

► A TRINITARIAN APPROACH ◀

— A —
HISTORY
— of —
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

GERALD BRAY

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GERALD BRAY

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*God hath spoken—by his prophets,
Spoken his unchanging word,
Each from age to age proclaiming
God the One, the righteous Lord:
Mid the world's despair and turmoil
One firm anchor holdeth fast,
God is king, his throne eternal,
God the first and God the last.*

*God hath spoken—by Christ Jesus,
Christ, the everlasting Son,
Brightness of the Father's glory,
With the Father ever one;
Spoken by the Word Incarnate,
God of God, ere time began,
Light of Light, to earth descending,
Man, revealing God to man.*

*God yet speaketh—by his Spirit
Speaketh to the hearts of men,
In the age-long word expounding
God's own message, now as then;
Through the rise and fall of nations
One sure faith yet standing fast,
God abides, his word unchanging,
God the first and God the last.*

George Wallace Briggs (1875–1959)

Preface

Until the nineteenth century, there was no such thing as the “history of Christian doctrine.” The doctrines themselves were contained in the creeds and confessions of the church, but how they had come into being was seldom examined in any detail. Protestants were aware that there had been developments over time, since otherwise the sixteenth-century Reformation would have been incomprehensible. If no change of any kind was possible, the Reformation should have been rejected as an innovation that was incompatible with eternally revealed truth, which is just what their Roman Catholic adversaries argued. Claiming the authority of the apostle Peter as the appointed successor of Jesus and the first bishop of Rome, the popes and their supporters assumed that what they believed and taught had come directly from the Lord himself.

The Eastern Orthodox churches had never accepted papal jurisdiction over them. On the whole, they agreed with Rome about the *content* of the church’s theology, but not about the nature of the *authority* that had defined it. To them, Rome not only claimed a power that Jesus had not given to Peter, but it had corrupted the church’s teaching in the process. This was the significance of adding the word *filioque* (“and [from] the Son”) to the Nicene Creed’s statement that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (John 15:26). Did the pope have the power to authorize such an addition as this without the backing of a universal (“ecumenical”) church council? Rome said that he did, but the East replied that he did not. Each side believed that the other had misread the Bible, in particular the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:18–19:

... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

It was the use made of this statement to undergird papal power that split the church apart. In 1054, papal legates excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople because he would not submit to their authority, and in the sixteenth century Rome did the same to the Protestants, who also looked back to the eleventh century as the time when things had started to go seriously wrong in the church.

It soon became apparent that the Protestant rejection of papal authority was not like that of the Eastern churches, but no one thought to appeal to history as an explanation for this difference. Change and development over time were dimly understood, but their significance was not properly appreciated. Martin Luther, for example, did not hesitate to tell his students that Paul's epistle to the Galatians was of special relevance to them because Germans and Galatians were both of Celtic stock, and so it was only to be expected that the problems of ancient Galatia would be paralleled in contemporary Germany! It was not until the nineteenth century that historical development was used to explain the divisions that had occurred over time and the emergence of the doctrines that the different churches held, either in common or in opposition to one another. Since none of those doctrines was clearly stated in the New Testament, the suspicion began to grow that the very concept of doctrine had evolved in postbiblical times and had been imposed on the church by a priesthood determined to secure its own power.

To men who believed that the Christian faith ought to be grounded on Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), this came to mean that theology (or "dogma," as they usually preferred to call it) was a corruption of the primitive faith. They believed that if dogma could be sidelined or even dismantled, Christians might come together again, not in the churches (because they too were the product of postbiblical deviations) but in their hearts. Believers who demonstrated the spirit of Christ in their lives were more likely to persuade others of the truth of the gospel message than institutions which imposed their own orthodoxies on people who did not understand what they meant.

This was a one-sided view, of course, but the notion that what the church(es) taught was significantly different from what could be found in the Bible took root and gave birth to what we now call the "history of Christian doctrine." Of course, by no means everyone agreed with the thesis that postbiblical developments were corruptions of Christ's original teaching. That interpretation was promoted mainly among liberal Protestants, though over the course of the nineteenth century it became dominant in the Protestant world.

