Introduction

This is a tale of passion, illusion and controversy. It retells the magnificent, though troubling story of the growth and triumph of Christianity in the Roman empire during the first three centuries after Jesus' birth. Christianity triumphed, but only after prolonged struggles with the Roman state, with competing religions and with internal dissidents. So in order to understand the growth of early Christianity – perhaps 'Christianities' would reflect its diversity better – we have to set it in its Jewish and pagan contexts, and we have to trace its fierce internal controversies.

The real Jesus was a Jew, the leader of a radical revisionist movement within Judaism. It seems improbable that he had any intention of founding a new religion. But after his execution, ordered by a combination of Jewish priests and Roman officials, the Jesus movement rapidly evolved into an independent religion, persecuted and protected by the Roman state. Three centuries later, against all the odds, the Roman emperor Constantine (306–37 CE) converted to Christianity. All his successors (except briefly Julian the Apostate, 361–3) were Christian. By the end of the fourth century, pagan rites had been banned, and Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman state. Within three more centuries, the heartlands of early Christianity – Palestine, Syria, Egypt and north Africa – had all become predominantly Muslim. Religious allegiance followed political power.

Religions create, and thrive on, passionate commitment, and passionate conflicts. Jesus is a symbol both of devotion and disagreement. Pagans and most Jews thought that it was absurd to claim that Jesus was the Son of God. And early Christians disagreed fervently among themselves as to whether Jesus was wholly divine, or wholly human, or a subtle mixture of human and divine. Modern believers have tried to

forget these ancient debates, and have largely succeeded. But these were only some of the beliefs, which early Christians died and later killed for. They help to remind us that there were then, as there still are today, many Christianities. And it was by no means predictable which orthodoxies would win.

This book is an experiment in how to write religious history. It started with a research project on early Christianity at King's College, Cambridge, comprising five scholars of different nationalities, religious outlooks and academic specialisms (American, British, German; Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, agnostic, atheist; Jewish history, Roman history, New Testament, church history, rabbinics, patristics, theology). Unsurprisingly, seen in retrospect, we couldn't work together. We disagreed about almost everything, although (as we now claim) we all learnt a huge amount from each other.

So what did I learn? Primarily that I didn't know enough, and sometimes didn't want to learn, about other faiths. Beneath the liberal veneer, there was a reluctance, a deep resistance to be open-minded, to unlearn the half-unconscious absorptions of childhood and adolescence. Put another way, my atheism was indelibly Protestant. And religious history is inevitably affected by what writers, and their readers, believe. But history is, or should be, a subtle combination of empathetic imagination and critical analysis.

This history plays on several irreconcilable tensions. What was it like to be there? We don't and cannot know. And yet surely empathetic imagination should play its part. We have to imagine what Romans, pagans, Jews and Christians thought, felt, experienced, believed. But, as with baroque music played on ancient instruments, we listen with twentieth-century ears. We read ancient sources with modern minds. And if we report what we do know in quasi-objective, analytical terms, then inevitably our whole language of understanding and interpretation is deeply influenced by the modern world, and who we are in it. We cannot reproduce antiquity. And in religious history there is necessarily subjectivity. We know from experience that other writers, and readers, are very likely and fully entitled to disagree.

So why then don't we incorporate this empathetic wonder, knowledge, pseudo-objective analysis, ignorance, competing assumptions and disagreements into the text of the book? That's what I've tried to do. Successive chapters explore Roman paganism, Judaism, and early Christianity in their variety and interactions. But they also explore different methods of historical reportage, description and analysis; and some of my colleagues' objections.

We start in ancient Pompeii. Two modern time-travellers report what they've seen during a brief stay, timed just before the eruption of Vesuvius. By this tactic, I wanted to share the liveliness, pervasiveness and passion of paganism through texts and artefacts. But inevitably, we see the Roman world only through modern eyes; the alien culture of ancient Rome has to be interpreted by us. Time-travellers stand for one version of history, fictionalised in order to expose the difficulties which all historians face in recreating the past. But time-travellers have a restricted view; they can report only what we already know. I'm far too inhibited an academic to make things up. This is not a novel, even if it has a few novel-like characteristics. And in a letter incorporated into the text of the book, one of my liberal colleagues roundly criticises the whole experiment: innovative perhaps, rumbustious, but from an intellectual standpoint fatally flawed. Even the end notes, which cautiously document every step and most words, can't fend off her criticism.

The second chapter tries to go one better. But the problem is slightly different: how to evoke the flavour of an obsessional sect of fervently committed Jews from Qumran, the site of the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947. The tiny Qumran sect of ascetic males opens a small window on the religious ferment in Roman Palestine in the first century, before the Jewish rebellion of 66–73 CE. These Jews were not proto-Christians – far from it, though they shared with Jewish-Christians both religious passion and hopes about the Messiah(s). They highlight the intense religiosity in Palestine, during the period in which Christianity first arose. But the Dead Sea Scrolls are repetitive and difficult to understand. So here I try to capture both the intensity of their religious passion and the difficulty of reporting it now, by using a quintessentially modern idiom, a TV drama, in which all that we see/read is mediated by a simplifying process of (mis)interpretation. This TV play is set partly in ancient Rome, partly in the modern world. The Qumran myth is replayed, as all old myths should be, with ancient and modern players, and with authentic words. But in the modern medium, much is also changed; there are, for example, slippages of time and character. That too is unlikely to please my critical

colleagues. So they too are given a voice, though only after the show is over. For me, the hero of this play is the TV camera itself, which, like a historical source, arbitrarily selects what it chooses to show, never lies and never understands.

