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"THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND"

JESUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS lived at a time when the situation of the Jews was particularly turbulent and potentially explosive. The rural communities of what has come to be called the Holy Land, where Jews had practiced traditional ways of life for centuries, increasingly confronted an encroaching pagan culture that baffled and repelled them, not so much in their insulated villages, but from what they heard of city life in such places as Jerusalem.¹ Centuries of domination by foreign empires had, by the time of Jesus, brought once isolated Jewish communities into direct, often unwilling, contact with their pagan neighbors—Babylonians, Romans, Asians, Egyptians, Greeks, Africans, and Persians. Many Jews, especially the richer and more worldly ones, struggled with questions of whether, or to what extent, they should act "like the nations." Should Jews seek foreign citizenship, with its great economic and political advantages? Should they hire pagan slaves to teach their children Greek and Latin, and risk encouraging them to exercise naked in the public baths? Should they strive to enter the lively and cosmopolitan world of pagan culture and social life, abandoning ancient customs like circumcision and kosher laws that their pagan neighbors considered barbaric?

In Jesus' time, these urban Jewish communities were uneasily divided between those who accommodated pagan culture and accepted its political domination and those who resisted both pagan culture and politics. Once allies of the Romans, the Jews were now their subjects, and Judea had become a Roman province ruled by the puppet Jewish dynasty of Herod the Great for their pagan masters.

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Even those who resisted pagan culture had been deeply affected by it; yet they held to the customs that distinguished and separated them from their pagan neighbors. Many Jews, especially poorer ones, and those who lived in the rural villages where John and Jesus preached, detested the court of the Herods, with its luxurious entertainments and extravagant palaces, which the Herods sometimes named for the emperors but financed with heavy taxes, extortion, and bribes extracted from their fellow Jews. What angered these rural people especially was the way the Herods, neglecting Jewish tradition, courted and copied the Romans.² Prince Herod Antipas, grandson of Herod the Great, had gone to Rome to be tutored by the same philosophers who tutored the prince Claudius, future emperor of Rome. The Jewish historian Josephus says that not long before Jesus' birth, two thousand Jews had been crucified in his native Galilee for rebelling against Rome, leaving a forest of crosses littered with rotting corpses as a warning to others.³ Jesus himself, charged with treason against Rome, would one day suffer the same penalty. Especially among the poor, the pious, and the rural Jews, antipagan feeling ran deep; and it was among such people that Jesus found his following.

Many Jews distrusted, too, their own religious leaders who served at the Jerusalem Temple, especially the powerful and wealthy men who surrounded the high priest, for their open collusion with the Roman occupiers. Members of Jewish communities responded to this situation in a variety of ways. The most popular sect, the Pharisees, bitterly criticized these leaders for having subverted the Temple,⁴ while some devout people went further and withdrew in protest from ordinary Jewish life. The Essenes, for example, during the first century B.C.E., abandoned Jerusalem, denounced the Temple worship as polluted, and formed a "pure" community in desert caves overlooking the Dead Sea. There they renounced private property to live in a monastic community; they observed the rules prescribed for holy war; and they avoided sexual contact and impure food, thoughts, and practices as they awaited the battle of Armageddon. They warned that on that day of judgment God himself would annihilate the hypocrites and evildoers and vindicate the Essenes as the righteous.

Jesus' predecessor John the Baptist, a passionate reformer who may have lived for some years with the Essenes, publicly harangued Herod Antipas, then tetrarch of Galilee, for having married his

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brother's ex-wife; at the instigation of Herod's wife—she was the mother of Salome—John was imprisoned and beheaded.⁵ There were many people who agreed with John that the times called for radical reform. No longer was it enough merely to follow traditional Jewish patterns or to stay within the boundaries of the law. John demanded much more; he demanded, in fact, that people return not just to the letter but to the moral spirit of the law.⁶ Yet for all of John's claim to speak for authentic Jewish tradition, there remained a more difficult question: Which elements of the Jewish tradition were essential and true, and which were antiquated relics of an archaic past? Which should one follow, and which discard?

Jesus of Nazareth was baptized by John and then, according to the Gospel of Mark, was driven by the spirit into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). He returned from his solitude fired with the conviction that the Kingdom of God was at hand. Like the Essenes, Jesus declared that the crisis of the times required radical sacrifice. Going from village to village near his birthplace in Galilee, Jesus warned that the coming day of judgment was about to turn the social and political world upside down. Then "many that are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30); and the coming kingdom would be given to those who were now "despised and rejected." Jesus declared in his famous Sermon:

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.

Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh. . . .

But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger.

Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep."

(LUKE 6:20-25)

Jesus disregarded—and, his accusers claimed, dismissed—strict kosher and Sabbath observance and attacked the legal casuistry that enabled people to evade responsibility for those in need. As biblical scholars generally acknowledge, the gospels of the New Testament are neither histories nor biographies in our sense of these terms; we have no independent sources with which to compare their accounts. But as they recount his life and message, Jesus demanded sacrifice and transformation, extraordinary measures to prepare for the coming new age. His message could hardly have been more radical, then or now:

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"Give to everyone who begs from you; and of him who takes your good, do not ask them again."

"But love your enemies and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return."

As for the Ten Commandments:

(LUKE 6:30, 35)

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill, and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire."

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

(MATTHEW 5:21-22; 27-28)

Jesus attacked Israel's religious leaders with irony and anger:

"The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice."

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith. . . . You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!"

"You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?"

(MATTHEW 23:2; 23-24; 33)

Jesus' passionate and powerful presence aroused enormous response, especially when he preached among the crowds of pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. As the Jewish and Roman authorities well knew, tensions were high during the religious holidays when Jewish worshippers found themselves face to face with the Roman soldiers. Jesus' near contemporary the Jewish historian Josephus, himself a governor of Galilee, tells of a Roman soldier on guard near the Temple who contemptuously exposed himself before just such a crowd, an outrage that incited a riot in which twenty thousand died.⁷ When Jesus dared enter the Temple courtyard before a certain Passover, brandishing a whip, throwing down the tables of those changing foreign money, and quoting the words of the prophet Jeremiah to attack the Temple leaders for turning God's

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house into a "den of robbers," the Gospel of Mark says, "he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple" (Mark 11:16). But soon afterward the authorities took action to prevent this firebrand village preacher from fanning the religious and nationalistic passions already smoldering among the restless crowds. The Jewish Council, eager to keep the peace, and hoping to avoid recriminations from their Roman masters, collaborated with the Roman procurator to have Jesus arrested, tried, and hastily executed on charges of having threatened to tear down the Temple single-handed, and having conspired to rise against Rome and make himself king of the Jews (Mark 14:58-15:26).