Roman Catholics, by contrast, initially found it hard to reconcile their beliefs with any notion of doctrinal development, but after the proclamation of papal infallibility in 1870 (which clearly was an innovation of sorts), the idea was taken over and used to explain why the papacy could introduce such apparent innovations and make them compulsory parts of Catholic belief. In Roman Catholic eyes, doctrine developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who worked through the pope in order to confront and confound the errors of the age. They agreed with liberal Protestants that some of their teaching had been

unknown in the early days of Christianity but argued that it had been made clear to the church in response to changing historical circumstances. The history of Christian doctrine was therefore to be understood not as a corruption of the original message of the New Testament but as a work of the Holy Spirit, adapting and bringing to perfection over time the revelation that had been given once and for all in Jesus Christ.

Conservative Protestants, and eventually even the Eastern Orthodox churches, gradually accepted the concept of the historical development of doctrine along lines broadly similar to the Roman Catholic view, but they interpreted the work of the Holy Spirit very differently. To them, the history of Christian doctrine was a struggle to maintain the truth of the gospel over against predators of different kinds—the popes, of course, but also the ancient heretics and the liberals of modern times.

Today, these nineteenth-century positions have been greatly modified, if not entirely abandoned, by all sides in the debate. No one now believes that Christian doctrine is a corruption of the teaching of Jesus, even if it is still widely claimed that much of it is different from anything he would have recognized. Similarly, very few people would now assert that what their particular church teaches is absolute truth to the exclusion of everything else. The concept of doctrinal orthodoxy still exists and is defended by conservatives from very different backgrounds, but everyone recognizes that it has often been formulated by political and other extraneous factors whose influence must be transcended if we are going to recover the sense of unity that lies beneath the surface of our divisions. Whether this recovery will lead to a reunion of the churches is doubtful, because the force of tradition and the staying power of institutions militate against it, but it can certainly be said that there is now a kind of spiritual ecumenism in the Christian world that brings people together across traditional barriers, both individually and in a plethora of parachurch organizations.

All this means that it is no longer possible to write a history of Christian doctrine whose main purpose is to debunk or defend a particular denominational tradition. We all have our preferences, of course, but anyone who argues that only the Baptists, or only the Roman Catholics (or the Reformed, the Eastern Orthodox, the Lutherans, or whoever) are right while everyone else is wrong is now regarded as a propagandist, not as a historian—and is dismissed accordingly. At the present time it is universally agreed that the historian must rise above his own bias and be as fair as he can be to others, accepting that even disagreeable facts must be analyzed and explained in their context, even if he might privately wish that the past had been different.

To some extent, the course of recent secular history has helped make this

more “objective” approach easier and more natural. If we look back over the twentieth century, which one of us does not wish that it had been different from what it was? No one in 1900 wanted world war, routine genocide (a word that did not then exist), or the invention of weapons of mass destruction, and no one wants them now. But we cannot pretend that they never happened, nor can we blame one side for having caused all the trouble. The Western Allies (the United Kingdom, France, and the United States) tried that on Germany after the First World War, and look what they got—the revenge of Adolf Hitler! We do not want to make that mistake again, and this feeling has rubbed off on church historians as much as on others. Responsibility for what happened in the past is shared by all involved, because human beings are inherently sinful, and no one should be more aware of this than Christians, whose business it is to preach sin, righteousness, and judgment to an unbelieving world.

Of course, if we are to write a history of Christian doctrine at all, it must have some unifying principle, and if denominational or ideological allegiance will no longer do, something must be found to take its place. One possible approach is to take individual doctrines and trace their history, which is basically what Gregg Allison has done in his recent book *Historical Theology* (Zondervan, 2011). This is useful for students who are asked to write a paper on the development of something like the doctrine of the atonement, for example, because the information relating to it is gathered in one place. It also corresponds to a general tendency in modern research, which likes to make its material manageable by chopping it into bite-sized chunks and examining each one of them in depth, often to the virtual exclusion of anything else. Thus we can study the Trinity or justification by faith as discrete doctrines that have developed over time and look at how they have come to be what they are today, without getting bogged down in apparently irrelevant things like papal authority or original sin.