The third chapter, on the evolution of early Christianity as a revolutionary movement, is a conventional, objective analysis. This 'objectivity' is the product of my unbeliever's distance from the Christian sources, but then this unbeliever-stance might not seem 'objective' to believers. Indeed, what would an objective account of early Christianity look like? This chapter concentrates on the evolution of the New Testament, on the growth of an orthodox tradition of belief, on orthodox Christians' increasing efforts to impose a unity of faith through a hierarchy of priests and the canonical New Testament. It finishes with a study of persecutions and martyrs, which partly subverts convention by arguing that the Roman state largely protected Christians. And it argues that Christian Martyr Acts, which are dramatic accounts of Christians' trials and sufferings, functioned more as an alternative than as a stimulus to martyrdom. Reading about martyrs' bravery and faith recreated the performance, with only vicarious suffering.

The fourth chapter, called 'Jesus and his Twin Brother', retells some of the religious stories from the secret (apocryphal), non-orthodox writings, which from the second century onwards supplemented the New Testament. And Jesus' twin brother is an icon for Christian religious inventiveness. Some Christians, at least, thought they needed to pursue salvation by enlarging the divine within themselves. They needed an intermediary between their own inadequate humanity and the transcendently divine Jesus. Jesus' twin brother is a symbol of believers' need to search for God within themselves. The chapter is split round a letter from a German academic, who trenchantly objects to the infantilisation produced in the reader by these stories. Stories, he claims, are no substitute for rigorous intellectual analysis. Religious history, if not religion, is too serious for stories. But in the Roman world stories, not analysis, were the stuff of religious persuasion. And story-telling used to be the stuff of history.

The second half of the book has a similar structure. We begin again with our two time-travellers, Martha and James. But this time they visit Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor (Turkey) to see something of the variety of pagan practice and religious passion. It's a radically different world of

disease, dirt and animal sacrifice, of temples, professional priests, magic, blood, violence, short lives and long stories. Romantically, we often imagine Greece and Rome as our cultural ancestors. We tend to forget that the strangely alien cultures of Egypt and Syria were important parts of the Roman empire, and the cradle of early Christianity. Suitably, in a story about religion, at the end of the chapter James is unjustly arrested, thrown into prison, summarily tried by a Roman judge, and strung up to be tortured. But in the nick of time, he is saved, by a miracle of modern science. This naive fiction invites the reader to reflect on the difference between the unbelievable, the believable and the believed. Some early Christians believed that Jesus too did not actually suffer on the cross, but escaped by a magical illusion.

Chapter Six comprises a 'previously unpublished' letter written by a recent convert to Christianity in the early third century seeking advice from a more experienced believer. The new Christian, Macarius, has (unwisely) accepted a dinner-party invitation from an old friend, still pagan. At dinner, they all discuss religion, and the pagans take the opportunity to offload all their pent-up criticisms of upstart Christianity. Ancients were not as kindly as modern liberals. Much of what they say is probably untrue, but that did not necessarily reduce its force; besides, Macarius probably exaggerates Christian virtues. Even so, he doesn't manage to say all that he wanted to, and subsequently thinks of. To add insult to injury, at dinner, he is sat next to a Jew (as though there were no difference) who comforts him by giving his scurrilous account of Jesus' life: all pure invention. Long before the evening ends, most of the guests have turned from serious discussion to ghost stories and dancing girls. Macarius leaves bruised, but with his convictions undiminished.

Chapter Seven recreates the rival, semi-Christian universes of Gnostics and Manichees, by retelling their versions of creation. In creation, we see the nature of God(s) and of the humans they made. Stories of creation set the stage for the first interaction between God and humans. They allow believers to explore the nature(s) of God(s) and humanity. And since practically no one nowadays is either Gnostic or Manichee, they provide us with an ideal template for perceiving how believers construct God(s), and their religion's foundation myths. For Gnostics and Manichees, one basic problem was why did a good and omnipotent God allow evil into the world. The Gnostics' typical answer was that it was a tragic

and stupid mistake, committed by God's youngest daughter, Sophia= Wisdom. Manichees saw world history as a continuous struggle between the forces of Light and Dark, good and evil. Orthodox Christians eventually followed Augustine in considering evil as humans' fatal flaw, inherited by all of us from Adam and Eve. The chapter ends with Augustine's death-bed nightmare, previously unrecorded, in which he dreams scarily that some of his beliefs were ill-founded.

