prophecy according to which Rome would perish in a fire. Emperor Nero ordered a meticulous investigation and at the end only the Christians who spontaneously declared themselves guilty were condemned to death. After that the Emperor strove to rebuild the "Capital of the world" (Lat.: *Caput Mundi*)¹. The repression calmed the turbulent waters in the cities of the Diaspora. However in 66 d.C. a sudden revolt arose in Jerusalem from futile motives.



7. The Emperors Vespasian and Titus

After some initial successes, the rebels had to withdraw and barricade themselves up in Jerusalem. Two Emperors participated in the war: Vespasian and his son Titus. It was a dirty and cruel war, in which everyone fought against everyone. When the Romans entered Jerusalem, the Zealots barricaded themselves in the Temple. Here they put to the sword the priests accused of being collaborators of the Romans. Finally the Temple was destroyed being torn down stone by stone; and Titus killed the last surviving priests².



8. Roman soldiers bring to Rome the sacred objects of the Temple

¹ The Roman historian Suetonius (70-126 AD), opponent of Imperial politics, launched the accusation that Nero was the promoter of the fire. Slander that through Christian literature has continued to be believed until today. *Nerone. Duemila anni di calunnie*, Milan, Mondadori, 1993. The other Roman historian, the senator Tacitus (55-117 AD), on the other hand, claims that these were just slanderous rumors.

² Vicente Risco, *Historia de los Judios desde la destrucción del Templo*, Barcelona, ed. Gorla, 1944, pp.54-57.



In this way the ancient religion received a blow from which it would not have recovered: in the past, during the Babylonian captivity, the Jews had lost the pronunciation of the name of their God, the Ark of the Covenant¹ and ten tribes of their people with the relative social functions.



9. Distruction of the Temple

The Temple and the priestly caste were completely destroyed; this caused not only the loss of the priestly rites and sacrifices but also the loss of their own very religious center. The war ended in blood as it began: Titus arrested and executed all the direct descendants of King David, so as to prevent anyone proclaiming himself Messiah². Ancient Judaism was dead and in its place it only the new rabbinical reformed religion remained. The scribes-rabbis did not refer directly to the *Tōrāh* like did the *kohens*, but mostly to the oral comments (*Mishnah*) and writings (*Gemara*) of the rabbinic tradition, the so-called *Talmud*, that they considered even more sacred than the Old Testament. With the disappearance of the Jewish priesthood, even the Essenic communities, whose members were predominantly of the tribe of Levi, suffered the same crisis and disappeared³. The Jewish esoterism continued in the form of *Qabbalah* in the shadow of the synagogues and with a rabbinic transmission.

On the eve of the Jewish war, the government of the Christian Church, i.e. the Nazarean Sanhedrin, took refuge in the city of Pella, to avoid arrests and reprisals by the Romans, by the real Sanhedrin of the Temple and by the different rebel factions⁴. However, Christian zealots and sicarii actively participated in the insurrection, to such an extent that, at the end of the war, the Romans persecuted them everywhere in the East part of the Empire. The nazarean Sanhedrin had to hide and suffer losses of human lives and desertions from the faith. Rome easily stifled revolts led by someone who proclaimed himself

¹ Coffin in cedarwood and gold plates that had contained the tables of the Law delivered by Yehovah directly to Moses. It was the holiest object of their religion, preserved in the *sancta sanctorum* of the Temple; it disappeared before the sixth century. B.C.

² The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37-100 AD) narrated the last heroic resistance of nine hundred zealots entrenched in the fortress of Massada. They should have resisted the Roman siege for three years, finally deciding to commit suicide en masse. Archeology has demolished this episode as a historical forgery. Obviously, UNESCO declared the heroic memorial "World Heritage Site". Ben-Yehuda, Nachmann, *The Masada Myth. Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

³ Especially the second revolt of 133 AD was fatal for the Essenes, when the Pharisees-scribe-rabbis declared them heretics. They abandoned their hermitages at the Dead Sea and dispersed vanishing from the History. They fled the persecution after hiding their writing texts, the famous Dead Sea manuscripts only rediscovered in the 20th century. Hugh Schonfield, *The Essene Odyssey*, cit., pp. 124-125. The Nazareans-Essenes, on the other hand, continued to transmit their esoteric knowledge in the form of Christian monasticism, taking refuge in the deserts of the Middle East and Egypt. *Ibid*, pp. 19-20.

⁴ Hugh Schonfield, *Jesus: Mesias o Dios?*, Barcelona, ed. Martinez Roca, 1987 (1 ed. *Those incredible Christians*, Longmead (UK), Element Books Ltd, 1968), pp. 95-96.



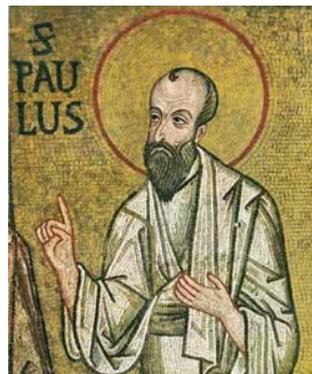
Messiah. But for the Empire the fanaticism of the followers of a dead Messiah who was supposed to return miraculously to life, to win Rome and dominate the whole world, was more dangerous.

In the West part of the Empire, the Jewish-Christian communities of the Diaspora did not participate in the rebellion¹. There are two main reasons for this behavior. First of all, the Jews who had lived in foreign cities for centuries had their interests, assets and commercial networks there. Most of them had lost the use of Hebrew and Aramaic languages, in favor of Greek and Latin, and so had been profoundly influenced by Hellenistic-Roman culture.



10. Meeting of Rabbis

Secondly, they feared of the inflexible punishment of Imperial justice, which they had suffered during the fire of Rome. The Jewish-Christian community of Rome did not welcome the preaching of St. Paul. While St. Paul was under house arrest for a couple of years in Rome², he received many semi-converted visitors, but none of them was Jews by birth. After the end of the Jewish war, Roman Jews followed the doctrines of St. Paul, which were not hostile to the Romans and did not describe Christ as a Jewish King, but as a divine manifestation. This was a much more acceptable to the Romans both in the religious and in the political sense.



11. St. Paul

¹ The Jews tried to unleash the anti-Roman revolt twice more. In 115 AD. in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and in 132 AD in Palestine. The outcome was devastating. Palestine after the war became a desert and the few Jews who remained alive were forced to a second Diaspora. Until the recent establishment of the state of Israel, a few sparse groups of Jews remained to live in that disastrous area, in the minority compared to the other inhabitants of that unhappy territory.

² Condemned by the Jews, St. Paul appealed to the Emperor as a Roman citizen. Brought to Rome, after two years he was condemned to death by beheading.



The epistles of St. Paul were then the only written texts of the New Testament. The Christian community of Rome diffused them in all the cities of the Empire, and this explains why the Gospels, which were written at least thirty years later, never describe Jesus as the Messiah. In this way, after the disappearance of the Sanhedrin of the Temple and after the dispersion of the Nazarean Sanhedrin, the episcopate of Rome became hegemonic over all the episcopates of the other cities of the Empire. At the end of the first century AD Rome, capital of the vast Empire, established itself as the seat of the highest Christian authority, assuming the Roman priestly title of *Pontifex Maximus*, the Pope. Thus the ancient Moses' religion split into two new religious forms: the Talmudist Judaism reformed by the rabbis and the Christian Church of Rome based on the pauline doctrine.

Gian Giuseppe Filippi