The trouble with that approach is that it oversimplifies and therefore distorts the history that it wants to explain. There has never been a time when people have held to individual doctrines as if the rest of theology did not exist. Even those who have stressed one particular thing—the sacraments, for example, or biblical inerrancy—have done so in a context that affects everything they believe. They may be accused of having distorted their theological inheritance by an undue emphasis on one part of it, but they have never believed that one point to the exclusion of the rest. Theology has always come as a complete package, even if the arrangement of its materials has changed over time and may now be quite different from what it once was.

Today we live in a climate where the doctrine of the Trinity has assumed a

new prominence in theological discussion. Why this is so can be debated, but however we got to this point, this is where we are now. It therefore seems logical and appropriate to adopt a Trinitarian framework as the basis for explaining historical theology in the current context. Everyone agrees that the doctrine of the Trinity as we know it did not spring fully grown out of the New Testament. Whether we think that its emergence was a deformation of the original divine revelation or the natural outcome of godly reflection on it, no one can doubt that the result has commanded the assent of the vast majority of Christians over the centuries. Disputes there have certainly been, but every branch of the Christian church confesses that “we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Furthermore, we also agree that each of these three persons is active in a distinct way. The Son came into the world as Jesus Christ; the Holy Spirit comes into the hearts of believers, giving them the power to cry “Abba, Father!”—and the Father is the one to whom our prayers are directed. Theologians differ about whether priority should be given to who the persons are or to what they do. The former is the more logical approach, since the authority of what a person does depends on who that person is, although it is possible to argue that the first Christians saw what God was doing in their midst and only later figured out how each of the divine persons was involved. Nevertheless, an understanding of who God is must come before there can be a proper appreciation of what God does, an order that is borne out by the way Christian theology actually developed.

When Jesus proclaimed his relationship with the Father, he introduced a subtle but significant shift in the Jewish picture of God, which now had to allow for a Father-Son relationship that could embrace both a divine incarnation and the ongoing transcendence of the supreme being. Nevertheless, the early Christians gave a priority to the Father that was in direct continuity with the Old Testament, and the revelation of the Son did not entail any departure from its transcendent monotheism. It was the organizing principle on which everything else depended, but the confession of the Son as Lord made it necessary to determine what his relationship to the one God was. Similarly with the Holy Spirit. Was he to be regarded as a person like the Father and the Son, as a personification of the divine being, or simply as another name for the Father? Were Christians expected to relate to God as one, as three, or as some combination of the two, depending on the circumstances?

These questions were inherent in the New Testament revelation, but resolving them was not an immediate priority for the first generation of Christians. Awareness of their importance and the need to get to grips with them grew

over time and became urgent when false teachers emerged who tried to lead the church astray by equating the Father with God and denying the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Some people today argue that these questions should never have been raised and that had they remained dormant the church would not have been divided in the way that it was, but this is naive and contrary to the teaching of the New Testament, where Christians were told that they must move on from the milk of the word to its meat.¹ That meant coming to terms with problems that did not appear on the surface but that would threaten to destroy the gospel message if they were not resolved. Laying a firm foundation involved going beyond what was immediately visible, and that is what the church found itself obliged to do. One thing led to another, and in the course of church history different aspects of Christian doctrine came to the fore and demanded resolution. Each time this happened, theologians had to take another look at their inheritance and examine it from a different angle. Just as a piece of cut glass reveals different aspects of the light according to how it is held, so the New Testament appears in a new light when looked at in response to the different theological questions that have been put to it.

