

THE THIRTEENTH APOSTLE: THE STORY OF PAUL OF TARSUS

as told by Marcus Calpurnius Fronto,
sometime Special Investigator with the Roman Secret Service

Translated by John Leonard

I

Prologue

Kal. Mar. 838 AUC [1st March, 85 CE]

Marcus Calpurnius Fronto to his friend Lucius Silvanus Naso the Younger, greetings.

Your request to me for information regarding the so-called Christians and other similar groups reached me just as I was about to depart for Sicily, under doctor's orders, last autumn. The reason you have not heard from me before now is that I was taking great pains to go through all my files, records and notes to provide you with as full an account as I possibly could. I took all these materials with me to Sicily and have occupied myself with the task ever since, indeed I was glad to have some task of such magnitude to complete, for, as you can guess, beyond the mild climate and the antiquities, Sicily has few advantages and fewer attractions. However not only did I pass a pleasant time going through my records and assembling an account for you, but my health improved, thanks to the mild weather and to the memories of my younger days that these writings provoked, and I am now feeling much better than I have done for many years.

Indeed, Silvanus, it is always a pleasure for me to help you with your researches. I will never forget the friendship that was between your father and myself, which everyone said, jokingly, was only natural¹, but which was the solace and delight of my young manhood, until your father was so suddenly smitten down with a cruel disease. I am glad, in a way, that you were so young at the time, so that you cannot remember your father, for if you had, you would have carried the sorrow of that bereavement with you throughout life. However it has been a great pleasure to me to see the fine and noble qualities of the father expressed in the son, though in a different sphere. Your successes with your literary works have continued to

¹ It was natural for Lucius Silvanus Naso, Senior, whose second surname means 'nose', to be friendly with Marcus Calpurnius Fronto—'Fronto' means 'forehead'.

fill me with pleasure, for besides the admiration I am bound to feel for the work of one whom I consider almost a son, by any estimation your works are worthy of praise. Your *On Gaul and Britain* was the most interesting and best-researched account that had ever appeared, and I was pleased to have been able to supply you with my personal observations about Britain, and that you found these useful. Your next works, on Germany, on Africa, and on Asia beyond the Parthian Empire, are likewise marked by scholarship, urbanity and intelligence. This latest work of yours, *On the Races and Sects of the Empire*, will prove, I'm sure, to be as useful and as accurate as your former works, and, like them, will satisfy a long unmet need.

It was an honour for me to read your letter and find myself described as 'perhaps the best-informed man in the Empire about these sects', as indeed, I suppose I am, thanks to my second career as a Special Investigator, with responsibility for these sects. Yet, when I came to consider my activities in connection with these groups, and when I came to read through my notes, I began to despair of ever reducing all the information I had to one coherent account. For there are as many accounts of the Christian sects as there are believers, or informers, or investigators, or bystanders. With other religious or national sects it is clear what the purpose of their teaching and activity is, namely to overthrow Roman rule in their particular corner of the Empire, and thus it is easy to investigate, infiltrate and extirpate them. But the Christian sects are not like this, they have no very strongly marked racial or local affiliations, and they are adamant that their purpose is not to disrupt the social order, or the government of the Empire, but, as it were, to transform them from within. And yet they are not like those newer religions which have been established amongst us in recent times, which co-exist with the traditional religion of Rome, or of Greece, or wherever, but instead these people boldly maintain that there is only one true God, and that he alone is worthy to be worshipped, and so they cannot worship other gods, even under pain of death.

My own feeling is that these sects have grown up because the Empire has made travel and trade much safer and more profitable, and has encouraged the idea that the shores of the Mediterranean and lands beyond are one state and that freedom of movement is a norm, not an exception. Once everybody stayed in the place they were born, worshipped the traditional gods of their country and were content. Now every city and town is full of a crowd of people from every country in the known world and they marry amongst themselves, and their religions become, as it were, businesses, vying with each other to attract the greatest number of converts. Christianity is one of these, perhaps the most interesting, in that it

sprang from Judaism, but has now divorced itself entirely from its parent religion, though there were Jewish Christians until very recently, as I shall explain.

If I were to give you a summary of my findings this would be to give a simple description of a very complex situation. And for reasons I will mention later I believe that it is very important to set out fully the train of events which has allowed these Christians to invent their religion in the way that they have. It may be that you will not wish to use all the information contained in this account, my dear Silvanus, but then I would hope that besides the masterly summary that you will make, this account will also stand in all its detail.

So this is why my account, which I am sending you by the same messenger as this letter, does not consist of a bald summary of facts, but is in a literary form, and consists of a narrative of how I became involved in the surveillance of and the gathering of intelligence about the Christians, and what I found out about them. When I began writing this account I thought perhaps that it would qualify as a romance, of the sort that we old men like to read to remind ourselves of the idealism and amorousness of youth. And indeed some of the ingredients of a romance are here: there is an apparent death, many voyages, one shipwreck, a few recognitions and chance meetings, and not a few thieves and bandits, of a figurative kind, but against this we must set the fact that there is no love-interest, that it is in a realistic mode, and that idealism is outweighed by superstition, demagoguery and mendacity. And besides the work is mainly in Latin, interlarded with lots of bad Greek, and so it is more like a parody romance, or novel of low-life, like that novel of the Arbiter's that everyone was raving about a few years ago, though considerably more chaste.²

Please do not think that your old friend is in his dotage, writing you a novel when all you wanted was a few pages of information. I am sure that you will find it interesting to read, and indeed I am very pleased, looking through it, at how well it has turned out, considering that it is the first literary work I have ever undertaken, and that I am nearly seventy years of age. I may even give readings from it this season! But I will wait for your advice.

Farewell then for now; greetings to your wife and children, I hope we will see you in Rome this year. I enclose letters from Calvus and Placidus.

This in my own hand—remember your old friend.

² ie *The Satyricon*.

By my servant Milo.

II

I first became involved in the surveillance of the Christian sects in the autumn of the seventh year of the reign of the Emperor Nero.³ It happened like this: I had returned a couple of days earlier from a vacation on my estate in the Po Valley and was catching up with business in Rome. I had had an interview the day before with my steward, who had told me of all sorts of repairs that needed carrying out, and I was sitting that morning in front of a large pile of bills. As you can imagine I was not in the best of moods, and the cold, rainy weather did nothing to cheer me up—it was one of those days when the rain falls heavily and perpendicularly from dawn till dusk, and all through the night. When a servant entered to ask whether I could see one Faustina, I was just about to snap back that I couldn't when I remembered that today was the day of the week I had set aside for clients, and besides Faustina was unlikely to come and visit me unless something very urgent was the matter.

Faustina was the wife of Servius, a freedman of mine. They had been the favourite servants of my father, and when he died, and it was found that his will had not been kept up to date, and that he made no provision to free any of his servants, I freed them myself, and helped them to set up a wine-shop in the same quarter of town as my house. Most wine-shops, as you know, are filthy holes, full of thieves and prostitutes, which serve bad wine and worse food. But Servius and his wife were very decent honest people and hired not only two burly ex-policemen as bouncers, but an excellent cook, and their wine-shop was really very good, clean, cheap, with an excellent cellar of drinkable wine (it's astonishing how much wine that gets sold is really quite undrinkable and positively poisonous). I often used to drop in to their shop for a snack, or lunch and I was always warmly greeted; my favourite dish was fried fish that their cook cooked to perfection, to a recipe from Samos, and my favourite wine was a light, straw-coloured, slightly fizzy wine from the south of Gaul, a wine you could drink at lunchtime on a hot day and not feel in the least sleepy in the afternoon—I've never found it elsewhere. I am only sorry, my dear Silvanus, that you never knew Servius and Faustina, or

³ 61 CE.

visited their shop, as they retired to the country shortly after the episodes I am about to relate, before you were old enough for me to take you to see them.

Anyway, I feared that when Faustina came alone it was because Servius was ill or had died. But when she entered I could see that, although she was distressed and anxious, it was nothing of so great urgency. Evading my offer of refreshment, she plunged straight into her story. It appeared that during this year Servius had begun to attend meetings of a religious group called the Christians. Their leader was one Paul of Tarsus, who had recently arrived in Rome and was living nearby, technically under house-arrest, but in practice free to preach and make converts. Servius had always been a very serious and honest man, and so I understood that he might be attracted to some sort of new religion or religious brotherhood, but my reaction was one of surprise, as it occurred to me, though I said nothing to Faustina, that he would have been more likely to have gone for some more respectable new religion, of which there are a number in Rome now, rather than this down-market affair. Faustina's main worry was that Servius was being pressed constantly for money by the leaders of this sect. Every meeting he went to he progressed further towards the goal of initiation, which they carry out by baptism, but only at the expense of a hefty donation to help the poor Christians of this town, or a persecuted brother from that town. Each week the story was different, but the effect was the same, Servius parted with more cash, which they could ill-afford to lose, and with their five children still at home, Faustina was worried that they would be utterly ruined by Servius's new enthusiasm.

She concluded and I promised to set about finding out about these Christians and seeing how Servius could be rescued from them that very day. And indeed the prospect of some unusual task immediately banished from my mind all thoughts of repairs and bills, and set my mind to work on how we might save Servius. For it occurred to me that no one is converted against their will and for someone as clever as Servius to become interested in this group it had to have a very persuasive leader or leaders or to offer something altogether new. But it also occurred to me that it would be difficult to win him away from this group, as he was not the sort of person whom one could call in and order not to attend any more meetings—he was too independent-minded for that, and had already shown this by taking up with this religion in the first place.

After Faustina had left, thanking me for my promises to help her rescue her husband, I began to think of a plan that could extricate Servius from his attachment, and indeed I thought of one, as will emerge later in this account. But I thought that it would still

be advantageous to find out more about this sect, because, if my plan didn't work, it might then be necessary to counter this group by legal action or some other way. I ventured out, after lunch, into the rain and made several visits to friends whom I thought would be able to tell me who to go to to find out more reliable information. One name constantly recurred—Publius Lollius Tubero; he, I was told, was a prefect of police, with special responsibility for cults, sects and secret societies throughout the Empire. And indeed the name reminded of popular talk about him, about his prodigious memory and facility with languages, his famous expedition, whilst a legionary officer, all the way to China, and, since his appointment to the Secret Service, of his many daring commando-operations within and outside the boundaries of Empire against various rebel groups. Suddenly I was impatient to meet this man and, from the last house that I visited I sent a message to his office, at the old Augustan palace, asking for an appointment and briefly outlining my business. The servant returned with a note saying that I could see Lollius the next morning.

The next day dawned bright, but cold, and I hastened away towards the palace at the earliest decent hour. Brandishing my letter I was waved through the various guard posts and arrived at last in a dark and quiet corner of the palace, where all the servants seemed to tiptoe around. I was shown into a very long, narrow office. At the end, by the window, I could see a man sitting at a desk, and as I neared I saw a very tall, bulky man, untidily dressed, with uncouth curly hair, but well-shaven and clean. I immediately decided that I was going to like Lollius; you know, Silvanus, how sometimes you can tell whether or not you are going to like someone from twenty feet away, well, of course, time has proved me right, and since I introduced him to you we have all been close friends, and he one of your principal informants for your *On Farther Asia*, and so there might be thought to be no need to describe him to you, but, for the purpose of this narrative, I should like to continue as though you do not know him or any of his fund of information and anecdotes, for this is to be the story of how I became involved with investigating the Christians, and others now or in the future may wish to read my account and they, not knowing Lollius, will want to know what he was like and so forth—and this consideration applies to other information later in the book that you will know already.

Lollius rose when I approached and said: 'Calpurnius Fronto, a pleasure to meet you.'

'Lollius Tubero, likewise, I'm surprised we haven't met before.'

'The fault is mine, I assure you, I am so busy here, with information gathering and counter-intelligence, and with coming and going all over the Empire, that I am never on the social circuit. But I have heard all about you and your exploits in Britain... tell me, when are you going to publish your account of those islands, I can assure you that it is badly needed at the present time, what with the difficulties we are having with the tribes there.'

'Thank you, Lollius, thank you for your compliments,' I replied, 'But they fill me with embarrassment, for I must be the only person in Rome with a reputation for being an antiquarian, who has never published a page. The fact is that I was intending to gather my materials together into an account, but shortly after I returned from Britain I suffered the loss of a very dear friend, and for several years I could scarcely work up the energy to read or write a sentence. And then, just as I was recovering from my grief, my father died and left me a good inheritance, but one so badly-administered and encumbered with debt that I am only now beginning to get on top of my affairs...'

'But we will,' broke in Lollius, 'have your account eventually.'

'Eventually perhaps, but I think that what I gathered there was nothing very special, it was simply what anyone could have written down who had been there...'

'*Exactly*,' said Lollius, 'That is exactly the sort of information that is most valuable—the sort that anyone could have noted, *but didn't*. When we're training agents here that is what I insist on time and time again: it's not big secrets and great conspiracies that we want them find out, except in very rare cases we already know all that—it's the little details we need, what colour cloak the suspect was wearing, what accent did he have? When did he leave the inn? What sort of paper did he use for his letter? That sort of thing. I'm sure that when your account is published it will be most valuable just because it will tell people that the Britons are people just like us, not fiercer, or stronger, or more virtuous or whatever, but just people.'

'That's right, whenever I was told by a certain group of people in Britain that the next tribe were more war-like, or taller, or fiercer, I used to wait and see, and then all I'd see was more Britons, differently-dressed perhaps, doing things in a different way certainly, but just people.'

'Good, good,' said Lollius, 'if only more people would realise that to understand other peoples you first have to get past your own ideas about them, to find out that they really are just people, just as boring and everyday as your own countrymen, *then* you can begin to find out how they think and how they do things, and what they think, and what they're likely to do.'

‘Anyway,’ I continued, ‘I now don’t think that I will complete this work on my own, but I have a son, well, the son of a very dear friend, the one I told you died young and so affected me, and he is a very bright boy, and determined already to be a historian and an antiquarian and a geographer, and I think that I will wait until his tutors are agreed that he is old enough, which should not be too long, and then I will turn the materials over to him, to give him a head-start on his first work. But in the interim, I would be happy to lend you those materials, if you think they would be of use to you.’

Lollius nodded, and then said, ‘And what was your query about the Christians?’

I explained at length about Servius and his infatuation with this new cult and Lollius nodded as I outlined my plan to save him. When I finished I thought for a moment and then said:

‘I don’t see why your plan shouldn’t work, you know this Servius, and I don’t, so I can’t say whether it would succeed, but I can give you the names of a few people who might be able to help you. As to the Christians, it will be difficult to challenge them in court, because so far they have done nothing illegal; it is not illegal to set up a new religion, so long as the practices involved are not themselves illegal. We prefer religions to be licensed, you know, but if they’re not it still doesn’t mean we can break them up straight away. We know a bit about this Paul, and we know that he, like the various Jewish groups, preaches that there is only one God, and that all other gods are false. But he also includes prayers in every service for the Emperor and the Empire, and enjoins his followers to follow every law scrupulously, so unless we take each and every member of his group and ask them individually to sacrifice to the Emperor, in which case they usually refuse, then there’s nothing at all we can do. And it isn’t illegal for a sect to ask for money from its worshippers, and if we arrested Paul and his followers they could no doubt provide us with dozens of witnesses to the fact that there really is a distressed widow in Pergamum who needs help, they could probably produce the widow too, and they would certainly show us a set of beautifully audited accounts showing, you know, “*Item, 2 denarii from Servius the Vintner, to the poor widow of Pergamum.*” We’ve seen it all before.’

He paused, and then gestured to the long walls of his office, which were taken up with long shelves, on which were stacked hundreds of chipwood boxes, painted red. On his desk were another five or six, one titled ‘Paul of Tarsus I’, another ‘Paul of Tarsus II’, another ‘Christian Sects Various’.

‘Do you know how many sects there are in Rome, besides these Christians?’

'A hundred,' I guessed, 'Two hundred.'

'Two hundred and seventy three,' Lollius said triumphantly, 'we found the 273rd last week, it had only been going a week and they were very surprised to see us, as we outnumbered the congregation, *and* we're on the track of another five at the moment. And remember, we're not even supposed to be looking after that department—we're really here to carry out surveillance on dangerous guerilla-groups, and insurgents and nationalist groups, the only reason that we're taking an interest in these sects is that often nationalist groups and independence movements use them as a screen to set up cells in the capital itself. Paul's sect is an offshoot of Judaism, but now it seems as if he has broken with the Jews entirely. Which means that, if this is true, and as long as he continues a quietist, we're no longer very interested in him....'

The interview seemed to be petering out and I was disappointed, because I wanted to get to know Lollius more, so I said:

'Well I really came here because I was interested to find out more about the Christians anyway...'

A smile crossed Lollius's face.

'Good, I like people who are interested in information, it's my trade, as it were. Well, as it happens I was going out right after I had seen you, to interview someone about more pressing concerns. But I'm sure that this person will be able to tell you something about the Christians as well. I would tell you everything I know myself, but it's always better to get information verbatim, rather than by report, and anyway if, after hearing what this person has to say, you're still interested I can lend you five... six... eight... eleven boxes of files about them to read at your leisure.'

'Well, I'd like that,' I said.

'Good,' said Lollius, 'Let's go then.'

As we were on our way Lollius began to tell me about his exploits in Asia; it seemed that when I had said I was interested in obtaining information about the Christians for my own satisfaction, I had immediately broken the ice and Lollius was now as interested in cultivating me as I in cultivating him. He told me that as a young man he had decided that, as a younger son of an already-bankrupt knight, his only prospects lay in a full-time army-career, and so he had borrowed the money necessary to purchase a commission and had been assigned to the *Legio X Fretensis* in Syria. There, bored with garrison life, he persuaded the commander to allow him to go with a company of Greek, Armenian and Jewish merchants on

an expedition through the Caucuses, and into Central Asia, to report back on the nations that lay beyond the Parthian Empire. He travelled with them, but they were going all the way to China, to try to open a silk trade by a northerly route, thus avoiding the Parthians and their customs dues. He had therefore gone with them all the way to China, to the capital of their Empire, which is located on a great river in the north of the country and goes by the name of Loyang, or some such name. There he pretended to be an envoy of the Roman Emperor, seeking an alliance with the Chinese against the Parthians. And as the Chinese Empire had recently been riven by civil war and the ruling dynasty had been deposed for over twenty years, and then reinstated, the new Emperor was very flattered and very pleased to have so marked a sign of his imperial preeminence as the envoy from a distant and mighty sovereign, and so kept him at court for five whole years. Lollius had, however, begun to repine and the arrival of another party of merchants, and their signalled departure gave him the excuse to leave. He travelled back through Central Asia and arrived in Syria, to find a new legionary commander, but apart from this as little action as there had been when he left. His report, however, was so detailed and so useful, that the Emperor Claudius had seconded him to set up the section of the secret service that he now commanded.

If a man had done only this then he would be set up in small-talk and anecdotes for the rest of his life, but in addition Lollius is such a *raconteur* that that morning I took no account of which way we were heading, or how far we had gone, but all I remember is fragments of his conversation. As for example me saying:

‘It must have been very strange to live in China for so long.’

‘Well to begin with, an especially as their language is so difficult for us Europeans to learn, though indeed its peculiarities are shared with nearly all the languages of the region, just as the languages of Europe have a general similarity to one another. But once I got to know a few words and had the customs of the land and the court explained to me, I soon recognised that the way they do things, though it is completely different from our way of doing things, is just as logical...’

‘Or illogical.’ I added.

‘Yes, you could say that. And I found that there were colonies of Jews and Greeks living in Loyang anyway, so I wasn’t without people to interpret and guide me round.’

‘Why are there Greeks and Jews in China?’

‘There are Greeks and Jews everywhere, so there are bound to be some in China. Do you know the joke about the Greeks and Jews?’

'No.'

'Well it goes like this—if you're a traveller, is it better to be a Greek or a Jew?'

'I don't know.'

'It's better to be a Jew. Because if you're a Jew you will be welcomed by your fellow-Jews, and cheated by the Greeks.'

'And if you're a Greek...'

'You'll be ignored by the Jews and cheated by your fellow-countrymen... But seriously the Chinese are so far ahead of us in all manner of handicrafts, that it's not surprising there are so many merchants trying to establish trade-routes with Europe. For example they have a very fine glazed pottery, that is as strong as ours, but pure white and as thin as an eggshell. They have better paper than us, thinner, more flexible, takes ink better, and costs a fraction of what our paper does. Their steel blades are lighter and stronger than ours and don't rust so readily. There's silk of course...'

'But why don't the Chinese themselves start up these export markets.'

'Because they think it unbecoming to be a merchant. In their scheme of values even a peasant is considered of more worth than a merchant. And their nation is so prosperous anyway that they don't need foreign trade. Loyang, for example has a population greater than that of Rome, and they tell me that before the civil wars it was even greater. And besides, just as our Empire is surrounded by barbarian nations, so is theirs, so export is difficult. You might as well ask why we don't make enormous efforts to export to China. Look, we're here now.'

We paused and I saw we were at the entrance to a tenement block in one of the poorer parts of town. I didn't recognise the street.

'Who are we going to see?'

'An old Rabbi lives here, we've recently found out about him, and I was coming here anyway to ask him some slightly more tricky questions about some Jewish nationalists I'm longing to track down, but I think we'll warm him up by asking him to tell us about Jesus.'

'Jesus?'

'Jesus of Nazareth, Christ, or "the anointed one", after whom the Christians take their name.'

'But isn't it forbidden for Jews to meet non-Jews, won't this Rabbi be offended by our visit?'

Lollius laughed and laughed:

'You're the first Roman I've ever met who expressed any sort of concern about anyone else's sensibilities, it's not a national characteristic. Yes, I'm sure there are plenty of people he'd

sooner meet than us, but this is Rome, and you can't live in Rome without meeting Romans, can you?'

As we climbed the stairs to the top floor Lollius explained to me that the Jewish laws of purity related mainly to food, the kind of food and the utensils used to prepare and serve it, and so it would be next to impossible for a strict Jew to dine with a Gentile (which is the word they use for non-Jews). Therefore we should not expect to be offered any food or wine by the Rabbi, but as to sitting in his apartment and talking, this shouldn't cause too many problems for him.

We knocked at the door and a little old woman, perhaps the Rabbi's wife, opened and ushered us in. Evidently we were expected. At the table in the room sat the Rabbi, an old tawny-skinned man, with a long white beard and grizzled hair. I noticed that he was blind.

'Jonathan ben Simeon,' said Lollius in Greek, 'I am Lollius Tubero and this is my friend Calpurnius Fronto; we've come to ask you a few questions.'

'Gentlemen, you are most welcome,' said the Rabbi, in an incredibly thick Aramaic accent, and with the expression of someone welcoming two wolves to his house, 'I will try my best to answer your questions.'

'Well,' said Lollius, sitting himself down on a rickety chair and pointing out the remaining one for me, 'First of all my friend here would like to hear about Jesus of Nazareth.'

The Rabbi's face showed complete surprise and puzzlement, and I saw at once that Lollius was being very clever. The Rabbi, knowing we were coming and knowing what information he had that we wanted, had probably spent the intervening time planning exactly what he was going to say to whatever questions we might ask him. By beginning with a topic completely removed from what he anticipated Lollius had surprised him and might, by this, be able to trick him into revealing something important.

'Jesus of Nazareth?'

'Yes, that's right, Jesus of Nazareth, a fellow-countryman of yours, I believe.'

'Yes, he was a teacher.'⁴

'What did he teach?'

'He taught what all Jewish teachers teach, the Law, and the duties incumbent on us, and how we are to interpret the Law with regard to our everyday life.'

⁴ ie a Rabbi.

‘But I’ve heard that he wasn’t just a Rabbi like you are, with a congregation in one place, but he roamed about and taught rebellion and preached that God was about to destroy Rome and free Israel.’

The Rabbi’s face turned bright red and he began breathing heavily. After a moment he answered:

‘At various times God has punished the sins of Israel by allowing foreign nations to rule our land, and we regard the Roman rule of Israel as such a punishment. Certain hot-heads want to rise up and free our land by armed force, but most of us believe that when God is ready he will free us himself, and that at present our duty is to be obedient citizens of the Roman Empire.’

‘And Jesus?’

‘He may have taught the same thing, I know little about him.’

‘But he associated with John the Baptist, who was executed for treason.’

‘John preached that Israel should repent of its sins; he was murdered by Herod Antipas because he dared to say that Herod’s marriage was incestuous and no marriage according to our Laws, which it wasn’t.’

‘John baptised Jesus and afterwards Jesus was called the “anointed one”, what does this mean?’

‘John baptised many people as a sign that they had renounced their sins. As to why some call Jesus the Christ, I cannot say.’

‘Did he not claim to be the Messiah, who is to liberate Israel?’

‘I congratulate you on your knowledge of our religion,’ said the Rabbi sarcastically, having by now guessed that Lollius was unlikely to use violence against him. ‘The Messiah is the man whom God will use as his instrument to liberate Israel; Jesus may have thought that he was the Messiah, and others may have thought he was, but he did not liberate Israel, therefore he is not the Messiah. Many men have claimed themselves to be the Messiah, but none has been proved to be the chosen man as yet.’

‘Yet he visited Jerusalem at the Passover and tried to instigate the mob against the Romans.’

‘All Jews must visit Jerusalem at the Passover, if they can; as to what he did there I do not know.’

‘But Pontius Pilatus, the governor, had him executed.’

‘The Roman have killed many of our people, some with good reason, others with none.’

‘When do you think the Messiah will come?’

‘When God is ready, it is impious to speculate when.’

‘But many believe that he will come within our lifetime.’

‘That is their opinion.’

‘Why do some Jews still follow Jesus.’

‘They say he was a man of learning and wisdom, and anyone whose teaching is imbued with the spirit of God will attract a following, even after his death. We revere the memory of great teachers and their teaching is handed on to future generations.’

‘But they say that Jesus is still alive.’

‘Oh no, you Romans are too thorough for that, a man condemned to death dies, is that not so?’

‘But I have heard that when he was placed in temporary tomb, that on the third day the tomb was found empty.’

‘I have not heard that.’

‘But his followers maintain that he is still alive even now, that he came to Rome, that he has travelled around the Empire and beyond, still preaching rebellion.’

‘If he did survive his crucifixion then it may be that he would decide to travel round the Empire visiting Jews in their communities, but I have not heard that he did survive, or that if he did, he has been travelling around. You should be aware, gentlemen, that it is quite frequently the custom of religious fanatics to steal bodies from tombs, especially the bodies of notable people. For it is one of the signs of the last days, when the Messiah is to come, that the dead will rise from their graves. If they can create enough hysteria these people think that their purposes can be accomplished.’

‘But many of his followers claim to have seen him in the flesh.’

‘What they claim is no business of mine.’

‘And many Gentiles claim to follow him too, and say that he was the Son of God.’

‘All men are the sons of God; and it is none of my concern what Gentiles say or do. God in his mercy may spare the best of the Gentiles in the last days, so some of our prophets reckon, but my concern is with the Children of Israel.’

During this exchange neither man had raised his voice or expressed anger, but I could see that as the conversation refused to go the way Lollius was expecting he had become angrier and angrier, whereas the Rabbi had become calmer and calmer.

‘Very well,’ said Lollius, ‘Enough of Jesus. Now, where were you before you arrived in Rome...’

Lollius, lapsing into a familiar routine, grew calmer, as he asked the Rabbi whether he had known such and such a person at such and such a place, whether it was not true that so and so was the leader of the sect called the Shepherds, whether so and so wasn't the brother in law of such and such a nationalist, whether he had ever heard the password 'Adullam', and what it meant. And during all this the Rabbi fended off his enquiries with the same aplomb that he had demonstrated while refusing to commit himself about any knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth. After a while I saw that Lollius was getting bored, and soon after he wound up the questioning with a warning that the Rabbi was not to leave Rome, or to move around within Rome, without telling the police, and that if he learnt about any revolutionary activities he should let him know immediately.

Then we left. As we were quitting the room I pressed a gold coin into the old woman's hand, as it looked as if they lived in miserable poverty and the Rabbi was someone I guessed to be, despite his race and religion, a good man. Lollius pretended not to notice this.

In the street outside Lollius set off at an even quicker pace and I hastened to catch up. I saw that he was annoyed and so said nothing. We continued for several streets, until suddenly I realised that we were very near to Servius's wine-shop.

'Hey,' I said, 'Servius's wine-shop is at the end of this street, how about stopping for some lunch.'

Lollius pulled up and said:

'What?'

'Servius, you know, my freedman, the chap who's being bamboozled by Paul of Tarsus... That is unless I've taken up too much of your time already, I know you must be very busy...'

'Oh no,' said Lollius, 'Some lunch would be a good idea, and besides, I've still got to tell you what I know about this Jesus, as our friend there was so unforthcoming.'

As we walked towards the shop, I asked:

'What did you think of the Rabbi, did he know anything? Did he have something to hide?'

'The old buzzard was very clever. Within a couple of minutes he realised that he wasn't going to get dragged off to interrogation and I think he got positive pleasure from being so rude. All the Jews hate our guts, but few of them will say so. I admire him. As to Jesus, no he doesn't know anything that we don't, he was just being obstructive. You know if you're a Jew you can have as bad an enemy as you like, another Jew, and yet if a Roman asks you about them, there's no way in the world you'll ever breathe the least word about that person. The Greeks aren't like that, if a Greek is enemies with another Greek, he's off to the police-station with

tall tales about his enemy before you can turn round. He has to, otherwise the other one would be there first. But the Jews, they won't have anything to do with us—that gold coin you gave the old woman, they'll have waited until we were gone and then thrown it into the street.'

'What about all those other questions you had?'

'He's been too long away from Palestine to know anything, I think; he's been in Egypt and Greece, before coming here, we knew that anyway. I think he knows something about the Shepherds, but not much. We'll keep an eye on him, but I don't think that he'll be any use to us.'

We had arrived at the Three Fish by now and entered. Servius was away, but Faustina welcomed us and showed us to the best table. I took over and ordered fried fish for both of us and a bottle of the Gaulish wine. Lollius began.

'Well, what I was hoping was that our friend would be very keen to tell us about Jesus, hoping that we would not press him so hard on the more dangerous questions. He didn't play along. But you got the main points didn't you?'

By now the wine and a few servings of bread, olives and cheese had arrived. Lollius seized hungrily on these *hors d'oeuvres* and took a big swig of wine. I could tell at once that he hated the wine.

'Perhaps you'd better order their table wine, I assure you its very acceptable.'

Lollius laughed: 'Ah, well, this place is certainly worth preserving just for the snacks—look at this bread, it's as fresh as anything. Normally the snacks they give you in these places look as if they've been on the premises since they opened. As for the wine, we'll agree to differ.' And we waved to the waiter.

As Lollius was ordering another bottle of wine, I began hesitantly:

'Well, I get the main story. Jesus was a Jewish teacher, a Rabbi, who believed that the end of Roman rule was at hand and so travelled round the country preaching repentance and readiness for these events... is that right?'

'As far as we know.'

'But I don't understand about this John the Baptist.'

'He was another preacher, who also believed that the last days were at hand. He was baptising people in the River Jordan, but when Jesus appeared it seems that not only did he baptise him, but he also anointed him too...'

'What does that mean?'

'Well, that's why the Rabbi was so keen to disclaim all knowledge of the title "Christ", it means that John anointed him King of Israel.'

'But how could he do that, there already was a King wasn't there?'

'Not in Judah, some of the sons of Herod, who used to be King of the whole country, were ruling the provinces around about at this time. But the Jews had never accepted Herod as their legitimate King anyway. Only someone of the house of David, who was the first King of Israel, who reigned hundreds of years ago, long before Rome was founded, can be a King. And we found that this Jesus was descended from David. The other thing is that Kings of Israel were often anointed by prophets, and John obviously thought himself a prophet and entitled to carry out this ceremony.'

'So Jesus was a rebel, or he did want to remove Roman rule, at any rate.'

'Well it seems that his opposition was on a spiritual plane, that is he expected everything to happen without any human action, but by divine intervention. Indeed there is evidence that John soon discovered that he had made a mistake in anointing Jesus, when he saw that Jesus was not going to raise the standard of rebellion.'

But now Lollius's wine had arrived, and he had tasted it and found it much more to his liking. Then the fish had arrived, all crispy and fragrant, surrounded by lettuce and cucumber. We both began eating with gusto.

'But the other thing I don't understand,' I said after a while, 'Is about his death, or not. Can you explain?'

'This is the most extraordinary part of the whole business. After a couple of years of public preaching Jesus arrived in Jerusalem at the Passover, this was about thirty years ago. He was arrested, as you'd expect, condemned to death and crucified. But after he was taken down and put in a temporary tomb, because of the Passover, which is a religious festival during which no work can be done, it seems he revived and escaped. As you can imagine the whole thing was an enormous embarrassment to the Governor, Pontius Pilatus, and it formed one of the articles of indictment against him when he was recalled.'

I laughed, 'that Pilatus was so incompetent, I often think that Tiberius used to appoint really bad governors just as a joke.'

'Yes, but like most really incompetent administrators he did very well for himself, retired with a million, and lived very well; he only died a few years ago.'

'Perhaps, as the Rabbi suggested, Jesus's followers did steal the body away.'

‘Well, possibly, it certainly is incredible that someone could survive crucifixion, be in a coma for three days and then escape. But on the other hand the sort of devotion that his followers show can’t be caused by a confidence trick, no matter how clever. There are many Jewish teachers who have been considered very wise and they have lived out their lives and died and they are still revered, but not in a fanatical way; they are considered to be simply men favoured by God. This Jesus inspires his followers with such devotion that something extraordinary like this must have happened. And besides, we have reliable reports of his being seen all over the Empire in the intervening time. He was here in Rome at the time of the big Jewish riots in the reign of Claudius, he may have been behind them. And Claudius in the end had to expel the Jews from Rome for a time, do you remember?’

‘I was in Britain at the time.’

‘I was in China, or just coming back at any rate.’

‘But this Jesus has been seen since.’

‘Yes, it seems that he is touring the Empire, and anywhere else, where there are Jews, and that he is still preaching repentance and the imminent coming of the last days. He has been seen in Parthia, Armenia, India, we even have one report from China.’

‘Could he have got as far as China.’

‘Well I did, and I’m not half so determined as he evidently is; and I’m not Jewish either, so I didn’t have any fellow-countrymen to help me.’

‘Oh, sorry to interrupt you,’ I said, ‘But over there, look, Servius has just come in.’ I waved him over and he approached looking worried and anxious, still removing his cloak. ‘Servius, I’d like you to meet my friend Lollius Tubero; we’ve just been enjoying a meal here, and well up to the usual standard, I may say.’

‘Thank you, sir, you’re very kind.’

‘Servius,’ said Lollius, ‘Calpurnius has been telling me what an honest man you are, and certainly I think this is the best wine-shop I’ve ever visited in Rome, though I can’t say much for the wine that Calpurnius is swilling.’