The final chapter is a study of Jesus, not so much of the historical Jesus, but of the many and varied Jesuses of history constructed over time. Jesus, I argue, is not just, nor even primarily, a historical person. Rather, like the sacred heroes of other great religions, he is a mirage, an image in believers' minds, shaped but not confined by the images projected in the canonical gospels. To be sure, his canonical historicity is part, but only part, of the image. But as with all beliefs, most is imagination and inspiration. History here is a history of representations, not of facts. So ancient Christians constructed many Jesuses, as modern believers still do. Fixation on any particular version as the true Jesus is more a matter of believer-choice, than of historical truth or falsity.

The structure of the book is like a triple helix of multi-coloured and interwoven strands. The three major strands, Judaism, paganism and Christianity, were each in themselves diverse, complex and changing. They continually interacted, both inside themselves and with their own variants, and externally with each other. Patterns of identity and fusion are visible, much more in the illusory calm of retrospection, than they ever were to contemporaries. And so to re-experience the thoughts, feelings, practices and images of religious life in the Roman empire, in which orthodox Christianity emerged in all its vibrant variety, we have to combine ancient perceptions, however partial, with modern understandings, however misleading. That is the tension and the excitement of recreating and reading a history of a vanished world, which was once full of harsh realities, dreams, demons and gods.

CHAPTER ONE

A World Full of Gods

1 INTRODUCTION

I could see no other way. Hesitantly, I placed the following advertisement in London's *Time Out*:

> *Wanted Urgently,* two intrepid Time-Travellers
>
> *Destination:* Ancient Rome
>
> *Qualifications:* Applicants should be in good health, non-smokers, at least one of the successful pair will be male. Travel experience in third world essential; medical or anthropological skills an advantage. Academic knowledge of ancient Roman literature, art or history an advantage.
>
> We provide round trip, choice of status (slave, merchant etc.), appropriate retinue, language skills (Latin and Greek), impenetrable disguise, all inoculations, substantial out-of-purse expenses (by kind gift of the Royal Netherlands Coin Cabinet), free transport between towns, life insurance, and comprehensive health insurance.
>
> *Duration of trip:* 2–3 weeks. Successful applicants must keep detailed travelogue. Handsome bonus on completion.
>
> Preliminary enquiries and further details from Sarah or Charlotte, on 0171 493 4876. No time wasters.

I didn't have many decent applicants, just your usual stream of drop-outs and obsessionals. And to be frank, at first sight, neither James nor Martha (that's what they said their names were) seemed ideal, but it's a wonder what a toga can disguise. Yet they both turned out to be a fantastic success: resourceful, intelligent, and fairly knowledgeable about things Roman.

I didn't enquire too closely about their personal relations, especially when they passed the aptitude tests with flying colours and took to Latin like ducks to water. They said they wanted a break, needed the money

and had always wondered what ancient Rome was really like. Of course, I stressed the need for absolute secrecy. I didn't want others reaping the reward of our inventions. Anyhow, to my relief, they signed the exclusive publishing contract, without demur. In fact, I think they wanted to keep their trip together secret, every bit as much as I did.

In due course when the plans and technical tests were finalised, I wrote them a brief letter of confirmation

King's College
Cambridge CB2 1ST
21 June 1997

Dear Martha, Dear James,

Just to confirm our arrangements. Your trip is planned for 1 July 1997 at 0400 a.m. Please be at the Sidgwick site steps at 1100 p.m. Transport, medical, kitting out will take place then. As a precaution, please do not eat after 2 p.m. on June 30. You should both arrive at the Sidgwick site by midnight. Return will be in the late evening 21 July. We'll arrange transport home for you by taxi.

A bonus of £5,000–£10,000 will be paid to each of you on receipt of a detailed written report covering your trip. Your primary objective is to recover as much information as you can about Roman religious practices among pagans in the first three centuries CE. You have both signed a contract giving KH Inc. sole publishing, film and TV rights. Complete confidentiality about the techniques of time travel is strictly required. But you may use any information gained about the Roman world in your scholarly lives and writings after 1 January 2000.

Itinerary: Pompeii (Italy), Tebtunis (Egypt), Hierapolis (Syria), Ephesus (Turkey), Rome. Transport by holographic time-machine between locations will be provided. This will allow you a short respite for recuperation, minor recalibrations of time-period, readjustments of your interactive language-implant if necessary, opportunity to change persona and disguise, briefings on new site and entourage.

Status and Durations: In order to optimise your range of information, it would be best if you could change status and persona in each location, though final adjustments can be made in the light of your experiences.

Congratulations on being selected for this chance of a lifetime, and record-breaking experience.

From all the team, our fervent best wishes.

Keith Hopkins (Academic co-ordinator)

The contract with our technical backers specified that absolutely no details about the techniques of time-travel should be included in the historical reportage. They would release preliminary analyses in scientific journals, and in fact the *New Scientist* has already carried articles which attracted widespread attention. What follows are extracts from Martha's and James' individual accounts.