This is the essence of historical theology, whose task is to explain how and why this happened. Theological developments did not occur arbitrarily but appeared in a logical sequence over time. The resolution of one problem led naturally to the next one, a process that we can observe from the beginning of the church up to the present time. Whether we have now arrived at the “end” of Christian theological development is impossible to say. Our perspective can only be governed by where we are, because each generation has a complete theology of its own. Future ages may well have to recast the tradition in order to explain developments that are as yet hidden from our eyes, but this we cannot tell. It may also be that we have reached the end of the present age and that Christ will come again before that can happen. This we do not know either. All we can do now is look at where we have come from, try to understand where we are, and suggest where we might go from here. What happens next remains hidden in the mind and purposes of God.

If these basic principles are understood, the organization of this book will be easy to grasp. Christian theology began with its Jewish inheritance, which it appropriated *in toto* and claimed was to be understood only in and through Jesus Christ. The nature of that inheritance and its impact on the early church must therefore be considered first. Next there comes the person of God the Father, whom Jesus introduced to his disciples. As good Jews, they knew about

¹ 1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12–13.

the one God, but they did not address him as their Father, and Jesus became known for this teaching. His signature cry was *Abba* (Aramaic for “father”)—it is one of the few words of his that has been preserved in the original language.

Christians who prayed to God as their Father had to stress that he was the God of the Old Testament—the Creator and the Redeemer are one. This was disputed by the so-called “Gnostics” but it was fundamental to the integrity of Christianity. The Father was not a superior deity who intervened in order to rescue the work of an inferior Creator, but was himself the Creator who stepped in to put right what had gone wrong with his creation.

After that was established, the identity of the Son was next on the theological agenda. The incarnation of the Son could not really be understood until it was agreed that created matter was not the work of an inferior deity, because in that case, God could not have become man without ceasing to be divine. The great disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries over the person of Christ arose out of attempts to express this great mystery in a way that would affirm both the divinity and the humanity of the incarnate Son without compromising the integrity of either. That was not an easy task and it produced many serious disagreements, but the end result was the great creedal theology that has commanded the assent of virtually the entire Christian world and has stood the test of time.

Once the person of the Son had been defined to most people’s satisfaction, the church had to move in two different directions. On the one hand, it had to link the person of the Son to his work, just as it had previously connected who the Father is to what the Father does. But it also had to move on to define the person of the Holy Spirit, who was neither a second Son nor an attribute of the Father’s divinity. Which of these two would be dealt with first was not logically determined in advance, and it is fair to say that the Eastern (Orthodox) churches generally moved on to the person of the Holy Spirit, whose identity and relationship to the other persons would preoccupy them for centuries, whereas the Western church (the ancestor of today’s Roman Catholics and Protestants) concentrated more on the work of Christ. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) wrote on both subjects, but his treatise on the Holy Spirit was directed toward the controversy between the West (which he represented) and the East, whereas his discourse on Christ’s atonement was intended for a purely Western audience, which gives us a good picture of how theology was developing in the eleventh century. It is also typical of the Western tradition that it is for his work on the atonement that Anselm is now famous, whereas his arguments for the double procession of the Holy Spirit have attracted far less attention.

By 1500 East and West had gone their separate ways because they could

not agree about the Holy Spirit's identity. It was clear that what was central for the East was relatively peripheral in the West, where the procession of the Spirit from the Father (or from the Father and the Son) was something rarely discussed outside the polemics connected with East-West relations. What they concentrated on was the work of Christ, especially as this was communicated to the believer through his presence in the sacraments. The sixteenth-century Reformation had nothing to do with the double procession of the Holy Spirit but was preoccupied with the sacrifice of Christ: was it a once-for-all, unrepeated historical event, or did it miraculously reappear every time the priest celebrated Holy Communion? This was a question that few people in the East understood (let alone had an opinion about), but it split the Western church in two.