‘An acquired taste, I think, sir,’ said Servius, with a bow, ‘is there anything else I can get you.’ We asked for some more bread and grapes, and Servius left. Lollius returned to his theme.

‘But as you’ll find when I lend you those files, there are various different sorts of followers of Jesus, some Jewish, some not, like this Paul of Tarsus, for example. I’m afraid you won’t be able to take the files away with you, you’ll have to read them inside the palace, but we have a very comfortable common room with easy chairs and food and wine and so on, and it

shouldn't be a burden for you. Now there was one other thing I wanted to sound you out about. Can you spare another hour or so this afternoon? I have to go out now and track down another Jew I want to question, but if you could come back to my office in a couple of hours I have a proposition that I want to put to you.'

By now I had fallen completely under the spell of Lollius; in my life I have met many people who have done great things in the military, or business spheres, but no one I could really admire whole-heartedly, and equally I have many friends and acquaintances, but few that I would want pass a great deal of time with. And most people you meet, in or out of Rome, you'd never want to spend five minutes with. Yet I had just spent several hours in Lollius's company, and, within a few minutes after he left, I was feeling impatient to meet him again. I had a word with Faustina, out of sight of Servius, and assured her that within a week Lollius and I would have taken Servius in hand. After that I returned home for a nap.

Later that afternoon I ventured back to the palace, in quest of Lollius and I found him sitting in his office in a high good humour.

'You'll be pleased to learn that I've had a much more successful expedition since I last saw you,' he announced. 'We've arrested two people who may have some very interesting information about a Jewish group we've been pursuing for some time. We should soon know a few more things.'

I congratulated him, and he then added:

'As to all the Christian files, I've ordered them for you and you'll find them down in our library, on desk number three and we'll keep them there for you until you've finished with them. If you want any other information you can ask the librarian, Aristophanes, who can show you where the works you need are.'

I had sniggered at the name of the librarian and Lollius added:

'Don't worry, he's nothing like his namesake and has absolutely no sense of humour at all; in fact he's a philosopher...'

'That's right,' I said, 'I remember hearing of a book of his once, *Aristotle Reinvestigated* or something, wasn't it?'

'Yes, something completely unexciting; but his thesis was very interesting, namely that four hundred years of commentary have done nothing to take Aristotle's thought any further, and that it has also obscured the real meaning of many of his works, and that we should re-read Aristotle, and not his commentators.'

'Hmm,' I added, not really knowing what to say.

‘Anyway,’ Lollius continued, ‘The other thing I wanted to raise with you was this. See the Army List here?’ He held up a scroll. ‘Well every so often I go through it to look for the name of retired officers whom I think might be interested in helping us with our work. You will be pleased to know that out of about eight hundred former officers you are one of about ten that I had marked as being worth approaching.’

‘Oh, I’m flattered, I assure you,’ I said, flustered.

‘Yes, in fact most are perfectly hopeless, but we do like to snap up the likely ones; in fact we’d have approached you before now but we knew about your sorrow over your friend’s death and then how you were tied up with your business affairs and we waited. We would have contacted you within a year, but as you came to see us, I thought, well, why not ask him now?’

‘What is it,’ I asked, intrigued, ‘that you would like my help with?’

‘Well, as I explained this morning, I’m really here to keep the dangerous nationalists under control, but I still have to keep an eye on all these sects and societies in Rome as well. I’m really looking for someone reliable to manage that end of things for me. Are you interested?’

‘Er, yes, I might be. But what are the conditions?’

‘Well, we can’t offer you a salary, but of course you don’t need one anyway, you only need an occupation that will keep you from spending your inheritance, isn’t that right.’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ I laughed, marvelling at the extent to which Lollius could read my mind.

‘On the other hand, you’d have free travel and accommodation when on business, expenses, the rank you had before and the right to call out the army or the navy to help you—that’s terribly exciting—you’d be based here, under me, and after a few weeks in which you’d read up all about these groups in the files we already have, and pick the brains of Aristophanes and myself and the others here, then we’d let you off on a long leash. The only thing you’d have to do is report every so often, and of course tell us anything important you find out before it becomes critical.’

I laughed at this, but Lollius glared and snapped:

‘Don’t laugh, there was someone once who knew there was going to be a revolt in Armenia a month before it happened, but forgot to tell anyone—this is before my time.’

‘Was he in their pay?’

‘No, he was just an idiot. After that he was sent to Egypt and he fell down a well.’

‘Was he drowned?’

‘Everyone thought so, but after someone went down on a rope they found him all covered in mud and only half-drowned, unfortunately. So after that he had to be retired. Read the whole

story in the files if you like, his name was Vertumnus Niger. Anyway, what do you say to our offer?

'What can I say but "Yes"? It would be something I'd enjoy and I do need something to do, all this landowner and patron business is getting me down. Yes, I accept.'

'Good, well, when do you want to start?'

'No time like the present, I could begin on those files right away.'

'Excellent, I'll call Aristophanes up to show you round. I'm usually here all the time. If you need anything though Aristophanes knows as much as I do about the running of the place. Now I must be going to see about the interrogation of those prisoners...'

And that was how I was recruited to the Secret Service, and how I came to take part in the surveillance of the Christians and other sects. But as to what I found in the files and records when I began to read them, I will leave that for another chapter.

III

Immediately I left Lollius's office that afternoon I descended to the library. This was a large, well-lit room on the ground floor of the palace, opening on to a courtyard. I noticed two sentries on guard at that entrance, I suppose to see that no one took any files or scrolls away with them. In fact there were sentries at the other two entrances too, and it was only the staircase up to the floor above which was unguarded. The library was equipped with reading desks and easy chairs, and a table in the corner held jugs of wine and plates of snacks. One end of the room was entirely taken up with library shelves, around the walls and free-standing.

The library was deserted, so I went over the reading desks and found my desk, with all the files. I sat down and opened the boxes one by one and began to read the lists of contents for each box. After a while it occurred to me that if my reading was to be methodical I had better begin with Judaism, as, as they say, so is the shoot to the original trunk, and this sect of Christians originated within Judaism. I walked over to the shelves; Aristophanes was nowhere to be seen, however, I discovered a plan painted on one end of the shelves, and soon located what I wanted, viz a couple of works on the Jews and their recent history and the scrolls of their holy writings translated into Greek, which was done at the court of one of Ptolemies—Alexandria, then as now, being a great Jewish centre.

I began to read in these works, but after a while I perceived that dusk was drawing on and so I returned home.

The next morning I arrived at the palace and was waved through all the sentry posts, evidently Lollius had spoken with the security division and I was now known as an employee. At the library I met a short, balding Greek, whom I took to be Aristophanes, but before I could address him he spoke to me:

'Good morning, Calpurnius Fronto, I'm sorry that I wasn't here to greet you yesterday, but Lollius and I had a great breakthrough yesterday with those 'Shepherds', he probably told

you about them, and we had mobilise everyone to go out with the police to make arrests. We think that we rounded the whole group of them up, leaders and all.'

'I'm very pleased, and I expect Lollius is too.'

'Yes, he's more pleased than I've seen him before; he'll probably be in a minute or so. But anyway, how did you go with your researches?'

'Well, I started reading the files on the Christians and the other sects, but then it occurred to me that if I was to understand them, then I should first have to understand Judaism, so I began to look at a few works on that subject, and to browse in the Jewish holy writings.'

Aristophanes smiled:

'And what did you think of them?'

'They're most puzzling; and I have some questions for you, because I've always thought that the easiest way to find anything out is to ask someone, just so long as that someone is trustworthy, of course.'

'What was it you wanted to know?'

'Well, it's all this Messiah business, and the expectation of the imminent end of the world. That seems completely foreign to our thought.'

'Hmm,' said Aristophanes.

'Well, Aristotle for example said that the world was without a beginning and without an end, and, I don't know much about philosophy, but my tutor told me when I was young that the genius of Aristotle, in contradistinction to other philosophers, lay in his summing up and justifying common, everyday beliefs, rather than inventing a whole new philosophical world of his own...'

I trailed off because Aristophanes, who had stiffened at the mention of Aristotle, had grown red in the face, and agitated, and I realised that, to an expert on Aristotle, what I had just said was the very worse thing I could have said and that the least I could expect was a two-hour lecture on Aristotle's theory of time and the world. However, I was to be pleasantly surprised, because, as I afterwards found out, Aristophanes was a fanatic where Aristotle was concerned, but at the same time had just enough detachment to avoid always swerving into this obsession, even when provoked.

'No, I think what Aristotle was saying was the natural world, vegetation, animals, birds, the sea, the weather and so on, has always existed, and will always exist, *as far as we can tell*. But at the same time we know that human societies change within a few generations, so that a few hundred years ago Rome was a little settlement of mud huts, and a few thousand years

ago people didn't even cultivate the ground, but hunted and gathered wild food. However, I see what you mean, you're thinking of this creation myth at the beginning of the Jewish scriptures and the current expectations of the Messiah that are deluding the Jews at the moment. I agree, this is a different thought-world entirely.'

'But is there any explanation for it?'

'Well, it's not as if we don't have creation myths, only there is no one myth that everyone agrees on, and most are self-evidently either poetic fancies, or fairly obvious allegories in the cause of some theory or other of politics or physics. And you Romans, practical and down-to-earth as always, have absolutely no traditional beliefs about the beginning of the world. So I think that the best minds amongst us, led by Aristotle, are right in thinking that, unless we can discover some new and unsuspected set of evidence to point us towards a more definite conclusion, we are quite right to reject as foolish any speculation as to how the world began, and similarly, how, or when, or whether, it might end.'

I nodded, relieved to have got over that sticky patch.

'But,' Aristophanes went on, 'it's not as if the Jews are much different from us on the subject of a Creation Myth, for, you may have noticed, the first book of their scriptures contains two, slightly divergent, creation myths...'⁵

'Yes, I noticed that.'

'Well, it may be that if the Greeks had ever been politically united, then some sort of canon of myths and legends could have been assembled which began with one, or two similar, creation myths.'

'Yes, of course, I hadn't thought of that, I mean the Greek myths are told in completely different ways in each city, and this is to bolster the importance of the city in which that version is found. But when did the consolidation of the Jewish myths take place?'

'Well, the first kingdom in the land we know as Judah and the surrounding parts, was three hundred years or so before Rome was founded, and was the work of one David, who became a powerful king, and was succeeded by his son Solomon. But their kingdom split up soon after and in its place there were two rival kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. After a few hundred years the Israelites were defeated by the Assyrians and deported to the eastern parts of the Assyrian empire, and a hundred years later or so the same thing happened to the inhabitants of Judah, only this time the aggressors were the Babylonians.'

⁵ Genesis 1: 1-2:4 & 2: 4-3:24.

But then an extraordinary thing happened, instead of becoming assimilated in Babylon, as the Israelites had become in Assyria, the Jews worked very hard at their myths and legends, and began to assemble a canon of scripture using these, as well as certain religious poetry and some genuine historical records. But the religion they came up with was not a continuation of the religion they had practised before, but a new one. Before they had worshipped several gods and goddesses, but after this religious revolution they worshipped only one God, Yahweh, and claimed to have only ever worshipped him alone.'

'It was at about that time that the Greeks began to worship Zeus in a philosophical sense, as the sole God of the universe, ineffable, all-powerful, and a fount of justice and wisdom,' I interjected, 'in place of the disreputable, lecherous old tyrant that the myths portray him as, so perhaps there was influence one way or another.'

'Possibly, because at about this time the Persians were coming up with their own new religion, said to have been initiated by Zoroaster, which is similarly new and divorced from what had gone before.'

'Right, so I understand better now, all these books in Jewish scripture were assembled then to justify a new theological order. And all those completely unedifying legends about the patriarchs and a flood and things like that were a sort of prologue, just as the Greeks rehearse the legends of Troy and so forth. But what about this Messiah? I don't find very much about him in their scriptures.'

'Well, that's right, as Messianism is a more recent development still. After this new religion had been formulated various poets gave vent to prophecies that God would restore Israel, and indeed, within a generation the Persians had defeated the Babylonians, and some parties of Jews were allowed back to Jerusalem, their former capital, and, after much wrangling, even allowed to rebuild the city and the temple that was there. So it seemed as if the prophecies had been correct. But then the Persians were defeated by the Macedonians, under Alexander, and his successors, the Seleucids, wanted to subdue the Jews and convert them to a Hellenistic culture and to take away their semi-independence. And so for many years the Jews fought against the Seleucids, and when they freed themselves, after no more than a few years of peace, the Roman arrived and imposed a foreign race of kings on them. And so their history has been one of hope, and struggle and disaster and hope, and their thought, consequently, swings between a confidence that God will deliver them, to, in defeat, a fervent desire that he will. And as Roman rule has gone on and on, and has become more and more onerous, it is not surprising that militant Messianism is on the increase, nor is it surprising

that, as the Jewish people's sufferings in this world have often been so great, that their imaginations can only conceive a deliverance which involves a cataclysmic overturning of the whole order of things, succeeded by a period of peace, under direct divine rule. At each period of oppression and defeat in their history the Jews produce a welter of poetic literature depicting the end of the world and the defeat of their current enemies, if things improve this production ceases, but at the next crisis the old prophecies are revived and reedited to be applicable to the latest circumstances.'

'Is much of this apocalyptic literature found in the Jewish scriptures?' I asked.

'Not much, because the canon was fixed some generations ago, before there was much apocalyptic literature, and besides not all Jews are apocalyptically-minded, like that old Rabbi you went to see yesterday, and this literature is often considered not very respectable, or politically dangerous. So only a few passages in the Jewish scripture and one short book are properly apocalyptic, but other passages are read by the Jews as foreshadowing the Messiah and the last days. And there is a great deal of this literature outside the bounds of their scripture proper, of course, which is passed about secretly, or in oral form.'

'It's all very strange,' I said.

'And yet,' Aristophanes went on, 'there is such a strain of realism in Jewish thought too. For example the Herods, father, monstrous son and dismal, incompetent grandsons and grand nephews and so on, were adventurers from Edom, the next country east of Judah, across the Dead Sea, and yet many of the Jews accepted them as God's punishment, because one of the Jewish leaders who had fought against the Seleucids, in a moment of over-confidence, had invaded Edom, and forcibly converted its inhabitants.'

'It's all very strange,' I repeated.

'I think the strangest thing of all,' said Lollius, entering the room suddenly, and breaking into the conversation, as, as I later found, was his habit, 'is what a lot of cold fish they all are, these Jews and Christians. In all my time investigating them I haven't found one sexual scandal or impropriety amongst the lot of them. I find it extraordinary they can contain their passions so well—perhaps that's why they're all barking mad and waiting for the last days.'

I didn't find it incredible that these people could control their passions, but as I knew that Lollius had a reputation as a great frequenter of courtesans and flute-girls I didn't want him to think me effeminate if I confessed this, and besides, he was in a boisterous good-humour and only joking, so I said nothing on that head, but changed the subject.

‘But why is it that if national defeat and oppression has caused this upsurge of fanaticism,’ I asked, ‘the same thing has not happened in Greece, or anywhere else?’

‘Greece was never united politically, and most of the oppression it suffered until the Romans came along was at the hand of fellow-Greeks, or the Macedonians, who are half-Greek at any rate,’ Lollius began. ‘And besides, they never had to invent a myth of national exclusiveness. If the Jews had not invented themselves in Babylonia they would have disappeared completely, whereas the Greeks have never been in that situation and have no more than any other nation has, which is just a vague sense that they are the best nation and the only civilised one and so on....’

‘But the problem with the Jews,’ Aristophanes continued, ‘is that part of this myth is the idea that they have to worship their own God, and no other, in their own way. This makes them peculiarly sensitive to any imposition on their customs and religion. And the irony is that they’re just about the only race that could be trusted to govern themselves within the Empire...’

‘That’s right,’ Lollius said, laughing, and poking Aristophanes playfully, ‘The Greeks couldn’t, they’d be at each other throats the minute that we left, eh, Aristophanes? With any other nation in the Empire it can be argued that for most people being ruled by Rome is hardly any imposition and that most people are better off. But not the Jews, because we have chosen some really dreadful rulers and governors for them, almost as if we wanted to provoke them into revolt. And we have trampled all over their sensibilities, right from the moment that Pompey decided to profane their Temple, which was a stupid thing to do.’

‘Quite right,’ I interjected, ‘when I was in Britain, I used to seek out temples and shrines wherever I went and go and make offerings there. What can you lose? a few gold pieces and few minutes of time, and the impression it makes is incalculable, and you get the priests on your side, and besides we can all do with divine favour, wherever it comes from, can’t we? I mean, all that profanation did Pompey no good in the long run. And I expect that after the Jews’ adventure in Edom they would have no designs on any other province of the Empire...’

‘I agree,’ said Lollius sadly, ‘And it often fills me with sorrow that I spend all my time chasing Jewish nationalists when, with a bit more care and thought, the Jews could have been our natural and most dependable allies. If I were a Jew, I’d be doing exactly what they’re doing now, plotting against Rome and Roman rule...’

Lollius had thrown himself into a chair and was morosely looking at his foot, Aristophanes had turned and began to tidy some files; the conversation appeared to have reached a bit of an impasse, so I decided to change the subject.

'Well, thanks for your information and interpretation.' I said, 'Now I don't think I'll have any difficulty in reading through these files and coming to an understanding of these sects, in a few weeks' time, and of course I'll also have to look up all the non-Jewish ones as well, but what about Servius, could we perhaps begin to move on that quickly?'

'Ah, yes,' said Lollius, 'we'd better move on that one quickly, otherwise Servius may be difficult to reclaim. Are you still going to try your plan?'

'Unless you can see why I shouldn't,' I said.

'No, I don't see why not, if everything runs smoothly, and if Servius is as gullible as you say he is, then it should certainly work. And it'll be great fun; I'll help you, you can take as many of the police as you like to help, and...' he added scribbling on his tablets, 'this is probably the man you need.'

I glanced at the tablets and memorised the name. As I turned to Aristophanes to ask him to ask someone to fetch this man to the palace, Lollius reached across and took hold of one of the boxes of files. He opened it and pulled out a chart of figures; frowning he made mental calculations and then said:

'Well, if you wanted to we could carry out your plan as early as tomorrow, but I see that the Christians have a meeting tonight, which we could attend too if we wanted to.'

'What was all that calculation you were doing?'

'Well the Jews and Christians have a seven-day week, did you know that?'

'No, I didn't; why is that?'

'Because their calendar is a lunar one, hence months of 28 days, divided into four weeks of seven days. With them every seventh day, the sabbath as they call it, is a day of complete rest. On that day the Jews have a synagogue service, and on that day too the Christians have a service, which follows the form of the synagogue service, in that it has readings from the scriptures, hymns and prayers, but it also incorporates a meal.'

'A sacred meal, like that in the mysteries?' I asked, intrigued.

'Well, I'm told that the Jews leave the synagogue after the Sabbath service and go on to dine with their friends and relatives, in big groups. But the Christians have actually taken this meal and incorporated it into their service, like the sacred meal in the mysteries, only the

explanation they give is that it commemorates the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples, before he was arrested.’

‘But surely we can’t gatecrash one of their services?’

‘No, this meeting tonight isn’t one of those; the Christians make a great to do about the initiated and the uninitiated, this is the process which this Servius is going through—and the final entrée into initiation takes place when the catechumen is baptised before this sabbath-service and then allowed to take part in it, and share the meal. The initiate will have been attending special classes for several months before this of course. But the service I intend to take you to is a mid-week service, a sort of general proselytising meeting, where anyone can go, so long as they are not Roman citizens, of course⁶, and where they are given food and drink, and then have to listen to a talk by one of the leaders. These are very interesting, and we may even see Paul himself at this service.’

‘But won’t it be dangerous?’

‘Oh no, this is, after all a pacificistic sect, and besides, we’re not going to announce ourselves for who we are, we’ll just pretend to be slaves or freedmen... or Greeks’ he added as Aristophanes came back into the room.

Aristophanes ignored this sally and told me that the Egyptian priest would be with me in half an hour or so. Lollius waited until he had finished, then handed him the piece of paper, asking him to check his calculations, and then turned to me:

‘That’s a chart that someone very clever with numbers we used to have drew up to convert our dates to days in the Jewish calendar. I’m just asking Aristophanes to confirm that this is the night they hold their meeting.’

Aristophanes handed the paper back to him with a nod and he continued:

‘Good, it’s a very late meeting, because of course they hold it at an hour when all the servants and domestics can get away, but I’ll book some plain-clothes officers to come with us and I’ll meet you here about an hour before, all right?’

I nodded, and Lollius left, Aristophanes had returned to the shelves and was busy with some reshelving. I turned back to my books. After a little while two soldiers entered, leading a tall, thin, sepulchral-looking man. They presented him to me and I dismissed them. I greeted the priest and he said:

⁶ Because Roman citizens were forbidden to convert to an unauthorised religion.

'I hope, sir, that I have done nothing which might have unwittingly offended you, or broken some law I was unaware of?'

'Not at all,' I replied, glad to be able to set him at his ease. 'In fact the reason that I sent for you is because I have had such good reports of your sect that I want to present you with another member. But first could you tell me what your religion consists of?'

The priest began and soon I realised that his religion was one of the Isis and Osiris mysteries that are so common in Rome. Everything he said served to show me that what they did and taught was entirely blameless and it only remained to find out whether this sect was within Servius's means.

'So,' I said after he had finished, 'what are your charges?'

'We ask our initiates to make a monthly donation of a few *denarii*, which should come to fifty or so by the end of the year, and a one-off initiation fee of 50 *denarii*.'

'That's a bit steep, isn't it?'

The priest drew himself up in scorn, and said: 'Not when you're paying for eternal life.'

And I reflected that, well, it was a lot for a person of Servius's means, but it was a regular payment, not a constantly increasing series of demands, as the Christians seemed to make. I often think how lucky I was, Silvanus, that my father was a prominent resident in the Campania region, and how this allowed him to be initiated into the oldest and most authentic of the mysteries, namely the Orphic Mysteries, and how I in turn was able to be initiated, and how I was able to present you, my friend, for initiation. Were it not for the fact that we are members of such an august religion, then we too would have to pick and choose amongst the gaggle of religious entrepreneurs who hawk their faiths about, or worse, attend the schools and there bandy archaic Greek with the philosophers. Anyway, I decided there and then that this religion would do for Servius, and if the initiation fee was rather large, then perhaps I could help him out with it—for in these things I expect that it is the rule that you get what you pay for.

The only thing that remained was to see whether the priest would agree to my plan; as I explained it to him his look of disdain increased, but he didn't say no, and so I arranged for everything to swing into action the next afternoon.

That evening I returned to the palace, having borrowed some suitable clothing from one of my servants. Lollius was there waiting for me, also clad in old and dirty clothing. He explained that the plain-clothes police had gone on ahead, and would already be in position by the time we arrived. We left the palace and walked on through the darkening streets. As

we went Lollius told me about the house that Paul had taken when he arrived in Rome. It was a tall tenement-block in the suburbs on the Ostia road; it stood below the level of the street, so that the ground floor was in fact a sort of semi-basement. This was the floor that the Christians used for their services and meetings, as it was more discreet than the use of a conventional ground floor would have been. The floors above were used by Paul and his followers as their own lodgings.

'I thought,' I said, 'that this fellow was under some sort of house-arrest? What's the story, I haven't got up to that bit in the files.'

'He's accused of a breach of the peace, a very serious one, some three or four years ago, at Jerusalem. He appealed to the Governor of Judah, and then to the Emperor, so his case was transferred here. But of course the Jews aren't happy with our justice system in Judah, much less here, so there'll never send any representation to Rome, even though it was on their complaint that Paul was arrested in the first place. So Paul will never come to trial. And to tell you the truth I don't think anyone in Rome gives a damn what happens in Jerusalem anyway, so long as it doesn't involve some sort of general Jewish revolt.'

'But isn't he still under house arrest?'

'Technically, but it isn't really any more binding than the warning I gave to that old Rabbi yesterday. But the odd thing is that Paul really hasn't been outside his house since he moved in anyway. Queer, we've been watching him round the clock, but no.'

By now we had come to the district where Paul's house was located, and soon we entered the street. It was a dark, poor street, though the house to which we were heading was well-enough lit, and as we drew closer I noticed groups of people also moving that way. At the steps down to the front entrance there was a positive crush, and it took us a few minutes to get level with the doors. At the doors stood two burly doorkeepers, arranging people in two orderly queues, male and female. Just as we got inside someone had done the most obnoxious, smelly fart, and we had to walk through this miasma, and when we emerged the other side it was into an equally thick atmosphere generated by sweat and unwashed, greasy bodies pressed into an airless, hot room. Just inside the door stood a young Greek with a piece of paper on a board taking names. I didn't hear what Lollius gave as his name, but I said boldly:

'Milo, servant of Calpurnius Fronto, Knight,' in Greek and with as thick an accent as I could manage.

Next another young Greek stood by a table and offered a bread-roll and an earthenware cup of wine to each person; I saw that no one refused, not even Lollius, so I seized on these too, and finally we emerged into a more open area of floor. I followed Lollius to the far wall and stood by him. We both looked around at the scene. We were towards the back of a room perhaps twenty feet wide and forty feet long, into which were crammed a press of people. Down the front of the room was a dais and around this the audience was clustered thickly, but up our end of the room there was more space, though not too much, and the free area of floor was getting smaller and smaller all the time as more and more people emerged from the vestibule. The upper end of the room was in darkness, but lights burned in wall-niches around the dais. There was a palpable air of excitement in the crowd. I looked about trying to guess at the nationalities and classes of the audience. A surprising number were women, who were evidently supposed, by the effort of the doorkeepers, to keep to the left hand side of the room, but this order seemed not to be widely understood or obeyed, for the women were mingling amongst the crowd generally. As the nationalities and classes, most of the audience looked Greek to me, though I suppose a few were Roman, and almost all were evidently of the poorest classes, slaves, labourers and so forth.

After a few minutes a tall, thin Greek appeared on the stage and called for order. Almost at once the audience fell silent, a remarkable occurrence, for I would have said that such a crowd of people would have been unruly and noisy and difficult to control, but evidently they had come to listen. After thanking the audience for coming, the Greek introduced himself as Timothy, a disciple of Paul, and he began to introduce the faith of his master to the audience. It was obviously a well-practised and carefully-conceived speech, which outlined in very general terms the doctrine of the one God and of the necessity of faith in this one God, and of the great example of Jesus and so on. This was not news to me and so, whilst pretending to listen intently I looked about secretly to gauge what the reaction of the audience was. Well, it was highly interested, not only had these people come to listen, but they had also come to be convinced, it seemed.

After Timothy had wound up his speech he promised that the next speaker would elaborate on his themes with reference to the scriptures. Sure enough a short, balding man got up and began to read out of a scroll the various passages in Jewish scripture that the Christians claim indicate the future appearance of Jesus. These went on and on, and as I had spend the best part to two days already reading these scriptures I was rather bored, as I recognised the odd passage, but the general style of the passages was such that, it seemed to

me, one could, with a short acquaintance with the style, just make up the references, and no one would be any the wiser. I murmured to Lollius:

‘This is boring isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘but the audience isn’t complaining, they know the best bit is just coming.’

Soon the scripture reading ended and Timothy got up to thank the reader. He then announced that the recent initiates would appear, and at this a sort of half-cheer went up from the audience. I didn’t know what to expect and so was interested when half a dozen nervous-looking people appeared on stage, dressed in white robes. The first one, a man, began to speak and started to tell everyone how great a sinner he had been before he joined the Christians and how this had changed his life and assured him of salvation. Each of the six spoke in turn to the same effect and I began to have to repress my amusement at what I thought was the affected tone of penitence. But more than this, the sins that the people confessed were such half-hearted ones that it hardly seemed worth confessing them; they were the sorts of petty dishonesties and thefts and evasions that I would be surprised if my servants were not guilty of. I shot a glance at Lollius, and I saw that he too was at pains not to laugh, but he put a finger to his lips and pointed towards the crowd. And this was the amazing thing, the crowd seemed positively riveted by this tawdry and unexciting ritual of confession; several of the crowd would groan when a particular misdemeanour was mentioned, or when one of the people spoke of their wretchedness before their conversion, others were rapt and wet-eyed, others covered their faces. Lollius leaned forward:

‘There’s a lot of emotion about tonight, so Paul himself may appear.’

Sure enough, when the last of the six had finished Timothy announced that Paul himself, as a special favour to the audience, would appear, and before he had finished a noise of approbation arose from the crowd, as a small man had appeared and made his way to the front of the stage. He was little and bandy-legged, with a balding crown and a very prominent nose. His extraordinary appearance was enhanced by the fact that his brows were also large, and his very bushy eyebrows formed one continuous line across his face. He looked stern and threatening, but suddenly, so suddenly it startled me, he looked up with a serene expression on his face and the crowd gave another noise of approbation.

‘My brethren,’ he began, in a well-modulated Greek with a hint of an Aramaic accent, ‘It is well that we have been reminded of our sins, for there is no one amongst us without sin, and except we ask God for mercy and implore the intercession of his Son, Jesus Christ, no-one will be saved.’

He continued in this vein for some time, beginning to enlarge on his own career, how he had once been a rigidly orthodox Jew in the pay of the High Priest in Jerusalem, and how he had persecuted the followers of Jesus, until he met with Jesus himself on the roadside near the city of Damascus, who had convinced him of the error of his ways, and so the story went on. I was interested in this narrative, because at that time I had not read the files about Paul, and it was interesting to get the story from his own mouth, though I couldn't help feeling that he was far too satisfied with his former sins, and instead of repenting of them, seemed to treat them as a sort of guarantee of his own importance. However, I did not have much of a chance of following up this analysis as the reaction of the audience began to engage my attention. They were utterly enthralled by Paul, not only did they follow his every word, display each emotion on cue, as Paul reached that particular part of his narrative, but they began to press forward, and respond loudly to each climax in the story, with groans and cries and suitable ejaculations. Not only this but something began to affect me too, my pulse began to pound and my vision narrowed, there was a roaring in my head, and I had to ask myself what was the matter. It wasn't that I was responding to Paul's narrative, for by now the crowd was so noisy that I could barely hear his discourse, and besides, although he was an accomplished orator, he was, after all only a religious cheap-jack, but it was something else. I turned and looked at Lollius and saw that he had been watching me with amusement; suddenly I knew what it was that was affecting me, it was the smell that the crowd gave off, a heady aroma that I had only smelled once or twice before: once on one of my infrequent visits to the Circus, at the climax of a particularly long and skilful fight between two well-matched and equally-popular gladiators, and once again, amidst the ranks of my legion, when we, one hot morning, below a green wood, waited for the onslaught of the British war-chariots.

Lollius lent forward and whispered: 'They love him, and he handles them so well; watch him calm them down again now.'

And indeed, Paul was now returning to his initial theme, and sentence by sentence the hysteria abated, so that at the conclusion to his discourse, you could have heard a pin drop. Paul ended:

'And see the mercy of God extended to us—for now even some of the men prominent in Caesar's household are with us.' And with that he pointed directly at us. Fortunately both Lollius and I had the presence of mind to turn around and look behind us, as though we thought that the men he was indicating were still further to the rear of the hall, so that few

people suspected that it was us he was meaning, and besides the back of the hall was in comparative darkness. Nevertheless I got a nasty shock. After Paul had vanished I whispered to Lollius:

‘Are we safe?’

‘Completely, he always does that anyway, I should have warned you.’

‘The doorkeepers look pretty formidable.’

‘They’re police.’

‘Oh.’

Timothy had reappeared on stage and was organising for the audience to join in initiation-classes, which were held at various times throughout the week. Before he got up to the back some members of the audience had begun to drift away, and we followed them out into the street. The night was cold, but the air was very refreshing after the stuffy and charged atmosphere of the hall.

‘Well,’ I began, ‘he can certainly play them.’

‘Yes, he’s a master of that sort of rhetoric, wouldn’t convince us of course, we’ve had the usual polite education and gone to the law-courts and listened to the orators who can really turn it on; but of course the people he’s speaking to are a different class, as you noticed, not very sophisticated, wouldn’t know they’re being rhetorised, as you might say.’

‘I was surprised by the crowd, I had no idea that it would be such a low class of people, otherwise I’d have borrowed the cook’s clothes, never mine my valet’s. But I had the impression that this was a money-making operation, but now it seems to me to be a sort of general charity organisation—none of the people there would have been worth anything.’

‘Well, from what we’ve been able to deduce, Paul and his disciples operate on several levels; what you saw tonight was their general recruitment—these people will be combed and selected and assigned to the classes you heard them organising and those that last the course will be welcomed into their church. But Paul and the others also take care to cultivate others of higher social classes, like your Servius, and they have different meetings for them, and of course, those sort of people are expected to contribute largely.’

‘So do you think that this is fundamentally a crooked outfit?’

‘Well, if you’re a rich convert, it probably doesn’t make any difference, if you’re poor then it may be a good opening and in this case the church may function as a religious club, you know, meals and charity and insurance and contacts and that sort of thing. It’s people like Servius who gain nothing.’

‘But the money they do cream off, I mean the money that doesn’t get returned the members of the church, who gets that.’

‘Well, Paul and the leaders do, I suppose. But I don’t think that Paul is as flagrant as some religious leaders, he never dresses extravagantly, never indulges in anything, but he lives quite well. I suspect that the main part of the money goes to a fund for use in emergencies, or to help him out of difficulties—for example we suspect that he used these funds to buy citizenship....’

‘Goodness, how could he have afforded that? I wouldn’t have thought that someone like him could save up that sum in a thousand years.’

‘No, he probably makes less per year than a quarter of the revenue of one of your estates,’ returned Lollus with a grin. ‘Yes, he must have come by a lot of money at that point. And of course when he was travelling around more, in his missionary days, he will have spent more, you know how expensive travelling is.’

We moved on in silence, until I thought of another question:

‘I heard Paul say that Jesus was the Son of God, but they’re always going on about the one God, so how can a unique God have a Son, I don’t understand, especially as you say that this Jesus is still alive, does Paul know this?’

‘I don’t know, no doubt you’ll soon call him in to resolve these questions. Or you could ask Aristophanes tomorrow. Well, anyway, it’s very late and here’s a little wine-shop I often stop at for a nightcap, but I suspect it won’t be entirely to your tastes.’

We had stopped outside a very lurid-looking tavern that I knew was probably little better than a brothel, so I excused myself from further entertainment that evening and returned home.

The next morning I asked Aristophanes for an answer to my queries of the night before and to my relief the librarian looked tentative for the first time that I had seen. ‘The difference between the Jewish followers of Jesus and Paul’s sect,’ he began, ‘is that the Jews believe that Jesus may have been the Messiah, and that he may yet vindicate this title, whereas Paul’s sect believe him to be a divine being, an aspect of the Godhead.’