Jesus himself, according to the New Testament, saw himself very differently, not as a revolutionary but as a man seized by the spirit that inspired Isaiah and Jeremiah—the spirit of God—as a prophet sent to warn humankind of the approaching Kingdom of God and to offer purification to those who would listen.⁸ Repeatedly, according to the New Testament accounts, Jesus chose to risk death rather than allow himself to be silenced.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the religious meaning of Jesus' message, one could say from a strictly historical perspective that Jesus foresaw events accurately: in many ways the world in which he and his Jewish contemporaries lived would soon come to an end, less than forty years after his death, with the catastrophic Jewish war against Rome. In 66 C.E., the religious and patriotic feeling that the Jewish Council feared Jesus might ignite finally caught fire. Outbreaks of violence against the Roman occupation exploded into a civil war that finally engulfed the whole province that the Romans called Judea. Josephus, born in 37 C.E., a few years after Jesus' death, participated in that war, and described its horrifying devastation, as Titus's clanking Roman forces marched upon Jerusalem. The streets streamed with blood; the inner city was ground to rubble, and the Temple itself burned to a heap of ruins. Titus, the Roman conqueror and future emperor, annihilated Jerusalem politically as well, reestablishing in its place the colony the Romans called Aelia Capitolina, sacred to the gods of Rome.

The "new age" that followed the Roman victory challenged and split Jewish communities from Judea to Rome and throughout the world. Some Jews simply gave up and followed pagan customs, but the majority gradually came to adopt the forms in which the party of the Pharisees salvaged and recast their ancient traditions. According to Professor Jacob Neusner, the Pharisees hoped to reunite the

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Jewish communities by providing a common code of law; thus they gave birth to the rabbinic movement.⁹ These rabbis, or teachers, replaced the priests and the animal sacrifices that they had offered in the destroyed Jerusalem Temple—that Temple having been for many Jews the central focus of Jewish life—with the “sacrifices” of prayer, Torah study, and worship in synagogues scattered throughout the world wherever Jews lived. And the rabbis themselves, as “teachers of the law,” came to replace the hereditary caste of Jewish priests who had for generations officiated in that Temple.¹⁰

But the radical sectarians who called themselves followers of Jesus of Nazareth went further. Having refused to fight in the Jewish war against Rome, they had already alienated themselves from the Jewish communities; now they broke with their fellow Jews and proclaimed that they themselves were the “new Israel,” even the “true Israel,” of this shattering new age. Some Jews who joined this Christian movement, especially those influenced by Paul’s teaching, abandoned, within one or two generations of Jesus’ death, the characteristic practices that had distinguished them as Jews. Many gave up circumcision, kosher laws, and Sabbath observance, claiming, in Paul’s words, to be “Jews inwardly,” circumcised “in the heart” (Romans 2:28–29) and not in the flesh. All converts to this new movement, whether they had once been Jews or pagans, tended to distinguish their “new Israel” from the rest of the world by insisting upon strict, even extreme, moral practices. The most controversial aspect of this new moral austerity was the sexual attitudes and practices of its adherents.¹¹

This is a book not about Jesus’ message but about practical elements of his message, especially as he and his followers read these elements back into the story of creation. According to the New Testament, Jesus himself mentioned the story of Adam and Eve only once, in answer to a question about the legitimate grounds for divorce. To judge by New Testament reports of his few comments concerning marriage, divorce, and celibacy, such concerns seem almost incidental to Jesus’ message. But after his death, as the movement he inspired grew to include Greeks, Asians, Africans, Romans, and Egyptians, as well as Palestinian Jews, his followers struggled with questions of how to translate his spiritual teaching into the practical terms of everyday living. Should Christians marry or not? Should the roles of men and women in the community differ, and, if so, how? Should converts avoid sexual activity outside of marriage—or even within it? What about prostitution, abortion, and the

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sexual use of slaves? These questions, too, bore wider implications: How are Christians to understand human nature? Are slaves, for example, essentially any different from free persons?

Such questions did not, of course, originate with Christians. Jewish teachers debated such topics, and as the French scholar Paul Veyne, among others, has shown, certain pagan philosophers advocated sexual restraint similar to that adopted by Christians.¹² But the Christian movement popularized these changing attitudes with momentous consequences, especially after the fourth century, when the Roman emperor Constantine declared his own allegiance to Christ and granted Christianity not only legal but privileged status within the empire. It was from that time that Christian attitudes began to transform the consciousness, to say nothing of the moral and legal systems, that continue to form western society.

This book will explore the attitudes that Jesus and his followers took toward marriage, family, procreation, and celibacy, and thus toward “human nature” in general, and the controversies these attitudes sparked as they were variously interpreted among Christians for generations—or for millennia, depending on how one counts. It will also show how men and women who converted to Christianity often adopted attitudes toward sexuality that their families and friends considered bizarre. Moreover, I shall further speculate on how we have come to take for granted the set of attitudes about sexuality and human nature arising from “Judeo-Christian culture,” attitudes that many people today take to be normal and obvious but that were, in the context of early Christian times, anything but normal and, from the anthropologically informed perspective of our own contemporaries, anything but obvious.

JESUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS, at the beginning of what came to be called the Christian Era, took up startlingly different attitudes toward divorce, procreation, and family from those that had prevailed for centuries among most of their fellow Jews. So powerful were these challenges to convention that they precipitated, or at least accompanied, the birth of a new religious movement. Despite Jesus’ radical message—or perhaps because of it—the movement quickly spread throughout the Roman world and within three centuries came to dominate it.

As the Christian movement emerged within the Roman Empire, it challenged pagan converts, too, to change their attitudes and be-

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havior. Many pagans who had been brought up to regard marriage essentially as a social and economic arrangement, homosexual relationships as an expected element of male education, prostitution, both male and female, as both ordinary and legal, and divorce, abortion, contraception, and exposure of unwanted infants as matters of practical expedience, embraced, to the astonishment of their families, the Christian message, which opposed these practices.

Certain scholars, prominently including Paul Veyne, as we have noted, have recently downplayed these differences and have pointed out that philosophical moralists such as Musonius Rufus and Plutarch advocated similar moral practices. Veyne concludes that "we must not argue in stereotypes, and imagine a conflict between pagan and Christian morality."¹³ Yet as the philosopher and convert Athenagoras (c. 160 C.E.) points out in his defense of the Christians, addressed to their persecutors, the emperors, what philosophers advocate may have little or nothing to do with what actually motivates people to change, as conversion has done to many Christians.¹⁴ Indeed, such specific ways in which conversion changed their own lives and those of many other, often uneducated, believers, in matters involving sex, business, magic, money, paying taxes, and racial hatred.¹⁵ Justin and Tertullian both relate cases in which the moral transformation accompanying a believer's conversion aroused pagan relatives to outrage and even led to legal accusations and disinheritance. Of course these Christians were writing in defense of their faith; we need not accept all their rhetoric as fact to acknowledge that they and many others certainly *did* "imagine a conflict between pagan and Christian morality" and tried to act accordingly.