To my surprise, their final reports were exhilarating, though a bit patchy. It was not their fault, or not completely. They came back emotionally drained and quite exhausted. Their imprisonment and James' trial had been traumatising. Each novel experience crowded into the other, and they had found it very hard to find the privacy, time and even the light to write up as they went along. So the stories they came back with – conflicting of course – needed some drastic editing. But they always do, don't they? And besides, you know what publishers are like: they pretend to be easy-going, but in the end they want it all in one coherent style.

2 THE TRIP (MARTHA)

We were shit scared. The thought of going away on holiday together was fine, rather romantic actually, though of course James wouldn't admit it, even to himself. But we really didn't know if we'd get home again, and rather stupidly we didn't realise beforehand that we couldn't talk much about what had happened. Not because of the contract, which we'd signed without reading all the details, like a car-hire insurance, but because no one ever believed that we had actually broken through time-barriers, and had gone to ancient Rome and back. Some friends did ask us about it all, with a sort of amused tolerance, but their staying power was five minutes max, as though we were talking about a package holiday on the Costa Brava.

Technically, the arrangements worked out fine. We'd go to Pompeii first, partly because we thought it would be easier to find our way round a small town, not such a culture shock as Rome itself, and we had a map of the place, in our minds. We weren't allowed to take any twentieth-century artefacts, though I smuggled a pack of paracetamol, antiseptic ointment and some Tampax. Besides, no one knew how accurately the time-calibrator worked, and we thought it would be inconvenient to

postpone our visit to Pompeii and then arrive just after, or worse just when, Vesuvius erupted.

We'd agreed on status and disguises with Keith, before we left. In Pompeii, James was to be a teacher of Greek from Ephesus, Caius Stertinius Aquila, with me (a bit against the grain) as his tag-along wife, Stertinia Eirene. But we could change status between destinations. We agreed with him that variety of perspective would make the total trip more interesting. In Pompeii, we would be ambitious, Greek-speaking immigrants, semi-foreigners so to speak, whose oddities would be overlooked, while we learnt the ropes. That would give our interactive language-implants time to improve; they were designed (like teach-yourself-typing chips) to become more competent with use. The more we heard, the better we'd speak. That was the theory anyhow.

Then we'd be rich foreign tourists in Tebtunis and Hierapolis, young provincial grandees in Rome, and, for the sake of variety, skilled slaves in Ephesus. Keith promised to find us a kind owner. His promises proved as misleading as a holiday-brochure. But more of that later.

3 POMPEII (MARTHA)

We landed outside the town just before dawn, while it was still dark. Luckily there was no one around, and once we were on the road, there was nothing (we hoped) to make us conspicuous. If anything it was a relief to see real peasants trudging along towards their fields with baskets on their backs. James seemed anxious, but he said *Ave* more or less distinctly, and with increasing confidence as we went along. Soon we saw the Villa of the Mysteries on the left, and the line of grand tombs which stretch outside the town. Some are like miniature houses, with stone dining rooms outside for banquets to feast the dead. One of the grandest tombs had vivid pictures of men killing wild beasts, and of gladiators fighting and killing each other, probably at games held to commemorate the dead man. Charming.

We got to the city of the living through the city of the dead, with a pyre still smouldering from a funeral the night before. Human bodies burning, I thought, must smell like roast pork, enough to turn one vegetarian. Anyhow, we had made it to Pompeii – to judge from the tell-tale signs of damage and renovation, some time after the earthquake of 62 CE.

A peasant with a cart-load of vegetables had blocked the central arch of the gate; he was arguing vociferously with a tax-collector, levying a small percentage on goods coming into the town. We sidled through the smaller gate for pedestrians. No one paid any attention to us. So I turned round to see the outcome of the carter's argument; of course, he was paying up, and cursing feebly. But I didn't look where I was going and almost bumped into a couple of men we had been following. They had stopped to say a brief prayer at the altar and statue of Minerva, tucked into a niche just inside the gate. They were probably praying for a good day in town. So were we.

We went along with a gentle stream of others, towards the Forum – first street left, third right, I remembered from our briefing. The streets were paved with large stone blocks, and had high kerbs protecting the sidewalks, with occasional stepping stones across the road, in case of rain and to avoid the horrendous litter – no plastic bags or Coke bottles, but general garbage, vegetable peelings, donkey droppings, the occasional carcase of a cat. We saw a few live ones around, skin and bones. The dogs, wolfish-looking hounds, looked better fed, but ferocious; luckily they were usually chained. Some houses had a warning mosaic of a dog just inside the door with the motto *cave canem* (beware the dog) written below.

It all looked much more lived in than it does now, which is hardly surprising, and much more crowded (plate 13). Thinking back, what I remember most are the noises (people hammering, shouting, selling, arguing), the bright colours especially on stone columns and marble statues (which are now white, but most of them weren't then), the precipice between rich and poor (much more visible, once we'd actually been inside a few houses), the smells and flies everywhere. No wonder some rich guys went round in litters, holding roses to their noses.[1]

Our first job was to find an inn and buy some slaves (without them we'd have no street cred, and be an easy target for thieves). But, before anything else, we needed breakfast. We hadn't eaten since yesterday. 'I'd kill for a coffee,' I muttered to James. 'By the look of it, you'll have to do with some bread and goat's milk from that shop over there,' he replied laconically, in hesitant Greek, 'unless you're feeling more adventurous.' James had some greasy-looking grilled sausage, which I thought risky. I just had bread and milk; at least dieting was going to be easy here.