‘But we know that Jesus is still alive somewhere, or at least we don’t know that he’s dead. How can you believe that someone who is still alive is a part of the Godhead?’

'I don't know whether Paul does know that Jesus is still alive, or, if he does, how he justifies it, but an old Jew of our acquaintance, who is now dead unfortunately, once told me that he thinks that the identification may have been a series of metaphorical slippages concerning the term "Son of God".'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, for Jews everyone is technically a Son of God, even Romans, as the first man, Adam, so their scriptures say, was "made in God's likeness".'

'That's what the old Rabbi said, though he didn't mention Adam.'

'But this term also has a more exact sense, of "a person peculiarly favoured by God", as, for example a prophet, or a king. And Jesus was a king, so he was certainly a Son of God in that sense. *However* the apocalyptic writings, or some of them, say that in the last days God will send out an emanation from himself, sometimes called the Ancient of Days, who will help the Messiah achieve his victories. Now there is no problem with this in orthodox Judaism, because God can send out whatever emanations he likes without compromising his singularity, and the Rabbis have various other emanations to list too, such as his Spirit, which accomplished the act of creation, if you recall...'

I nodded.

'... and Wisdom, who inspires the Rabbis. But somewhere, probably in Egypt, where religious doctrines are broken apart and bits of them are joined back together again to make new religions every day, somebody came up with the idea of one of these emanations being eternal, and co-existent with God. *Then* it is easy to collapse the whole chain of reasoning into the equation of Jesus = Son of God = an eternally-existing aspect of the Godhead, though it's not something that an orthodox Jew could ever have done.'

I was baffled, and after a moment said:

'Oh well, I expect that once I've got clear in my own mind the distinction between these Jewish Christians and the Pauline variety, then I'll have solved the question.'

Aristophanes' eyes twinkled:

'Oh you think so. No, once you've done that you still have to find out about the Gnostics.' And with that he began to walk away.

'Who are they?' I began.

'Ask Lollius,' the librarian returned over his shoulder, 'or ask that Egyptian priest this afternoon.'

When Lollius came in later I asked him about the Gnostics, but all he did was snort angrily and leave the room. He looked a little the worse for wear after his night out, and so I decided to ask the priest when I got a chance instead.

IV

Fortunately Lollius did not continue in his bad mood all day; towards lunch-time he began to brighten considerably and when I reminded him that today we were to take Servius in hand he returned to his usual affable self. My plan for Servius relied on the fact that he was very regular in his habits. Although, like anyone, he drank well-diluted wine throughout the day, he only took one cup of almost undiluted wine, and this was invariably a couple of hours after lunch, to relieve himself of that mid-afternoon lethargy that not having the leisure for a siesta entails. I had conveyed to Faustina a sleeping draught, this I had from Lollius, official issue, guaranteed absolutely safe and dependable. She was to drug his wine that afternoon. A little after midday Lollius and I arrived at the Three Fishes, ordered lunch and drinks and unpacked papers as if to go over them. After an hour or so Faustina signalled to us that Servius had drunk his cup of wine and not noticed anything amiss. A little later she came over to tell us that he had passed out in the kitchen.

We went over to the kitchen door and entered; Servius had sat down at the table, feeling weariness come over him and had slumped over the table. Lollius went to the back door and motioned to two policemen who had been waiting outside. They came and took Servius and loaded him on to a hand-cart and threw sacks over him. Then we and the policemen took it in turns to wheel our cargo the three or four miles to the Egyptian priest's temple.

There the priest was waiting for us and had prepared a room where we were to leave Servius until he recovered. We set the policemen to watch over him and retired to another room, where the priest had set wine and food for us. He was about to retire, when I motioned to him to stay and to sit with us, saying:

'I've got a question for you. And for you too Lollius, now that you've recovered your good-humour. What about these Gnostics then?' I looked at both men, and both of them, the Egyptian priest and the Roman policeman had such identical expressions of distaste on their faces that I burst out laughing. And I said:

‘Come on, what is it about these people, why do you hate them so much?’

Lollius said:

‘I’ll let our friend speak first.’

The priest considered his words and then spoke:

‘Well gentleman, you are aware that the religion which I have the honour to serve and propagate is the most ancient religion in the world, and is the only true one, insofar as the initiates of Isis and Osiris, those who have learnt all the secrets of their mysteries, after death are welcome into the Halls of the Dead and become Lords of the Dead and depute for our Lord and Lady, and have government over the unhappy souls of the uninitiated. This religion is the true religion of Egypt; it has been practised for thousands of years in our land, by all the Pharaohs, who, though publicly they worshipped other deities, in private worshipped only our Lord and Lady, and confessed no other gods to have any power.

When, after many difficult years, when we had lost our own sovereigns and were ruled by the Persians, Alexander the Macedonian liberated us, and the line of kings that followed him, though they introduced their Greek gods to the land, in private also confessed our mysteries and acknowledged that the Greek religion itself, though corrupted and defaced by time, has indeed no other original than our religion. However these Ptolemies also cultivated Greek learning and Greek philosophy, and a strain of barking atheists grew to have great influence. But worse, the Jews, who had been living in Alexandria and other parts of our country, and whose religion also springs from ours, though they now confess a single God, have now begun to get together with these atheist Greeks and have bred a bastard religion that denies our deities ever more blasphemously than the atheists, and they have led many thousands away from true religion and towards vile rites and blasphemies. The bottom-most pit of Hell is reserved for these people.’

‘Let me translate,’ said Lollius. ‘Gnosticism is a religion that seems to have begun a few generations ago in Egypt, when heterodox Jews and philosophical Greeks began to confer together. Have you heard of Philo?’

‘Yes, he was a Jewish leader in Alexandria and a scholar.’

‘Hmm, he tried to interpret the Jewish scriptures with the aid of Plato and other philosophers. Well his endeavours were quite rational, they only offended the most nationalist of Greeks and the most traditional of Jews, in Alexandria at any rate. But, believe me these Gnostics are a different kettle of fish. They believe that the world of matter is essentially evil, and therefore the god who created it is not God, but a devil, pretending to be

God. Thus they revile the gods of Greece and the God of Jewish scriptures as false gods, and declare themselves the only saved ones, because they alone have the necessary knowledge⁷ of secret religious doctrine and formulae to free them from the trammels of the world...'

'Gentlemen,' interrupted the priest, 'I realise that you are high-minded and religious yourselves, but I would beg you not to discuss these blasphemies further in the precincts of this temple.'

Just at that moment a policeman put his head around the door and announced that Servius was groaning and stirring. We ordered the policemen to pinion Servius and take him into the main body of the temple. This was a dark room, illuminated by lanterns; the walls were either covered in drapes, or in places bare, so that rows of hieroglyphic characters could be seen. The priest had prepared the room so that he, and others when necessary, could stand on a dais at one end, illuminated from behind, and Servius and the two policeman would stand below. Servius was still groggy and unsure on his feet, so the policemen jerked him up roughly and the priest, donning a mask and robes, mounted the dais. Lollius and I stood back, behind and slightly to one side of the dais, so we could see Servius round the end of it. The priest then called out in sonorous tones:

'Servius, Servius.'

'Yes,' replied Servius, 'Where am I, who are you?'

The policemen immediately delivered several heavy blows to the luckless vintner, and one said:

'Down on your knees wretch, have you no respect?'

'Ow! Ow! Help, mercy! Where am I?'

'Wretch,' said the priest, 'You are dead, and have come to judgement.'

One of the policemen struck another blow and said to Servius:

'This is the Lord Anubis, the judge of dead souls, abase yourself.'

'Oh, Oh,' groaned Servius, 'Mercy my Lord, have mercy on me.'

'Well,' said the priest in sepulchral tones, 'Your death was sudden and took place before you had a chance to prepare yourself, yet I must still consult the scroll of your life, to find out which portion of the afterlife is to be yours, punishment or reward.'

⁷ Greek *gnosis*.

He opened a scroll with such solemnity that Lollius and I could scarcely conceal our mirth, but ignoring the sniggers and rustling behind him, and the groans and sobs of Servius in front of him, he pretended to read:

‘I read in this scroll that you have been a faithful, hard-working and honest servant to your master, and after being freed, an honest and hard-working vintner, a good husband and father. Nothing here that would say other than that you should be given an honourable place in the Abodes of the Dead.’

‘But my Lord, my wife and children will be left destitute, they will have nothing to support them—could you not release me from death, at least for a little time, so I could make provision for them?’

The two policemen, getting thoroughly into the spirit of the charade, at this began beating Servius again, until he was prone.

‘Impudent wretch,’ said the priest, signalling to the policemen to moderate their blows, ‘is it not enough that I tell you you are to be honoured amongst the dead, that you then feel you can ask me to reprieve you. How many times have I heard this, from better men than you? And besides, here on the last few line of your scroll I see a great black mark; did you not leave the religion of your forefathers, which, though corrupted, is at least a likeness of the one true religion. And did you not follow after a charlatan, a religious pretender, a Jew?’

Servius simply lay and trembled.

‘Why did you follow this miscreant, wretch?’

‘My Lord, I had heard he was virtuous, and eloquent; I went to his meetings, they were simple and his words were persuasive. I thought that in joining the sect I could do good, and inherit eternal life. Forgive me.’

‘Fool, this Paul’s words were full of deceit and guile; he pretended virtue in order to take your money away. Did he not ask you for money?’

‘Yes, quite large sums. But he said they were for charity.’

‘And did he not tell you to forsake the gods of the pagans, and maintain that only his God was the true God, and did you not believe him?’

‘Yes, my Lord, I did, forgive me.’

At this the policeman again raised their hands, but the priest said:

‘Wait, no more blows. I am inclined to listen to Servius, for he has been good-hearted, though blasphemous through credulity. Is there anyone you can call as a witness to your good-faith?’ Servius looked up eagerly:

‘Yes, yes, my Lord, my old master Calpurnius Fronto Senior.’

This was my cue, and when the priest nodded, I strode up on to the dais, and said: ‘My Lord Anubis, I obey your summons.’

My father was of a very similar build to myself, but his voice was deeper and he had a strange way of saying his ‘r’s, I did my best to counterfeit his voice, and as the light was behind me it would have been impossible for Servius to have noticed that I was not my father. I continued: ‘I am very sorry to see my servant Servius here, after his sudden death. I can only report that he was always a model servant, I always intended to free him in my will, but, unfortunately, affairs pressed about me and I was never able to redraft my will to that effect. Fortunately my son carried out this service for me. I am sorry that Servius was led astray by a religious trickster, but I hear that he has deluded many, and I can only join with my servant in asking you to give him a second chance.’

The priest pretended to deliberate a while, and then said:

‘Hmm, have you anyone else you can call as a witness.’

‘Oh yes, my current patron, Calpurnius Fronto Junior, and thank you master, thank you,’ he added, turning to me.

‘Very well,’ said the priest, ‘But it takes longer to summon the living to this chamber.’

Meanwhile I had disappeared from the stage, and, standing behind it, pulled off my gown, and remounted the stage, as myself, as in my night attire.

‘My Lord Anubis, it is an honour to be summoned here from my sleep to give witness to Servius’s worthiness. He is, as my father told you, a very worthy man, save only in this question of his following a strange and blasphemous religion. If your Lordship would be good enough to allow him to ascend to the world of the living again, and thereby allow him to provide for his family, would you also be good enough to direct him to the purest form of your religion currently being carried out in Rome? This I’m sure would allow him to follow the correct path in life.’

‘Anubis’ appeared lost in thought awhile and then spoke:

‘Very well, the testimony of two such religious and honourable men, father and son, has decided me to grant your request. You will return to the living, and revive miraculously in the middle of the night following the afternoon you died. But Servius, mark this: next morning a messenger will visit you and show you a sign, a golden scarab beetle, and you will follow him wherever he leads you. Do you understand?’

‘Yes my Lord, and thank you, thank you,’ gushed a much-relieved Servius.

'Silence!' barked the priest, and motioned to the policemen, who jerked Servius back up on to his knees.

'Now, drink this,' he continued, stepping forward on the dais, and descending three steps to the floor holding a cup out to Servius. Servius drank; in fact he drank wine laced with the same sleeping draught he had drunk earlier in the day. After a few seconds, his eyes glazed and his head slumped and he collapsed on the floor.

With this the priest pulled off his mask and the policemen went to light more lanterns. Lollius and I came forward to congratulate the priest on the entertaining charade we had just witnessed. He accepted our thanks, but looked just as disdainful as he always did. Lollius nodded to the two policemen, who picked Servius back up, and carried him out into the anteroom. There they loaded him back on to the trolley, and disappeared into the twilight with orders to take Servius back to The Three Fishes.

I had better finish this part of Servius's story quickly, lest I take up too much of the narrative with a description of what may seem nothing but irrelevant horseplay. The police took Servius back to the tavern and he was put to bed. Later that night, when he began to revive, the whole household, schooled in advance by Faustina, gathered tearfully about the bed and acclaimed Servius's miraculous return to life, after spending, so they said, so many hours in a deep coma. The next morning I hastened round to Servius's house early and burst in asking after him. On being led to see him, still recovering in bed, I explained how that night I had had a most vivid dream in which I had been summoned by Anubis to testify to his good character and to speak on his behalf, and how relieved I was to see him still alive. Servius for his part told me the whole of his experience, showed me the bruises and exclaimed against Paul and the Christians, saying he couldn't wait until the messenger arrived that day to show him the true religion. I, for my part, agreed that his Christian adventure had been a great mistake, and counselled him to trust to his experience, as, as I had independently experienced it, it must be true.

Well, the messenger arrived, as arranged, that day, showed the sign to Servius and led him, hobbling, to the priest's lodgings. The priest then told him that he had had word from his master Anubis in a vision that a new convert would be found, at the Three Fishes, and had told him how to send a messenger and what sign the messenger should bring. And Servius entered into the service of Isis and Osiris that very day, and being Servius, was not contented to be just an ordinary devotee, but dedicated himself whole-heartedly to that religion, though fortunately not to the detriment of his business. Incredible as it may seem Servius,

well-advanced in middle-age, took to sitting up at night to learn the Egyptian language, and when he had mastered everything that our priest could tell him, he travelled to Egypt to learn more from the priests there, as will be narrated later in this story. Finally he returned to Rome, sold the Three Fishes, and moved down to near Naples, where, now ordained a priest, he set up a new branch of the religion, and he and Faustina live there to this day, and he is reputed a wise and holy priest, pillar of the local community and so forth. The Three Fishes, sadly, declined after it changed hands, the cook left, the food and wine went downhill, and the only consolation for the patrons was the dubious one of 'exotic entertainment'.

But to return to the day that Lollius and I played the initial trick on Servius. After he had been carried away, we thanked the priest again, and I handed over a bag of money to him, a gift from myself, plus Servius's initiation fee. And then Lollius and I left. I was turned for home, but Lollius said:

'I'd better finish telling you about the Gnostics, and there's a little tavern nearby that's a favourite of mine, fancy a drink?'

I must have looked dubious, because Lollius immediately added:

'Don't worry, it's nothing like the place I went to last night, in fact I must give up going out on the town like that, I'm getting too old. This is a very quiet place; not as nice as the Three Fishes, but quiet enough.'

So we walked a few blocks, and then turned into the little bar that Lollius indicated, which was indeed a quiet place, until the entertainment started, a very decorous Syrian woman-singer, who, however, had such a terrible voice that we had to move to the furthest table and hiss in each other's ears to conclude the conversation. This is how it went, minus the interruption.

'As you can imagine,' said Lollius, 'if the Gnostics believe that the material world is essentially corrupt, then they're not very political...'

'Because it doesn't matter how much change you make to the current world, it is still corrupt and evil?'

'Exactly. And that's exactly what we want, non-political religious cults. But of course just because they're Gnostics, doesn't mean we can just ignore them, because if you were a violent nationalist and wanted to infiltrate Egyptian, or Roman society, what would you do?'

'Pretend to be a non-political and quietist religious sect.'

'Yep. And the problem with the Gnostics is there isn't just one version, or five, but fifty-five, or five hundred and five. It's because they rely on charismatic leaders, and such leaders are

always likely to lose their influence, be usurped, lead splinter groups and so on. And besides every different group has a different practice of religion. Their belief that the material world is corrupt can lead to two different modes of life. Some of the groups, not many, live riotously and go in for particularly single-minded and protracted sexual orgies—they reckon thereby to abuse and revile the flesh. But there are not many of these, probably far fewer than people would like to think. Most of these people go in for asceticism, of one sort or another. Some like to live on a bowl of porridge and crust a day, live in caves in the desert, and most starve to death pretty soon. But the majority are middle-of-the-road, they might sell everything they have, but they put the proceeds in a central fund, and live in quiet communities, dedicated to prayer and ascetic practice.’

‘But are these people Greeks, or Jews, or Christians?’

‘Who can tell? They combine elements of all three religions, and some are definitely Greek, some definitely Jewish and some call themselves Christians, but they’re all Gnostics really. I guess that the reason I dislike them is because I want all religions to be discrete phenomena, comprehensible, stable, and accountable. That way it’s easy to keep an eye on them. But these groups are in such a state of flux, they’re mostly in Egypt, probably because it’s easier to be ascetic in a hot climate, and they’re almost impossible to infiltrate.’

‘Why is that?’

‘Because they demand so highly of their initiates; the average police spy is not very bright and not very convincing, and they see through them very quickly. The worst are the groups that practice sexual orgies—anyone joining has to counterfeit such an intense commitment, and demonstrate such stamina, that they soon get detected. And the ascetic sects are almost as bad; a typical practice is for a devotee to lie on his back across a deep trench, which is just wide enough for him to rest his heels on one side, and the back of his head on the other. Imagine that. And imagine spending, not just five minutes like that, but five hours!’

‘And then I suppose it’s difficult to keep an eye on cults that are so far away.’

‘Yes, and we always seem to get perfectly hopeless agents, like that Vertumnus Niger I told you about. And even quite decent people who go there end up badly. You’ll have to see whether you can do any better. You’ll have to go there next year, next sailing-season, and try to organise a better local administration.’

And that was about all that was said about the Gnostics that evening.

Well, in the weeks that followed I read through everything relevant that I could find about the Jews and the Christians and the Gnostics. I began with the Jewish scriptures,

and read them in the Greek translation, then I read various works on the Jews by Greek writers, mostly hostile I might say. Then I looked for works by Jews themselves, but of course they do not choose to justify themselves to non-Jews, and particularly not in Greek. Indeed in what few works I could find I found the sentiment that it had been a most unfortunate mistake to translate their scriptures at all almost universally agreed. I found a few apocalyptic works translated and it was obviously from these that Aristophanes had derived his knowledge of the genre. The works of Philo from which I had expected much were quite useless as to the current beliefs and practices of Jews, as all he had done was to run Plato and Moses, the leader the Jews reckon to have written the first five, and most holy, books of their scripture, head on into each other. This I thought a grotesque exercise, and one even more bizarre than the writings of Plato and Moses taken separately.

There were plenty of reports of current Jewish sects on file, but most of these concerned militant sects, and those were the responsibility of Lollius, so I left that side of things alone.

There was little about the Gnostics, for the reasons that as Lollius had outlined, and I resolved to make it my business to find out more about these in the new year.

Finally I came to the files dealing with the Christians, particularly with Paul and, as I was starting methodically, I first looked for any references to Jesus and his career, but there were none. Puzzled I went in search of Lollius and found him talking to Aristophanes in the library. I should say that this was several weeks after the events narrated in the passages above, and after an office had been found for me. I asked Lollius my question, and he replied: 'Well, when I was commissioned to set up this section I went to the imperial archives and before I could do anything I had to hire a good librarian to help me, that's when Aristophanes came on the scene. Our job was to search the archives, and to extract anything that bore upon cults and sects and secret societies and nationalist politics and to extract them for our own library. Unfortunately we found great confusion; under Augustus all the separate archives from the various great magnates of late Republican times had been gathered together and catalogued very well, but for two reigns nothing much had been done and the collection was in great confusion. To start with much of the material was a century or so out of date, so we persuaded Claudius to hive that off into a separate collection. Next we found that of the material that remained, much of it was fragmentary, and there were many files you would have expected to be there which were missing completely.'

'Why was that?'

‘Well you can imagine that if you have two reigns of despotic government there will be many things that will be convenient for those in power to suppress, or never file in the first place. But I suspect that under the government of Tiberius’s favourites, Sejanus and Macro, people were allowed to bribe the librarians and get them to jettison inconvenient records. In particular there were no records whatsoever of anything about Palestine from the years that Pilatus was governor.’

‘So you think that Pilatus, or his friends, got into the archives and took away all those records, so that they could not be produced at his trial?’

‘Looks like it.’

‘But surely that would be the most terrible crime and when it was discovered would only incriminate Pilatus the more?’

‘Well, look at it this way. He was recalled in the last year of Tiberius’s reign. Now Tiberius was very old and had lived on Capri for years and deputed all the government to favourites; and legal business in the higher courts was just about at a standstill. On the other hand the heir presumptive was young Caligula, who, at that time, as the son of Germanicus, was thought of as being a paragon, at least compared to his uncle. Pilatus probably thought that the best thing to do was send a quick messenger to Rome, to his supporters, asking them to obtain and destroy all the records in the archives relating to his governorship. That way when the young heir succeeded nothing could be proven, and if the old emperor lived another ten years he was unlikely to be found out either. It was a gamble, the best he could do, and as it happened it turned out well for him because Tiberius was dead by the time he arrived back in Rome, and Caligula, as a way of showing his independence, had cancelled all legal proceedings instituted by Tiberius; so Pilatus got off scot-free and his theft was never detected.’

‘Is that certain?’

‘I can’t think why else the file from those years should be missing, when we have full files for every other governorship, from the death of Herod the Great to the present. Pity old Pilatus died a few years ago, we could have asked him.’

‘So nothing about the trial of this Jesus?’

‘Nothing, I’m afraid. What I’ve told you about him has been gleaned from the accounts of half a dozen people I’ve interviewed, all hearsay, I’m afraid.’

I made a mental note to pursue this path of inquiry.

But before I get on with telling you exactly what was in files and what I later found out and what happened over the years I was involved with the Secret Service, I should first of all tell you about my work with the other sects, the ones that weren't Jewish or Christian or Gnostic. And indeed, if, in the following chapters I give the impression that I spend the next fifteen years investigating the Christians, I would be misleading you. For most of the time I was actually investigating other sects. But these were quite simple to deal with and often I did no more than certify them legal and above board. For if I found any sect that was nationalistic, then I handed the file straight over to Lollius and he dealt with them. If I found the sect peaceful and honest and well-run, and not to be one that was trying to recruit citizens, then nothing further needed to be done. And besides all these sects are really quite simple to understand: there are, for example, sects in Rome which are the representatives of various national cults, as for example the Gaulish gods, or the Armenian ones, and these are present in Rome to serve the needs of Gauls and Armenians who happen to dwell there. And then again there are sects peculiar to the army, which are dealt with by the military authorities. And then there are other, more international sects, such as the various versions of the cult of Isis and Osiris, one of which we tricked Servius into joining. But none of these took up much time. Of all the sects, only the various strains of Christianity looked like going on and becoming a problem, so I was right to spend a greater amount of time chasing around after them. For only these sects were terribly successful in recruiting large numbers of people, from various nationalities and backgrounds, and thus surmounting the limits of their original constituency, which every other religion seemed to be unable, or unwilling, to do.

By the way, in case you're wondering, in fifteen years of looking after them, the 273 sects mentioned by Lollius suffered these various fates: 33 of them were militant and dangerous, or a front for criminal activity, 15 were Jewish, Christian or Gnostic, and the rest were harmless. The middle group I will discuss as we go along, but of the others, the militant sort were infiltrated and destroyed at a regular rate, and most disappeared after the Jewish War, such that by the time I gave up my job there were a mere 20 or so still going. In fifteen years no less than 167 sects died out, but over this time a similar number were founded, so the number of these sects has remained more or less constant.

As to the followers of Jesus and what records we possessed of them, we have numerous reports from various sources. Anywhere outside Palestine we had gathered information from the local police and magistrates and any police spies who may have been employed, also from informers and people who had once belonged to one of the sects and

had left. In Palestine the situation was more difficult because many parts of that land were at various times ruled by various of the descendants of Herod, and each one of these rulers kept their own police-force and their own records and found it in their own interest to inform us only of what they wanted us to know. So, from the records in front of me, it was difficult sometimes to make out what was going on. Moreover, as all the Jews are so vehemently anti-Roman we can hardly count on any informers and it is very difficult to recruit agents and to maintain them for long. Our best source of information has always been the circle around the High Priest at Jerusalem, who has an interest in maintaining good relations with Rome.

However, to add more complications, the High Priest and his circle, the rich, land-owning families of Judah and other provinces, are of a sect called the Sadducees, from the name of Zadok, who is reputed to have been the first High Priest, many hundreds of years ago. Their religion is essentially a very conservative one and they believe that the true centre of Judaism must remain the Temple in Jerusalem and that its essence is the rites carried out there. Although the populace still worship at the Temple and pay their dues to it, most of the people despise the High Priest and his followers as corrupt and pro-Roman, and most simultaneously follow another strain of Judaism, led by people called the Pharisees. 'Pharisee' means 'set apart', though whether it means set apart from the priests at the Temple, or from contact with the world of Gentiles is debated. The Pharisees are caricatured as laying down a great catalogue of rules and regulations for the people to follow, mostly concerned with ritual purity. But in fact what their aim really is to ensure that the rules found in the scriptures are not infringed, and they do this by setting out a further series of prohibitions, not mentioned in scripture, to ensure that the possibility of contravening one of the original rules is never met with in the first place. For example in scripture it is laid down that no work must be done on the Sabbath, so the Pharisees have evolved an elaborate series of rules about exactly what can be done, which is very little, so that nothing at all that could be considered work by any stretch of the imagination is possible. Needless to say most of the people are as unconcerned about these rules as they are about the pretensions of the priests, and support the Pharisees, but never let their elaborate rule-making inconvenience them. One further item of interest on this head is that all the Pharisees' teaching is carried out orally, and when a great teacher dies, his teaching is memorised in summary form and transmitted by his disciples to future generations.

Pharisees first began to appear over two hundred years ago, at a time when the Jews began to be dispersed around the Mediterranean, particularly to Egypt. They created the

institution of the synagogue, which is found all over the world, wherever there are Jews, and which serves their religious and educational needs, as the Temple is far away. This is the institution which is their main seat of power. Their holy men are called Rabbis, that is teachers, for the Temple is the only place that sacrifices can be offered and Rabbis are not priests, indeed, they are all required to work at a trade during the week. However, during a time of internal unrest during the time that the Jews were independent, under their own Kings, various powers were granted to the Pharisees, and most of the legal system fell under their control, and this is another institution which gives them great power and influence. Most of this sect are quietist, but others are militant, including the Zealots, and other groups of guerillas. This Jesus, we surmise, was a quietist, though he had two disciples who had been militants in the past: Peter and Simon.

And then we must add to these the Greek-Jews. These are Greeks who live in Palestine, or in association with Jews in any of the cities around the Mediterranean. They, for whatever reason, perhaps wanting to be on good terms with Jews in business dealings, or perhaps out of genuine religious feeling, have come half-way to Judaism. They obey the moral teachings, but not all the dietary and other regulations, and they do not generally have to submit to circumcision, which is, of all things, that which divides irrevocably the Roman and Greek peoples from the Jews, as we think of it as a grotesque mutilation, but the Jews regard it as a mark of their peculiar election, though the Egyptians are also circumcised. The position of these Greek-Jews is somewhat precarious, for most strict Jews have no more regard for them than for any other Gentiles, even though some of the Jewish prophets represented in their scripture have predicted that God will save righteous Gentiles in the last days too. Moreover it is particularly difficult for them in Palestine itself, and most have to, in the end, go all the way, get circumcised and convert fully. But elsewhere, where the Jews are more lax in their observances, there are a considerable number of these people.

You must understand that the situation I am describing is the situation as it was in time of this Jesus and as it still was in the time I was first reading these files. Of course after the Jewish War and the complete destruction of Jerusalem the High Priesthood came to an end and all the rich families in Palestine were either murdered by Jewish revolutionaries during the war, or executed by us afterwards, and their lands were given to settlers and colonists. The main Pharisaic academy left Jerusalem before it was besieged and took up residence elsewhere. The synagogues are now the only official Jewish institutions remaining, and the Pharisees the only Jewish sect still extant. The number of Greek-Jews declined after

the War, as the Jews had become even more bitter and isolationist and few communities were prepared to show any accommodation at all to Gentiles.

Now what meagre references there were in these files to Jesus were basically what Lollius had told me before. There was a report from the police in the tetrarchy of Herod Antipas which listed the crimes of the prophet John the Baptist, and one of the items on it was:

Item: two years ago he illegally and treasonably crowned one Jesus of Nazareth King of Israel, with full antique ceremony.

And attached were various documents, including a report of this event, which seems to have been quite elaborate and to have involved a cast of many people, including choirs and attendants and so forth—and all in the middle of the Galilean countryside by the Jordan! Reading this description I was struck by how similar it sounded to the ceremonies that Herod Agrippa had planned in Claudius's reign, and which he would have carried out if he had not been struck down with a fatal illness just before.⁸ Evidently he too knew of the correct form for the coronation of a Jewish monarch.

As to the events surrounding Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem, his capture and trial and his miraculous escape, there was nothing. The story only began again a few years after these events. The sources that we had for this were members of the High Priest's circle, for the reasons that I outlined above. And these were particularly hostile to the followers of Jesus, primarily, I suppose, because he had caused trouble for them with Pilatus (reading between the lines I guessed that what had happened was that it was the Sadducaic party that had arrested Jesus and handed him over the Pilatus) *and that he had escaped*. Also he seemed to have much more of a following than is usual with Messianic pretenders, for you must understand that scarcely a year goes by amongst the Jews that some one or other doesn't announce himself as the Messiah. But this Jesus, by the force of his personality, because he had been anointed king, and was actually of the legitimate line, because of the excellence of his teaching and because (this again reading between the lines) he enjoyed support amongst the leading men of the nation, seems to have retained his followers even after his arrest, and the subsequent events. For we find that, according to these reports, the circle of his followers, led by the twelve men who had been his disciples, numbered several hundred, and these were so devoted to his cause that they had given away all their possessions, and lived communally,

⁸ in 44 CE

praying and waiting for their absent leader's return. The leaders of this sect were James, who is usually called the brother of Jesus, though whether this is to be taken literally or not I could never find out, and Peter, one of the disciples who had once been a Zealot. And the chief twelve men were called the Messengers⁹, for, before his arrest, Jesus had commissioned them to spread news of repentance and imminent deliverance around amongst the Jews.

The actions of these men at this time were an annoyance to the temple authorities, but there was nothing they could do, as nothing the followers of Jesus did was actually illegal, and they had the support of the Pharisees. For example the Temple authorities tried to bring an action against the followers of Jesus for carrying out prayer meetings in a part of Temple, and their leaders were arrested. However when they were brought to trial they were released on the judgement of Gamaliel, the chief judge of the court, and a leading Pharisee. And so the High Priest and his faction, seeing they could not prevail this way, decided on another tactic, and this is where our friend Paul first enters the story.

⁹ ie Apostles.

This Paul was not a Jew, or at least not born a Jew. I say this at once because the idea has got abroad, largely as a result of Paul's own statements, that he was. In fact his original name was Solon and he was born into a family of tent-makers in Tarsus.

Tent-making is a major occupation in Tarsus, because the province yields much flax and linen is the raw material for this trade. Moreover in the mountainous parts of Cilicia the main activity is herding sheep and goats, and in the summer the shepherds take their flocks high into the mountains to feed on the lush pastures, and live in tents during this season. Thus there is a constant demand for tents, or tent-repairs, and there is also a thriving export-trade, for many other parts of Asia are not suited to flax growing.

Paul's immediate family were Greek-Jews, and he too was of their faith and brought up in it, so that the Jewish scriptures were very familiar to him, though only in their Greek version, for Greek was his native language, and one which, although he learnt Aramaic later, was to remain his first language. He was perhaps ten or fifteen years younger than Jesus, that is, about ten years older than myself, and I was born in the sixth year of the reign of Tiberius.¹⁰ He first arrived in Jerusalem as a young man a few years before the arrest and attempted execution of Jesus; how or why he arrived in Jerusalem is not explained and I never found out. Perhaps he came with some relatives on a business trip or something similar. In any event in Jerusalem he entered into the service of the High Priest and we begin to find him mentioned in their reports to us, first as Solon the Greek or Solon of Tarsus, and then as Saul the Convert, or Saul of Tarsus. For it seems that soon he realised that to get on he would have to go all the way, and convert fully, which would have involved circumcision. He then chose the nearest equivalent Jewish name to his own, namely Saul, and consequently was adopted into the tribe of Benjamin, as Saul was an early king of the Jews who had come from that tribe.

¹⁰ ie 20 CE.

It might be asked why the High Priest and his circle should want to recruit a foreigner and a convert into their service. And the answer is that they were labouring under the same difficulties as we were in Palestine, viz, that they could never trust any Jewish-born recruits, as they were likely to be Pharisaic and anti-Roman. So converts and foreigners were employed almost exclusively by them, as being more trustworthy.

In fact in these records we find Saul at first doing more or less the same sort of work as Lollius and I were doing, only as he was lower down in the hierarchy, being equivalent only to an NCO in the Roman army, he had to do all the dirty work. And the other difference is that with us, our work was mainly surveillance, and we only interfered to prevent crimes, or revolution, whereas the sort of things that Saul and his fellow soldiers were doing were more like social coercion: the populace in Palestine was already in a near-constant state of turmoil and what was required was arrests, beatings, searches and riot control, more than investigation and infiltration.

Soon Saul distinguished himself by his ruthlessness and energy, and he rose to be one of the officers of the High Priests corps of soldiers. He was given special responsibilities for trying to break up the sect of the followers of Jesus, and he did indeed take extraordinary pains to harass the members of this sect and search their homes and places of meeting. However they were protected by the courts, and by the fact that they had few possessions, for the easiest way to intimidate anyone is to destroy or confiscate their possessions and means of life. But Saul soon had a better pretext to act against the sect as some Greek-Jews who had attached themselves to the followers of Jesus began to create disturbances. In particular one of them, Stephen, began to preach blasphemous doctrines, such as that no-one must worship at the Temple any longer, and that the Jewish scriptures were superseded by the events of Jesus' life. Finally he publicly recounted a vision he had had of Jesus at the right hand of God in heaven, which was doubly blasphemous, as not only is God unique and indivisible, according to the Jews, and therefore no other being can share his attributes, but no one can see God and live—even Moses, the holiest prophet of Judaism, only caught a glimpse of God's 'back parts' on Mt Sinai, according to their scriptures.¹¹

Saul was in a quandary, as obviously the followers of Jesus would move quickly to expel Stephen, and would probably just ship him out of the country to somewhere where his eccentricities would do him no harm (indeed it is a rule with the Pharisees that if a death-

¹¹ Exodus 33: 23

sentence is to be pronounced by the court, the court must adjourn until the next day before giving its verdict, thus giving the malefactor a chance to flee abroad). Even Saul realised that the followers of Jesus did not share Stephen's views, as he also knew that the leading followers of Jesus were in contact with Jesus by verbal messages, and no-one can believe that someone who is still alive and in communication with them can be a part of the Godhead. Stephen, being young and excitable, and being a Greek-Jew and not privy to Jesus's actual movements, might have been excused his follies. However Saul quickly organised a lynching party which ambushed Stephen outside the walls of the city and stoned him to death. But Saul took no part in this killing, instead he guarded the cloaks that his gang had discarded, at a safe distance.