Their own accounts suggest that such converts changed their attitudes toward the self, toward nature, and toward God, as well as their sense of social and political obligation, in ways that often placed them in diametric opposition to pagan culture. For the most dedicated Christians, conversion transformed both consciousness and behavior; and such converts, gathered in the increasingly popular Christian movement, would profoundly affect the consciousness of all subsequent generations as well.¹⁶

Other Jewish teachers of Jesus' time, and for generations before, had pronounced certain pagan sexual practices abominable. Among conscientious Jews, only the worship of pagan gods aroused more outrage than pagan sexual behavior. Generations of Jewish teachers had warned that pagans thought nothing of pederasty, promiscuity,

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and incest. Yet the clash with outside cultures challenged Jewish customs in turn. Many pagans found such practices as circumcision to be peculiar, antiquated, and no less barbaric than Jews found the sexual habits of pagans. Babylonians and Romans, themselves monogamous, criticized the ancient Jewish custom of polygamous marriage, practiced by such venerable patriarchs as Abraham, David, and Solomon, as well as by the wealthy few who could afford it, even in Jesus' time and later.¹⁷ The Jewish historian Josephus, himself apparently polygamous, tried to justify to his Roman readers the ten wives of King Herod the Great (and possibly his own bigamy as well)¹⁸ by explaining that "among us it is the custom to have many wives simultaneously."¹⁹ Those familiar with Roman law could also question traditional Jewish divorce law, which granted to the husband (but not to the wife) the often easy right of divorce.

For centuries—indeed, for over a millennium—Jews had taught that the purpose of marriage, and therefore of sexuality, was procreation. Jewish communities had inherited their sexual customs from nomadic ancestors whose very survival depended upon reproduction, both among their herds of animals and among themselves. According to the story of Abraham told in Genesis 22, the great blessing promised through God's covenant with Israel was progeny innumerable as the sands of the sea and the stars in the sky (verse 17). To ensure the stability and survival of the nation, Jewish teachers apparently assumed that sexual activity should be committed to the primary purpose of procreation. Prostitution, homosexuality, abortion, and infanticide, practices both legal and tolerated among certain of their pagan neighbors, contradicted Jewish custom and law.

Both polygamy and divorce, on the other hand, increased opportunities for reproduction—not for women, but for the men who wrote the laws and benefited from them. Jewish law even went so far as to require that a man bound for ten years in a childless marriage should either divorce his wife and marry another, or else keep his barren wife and take a second to produce his children.²⁰ Jewish custom banned as "abominations" sexual acts not conducive to procreation, and the impurity laws even prohibited marital intercourse except at times most likely to result in conception.

Generations before Jesus, Jews, like so many other peoples, had begun to invoke their creation accounts, specifically in Genesis, to prove that such tribal customs as these were not barbaric or peculiar,

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as their pagan critics charged, but were part of the very structure of the universe itself. In their arguments from Scripture, Jewish teachers often avoided speaking directly about sexual practices but engaged in heated discussions about Adam, Eve, and the serpent, and in this metaphorical way revealed what they thought about human sexuality—and about human nature in general. The *Book of Jubilees*, for example, written about 150 years before Jesus' birth by a Palestinian Jew, retells the story of Adam and Eve to prove, among other things, that Jewish customs concerning childbirth and nakedness were not arbitrary or trivial but actually built into human nature from the beginning. As this author tells it, Adam entered Eden during the first week of creation, but Eve entered the garden only during the second week; this explains why a woman who gives birth to a male child remains ritually impure for only *one* week, while she who bears a female remains impure for two weeks.²¹ The author goes on to recall that God made leather garments for Adam and Eve, and clothed them before expelling them from Paradise (Genesis 3:21); this shows that Jews must "cover their shame, and not go naked," the Geniles do," in public places like the baths and the gymnasium.²² Throughout subsequent generations, what Jews and Christians read into the creation accounts of Genesis came, for better and worse, to shape what later came to be called Judeo-Christian tradition.

By the time Jesus preached, his Jewish contemporaries had no difficulty defending their ancestral emphasis upon procreation by showing from Genesis 1 that as soon as God created all living creatures, culminating with the first man and woman, he commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Whatever disagreements existed between various groups of Jews (the Pharisees, for example, apparently approved of sexual pleasure within the bonds of marriage, while the Essenes practiced sexual restraint), Jewish teachers agreed that this primary and sacred obligation to procreate took precedence even over marital obligations—thus a barren marriage could be invalidated—and dictated its structure. They pointed out from Genesis that God first commanded man and woman to procreate, and only afterward, to help them do so, he brought Eve to Adam and joined them in the first marriage:

*Then the man said,
"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man."*

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Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

(GENESIS 2:23–24)

For centuries Jewish teachers built from this passage the basic laws of marital behavior. Certain rabbis actually turned these lines from Genesis into a code of sexual conduct. Rabbi Eliezer (c. 90 C.E.) took the words "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother" to mean not only that a man must not marry his mother, but that he must also refuse to marry "her who is related to his father or to his mother" within the degrees of kinship prohibited as incest. Rabbi Akiba (c. 135 C.E.) took the next phrase, "and cleaves to his wife," to mean, in his words, "But not to his neighbor's wife, nor to a male, nor to an animal"—thus disposing of adultery, homosexuality, and bestiality. Rabbi Issi (c. 145 C.E.) among others, took the phrase "and they become one flesh" to mean, in his words, that the man "shall cleave to the place where both form one flesh," prohibiting through this euphemistic phrase what the rabbis called "unnatural intercourse"—sexual acts or positions that might inhibit conception.²³ Other Jewish teachers agreed that the purpose of marriage is to "increase and multiply"; that one must accept whatever facilitates procreation, including divorce and polygamy; and that one must reject whatever hinders procreation—even a marriage itself, in the case of an infertile wife.

Jesus radically challenged this consensus. Like other Jewish teachers, Jesus, when he speaks about marriage, goes back to the Genesis account of the first marriage; but he reads the same passage very differently than others did. Asked by conservative teachers of the law, the so-called Pharisees, about the legitimate grounds for divorce, Jesus answered that there were none.²⁴

"Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one'? So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder."

(MATTHEW 19:4–6)

This answer shocked his Jewish listeners and, as Matthew tells it, pleased no one. Among Jesus' Jewish contemporaries no one questioned the legitimacy of divorce. The only question was what constituted adequate grounds; and it was this question of grounds, not the legitimacy of divorce as such, that split religious schools into

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opposing factions. The teacher Shammai, for one, took the conservative position: the only offense serious enough to justify divorce was the wife's infidelity. Shammai's opponent Hillel, famous for his liberal judgments, argued instead that a man may divorce his wife for any reason he chooses, "even if she burn his soup!" The well-known teacher Akiba, who agreed with Hillel, added emphatically, "and even if he finds a younger woman more beautiful than she." But however various teachers disputed the grounds for divorce, no one went so far as Jesus did and prohibited it altogether. Those among his audience familiar with Jewish law demanded to know how he dared question divorce, a right—and, in some cases, an obligation—provided in Mosaic law as essential to procreation. Jesus admitted that divorce is technically legal, but he rejected the practice nevertheless. "Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning [i.e., from the time of creation] it was not so" (Matthew 19:8). Moses took it upon himself, Jesus says, to change what God had created and to permit divorce as a concession to "your hardness of heart."