When we turned into Mercury Street, we both stood stock still, like

old-style Europeans amazed on first seeing Manhattan. The street was broader now, and swept relatively clean. Over the street, crowded with people between its boldly coloured walls, was a tall triumphal marble arch, with another arch echoing it further along, marking the grand entrance to the Forum. Astride the arch was an emperor on horseback, in shining bronze; and, by each arch, the grandiose marble pediment and bronze roof tiles of two temples, one as we found out, dedicated to the Good Fortune of the emperor Augustus, jutting into the street, and the other to Jupiter, which filled a whole side of the Forum. Of course, none of these buildings was tall like a skyscraper, but in the Roman scale of things, temples and emperor lorded it together, towering over us humble citizens, who walked underneath.[2]

At our level, the house walls were windowless on the ground floor, I assume to minimise risks of robbery, but they were plastered and painted. And on the paint were dozens of slogans, graffiti of every type, so that the whole surface within reach was covered, like an old-style NY subway car. There were new and old election posters for town magistrates: 'The fruit-sellers want M. Cerinius as *aedile*.' 'All the fruit-sellers want M. Holconius Priscus as *duovir*.' There were painted advertisements for a drinking house, and then just your normal clutter of scribbles: 'Down with Nucerians' (a local rival town), 'Up Pompeii' (sic), 'Vespa[sian]' (the new emperor's name), 'Aphrodite', 'Romulus', various people's names, and 'Martial is a cunt-licker.'[3] These Romans seem to have a sexual fixation. Well, now I think of it perhaps we all do. But they express it, or the men do, with phalli everywhere. But more of that later.

A couple of minutes later, through the second arch, we went into the Forum. Actually, James, who was watching a pretty young girl bending over to fill a bucket with water at a fountain, fell into the Forum, down two steps, right into the lap of a ragged beggar, sensibly squatting at the bottom. James apologised in what I thought was impressively vernacular Latin, but a guy saying a quick prayer at an altar tucked against the wall gave him a very odd stare. In his embarrassment, James reached for his purse, and gave the beggar, to judge from his reaction, an absurdly generous tip. Anyhow, the beggar thanked him effusively, and said that Good Fortune must have tripped him up.

My initial impression of Pompeii (and the whole trip confirmed it) was that there were temples and Gods, and humans praying to them, all

over the place: at the entrance to the town, at the entrance to the Forum; there were altars at crossroads, Gods in niches as you went along, with passers-by just casually blowing a kiss with their hands to the statue of a God set in a wall.[4] And of course, here in the Forum, the ceremonial centre of the town, there were temples, altars, Gods, heroes, just about everywhere we looked, to say nothing of statues of emperors and of local dignitaries, on horseback, or simply standing there, impressively impassive, in marble. Our end of the square was filled by the grand temple to Jupiter, with Vesuvius magnificently snowcapped behind. And all the rest of the buildings looked as though they could be temples too.[5]

We wandered further, into the Forum, trying to look unselfconscious, but were pestered, inevitably I suppose, by other beggars, who spotted that we were strangers, and by a sharp-eyed youth, who asked us if we wanted an inn. He knew the best. We shook him off with the experience gained in modern Egypt; we could have told him that his numerous descendants still flourished, but he wouldn't have understood. On the left was the Market Hall, filled with vegetable-sellers and shouts, and, to judge from the smell, with fish. There were lots of stalls in the Forum itself, and under the porticoes around. But they were selling food, cloth, leather and pots. We wanted something grander.

We thought we'd find a slave-trader in the commercial meeting place, the Hall of Eumachia, named after a priestess who had paid for its refurbishment. But that turned out to be a modern misconception. It was decorated rather pretentiously on the outside with statues of Roman heroes, Aeneas and Romulus (Rome's mythical founders) and Anchises (Aeneas' father). Their identification was made easier for us – and for semi-literate Pompeians, we thought – by largish stone plaques telling us who they were. This fashion for glorifying Rome's heroic past had started in the city of Rome, promoted by the emperors there. Smaller Italian towns copied it – as though Pompeii could look like Rome! We even saw an Aeneas picture above a shop in the main street. It was rather like flying the national flag to drum up custom.[6]

In fact, not everyone took this heroisation of traditional history so seriously. Inside one private house which we visited later, we saw a small obscene caricature of Aeneas and Anchises, painted with dog-heads and large drooping penises, and carrying a dice-box instead of the sacred household gods (plate 14).[7] In one sense the official propaganda had

obviously worked well enough. For a caricature to succeed, the Aeneas image had to be immediately recognisable; on the other hand, authority here was obviously not so oppressive that anti-authoritarian jokes were banned, at least so long as they were kept inside.