The disputes between papal loyalists, whom we now call Roman Catholics, and their opponents, whom we lump together as "Protestants" even though this term originally applied only to Martin Luther and his immediate followers, was not really about the work of Christ, however. Rather, it was about the way the effects of his saving work were received in the church, and that was the work of the Holy Spirit. Did the Spirit work primarily through objective means like the papacy, the institutional church, the sacraments, and so on, as the Roman Catholics claimed, or did he work subjectively, in the hearts and minds of individual believers, as the Protestants insisted? To understand the difference, ask yourself the following question: "When did you become a Christian?" A faithful Catholic would answer, "When I was baptized," but no true Protestant would say that. However important baptism may be, Protestants would insist that ceremonial water cannot make someone a believer. Without the inner working of the Holy Spirit, the outward rite we call "baptism" is of no intrinsic value. The same principle applies to everything else. A minister's vocation is "valid" not because of his ordination but because of his calling by God. Anyone can be ordained by the church authorities, but not everyone is called by God, as both Protestants and Catholics recognize. But where most Protestants would accept the ministry of an independent person like John Bunyan or Billy Graham, whether he was properly "ordained" or not, they would be less inclined to sit under the ministry of an immoral preacher. Many Catholics, on the other hand, would be more likely tolerate a bad priest than a do-it-yourself evangelist, because it is the authority of the church that counts for them, and not the personal holiness of its individual representatives.

Finally, in the modern world, the historical antagonisms between different groups of Christians have had to compete with something quite different. This is the suspicion that either there is no God at all, or that all religious beliefs

point to the same transcendent deity. From the triumph of Christianity in the fourth century until about 1700, no theologian had been forced to argue the case for New Testament monotheism—the belief that there is one God who reveals himself in three persons—unless he was engaged in dialogue with Jews or Muslims. Such dialogues did take place from time to time, but they were rare and peripheral to the main body of the church. For the most part, Christians persecuted Jews and fought against Muslims with no questions being asked on either side.

All this changed in the eighteenth century, when men brought up in “Christian” Europe and America began to challenge their own religious inheritance in the name of “reason.” First to go was the Trinity, which seemed to them to be illogical and even incomprehensible. From there it was a short step to open atheism, because if God was a distant power with no direct connection to everyday life on earth, what was the point of believing in him? Admittedly, many atheists hedged their bets and declared themselves to be “agnostics,” if only because they realized that disproving the existence of God was even harder than proving it, but the practical result was the same. God was removed from the mental furniture of educated Westerners, a situation that continues to the present time. Christians (and others) enjoy “religious freedom” in Western countries, but only to the extent that their beliefs do not matter. If a religious conviction interferes with the atheistic mind-set, then it must be silenced, or at least sidelined. You will not get a doctorate today if you claim (as Isaac Newton did) that your research is primarily intended to explore the mind of God at work in the universe!

It is in this Babylonian exile of the modern church that the doctrine of the Trinity has returned to center stage. Christians of different traditions have come together, realizing that if they do not hang together they will be hanged separately. Where this will lead (if anywhere) is impossible to say, and it is not the business of the historian to indulge in prophecy. All we can affirm is that this is the point that we have come to at the present time, and those of us who believe in the providence of God (as this author does) are confident that he is working out his purposes for us and for his church as much today as in the past. This was the confidence of the late Archdeacon George Wallace Briggs, who after living through two world wars and an unprecedented “rise and fall of nations” could still write the forward-looking words of the hymn with which this preface began. The God who has spoken in the past continues to speak in the present, but his message is the same now as it has always been. The forms change over time and new developments occur in the way that the truth is expressed, but its substance remains unaltered. How this

has happened and what it means for us today is what the following pages are all about.

The aim of this book is to make the history of Christian theology comprehensible to nonspecialists while at the same time providing a useful resource for those who want to take the subject further. Technical terms are explained in simple language, and background information is provided when it is necessary for understanding the subject and is unlikely to be part of the average person's general knowledge. At the same time, original sources are given in the footnotes, where it is assumed that serious students will be able to consult works not only in Latin and Greek but also in French and German. Works in other languages (Danish, Dutch, Romanian, Russian, Swedish) are also cited when theological developments in those countries are being discussed. However, English translations are also noted when they are available.

In the main body of the text, quotations from other languages have been freshly translated, and biblical references have been taken from a form of the text that the original author of the quote would have been familiar with, not from a modern translation based on a critical edition.