When his own followers, offended by such vehemence, complained, "If such is the case . . . it is not expedient to marry," Jesus must have astonished them even more by agreeing that, yes, it is better not to marry, and praising "those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 19:12). Luke says that Jesus even praised barren women: "Blessed are . . . the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck" (Luke 23:29), implying that the time was coming when the people who did not have children would be the lucky ones. Luke probably saw this as Jesus' prophecy of the coming war against Rome (66–70 C.E.); but later readers often took it as referring to the Kingdom of God. In another passage, Luke has Jesus link marriage with death, and celibacy with eternal life:

And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection."

(LUKE 20:34–36)

Such statements must have horrified Jewish traditionalists, for barren women, whom Jesus blessed, had traditionally been seen as accursed, and eunuchs, whom Jesus praised, were despised by rab-

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binic teachers for their sexual incapacity. Unmarried himself, Jesus praised the very persons most pitied and shunned in Jewish communities for their sexual incompleteness—those who were single and childless; for Jesus' radical message of the impending Kingdom of God left his followers no time to fulfill the ordinary obligations of everyday life. First-century Christians saw themselves participating at the birth of a revolutionary movement that they expected would culminate in the total social transformation that Jesus promised in the "age to come."

To prepare themselves for these events, Jesus commanded his followers to forget ordinary concerns about food and clothing, "sell your possessions, and give alms" (Luke 12:33), divest themselves of all property, and abandon family obligations, whether to parents, spouses, or children, for such obligations would interfere with their dedication to the apocalyptic hopes Jesus announced; the disciple must become wholly free to serve God. According to Luke, Jesus even went so far as to say, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). The coming new age demands new—and total—allegiance, no longer to family and nation but to the kingdom itself. Thus Jesus urges his followers to break their merely natural relationships in favor of spiritual ones. Acknowledging that such teaching divides and disrupts family relationships, Jesus boldly declares:

"I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! . . . Do you think that I have come to give peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law."

(LUKE 12:49–53)

Mark tells how Jesus rejected his own mother and brothers in favor of the family of his followers. When his mother and brothers came to speak with him and stood outside the crowded room where he was preaching, he refused to go to them, saying,

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."

(MARK 3:33–35)

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Thus Jesus dismisses the family obligations considered most sacred in Jewish community life, including those to one's parents, siblings, spouse, and children. By subordinating the obligation to procreate, rejecting divorce, and implicitly sanctioning monogamous relationships, Jesus reverses traditional priorities, declaring, in effect, that other obligations, including marital ones, are now more important than procreation. Even more startling, Jesus endorses—and exemplifies—a new possibility and one he says is even better: rejecting both marriage and procreation in favor of voluntary celibacy, for the sake of following him into the new age.

Twenty years later, Jesus' zealous disciple Paul will go even further. Paul, born in the cosmopolitan Asian city of Tarsus, brought up in the strictly observant tradition of the Pharisees, was suddenly converted from bitter hostility toward Christians to become one of their leaders. While we know little of him as a person, we know from his letters, now preserved in the New Testament, that Paul was a man of intense convictions. Paul accepts Jesus' judgment that marriage is indissoluble and, like Jesus, not only subordinates but actually ignores the command to procreate. But he often speaks of marriage in negative terms, as a sop for those too weak to do what is best: renounce sexual activity altogether. Paul admits that marriage is "not sin" yet argues that it makes both partners slaves to each other's sexual needs and desires, no longer free to devote their energies "to the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:1–35).²³ Paul sees not only marriage but even the most casual sexual encounter as a form of bondage. Shockingly, he takes the passage from Genesis traditionally used to describe the institution of marriage and applies it instead to an encounter with a prostitute: "Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two shall become one'" (Genesis 2:24). Paul then contrasts such sexual union with the believer's spiritual union with Christ: "But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Corinthians 6:16–17).

Neither Jesus nor Paul, of course, invented religious celibacy. But those few Jews among their contemporaries who practiced it—some of the Essenes who lived in caves overlooking the Dead Sea, as well as Essene groups in other places, and the Therapeutae, a monastic group of men and women in Egypt—were widely considered extremists. Paul, however, declares, on the contrary, that he wishes that everyone were voluntarily celibate, for the sake of the kingdom, like himself (1 Corinthians 7:7–8). Single people, spared

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the anxieties and obligations that plague married people, are not only freer but, Paul says, happier. He concedes, however, that "if they cannot contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:9). Yet Paul encourages even those who are married to live as if they, too, were unmarried: "Let those who have wives live as though they had none" (1 Corinthians 7:29b).

George Bernard Shaw was wrong when he accused Paul of inventing religious celibacy, which Shaw called "this monstrous imposition upon Jesus"; and Shaw was also wrong to attribute Paul's celibacy to his "terror of sex and terror of life."²⁶ For Jesus and Paul, as for the Essenes, such drastic measures were not a reflection of sexual revulsion but a necessity to prepare for the end of the world, and to free oneself for the "age to come." Paul, like Jesus, encouraged celibacy not because he loathed the flesh (which in my opinion he did not) but out of his urgent concern for the practical work of proclaiming the gospel. Paul himself insisted that he did not want to place constraints upon believers, but instead, in view of "the present distress," wanted to free them from external anxieties:

I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short. . . . I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

(1 CORINTHIANS 7:29, 35)

Paul had established groups of followers among Jews and Gentiles from the Greek seaport cities of Corinth and Thessalonica to the Asian coastal cities of Galatia and Ephesus, and he jealously watched over each of these groups to keep them pure while awaiting the kingdom. He told his converts in Corinth that he saw the Christian church as Christ's "bride," and himself as a father or marriage broker anxious to preserve a young girl's virginity for her future husband:

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

(2 CORINTHIANS 11:2–3)

Here Paul speaks of protecting the church's virginity as a metaphor for maintaining his pure and original teaching; but certain Christians in following generations took his words literally, as an injunction to celibacy.²⁷

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Although Paul intended his first letter to the Christians at Corinth, and especially its seventh chapter, to settle community disputes over marital issues, the result was that he raised more questions than he answered. Some Christians took Jesus and Paul at what they believed to be their word and preached the gospel message as liberation from all worldly concerns, especially from care for family and children, which preoccupied the majority of their contemporaries. Some of Paul's converts in Corinth, both women and men, enthusiastically embraced celibacy. Although Paul specifically had advised married Christians against unilaterally refusing marital relations (1 Corinthians 7:2-5), some married Christians, prohibited by Jesus' command from divorce, chose to take Paul's advice ("Let those who have wives live as though they had none," 1 Corinthians 7:29) as if Paul had, in fact, urged sexual abstinence *within* marriage.