Anyhow, we went through the grand entrance of the Eumachia building, decorated with acanthus leaves. And it wasn't a hive of commerce, after all, more like a social meeting place. But James eventually plucked up courage and asked a group of men where we could buy slaves. Several of them made competing suggestions, but one of them said that a slave trader from Macedonia was in town. He had sold several slaves yesterday at Toranius' auction house. Some might be left over. He called a young boy over, obviously one of his slaves, and told him to guide us there.

4 BUYING A SLAVE (MARTHA)

God, they looked depressed, and shivering in spite of the spring sunshine. A gang of eight male slaves, chained in a line by their necks, slouched against a wall in the courtyard.[8] 'I'm sorry, they're sold,' the slave-trader Caprilius said, without a hint of apology. 'I haven't got much left, or not at your price,' he went on. 'Of course if you're feeling extravagant,' he winked at James like a used-car salesman producing a Rolls-Royce, and nodded to his assistant, who brought out two stunningly pretty, curly-haired boys, aged about ten.

What I wanted to say is not printable. Of course, I trust James completely, but I didn't know how native he might be induced to go. Besides, it's all very well having an interactive language-implant, so that we could speak Greek and Latin increasingly well, but what we really needed was knowledge about the culture. How did Roman wives signal no, I mean NO! to their husbands? Actually, I guessed from the slave-dealer's posture that I shouldn't have been there. This was man's business. Anyhow, as soon as I heard the price, I knew James' virtue was safe. 50,000 sesterces each (and twenty times what we expected to pay) was more than we had in the kitty. So I just looked demure. Perhaps I *was* learning the culture.

In the end, buying slaves proved harrowing but simple. We found a strapping big youth called Myrmex, who might have been a good buy but for the fact that he was quite obviously simple. He had an iron collar round his neck, not because he was really a runaway, but just in case he got lost. Later that day, we took him to a blacksmith, and had the collar taken off.[9] His back was quite scarred from old whippings, and he seemed understandably anxious about who was going to buy him, but to judge from his answers to James' questions, he seemed basically amenable.

What amazed me was the speed with which James seemed to get used to examining the bodies of the slaves on sale, as though they were animals. 'Open your mouth, strip naked, open your legs,' the Greek word for slave-dealer literally means 'body-seller'. And that's exactly how these slaves were being treated, as bodies, just like used cars in fact. We bought the other two slaves quickly enough, because effectively there wasn't much choice. Obviously, we paid far too much, to judge from the speed and amiability with which the dealer had the contract drawn-up and witnessed, and the sales tax paid. At least the contract told us the date; we had come to Pompeii in the eighth consulship of the emperor Vespasian [77 CE]. We knew what these locals didn't; lots of them were about to be wiped out by the volcano.

James bought a slave for me, a very pretty olive-skinned girl called Fotis in her late teens, from Asia Minor. We were lucky to get her – she'd arrived just too late for yesterday's auction. She'd been put on the market by her previous owner's widow, but not before she'd been branded in revenge for her ex-husband's affections. Poor girl, she kept trying to cover the mark up. And for himself James bought the ugliest fellow you could imagine, thick-lipped, pot-bellied, squinting, his whole body shook when he laughed, but with intelligent eyes and a sharp tongue. You could see that he would be a load of trouble, but he'd be smart enough to help us through the maze of Roman culture – at a price and if he wanted to. At least, he wanted us to buy him, practically begged James. 'Buy me,' he said, 'and by Isis I'll be useful to you.'[10] His name was Aesop.

Once we'd got our three slaves, we felt almost like real Romans, able to cut a figure as we went back across the Forum again, off to buy clothes for them as well as for ourselves, and to find a good room at an inn. The Forum was even busier now, perhaps because there was a sacrifice going on in front of the temple of Jupiter. It was 1 March, the birthday of Mars. A white bull wreathed in flowers stood ready for the chop, at the great altar in front of the temple. A town dignitary, looking proud, stood above our heads on the temple platform, recited a longish prayer, poured a libation and burnt incense on the smaller altar up there, and then sol-

emnly processed down the narrow temple steps, towards the bull, where near-naked slaves brandished hammer and knives, waiting to stun and kill the poor animal.

I realised that worrying about slaughter was mere sentimentality. For poor citizens of Pompeii, the bull meant a rare piece of meat, even a public banquet with free wine, or sometimes, if the meat ran out, just cakes or biscuits in the shape of the emperor.[11] For the richest Pompeians, being a priest was part of the job which every town magistrate did for a year at a time. Public sacrifice gave magistrates an opportunity to show off, win prestige, dramatise their status, and repay to the citizens a small percentage of what they had taken in rents.

A small crowd watched the sacrifice; they had come along as part of the procession. Other people gave a passing glance and went on with their business. I thought it was rather like a modern church service in an ancient cathedral, a core of adherents with lots of tourists milling around. But of course all this was happening outside, at one end of the Forum, as though it was designed for an ever-fluctuating mixture of participants and spectators. We could be there, without belonging. In the Roman world, only Jews, Christians and mystery cults kept their private religious rites solely for insiders.