This book began life at Moore Theological College in Sydney, an institution of higher learning that shines as a beacon of light in an Anglican Communion that is currently beset by the storm clouds of schism, heresy, and apostasy. Special thanks are due to the former principal John Woodhouse and his wife, Moya, for the warm hospitality which they have always shown the author, and to the current principal Mark Thompson and his wife, Kathryn, on whose kitchen table the first draft slowly emerged. Different parts of it were subsequently written at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama; at Knox Theological Seminary in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; and at Tyndale House in Cambridge, all of which have been spiritual homes to me over the years. In addition, I must thank my employers, the Latimer Trust, whose constant support and encouragement have made this work possible.

As it happens, the volume reached completion on a return visit to Moore College, where a rapidly assembled team of critics put it through the final test of relevance to its intended audience. Special thanks are due to Joel Atwood, Matt Baker, Katherine Cole, Nick Davies, Matt Dodd, Tom Habib, Hank Lee, Matt Simpson, Mike Turner, Luke Wagenaar and Mike Weeks, who kept the author on his toes and did much to make this book accessible to its intended audience. It is to them and to the many godly men and women who over the years have passed through Moore College as teachers, staff, and students, that this book is humbly dedicated as a small token of my abiding affection for them. To them and to all who read this book, may the Lord God of Israel pre-

serve and protect you in your earthly pilgrimage and bring you safely home to rest in his eternal glory.

Gerald Bray
The Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist
October 18, 2013

A Note on Transliteration

Greek and Cyrillic words that occur in the text have been transliterated into the Latin alphabet so as to make it easier to read them. In the footnotes, the standard international conventions that govern transliteration have been followed where names and publications are concerned, unless there is a generally recognized English equivalent (for example, *Tolstoy*, not *Tol'stoj*). Ancient Greek names have been given in their English or Latin forms (for example, *Aristotle* and *Plato*, not *Aristotelês* or *Platôn*). Unfamiliar Greek names have been Latinized, because a form like Autolycus looks less outlandish to most readers than pseudo-Greek alternatives like *Autolukos*, *Autolykos*, or *Aytolykos*. Modern Greek names are transliterated according to the same principles unless the writers concerned have adopted their own form of transliteration. So, for example, John Zizioulas is widely known under that name, not as Iôannês Zêzioulas, and so the more familiar form is adopted here.

The titles of ancient works have been given in Latin, which is the standard way of tracing them, even when they are written in Greek and there are English equivalents. Thus, Augustine's *City of God* is given in the footnotes as *De civitate Dei*, Basil of Caesarea's book on the Holy Spirit is *De Spiritu Sancto*, and so on. Scholarly monographs that have been translated into English from another language are referenced in both the original and the translated editions, but when no English translation exists only the original title is given.

Otherwise the system of transliteration has been designed to make it as easy as possible both for readers who know the original languages to reproduce the forms in the appropriate script and for others to pronounce the different words and names correctly.

With respect to Greek, most of the transliterations are straightforward. However,

Ypsilon has been rendered as *y* when it stands alone but as *u* in diphthongs (*au*, *eu*, *ou*).

Long vowels have been indicated with a circumflex (*ê* for Eta and *ô* for Omega).

With respect to Cyrillic, the soft sign after certain consonants has been indicated by an apostrophe (') but the hard sign has been ignored. The Russian letter *ë* (which is always stressed) has been rendered as *yo*, in accordance with the pronunciation—Solovyov, for example, and not Soloviev, as is often found in Western publications. Likewise Fyodor and not Fedor. An occasional exception has been made when a Russian writer has adopted a particular form of his name in the Latin alphabet, but the phonetic equivalent is indicated in parentheses where a reader might otherwise mispronounce it, as for example, Zernov (Zyornov). This is not done, however, for the descendants of Russian exiles who have no real connection with their ancestral homeland. Thus, for example, Bouteneff is not accompanied by Butenyov.