This event severely embarrassed the followers of Jesus, because they could not protest against the murder without seeming to support Stephen's doctrines, but they could not refrain from protesting lest they seem to endorse illegal killing. In the end they protested via Gamaliel, the president of the highest Pharisaic court, and this protest was not public, and therefore attracted no notice. However it was also ignored by the High Priest, as was almost everything the Pharisaic courts did.

If Saul had scored a victory in the matter of Stephen, his next exploit was a disaster. One day at prayers in the Temple Saul tried to incite a crowd to attack James the Just and his followers; thinking that the crowd could be swayed by violent action on his part Saul picked up a ritual candlestick and attacked James. James, seeking to avoid him, fell heavily down a flight of fifteen stairs and was carried away by his followers as one dead. However the crowd at the Temple was so incensed by this that they attacked Saul and his soldiers instead, who had to fight their way out leaving several badly injured worshippers behind. If the followers of Jesus had lost some popular support by the actions of Stephen, they more than regained it after this action, especially as James, who, by the by, was not badly injured and soon recovered, had a great reputation for learning and holiness.

This is as far as the accounts emanating from the High Priest's establishment take us, other than a few other notices, which, interpreted in the light of other documents, confirm the outline of the later events of this story. The remaining part of the story of Paul, as I read it in the first winter of my involvement with the Secret Service, had to be pieced together from various sources, most notably, and remarkably, the testimony of one Barnabas, who plays a major part in the narrative that follows. The motives that induced him to reveal the story to us will be explained in due course.

After this setback Saul decided that desperate action was needed, and he soon conceived a bold plan. He learnt that Jesus had returned from Parthia, where he had been for the previous five years, and had taken up residence in Damascus, a little way north of Jerusalem. Damascus was at this time ruled by its own King as an ally of Rome, and therefore outside the jurisdiction, not only of the High Priest, but of Rome too, so that if Paul went there he would be acting illegally. Nevertheless he proposed to the High Priest that he should go on official Temple business to the Jewish community there, with letters of authority from the High Priest, and find some way to kidnap Jesus, and to bring him back to Jerusalem. The High Priest was tempted by this plan, as he realised that if he provided a letter of accreditation to Paul, and the plan went wrong, he could always claim that he knew nothing of the kidnapping plot and that Paul was exceeding his orders. However Paul, also realising that the High Priest was tempted precisely because he could not lose from the deal, determined to secure a higher prize than any monetary one for his efforts, and asked if, if this mission was a success, he could have in marriage one of the daughters of one of the priestly families.

By now my readers will have gathered what an unprincipled and ruthless fellow this Saul was, but this demand of his needs to be explained to appreciate what an outrageous one it was. In the first place he was a Greek and a very recent convert to Judaism, secondly the families from which the High Priests were recruited were the very best families of Judah, ones which traced their pedigrees back to the old Jewish monarchy, and they, like the patrician families in Rome, could only marry amongst themselves. Finally Saul had only recently risen through the ranks, and was now merely a Captain, and his family were, as it were, nobodies, and not even very rich nobodies.

Nevertheless the High Priest swallowed his anger, thinking that if the question of Jesus and his followers could be settled once and for all the populace would become much more quiescent, and that the whole question of Roman rule could be addressed more rationally; perhaps then it would be worth finding some second-cousin of marriageable age from one of the lesser priestly families to appease this incorrigible, though very useful, adventurer.

So Saul left on his mission. However, the spy who had tipped him off about Jesus was a double agent and the followers of Jesus also knew about Saul's mission. And Peter left Jerusalem secretly, to warn Jesus.

When Peter arrived in Damascus he and Jesus decided on a bold plan. They lay in wait for Saul's party with a few followers in the hills by the road, just over the border in the territory of Damascus. In the late morning they spied the men and mules crossing the border and moving on towards Damascus. It was very hot, and at midday, by a grove of shady trees, Saul and his men stopped, unsaddled their mules and took lunch, then they fell asleep, scattered on the ground under the trees. Saul moved away and sat against a stone some distance away to read some papers, but soon he too was nodding. Jesus and Peter and their men crept nearer. At last they were standing over the sleeping Saul and Jesus said loudly:

'Why are you persecuting me, Saul?'

And Saul woke with a start, was dazzled by the bright sunlight and could see nothing, and cried:

'Who are you?'

'I am Jesus, whom you have set out to capture.'

Saul gathered his wits, looked about and saw that his own men were several hundred yards away, that Jesus was guarded by as many men and that Peter stood at his shoulder with a drawn sword. He fell on the ground at Jesus's feet and begged for mercy.

If Saul had been a bolder fellow, and had tried to rouse his men, and make a fight of it, or had tried to flee, the story might have been different. Or again if Jesus had simply nodded to Peter to step forward and lop off Saul's head, then the story would have ended there and there would have been no Christians at all, and no need to trouble oneself about them. But unfortunately Jesus was a man of the utmost scruples, and although it is lawful for the Jews to kill in a just war, or in self-defence, yet it is not lawful for them to kill anyone, especially a fellow-Jew, once they have begged for mercy. Moreover the Jews are constantly seeing parallels between their own actions and stories in their scriptures. In this instance Jesus immediately saw himself as David the King, (as indeed he was a descendant of David, and had been anointed King), who, on one occasion, early in his career, had had his rival Saul at his mercy, yet spared him. And so he promised him his life. Yet Saul also recognised the story that they were playing out, and realised that although his life was safe it had been bought at a price. The historical King Saul had had to acknowledge King David's legitimacy, and so Saul, still lying in the dirt, humbly asked Jesus what he should do. Jesus replied:

'Go to Damascus, and in the street named Straight, seek out Ananias at the house of Judas.'

And with that Jesus and his followers left. Saul slowly raised himself up, but discovered that he had been struck blind, and his cries of alarm raised his men. This blindness

is perhaps, after Jesus's miraculous escape from death, the most inexplicable part of the story, yet a physician I consulted about these symptoms tells me that he has encountered this kind of blindness on two or three occasions, and always the blindness occurred suddenly when the sufferer was confronted with a situation full of danger, but one in which his conscience, and his feeling of guilt and self-esteem, were also involved. For example the physician instanced the case of a young man in Greece who had unwittingly married his sister, they being parted in early youth and unknown to each other. But when the sister's friends brought a lawsuit against him unexpectedly and used the incestuous marriage as one of the articles of evidence, he was so astonished and mortified to receive the news that he lost his sight for three days.

Saul's case must have been even worse than this, for not only had he just sworn allegiance to the person he had been trying to capture, but his was still in the power of his men, who possessed the secret of the plot to kidnap Jesus, and they were all in hostile territory. But Saul was a very quick-thinker and by the time that his men had reached him and asked him what the matter was, he had thought of his story. He had, he told them, received a vision from heaven that had blinded him; but he had been directed on to Damascus to the house of Judas, and they must lead him there. This they did, and once Saul was at the house of Judas, where Ananias came to tend him on Jesus's instructions, he dismissed his guard and told them to return to Jerusalem, and report to the High Priest what had happened.

Ananias, naturally, was amazed at this turn-around, and chagrined too, for he would rather have had anyone in his care than the former enemy of their sect, whom he still did not trust. But he tended him nevertheless and Saul gradually regained his sight. After a few days he even prevailed upon Ananias to let him speak in the synagogue on the ostensible purpose of his mission, namely, to collect Temple dues and to instil in everyone the vital importance of the Temple as the centre of Jewish life. However Ananias and the others, Jesus having departed again for Parthia, were so appalled by Saul's brazenness that they pretended to Saul that a plot was being hatched against his life, by followers of Jesus who had learnt of his secret mission. And that night they let him down over the city walls in a basket and advised him to return to Jerusalem.

Saul then disappeared. This was hardly surprising, as he was not trusted by the followers of Jesus, and was now a deserter from the High Priest's corps, so Jerusalem was not a place he could return to in safety. As it was a great achievement of mine to discover where Saul had been during this time, and one I did not make for some time, I will postpone

revealing this fact, and reveal this at the proper place in the narrative. However at the end of three years Saul reappeared in Jerusalem, accompanying a Cypriot Jew named Barnabas, who introduced him to the ruling circle of the followers of Jesus, and especially to Peter and to James, and told them the story of his meeting with Jesus and his conversion and vouched for his integrity and the sincerity of his repentance. It seems that Barnabas had met Saul at Tarsus, and had fallen under his spell. However none of the followers of Jesus trusted Saul, and besides, as soon as the High Priest got to hear of his presence in Jerusalem he sent armed parties out to apprehend him, and so, just as the followers of Jesus in Damascus had done, the followers of Jesus smuggled him out of the city and sent him back to his home-town of Tarsus, with instructions to tell his local Jewish community of the career and message of Jesus.

For, during this time the Twelve in Jerusalem had not only been keeping their faith alive in Jerusalem, but had been proselytising around the region. So, for example one of their number Thomas was sent to the Jews of the Kingdom of Adibene to the north west, and he afterwards joined Jesus in Parthia and accompanied him on his journeyings. Philip, another leader, was sent to Samaria, the region north of Judah, which is inhabited by a mixed population, including some of the descendants of the peasantry of the northern kingdom of Israel, and by immigrants drafted in by the Assyrians, after they had deported most of Jewish inhabitants of the kingdom. The Samaritans also follow the Jewish religion, but because they only recognise the first five books of the Jewish scriptures and because they have their own temple in Samaria, the Jews will ordinarily have nothing to do with them, and despise them even more than they despise any other people. Jesus had, however, on occasions expressed a more accommodating opinion of the Samaritans than was usual, and it was felt that the Twelve should at least make an effort to preach to them. However, after a few years Philip gave up on his mission and retired to Caesarea.

Peter at this time also went on a mission to Lydda and Joppa, and teachers were also sent to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. As he was a Cypriot, Barnabas was one of the teachers sent on this mission, and during the course of it, he happened to go to Tarsus, where he met Saul again. This was now ten or twelve years after Jesus's arrest and escape, and some five or six years after Saul's conversion, and during the latter part to this time, after his retreat from Jerusalem, Saul had been living in Tarsus, working at his old trade, and preaching in and out of the synagogue constantly. So forcefully had he communicated his message, indeed, that he had become one of the leaders of the synagogue, and Barnabas was so delighted to discover

his former protégé, and to see what success he had had with his teaching, that he immediately recruited him to his teaching mission and carried Saul back to Antioch with him.

Saul continued in his preaching there with the other leading followers of Jesus of the town until he and Barnabas were sent by the congregation to Jerusalem. What had happened was that a famine had been afflicting Judah and the surrounding provinces, and the Jews of Antioch had gathered alms for the Jews of Jerusalem, as indeed had many Jews from all over the Empire and beyond, and they sent Barnabas and Paul with the money and food. Jerusalem was a very dangerous place at the time, because Herod Agrippa, in his efforts to impose a unity on the Jews, had begun to persecute all sects other than the ones he favoured. Indeed Peter was imprisoned for a time during this period. And so Barnabas and Saul hastened back to Antioch, bringing with them one of the Jerusalem followers of Jesus, called John Mark.

Shortly after this the leaders of this group in Antioch urged Barnabas and Paul to go on a missionary journey to some of the towns of Asia Minor to spread their message further. First of all these two, accompanied by John Mark took ship to Cyprus, for this was Barnabas's home island, and there he hoped to make converts and raise funds amongst his family and acquaintances. However, no sooner had they arrived than they were taken in front of the Governor, Sergius Paulus, and he questioned them very thoroughly. In fact he had received a request from Herod to make sure that any Jews who passed through Cyprus who belonged to groups not friendly to him were harassed and sent on their way. Barnabas and his companions could do nothing, not even see their friends without incriminating them, and so they left after a week.

After this these men took ship to Perga, and from there travelled to Antioch of Pisidia, then to Iconium, then to Lystra, then to Derbe. However they met with great difficulties in all these towns for two reasons. The first is that the civic authorities had, like Sergius Paulus, been warned by Herod Agrippa to harass unfriendly Jews whenever they came across them, and indeed John Mark, as a Jerusalem Jew, and therefore under even more suspicion than the others, left them at Perga and returned to Jerusalem. Ironically it was on their way home from this failed mission that Saul and Barnabas encountered news of the sudden death of Herod. The second was this: at this time the followers of Jesus were preaching mainly to fellow Jews, this included, of course, Greek-Jews. However it was difficult for them to preach anything new in the name of Jesus, as Jesus had been an orthodox

Pharisaic Jew and the only difference between his message and that of the orthodox Rabbis was the urgency of the need for repentance, and the fact that he had been chosen as King of Israel. But to preach this latter point generally was politically very dangerous. And yet not to preach it was effectively to have nothing new to say. It was only those who had actually known Jesus, or who were privy to the secret of his continued mission to the Jews of the world, who could share in this faith. Moreover, as Barnabas and Saul found, the Jews of the towns they visited were reluctant to entertain them, as they were small communities, isolated in the midst of hostile Greeks and locals, and they too had recently been harassed by the civic authorities.

On the other hand Barnabas and Paul had also determined to try to preach their faith to non-Jews too, and this they found to be next to impossible. Aristotle, I think it was, said that a speaker, if he is to convince his audience, must rely on either *logos*, *ethos* or *pathos*, or a combination of these—that is either the cogency of his arguments, or his reputation, or the emotions he can stir up with his words. Now proselytisers such as Saul and Barnabas cannot rely on reason to sell their religion, as religion, or any sort of new or revealed religion at any rate, is not a matter of reason. Nor could these preachers rely on their reputations, as they could in the Jewish community, indeed, as Jews they were automatically suspect to their auditors. So it had to be a matter of emotion, and the clever use of rhetoric and the appeal to emotion. But these provincials were used to seeing several new religions being peddled every month in their market places, and it would have to be someone very persuasive indeed to talk round a hard-nosed and brutal crowd of provincials, such as those they met with. Finally of course there was the same problem with the message that they were carrying that they had encountered with their Jewish audiences, that is, what could they actually say: ‘Hello we’re here to preach to you about a Jew who set himself up to end Roman rule in Judah?’ Hardly.

So the two, and those who had gone with them returned glumly to Antioch, lucky to have escaped imprisonment, and with little to show for their mission.

After a little time Saul and Barnabas decided to go on to Jerusalem, as they still had some funds to deliver to the follower of Jesus which had been donated after the time their last visit. Moreover they wished to consult the leaders of the church about their methods in proselytising. For a disagreement had arisen between Barnabas and Paul; Barnabas wished to continue to proselytise mainly amongst the Jews, but amongst the Gentiles where possible, hoping that the death of Herod earlier in the year would make it easier for them on their

next journey. However Saul was convinced that another course was necessary. He was of the opinion that what was needed was a radically simplified message—one that stressed monotheism, ethics, the unique nature of Jesus, and so forth, which would convert Gentiles to a sort of loose Greek-Jewish faith, and make them ripe for later conversion, or if they were not willing to go to these lengths, then at least assure them of some sort of preferential treatment in the Last Days. Barnabas was opposed to this as he was a very rigid Jew, indeed he was a Levite, which is to say a member of that tribe of the Jews from which their priesthood is taken, and which constitutes a sort of spiritual aristocracy amongst the Jews.

In Jerusalem it was, surprisingly, Saul's arguments that won the day. There were two reasons for this. The first was that the majority of the Jerusalem followers of Jesus were quite indifferent to the proselytising efforts of Saul and Barnabas outside the immediate vicinity of Judah. It might have been thought worthwhile to send missionaries to various towns and regions with large Jewish populations, but as to what Saul did in Asia Minor (as outlandish a place for a Jew as for a Roman), nobody much cared, especially as many still remembered Saul as their persecutor and still did not trust him. Secondly a faction of the sect led by Peter did care about proselytising, and, even more surprisingly bearing in mind Peter's own experience of the man, agreed with Saul that his was the best way to go about it. Perhaps this could be explained by the fact that Peter was a Galilean, and not a Judite, and therefore less worried by many of the strict religious observances of his fellow-religionists.

At any rate the church in Jerusalem voted that Saul and Barnabas could proceed to Asia Minor as missionaries to the Gentiles, and that the only observances they should require of their converts were a pure life and an abstention from meat offered in sacrifices, and from meat from animals that had not been bled to death, as is the customary Jewish method of slaughter.

Thus Barnabas, Saul, John Mark and two other disciples, Judas and Silas, returned to Antioch intent on carrying out another journey, one which would not repeat the mistakes of their previous one. However at this point we come to a turning point in the story of Saul. For at Antioch he and Barnabas had a quarrel and went separate ways. Ostensibly the quarrel was over John Mark, whom Barnabas wanted to take with them, and whom Saul wanted to leave behind, as he had deserted them before on a journey. Yet the reason that John Mark had left on the previous journey was precisely to make it easier for the other two. Nor was the quarrel really about Barnabas's injured pride, he having lost the argument in Jerusalem. No, the real reason is that John Mark had learnt from his servant that on their previous visit

to Cyprus Saul had used some of the funds collected by the Jews of Antioch to help their brethren in Jerusalem, which he had retained, to buy Roman citizenship from Sergius Paulus, and he immediately told this news to Barnabas.

Now to us Romans it seems that nothing could be more natural than that everyone in the world would wish to purchase citizenship, if only for the legal privileges and immunities that it confers on the citizen. And indeed any Greek, or other foreigner, who can scrape the cash together and find a suitable sponsor will do so. But the Jews, just as they hold the Romans themselves in abhorrence, hold anyone who holds Roman citizenship in abhorrence too, as one having traffic with 'the wicked kingdom', as they term Rome; and no matter how rich a Jew may be it is very rare that any one of them would risk the anger and contempt of his fellow-religionists by taking citizenship. So it is not surprising that Barnabas's reaction, as John Mark's had been, was immediately to sever all links with Saul.

On the other hand it is not so difficult to see why Saul thought it necessary to acquire Roman citizenship. My guess is that even at this stage he was planning his proselytising tours around the world of the Gentiles, and figured that the most useful thing he could possess for this was citizenship, as it would immediately free him most of petty indignities that local magistrates could visit on a travelling preacher. As to the amount of money required, it may be that Saul had been saving from his business, or had acquired money from relatives, but that most of the money came from the donations of Jews for the relief of the Judean Jews which he had fraudulently kept back, cannot be in doubt. It seems that he had laid up this money with friendly bankers in Antioch, and it was easy for him to obtain the ready cash again in Cyprus, even at short notice, on the presentation of drafts from Antioch to local bankers.

As to Cyprus, well, it seems that Saul seized the opportunity that their trip there offered, as Sergius Paulus was well-known as a Governor who, to make quick money, sold citizenship at a low price and never enquired as to the character and credentials of the applicants, as he was supposed to, so long as they could pay ready cash. I can imagine Saul creeping away from his companions and knocking on the door of Sergius's secretary's door, the price being agreed, the money handed over and, later in the week, Saul attending a citizenship ceremony where the Governor would appear to wave his arms grandly in gestures of welcome to a mixed bag of crooks and villains, and pronounce, in the name of the Emperor, the particular pleasure that welcoming so many distinguished foreigners into the brotherhood of Rome citizenship gave him, or some such rigmarole. As Sergius was a

fundamentally dishonest man it would not have occurred to him to ask why one of the Jews he had questioned earlier in the week should now wish to obtain citizenship, or how he had come by the money to do so.

As to the enormity of the step that Saul, who by-the-by we must now call Paul, for he had taken the name of the governor as his name, as is the custom, had just taken, the fact that he then chose to conceal his new citizenship from his companions throughout their subsequent trip can witness. For during this trip the pair were subjected to various indignities that, had Paul revealed his citizenship, they could have escaped.¹²

At various times and in various situations Paul, who was never ashamed to proclaim his citizenship, claimed that he was a citizen on account of his birth in Tarsus. And provincials, who are often not well up in legal matters, often believed this. Nevertheless he could not have acquired his citizenship in this way, as Tarsus is merely a free-city, and, as I have explained, we know that this was not the case anyway.¹³

As to Barnabas, who has been our main source of information in this part of the narrative—his career, as that of John Mark, was to be a short one after this. The two of them sailed, together with Judas, for Cyprus again, where Sergius Paulus, chagrined at their return threw them into gaol. It was there that Barnabas made a full statement of his career and that of his fellow religionists, which is why we have this story thus far in such detail. Nevertheless he did nothing improper in this, for indeed, if one ignores Jesus's title of King of Israel, as Barnabas did, avoiding all mention of it, then nothing that any one of followers of Jesus did was illegal, nor was it disloyal of Barnabas to allude to the continued existence of Jesus, as this was a fact known to us at the time anyway, and Jesus was then safely beyond the frontiers of the Empire, as far as Barnabas knew. Barnabas had probably chosen the course of making a full statement to protect his family, still in Cyprus, and also perhaps because he hoped that if he was so forthcoming about all other aspects of the activities of the followers of Jesus then he would avoid being questioned about Jesus's pretensions.

However Sergius Paulus was cleverer than that and sent to Rome to find out about Jesus. The files on Jesus were, of course, by this time, already destroyed, so nothing could be found out, and the request languished in someone's in-tray for months. When at last a

¹² In this period non-citizens could either be given citizenship as a recognition of their high social status, or could purchase it at an enormous cost. Citizenship conferred useful legal immunities and allowed the citizen to avoid paying many taxes.

¹³ Those born in *free cities* enjoyed some of the benefits of citizenship, though not all, but only when they were resident in the town of their birth.

message returned to the effect that nothing was known of Jesus and the prisoners could be released, it was too late, for Barnabas, John Mark and Judas had succumbed to gaol-fever. Paul was then, a year or so into his second journey, freed from the possibility that his secret would be revealed to the brethren in Judah, and left in sole charge of the mission to the Gentiles.

The change in his teaching and preaching from then on is remarkable and it cannot be otherwise than that Paul had secretly planned all along to substitute a new religion for Judaism, and that he had simply been biding his time, waiting for a favourable opportunity, and syphoning off funds from the accounts he maintained for the purpose of obtaining citizenship. And we must wonder at his patience, for he submitted to Barnabas's leadership completely in the first trip, and suffered all the consequences of his leader's bad judgement, when, by the evidence of the success of his subsequent trips, there is no doubt that he could have succeeded better on the first trip alone.

Before proceeding to narrate the rest of Paul's career, until the time that we find him in Rome at about the time I first began to read these documents, I should say that our principal source for some time is a collection of Paul's own correspondence which we obtained from various sources, once interpreted and with all its inaccuracies sifted out, eked out by reports from the local authorities in each of the areas he visited, and the information we subsequently obtained from one of his followers. As to the details of the doctrine he taught on this trip and the extraordinary nature of the letters, I will leave this until the next chapter. Suffice it to say that from here on Paul's doctrine is entirely, from a Jewish point-of-view, heretical, in that he did not scruple to identify Jesus with an aspect of the Godhead, but also that the mendacity he had demonstrated with regard to the funds for the relief of the Jews of Judah was now given free rein, and it was to cause him much trouble later.

On his second journey Paul retraced his steps from the first journey, except that he travelled in reverse, that is to say he went from Antioch to Derbe, then to Lystra, then to Iconium, then to Antioch of Pisidia. In Lystra he recruited his most faithful follower, a young Greek named Timothy. In all these towns Paul employed his new strategy, that is that if asked he would preach at the synagogue, and here his preaching would be entirely orthodox, but mainly he kept away from the Jews and instead made overtures to the Greek-Jews of the towns, and began to hold discrete proselytising meetings of the sort that we attended in Rome. Here he was fantastically successful, managing to attract all kinds of people and

recruiting a fanatical following. His rhetoric appealed particularly to women. Once he had established a viable congregation in any one town he would move on to the next.

Continuing his journey from Antioch of Pisidia Paul and his followers made their way through Phrygia and Galatia, but here, further inland, they were at more of a disadvantage, as Paul's reputation had preceded him, and the Jews of these towns would have nothing to do with him, and forbade their congregations to have anything to do with him either. And so Paul journeyed on, to Mysia, where instead of going on into Bithynia, they changed their plans and crossed into Macedonia. I would ask my readers to remember Paul's change of plans in Mysia, as I later discovered that something extraordinary had occurred there to make him change his mind; but this will be narrated in due course.

Arrived in Macedonia Paul and his followers travelled to Philippi, but did not dare to make any converts, lest they be charged with converting Roman citizens. Nevertheless they were attacked in the market-place by a mob on account of the fact they were Jewish, and the magistrates, without hearing them, threw them into prison. It was not until morning that Paul was able to reveal his citizenship, and then, of course, they were at once released.

However Paul's bad luck continued, for the next place that he arrived at was Thessalonica, where he managed, in a very short time, to found a devout congregation. But here the Jews made a great commotion, and incited a mob to attack the house of Paul's patron, Jason, and so Paul was forced to flee by night to the city of Beroea. Here he founded another congregation, and, because there were fewer Jews, managed to do so without much controversy; however, soon the Jews of Thessalonica sent word to the Jews of Beroea to make Paul's life difficult, which they did, and he was forced to leave this town too. Finally after a fruitless stay in Athens Paul arrived in Corinth.

Now one interesting thing to be noted in all this is that Paul never had any difficulties in recruiting followers anywhere, but that he also seemingly could never avoid stirring up the most violent hatred, particularly amongst Jews. At times this seems to have been due to their knowledge of the doctrines he taught, but on other occasions seems to have been due to Paul's keenness to obtain expenses from his congregations, for several times he was accused of financial dishonesty, and almost every one of his letters either includes a plea for donations and expenses, or a defence against the charge of dishonesty. And this quality is even more remarkable given that the congregations he founded seem to have survived quite well without him, and that even when Paul left behind one of his disciples, either Silas or Timothy or another, *they* managed to get on with the local Jews and the local population.

It must be that Paul had the sort of gifts that one either loved or hated him, and, for my own part, in my two meetings with him I decided that there was something altogether reptilian, not to say snake-like, about him, and that my reaction was very much the latter one, viz hatred. Nevertheless, he inspired a fanatical following, and if he cared to, as for example earlier in his career, he could clearly dissemble a fair appearance of whatever he chose to appear as.

At Corinth Paul had his greatest success so far in his career, and the church he founded proved to be large and thriving from the very first. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that the Jewish community there was very small and therefore unable to succeed in making any trouble for Paul. Notwithstanding this Paul did get embroiled in a legal dispute with them, for shortly after his arrival he was asked to preach at the synagogue and did so. However his preaching displeased them and they rejected him, and so Paul stood up in the pulpit and told them in round terms that henceforth he would not bother to try to convert any Jews, but instead would concentrate on the Gentiles. A little after this the Jews brought legal action against Paul, as a disturber of the peace, yet Paul bribed Gallio, the Governor, to give judgement in his favour, and when he had done so the court-officials seized the leader of the synagogue and beat him severely in the court-house, and yet the Governor did nothing. Such is Roman justice.

Paul stayed at Corinth for some time. The reason for this was that the church he had founded was very generous to its founder, and moreover he had entered into a business partnership with a Jew, named Aquila, who was of the same trade as him. Aquila and his wife, Priscilla had lately arrived from Rome, where they had been expelled by Claudius's edict, and were glad to find another tent-maker to set up a business with. In time they also became Christians, for by-the-by this was the name that Paul had coined for his new sect, as before this the Jewish followers of Jesus had no real name, other than 'followers of Jesus'.

After a year or so Paul determined to leave Corinth and revisit some of his former stopping places. He sailed with Aquila and Priscilla to Ephesus, where he had his usual run-in with the Jews, despite the fact that he had shaved his head, in imitation of a Jewish custom, whereby one making a religious vow will shave his head and keep it shaven until the period of the vow is accomplished. Paul was prone to such extravagances, perhaps it was the practical expression of his love of duplicity and pretence, for earlier in his career he had had

himself tattooed with religious signs,¹⁴ however this outlandish act had completely the opposite effect to the one intended, for when he first returned to Jerusalem after his conversion and the followers of Jesus saw these marks, they distrusted him all the more.

Despite his rebuff at Ephesus Paul knew that that town was fertile ground and so left Aquila and Priscilla there, and as they were well-schooled in his methods, they began to assemble a congregation there too. However they were much troubled in their endeavours by a third force, namely a religious proselytiser named Apollos, who was a Greek, and a Gnostic. It seems that what Paul had effected in Asia had come to the ears of the Egyptian Gnostics, and they had determined to exploit the interest that Paul had created in new religions of the sub-Jewish kind. And indeed such is the way in these matters, for when, let us say, a potter begins to make a new kind of pot, of a new design, and begins to export it here and there, and set up new shops to sell it, he finds within a few weeks that imitators arise and try to capitalise on his innovation. And so it was with the Gnostics, who began to visit every town in Asia that Paul had been to, and some that he had not, and started to preach and convert his followers. Indeed when he had gained as many converts as he could in Ephesus Apollos voyaged to Corinth in an attempt to steal away Paul's followers there. For the rest of his career Paul was to be troubled by these fellow-preachers.

Incidentally it is a good question as to how the Gnostics had ever got to hear of the name of Jesus. As I've said before Gnosticism began a century or so ago in Egypt as a blend of Greek philosophy, aspects of the Jewish religion and who knows what other superstitions. They are concerned always to put forward the idea of the true God, not the false Demiurge who created the material world, sending a Messenger to earth to proclaim the truth. As such Jesus would have seemed as likely a figure as any in recent times, owing to his strict religious beliefs, his apocalyptic leanings and his miraculous brush with death. Perhaps some of the Jewish followers of Jesus tried to proselytise the Alexandrian Jewish community and the story of Jesus's career came to the ears of some Gnostic sect or other. I could never find a definite record of any such events, but this is probably what happened. Anyway, whatever happened, several Gnostic sects in Egypt had begun, at this point in the story, to use the name and selected details of the life of Jesus as part of their teaching. And these were the ones who sent missionaries, such as Apollos, out to Asia Minor.

¹⁴ Gal 6 17

Meanwhile Paul had returned to Judah, but hardly had he disembarked at Caesarea than he was told that the High Priest's secret police were after him, and so he fled to Antioch. But by this time Antioch, owing to the presence of Peter, who had moved there some time before, had become a strong-hold of the followers of Jesus, and so Paul retraced his former path through Asia, visiting the churches he had founded, only this time he turned south towards Ephesus and arrived there after some months on the road.

At Ephesus Paul spent some time consolidating the church that Aquila had begun, and contesting the preachers of other religions. After a while an uproar broke out because the common people of Ephesus, whose livelihood depended on the traffic of pilgrims coming to the great Temple of Artemis, felt that these preachers of new religions were threatening their patroness. However Paul bribed the authorities to quell the disturbances and to protect his congregation. Nevertheless he felt it prudent to leave Ephesus soon after, for a tour around the churches in Greece, and he took several of his leading disciples with him. This tour took up some time, as wherever Paul felt safe from prosecution, and wherever he could set himself up in his trade, or rest from his labours and be supported by his followers, he was always inclined to stop. However, after touring around Greece he and his followers began to turn their steps back to Asia.

At Troas an incident occurred which was trivial enough in itself, but which I have heard absurdly magnified by Paul's followers, though not by himself. It appears that Paul was preaching in an upper chamber of a house, and one of his auditors, who had been sitting on the window ledge fell asleep and tumbled backwards out of the window and fell three storeys into the street. Now it is well-known that babies and those who are asleep and those suffering from fits, if they fall, fall softly, as their bodies are not tensed up, but relaxed. And this young man was badly bruised, but not injured, as he had fallen softly, and besides the street was inches deep in mud. Nevertheless this has not stopped Paul's followers from claiming this as a miraculous raising from the dead, performed by Paul. In fact in this story as a whole there is only one incident, which, if examined, strains credulity even a little, namely Paul's sudden blindness, and this too has a strictly rational explanation. Moreover in the life of this Jesus, insofar as I have been able to discover, there are likewise no miracles, or anything other than a few remarkable, but explicable, events.

At this point, perhaps five or six years before I began to investigate the sect, Paul had been travelling for nearly a decade, and had built up churches in numerous cities in Asia; he had a band of dedicated followers, and had amassed considerable funds. He was a highly

successful religious entrepreneur, and could well have spent the remainder of his life in Ephesus, or Corinth, as the leader of his church, or perhaps continued in his journeys. But now he did something inexplicable to a more rational understanding. He decided to journey to Jerusalem. Why he did this is difficult to understand: the High Priest's establishment was still out to apprehend him, the Roman authorities were becoming harsher and harsher in their repression in Judah, as the tide of religious and nationalist sentiment rose, and the followers of Jesus would be unlikely to receive anyone who had done a tenth as much to the detriment of the Jewish religion as Paul had done. Yet I suppose Paul was deluded enough to believe that if only he could speak to the followers of Jesus and show them what he had done they might approve, and they might even come round to his way of thinking!

Anyway, whatever his motives, Paul set off for Judah, and with a few followers boldly made his way to the house of James, the leader of the followers of Jesus and demanded to be received by them. The followers of Jesus were astonished to see Paul and his followers, and for the moment didn't know what to do. The last time they had seen Paul was over a decade before, when they sent Barnabas and him away to be preachers to the Gentiles. Since then they had learnt that he and Barnabas had split, and that Barnabas and his followers had died in prison in Cyprus (though they probably did not know the secret of Paul's citizenship). Apart from this they had heard the occasional report of some dispute between Paul and the local Jews of the towns he had visited. This may have meant little to them, as the Jews of Judah look down on the Jews of the dispersal as of doubtful religious credibility, and, as I have said before, the Jews, no differently from anyone else, are riven by factional divisions. Nevertheless to see Paul again in the flesh, proffering lavish amounts of money as a proof of his zeal to the cause of proselytising, can have excited no feelings of confidence in them.

However, reluctant to send Paul away unheard, the leaders decided, on hearing Paul's plea that he had always been a good Jew, and that he had adhered strictly to the instructions they gave him all those years ago in the matter of making converts, that they should require Paul and his followers to undergo several days of purification in the Temple, as a gesture of their goodwill; this would also give them time to decide what to do with him.