Within about a century of Paul's death, ascetic versions of Jesus' message were spreading rapidly, especially in the cities of Asia Minor where Paul himself once preached. What prompted this enthusiasm for renunciation is unclear, but it expressed itself in such widely popular narratives as the story of Thecla, the lovely young virgin who renounced a lucrative marriage which her mother had arranged for her, cut off her hair and dressed in men's clothes, and ran off to join the movement that Jesus and Paul had initiated. According to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, she was determined, in fact, to do what she believed the gospel required of her—to become, like Paul himself, a celibate evangelist, and reject her wealthy fiancé, Thamyras, who would have supported not only Thecla but her aging and impoverished mother. When Paul came to preach "the word of the virgin life" in her home city of Iconium, in Asia Minor, Thecla's mother forbade her to leave the house to hear him. So Thecla sat at the window, straining to hear what Paul was saying to the crowds of young people and women pressing around him:

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God [Cf. Matthew 5:8]. Blessed are they who have kept the flesh pure, for they shall become a temple of God [Cf. 2 Corinthians 6:16]. Blessed are the continent, for to them God will speak. Blessed are they who have wives as if they had none, for they shall inherit God [Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:29]. Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well pleasing to God, and shall not lose the reward of their purity [Cf. Matthew 10:42]"²⁹

Her mother, alarmed when for three days Thecla refused to leave her place even to eat or sleep, told her daughter's fiancé about the

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"strange man who teaches deceptive and subtle words . . . Thamyras, this man is disturbing the city of the Iconians, and your Thecla too; for all the women and young people go in to him. 'You must,' he says, 'fear one single God only, and live in chastity.' And my daughter, too, like a spider at the window, bound by his words, is dominated by a new desire and a fearful passion; for the girl hangs upon the things he says, and is taken captive. But you go and speak to her, for she is engaged to you."³⁰

But Thecla vehemently rejected Thamyras's loving pleas, as she had her mother's orders; and he, grieving and furious, immediately arranged to have Paul arrested for encouraging people to defy traditional customs and even the laws. Hearing of Paul's arrest, Thecla stole out of the house secretly at night to go to the prison, bribing the warden with her bracelets and the guard with a silver mirror to let her enter Paul's cell to talk with him privately.

The next day, when the governor, at Paul's hearing, demanded to know why Thecla refused to marry her legal fiancé, she "stood there looking steadily at Paul" and refused to answer. Her mother, enraged that Thecla would jeopardize her own future as well as her family's, burst into a violent tirade:

"Burn the lawless one! Burn her that is no bride in the middle of the amphitheater, so that all the women who have been taught by this man may be struck with terror!"³¹

The governor, shaken by Thecla's defiance and her mother's rage, ordered Paul to be beaten and driven out of town. Thecla he condemned to be burned alive for violating the laws of the city and so threatening the social order. Brought naked into the amphitheater for execution, Thecla was stretched out on a pile of wood, and the kindling lighted, but suddenly a raincloud overshadowed the amphitheater and burst. Escaping in the confusion, Thecla went searching for Paul. But a Syrian nobleman, aroused by this young woman traveling alone in Antioch, tried to rape her. To protect herself from such attacks, Thecla cut off her hair and dressed herself as a man. Thecla's story celebrates her as someone who resisted family pressure, social ostracism, rape, torture, and even execution to "follow the word of the virgin life as it was spoken by Paul." Even the apostle himself, the story says, at first would not take her seriously, refusing to baptize her or to accept her as a fellow evangelist. So she, in desperation, baptized herself, and persisted in pursuing Paul until he reluctantly granted her his blessing. Having achieved her vocation,

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Thecla became a famous teacher and holy woman, revered for centuries throughout the eastern churches as a beloved saint.

Although many legends grew up around Thecla,³² and some scholars regard her story as fiction, she may well have been an actual person.³³ Whether or not she in fact heard Paul himself preach, she—and thousands like her—welcomed such radical versions of the gospel. Following Jesus' advice, these young disciples broke with their families and refused to marry, declaring themselves now members of "God's family." Their vows of celibacy served many converts as a declaration of independence from the crushing pressures of tradition and of their families, who ordinarily arranged marriages at puberty and so determined the course of their children's lives. As early as the second century of the Christian Era, and for many generations thereafter, Christian celibates may have invoked Thecla's example to justify the right of Christian women to baptize and to preach. Even two hundred years later, Christian women who chose the way of asceticism, whether living in solitude at home or in monastic communities founded and often financed by wealthy women, called themselves "new Theclas."³⁴

The enormous popularity of Thecla's story suggests how the Christian movement might have appealed to young people, to Thecla's adolescent peers. Yet other popular stories—themselves probably legends—tell how the radical message seized some of their older, married sisters and brothers and irrevocably changed their lives too. According to another widely told Christian story, the *Act of Thomas*, the lovely Mygdonia, wife of an aristocrat in India, having heard that the Christian apostle Thomas was about to arrive in her city, was filled with curiosity and immediately set out to hear him. But as her elegant litter, carried by slaves, approached and parred the crowd surrounding Thomas, the apostle pointedly ignored Mygdonia and, turning instead to her slaves, addressed to them these vehement words:

"This blessing and warning are *for you* who are 'heavy laden.' For although you are human beings, those who have authority over you think that you are not human beings, as they are. . . . They do not know that all people are alike before God, whether slave or free."

Mygdonia, shocked and chagrined by these words, sprang from her litter and threw herself on the ground before Thomas, acknowledging.

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ing that "we act, indeed, like irrational animals," and asked him to pray for her and teach her the gospel.³⁵

Thomas consented, and Mygdonia discovered through his words a sense of inner freedom and spiritual dignity she had never before experienced. Thomas persuaded her, too, that to follow the gospel she must devote herself to celibacy, even within her marriage: "This sordid communion with your husband will mean nothing if you are deprived of true communion."³⁶ Convinced by Thomas's words, Mygdonia turned away from her husband's anxious and loving pleas and then rejected his "shameless" sexual overtures. At first pleading headaches, she finally struck him on the face and ran naked from the bedroom, ripping down the bedroom curtains to cover herself as she escaped to sleep with her childhood nurse. Although her husband grieved, suffered, and raged, he finally yielded, and, receiving baptism himself, agreed to live with her henceforth in celibate marriage.

