CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE REASON FOR THE PERSECUTION OF PAUL AND THE OBSCURITY OF ACTS

[261] The Eranos Yearbooks, for which Professor Scholem did so much, have shown by many examples how certain patterns recur in the history of religion. This recurrence greatly increases the importance of Scholem’s specialized studies, for instance, of the Sabbatians and of the Frankists. Not only have these studies clarified areas hitherto obscure in the history of Judaism, but they have provided students of all religions with exemplary dissections of extreme cases of religious pathology, cases in which, just because they are extreme, it is possible to see the full development and understand the essential nature of tendencies that in less extreme cases remain obscure and sometimes are barely recognizable.

One such case is the early history of Christianity, in which we find a similar complex of Messianic claims and antinomian consequences, secret doctrines and subterranean conventicles. In Jesus’ Attitude Towards the Law,¹ I argued that the essentials of this complex went back to Jesus himself, that his teaching included not only two types of legal interpretation—one for ordinary Jews, the other for the crowds who followed him, whom he considered the bridal party of the Messiah (Mark 2:19)—but also a secret initiation by which he admitted his intimates to the Kingdom of God and thereby enabled them to escape from the authority of the Law (Luke 16:16; Matt 11:11).

One of my arguments for this theory was drawn from the persecution of the early Christians by their fellow Jews. I argued that this persecution is too well attested to be denied (2 Cor 11:24f.; 1 Thess 2:15f.; Mark 13:9 and parallels; Matt 23:34; Luke 11:49; John 7:13; 9:22; 12:42; 16:2; 19:38; Acts 4:2ff.; 5:17ff.; 6:11f.; 8:1ff.; 12:3 and many passages to be cited later in this essay). It is also too serious to be explained by the supposition that Jesus’ teaching differed [262] from that of the other teachers of his time only in such minor details as we find disputed between the authorities of Rabbinic literature. Similarly, the persecutions cannot be explained solely by reference to the peculiar Messianic beliefs of the Christians, since peculiarities of Messianic belief seem to have been matters of comparative indifference in the first century, provided they did not lead to

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peculiarities of practice. What we must find, therefore, is some peculiarity of primitive Christian practice sufficient to explain the persecution. This peculiarity, I argued, was Jesus' teaching of freedom from the Law and the libertine consequences which he and his followers drew from it.

In the present article I wish to support the above argument by special consideration of the case of Paul, whose letters are the earliest Christian documents known to us (probably earlier by a quarter of a century than any other Christian text now preserved as an independent document).

As to the main outlines of Paul's teaching concerning the Law there is little doubt—they are set forth at length in his own letters, especially Romans and Galatians. It is worth remarking, however, that Paul is not antinomian. The Mosaic Law, he insists, is holy and spiritual (Rom 7:12, 16); it not only was, but still is, valid; even Christians who accept its yoke are bound to follow it in all details (Gal 5:3). But no man is capable of obeying it perfectly (Rom 3:20; 7:21ff.; Gal 2:16; 3:11). Therefore the practical effect of its revelation of the demands of God is merely to turn man from an unintentional to a deliberate transgressor (Rom 3:20; 5:13; 7:7). This, indeed, was why God gave it, that men might recognize their sinfulness and so be led to Jesus, the true means of justification (Rom 5:20; Gal 3:19-24). Liberation from the Law is effected by a magical ceremony, baptism, in which the recipient is identified with Jesus (Rom 6:1-11; Gal 2:19ff.; 3:27). Jesus had died and thereby both satisfied and escaped the Law; he had also risen again and was now living a new life on which the Law had no claims; the believer identified with him by baptism participated at once in the death, the escape, and the new life of freedom (locc. cit. Rom 7:5ff.; 8:10f.). The notion that death sets a man free from the claims of the Law probably came to Paul from his Pharisaic background (cf. Shabbath 151b etc.). The free Christian might, indeed, condescend to go through the [263] forms of legal observance, either to win converts (1 Cor 9:20) or to keep from offending conservative Christians (1 Cor 10:28-32) but this was mere pretense, and did not modify the essential doctrine.

It is at once apparent—especially in the light of the better documented Sabbatian and Frankist histories—that these doctrines would immediately lead to serious trouble. Especially dangerous would be the permission of occasional conformity, which could easily be made an excuse for hypocrisy and would make it possible for legally impure and untrustworthy men to penetrate observant communities. It

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2 Evidence for this will be found in my article "What Is Implied by the Variety of Messianic Figures," volume one, chapter twelve, above.