But while Paul and his disciples were at the Temple reports began to arrive of Paul's heretical teaching, and his hostility to Jews and his Roman citizenship. The leaders of the followers of Jesus were appalled and sent word to the Temple that Paul and his followers were never to come near them again, and that they would give them one day to complete their purification and leave the city, then they would report them to the High Priest's police.

However the city mob had already got to hear of Paul's presence in the city, and a rumour spread that one of the followers of Paul was not even a Jew, and that Paul had, in taking him into the Temple, profaned it. A crowd quickly gathered to lynch the men in the Temple, and they seized Paul and began to beat him, and he had to be rescued by the Roman soldiers who were stationed outside the walls. The soldiers led him away to the fortress next to the Temple, intending to examine him there, but Paul asked them whether he could speak to the people outside, and the officer, supposing that this would pacify them, agreed.

Unfortunately Paul had been too long away from Judah to be able to handle the crowd, for he began by talking about his own career, about his service in the corps of the High Priest and his conversion. He did this because in his new religion a great point is made of stressing how sinful the convert was before his conversion, the greater the sinner, the better a Christian he might become, whereas for the Jews, as for all sane people, the most important thing is never to have sinned in the first place. And indeed we have seen how after his conversion Paul was never really trusted by the followers of Jesus. However Paul had honed his own story to fit with this pattern of confession, and was so used to repeating it that he failed to appreciate how inappropriate it was for the situation, for the crowd were so furious at hearing this beginning to his story that they would hear no more, and howled for Paul's blood.

The soldiers, furious at Paul for having failed to pacify the mob, dragged him away and were about to flog him when he revealed his citizenship. He was quickly unbound and brought before the Governor at Caesarea, and had the Governor been the usual run of Governors all that Paul would have had to have done was bribe him and be released. But Antonius Felix was a Governor on the make, and Paul's bribe was insufficient to secure his release. It may also have been that the High Priest was offering a larger bribe for Paul's conviction. Whatever the reason, Felix refused to release Paul, so Paul, as so often, did something very clever and very unexpected, he appealed to have his case heard by the Emperor. Most people have never heard of this legal right, but it exists. I suppose the reason why few people choose to take it up, and why it is so little known, is, of course, that the only way to be certain of winning a court case is to bribe the judge; magistrates and governors are expensive enough to bribe, but the freemen of the imperial court are impossibly expensive, so it is usually better to lose a case in the provinces than to win a case in Rome. However, in these peculiar circumstances, Paul was on secure ground because he knew that the Jewish

authorities would never send a submission to Rome, and that the worst he would have to suffer was house-arrest in Rome.

And this is indeed what happened, the chagrined Felix kept him a prisoner for as long as he dared to defer the case, but when he was succeeded in office his successor Festus, despairing of any possibility of further bribes from the High Priest, shipped Paul off to Rome in the middle of winter, hoping he would drown on the way. In fact the ship that Paul was passenger on did suffer from bad weather and was wrecked on Malta, but all the passengers survived, and Paul arrived in Rome, found himself a comfortable house to live in, and began to recruit converts in Rome. And this brings the story down to the time I first began to be acquainted with the sect, and attended a meeting of theirs, as has been related before.

One thing I omitted to mention is that, Paul's correspondence and the report of the local authorities having been a good source of information for his movements and motives during his missionary work, the last part of my account in this chapter, the narrative of his misadventures in Jerusalem, was reconstructed from the official document of indictment and from communications from the High Priest's establishment, which was reporting to us directly on the misgovernment of Felix and of his successor.

VI

In this chapter I propose to give an account of the writings of Paul that I studied during the first winter of my involvement with the Secret Service. At the time I made extensive notes and I am now writing my account up from these. The writings we had were almost all letters written by Paul to the various congregations he had founded, and consequently came from that period of his life after he had broken with Judaism, and before he was imprisoned in Judah and brought to Rome. I will deal with the correspondence and relations he enjoyed with his churches during his time in Rome in subsequent chapters.

However there is one very important thing to say before I begin my analysis: no one reading the letters of Paul that I had in front of me in the old Augustan palace that winter, who was not already a fanatical devotee of his sect, could possibly believe other than that the writer of them was a charlatan. His dishonesty and disingenuousness ooze from every line of these epistles. Yet it might be asked why Paul was so keen to incriminate himself by writing what he did, knowing that most of his correspondence was bound to fall into the hands of the authorities. I think the answer is that throughout these writings Paul shows himself to be someone with a supreme confidence in his own self-authorized mission, and in his ability to communicate his message. Thus he cannot see that any reasonable person in reading his writings will automatically consider him to be a rogue.

What is really remarkable is that the writings of his that I read carefully twenty-five years ago perished a few years later, when that wing of the palace was burnt down, and only my notes, which I was carrying with me at the time, have survived to show the original state of these letters. Now I have come across collections of Paul's writings, made by Christians after his death, and these purport to be his writings, but are in fact his writings heavily edited, rearranged and in places rewritten. So if you were to take up a collection of these you might find that some of the passages I quote and discuss have been deleted, or appear in different contexts. I have not troubled myself to make a detailed comparison between my own precis of Paul's writings and the versions of them I later came across.

Nevertheless I have noticed that, contrary to what one might predict, generally in these later versions many of the passages that I noted as particularly flagrant and shameless have been allowed to stand, an extraordinary thing, though I suppose that if one were to delete every example of shamelessness and mendacity in them, there would be very little left. However I think that a better explanation might be this strange Christian habit of mind that the greater the sinner, the greater the Christian, and that the more absurd the belief, the more reward will be given to the believer. Thus if the founder of this religion would by any conventional estimation be seen to be a fraud and a liar, so much the better.

I arrange my discussion of these writings under four heads; and the first of these is the evidence that they provide for Paul's financial dishonesty. As I said before almost every letter contains either a plea for donations, with the proviso that Paul be allowed to take his expenses from these donations, or a defence against the charge of financial dishonesty, and this is one of the most marked features of these letters. This is way this prophet expresses his justification for this: 'If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits'¹⁵ Indeed from one letter to one of his congregations it appears that the church had so little trust in him that he has had to appoint two of his followers, whom the church did trust, to audit the accounts.¹⁶ In the same letter this worthy man also writes to the church that he is going to send his followers on to gather the donations in advance so that he, that is Paul, will not be kept waiting, or be shamed by a refusal, when he arrives;¹⁷ not only this, but the same unfortunate congregation is assured by Paul that they must give generously as a mark of their faith, indeed, they owe it to themselves to do so.¹⁸

This is a feature of these writings that will not need labouring, so I will say no more about it. However I would like to note that it is not just that Paul is hungry for expenses, and eager to gain profit by his proselytising, but his writings also use this very failing of his to magnify his preeminence. In the same letter I have been alluding to Paul relates an ecstatic experience he has had, and then goes on to say that this experience has given him so much spiritual power that God specifically afflicted him with a conspicuous failing: 'a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to keep me from being too elated.'¹⁹ And this

¹⁵ 1 Cor 9 11.

¹⁶ 2 Cor 8 16-24.

¹⁷ 2 Cor 9 1-5.

¹⁸ 2 Cor 8 8-15.

¹⁹ 2 Cor 12 7.

must mean his covetousness, for elsewhere, in discussing the burden that the Jewish law placed on him he relates:

Yet if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it was to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'. But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness.²⁰

Now of course it is true that every man is entitled to pursue a trade and to make money, indeed those who do not are regarded as a burden on their families and society. And religious leaders, no less than any other men, are entitled to gain their living by the donations that their followers and congregations make. However it is clear from Paul's correspondence firstly that his eagerness to gain money from his followers was greater than is normal or allowable in someone who has dedicated their life to spirituality, and that this is something that was recognised by at least some of his followers, and by himself. Secondly it is also clear that Paul consistently confused in his own mind and in his writings spiritual and worldly goods and rewards and that this metaphorical confusion can only be a bad legacy to his sect.

Moreover we found out that Paul's family, by following the trade of tent-making, which is a skilled trade and one much in demand all around the Mediterranean, was a moderately rich one. This meant that Paul could have survived for long periods without relying on the generosity of his followers at all, and indeed, with the exception of his sojourn in Rome, wherever he stayed in his journeying for more than a few weeks, he set himself up in business, so as to gain even more money. Finally, of course, as we have seen, on at least one occasion Paul resorted to outright theft.

So much for this then. The second feature of these writings is a general shamelessness and lack of concern either with the truth, or the proper rules of decent behaviour and what one can and can't say. My readers will doubtless have recoiled from the account I have already given of these writings, especially the two quotations, since it is hardly the actions of an honest man to deduce theological truths from his own failings. But this is a feature of Paul's writings, the writings, as I have already opined, of a gifted orator, who does not realise that the same words written down will condemn a man, which when spoken in the right context, will win over his audience. And indeed an even more marked feature of these letters than the allusions to his financial dishonesty are his exaggerations, and his defence of himself against the charge of exaggerating. One example of many will suffice here:

²⁰ Rom 7 7-8.

in one letter he describes how he ‘fought with beasts’ at Ephesus,²¹ but no one condemned to be thrown into the arena with animals has ever survived, and if he is speaking metaphorically then what he says is simply untrue, for, as we have seen, when disturbances arose at Ephesus, Paul simply bribed the authorities to protect him and his followers and left the town discretely—hardly ‘fighting’.

But just as Paul uses his covetousness to magnify himself, instead of hiding it away, he also boasts constantly of the uniqueness of his message and mission, and uses an exaggerated catalogue of his sufferings to prove this. Yet these sufferings are largely invented, so that when he writes at one point that:

Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times have I been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren... &c &c²²

None of this, or very little, is true, for example he was shipwrecked only once, several years after the date of this letter, was never, that I could find, stoned, or beaten; all the dangers and discomforts he appears to have suffered were either self-inflicted, or amounted to no more than a few nights of imprisonment, and a few instances of rough handling, nothing more. His final piece of shamelessness in this regard is when he writes to another church:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church...²³

Leaving aside for later consideration the contention that Paul’s church can be seen as Jesus’s ‘body’, I can’t see that Paul’s comparatively easy life can be considered in the same way as Jesus’s life. For Jesus suffered agonisingly during his imprisonment and crucifixion, and in his later career, as we know, he travelled in disguise, often by night, and never comfortably and easily like Paul.

Another example of the shamelessness revealed by Paul’s writings is his constant boast of being one of the messengers, that is one of the leading members of Jesus’s followers in Jerusalem. But as we have seen these men were the leading disciples of Jesus while he was active in Judah, and shortly before his arrest he commissioned them to go out as his

²¹ 1 Cor 15 32.

²² 2 Cor 11 24-26.

²³ Col 1 24.

messengers. Now there were twelve of these, one for each of the tribes of Israel, and all of them seem to have survived for many years after Jesus's arrest and exile, and even if a vacancy had occurred the followers of Jesus would never have appointed anyone like Paul to their number, but a learned and pious Jew instead. This undoubtedly irked Paul, and spurred him on to claim apostleship, though I doubt that he had ever stopped to consider that if he were an apostle, then he would be the unlucky thirteenth apostle, and indeed in my mind I always think of him as The Thirteenth Apostle.

So, claiming apostleship, and thus laying claim to be someone who supported and preached the message of the followers of Jesus Paul in fact, as we have seen, went about preaching an entirely new religion, and in his letters he does not scruple to lay claim to this *at the very same time*; 'my message' is the constant refrain we read, 'my preaching', 'my gospel', 'my teaching' and so forth.

But to a mind like Paul's it is quite reasonable to claim two contradictory things at once, for example, at the same time as stressing the newness and uniqueness of his teaching, which indeed is true, he also claims to be still in touch with the followers of Jesus, as when he claims to have admonished Peter at Antioch²⁴, whereas we know that from the time he parted from Barnabas to the time he arrived in Jerusalem, some twelve or fourteen years later, he never communicated with the followers of Jesus at all, not once.

The best expression of this duplicity I can find in these writings is where Paul writes of his practice in his proselytising:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law ... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.²⁵

It will hardly need pointing out that all of Paul's writings are those of a renegade, that is someone who has left his ancestral religion and joined himself to a new one, and as such will naturally excite the disgust of all decent men. But Paul's case is still worse, for the religion he abandoned was not his ancestral religion, but one he had converted to, and the religion he joined himself to was entirely of his own making. Whatever we Romans think about Judaism, at least it is the ancestral religion of a nation, hallowed by tradition, and is a

²⁴ Gal 2 1-21.

²⁵ 1 Cor 9 19-22.

permitted religion in the Empire. But Paul's religion is his own invention, and one hallowed not by tradition, but by the tall stories of its founder, as for example in this passage:

I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to the visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up to Paradise, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.²⁶

Presumably Paul knows that if one does have this sort of experience, or if one is initiated into religious secrets, not only must one not reveal the secrets, or the experience, but one must not even allude to them, but he chooses to boast of these experiences instead, and at the same time show his weaknesses to his congregation.

My readers will already have noted that Paul often alludes to the Jewish Law as a 'burden', one that his followers can slough off. And this, of course, is something that no pious Jew could ever have said, and naturally Jesus said nothing of the kind either, in any of his pronouncements. For if a man has been brought up as a pious Jew then the obligations of the Law are not a burden, but are simply his natural conduct, just as we Romans act in the way our laws and customs tell us to, without even suspecting that we are acting other than naturally. That Paul can write of the burden and impositions of the law shows that he is no Jew, and that most of his congregations were not composed of Jews either, but of recent converts. And I cannot forbear from quoting one passage in keeping with this observation; here Paul is searching around for an analogy for his contention that Jews are now free from the obligations of the law:

Do you not know, brethren—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during his life? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning her husband. Accordingly she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from the law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.²⁷

Well! It hardly seems necessary to comment, but in case any of my readers can't see Paul's mistake here, one which he himself supplies the answer to, I will elaborate: Paul states

²⁶ 2 Cor 12 1-5.

²⁷ Rom 7 1-3.

correctly that the Jewish law is binding on a Jew all his life, but then goes on with a completely false analogy of a Jewish woman, who is released from the marriage law on the death of her husband. True, but she isn't released from the *whole* law, just the law relating to marriage. To try to mend Paul's fractured simile: if the woman is a Jew, wedded to the law, then she can never look forward to widowhood, for the law is eternal, and will never die. By his own analogy Paul has condemned his religion as an adulterous one, or in the language of the Jewish prophets 'a whoredom'.

I must digress a little about the letter in which this particular passage occurs. This differs from most of the other letters in that it was not written to a congregation of Paul's, but to the Greek-Jewish community in Rome. The circumstances of its composition seem to be that Paul had throughout his missionary career always wanted to come to Rome. This, incidentally, would have been a very suspicious desire, in Jewish eyes, as they figure Rome in their writings as 'the wicked city', or 'Babylon', as it is the chief city of their oppressor, just as Babylon used to be, and any Jew who has to venture to Rome does so with the utmost reluctance. But no doubt Paul cast covetous eyes upon Rome, as do all provincial entrepreneurs, as the most populous and richest city of the Empire. At one point he wrote to the Greek-Jewish community, announcing his intention of visiting Rome, and sounding them out, for no doubt he hoped that, as Rome is so far from Palestine, the observances of the Greek-Jews there were correspondingly lax, and that news of his misdeeds might not have reached their ears.

Well he was to be disappointed, the community in Rome wrote back to him that they had heard many bad reports of his teachings, and they enclosed a questionnaire on his religious beliefs for him to return to them. Paul responded with a long, rambling screech, loosely tied to the questions they asked him, in which he did not scruple to admit every last aspect of his eccentric views. Naturally the congregation were horrified at these, and the shameless way he put them across, and they wrote back, telling him that they could, under no circumstances, meet him. And indeed when Paul did arrive in Rome he was completely shunned by them, as by all Jewish people. Although the Greek-Jews of Rome were probably too shocked to be amused, I hope that my readers will derive amusement from the passage quoted above, as I did. And I should also like to quote another equally amusing passage, to give a more generous taste of the letter:

Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law,
but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very

commandment which promised life proved death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. We know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions.... &c &c.²⁸

No wonder the congregation of Rome was unimpressed.

So the writings of Paul are those of a renegade, with little idea of the niceties of the religion he is betraying, and a complete shamelessness about promoting every shameful aspect of his new religion. Before moving on to describe this new religion, as revealed by his writings, there are three further points I should like to make about Paul's abandonment of the Jewish religion. The first is that, just as no Jew would ever describe the law as a burden, so Paul, in one passage, does what no Jew would ever do, or dare to do, either—he describes himself as superior to Moses, who is the most holy figure in Judaism.²⁹

Secondly, as we know, his principal heresy is describing Jesus, his master, as in some way an aspect of the Godhead; this is, from a Jewish point of view, bad enough, but his explanation as to why the career of Jesus has superseded the law is worse. At one point he writes that: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree"'.³⁰ Now this passage puzzled me for some time until I took the trouble to go to a friendly rabbi we cultivated, who explained it to me. Apparently before the Jews were taken away captive to Babylon a rival religion to that of Yahweh-worship (for such is the name given by the Jews to their God) was that of Asherah, a fertility goddess, and part of her rites was a mock-sacrifice, in which a man was hung up on a tree, as one crucified. The Jewish law-makers therefore cursed anyone who had taken part in these rites as the crucified man, as an enemy to their God, who demanded exclusive loyalty from his worshippers. In making out that Jesus was as one accursed, Paul is aligning him with a rival religion, a thing that Jesus, as a pious Jew, would have been horrified at. Incidentally I have learnt that the reason why we crucify people as the most signal form of capital punishment is that we borrowed this method of execution from Carthage, and the Carthaginians, as Semites originating from Phoenicia, undoubtedly derived this method of

²⁸ Rom 7 8-15.

²⁹ 2 Cor 3 12-18.

³⁰ Gal 3 13.

execution from these rites. And perhaps we can surmise that originally this rite was not a mock-sacrifice either, but a real one.

Finally however I must just cap all these passages by quoting you a passage wherein Paul assures his followers of divine favour in the last days, for, in case I haven't made it clear before now, Paul expected the last days to occur in his own life-time. Anyway, he writes:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort yourselves with these words.³¹

As to the religion that Paul invented, I would say that it is no religion. Obviously it is not a legally-recognised religion like the authentic religions of the world, or such modern ones as we have certified as law-abiding and decent. But what I mean is that it has few rites, and fewer beliefs. Now, of course, one would hardly expect Paul to communicate religious secrets in his letters, letters he knew would inevitably fall into our hands. But the general paucity of data about the rites and beliefs of his religion in the letters is borne out by the reports we gleaned of his services and what he told initiates. The tenets of this religion seem to consist of the following:

1. That everyone must repent of their sins;
2. That the end of the world is very near and that it is important for everyone to repent and be saved before that event;
3. That Paul in some way has a unique message, derived in some way from the life of Jesus, who, in some way, is part of the Godhead (none of these points are explained very well); and finally
4. That everyone must have faith—though whether in Paul, or Jesus, or God, or all three, is not explained either.

It is customary for us, when we are dismissing a religion or a cult to say that it is an 'ecstatic' one; which is to say that it takes someone out of themselves, turns their brain, makes them forget their traditional beliefs and social obligations. But Paul's religion is not like this, for although it leads his followers into all kinds of unwise acts, and sets them against the authorities of the state, it does not take them out of themselves, instead it reinforces

³¹ 1 Thess 4 17-18.

their own self-confidence and spiritual pride. So perhaps it would be better to call this religion an 'enstatic' religion.

As to rites, as I have noted before the Christians have a sacramental meal as part of their service, and yet no one is quite sure whether this is simply a commemoration, or whether the meal is considered in the same mystical sense as those in the mysteries (those who are initiated in any of these will understand what I mean by this). If the latter, then these rites are yet another token of the distance that Paul has moved from Judaism, for no Jew could think of partaking of a sacramental meal, like those of the mysteries; such things are an abomination in their religious law.

As to any other observances, just as Paul claims to be able to be both a Jew and a Gentile, he also allows his followers the same luxury in their behaviour; it doesn't seem to matter to him what people do, so long as they are believers, and specifically believers in him. For example, although he had promised the Twelve in Jerusalem, before he had broken with Barnabas, that one of only two rules he would impose on the Gentiles was an abstinence from meat offered in sacrifice, we find him writing to a congregation of his that this is no sin, if the person in question does not think that it is.³²

That is as much as I propose to say about the writings of Paul, for anyone, if they are curious, can probably procure a copy of his writings from the Christians, though remember, as I said before, these were in large measure edited and rewritten subsequent to Paul's death.

However, while I am on the subject of writings, and have my notes in front of me I should also note that in our collection we had several pieces of writing against Paul from the followers of Jesus. The Jerusalem church, as I said, was aloof in its attitude, not only to adventurers like Paul, but also to the Jews of the dispersal generally, and the only piece of writing we have from this source is a rather elegant epistle by James the Just to the followers of Jesus. The only possible allusion in it to Paul and his career is a diatribe against the tongue, 'no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison'³³, which here perhaps stands for Greek rhetoric. However we also have writings which emanate from the church of Peter at Antioch, which are definitely aimed at Paul. Whether or not the epistle from which the following passage comes was actually written by Peter himself is difficult to

³² 1 Cor 8 1-13.

³³ James 3 8.

say, and there are several similar ones, but he would certainly have approved of its vigorous condemnation of Paul, and his teaching:

But false prophets also arose amongst the people, just as there will be false teachers amongst you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing on them swift destruction. And many will follow their licentiousness, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words....

They are blots and blemishes, revelling in their dissipation, carousing with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! Forsaking the right way they have gone astray; they have followed the way of Balaam, son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing....

They are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm; for them the nether gloom and darkness have been reserved. For, uttering loud boasts of the folly, they entice with licentious passions of the flesh men who have barely escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for whatever overcomes a man to that he is enslaved....³⁴

To those who are not used to the Jewish mode of expression I must say that the Jewish scriptures metaphorically describe every sin as a sexual sin, so the references to licentiousness in the above passage should not be taken literally, but as a description of spiritual 'whoredoms'. Balaam, by the way, was a prophet who was hired by an enemy of the Jews to curse them, and is a metaphorical way of saying that Paul was, figuratively, taking the pay of Rome, and cursing the Jews.

Indeed, so marked a feature of the writings of Jews of the dispersal did this condemnation of Paul, and other false teachers, become that it entered briefly into the repertoire of apocalyptic writers. I am running slightly ahead of events here, but I should, nevertheless, like to report on an apocalyptic piece of writing that I came across some years after I read the main body of these writings. The occasion for the piece was the Jewish War, which, not surprisingly, elicited a flood of similar material. Here the writer is concerned to catalogue the signs that will precede the last days and Rome is allegorised as a wounded beast, who is nevertheless given dominion over the earth for a time, and Paul appears as this beast's prophet, the false prophet who acts for Rome and preaches blasphemy:

Then I saw another beast which rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercised all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants

³⁴ 2 Peter 2 1-3, 13-15 & 17-20.

worship the first beast.... It works great signs.... and by the signs which it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, bidding them make an image for the beast....and it was allowed to give breath to an image of the beast so that the image of the beast should even speak, and to cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain....³⁵

Now it may need explaining why Paul and his religion should be firmly linked in the Jewish mind with Rome, for, as will be apparent from what I written thus far, to us Romans Paul and his religion were of very doubtful legality and certainly there is no sense in which, from our point of view, Paul was 'on our side'. The answer is to realise that for the Jews the greatest sin of all, the sin which all the Gentiles share, is idolatry, that is, worshipping images and statues, things made by human hands, as though they were divine. The Jews do not do this at all, and indeed in the holiest shrine of their Temple there was nothing at all that could be called an image, only a wooden chest, which was held to symbolise the covenant of God with the people of Israel, from some happening in one of their legends.

To digress for a minute, it is strange that the Jews cannot understand that when we worship statues and so forth, we are really worshipping the deity represented by the image, not the image itself. I agree it would be more consistent to worship only the name or idea of a deity, but the common people like to have images and pictures and so forth. And indeed the Jews reckon that their law was given to them by God, yet the copies they have of it were written by men, not the hand of God, so in treating the law as a symbol of God's mercy extended to them they are using the same symbolic process as we do with statues. But I suppose every people have their own idolatry (Lollius tells me that the Chinese have both temples filled with Gods, *and* a corpus of holy writings, so there you are); the only contemptible idolatry is that which takes the inflated pride of a man like Paul, and worships that.

Anyway, to return to the passage already quoted: Rome is considered the mother of idolatry by the Jews, perhaps for no better reason than that we happen to be the ones ruling Palestine, for I don't think we are any more given to image worship than anyone else. Now, if Paul sets up a false image for people to worship, namely his idea of Jesus as part of the Godhead, then he is an idolater, if he is an idolater he must be in the pay of Rome. QED. And the fact that Paul's disciples were and are studious in avoiding any political commitment at any time only adds to this suspicion, as, no doubt, the Jews thought that anyone who was

³⁵ Rev 13 11-15.

not for them was against them. And incidentally the reason that Paul is depicted in the passage as having horns like a lamb, but speaking like a dragon, is that throughout this piece of writing the emanation of God who most often mentioned is called The Lamb of God, so in having horns like a lamb Paul gives the false appearance of being holy and sent from God, but as soon as he speaks he betrays himself with a dragon's voice.

As I said, in this kind of writing at this time I surmise that twelve or fourteen years of Paul's activities in Asia Minor, and the Jewish opposition to them, led to this literary convention of a false teacher, sometimes figured as a blasphemous beast. It is most amusing then to see that in the writings of Paul edited by the Christians after his death, that one such passage is reused, inserted in one of Paul's own letters! What happened after Paul's death, and again this is to go ahead by some ten or fifteen years, is that the Christians took several pieces of writing from the followers of Jesus and re-edited them to prove that Paul was not inventing his own religion, but that what he taught had been the true meaning of Jesus's life and teaching. In the process of this they found a passage in some Jewish apocalyptic writings about 'the man of lawlessness' (ie the man who preached against the law = Paul), and, either not understanding it, or being very clever, inserted into a letter of Paul's to show that he had not looked forward to the imminent end of the world. For in this passage he is made to say that the end of the world cannot be imminent as this 'man of lawlessness' has not yet appeared.³⁶

In fact Paul had looked forward to the imminent end of the world, but when, six years or so after his death, during the Jewish War and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem, the world had not ended, as it should have done, the followers of Paul, embarrassed by their master's extreme statements on this subject, toned them down in his writings, and in this instance used the non-appearance of the 'man of lawlessness' to try to show that Paul was more cautious than in fact he was. For in another passage Paul had written:

the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a women with child, and there will be no escape.³⁷

And with this I will close the chapter.

³⁶ 2 Thess 2 3-9.

³⁷ 1 Thess 5 2-3.

VII

So by the time that next spring came around I had read through all these letters, and other writings, except, as I said, those which I came across later and only inserted in the last chapter to make the argument complete. As spring approached the time for my departure for Egypt neared, as Lollius had booked me on to the first regular naval transport of the season bound for Egypt. I thought at the time that Paul and Paulinism was something important, but at that time Egypt was more pressing, for as far as we knew Paul would stay put in Rome indefinitely. Indeed, as he was under a form of house-arrest, we thought it would be difficult for him to do otherwise. My plan with regard to Paul was to wait until I returned in the autumn, review the information I had and then bring Paul in for questioning. For you must realise that before the Jewish revolt we had had no experience of the wholesale rounding up of the members of sects. Paul's sect was not a legal one, but at that time it did not seem to be engaged in illegal activities, and so we could afford to let it wait.

On the other hand I was busy with other work too; I had the other, as yet not legalised, sects in Rome to continue to investigate and register, and I had to prepare for the trip to Egypt. Throughout the winter Lollius was very affable, as I think he had always meant to go to Egypt himself to sort out the local organisation of information gathering and to try to understand the complex religious situation there. However as Egypt, despite its teeming population and the large numbers of Jews settled in Alexandria, has never been a breeding ground of revolutionary doctrines, so I guess that Lollius just kept on putting it off, in the way that one always tends to put off an irksome, but not pressing, tasks. I have a friend who has always said he will begin to learn Greek one day, but he is now seventy, so I don't think he ever will; and indeed those of us who are lucky enough to have learnt Greek in our youth are at an advantage here, for while the mind is young and flexible it is easy to learn languages, but once passed adolescence it is very difficult.

One day in March I had word that the ship would sail the next day, so I tidied up my desk, gave last minute instructions to Aristophanes, who never left the palace and was always

in charge when Lollius was away, as he was at that time, and returned home to pack. The next morning, early, with my military chest on a hand-cart propelled by Milo, I called in at the Three Fishes, for Servius was to accompany me. When he had heard that I was to go to Egypt the next season he had called round and begged to be taken along. For he had advanced so rapidly to initiation and towards further grades of initiation with the sect he had joined that it was considered that he should proceed to Egypt, for more study. And indeed he had already begun the study of the Egyptian language and the strange writing-system they use, and was progressing well, far better than my friend with his Greek! I agreed to take him along as a servant, and when I returned to Rome he could stay on as long as he wished, and return by his own means. In the interim the Three Fishes would be managed by Faustina, and their eldest son and daughter, who were now nearing adulthood.

We made our way down to the river and took a boat to the naval dockyards at Ostia. The morning was cold and mist was wreathing the river and the countryside on either bank, and so our journey was a rather eerie one. However the sun began to shine through the mist, and soon masts and cranes loomed up to show us we were nearing the dockyard. At the dockside we disembarked from our boat and located our ship, the *Arion*, and went aboard. The captain greeted us with some surprise, as he not expected us until later in the day. There is, my readers will probably know, a notorious antipathy between sailors and soldiers, and knowing that he was to have a soldier as a passenger the captain had assumed that I would keep them hanging around all day, and miss the favourable wind. However, as it was, the ship could leave immediately, and so we bade farewell to Milo and watched the gangplank being taken in, the ropes cast off, and the ship being manoeuvred into a position where the sails could be hoisted and it could clear the harbour.

I had only ever been on a ship twice before, once when I crossed with my legion from Gaul to Britain, and once on the way back, when my term of duty expired. On the first occasion we were expecting to have to fight our way ashore, and although the sea was quite rough I expect the nervous energy kept me from feeling the effects of being at sea. On the way back the Channel, which is said to be a very stormy stretch of ocean, was as flat and calm as the proverbial mill-pond. And besides the Channel is only some twenty miles across. However on the day we set sail for Egypt, although the weather was fine and the swell not high, I immediately began to feel ill. Perhaps also contributing to this was the thought that I had at the very least another two weeks on board to look forward to. Anyway within an hour I was completely prostrate on my bunk, much to the amusement of the sailors and I stayed

there pretty much until we arrived in Egypt, with Servius tending me and bringing me wine and sops, for I could eat nothing else.

It was the smell that brought me on to the deck on the day we neared Alexandria. Our voyage had been exceptionally fortunate as regards winds and seas, and we had made very good time, but to me it had seemed an eternity of lying on my bunk, vomiting and dozing by turns, praying for the voyage to end. However, as soon as I smelled the warm, spicy smell coming off the land that morning I roused myself and staggered on to the deck. Poets and imaginative writers can rhapsodise so well about pleasant prospects and beautiful landscapes, so I will not attempt to describe how the thin strip of land on the horizon, as we drew nearer, gradually resolved into the gleaming white palaces and buildings of the harbourside at Alexandria. By the time we had docked I was feeling completely recovered, though ravenous, and we hardly stayed to bid the captain farewell politely, but gathered our things, flew through the officials who were checking the credentials of new arrivals, and within a few minutes we were standing in the street outside the docks, enjoying the heat, the odours and sights of this city.

‘Well,’ I said to Servius, ‘I don’t know about you, but I’m ravenous; let’s find somewhere to eat.’

Servius went up to various passers-by, keen to try out his Egyptian, but everyone we met was either Greek or Jewish. The fact is that Alexandria is a Greek and Jewish city, and Egyptian is spoken in the other towns, or in the country, or in traditional religious circles. Nevertheless we soon found a tavern to eat at, and although the establishment in question was not up to the high standards of The Three Fishes, we found it entirely acceptable, though I expect that as I had not eaten more than a few sops for two weeks I would have been satisfied with anything. The food we found was not as foreign to the country as the people of the town, and it was certainly nothing we were familiar with. The main course was a spicy dish of goat-meat, with dates, accompanied by a loaf which appeared to have been made with large quantities of sesame seeds. A sweet dish that was brought to us was a biscuit made out of lotus-seed paste, liberally doused in rose-water. However the wine was terrible, and we afterwards learnt that, owing to the great heat, the grapes in this land are degenerate and yield sour wine, no matter how carefully they are tended. The only use that this wine has is to disinfect the water. For in this low-lying country the River Nile is the only source of water, and it is frequently muddy and foul, or polluted by the ordure from the city. The local drink is a weak barley beer, which, in this climate, is indeed very refreshing.

After we had eaten our fill, I decided that we ought to make our way to the Governor's residence, for we had been promised accommodation in the official guest-house. And indeed, after retrieving our baggage from the docks, and arranging for it to be delivered, and after making ourselves known at the official residence, we were shown to a very commodious suite of rooms. I decided then that I would go to sleep and try to make up for all the fitful sleeps I had enjoyed on the ship with a long rest. Servius, on the other hand, was keen to venture forth and explore the town, and I gave him leave to do so. After he left I lay down, and despite the fact that I could feel the bed and the room heaving up and down, as with the swell of the sea, I soon fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning I arose early and much-refreshed, and filled in the time before everybody else arose by walking in the gardens attached to the Governor's palace. In hot climates it is the case that the early morning is the most pleasant time of day, and I delighted at the lush foliage, the flowers and the unfamiliar, and brightly-coloured, birds I saw there. It was as well that I had had a good sleep and was in a good mood, for the next hour or so was very trying to my patience. Egypt seems to be one of the provinces where all the stupid and reactionary administrators and soldiers end up. I had an interview with the Chief of Police of the province, a thick-set, greying old soldier with no neck, and, seemingly, no brains. He was immensely irritated, it was plain, by interference in his affairs from Rome, and spent the first half of the interview telling me that there was nothing wrong with his administration, and it didn't need any changes in procedure.

To soothe his feelings I agreed that no-one that I knew had raised any objections to the policing regime in Egypt, and that Egypt was a peculiarly peaceful province, for beyond the perennial civil war between the Jews and Greeks of Alexandria, the countryside was quiescent and the peasantry never tumultuous or malcontented (indeed as the descendants of the people who allowed themselves to be enslaved and driven to build those enormous, obscene, monuments to human stupidity, the Pyramids, this is not surprising). Moreover the province was very prosperous, and was providing, as always, an abundant surplus of wheat for export. But what I wanted to say to him, and did, in as many words, was that although Egypt itself was calm and peaceful, the religions and new religious doctrines it produced were, like the wheat it produced, constantly being exported, and that if we were to keep control of the religions of the Empire, it was necessary to gather information, and conduct surveillance and research into these sects, particularly of the Alexandria region. At this point I produced the sample briefing documents, check-lists and reporting forms that Lollius,

Aristophanes and myself had drawn up, and I put them on the Police Chief's desk and began to explain them, but the Chief looked so furiously at them I was afraid that he was going to tear them to shreds before my eyes.