Such popular stories about the apostles graphically describe how some early Christian preachers, attempting to persuade men and women to "undo the sin of Adam and Eve" by choosing celibacy, disrupted the traditional order of family, village, and city, encouraging believers to reject ordinary family life for the sake of Christ.³⁷

But many other Christians sharply protested. Such radical asceticism was not, they argued, the primary meaning of Jesus' gospel, and they simply ignored the more radical implications of what Jesus and Paul taught. One anonymous Christian living a generation after Paul wrote to a pagan friend that far from rejecting marriage and procreation, "Christians marry, like everyone else; they beget children; but they do not destroy fetuses."³⁸ His contemporary, the Christian teacher Barnabas, a convert from Judaism, assumes that Christians who follow the "way of light" act like pious Jews, abstaining only from sexual practices that violate marriage or frustrate its fulfillment in legitimate procreation.³⁹ Clement of Alexandria, a liberal, urbane, and sophisticated Christian teacher living in Egypt more than a hundred years after Paul (c. 180 C.E.), denounced celibates and beggars who say that they are "imitating the Lord" who never married, nor had any possessions in the world, and who boast that they understand the gospel better than anyone else.⁴⁰

For Clement, such extremists are arrogant, foolish and wrong.⁴¹ But how could such Christians as Barnabas or Clement, who

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sought a more moderate message, deal with certain well-known sayings of Jesus—for example, his categorical rejection of divorce, or his statement that "if anyone does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26)? The impact of such sayings might have limited the Christian movement to only the most zealous converts. Within two generations of Jesus' death, however, some of his followers dared to change the wording of such extreme sayings and insert modifying phrases. The author of the Gospel of Matthew, for example, finding Jesus' prohibition of divorce impossible, added a phrase that apparently allowed divorce in the case of the wife's infidelity: *Μὴ ἐὰν πορεύῃς*, "for immorality," a crucial exception that placed Jesus on the side of teacher Shammai. So according to Matthew, Jesus says, "Whoever divorces his wife, *except for immorality*, and marries another, is guilty of adultery" (Matthew 19:9). And Matthew softens what, according to Luke, Jesus had said about hating one's family: Matthew rephrases the statement so that Jesus says, "Whoever *loves* father or mother *more than me* is not worthy of me; and whoever *loves* son or daughter *more than me* is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37).

The author of Matthew not only apparently changes words and injects phrases but goes further, deliberately juxtaposing Jesus' more radical sayings with more moderate sayings on the same theme. According to Matthew, for example, Jesus concludes his ringing rejection of divorce—"What God has joined together, let no man put asunder"—with Matthew's modification *allowing* for divorce—"Whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another, is guilty of adultery" (Matthew 19:9). Only a few verses later, Matthew juxtaposes Jesus' promise of great rewards to "every one that has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name's sake" (19:29), with Jesus' reaffirmation of the traditional commandment "Honor your father and mother" (19:19). Thus Matthew, obviously aware of such discrepancies, and perhaps embarrassed by them, implicitly discriminates between two types of saying—and two levels of discipleship. Matthew gives the reader the impression that Jesus' message and the movement he inspired need not place extreme demands upon every believer, but only upon would-be spiritual heroes—those who want to follow Jesus' command to "be perfect" (Matthew 5:48). But followers of Jesus who want to stay home with their spouses and children and continue to support their aging parents can, according to Mat-

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thew, remain committed to family life and still find their place within the Christian community.

Certain followers of Paul, concerned to make Paul's message equally accessible, and finding some statements in his first letter to the Corinthians, for example, too extreme, decided that he could not have meant what he said there, much less what enthusiastically ascetic Christians took him to mean. Thus some of Paul's followers proceeded to compose, in Paul's name, letters of their own designed to correct what they believed were dangerous misinterpretations of Paul's teaching. Several of these anonymous admirers of Paul, a generation or two after his death, forged letters, filling them with personal details of Paul's life and greetings to his friends, hoping to make them appear authentic. Many people—then and now—have assumed that these letters are genuine, and five of them were in fact incorporated into the New Testament as "letters of Paul." Even today, scholars dispute which are authentic and which are not. Most scholars, however, agree that Paul actually wrote only eight of the thirteen "Pauline" letters now included in the New Testament collection: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Virtually all scholars agree that Paul himself did not write 1 or 2 Timothy or Titus—letters written in a style different from Paul's and reflecting situations and viewpoints very different from those in Paul's own letters. About the authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, debate continues; but the majority of scholars include these, too, among the "deutero-Pauline"—literally, secondarily Pauline—letters.⁴²

Although the deutero-Pauline letters differ from one another in many ways, on *practical* matters they all agree. All reject Paul's most radically ascetic views to present instead a "domesticated Paul"⁴³—a version of Paul who, far from urging celibacy upon his fellow Christians, endorses only a stricter version of traditional Jewish attitudes toward marriage and family. Just as Matthew juxtaposed Jesus' more radical sayings with modified versions of them, so the New Testament collection juxtaposes Paul's authentic letters with the deutero-Paulines, offering a version of Paul that softens him from a radical preacher into a patron saint of domestic life.

The anonymous author of 1 Timothy, for example, makes "Paul" attack as demon-inspired those "liars . . . who forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods which God created" (1 Timothy 4:1-3), taking aim, presumably, at the preachers of asceticism, who depict Paul as one of themselves, indeed as their model.⁴⁴

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Denouncing the characterizations of Paul that appear in such works as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the author of 2 Timothy almost goes so far as to take sides with Thecla's mother, warning people to avoid those who

make their way into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses, who will listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

(2 TIMOTHY 3:6-7)

The conservative Paul of Timothy directly contradicts the advice Paul gives in 1 Corinthians, where he urges virgins and widows to remain unmarried. According to 1 Timothy, Paul, concerned that the presence of unmarried women among the Christians may arouse suspicions and scandalous gossip, declares, "I would have the younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households, and give the enemy no occasion to revile us" (1 Timothy 5:14). Dismissing ascetic discipline as mere "bodily training" (1 Timothy 4:8), worth little for developing piety, this "Paul" warns his readers to "have nothing to do with godless and silly myths" (1 Timothy 4:7). As Dennis MacDonald persuasively shows, the author of 1 Timothy is denouncing, in all probability, such stories as those of Thecla and Mygdona, which circulated for generations, perhaps especially among women storytellers. (See notes 33 and 34, above.) Challenging those who, like Thecla herself, claim that women have the right to teach and baptize, the author of 1 Timothy recalls Eve's sin and commands that women must

learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet women will be saved through bearing children, if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

(1 TIMOTHY 2:11-15)

Read this way—as it still is read by the majority of Christian churches—the story of Eve both proves woman's natural weakness and gullibility and defines her present role. Chastened by reminders of Eve's sin, deprived of all authority, women must silently submit to their husbands, grateful that they too may be saved, provided they adhere to their traditional domestic roles.⁴⁵ The "Paul" of 1 Timothy goes so far as to judge even men's leadership abilities on the basis of their domestic roles as family patriarchs:

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Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife. . . . He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful . . . for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church?