Soft vowels have usually been indicated by a preceding *j* (in the footnotes) or *y* (in the main text) but omitted after a soft sign or a preceding *i*. Thus, for example, *rasp'atie* ("crucifixion") rather than *raspjatije* or *raspyatiye*. Greek and Latin loan words in Russian have been transliterated according to the standard Russian conventions, even when this leads to inconsistency. For example, *typographia* from Greek becomes *tipografia* when it is from Russian, even though it is the same Greek word.

Note also that because the Cyrillic alphabet lacks the Greek *Xi*, a name like Maxim(us) becomes Maksim. Since 1917 Greek Theta has been written as *f* in Russian, which is how it has always been pronounced. Thus the Greek name Theophanes becomes Russian Feofan, Theodore is Fyodor, and so on. This is not a problem with modern writers, whose names are usually preserved intact, but it can cause some confusion when dealing with pre-1917 Western publications, which often Hellenized or Latinized them. It should also be remembered that Russian names can be "Latinized" according to different systems that correspond to different Western languages. Thus, for example, we can find Yeltsin (English), Eltsine (French) or Jelzin (German) instead of the more technically correct El'cyn, Jel'cyn or Yel'cyn, but all six of these forms transliterate the same Russian original! Most Russian émigrés of the early twentieth century preferred the French form of their name, which has now become standard in their family—e.g., Zouboff instead of Zubov, which would be the form more likely to be used today.

PART ONE

The Israelite Legacy

Christianity and Judaism

The Parting of the Ways

Why are Christianity and Judaism different religions? Today we are used to this and seldom give it much thought, but for the historian it is a question that demands an answer. Consider the evidence. Jesus was a Jew and so were his disciples. Neither he nor they expressed any desire to break away from Israel. Jesus made it clear that his message was intended primarily for Jews, and his disciples followed him in this.¹ He regarded the Hebrew Bible as authoritative Scripture, quoted it often, and even stated that not one word of it would be overruled by his teaching.² His message was that he had come to fulfill the promises made in the law and by the prophets, and there were many Jews in Jesus' time who were actively waiting for that to happen. They expected a charismatic Messiah figure who would come and deliver Israel from its bondage to the Romans, and to some of them at least, Jesus looked like a plausible candidate for the role. They may have been wrong to interpret his mission in political terms, but that was a mistake that could be corrected by a more spiritual interpretation of the promises made to Israel—it was not a new idea that was alien to the hopes and aspirations of the nation.

Furthermore, although the Jewish world of Jesus' day stood apart from its non-Jewish (or "Gentile") surroundings as a distinct religious and national entity, it was not a monolith. Alongside the temple establishment in Jerusalem, which all Jews recognized as their central religious authority, there were many subgroups competing for influence among them. In the New Testament we meet the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who are well known from other sources. There was also the Qumran community, which was not mentioned by anyone in ancient times but which we know a lot about thanks to the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947. Among several other groups there were many "Hellenized" Jews, people who had adopted Gentile ways and the Greek

¹ See, for example Matt. 15:26; John 4:22; Acts 2:36.

² Matt. 5:17–19.

language but without abandoning their ancestral faith.³ We might even include the Samaritans, who were Jews of a kind even though they were rejected by the mainstream. Why could Jesus not have launched a messianic sect similar to one of these and remained within the fold of historic Judaism?

In fact, some modern scholars think that this is more or less what Jesus wanted to do. They portray him as a great rabbi whose intentions were traduced by others after his death.⁴ What propelled his disciples (or perhaps *their* disciples) to develop a belief in Jesus as the Son of God that was incompatible with the Jewish understanding of monotheism remains something of a mystery to them. They generally conclude that this development occurred under non-Jewish influence, but why that was able to supersede traditional Jewish beliefs is unclear and remains controversial.⁵