5 THE BATHS (MARTHA)

We decided to split up. James asked the innkeeper where the best baths for women were. The innkeeper said that if I wanted the women-only baths, he'd heard there was a respectable establishment in town. But everyone said that the new baths for men and women, just outside the town walls towards the sea, were more luxurious, though more expensive than the older baths inside the town. So we walked in that direction together, each now like any prosperous Roman, with our own slave attendant. Well, when I say we went together, I mean that James walked ahead followed by Aesop and Myrmex, and I followed with Fotis behind me, carrying an oil flask, a flesh-scraper, towels and a change of clothes. When we got to the Sea Gate, James went off to do some more shopping, and I turned off with Fotis to the baths.

It was still only mid-morning, more of a time for women to bathe than for men, or for mixed bathing. I paid at the entrance, not a huge sum,

but enough to frighten off *hoi polloi*. Just inside the entrance, there was only one changing room. Its decoration was eye-stopping.[12] Fotis just giggled. The equipment was ordinary enough: a simple trestle table with wooden boxes on top for us to put our clothes in. And then, above the table, there was a painting of the table with numbered boxes on it (I II III and so on); the picture jokily mirrored reality. But above these numbered boxes, above our heads, there was a whole series of sexy pictures. So customers had a double mnemonic. They could remember where they had left their clothes, either by number or by type of sexual coupling.

You know how modern textbooks on Roman art or social history tend to leave sex out, as though it wouldn't be right for us to have sexually outrageous Romans as our cultural ancestors.[13] And college students have sex on the brain enough, so there's no need to add stimulus. Besides, it's exploitative to use women as passive images of male desire, and modern scholars claim that Roman men were interested only in conquest by penetration, and thought that mutual gratification was decadent or even diseased. OK. But here in real Pompeii, in the only changing room of these up-market baths, used by women, men and children, explicit pictures of sexual couplings confront you, whether you like it or not. And the women (or their images projected by men) were not uniformly passive. Sure, in II, the man was having the woman from behind, but number I showed the woman on top, III was a picture of a woman fellating a man, interrupted in his reading. These changing rooms were clearly aiming at an educated clientele. Then to balance matters, there was cunnilingus by a man (Roman satirists always sneer at this, as though it was demeaning for a real man to devote himself to a woman's pleasure). The next picture was more conventional, except that the woman had one leg athletically over the man's shoulder.

After all that, the sexual combinations became rather more complicated, and I felt a bit embarrassed at the length of time I'd already spent looking at them, with Fotis standing behind me. Not that she was looking modestly at the floor; far from it. She was taking it all in, probably encouraged by the fact that I couldn't help myself smiling, though I personally didn't find the pictures erotic or arousing. Anyhow, the next two pictures showed a trio of two men and a woman, and then a quartet of two men and two women in a homosexual and heterosexual chain. And the series finished with a solitary man reading a papyrus roll, but

with his penis seriously deformed by testicular dropsy, as though to say (at least that's what I thought), all's well above, but not below.[14]

Perhaps collectively the pictures were saying, here we cater for all tastes (except the prudish); or more kindly, here you must undress, but no matter what you expose, we've seen it all before, in pictures. I suppose one stunning aspect of Roman society was this contrast between the staid clothing of public appearances in the Forum outside, and the almost daily routine of seeing each other stripped of clothing, naked in the baths.

Well, this was my real baptism into Roman life. So I took the plunge and undressed; Fotis did too. Naked, we went into the first room of the baths proper, the cold room. It was extraordinarily pretty, with marble floors, space for exercising and a cold bath. Water was tumbling down mosaic steps to produce a wall of water, and below that, a large pool, painted blue and decorated with fish. We joined them and a human couple splashing energetically. We soon understood why: the water was freezing.

We decided to leave exercises to another day, and hurried into the next room. My commitment to Roman pleasures was dwindling. Besides, I thought that we'd have to follow certain routines or look strange, and I decided I looked strange enough as it was. The next two rooms were increasingly hot, and more crowded. People must stay here longer. And to judge from the gossip levels, most of them were regulars; perhaps they came here every day. Luckily, there was room for us on a bench in the hottest room, near the window in the apse (did Christians building churches borrow apses from Roman baths?), overlooking a small garden and the canal beyond, where ships were tied up. The glass was a bit thick, but the view was still attractive. We could watch the world go by. And while we sweated with lazy pleasure, sailors carted goods up the slope into the city, and slaves doubtless shovelled their sweat into the furnaces beneath us.[15]

Luckily, Fotis knew what to do. She occasionally splattered a bucket of cold water on the hottest stones, to create more steam. And when I found the heat unbearable, all we had to do was to go into the next room for another swim, in a comfortably heated pool. At intervals, Fotis oiled me, gave me a massage, and scraped my skin. I began to see how Romans could get addicted to owning slaves and bathing (incidentally, the Latin word for washed, *lautus*, means prosperous). I could get attached to the

whole slow ritual of bathing, moving from one room to another, chatting, exercising, contemplating one's own privilege. This was the Roman equivalent of a plush London club. And of course, I'd even got used to my own, thought not to everyone else's nakedness. You could even understand perhaps why Roman guys had so much of a penis fixation; they were always on show. One emperor even chose his ministers by the size of their dicks, a bit unimaginative, and probably a fib.[16]

I haven't said anything about religion and bathing, because in these baths there were no statues of Gods, though there were in other baths we visited. There was a painting of the Goddess Fortune in the loo, but James will probably tell you more about that than you want to know. One thing did strike me, when we visited the temple of Isis a couple of days later. The paintings in these baths – country-scenes, strange animals, sea-battles and mythical figures – were very much like the paintings in the temple. But then, in Roman life, baths and temples were complementary, not opposed.