(1 TIMOTHY 3:2-5)

Thus, whereas the authentic Paul declares in his letter to the Corinthians, "I wish that all were as I myself am," voluntarily celibate, the "Paul" of 1 Timothy urges marriage and family upon men and women alike.

The Letter to the Hebrews expresses a positive reverence for marriage—and specifically for sexually active marriage: "Marriage is honorable unto all, and the marriage bed is not polluted" (Hebrews 13:4). The deuterio-Pauline letter to the Ephesians calls ascetic Christians foolish, insisting that "no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it" (Ephesians 5:29). The author of Ephesians goes so far as to attribute to Paul a vision of Adam and Eve—and, consequently, of marriage itself—as symbolizing the "great mystery . . . of Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32). "Paul's" Christian vision of marriage confirms, this author claims, the traditional patriarchal pattern of marriage,

for the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church. . . . As the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.

(EPHESIANS 5:23-24)

Taking his cue from Paul's saying that "the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband" (1 Corinthians 11:3), the author of Ephesians explains that since the man, like Christ, is the head, and the woman his body, "so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies," and wives, in turn, should submit to the higher judgment of their husbands, as their "heads" (Ephesians 5:28-33).

Within thirty to fifty years of Paul's death, then, partisans of the ascetic Jesus—and of the ascetic Paul—were contending against those who advocated a much more moderate Jesus and a much more conservative Paul. Like relatives in a large family bantling over the inheritance, both ascetic and nonascetic Christians laid claim to the legacies of Jesus and Paul, both sides insisting that they alone were the true heirs.

Many Christians—perhaps the majority—were more concerned to accommodate themselves to ordinary social and marital structures than to challenge them. By the end of the second century, as the

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majority of churches accepted as canonical the list of gospels and letters now formed into the collection we call the New Testament, the moderates could claim victory and so dominate all future Christian churches. Writers now revered as the fathers of the church seized upon the tamed and domesticated version of Paul to be found in the deutero-Paulines as a primary weapon against the ascetic extremists. Clement of Alexandria, writing more than a hundred years after Paul's death, himself far less militant and far more sympathetic toward conventional social and family life than the apostle, spoke for the majority when he argued that the ascetics had exaggerated and misunderstood Paul's teaching.⁴⁶ Clement resolved to win back for the majority the disputed territory of the gospels and Paul's letters. Taking on his opponents' arguments point for point, Clement began by saying that although Jesus never married, he did not intend for his human followers, in this respect at least, to follow his example:

the reason that Jesus did not marry was that, in the first place, he was already engaged, so to speak, to the church; and, in the second place, he was not an ordinary man.⁴⁷

Ascetically inclined Christians had argued that Jesus' words prove that he advocated celibacy: why else, they asked, would he have praised women whose "wombs never bore," or men who "made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven"? Clement admits that such sayings are puzzling, but he avoids the issue that they raise by refusing to take them literally. He maintains that Jesus could not have meant by "eunuch" what most readers assume (a celibate man). Instead, "what Jesus meant," Clement clumsily argues, "is that a married man who has divorced his wife because of her infidelity should not *remarry*."⁴⁸

What about Paul, who remained, as he boasted, voluntarily celibate; or Peter, who, according to Luke 18:28, left his home to follow Jesus? Paul himself tells us, Clement could argue, that Peter, like "other apostles and the brothers of the Lord," traveled with his wife at church expense (1 Corinthians 9:5)! Then, in a passage that surely would have surprised Paul, Clement argues that Paul too was married: "The only reason he did not take [his wife] with him is that it would have been an inconvenience for his ministry."⁴⁹

When Clement attacks ascetic interpretations of Paul's message, he finds in the deutero-Pauline letters all the ammunition he needs. For example, "to those who slander marriage," he replies by quoting the antiscetic Paul of 1 Timothy.⁵⁰ But when he confronts the

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authentic letters, Clement finds his task much harder. Insisting, however, that the same man wrote both groups of letters, Clement skillfully interweaves passages from the authentic and the deutero-Pauline letters. Thus Clement, and the majority of Christians ever since, can claim that Paul endorses *both* marriage and celibacy:

In general, all the letters of the apostle teach self-control and continence, and contain numerous instructions about marriage, begetting children, and domestic life, but they nowhere exclude self-controlled marriage.⁵¹

Clement rejects, above all, the claim that Adam and Eve's sin was to engage in sexual intercourse—a view common among such Christian teachers as Tatian the Syrian, who taught that the fruit of the tree of knowledge conveyed *carnal* knowledge. Tatian had pointed out that after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they became sexually aware: "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Genesis 3:7). Other interpreters agreed that the accuracy of this interpretation is proved in Genesis 4:1, where the Hebrew verb "to know" (*yada*) connotes sexual intercourse: "And Adam *knew* his wife, and she conceived, and bore a son." Tatian blamed Adam for inventing marriage, believing that for this sin God expelled Adam and his partner in crime from Paradise.⁵² The distinguished ascetic Julius Cassianus instead blamed Satan, not Adam, for inventing sexual intercourse. According to Cassianus, Satan "borrowed this practice from the irrational animals, and persuaded Adam to have sexual union with Eve."⁵³ But Clement denounces all such views. Sexual intercourse, he declares, was not sinful, but part of God's original—and "good"—creation: "Nature led [Adam and Eve], like the irrational animals, to procreate";⁵⁴ "and," Clement might well have added, "when I say *nature*, I mean *God*." Clement says that those who engage in procreation are not sinning but "cooperating with God in his work of creation."⁵⁵ Thus Clement confirms the traditional Jewish conviction, expressed in the *deutero-Pauline letters*, that legitimate procreation is a good work, blessed by God from the day of human creation.

If engaging in sexual intercourse was *not* the sin of Adam and Eve, what *was* that first and fatal transgression? Such fathers of the church as Clement and Irenaeus insist that the first sin was disobeying God's command. Yet even Clement and his contemporary Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons, although eager to exempt sexual desire from

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primary blame for the fall, admit that, as they imagined it, "man's first disobedience" and the fall did, in fact, take sexual form. Clement carefully explains that the disobedience of Adam and Eve involved not what they did, but how they did it. As Clement imagines the scene, Adam and Eve, like impatient adolescents, rushed into sexual union before they had received their Father's blessing. Irenaeus explains that Adam and Eve were, in fact, underage:

For having been created just a short time before, they had no understanding of procreation of children. It was necessary that first they should come to adult age, and then "multiply" from that time onwards.⁵⁶

Clement blames Adam, who, he says, "desired the fruit of marriage before the proper time, and so fell into sin. . . they were impelled to do it more quickly than was proper because they were still young, and had been seduced by deceit."⁵⁷ Irenaeus adds that Adam's guilty response shows that he was well aware that sexual desire had incited him to sin, for he covered himself and Eve with scratchy fig leaves, "while there were many other leaves which would have irritated his body much less."⁵⁸ Thus Adam punished the very organs that had led them into sin.