At this point he burst out:

'I don't understand you, or your superior's, ideas at all. I'm just a plain Roman, old-fashioned, you know? Why do we have to go traipsing round after these Jews and Greeks and lunatics and perverts, and try to *understand them*? Why do we need to understand them? If they commit crimes we arrest them and throw them into prison, or execute them. If they revolt, we crush the revolt. But best of all we just get them to fight each other, and then we have a really quiet life.... You're a soldier too, aren't you? Why can't you understand me?'

I began again with all my tact and patience, using a new metaphor this time. I compared policing to the two schools of medicine. The one simply treats illnesses as and when they occur, but as we know, frequently the illness is too severe to be treated, and the patient dies. The other school seeks to keep the patient in good condition all the time, by a wholesome diet and exercise, but also seeks to understand *why* certain diseases occur, and to try to predict when they might break out, and to protect the patient against them. And indeed I am not really surprised that this individual did not understand me, for our point of view, that is, the view-point of Lollius and myself and our other associates, is not a very Roman one. We have long had the best army in the world and shelter behind this; our response to unrest is to crush the unrest by military means. But if in the future a non-Roman religion were to grow within to such dimensions that it could not be crushed by any military means, then the Empire would succumb. Thus we consider it very important to seek out information about such possible religions and cults, and to act on that information, long before any public manifestations of crisis can be seen, and thus to arrest the threat before it emerges.

But even quite intelligent Romans can be forgiven, bearing in mind our inflexible and arrogant mind-set, and the length of its continuance, for not grasping this point. And military types like the one I was speaking to on this occasion represent a further refinement of the mentality. They love to swagger around in the provinces, doing no work, being corrupt and raking in the money and insulting the locals at every turn. Indeed I have observed that frequently it is the army command in very peaceful provinces that has this mentality and way of going about things; in border areas, or more unsettled areas, frequently the army has adopted more subtle counter-insurgency tactics, like those that Lollius was advocating in Rome. In fact the Jewish War, where it is fair to say that our forces were stretched to their

utmost, proved the futility of the military solution, for though the revolt was crushed, it was at the expense of an enormous number of lives on both sides and the complete devastation of an entire province, and I doubt if we have heard the end of the Jews as a threat to the Empire even now.

Incidentally this obstructive chief of police, whose name I have purposely refrained from mentioning since a relative of his presently occupies a position of great power, suffered by his prejudices in the end, as, during the Jewish War, his legion was drafted into Palestine, and he was killed by a well-aimed ballista bolt during the final stage of the siege of Jerusalem.

Anyway, as my readers will have gathered, I got nowhere in this interview, and although the Police Chief made a promise of another interview at a later date to discuss the paperwork further. I did not expect this meeting ever to take place, as indeed it never did.

I was complaining about this to Servius as we ate lunch in the shade of a trellis overrun with vines, in the gardens, an hour or so later, when a young man came across and introduced himself. He was Caius Aemilius Lepidus, a descendant of the triumvir.³⁸ His father had been a great friend of my uncle, and so when he had seen in the official dispatches that I was to come to Egypt, he had become eager to meet me. I explained to him the purpose of my journey and complained about the lack of success I had had in my first interview. Aemilius condoled with me and explained that of all the reactionary officers in Egypt, the one I had encountered was undoubtedly the worst. However he was able to suggest another way of going about my task. He, that is Aemilius, was on the staff of the Governor, and had his ear, as they say; he could introduce me and my work to the Governor and get the changes in the intelligence work done in Egypt carried out from the top downwards, as it were.

I was delighted with the company of Aemilius and delighted by his idea. Indeed, although I write of staying at the Governor's residence and so forth, my readers must not imagine that I, or indeed Lollius, had much influence in high circles at any time, and I had certainly not expected to meet the Governor during my stay, for although we were staying at his residence, there are, at any one time, usually four or five hundred official visitors or guests staying there, and his household is on the grandest scale.

I will not insert here anything more than the most significant incidents during my stay in Egypt, and so I will not narrate every last detail of my meeting with the Governor and its aftermath. Suffice it to say that I met him, that he was impressed and won over by the

³⁸ Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, died c. 12 BCE, who shared power for a little time after Julius Caesar's death with Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar.

changes that Lollius and myself were advocating, and ordered them to be carried out. But it is the property of administrative systems that no matter how well-thought out they are their successful operation, and the useful consequences arising from this, are entirely dependent on the energy and intelligence of the people in the system. In this case, although our new reporting system was imposed, very little useful information came out, partly because of the laziness and incapacity of the police in Egypt, and partly because, only a little while later, Egypt, as indeed the entire Empire, was almost overwhelmed by the emergency of the Jewish War. In fact the discoveries I made in Egypt, which will be narrated in a moment, were perhaps of more significance than anything that came out of our much-refined reporting system.

Before telling you what these discoveries were, I will insert a note of what else I did in Egypt. Aemilius was no help to me in my researches into religious sects, for his interests were in physics and natural history. However he took me on a number of outings, one to a sort of game-park near Alexandria, where crocodiles and hippopotamuses, now rare elsewhere in Egypt owing to hunting, are maintained. On another occasion we went on an expedition into the desert, some three days travel to the west, which was the first time I had ever seen a true desert. These and all the other similar sights I saw in Egypt filled me with the greatest pleasure, for I am always more interested in the landscape and plants and animals of a region than in the buildings and towns, which are much the same everywhere. However we did do the usual things that visitors to Egypt do, even visiting those hateful pyramids—they gave me nightmares for weeks afterwards, about being imprisoned under great masses of masonry. Words cannot express my gratitude at the kindness that Aemilius showed me on this trip, and it has been a pleasure to have continued his acquaintance on his return to Rome, and, my dear Silvanus, to introduce him to you.

However there were two things that I discovered in Egypt that were of great significance to our understanding of the Christian sects. The first occurred after a few weeks in Alexandria; I had been on foot to a police-station in one of the suburbs of Alexandria to discuss with the local commander what sort of information we should like to have reported. I was walking back towards the Governor's residence, and this was during the heat of day, when the streets were quite deserted, when I heard a voice calling: 'Calpurnius Fronto.'

I turned and saw a little old man in a ragged Greek tunic motioning to me. I approached and saw that despite his very tanned face, and his foreign dress, he was a Roman.

‘Greetings,’ I said, ‘you know my name, but I don’t know yours.’

‘I am Lucius Vertumnus Niger,’ said the man in a very small voice. ‘I should like to take you to meet some people who have something to communicate with you.’

I didn’t recognise the name, though something stirred in the back of mind, and what he had said sounded very suspicious.

‘Oh yes,’ I replied, ‘and who are these people, and what have they got to tell me?’

Just as Vertumnus was opening his mouth I suddenly remembered who Vertumnus was, and broke in:

‘Oh yes, I remember who you are, you’re the one who fell down a well, aren’t you?’

A flicker of annoyance passed over Vertumnus’s face at this, but he continued:

‘The elders of the Guardians, the religious society of which I have the honour to be a member, would like to speak with you; they have information which may be of use to you.’

All the warning paragraphs in our training manual about how to avoid being led into dangerous situations began to reel off in my mind, and Vertumnus, seeing me hesitate said:

‘It’s not far from here, and I give you my word as an officer and a Roman that you will come to no harm.’

I didn’t like to remind Vertumnus that he was no longer an officer, having been dishonourably discharged from the service, and that if he went around with an Egyptian sect, in Greek clothes, he was hardly a Roman either, but he looked harmless and so I said:

‘Very well, lead on.’

Vertumnus turned and signalled to a small servant-boy who had been standing nearby, who then raced off, presumably to announce our imminent arrival. He then turned back to me and motioned me to follow him. After this he set off at a fair pace; from behind it was even more noticeable how he, a small man anyway, was extremely emaciated: his calves were like twigs, and his arms were even thinner—his neck looked like a vulture’s neck. I did my best to keep up and kept on throwing questions at his back, like:

‘How did you come to fall in the well? the files I’ve read didn’t make it clear what you doing at the time’ and:

‘How did you get mixed up with this sect anyway, you come from a good family, don’t you?’

But Vertumnus gave no answer.

We walked for four or five miles through the suburbs in a southerly direction. At first we were walking through quite poor areas, but after a while the houses became more spaced, and we entered an area of large mansions and open countryside, consisting of

pleasure-gardens and parks. At length we arrived at a low, but extensive villa and Vertumnus marched up to the front door and announced himself to the door-keeper. We were waved through, and Vertumnus, evidently at home, led me through the entrance hall, through the garden courtyard, towards the rooms beyond. Here he paused and knocked at a large dark wooden door, and on a command being given inside, entered. He popped out again immediately, and asked me to enter.

I entered the room and what greeted my eyes made me want to burst out laughing, though at the same time I was very aware of the particular and strange fittings and ambience of the room. What greeted me was the main reception room of the villa, but very plainly decorated in pure white, with deep red floor tiles. Hidden windows in the roof allowed ample afternoon light to flood down from above. There was almost no furniture in the room, so that the eye was immediately led to the far end, where, on the dais, three armchairs were set, one on either side and one in the centre. On these, and this is what made me want to laugh, were seated three elderly Greeks, all dressed alike in flowing pure white robes, and each had a long, flowing, snow-white beard. They reminded me irresistibly of those fresco-paintings you see of the gods on Olympus, and I was just wondering whether I was in the presence of Jupiter, Neptune and Mars, when the man in the centre began speaking in bad Latin:

‘Calpurnius Fronto, we are pleased you could come. We are the elders of the Guardians, that is, the Guardians of Sacred Knowledge, and we have something of importance to tell you.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ I said in Greek, and immediately the old man switched to what was obviously his native language.

‘My name is Artemidorus, and my colleagues here are Posidonus and Callisthenes.’

I made a small bow and said nothing, though as Artemidorus was introducing his colleagues I had stolen a glance behind me and noticed that Vertumnus had remained within the room, standing by the door like a servant. I was shocked at this, and further to this observation I could not help noticing that whereas Vertumnus was, as I said, extremely emaciated, the three elders were not by any means thin.

After a moment I advanced towards the dais and said:

‘Well you obviously know who I am and what I do, but I don’t know who you are, perhaps you could tell me.’

I had already gathered much information locally about the various sects that there were in Egypt, of which, as I have said before, there were a vast number and vast diversity, and a great many more than we had known of in Rome, and yet I had heard nothing of this sect. I

was shocked that they could so blatantly display a Roman citizen as one of their converts, but I guessed that, given the large mansion they inhabited, that they were clearly a very rich sect, and as such were probably protected by some influential magnate or other.

‘We are the Guardians of Sacred Knowledge,’ repeated Callisthenes, a slightly younger man, as I judged. ‘Our function is to bear witness to the Sacred Knowledge in this fallen world, and to help our converts to deny and abase the flesh and so achieve eternal life.’ ‘Our practices and degrees of initiation are designed to lead our devotees through the seven stages of enlightenment and to teach them the sacred words and the sacred knowledge that allows them to control heavenly powers,’ continued the other younger man, Posidonus.

‘But,’ Artemidorus continued the incantation, ‘our first lesson to all our converts is to spurn and despise all the false gods of the world: the absurd and ridiculous animal-gods of Egypt, and that false pretender Osiris, the lustful and criminal gods of Greece, the wrathful and uncouth Yahweh, whom the Jews worship, and the false gods of Rome...’

‘Hang on a minute,’ I said, ‘I came here to hear something you had to tell me. Is all you’re going to tell me that the gods my people worship are false, because if that’s it, then I can tell you that you’re wrong—the Roman gods do exist.’

‘How can marble statues and abstractions like “Mars”, or “The Empire” or “Victory”, be true gods?’ said Artemidorus scornfully.

‘Well marble statues are not the gods themselves, but representations of the gods. And it’s easy to see how these “abstractions”, as you call them, exist: the Empire certainly exists, and we have grand ceremonies on holy days in the calendar, when we pray and make sacrifices to “The Empire”, and then the Empire flourishes, so therefore the “abstraction” exists.’

‘But the Empire would exist anyway, even if no one made sacrifices.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Well obviously it would, it is a political system, made by men, maintained by men.’

‘Who else would it be made or maintained by? And I’ll give another example of how these “abstractions” work, if you like. You know that each Roman legion has an eagle, as a symbol of the *genius* of that legion. Now whenever the legion keeps discipline and makes the correct observances towards its eagle, then it is invincible, but if it doesn’t then it will be beaten and the eagle will fall into enemy hands.’

‘But,’ said Posidonus, taking up the argument, ‘none of these gods speak to the heart, they are cults which are concerned with matters of state, not with the individual soul and its salvation.’

‘Yes, but none of these cults is supposed to be concerned with individuals. People around Rome used to worship local gods, or goddesses, when it came to their personal affairs. Now, of course, anyone who is concerned about that side of things takes care to become initiated in one of the mysteries.’

‘But how can anyone worship so many different gods?’

‘Why should that be a problem? As a man I am subject to many different authorities, that of my father, my patron perhaps, my legionary commander, the Emperor, if I am a slave, to my master, and I have many obligations: to my servants, to my clients, to my wife and family. Why shouldn’t there therefore also be many deities to be worshipped?’

‘But there must be one, and only one God, who is all powerful,’ said Posidonus angrily.

‘And everything you have said to us shows that you are a worldly man, and that your religion is that of the world, the evil, fallen world, and that you give no thought to eternity,’ added Callisthenes. Both men were now red-faced and angry; I in contrast was just regaling them with stock-wisdom, or worldly wisdom, deliberately to annoy them.

‘Please,’ I answered, ‘one at a time. Why must there be one, all-powerful God? We see that in the world contradictory things happen all the time. On the one hand a wise man has much honour and wealth, whereas on the other, somewhere else, a man who is wise and virtuous has no honour and perishes miserably. Why not posit two gods, with two different sets of rules? We know that in this world there are many potentates; the Emperor, for example, is very powerful, but only in the Empire, elsewhere it is the Parthian king who rules, or the Emperor of China, or one of the kings in India. Why might there not be many gods? You yourselves, I know, say there is a false god who created the world specifically to trick humans into trusting in worldly things, but that behind him there is a true god, who created human souls. Why is this scheme any different from the one I have just put forward?’

‘And, secondly,’ I said, warming to my theme, ‘why should we not worship worldly gods, seeing as we are born into the world and that it is therefore our concern while we are alive. I belong to a mystery cult, which promises me a life after death. But beyond this I take little care, as I imagine that when I am taken into this future world it will be like when I was born into this world. At first my mother and nurse carried me about, and I couldn’t walk, or speak, and then I gradually gained the use of my faculties and grew in knowledge and wisdom. Why should the next world not be like this? Why does one have to take so much care of the next world in this world? can’t we just grow up in the next world when we come to it?’

And finally,' I added, 'you describe this world as "fallen", yet you don't seem to have fallen too hard here.' And with that I glanced around.

'Calpurnius Fronto,' said Artemidorus, who had remained calm and silent during this wrangle, and towards the end had motioned to his colleagues to be silent, 'It was a mistake on the part of my colleagues to try to explain to you our pure religion and how it differs from all others, which are the spawn of Satan. Please think no more of what we have said.'

'Very well,' I replied, 'now tell me what it is you have to tell me.'

'We know,' Posidonus began, 'that you are the person in Rome who has charge of supervising the licensing of foreign cults in Rome....'

'And elsewhere in the Empire,' I added.

'Quite so. Well we have information about a certain Paul of Tarsus, who, we know, is currently occupying your thoughts.'

'Well,' I said, surprised to hear the name of Paul of Tarsus mentioned in a context that I had little expected to hear of him, 'Yes, his sect is a very interesting one, and one that seems to be a very much more successful than any other sect in Rome at the moment.'

At this the three men shifted and gave separate, but similar, small noises of disgust.

'That Paul of Tarsus was once an initiate in our religion,' said Artemidorus.

'Really?' I said. 'It seems then he makes a habit of joining religions and leaving them. I suppose it's understandable that in the end he decided to invent his own. But when did all this happen?'

'This was over twenty years ago.'

I furrowed my brow and began to think when this episode could have fitted into the chronology of Paul's life and then I said:

'Ah, well, this must have been after he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, when he disappeared for three years. Though in one letter of his I read he claimed to have been in Arabia during this time.'

'No,' said Artemidorus, 'he was here in Egypt. Why did you think he might be in Arabia?'

'I don't know, I thought perhaps he might have been selling tents to the bedouin, or something.'

'No,' said Posidonus, 'the bedouin make their own tents out of camel and goat hair, they have no need of any imported tents. I think our friend was lying again, as is his wont.'

‘Right, so let me get this straight; he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus and has to acknowledge him, but then has to flee from Damascus. He can’t go back to Jerusalem, so he goes travelling. He ends up in Egypt and joins your sect. Well, what happened?’

‘He turned up in Alexandria in the company of another villain; does the name of Simon the Wizard, mean anything to you?’ said Callisthenes.

‘Yes, he was a another religious adventurer, or is. Doesn’t he have his own religion now, like Paul?’

‘He does,’ said Artemidorus angrily.

I should explain to my readers about this Simon the Wizard character who had cropped up in several of the documents I had been reading that winter. It seems that he was a Greek, born somewhere in Palestine, at about the same time as Jesus. He, like Paul, was a religious adventurer, and like him had a burning ambition which drove him on. For a time he had had great success in hoodwinking the superstitious peasantry of Samaria, and we knew that for the last two decades he had been based in Egypt, and had travelled around Asia Minor. It is said that he had been to Rome and, he had also, at some stage, tried to become a member of the Jewish followers of Jesus, but had been rejected. Thus his career was in many ways similar to Paul’s except that Paul was cleverer than him, for Paul had invented a religion which relied exclusively on Paul’s assertion of the truth of the message that he brought, just like Simon’s bald assertion of the truth of *his* message. But this premise once accepted, in Paul’s religion the faith of the believer then became the single foundation of the religion, a faith which, conveniently, elided Paul’s role in the dissemination of that faith.

Simon the Wizard, on the other hand, though his ambition was no greater than Paul’s, was less subtle, and relied on a sort of manic self-assertiveness. On one occasion, for example, he was arrested for blasphemy in a town in Asia Minor when he claimed that even the angels of this creation will not be saved, except by his sacred knowledge, or some such statement. He also leavened his teaching with impressive, though easily executed, magical tricks—hence his nickname. The religion he taught was not a consistent one, but varied according to his audience and his mood, seemingly, but it was Gnostic at base, and taught that Jesus was a messenger of the true God, sent to the Jews to try to convince them that their God was a false one. Simon claimed that he was the parallel messenger, sent to the Gentiles with the same message.

I had begun to suspect that Paul’s teaching, though he always took care to distance himself from ‘false knowledge’ of the Gnostics, was based on Gnostic doctrine, and the

parallel between Simon the Wizard and Paul had already occurred to me, so I was delighted to have a suspicion of mine confirmed, and to find that not only had Paul studied in Egypt, but that he had been an associate of Simon the Wizard.

‘Well, Gentlemen,’ I returned, ‘if you tell me that once these two men were initiates in your religion, let me try to guess, from what I know of them and their characters, what happened next. Let me see: I guess that Paul restrained Simon’s impetuosity, and they both put on such a show of piety and zeal that you congratulated yourselves on securing two excellent converts. However soon Paul began preaching different things to different groups of people, and he had probably also secured access to your funds, and these began to disappear. Then suddenly Simon left your religion, having appropriated religious secrets and rigmaroles, and Paul left soon after, taking money and converts with him. Am I correct?’

The three elders had listened to this with chagrin and surprise, and after I had finished Artemidorus said:

‘Yes, more or less, though Paul lasted a year longer with us. When Simon left he took no-one with him, and lived in poverty and obscurity for a while, but we think that when Paul left us, with many converts, and having diverted some of our funds, he then helped Simon to set himself up again, passed the converts on to Simon, and after that we lost sight of Paul—he may have returned to Palestine—but Simon has remained in Egypt, except for brief visits overseas, and has been a thorn in our side ever since. But there is one thing that happened which you did not predict.’

‘Yes,’ continued Callisthenes, ‘We had begun to grow dissatisfied with Simon, though as yet Paul had not shown his true colours. Simon was proud and ambitious and would not submit to our authority, but had begun to challenge it. Well, one day our faithful servant Vertumnus returned to this house. We were all elsewhere, at the house of another convert, and had sent him back to pick up some things we had forgotten. It was evening..’

I had noticed that as Callisthenes began the story Vertumnus had begun to move towards the dais in an agitated state, and now he broke in:

‘I entered the house, and as I was passing the room we use to store our most precious possessions, our sacred books, and the funds of the group, I heard a noise. I entered the room and saw three thieves ransacking the place, but before I could do anything I was coshed from behind by another thief and was knocked out. When I came to the thieves had tied me tightly with rope and assembled all their loot into sacks and carried it outside into a waiting hand-cart, then they came back and loaded me into the cart. They wheeled the cart for a mile or

so, and then stopped near a large well. They pulled me out and were about to throw me down the well, but I begged for mercy, so one of the group laughed and said: 'All right, you can swim then,' and cut my bonds. Then they threw me in. Fortunately I managed to cling on to the side of the well, and the next morning the herdsman who were drawing water for their animals heard me calling for help and pulled me out.'

'I see now,' I broke in, 'and you had to tell your superiors you'd fallen down there by accident, otherwise you'd have had to tell them that you had been spending all your time becoming initiated into a foreign sect, and neglecting your duty. Well it serves you right.'

Vertumnus retreated, humiliated, and I turned back to the three elders:

'What evidence do you have that either Simon, or Paul, or both, were involved in this robbery.'

'Nothing that would stand up in a law-court,' replied Artemidorus. 'It is just that Simon had left a day or two before, and a week or two earlier Paul had become our treasurer. When he left, we found such an enormous sum of money had gone missing that we could not believe that the thieves had taken it all away, as we doubt whether there was that much actually in the strong-room at the time.'

'So Paul may have taken advantage of the confusion to siphon off even more money.'

'Yes, and our books were in sad confusion as it was, as our previous treasurer had been ill for months before and had not had the strength to do any work.'

'Well,' I said, 'as you say, there is nothing here to prove conclusively that either of these men had a hand in the robbery. Now tell me, what did you do after Simon and Paul left your sect.'

'When Paul left, he took good care to leave the province very soon after and so we have never been able to catch up with him. Since Simon left we have constantly been on his trail, but we find that he was always able, either to elude arrest, or to bribe the officials, as, as you may have noticed already, Egypt is a very corrupt province and the police force is lazy and incompetent.'

'Which is why, when we heard that you were coming to Egypt,' continued Posidonus, 'we wanted to tell these things to you, in the hope that you would be able to help us get our revenge.'

'Well,' I said, 'thank you, gentlemen. As you know I am very interested in Paul and I will certainly have Simon arrested, if I can find him. And when I do come to meet either of these men, be sure that I will bear in mind what you have told me. But now the evening is drawing on and I must be returning to town otherwise I will be missed.'

At this Artemidorus and the others saluted me, and I took my leave. At the door of the reception room Vertumnus presented me with a small satchel, which he said contained the depositions of numerous of the sect's members, attesting what I just heard, and after that he lead me back out of the villa. At the door I said to him:

'Vertumnus, why don't you come with me. I'll take you back to Rome, back to your family.'

Vertumnus looked at me with horror. I continued:

'You look as if you've been through Hell.'

Vertumnus sneered at this and said:

'We are all living in Hell.'

'I'm not,' I replied, 'they're not', gesturing in the direction of the reception room, 'only you are.'

Vertumnus looked furiously at me and slammed the door in my face.

I was disappointed that I hadn't got the chance to ask Vertumnus about what had happened in Armenia as well, but then I suddenly realised that I was about five miles from town and without transport, and that night was drawing on, as indeed in Egypt, as the land is nearer the equator than Italy, so the days are shorter and the nights longer, even in the summer. However just outside the villa I saw a farmer driving an ass-cart full of water-melons in the direction of town and flagged him down. And so I rode into town, sitting on the front board of the cart, very pleased with myself, swinging my legs and munching water-melon. The driver, who spoke no Greek, cowered on the other end of the front-board. When we reached a part of town I recognised as not far from the official residence, I ordered him to stop. As I got down I threw him a coin, and he caught it, looked at it with astonishment, and then suddenly whipped his ass violently, and shot away. I discovered later that the usual custom for Romans in Egypt would be to commandeer the cart, steal the load, and the ass and cart, and beat the driver senseless, so I suppose he considered himself lucky.

Anyway, as you can imagine I was utterly delighted suddenly and unexpectedly to gain such information, though it didn't really surprise me that anyone unlucky enough to become involved with the Guardians should wish to leave the sect as soon as possible. However that Paul and Simon should have reacted as they did was entirely to be expected from what I knew of their respective characters, but also of the strange habit of mind I had detected in men of this type: that it was impossible for them to separate their dishonest actions from their conviction of the rightness of their motives. In this regard Simon was

merely a coarser version of Paul, and, as, as we say, 'birds of a feather flock together', their close association came as no surprise either.

However the principal interest in this discovery is that it allowed me to complete the mental outline of Paul's career I had begun to assemble. At first, as a young man it was evident that Paul, or Saul as he then was, had sought to advance himself by completing his submission to the Jewish religion and to the High Priest's authority. He had become a full convert to Judaism, and had shown extraordinary zeal in the service of the High Priest. And indeed he had done quite well in this cause, and would probably have risen to be the chief of the High Priest's soldiers pretty soon.

However, after his meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus he had had to abandon the High Priest's cause and to swap his allegiance to that of Jesus. But after his experience in Damascus he must also have realised that he would never be fully trusted by the followers of Jesus, nor would he ever attain a high position in that sect, as he was not Jewish-born and he had never known Jesus personally, as the Twelve had done.

He must have arrived in Egypt, after fleeing from Damascus, perhaps on business, and then joined this sect of The Guardians. This sect, as I subsequently found out, preached an orthodox Gnostic doctrine (if there can be such a thing) of the true God and his messenger, who is figured as his Son. I surmise that it was then that Paul suddenly saw that here was a religious synthesis that could allow him to transcend the failures of his earlier career. He could still claim to be faithful to Judaism, by teaching that his religion could be approached through the Law, he could still claim to be true to Jesus, by insisting that Jesus was in fact the Son of God and God's messenger to humankind, but the religion he would preach would be essentially *his*, one formulated by him out of the varied religious allegiances of his past, and made successful by his own oratorical and persuasive gifts. Finally, what the Gnostics taught him was that this 'knowledge' was not an external authority that had to be obeyed, but that it was an already-existing part of his own being, which had to be trusted.

From then on his ambition and his lack of scruples had their justification, and it was merely a matter for him of biding his time, until he could procure citizenship and set off alone on his mission. Though, as we have seen, it still took him six or seven years after his return from Egypt to break free of Barnabas and the followers of Jesus.

If this understanding was the most important thing to come out of my meeting with the Guardians, the location and surveillance of Simon the Wizard's sect became an immediate priority for me, although it had been on the list of things that I had wanted to clear up in

Egypt anyway. I had found that although I had the backing of the Governor, there was considerable resistance to the new ideas of policing I had brought with me. Consequently the most fruitful way of working was for me to go to each police district in Alexandria, and in the other towns of Egypt, and actually talk to the officers there; if I found some who were sympathetic I would mine them for information, and try to work on them so that they were impressed with the importance of intelligence work; it was while I was on one of these errands that Vertumnus Niger had found me.

I did gain much information this way and I found many clever young officers who were prepared to listen to me, some of whom have subsequently risen to high office, including two who have commanded legions. However it was Servius who located Simon the Wizard's sect in a town on the Nile south of Alexandria. I had found that I was amply provided with servants and messengers at the official residence, and so I had allowed Servius to depart earlier than planned to begin his training. A month or so later he returned to tell me that the priests he was studying with had launched a law-suit against Simon the Wizard's sect. I found it difficult to work up any enthusiasm for the charges as they were laid out, for it seems to me that these sects, no matter how ancient, or recent, are all on a level anyway, and are all competing with one another to gain converts. As I've said before, no-one joins one of these sects against their will, and if people are stupid enough to be deceived in the first place then they will be deceived by someone else at a later date, even if the law intervenes to save them on this occasion from their choice of religion. The allegations of witchcraft, abduction, extortion and immoral practices were, as far as I could see, completely baseless, and would get nowhere in a court of law unless the complainant had the ear of the judge. And so it turned out, the charges were dropped and nothing of any interest came out in the proceedings, except for one fact, the significance of which escaped me at the time, namely that Simon himself had a few months earlier left Egypt, leaving his deputy in charge of the sect.

Shortly after this I decided that I had spent enough time in Egypt. It was getting close to the summer, and Egypt in the summer is very hot indeed and in that season calentures and other illnesses afflict even the natives. In other provinces which have a warm climate, such as Africa, the Governor and his staff can move to a summer residence in the mountains to escape the heat, but Egypt is very flat, and there are no mountains to escape to. Besides, although I had gathered masses of information about the various sects of Egypt, none was of particular relevance to our work, for the sects that I had uncovered, although

interesting in themselves, for people who are interested in religions, did not seem to have much connection with other religions anywhere else in the Empire. Or rather, they did have connections, in that they were constantly being exported, as we have seen with the Egyptian Gnostic Christian sects like Simon's, but that on their home-soil these religions were unlike religions anywhere else in that they seemed to make no difference to the lives of their adherents, or their lives as citizens: they were largely *non-political* in other words. We had overestimated, I decided, the extent to which they were of significance. This judgement was, incidentally, borne out by the fact that during the Jewish War the Jewish community of Alexandria was not involved to any extent, and remained quiescent. There was, of course, the usual rioting between the Greeks and the Jews, but I believe that any unbiased witness to this would have had to have concluded that, as usual, it was the Greeks who were the aggressors.

The original plan had been for me to stay through the summer and to return in the autumn. However I longed to be away, and I dreaded the prospect of the voyage home. It was with great relief then that Aemilius asked me to accompany him on his journey back to Rome, one that would take him through Palestine and Asia Minor and across Greece on the way back to Italy; if I accompanied him I could arrive back in Rome at much the same time that I planned to arrive back anyway, and it would give me a chance to go and gather information about the various sects and societies in those provinces on the way.

VIII

Aemilius and myself and a train of servants and soldiers soon set out on our odyssey; we left the borders of Egypt and travelled over the desert on the well-known route towards Palestine. In case you are wondering why it was that we did not take a boat from Alexandria to Caesarea as almost anybody else would have done, the answer is that Aemilius, as I said, was very interested in plants and animals and so forth, and so wanted to travel overland as much as possible. I, for my part, was much relieved at not having to travel by ship, and trotted along on my horse quite contentedly.

The days were excessively hot, and so we would rise before dawn and ride till mid-morning, then camp and put up awnings to sit under and doze until the heat of the day began to abate, and then travel again until nightfall. I was quite content just to see the desert country, the distant mountains and the more conspicuous animals, such as antelopes, a very swift-footed grazing animal, and ostriches, but Aemilius insisted on chasing after every animal and bird we saw, and shooting at them with a little bow he had. If he hit anything and captured it he would hand the carcass to one servant of his, whose job it was to skin the animals in the evenings when we had stopped, and cure the skin over a smoky fire. The smell from this was quite disgusting, and in the very great heat the process was not very successful and even the cured skins were soon stinking like anything. Moreover Aemilius was always galloping off after antelopes or ostriches, which was very disconcerting, as he could easily have been thrown from his horse and been injured, or have injured his horse, or become separated from us in a country, so we were told, which contained bandits and revolutionaries. And thank goodness he never succeeded in capturing an antelope or an ostrich, to make us suffer the stench of that. Nevertheless he had a mania for these things and was always talking about how he had discovered another ten species of bird not found in Aristotle, or this or that author. I advised him to go and talk to Aristophanes when we returned to Rome, who, I told him, would be delighted to hear of Aristotle's inaccuracies.

As we got nearer to Palestine proper we were told several times by the guards at guard-posts and the soldiers at the various garrisons that the country was not safe and that we should wait and join up with another column of soldiers if we wanted to proceed. By the time we arrived at Caesarea we had seen numerous signs of the disturbances in the province, burnt-out buildings and guard posts, anti-Roman slogans painted on walls, the surly looks of the populace and so forth, and once, we had come upon a party of soldiers fighting with a mob in a little market town. Therefore we decided that we would wait at Caesarea until a column set out for the north, and travel with it until we passed out of Palestine. This suited Aemilius as here the countryside was fully cultivated and there was less opportunity for him to indulge his zoological interests. As for myself I was disappointed not to be able to visit Jerusalem, but on the other hand there was no real mystery about any of the Jewish sects at this time and I knew that Lollius's network of agents, such as it was, was already operating in Judah

In the event we had to wait a week or so, and so I volunteered to help out with the military organisation in Caesarea. At this time the town, though a predominantly Greek one, was nonetheless afflicted with violence and lawlessness no less troublesome than anywhere in Judah. One day a most amusing and perplexing incident happened. I had gone with a party of soldiers to relieve a guard-post in the outskirts of the city, but when we were half way to our destination a runner caught up with us with an order for the troops to return to headquarters to deal with some disturbance that had broken out nearby. I volunteered myself to go on alone to the guard-post to tell them why they could not be relieved. With hindsight this was a very foolish thing to do, and I don't know why I did it, or why some of the soldiers, or the runner, didn't tell me I was being so foolish.

Nevertheless I set off and soon realised I was lost. Moreover, whereas the suburbs we had been marching through had seemed to be friendly and quiet, I soon began to get the feeling I was moving into hostile territory. I was armed of course, but a sword is little use against an angry mob. I was getting quite worried by this stage, and looked for someone to ask directions from. I approached a short figure, who was hurrying along the side of the street, and stopped him. Immediately I realised, by his dress, that he was an Jew of the most fundamentalist kind; he was a little, rather ugly, old man with red hair, as many of the Jews have. To my surprise he smiled at me and greeted me in a manner that was not hostile. Reflecting that some Jews are pacific I asked him directions in Greek and he gave me a few

simple directions promptly, in the same language, and then smiled again and went on his way.

Thinking myself lucky to have met a reasonable Jew I strode quickly down the streets he had told me to take, but soon began to realise that something was wrong, for I seemed to be going deeper into the poorer suburbs when I rounded a corner and heard a women cry out:

'Oh look, girls, here's a nice soldier come to see us!'