Notes

NHL: Nag Hammadi Library (a fourth-century collection of mostly gnostic texts, written in Coptic).

CHAPTER ONE: *A World Full of Gods*

1 Cicero, *Against Verres* 5. 27.

2 The bronze statue is in the Museo nazionale in Naples. It is conventionally thought to represent Caligula, but the attribution is uncertain. Typically for practical Romans, the arch was also used as a water tower. Clay pipes brought the water down to a public tap at the base. L. Richardson, *Pompeii, An Architectural History* (Baltimore, 1988) 208–9.

3 *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (hereafter *CIL*) 4. 149 and 202 for election posters, and 1265–1365 for other graffiti in Mercury Street.

4 On kissing hands to gods on passing sacred places or statues see Apuleius, *Apology* 56; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 2. 4.

5 Actually three of them were temples: the Temple of Apollo, the Temple to the Public Lares and the Temple to the Genius of Augustus (later Vespasian). And in the other buildings, the Market hall, the hall of Eumachia and the basilica there were statues to gods and altars, at which people could worship. So Martha's general impression seems understandable.

6 *CIL* 10. 808–813. On the Eumachia building and in general, see W. Jongman, *The Economy and Society of Pompeii* (Amsterdam, 1988) 179ff.; in general, see A. Mau, *Pompeii, its Life and Art* (London, 1899) and R. Laurence, *Roman Pompeii* (London, 1994).

7 G. K. Galinsky, *Aeneas, Sicily and Rome* (Princeton, 1969) 32 and plate 30. The serious version of the Aeneas legend is above the shop of Fabius Multitremulus in the main shopping street, the Via dell' Abbondanza.

8 *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 110 (1986) 513–30: on Aulus Caprilius Timotheus, *somatemporos* (slave-trader). His tombstone depicts eight slaves chained together, followed by two women and two small children. For a grisly portrait of slaves in a bakery, branded on their foreheads, chained by the ankles, backs whipped, and thinly clad in rags, see Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* (hereafter *The Golden Ass*) 9. 12.

9 H. Dessau ed., *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (hereafter *ILS*) (Berlin, 1892) 8726–33, gives examples of bronze tags attached to these iron slave collars; 'I have escaped; grab me, bring me back to my master Zonius, and you'll receive a reward' (*ILS* 8731).

10 L. Daly, *Aesop without Morals* (New York, 1961) and *Life of Aesop* 15.

11 A bit of poetic licence from Martha here. The known cookie moulds in the shape of

emperors, from Britain and the Danubian provinces, date from the second century and later. See A. Lengyel ed., *The Archaeology of Roman Pannonia* (Budapest, 1980) 184 and plate 122.

12 L. Jacobelli, *Le pitture erotiche delle terme suburbane di Pompei* (Rome, 1995).

13 In standard works on Roman art, such as D. E. Strong, *Roman Art* (London, 1976) and R. Ling, *Roman Painting* (Cambridge, 1991) Roman erotic art does not exist, or if it does it is disguised as mythology. But see J. P. Hallett, *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton, 1997) for sophisticated discussion and fashionable views, or J. R. Clarke, *Looking at Love-making in Roman Art* (Berkeley, 1998).

14 These sexual scenes in the suburban baths, just outside the Porta Marina were themselves whitewashed over in antiquity shortly before the eruption of Vesuvius, and this was the only wall of the changing room repainted. Apparently, the paintings, exceptional in their explicitness and variety, did not appeal to all the baths' owners or customers. So Jacobelli, *Pitture erotiche* 28 and 78ff.

15 On the baths, see L. Jacobelli, Die suburbanen Thermen in Pompei, *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 23 (1993) 327ff. On Roman bathing in general, see I. Nielsen, *Thermae et Balnea* (Århus, 1990) esp. 119ff. Jacobelli and Nielsen correctly insist on the normalcy of nakedness in baths for men and women, sometimes separately, but from the early first century CE increasingly together. Cf. Clement, *Paidagogus* 3. 32: 'the baths are open for men and women; there they strip for lust;' and *The Teachings of the Apostles (Didascalia Apostolorum)* 3 (ed. Connolly pp. 14–17). And for Christian reactions, A. Berger, *Das Bad in Byzantischer Zeit* (Munich, 1982) 34ff. and 148. For Jewish reactions to gods in baths, see the Palestinian Talmud, Avoda Zara 3. 8.

16 *Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Elagabalus* 12. 2 cf. 5. 4 and 8. 6; Cassius Dio 80. 16.