The attitudes that Clement and Irenaeus helped to shape more than one hundred years after Paul's death set the standard of Christian behavior for centuries—indeed, for nearly two thousand years. What would prevail in Christian tradition was not only the stark sayings of the gospels attributed to Jesus and the encouragements to celibacy that Paul urges upon believers in 1 Corinthians, but versions of these austere teachings modified to suit the purposes of the churches of the first and second centuries. Clement and his colleagues established, too, a durable double standard that endorses marriage, but only as second best to celibacy. Clement and his fellow Christians constructed elaborate arguments, drawn primarily from the Hebrew Bible and the deuterio-Pauline letters, to show that marriage, for Christians as well as for Jews, is a positive act, involving "cooperation with God's work of creation."⁵⁹ Yet Clement can revere it as such only by going back to the consensus Jesus challenged. Clement, influenced, no doubt, by Stoic philosophers who agreed with him in principle, insisted that marriage finds its sole legitimate purpose—sexual intercourse its only rationale—in procreation.⁵⁹ Thus even Clement, certainly the most liberal of the fathers of the church, and one who, more emphatically than any other,

affirms God's blessing upon marriage and procreation, expresses deep ambivalence toward sexuality—an ambivalence that has resounded throughout Christian history for two millennia.

Clement believes that Jesus meant both to confirm and to transform traditional patterns of marriage; that he did not challenge the patriarchal structure of marriage (which for Clement expresses the natural superiority of men, as well as God's punishment upon Eve); but that Jesus did intend to eradicate such pagan sexual practices as incest, adultery, "unnatural intercourse," homosexuality, abortion, and infanticide, as well as the Hebrew practices of polygamy and divorce.

Marriage, now monogamous and indissoluble, as God originally intended it, may become, for believers, a "sacred image." But to experience it as such, the believer must be purged of the sexual passion that led Adam and Eve into sin. The married Christian must not only subordinate desire to reason but strive to annihilate desire entirely:

Our ideal is not to experience desire at all. . . . We should do nothing from desire. Our will is to be directed only toward what is necessary. For we are children not of desire but of will. A man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practice continence so that it is not desire he feels for his wife. . . . that he may beget children with a chaste and controlled will.⁶⁰

To accomplish this, as one might imagine, is not easy. "The gospel," as Clement reads it, not only restricts sexuality to marriage but, even within marriage, limits it to specific acts intended for procreation. To engage in marital intercourse for any other reason is to "do injury to nature."⁶¹ Clement excludes not only such counterproductive practices as oral and anal intercourse but also intercourse with a menstruating, pregnant, barren, or menopausal wife, and, for that matter, with one's wife "in the morning," "in the daytime," or "after dinner." Clement warns, indeed, that

not even at night, although in darkness, is it fitting to carry on immodestly or indecently, but with modesty, so that whatever happens, happens in the light of reason. . . . for even that union which is legitimate is still dangerous, except in so far as it is engaged in procreation of children.⁶²

Even at best, however, Christian marriage remains inferior to chastity. "Chaste marriage," in which both partners devote them-

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selves to celibacy, is better than a sexually active one. To the dedicated Christian,

his wife, after conception, is as a sister, and is judged as if of the same father; who only recalls her husband when she looks at the children; as one destined to become a sister in reality after putting off the flesh, which separates and limits the knowledge of those who are spiritual by the specific characteristics of the sexes.⁶³

Only spouses who are celibate and thereby recover, so to speak, their virginity transcend the whole structure of bodily existence and recover the spiritual equality Adam and Eve lost through the fall,

for souls, by themselves, are equal. Souls are "neither male nor female," when "they no longer marry nor are given in marriage" [cf. Luke 20:35].⁶⁴

Such, Clement says, was the marriage of the blessed apostles, and such their perfect control over their feelings even in the closest human relationships. So, too, the apostle says, "Let him who marries be as if he were not married" [cf. 1 Corinthians 7:29], requiring that marriage should not be enslaved to passion. . . . thus the soul acquires a mental disposition corresponding to the gospel in every relation of life.⁶⁵

Like Clement, the majority of Christians for the past two thousand years have chosen to maintain simultaneously Jesus' most extreme—even shocking—sayings, such as those prohibiting divorce and encouraging renunciation, together with others that modify their severity. By the end of the second century, Christians, as we have seen, had also incorporated within the New Testament a similar double image of Paul and his message. The churches that collected Paul's letters during the second century generally included, first of all, the authentic letters, which express Paul's own complex and often ambivalent attitudes, ranging from his preference for celibacy to his admission that "the weak" are better off married than promiscuous.⁶⁶ But the majority of Christians chose the domesticated Paul over the ascetic one and tolerated contradictory statements attributed to the apostle (just as Matthew attributes contradictory statements to Jesus himself). In this way, Christians could attract into the movement those who were married—and even divorced—as well as those eager for celibacy. Clement, like most of his contemporaries, chose to subordinate Jesus' calls for radical renunciation and to endorse instead procreation within marriage—as Jesus and Paul did

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not—not only as the normal, but even as the sanctified, course of Christian life. But Clement and his fellows did not renounce the ascetic ideal entirely. Instead, they used the diversity of New Testament sources to establish an extraordinary view of marriage and celibacy; for Clement's views on marriage virtually ensure that anyone who takes them seriously will judge himself or herself to be deficient by their standard. And Clement goes on to invite to the "angelic life" those eager few who shun the dangerous shoals of married life. For continence and virginity are, he assumes, better still—certainly safer, and far holier.

As the Christian movement, in Clement's time and later, became more complex, gathering hundreds of thousands of converts from Rome and Greece, from Africa and Asia, and throughout the regions of Spain and Gaul, the message of Jesus and Paul, intended originally for a largely Hebrew constituency, had to be refracted through that increasingly diverse movement. Jesus' radical call to repent and purify oneself to prepare for the Kingdom of God remained, for many, the primary point of reference. Simultaneously, however, Christians developed multiple images of Jesus and Paul and multiple interpretations of their message to suit a variety of mundane and spiritual purposes.

What made such an austere message, in its many versions, attractive to so many people? How did Christianity succeed in becoming the religion of the Roman Empire? In the next chapters we take up these questions and see how, within its practical severity, many saw a new vision of human nature—one that had power to validate and transform the lives of the multitudes who heard it.

These people have heard in the
Christian message of Adam & Eve part of the
divine image (the divine image of which
every man and woman is made) and have
used this message to show that
celibacy is a part of the ideal of the Kingdom of
God. The concept of human nature,
which is the basis of the Christian message,
is a part of the divine image.