Immediately I was surrounded by a crowd of women, some dressed in gaudy finery, some scarcely dressed in anything at all. I had strayed into the prostitutes' quarter of town. I began backing away down the street smiling and making friendly and conciliatory remarks, but I was surrounded on all sides by these harpies, and they began pressing closer and closer, and catching at my cloak and tunic, making ribald remarks and uttering endearments. I was closely pressed and out of the corner of my eye, on either side of the street, I saw several men closing in too, obviously the pimps, and beyond them a crowd gathering. Alarmed, I pulled out my sword, which made the women scream and pull back, and I began pushing my way through them to get out of the street, beating at them with the flat of the sword if they wouldn't move. This tactic succeeded and I managed to get out of the street and away from them and then took to my heels, dashing round several corners before I thought I was safe.

Of course I was now even more lost, but fortunately I came upon a small temple, and I entered it and sought out the priest, a fat Greek, who gave me directions, and I was soon able to find my way to the guard-post. From there I returned to headquarters with an escort.

Now it puzzled me at the time why the Jew should have given me directions to the prostitutes' quarter, when he knew what sort of reception I would get. For, although the women will derive a great deal of trade from our soldiers, it is the custom for them to visit the women at night and in a group. For a single Roman to enter the quarter in the mid-morning was to invite the treatment I received. Yet if he wished harm to me, as a Roman, then he could just as easily have directed me to the zealots' quarter of town, where I would have been promptly murdered. I don't imagine that if I hadn't succeeded in getting away from the women I should have come to much harm, but I would probably have been held captive until I could provide a ransom, the pimps and prostitutes counting on the shame of being found in that quarter being enough to make me keep quiet about the incident; I heard, subsequent to this, of a similar episode in Egypt involving a young officer of good family.

It was only some months later that I realised the point of the joke that this Jew had played on me. As a Roman I was, in Jewish eyes, an idolater, and, as I have already mentioned, to the Jewish mind all sins are metaphorically sexual transgressions. Therefore the natural home for an idolater is the stews. There is probably some text in the Jewish scriptures that could be produced to substantiate this equation, but I can't be bothered to find it; I'm sure that there is one if one were to look hard enough, probably along the lines of:

From the dens of iniquity have our enemies mustered,
And to their dens shall the Lord return them again.

From Caesarea we travelled north along the coastal road, making for Antioch. Although we soon passed out of Palestine the country was still troubled by unrest and the reason for this is that in all the towns of the whole region the Jews were fomenting revolution, and this caused, amongst other things, a general sort of lawlessness, so that many others took advantage of what the Jews were doing to become bandits and outlaws. Nevertheless we felt safer than we had done in Palestine, and the fact that the cultivation of the land was not so intense meant that Aemilius, who by the by had reluctantly had to abandon his collection of animal skins, on account of their smell and their putrid state, could now resume his hunting.

When we arrived at Antioch I had hoped to be able to learn of Peter, the disciple of Jesus and one of the Twelve, and I was, as we neared the city, debating whether to have him arrested so that I could question him. However, to my intense disappointment I learnt that he had been killed a few weeks before. What had happened was that he had been perhaps the most prominent member of the Jewish community in Antioch, and their most eloquent speaker and inspiring leader. He spoke always of the need to trust in God, not in the efforts of men, but, of course, even those Jewish leaders who advocated violence spoke in such terms, as not even the most religious Jew believed that God would come and free his people without some effort on their part. Consequently Peter was seen as one who was, if not a part of the militant Jewish cause, at least sympathetic to it, and his public pronouncements were seen as aiding it. Thus the chief of police in Antioch saw that it would be useful to get rid of him, and he was killed by a party of assassins brought in from elsewhere as he left the synagogue on the Sabbath.

I was, as I said, very disappointed to hear this, though probably if I had been the chief of police I might have done the very same thing. I was disappointed for two reasons, the first is that it gave me sorrow at the time, and it still saddens me that we were fighting the

Jews at all. They are a queer people, but I believe that of all the people of the world that we know they are most like us Romans, and it is a lasting shame that we never recognised this and formed an alliance with them. For of all people only the Jews and the Romans know how to keep their word and can be relied on, unlike the apathetic Egyptians, or the treacherous and childish Greeks, or the stupid and brutal Germans. If we had recognised this, and if Pompey, say, or Caesar, had formed an alliance with the Jews, given them their own king and dominion over the surrounding lands, we would have had peace and security in that quarter, never had to worry about Parthia, and could have devoted all our military strength to fighting the Germans, or fully subduing the islands of Britain and Ireland.

The second reason was this: Peter had been the right-hand man of Jesus in his public career, and since then had been in constant touch with him. All the religious innovations that had happened since, such as Paul's heresy, and the interest that various Gnostic churches had developed in him, though quite contrary to the Jewish meaning of his career, had been dependent on his life. And yet all this had happened some thirty years before I ever began to investigate these matters, and sometimes I felt that all the principal actors in the drama were slipping away, and that the whole story was becoming a myth. I had never met anyone who had met Jesus, much less Jesus himself, and with the death of Peter another possible link with his master had been broken.

I should also say that the death of Peter had an important effect on how knowledge of the life and teaching of Jesus was transmitted by his followers, but I shall enlarge on this at a more logical point in the story.

Although Peter had gone I was still interested in finding out what had happened to the various sects in Asia Minor, and fortunately I found a very intelligent young man working for the police in Antioch who, quite independently of anything that Lollius had been doing in Rome, had begun to investigate and use police officers to maintain surveillance of many of these groups. Together he and I compared notes, and launched several further investigations. We gathered much information together, but as most of it was only useful at the time, and as much of it had no bearing on either Paul or the Jewish followers of Jesus, I will summarise our findings which are of relevance to these matters briefly.

I mentioned earlier that while Paul was in captivity in Caesarea and at Rome his correspondence was intercepted, and one noteworthy thing was that for the period before his imprisonment we had many letters, but that after his imprisonment the number dropped off quickly. I had been puzzled by this, but my new colleague explained to me why this was.

In Asia and Greece both the Gnostic and the Jewish churches began to take over Paul's churches very quickly. This was because the suasion that Paul exercised evidently diminished with his absence. I have quoted passages from his letters previously which show that he was not at all shy about broadcasting his egregiousness in his letters, and I guess that unless one was under the direct influence of such a man these kinds of letters would quickly weaken, rather than maintain allegiance. Thus the Gnostics were easily able to seduce some congregations away by saying: 'Look, this Paul learnt everything he knows from us, and, frankly, he's a bit light-fingered. Also we have secret knowledge that he was never privy to. Why not let us tell you everything and let us convert you to the True Faith, which Paul could only allude to as a possibility.'

Nor on the other hand is it surprising that the Jewish followers of Jesus were able to convert many of the congregations. In the first place Judaism itself had become much more attractive in the decade preceding Paul's imprisonment, as many had seen Jewish militancy growing and had begun to suspect that a Jewish uprising might displace the Romans from their rule over the eastern Mediterranean area, and replace it with a Jewish empire. Therefore many people began to consider that a timely conversion would be politic. Moreover the Jewish followers of Jesus had begun to become less averse to attempting to make conversions amongst Greek Jews and even Gentiles. I suspect that Peter's influence was particularly important in this regard. Thus parties of the followers of Jesus would set out, armed with certificates of authenticity from the Jerusalem church, and say to the Pauline churches: 'This Paul taught you the importance of the life of Jesus, but let us explain the real meaning of his life, and let us induct you into the Jewish religion, for you already follow many of our customs, such as observing the Sabbath, having a Sabbath service and so forth, and you already use our scriptures in your religion.' And thus many converts had been made by both sides, and few, if any, of Paul's followers remained faithful to his faith.

This was the most important fact that we found out, that Paul's empire had virtually withered away, and we did also uncover various other facts about Paul's career, and about his family background in Tarsus, but I have already inserted these silently where necessary in the narrative.

My stay at Antioch was, however, cut short by a message from Rome, from Lollius, which had followed me from Egypt. It asked me to return to Rome at once, as Lollius had suffered a broken leg in an expedition he had undertaken and was laid up and unable to deal with any work. I was needed immediately, so, overcoming my dislike of the sea, I travelled

quickly to the naval base at Tyre and got on to a fast ship travelling back to Italy. Fortunately the haste of the journey prevented my becoming completely incapacitated, and within ten days I was at Brindisium. And on the twelfth day after leaving Asia I entered Rome.

It was by now autumn and a couple of months since Lollius had sent his message off. When I returned to the palace and sought news of him I found him in person, hobbling around with stick and almost cured. The fracture had been a nice clean one and his life had never been in danger, nor fortunately had any emergency occurred while he had been bed-ridden, so that Lollius, once he knew the reason why I had not returned sooner, viz that I already left Egypt when his message arrived, was not angry, and was indeed rather sorry to have taken me away from somewhere where I could have done useful work.

However, I soon discovered that although nothing significant had transpired in Lollius's department, something of the greatest importance had happened in mine. Scarcely three days after I had left for Egypt, and the day after Lollius had departed Rome on business, Paul had left Rome!

This news startled me, and also unnerved me. For here was a man who had arrived in Rome, rented a house and never left it for two years, suddenly quitting it and fleeing Rome. Moreover here was someone who evidently had access to the most secret details of the movements of the people who were supposed to be keeping a watch over him.

Our agents, though they had not foreseen Paul's departure had, after the event, found out that he had taken ship at Ostia bound for Spain, but which port in Spain we could not find out, for it is the custom of the ships that leave for Spain to sail across to Spain and cruise down the coast stopping at every port, before returning via Africa.

Now it will occur to my readers to ask why it is that Paul's flight occasioned me such dismay. For would it not have been easy for me to send out word to have Paul arrested and sent back to Rome in chains? Well, no. For you must understand that the Empire-wide network of agents and information that we now have was assembled by Lollius and his successors, helped by various others, including myself, over the next decade, initially in response to the Jewish War. At the time I am writing of some provinces, such as Spain, yielded as little useful information to us as though they been outside the Empire, and Egypt was another case in point. As far as finding Paul in Spain was concerned I might just as well have set about finding him in Germany, or China.

But then I could have, had I had sufficient cause, followed him there myself with some agents, and forced the local authorities there to help us to search for him. And this is

initially what I had decided to do. But on sending over to the Public Prosecutor's office for a copy of the charges against Paul I received the reply that no such document could be found. When I went to Lollius and asked him what this meant, he said:

'The Public Prosecutor's office is so corrupt that people often go in there thinking that it's the Fish Market. If you haven't got some notable determined to prosecute you, or if it isn't a matter that the police or us or other security people are pressing, then the price for getting the files lost is very low. And this case would have been even cheaper, because, as you told me, there was no submission from the complainants, and because it all happened so long ago.'

So that was that, Paul had escaped the charges laid against him, and had taken off into a province far from Rome where it would be difficult to find him, and where, in any case, there were fewer grounds for proceeding against him as there were before. I was rather despondent at this, for it seemed as though Paul had completely outwitted us, and although there were many other matters to occupy me in my position, I had come to see Paul and his affairs as one of the few intriguing matters that were outstanding.

However I was only to be despondent for a few days, for then an extraordinarily lucky thing happened. I was sitting in my office looking over some papers one afternoon when a soldier entered and said:

'There's a Greek to see you, sir, says his name is Timothy and you'll know him.'

And sure enough when I had said I would see him, hardly able to believe my luck, the soldier showed in the same tall, thin Greek who had introduced Paul's proselytising meeting that Lollius and I had attended nearly a year earlier. I motioned for the soldier to leave and said to Timothy:

'So your master left you behind when he fled, eh? That wasn't very nice of him was it?'

A look of intense annoyance passed over the Greek's face and I guessed that I had struck on exactly the motive which had prompted Timothy to come to us.

'Yes, he left without telling me, having previously said that he had abandoned the idea of travelling to Spain.'

'So he had been planning it for some time?'

'Ever since he had arrived in Rome he knew that he could get the charges against him dropped, but at first he couldn't decide whether to go back to Asia Minor, or to go on to Spain.'

'But he decided on Spain at last because it was fresh territory, not many Jews to get in his way, and because most of his churches had turned away from him?' I hazarded.

Timothy nodded.

'But why,' I asked, 'Did you oppose his plans, and more importantly why have you come to us?'

'I have come to see that Paul is not an inspired man, and that the faith he preaches is designed to magnify himself, not God... I have come to you because I would like to tell you everything I know about my former master, and in return I should like you to promise to release me and give me passage back to my birthplace, for I have no money and no means of subsistence.'

'Very well, if you answer all the questions I put to you as honestly and as fully as you can, I give you my word that within a week you will be on a boat heading back towards Asia Minor.'

I said, and with that I called for a secretary and began to question the man.

Timothy was interviewed by me that afternoon, and for some time the next day, and the day after that. He spoke confidently and without hesitation during this time, and I judged that he was holding nothing back. It seems that Paul had recruited him to his service nearly fourteen years earlier, at the beginning of his first independent missionary journey, from the town of Lystra, and that he had been his most faithful follower and confidant ever since. He spoke of how being under the spell of Paul was like that of being in love, and on suddenly finding that Paul had left Rome without him, because he would not countenance his plans, felt like being suddenly jilted by a lover. He spoke also of the effect of Paul's oratory, and how overwhelming it was, and how he had felt, while under its influence, that he really was in touch with the True Faith.

His narrative of Paul's career did not differ in any great detail from that which I have given already in earlier chapters, though I was able to tell him a few things about the earlier career of Paul that he had evidently not told to his disciple, such as his sojourn in Egypt. However Timothy was able to tell me the reason for his disagreement and break with his master, which also enlightened me further as to Paul's motives. It seems that during the whole time that Paul was in Rome he had been receiving messages from his former associate Simon the Wizard. These messages, which became increasing persuasive to Paul as he saw his churches deserting him in Asia Minor, were to the effect that as Paul's empire in the east appeared to be deserting him why did the two of them not get together again and try to carve out a new empire in the west. Timothy had heard of this man and disapproved violently of him and his methods and doctrines; he believed instead that Paul should leave Rome and

return to fight over the churches in Asia Minor. But Paul, weary perhaps of that fight, was all for giving the Roman church over to Simon and trying his luck in Spain.

This resolve was cemented when Simon himself appeared in Rome, a few months before I left for Egypt. But Paul, seeing Timothy's opinion could not be overcome, pretended to him that he had abandoned the plan. Then one morning Timothy awoke to find the house he shared with Paul and his other associates deserted and everything in it gone.

It was a marvel to me how so much could go on without our suspecting it. We had had Paul and his followers under close scrutiny for several years and we had never suspected this plan; nor had we suspected the presence in Rome of Simon and nor had we picked up that Simon had taken over Paul's former congregations. Equally disturbing was the news that Paul had spies inside this very department, who could give him news of our every movement. All this was a signal for us to become more vigilant.

Towards the end of my questioning I began to sense that Timothy was holding something back. I questioned him about this, saying:

'There is another reason why you feel so bitter about Paul, isn't there? And if I can guess correctly I would say that something happened very early on in your association that should have told you to avoid this man like the plague. But you ignored it at the time? Is that right?'

Timothy jumped when I said this and admitted that that was exactly what had happened. He said that during Paul's first journey they had arrived at Mysia³⁹ and there he had ventured out from the inn that they were staying at to buy some food. On his return he was told by another follower of Paul that Paul was having a conference with an important Jew, who had sought him out, and that he was not to be disturbed. Timothy had gone up to a room they were using as their sleeping quarters to rest, but this room was directly over the main room of the inn, where Paul and the Jew were speaking. Timothy, as he lay on the mattress, could not help but overhear their voices, and as he listened it became apparent that this Jew was Jesus, for he was taxing Paul with having taken Roman citizenship, with neglecting the Jews, preaching blasphemy and using his name as the principal instrument of this blasphemy. To this charge Paul was returning mild and equivocal answers, which however did not deceive Jesus, but infuriated him even more. Finally Jesus said:

'I am poor and weak, and without followers, and I cannot compel you to desist from preaching lies in my name. I see that you are scourge and an affliction sent to follow me by God, for my

³⁹ cf Acts 16 6-10.

sins, yet once, on the road to Damascus, you recognised my kingship and swore obedience to me. Will you now obey an order that I give you?

'Yes, my Lord, I will,' replied the would-be apostle.

'Turn from the course you intend to take and cross into Greece. The sons of Japheth delight in lies and it is only right you should convert them to your faith.'

Paul agreed to this, and indeed, as we know, he did then turn to Greece. I should also say that Japheth is the figure from Jewish scripture whom the Jews hold to have been the ancestor of the Greeks. Anyway, as Timothy narrated it, the interview finished soon after this, and Jesus uttered this parting shot:

'Saul,' for he still called him by his Jewish name, 'do you know what happened to your namesake, who once sworn allegiance to David the King, but afterwards sought his life again?'

'Yes, my Lord, surrounded by his enemies, he took his own life, rather than fall into their hands.'

'So will your life end.'

This account, though extraordinary, contained nothing that could lead me to believe that it did not take place. Indeed we had long suspected that Jesus was present in Rome during the Jewish riots in Claudius's reign that led to the expulsion of the Jews from Rome; and this incident, as far as one could judge, occurred a few months afterwards, when Jesus would have been travelling back towards Palestine. As I mentioned before, shortly after this in Greece Paul met the Jew Aquila, who had likewise just come from Rome.

I asked Timothy how he had reacted to this interview and he said that he had been stunned and for three days was so confused that he could hardly speak. Nevertheless he knew that it would be unwise to let Paul or anyone know that he had overheard the interview, and so he asked Paul in a roundabout way a few days after whether there was not something in the Jewish charge that he was preaching blasphemies. Paul had not reacted angrily to this, but insisted that the Jews were very dull-minded and literal when it came to the Law, but that he, that is Paul, had learnt from the Law what the Law did not know. Timothy persisted in his questioning, asking whether it was not true that Jesus himself would not approve of the teaching that Paul carried out in his name. Paul smiled at this and replied that God had sent his Son to earth and given him the mortal body and mind of man, so that it could well be that Jesus would not, as yet, understand the true nature of his election, and indeed his public career in Palestine had ended in failure. But, he continued, that as the last days approached Jesus would come to understand his role more and more, and that he, that is Paul, was an

agent of God in this, preaching the truth of Jesus's nature, when even he himself did not understand it.

This answer mollified Timothy and the eloquence that Paul demonstrated after this, which seemed to be twice that which he had shown before, also went some way towards effacing the episode from his mind, but the memory of it continued with him and had given him moments of doubt from time to time, until, when he found himself abandoned by Paul, it had returned to reproach him. I asked him what he thought now, and he replied:

'My parents are Greek-Jews, and I believe now that I have been seduced away from my God-given religion, that is Judaism, and I now intend to return to the law of the Jews.'

And so we concluded the interview, and Timothy signed the record of his questioning and we sent him off back to Lystra. However this young man did not stay there for long, but no sooner had he been welcomed back into the fold by the Jews than he was sent back to Ephesus by the Jews to convert those remaining adherents of Paul. And this he did, until, just before the Jewish War he had made himself so conspicuous as a member of the Jewish community that he was murdered by a mob of Greeks.

The information that Timothy gave us was most valuable, particularly in regard to Paul's current plans and state of mind, which, to judge by the way that he abandoned his principal disciple, must have been fairly desperate. The information that Timothy had given us about the second meeting between Jesus and Paul was interesting, perhaps most interesting as an exemplification of Paul's shamelessness, though this could have been predicted from the other information we had about him. However the most interesting thing that Timothy told us was rather personal to me. He vouchsafed it to me at the very end of the interview, after he had signed his deposition, when I suddenly remembered a question I wanted to ask him:

'By the way,' I said, 'one thing I've noticed is that we have lots of information about this Jesus, but we don't have a good description. Can you tell me what he looks like? Did you see him at Mysia?'

'Yes I did,' replied Timothy, 'I went over to the window when Jesus left and looked down on the courtyard. He was walking away from the door with one or two attendants and looked back, and I saw him distinctly. He is short, rather ugly and has red hair and a red beard, and he limps.'

I reeled at this, for it suddenly occurred to me that the Jew who misdirected me at Caesarea might have been this Jesus, who would by then have been an old man. I can't decide, even

now, whether it was him or not, for there must be any number of short, red-haired and ugly Jews, and many of them must be fundamentalist ones, and any number of those might have decided to send me to the stews as a joke. But I like to think that I did meet this Jesus, just once at any rate.

IX

So, with Paul's flight to Spain I was immediately deprived of the most interesting object of my investigation. Not, of course, that I was idle: for one thing as the inevitable outbreak of the Jewish War drew near there was more and more work to be done by Lollius, and I helped him in this. Moreover I still had to act as the unofficial licenser of religions in the capital. Also in my own affairs this was the time that I began to turn my estates in the south of Italy over to olive production, to supply the needs of the capital in bulk, whereas before they had been under mixed cultivation supplying the local markets, and this was something that was not done overnight.

We heard from time to time of Paul's exploits in Spain. He was not very successful there, I suppose for two reasons. Unlike the eastern Mediterranean, Spain has few cities, and a small urban population. Moreover although there are few Jews there, which was an advantage from Paul's point of view, there were only a few more Greeks, and as it was Greek in which Paul's rhetoric was delivered, then he had few opportunities to impress anyone with it. Finally he also seems to have found that although it was an advantage that there were no Jews to hinder his proselytising, this also meant there were very few potential converts, as it was in the circle of the Greek-Jews that he had had his greatest success in the past.

In Rome Simon the Wizard looked after Paul's congregations, or at least, those that remained faithful. We arrested him almost immediately we found him and questioned him thoroughly, though we could not use torture as he too, at some point, had managed to acquire citizenship. Anyway, he told us nothing that we didn't already know, and we could find no charges to stick. We sent to Egypt, but the charges that had been raised there had also been dropped, and there were no other charges pending. So we released him, hoping that he would do something unwise and illegal so we could prosecute him. But Paul seemed to have given him good lessons in discretion, for he behaved almost exactly like Paul, that is he never performed elaborate magical tricks or illusions, never, as far as we could tell, cheated his followers, and never tried to convert citizens. The doctrines he preached were, as far as we

could tell, more or less the same as those of Paul, so evidently he modified his own doctrines to suit his new position.

Thus the time passed, two years in fact since I had journeyed to Egypt, with little in the way of outstanding events, and then occurred perhaps the most dramatic event to happen in Rome, certainly in my life-time, viz the Great Fire. As this is a vital part of the narrative, indeed in many ways the turning point, I cannot omit it. But there is also the point that although everyone who was an adult at the time knows that there was a fire at this time which destroyed a good part of the city, it is also the case that few of my readers will have experienced the event as it occurred when the summer heat first becomes oppressive, in early June, at a time when those who can afford to be out of Rome are in the countryside, avoiding the heat and the diseases that are consequent on this heat. So it may be interesting to many to read my description of what it was like to have witnessed the fire.

The days before the fire were very hot and dry, though I suppose that if the fire had not broken out at that time no would have remembered them as being any hotter than usual June days. There was also a strong, dry south-westerly wind. Both Lollius and myself had been working during the previous few days at the palace, having returned from southern Gaul a few days before that. We were planning to leave for Greece and Asia Minor the week after. We had worked late, and when I arrived home I had a snack and went straight to bed. I am a very heavy sleeper and so I wasn't roused until Milo, who had been the night-watchman that night, had been pummelling me for several minutes, shouting:

'Master, master, there's a great fire, wake up.'

After I had roused myself, I pulled on some clothes, and, having made sure that the fire was not in our street, I climbed up to the attics, where Milo was waking up the other servants, and squeezed through a little trap-door on to the roof. From there was a good view of the whole city, and, looking north-east, I saw that a large part of the centre of the city was already ablaze, with great crackling sheets of flame shooting up into the air, illuminating the scene in orange light. At once I saw that we were quite safe, as the wind was blowing from us towards the fire, so the path it would follow would take it away from us.

My next thought was the palace, and the records in our section. I ran down to my room and snatched up my military cloak and sword, and, giving orders that everyone was to stay put, or, if the fire were to swing around, to evacuate the house and to meet me out on the highway at the fourteenth milestone, I took Milo with me and set off in the direction of the palace. At first we walked north through streets completely unaffected by the fire, yet

here, illuminated strangely by the fire, with long shadows thrown everyway, we saw people behaving strangely: there were people standing looking towards the fire, or wandering around, seemingly half-crazed, others were arguing, or packing up their possessions to leave. As we entered areas which were more affected, where the houses and pavements were covered in soot, and where little fires, started by sparks blown by the wind, were springing up, we saw looters breaking into houses, and the householders and police fighting with them, we found several dead bodies, whether looters or citizens, we couldn't tell. Nearer the fire still we saw people trying to save their houses or running distractedly, seeking the help of passers-by to save their possessions, or their families. Finally right near to the actual flames we saw charred corpses, bodies horribly burnt and contorted in their last agony, and other bodies, not burnt, but dead none the less, and people still alive lying on the ground, gasping for air, bloody froth on their lips.

My friend Aemilius tells me that there is a theory that the air we breathe contains several principles, including one *vital principle*, as he terms it, which is the one we require to sustain life. Now fire, it is thought, consumes this vital principle, so that anyone standing near a great fire such as this, deprived of the vital principle, grows weak and faint, or acts dementedly and with no thought for his own safety. Certainly this theory, coupled with the general panic that affects most people when confronted with a spectacle of terror and danger, may explain much of the strange behaviour that we witnessed that night.

We, at length, as I said, reached the tail of the fire. We then turned and followed along the rear of the fire until we came to the southern gate of the palace. We saw at once that much of the palace had already had the fire through it and was completely burnt out. Just at the gate I saw a man sitting on a stone with his head in his hands. Suddenly I recognised Lollius and he looked up and cried out:

'Oh Calpurnius, Calpurnius, look, look, Aristophanes was in there, oh poor Aristophanes, I've sent someone to look for him, I hope he got out.'

To say that I was astonished at finding Lollius sitting there wailing like a woman would be an understatement. I knew that Aristophanes had a small apartment within the palace, and that he would have been there, but my thoughts had rather been of the records that we had amassed. After a moment a soldier returned and saluted Lollius, saying:

'I'm sorry, sir, but the firefighters say that that part of the palace went up very quickly and no-one inside would have got out alive.'

Lollius nodded glumly and dismissed the soldier, then he turned to me and with tears in his eyes said:

'Oh poor Aristophanes, he was my dear friend...'

I didn't like to say to Lollius that Aristophanes wasn't his friend, he was just a Greek scholar who, if he hadn't got the job of librarian here, would have starved in the gutter, or had to return to Greece and become a school-teacher in the country, and who always hated the Greek jokes that Lollius was fond of telling. But I guessed that Lollius was perhaps affected by the fire, or maybe was just in shock, and had latched on to the unfortunate death of Aristophanes to give vent to his feelings about the fire and the sudden destruction that had seemed to come upon Rome.

As there was no possibility of saving any of our materials I saw little point in hanging about, getting in the way of the firefighters. So I instructed Milo to stay with Lollius and to escort him back to his house, which, I knew, was in an area that would have been safe from the fire. I then left, intending to wander about in the streets and observe the effects of the fire some more. For my own part a strange feeling had come over me. I felt very detached, and even elated. I think the reason was this: that normally we live our lives out, and during our lives everything that happens may be unexpected, or unlucky, but is not new or different. We see our family and friends go about their business, marry, have children, travel, go on campaigns, die or be killed, and yet this is what people do and always have done. In the wider world we see wars happen and victors and losers emerge, in politics we see regimes come and go, favourites be elevated and pass from favour, show-trials and repression start, but then these pass, until another round of the same thing occurs. And always things go on, the Empire survives, Rome survives. But this event, the Great Fire, was so unexpected and so awesome, that I was privileged, to be able to grasp how things *do* change over the long term. Of course the city was rebuilt quite quickly, but we didn't know that at the time, and it could well have been that as I was walking through the streets I could have been present at the death-throes of this mighty city, I could have been a conqueror treading the streets and witnessing my own handiwork, like the Greeks at the taking of Troy. Then I understood that one day, if not now, Rome would fall to a conqueror, and that perhaps some of the matters I was dealing with, the new sects and religions, might have a part to play in that future drama.

I wandered the streets for some time, marvelling at the grotesque theatre I was witnessing. Then I returned home to a short and fitful sleep, full of dreams in which what I had seen that night was magnified and distorted into even more bizarre sights. However I

did not have long to enjoy this sleep as, shortly after dawn, I was roused by a thunderous knocking on the door. When I went down in person to see who was calling I found a detachment of guards, an official litter and Milo and Lollius. Lollius explained that we were to attend the Emperor immediately, and that I was not to worry, as he had spent the night making enquiries and knew exactly what to say. But as I was climbing into the litter Milo whispered to me:

‘He’s been raving and babbling all night, and asking the most peculiar questions of every passer-by; I’d watch him if I were you.’

As we proceeded north Lollius was indeed babbling and speaking strangely to me, but I paid little attention to what he said because I was fascinated to watch out of the window the spectacle of the burnt city. Perhaps even more than the night sights I had seen the sight of the city in daylight, with block after block reduced to rubble and ashes, was one that will remain with me always. Nor was the Fire yet totally extinguished, and we passed several places where there were isolated fires still burning. Indeed I heard that the last of these was not put out until five days later. After a while I shouted to one of the guards to ask him where we were going and it turned out that we were heading to a villa of one of the leading senators, where the Emperor had established his temporary headquarters. This meant a long journey north, right through the most damaged parts of the city.

At length, however, we began to move through streets which were not badly damaged, and then these opened out into the gardens of very large villas. At length our party turned into one of the largest of these, and we got down from our litter and entered a grand entrance-hall. We were quickly waved through various ante-rooms and straight into the audience room. Here was a bustle of courtiers and functionaries. I smiled when I saw that the Emperor’s freedmen and other toadies and sycophants were looking very glum—obviously they had had great difficulty in humouring and flattering the Emperor into a mood in which he was fit to give orders. On the other hand the generals and other military men in attendance were secretly smirking and obviously not at all taken aback by the extent of the calamity. I know the mentality well, they were thinking: ‘At last something bad has happened to these spineless civilians; now perhaps we’ll get more recognition for the dangers we encounter in our job,’ or something along those lines.

The Emperor himself⁴⁰ was in a very bad mood, it was plain to see. He was sitting at a desk issuing orders in petulant tones, but when he saw our party approach he immediately looked up and barked:

‘Ah, Lollius Tubero and Calpurnius Fronto, my two chief intelligence officers. Well, I’m pleased that you managed to predict this fire for me, and I’m even more pleased that you managed to prevent it for me. After all, if it had got away half the city could have been burned.’

Lollius motioned me to remain behind him and stepped forward. I myself was completely unperturbed by the Emperor’s mood, as I was conscious that there was no dereliction of duty of our part. But I was worried that Lollius, who was normally the most skilful diplomat, might say something unwise, and inflame the imperial rage even further.

‘I have been making investigations, Caesar, since the fire first broke out and I am convinced that it was no enemy of the Empire who started it, but simply an accident.’

‘An accident,’ screamed the Emperor, ‘half my capital is burnt to the ground and you think it’s an accident.’

‘All the fire-fighters are quite convinced, my Lord,’ Lollius continued, unperturbably, ‘that it was an overturned oil lamp in one part of the wooden buildings south of the Hippodrome that started the fire. This then spread very quickly, on account of the strong wind and the fact that all the timberwork in these buildings was very dry from the hot weather, through the Hippodrome and over the Palatine into the Palace, and also north, towards the Forum...’

‘Enough, enough, I have heard enough,’ screamed the Emperor, rising from his seat and advancing towards Lollius. Finally he arrived face to face with Lollius, or rather his face was facing Lollius’s chest, as the Emperor was of medium height but Lollius was so much taller. Nonetheless the Emperor continued in the same hysterical tones:

‘An accident you think? I’ll tell you who did it, it was the Jews, it has to be the Jews, they’ve always been our enemies, and they’ve been making trouble for us for years. It must be them.... half my capital gone, what are you going to do about it? why didn’t you find these filthy rascals and stop them from setting light to the city. I have dozens of witnesses who say they saw masked men setting fire to buildings all over the city last night. Why weren’t you out there?’

⁴⁰ ie Nero.

'My Lord,' said Lollius, 'if we had had more funds made available to us then we could have patrols out every night looking for arsonists....'

This was too much for me, and I strode forward and inserted myself between Lollius and his angry sovereign and said:

'I'm sorry, Caesar, that Lollius is returning you such distracted and untoward answers, but the fact is that we lost a colleague in the fire, and the event itself has been such a shock to us. There is every reason to believe that it was militant Jewish nationalists who set fire to the Hippodrome. We regret that we were not able to stop them from starting the fire in the first place, but we should like to go to work to round up as many of the militants as we can, everywhere in the Empire, and make sure that such an outrage can never occur in the future.'

At my speech the Emperor began to be mollified and at its conclusion he said:

'Well Lollius, it seems that you have a sensible lieutenant, even if we can't say much for your own ideas. Calpurnius, I now appoint you Chief of the Intelligence Section, and Lollius will be demoted to your deputy. Now hurry up and find whoever was responsible, and start arresting those Jews.'

With that we made our obeisances and left, relieved to have escaped lightly. It might be thought that my actions were cowardly and calculating, and that I used the opportunity to supplant my senior, by suggesting an unwise course of action. But Lollius was so distracted that he would have got us both thrown into prison if I hadn't intervened. Moreover, although it was obvious that the Fire was simply an accident, not the work of Jews, or anyone else, except the careless groom, who, one hopes, perished in the stables, the Emperor had obviously had planted in his mind the idea that it was the Jews. So it was inevitable that a major crack-down on the Jews was going to start, and I reckoned that it was better that we directed it, rather than the bone-headed generals who had probably suggested the Jews as culprits to Nero in the first place.

The first of the two orders that Nero gave turned out to be of no effect anyway. In the first place Lollius, once recovered from his shock over the Fire, in a day or two, continued to act in exactly the same way that he had always done, and certainly didn't take any orders from me—not that I tried to issue any. We also found that someone at the time had forgotten to record Nero's order and send an order into the Treasury to alter Lollius's pay, so he continued to be paid exactly as before. The only slight change in our practice that Lollius's demotion entailed was that we took care henceforth that I signed anything that had to go in to a higher authority.

As to the order to begin rounding up the Jews, which, when it was published, was extended to all similar sects: I had hoped that in agreeing to Nero's hysterical demands we might be able to control this process, so that it wouldn't be such a disaster as if the military handled it. However, although we did manage to get a few messages to several Jews we wanted to protect, telling them to go into hiding, we were hampered by the death of Aristophanes, with his administrative skills and enormous memory, and even more so by the loss of our files. We really just had to put our heads together and try to remember which Jews were where, who should be arrested and who shouldn't, and so forth. Also we found that the military had already started to round up people in droves, and it was heartbreaking to arrive at a house to arrest a harmless rabbi, for his own safety, and find that he had been taken away that morning, and was already dead.

Moreover the persecution of the Jews was not just something that happened in Rome, but everywhere in the Empire, and belligerent local commanders grasped the opportunity to deal harshly with the insurgency that had been their bane for the past several years. But of course, as it was done quickly and without thought, and in the usual brutal and clumsy manner, then it did nothing to halt the Jewish insurgency, and indeed, as so many militants got away, it made the outbreak of open warfare inevitable, though the surprising thing is that it took so long to happen.

As to wisdom of this course of action, I can only say that it was a foolish policy, and one which led directly to the Jewish War. We Romans used to be very concerned to make sure that the wars we fought were just, that is they were in self-defence, or consequent upon great provocation. But to attempt to round up such a large number of the Empire's own subjects, even in the face of the constant and provocative insurgency the Jews had demonstrated, was to declare war on the Empire's own subjects, a war that was in no way just. Of course, two years later, when an independent Jewish state was declared and armies appeared in the field against us, then we were right to take similar measures; but the provocation had to come first. Moreover this policy in fact made it much more difficult to counter Jewish insurgency than the methods that Lollius and I would have adopted. And finally as to the charge that it was the Jews who had started the Fire, nothing could be more ridiculous.

Thus in the next few days and weeks Lollius and I had to work swiftly to try to salvage as much of our network of informers and agents as we could—for many of them were being arrested and executed before we could save them. During all this time we were working frantically and travelling around and so, I'm afraid, that I had very little time to devote to my

particular interest, namely Paul's sect. However I was aware that the sect that Paul had left under Simon's tutelage was dispersed at a stroke, and many of its members either executed or forced into hiding. Simon himself suffered an ignominious end, as, when the police came round to his house he tried to climb out of an upstairs window and over the roofs to escape, but instead he slipped and plunged into the street. He was taken up alive, but unconscious, and died that evening without ever regaining consciousness.

However the most dramatic event that happened in these days was the return of Paul from Spain. With very bad timing he had taken ship a week or so before the Fire, and sailed into Ostia the second day after the Fire, the ship not previously having received news of the calamity. He was immediately arrested by the customs, who had had his name ever since he fled from Rome. News was brought me that my 'most-wanted' person was in prison, and I ordered him to be brought up to Rome and brought to our temporary headquarters that very afternoon.

At length he was shown into my office, and I noted at once how he had aged, how he was almost completely bald, how he was even smaller and more bowed, but his expressions were still under his command to the same extent that they were on the day of the meeting we had attended. Before I could say anything, Paul asked:

'Sir, I should like to know why I am under arrest; I am a Roman citizen.'

'We have orders to detain and question any Jew of the Empire, in connection with the Fire of Rome. We have special powers granted us to detain and question even citizens, on this occasion.'

'But I am not a Jew and was not present when the Fire broke out.'

'For many years you claimed to be a Jew; and besides you are the founder of a sect called the 'Christians', who take their inspiration from a Jew who preached rebellion back in Tiberius's reign. And so I think that we are quite right in detaining you.'

Paul suddenly relaxed at this and laughed, and then said:

'Calpurnius Fronto, I know that you have been watching my congregation and movements for the last several years, and that you have taken the trouble to inform yourself about the doctrines of my sect, so you must know that in following Jesus we follow only the spiritual meaning of his life; as for his political career, it was inglorious, was it not, and ended in a debacle.'

'Tell me about the spiritual meaning of Jesus's life.'

‘Certainly, we believe that in Jesus God has sent his Son to earth to foreshadow the salvation of all men if they have faith in him.’

‘But that’s not what the Jewish followers of Jesus believe, is it? They believe that he is the King of Israel; a man inspired by God to liberate the Jewish people from Roman rule and to inaugurate a era of peace and plenty under the direct government of God.’

‘The Jewish followers of Jesus see only the obvious interpretation of Jesus’s life because they are blinded by Sin, and the Law, and are as stubborn and stiff-necked as their sinful ancestors, who went astray from God on many occasions. Unless they repent of their sins and embrace the New Covenant that I preach, God will abandon them.’

‘But I have information that Jesus himself knows of your preaching and opposes it; we have heard, for example, of your interview with him at Mysia.’

Paul’s face dropped momentarily, almost at once he regained his composure:

‘I expect you’ve been talking to Timothy, a proud young man, who believes that only what he believes is true. It’s true that Jesus, on that occasion, did say something of that sort. But it will be God’s crowning mercy when Jesus himself realises the nature of his own being and joins with me in announcing the New Covenant. For anything sent down and lodged in the flesh is weak and ignorant and does not know itself for what it is—namely an aspect of God inhering in the world. But if God sends his Spirit down then this understanding is magically given to the faithful soul....’

‘As to your soul, for example?’ I interjected.

‘God has been gracious to me and frequently granted me illumination, and I thank him for his mercy.’

The afternoon was turning to evening, and I knew I had much to do before the evening was out, so I turned back from the window and said:

‘Paul of Tarsus, what do you want to see happen?’

In saying this I was hoping to dupe him into saying something incriminating, as I knew that if only I were to give his propensity for boasting free rein, then he might stumble into an unwise statement. For by now I knew that a major war with the Jews was imminent, and unavoidable, but these Christians were something else entirely and I had decided that I wanted the head of them out of the way.

‘I want the whole Empire to acknowledge Christ.’

I scribbled this down eagerly, saying:

‘So you want to see the Emperor acknowledge a foreign potentate?’

'God will grant to his faithful sway beyond any imagining; if the Emperor acknowledges Christ then God will give him dominion over the whole of Europe and Africa and Asia for a thousand years. For the Empire itself is part of God's plan, and this will be revealed at the time appointed. Did your poet Virgil not prophesy the birth of a divine child who was to inaugurate an era of peace and plenty?'

I slammed my tablets shut, infuriated at his cleverness.

'Sergeant,' I shouted and after a moment the Sergeant put his head around the door. I gave an angry gesture with my hand which was meant to mean 'Take Paul outside and guard him while I fill in the paperwork'. The Sergeant entered and took Paul by the sleeve and they both walked out. I reached for some paper and wrote out an order to commit Paul to prison and hold him for further questioning. I then walked outside. The Sergeant was sitting at his desk writing a report, but there was no Paul.

'Where's the prisoner?' I asked.

The Sergeant gave me an alarmed look and said:

'Sir, I thought he was to be released; he came out here as cool as a cucumber and said: "You're very lucky, Sergeant, to have such an intelligent and fair-minded superior. But I must be on my way now," and he just walked out as though you'd released him.'

I stared at the Sergeant; for a moment the thought even crossed my mind that he might be a Christian, and had contrived his leader's escape. But I dismissed the thought and put Paul's escape down to his extraordinary presence of mind and effrontery.

'No Sergeant,' I said, 'he is to be held for further questioning.' And I waved the warrant in the unfortunate Sergeant's face.

'We'd better find him then,' I continued and with that we both tore down the stairs and out into the street. At the door to the house I paused, trying to think which way Paul would have gone. South was the logical direction, and so I told the Sergeant to search in that direction. But I thought that Paul might do the illogical thing and walk north into the area of the city that had been burnt.

I chased off in that direction and soon came upon a policeman. I asked him whether he had seen a short, bent, ugly, Jewish-looking fellow going that way, and he said he had and pointed further on down the street. I ordered the policeman to follow me and he came with me. Half a mile further on we met another policeman on guard at the entrance to a street branching off left. We repeated the question and he said:

'Yes someone like that came by only a minute or so ago and tried to turn down this street. I grabbed him and told him that there were unsafe buildings down there, and that the street had been closed. But he didn't appear to understand, so I tried to say it in Greek, but he shook me off and went down there anyway.'

Both the first policeman and myself raced off down the street at this, a little crooked lane lined with the burnt-out brick shells of tall tenement buildings. We were panting and sweating as we came up to a corner, but then I heard a soft soughing noise and felt the ground shaking and instinctively came to a halt and grabbed at the policeman to make him stop too. Suddenly the lane was filled with a vortex of dust and ashes, and as we stepped forward, coughing and choking, to look round the corner a great pile of fire-blackened brick rubble was sliding to a halt across the lane. I already knew what had happened, but I jumped on to the pile and scrambled up it to look over and further down the lane, but there was no one beyond. The policeman and I exchanged looks and he then, without being ordered, began running back up the street to fetch the second policeman and emergency workers.

They all returned within a very short time, and, after an hour and a half's digging, the dusty body of Paul was pulled out from under the rubble.

And so, in a way, the prophecy of Jesus was fulfilled.

X

It might be thought that with the death of its leader this sect that he had founded would disappear. However, as we know, this is not the case, as there are Christians still. But, it is fair to say, though they acknowledge Paul as their founder and inspiration, there are a number of important differences between the sects as they are found now, and the sect as it existed under Paul. And I should like to end this account by detailing these changes, and giving as much information as possible about the Christian sects as they currently exist. However after this time what we learnt of the Christians came in by our agents in dribs and drabs over the years, and there were no more dramatic events of the kind I have narrated in earlier chapters. So before describing these sects as they are now, I should like to mention what happened to myself and to Lollius and what happened to our organisation over the next ten years.

Well, the most important event in this period was the Jewish War, the campaigns in the field against the Jewish armies and the final, protracted siege of Jerusalem, ending in the complete destruction of that city and the Jewish Temple there. However these events are well-known, so I will not narrate them, or make any comment, save that this crisis was the most serious military emergency of the last two generations and taxed the resources of the Empire severely. Also to say that no more savage and bloody a war has ever been fought by two peoples before in the history of the world.

During this period and afterwards Lollius and I were busied in building up our organisation. When I was first recruited by Lollius there were just three of us working in the section, and we employed twenty or so agents, mainly in Rome. During and after the War we had increased our strength to twelve employees and five or six hundred agents in all parts of the Empire and, most importantly, we had been allowed to organise a proper network of regional offices, to coordinate intelligence work away from Rome. The principal reasons for the growth in our section were, firstly, the War itself, and the military's fear that, with so many troops occupied in Palestine, revolts could break out in other parts of the Empire, and

secondly the confidence of the new Emperor⁴¹ in us and in intelligence work in general, as one would expect from so experienced and successful a military commander.⁴²

Nevertheless within a few years of the War ending both Lollius and myself were becoming bored with our work and we both, independently, decided to quit. Lollius, I think, preferred the old days of a limited budget and daring exploits; as for myself I found that my work was becoming very bureaucratic. After all the licensing of religious sects had once been a very minor occupation of the Censors, and only with the vast numbers of religions daily being imported in Rome in this century has it been necessary for someone to work full-time on them. I found that I was working all day, every day on something that had less and less appeal. And besides I had my business interests to attend to.

In the event both Lollius and myself quit the service on the same day. I, as I said, had business affairs to look after and, in due course, also travelled to Britain again, curious to see how the province was changing under Roman rule, and to other parts of the Empire, such as Gaul and Spain. Lollius took off on his travels again too, intending to revisit China. In the event, however, he travelled north of the Parthian Empire, but turned south, with the party he was with, and entered India. He travelled about in that vast and prosperous country, until he came to the southernmost parts, where he took ship and visited the islands to the south and east of Asia, where few Greeks or Romans have ever been. He reports these lands as wonderfully beautiful, mountainous, but fertile, and clothed with dense forests. Here the local people have taken their civilisation from the Indian merchants and other visitors, and cultivate rice, and other crops, and many kinds of trees and shrubs which yield spices. Indeed nature seems to have granted to that area an extraordinary number of such plants.

But not content with this voyage Lollius then took ship with some local traders and sailed yet further south and east until they landed on the north shore of the southern continent, which, as far as I know, no Greek or Roman has ever done before. He tells me that this land is completely different from the islands to the north, being as hot as they are, if not hotter, but very dry and infertile. And indeed the local people do not cultivate the ground, but live by gathering wild plants for food and hunting animals. But these plants and animals are like nothing in the islands to the north either, for the plants and trees are altogether different, and the animals even more peculiar. For example the principal grazing animal goes

⁴¹ ie Vespasian, reigned 69-79 CE.

⁴² Vespasian was a legionary commander in the initial invasion of Britain, and was commanding the legions that were besieging Jerusalem when, in 69 CE, he was proclaimed Emperor by his troops.

about on its hind legs, and progresses by hopping, though they are marvellously swift, and can hop faster than a man can run. There are also many large crocodiles, found in the sea and in the lower reaches of the rivers, and many venomous insects and snakes, but no large, dangerous quadrupeds, such as lions or tigers. The natives are friendly enough and are quite happy to see the traders from the north land arrive to gather a certain type of sea-creature, which they esteem a delicacy, and other things such as berries and medicinal plants.

I believe that this exploit of Lollius's is the most remarkable voyage ever undertaken by a Roman, and, were it not for the fact that he has promised us a detailed account from his own pen, I would enlarge upon it. But my purpose here is another matter.

After the death of Paul and the break-up of his sect we heard no more of the Christians for some years. Nor did the Jewish followers of Jesus fare any better. Their leader in Jerusalem, James, the brother of Jesus, was murdered shortly before the War by the Temple establishment, and the sect, though its members managed to escape from Jerusalem before the siege got under way, declined thereafter. One reason for this was that after the War there was a great sense of disillusionment amongst the Jews. Jerusalem had been besieged, just as their prophetic books had predicted, and yet God had not saved the city, or his people, who had suffered miserably. And so Judaism seemed, at that point, to take a pragmatic turn, with most Jews accepting that because of their sins God still had to punish them some more, and that he would only send the Messiah when it suited him, not when it suited his people.

But shortly after the War ended news also arrived that Jesus himself had died. It seems that during the War Jesus had kept away from the Empire, and had been touring the Jewish communities in Parthia and India, urging repentance. Perhaps his message was made more urgent by the events of the War, or perhaps not; we had no reliable information on his attitude to the War. Anyway, it seems that a little after the War he arrived in a part of northern India called Kashmir, attended by his disciple Thomas and there, after a short illness, he died and was buried. Thomas went on to the south of India, where, a few years after, he too died.

After this very few of the Jewish followers of Jesus remained true to their faith, though, oddly enough, Lollius found, when he was in the south of India, that the Jews of that region, newly converted by Thomas, were fervent in their veneration for him. However, as I have pointed out before, the Jewish followers of Jesus never believed that Jesus was anything other than a highly-inspired man, and so when I say that their faith declined, all that this means is that they ceased to trust that Jesus was the Messiah. He still remained, for the very

few who had known him personally, and those who had been told of him, an inspired teacher and a holy man.

As to the Gnostics, for a time during and after the War all the Gnostic sects which had previously used the name of Jesus began not to, as being an impolitic thing to insist on at the time. The truth is that the Gnostics don't really need Jesus, as their belief is that God, that is the true God, has sent a messenger to convey true Wisdom to mankind, but it doesn't really matter to them who this Messenger is, nor is it axiomatic that there is only one. Thus anyone can figure in their beliefs as this Messenger or Messengers. As I write⁴³ some Gnostic sects are beginning to use the name of Jesus again, and it will be interesting to see whether they manage to convert the rest of the Christians to their beliefs, or vice versa.

As to the Christians themselves, in the time since the death of Paul, up to the present, I have continued to gather information about them, both when I was working for the intelligence section, and afterwards, when my successor was only too happy to pass on further information as and when it arrived. It seems that shortly after the War a sect calling itself Christian had formed in Rome, and that, over the next few years it linked itself to other similar sects in other parts of the Empire, notably Asia Minor and Egypt. However, what its relation to the previous Pauline congregations were we could never determine, for the leaders of the various sects seemed not to have been important in the previous congregations. Nevertheless these groups affected a great veneration for Paul, and, as I said, had various heavily-edited versions of his writings to hand to demonstrate this.

However, one great difference between these Christians, and Paul's followers is that they possess accounts of the life of Jesus. Apparently Paul had never been to much trouble to tell his congregations anything about the life of Jesus, as, no doubt, if he had, they might have begun to ask awkward questions about the Jewish context of Jesus's life. All that Paul seems to have told his followers about the life of Jesus was that he preached repentance, and that he was crucified, but had survived, which was true enough, as far as it went.

What seems to have happened to make it possible for these Christians to learn more about the life of Jesus is this. It is a fact that no matter how holy or inspired a Jewish teacher is held to be his teachings are never preserved in writing, but are instead memorised and repeated by his disciples, who then teach them to their disciples, and so on. It is amazing how complicated judgements, mostly involving very fine points of the Jewish law, can be

⁴³ 85CE

memorised in this way, but that is how it is done. Now Peter was acknowledged as one of the most important of Jesus's disciples and he knew all of Jesus's teaching by heart—in fact it was said that he would stay up at night reciting it to himself, to preserve it. When he was killed suddenly it was a great shock to his congregation, as few of them had learnt much of Jesus's teaching (it was, after all, over thirty years since Jesus had had to go into exile). And so several of them decided on a most unorthodox step and actually wrote the teachings of Jesus down. And other congregations followed this example, and so it came about that there were several versions of this teaching in circulation.

Now after the War, as I said, the Jewish followers of Jesus declined, and most simply returned to orthodox Pharisaical Judaism. A few, however, seeing various sects claiming to be successors of Paul's reviving, were tempted to cross over and join up. The number of these was very small, of course, but one or two versions of the written teachings of Jesus fell into Christian hands, and they were at once translated into Greek. However, these documents were not terribly useful to the Christians, as what they wanted was a narrative of Jesus's life and career, and what they got was an account of his teachings, arranged under subject-headings, and not in chronological order. So pretty soon these documents were heavily edited, and what little was known of Jesus's life, which was much more anecdotal and unreliable than what was known of his teaching, was patched up with examples of his teaching, though, of course, the various versions differed from each other in exactly how they did this.

When a version of this document first came into my hands I was immensely puzzled by it, as it seemed so jumbled and hard to understand. But after a few readings I felt I understood what had happened, viz that an outline of Jesus's life had been conflated with examples of his teaching, and heavily edited to remove much of the Jewish and anti-Roman meaning of the original. But it was not until I had shown the result to a rabbi, who advised us on such things, that he was able to explain to me exactly what had happened, as I explained above. He also pointed out one other curious thing, that in this life of Jesus Jesus is made to make all sorts of moral pronouncements *ex nihilo*. Yet it is the case that when a Jewish teacher teaches he never simply makes moral points, but always takes some text of the Jewish scriptures and enlarges on it, to make what points he wants. What had obviously happened here was that editors had, in most cases, discarded the original text on which Jesus was expounding, probably with the intention of implying that as Jesus was, in the editors' opinion, the Son of God, he could make whatever pronouncements he liked about anything,

with no reference to Jewish scripture. There were also all sorts of mistranslations and misunderstandings, either intentional or unintentional, of the Aramaic original of the document and of the Jewish context in which Jesus lived and taught. In particular they made a point of misinterpreting the phrase 'Son of God', and similar ones, and perverting its meaning into the Pauline one.

The final feature of these Lives of Jesus is that they contain many alleged miracles and miraculous happenings. What I surmise has happened here is that in many cases the editors have narrated incidents which were not miraculous as though they were, just as the editor of the account of the missions of Paul that I mentioned earlier had turned the incident of the young man tumbling out of a window at Troas into a miraculous rising-from-the-dead. Other miracles, I guess, were invented by taking symbolic actions performed by Jesus literally, or perhaps just they were just invented to add a supernatural aura to worldly events.

As to the beliefs of these new Christians, they followed Paul in holding Jesus to be the Son of God sent by his father to announce the salvation of mankind. But in holding this view they were faced with a problem that had not occurred to Paul. He had always believed that the reign of Jesus on earth would begin in his, and Jesus's, own life-time. However Jesus was, as we know, by now dead, and so these Christians seem to have solved this problem by taking over many of the apocalyptic Jewish beliefs about the Messiah and applying them to Jesus: that is that Jesus would come again surrounded by glory, rout the enemies of God and reign in peace for a thousand years in an earthly paradise, peopled by the elect of God. In this, of course they confused the fine distinction between the Messiah, always a mortal, and whatever supernatural emanations of God were sent to help the Messiah in his battles. But there is yet another problem with this belief and it was pointed out to me by one of our agents, a very bright young man named Silus, when we were talking about the Christians.

'The problem is,' he said, 'that Jesus was active in Palestine in Tiberius's reign, was arrested, crucified, survived.... then lived another forty years and died a normal death. It's that last forty years that's a bit of an anti-climax. At the last meeting I attended I said that I had heard a report that Jesus had lived for many years in exile after his surviving crucifixion, and had only recently died, and there was a great interest from the congregation, of a rather horrified sort, and an embarrassed reaction from the elders, who evidently knew the truth, but hadn't told their flock. The Life of Jesus they use ends with Jesus saying to his disciples:

“I will be with you always to the end of the age”⁴⁴, which I suppose originally meant that Jesus thought that the end of the world would come in his life-time. But now it’s a conveniently vague way of ending the story without committing the Christians to any definite date for the return of Jesus. But I’ve thought of what the logical solution to this problem of theirs ought to be.’

‘Oh, what’s that,’ I asked.

‘Well,’ said Silus, ‘What they ought to say is that Jesus survived his crucifixion, and then shortly afterwards was taken up to heaven, whence he will return whenever God pleases.’

We both laughed at this, but, believe it or not, this very year I have heard that one Christian church in Asia Minor has begun to teach this doctrine, which, as I’m sure that my readers will agree, is a very clever, though an extremely unprincipled, one.

Although these Christians take Paul as their spiritual fountain-head, their sudden accession of some of the traditions of the Jewish followers of Jesus allowed them to carry out a notable revision of history. Thus it is now the doctrine of most of these sects that although Paul was the main driving-force behind the spread of knowledge of Jesus in Asia Minor and Greece, and as far as Rome, he did not invent the Christian religion. On the contrary these Christians claim that he worked alongside the Jewish followers of Jesus propagating *the same faith*. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth, as we have seen, yet in support of this proposition they have produced a sort of history of the Jewish followers of Jesus, in which Paul appears, though the narrative is edited so that Paul does not appear to quarrel with them and various shameful secrets, such as Paul’s years in Egypt and his Gnostic training, and how he acquired his Roman citizenship, also do not appear. They also have a eulogistic account of Paul’s solo missionary journeys, which again fails to mention such things as Paul’s love of money, his double-dealings at every stage of his career, and his final tactical alliance with Simon the Wizard. Consequently this narrative, somewhat bathetically, breaks off some time around the time that I first began investigating Paul and his sect, with Paul under house-arrest in Rome. But no doubt this document will sooner or later be provided with a suitably edifying conclusion. No doubt also, the two documents I have mentioned will also be run together, to make one narrative out of two.

Now it might be asked why, if these Christians were proclaiming such lies, they were not contradicted. And the answer is that beyond myself and a few of my colleagues and

⁴⁴ Matthew 28: 20.

a very few Jews, nobody knew much about this Jesus any more. Not only had his brief career come to its climax over forty years earlier, but his apocalyptic kind of Judaism was at odds with the pragmatic and quietist kind that took over after the Jewish War. If there were any of the Followers of Jesus left who remembered him it was as an inspired teacher, not as a political leader, still less as King of Israel. And if they found out that some Gentiles chose to invent lies about him, well, I dare say they would have said what the old rabbi said to us on the first day I began investigating Paul and his sect: 'It is none of our concern what Gentiles say or do'. And herein lies another reason why these Christians have been so successful of late. After the Jewish War the Jews grew more bitter and inward looking, and whereas before they had been prepared to countenance dealings with Greek-Jews, and other groups who were not quite Jews, but better than Gentiles, now they had no time for any other people, and so many communities of Greek-Jews were spiritually stranded, as it were, and left without a faith. And therefore they took up with Christianity.

This explanation is borne out by the fact that when we have discovered what social group it is that constitutes the Christians in any place, it is usually the merchant-class amongst former Greek-Jews, and indeed it may be that the reason why there are so many communities scattered around the Mediterranean whose doctrines are so similar (and I do not include Gnostics here, for these groups are, as it were, necessarily heterogeneous), is that these doctrines were first passed around using the channels of communication that these merchants use for their daily business.

And the last thing to note in this context is that, as one would expect from the low social stratum from which these people come, the very minimal rites and ceremonies that Paul enjoined on his followers are not enough for these latter-day Christians. For their elders have now made themselves into priests, reckoning that the meal they share during their services is a sacrament. And the leaders of the church in each of the main cities have decided that being a priest is not honour enough, but that the chief man amongst them must be an 'overseer'.⁴⁵ Furthermore, they have begun to invent every sort of ceremony and rigmarole to magnify their importance. Lastly, in contradiction to all civilised precedent, they have introduced the shameful practice of private and silent prayer in their services.

⁴⁵ ie bishop, Greek *episcopos*.

I have now come to the end of my narrative and it only remains for me to sum up. These Christians, as we have seen, owe most to Paul of Tarsus, and acknowledge him as their founder, and, like him, they have managed to misrepresent, misinterpret and misunderstand completely the original significance of the life of Jesus, which was an entirely Jewish affair. What they have now is, properly speaking, a myth, concerning the alleged Son of God, who came to earth to announce the salvation of mankind, but unlike any other religion this myth is given a definite historical context, namely the latter part of the reign of the Emperor Augustus, and the reign of the Emperor Tiberius.

That peculiarity noted, it might be thought that all these Christians are is a sort of down-market mystery-religion; for just as it seems that everyone desires citizenship for the benefits it conveys in this life, so it seems everyone also desires to join one of the ancient mysteries, for the benefits that these confer in the next life. And if this is the case then perhaps there is nothing very wrong about it and that it is simply the outcome of the natural desire in people for some sort of religion to trust in.

However, I believe that this is not the case, and that Christianity is a religion which, if it is allowed to flourish, will prove disastrous. There are three reasons why I believe that this is the case. The first is that anyone who wants a religion already has one, namely the religion of his country and his people, and there is no reason why anyone should want to change their religion. Christianity was founded when a renegade from Judaism, who was in fact not a Jew anyway, but a Greek, perverted the meaning of certain political events in Palestine to his own ends. It has been carried on by other Greek-Jews, merchants and other such people, people who are likely to be untrustworthy, dishonest and self-seeking as a matter of course. And these elements, as history has shown, are likely, at times of crisis and war, only to take account of their own interests and not necessarily retain any loyalty to the Empire.

Moreover in their religion they seem to take a perverse delight in exalting lowly and unworthy people and in subverting all proper subordination in society, and thereby they give an indication that if their religion is allowed to grow they may succeed in bringing about social revolutions, such that, as was observed in the Greek city-states, *aristocracy*, that is, rule by the best in society, was succeeded by *kakocracy*, that is, rule by the worst, and basest, elements in society.

The third reason is this, that although there are, in various parts of the Empire, religions which people of this social class can join, and indeed nowhere yet is Christianity the predominant religion, even in its own social strata. Yet each of these sects is only a local one and Christianity is the only religion I know of, and I know of many, which has the potential to spread all over the Empire, wherever there are Greek merchants, and thus has the potential, eventually to become a very numerous and widespread sect.

Thus I believe that it would be a very bad thing indeed if Christianity were to flourish, and I think there is a great danger that this is what may happen. For at any time we are likely to be more concerned with the external enemies of the Empire, the German tribes, the Parthians, and so forth, or races within the Empire which are obviously numerous and hostile, such as the Jews, and we might be tempted to neglect such obscure sects as the Christians. Nevertheless, if over a hundred years or so the Christians were to grow so numerous as to be a danger to society, then one means of defence against them, namely knowledge of the truth of their origins might have been forgotten. For assuredly no scholar or historian will trouble himself very much to ascertain what lowly and inconsequential people are doing or thinking. This is one reason why I have written this account, so that all details of the emergence of Christianity are available to such people, and I hope that in subsequent generations, people will use this information to argue against the Christians, and to try to controvert them at every turn. If this information is lost, then the half-truths that they put forward as shining truth will not be able to be contradicted.

I have said that I believe that the Christians may become a greater danger to the Empire than the Jews ever were. As to what steps, beyond public dispute and contradiction, can be taken to prevent their religion from gaining ground, I should say that firstly there is little point in persecuting them, as, with religions of this kind, it seems that persecution only leads to a greater number of converts. I am reminded of a story that the bailiff of one of my estates once told me, which was this. As a young man he was a servant on a farm where there was a pair of crows which persisted, despite being repeatedly scared away, in robbing grapes and other fruits and crops. So he took a bow and shot the two. The next day another pair appeared and began robbing, just as the first had done; so he shot them too. Each day another pair appeared, and each day the bailiff shot them, until finally he was sickened by the slaughter, and so left the latest pair in possession of the farm, and tolerated their thefts. The application of this tale is that, just as there is an inexhaustible supply of crows, so there is an

enormous number of potential converts for this religion, and there is no point in killing people for the sake of killing people.

This of course does not mean that if these Christians commit crimes, or refuse, when required to, to sacrifice to the Empire, they should not be prosecuted and punished, merely that hasty and brutal retaliation, like that which occurred in the aftermath of the Fire of Rome, should not be contemplated as a policy for containing the sect.

What I think is needed is for the government to promote a legitimate and patriotic religion, one designed specifically for the social class most vulnerable to the suasions of the Christians, and one well-endowed and well-organised, so that it can take on the Christians everywhere it meets with them. There are several pre-existing religions which might serve in this regard, including a number of military cults. I myself have already sent a recommendation in through official channels concerning this and so I will say no more here. I will only say here that the reason why such a policy has never been needed before is that these social classes, viz the class of Greek merchants and their employees and hangers-on, has never been numerous until this century, when the expansion of commerce and trade has increased their numbers, in some cities by tenfold, all over the Empire.

At present the Christians have strong bases in all the big cities of the eastern Mediterranean, though at this stage they seem to have made no headway at all in Gaul, Spain, Africa and Britain, despite the labours of Paul in Spain. Their leaders have shown that they possess wonderful organisational gifts, and it is only a matter of time, in my opinion, before they become a danger to the state. Perhaps, it could be argued, the Gnostic Christian sects will overwhelm them; but these, as I have pointed out, are much more fragmented, and besides, the doctrine they teach is, if anything, even more self-indulgent and socially dangerous, and so it would be even worse if they did absorb their congeners. It may be also that the Christians themselves will split into rival sects and alliances and so fragment themselves. Certainly their doctrines at the moment seem so confused and unarticulated that the moment they do start to spell them out more clearly dissensions will undoubtedly arise. Moreover at present the alliance which exists amongst the Christian groups in the various urban centres of the Empire is all advantage to them, and I think that when it comes to the point where compromises must be made to continue these alliances then they may be broken. But I think that in that eventuality their leaders will come to see that their interests will best be served by maintaining their unity at all costs.

No, I believe that the only way in which this future peril will be countered is by concerned citizens not losing sight of the truth of the origins of these sects, and by determined government action to organise these social classes in a new way.

And that, my dear Silvianus, is all I have to say about Paul and the so-called Christians. I hope that my account is clear, useful and amusing, and, if required, as you well know, my papers are available to you, and to any other well-intentioned scholar or investigator who may want to make use of them.

And so farewell.

XI

Translator's Epilogue

The document translated in the foregoing pages has only recently come to light, on the shelves of the Vatican library, in the same manuscript as several third-century defences of Christianity. No other evidence for the existence of Marcus Calpurnius Fronto, Publius Lollius Tubero, or Calpurnius's dedicatee Lucius Silvanus Naso the Younger, is known; nor are the geographical and ethnographic works of Silvanus known from any other references. This, together with the fact that by the late second century, when the first anti-Christian diatribes began to be written, Calpurnius's account was evidently not widely known, indicates that Calpurnius was an obscure writer, and the social and intellectual circle he moved in was not one respected by later generations.

What is most remarkable about Calpurnius's work is, however, not so much the revelations about the early history of Christianity it contains, for here it only really confirms what theologians and Biblical scholars have, in the past thirty years, already concluded, or surmised, from an examination of the texts of the New Testament and other contemporaneous documents, and from the study of first century Judaism and Roman society and institutions of the same period.

No, its real significance lies in that it is the only sustained account of a contemporaneous Roman reaction to the emergence of the new religion. Seventeen hundred years after Christianity was declared an official religion by the Emperor Constantine, it is almost impossible for anyone, Christian or agnostic, to dissociate the long history of Christianity from its origins, and to realise that once Christianity was a matter of importance only to a few. Perhaps one function that this translation of Calpurnius's work will allow us to achieve is a necessary detachment in considering the history of Christianity.

A further interesting aspect of the text is the evidence it supplies for the nature of the Roman state's intelligence service and the kind of work that it carried out. This evidence has hitherto been largely lacking.

A final interesting facet of this work is that it demonstrates that it was possible for a first-century Roman, outside the mainstream of literary culture, to contemplate and complete a sustained and coherent narrative, in vigorous, colloquial Latin. And it is hoped that this style comes across in the translation of *The Thirteenth Apostle* presented here.

A chronology of events is supplied here, for the convenience of readers; all dates, except those from Roman history, are approximate:

27 BCE – 14 CE

Reign of Augustus

4 BCE

Jesus is born

10 CE

Paul is born

14 – 37

Reign of Tiberius

25

Paul arrives in Jerusalem

27

Jesus is crowned King of Israel by John the Baptist and begins his public career

29

John the Baptist is murdered

30

Jesus is arrested, crucified and survives, goes into exile

32-35

Paul harasses the followers of Jesus

35

Paul is ambushed by Jesus on the road to Damascus

35-38

Paul lives in Egypt

37 – 41

Reign of Caligula

38

Paul returns to Jerusalem, but is sent back to Tarsus

41 – 54

Reign of Claudius

41

Barnabas meets Paul in Tarsus and takes him back to Antioch

43

Britain is invaded by Romans

44

First missionary journey by Barnabas and Paul, Paul buys citizenship in Cyprus

44

Herod Antipas dies

46

Paul breaks with Barnabas and commences his second journey

48

Paul meets Jesus again at Mysia, Jesus orders Paul to travel in Greece

50	Paul returns to Palestine, but immediately quits the country again and begins his third journey
54 – 68	Reign of Nero
57	Paul returns to Jerusalem, the riot in the Temple occurs, Paul is arrested and detained at Caesarea
59	Paul is transferred to Rome
61	Calpurnius is recruited to the intelligence service
62	Calpurnius travels to Egypt and Asia, death of Peter, Paul flees to Spain
64	Fire of Rome (18th June), return of Paul from Spain death of Paul, persecution of the Jews begins
66	Jewish War begins, death of James the Just
68 – 69	‘The Year of Three Emperors’ (Galba, Otho, Vitellius)
69 – 79	Reign of Vespasian
70	Capture and destruction of Jerusalem, by Titus
71	Jesus dies in North India
75 onwards	the beginnings of the growth of Christian sects, first collections of Paul’s writings are circulated, early versions of what later became the Gospels and The Acts of the Apostles are produced
75	Calpurnius retires from intelligence work
79 – 81	Reign of Titus
81 – 96	Reign of Domitian
85	Calpurnius writes his account of the Christians
95	first recorded persecution of Christians, in the eastern part of the Empire