There were always many Jews who rejected Jesus and his message, but only when his followers started admitting Gentile believers to their fellowship without obliging them to become Jews first did it become clear that Christianity was not just another form of Judaism. Within a couple of generations, Jewish converts to the new faith tailed off and the church became a largely Gentile body to whom the political heritage and religious culture of Israel were alien. Once that happened, it was inevitable that Jews and Christians would emphasize their differences and downplay what they held in common. In many ways Jews found this easier to do than Christians did. Jews could always dismiss Christianity as an aberration based on a false interpretation of their sacred Scriptures, but Christians could not reject their Jewish inheritance so easily. They insisted that Christ had come to fulfill those Scriptures, and they knew that he had ministered almost exclusively to his fellow Jews. They also realized that his teaching and work could not be understood if the Jewish background to them was not recognized. The few Christians who tried to reject the Hebrew Bible were condemned as heretics, and the church continued to emphasize not only *that* Jesus had fulfilled the promises contained in it but also *how* he had done so.

The stages by which Christians separated from Judaism are obscure, though we may assume that the process was not the same everywhere. What is universally agreed is that by about AD 100 a Christian church had emerged that claimed a Jewish origin and heritage by appropriating the Hebrew Bible as its own, but that no longer thought of itself as Jewish.⁶ The Jerusalem temple had

³ They were numerous enough to form a distinct group in the early Jerusalem church. See Acts 6:1.

⁴ See, for example, Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); idem, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

⁵ See J. Carleton Paget, *Jews, Christians, and Jewish Christians in Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 1–39, for a good discussion of the current state of the question.

⁶ For a recent study of this process, see Thomas Robinson, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Parting of the Ways: Early Jewish-Christian Relations* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009).

been destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, so whatever connections the church continued to have with it after the resurrection of Jesus were automatically severed. The Old Testament food laws and other aspects of traditional Jewish practice that survived the initial conversion of Jews to Christ were gradually ignored or abandoned, and any knowledge of Hebrew was quickly lost. Christians read the Greek translation of the Bible as their sacred text and used it to argue that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Somewhat oddly, although Christians advocated loyalty to the Roman authorities, it was they who were persecuted for their beliefs and not the Jews, despite the Jewish tendency to rebel against Rome. The reason for this was that Judaism was a legally recognized religion, while Christianity was not. Even as early as AD 64, when most of the apostles were still alive, the emperor Nero could distinguish Christians from Jews to the extent of blaming the former, but not the latter, for having started the great fire of Rome in that year. This unfair discrimination inevitably caused bad feelings, and some Christians believed that Jewish agitators were the main cause of their suffering. How true that was is hard to say, but that there was an abiding tension between two otherwise similar communities is certain.

How did this happen? A comparison between Christianity and Samaritanism may help us understand the process more clearly. The Samaritan schism seems to have been political in origin, as much as anything else, and with a scriptural text that contained only six books (Genesis to Joshua), Samaritanism was less developed than full-blown Judaism. Christianity, on the other hand, was everything that Judaism was and more. Not only did it take over the whole of the Hebrew Bible, it added to it quite considerably. The Old Testament that the church preferred to use was a Greek version that contained a number of books (and parts of books) that were missing from the Hebrew text,⁷ and what we now call the New Testament was gradually added to it—in Greek, not in Hebrew. The New Testament is less than a third as long as the Old, but its significance for Christians is at least as great as that of the Old Testament, if not greater. The reason for this is that the church regards it not only as equally authoritative (and therefore just as divinely inspired) as the Hebrew Bible but also as a kind of commentary on it, giving principles of interpretation that the church can use to read and interpret its Israelite legacy.

It is the New Testament that tells us what the essential difference between Christianity and Judaism was, and we must look to it for clues to explain how the two became separated. Let us start with the teaching of Jesus. Was he a rabbi with new and challenging ideas, or was he something quite different?

⁷These books constitute what are now known as the Apocrypha. In Protestant Bibles they are usually omitted or printed separately between the Old and New Testaments.

What was his take on the law of Moses, and why was his view rejected by the Jewish leaders of his day?

What is certain is that Jesus was not a rabbi in the usual sense of the term. He was not trained in a rabbinical school in the way that the apostle Paul was, and as far as we know, his only contact with the rabbinic world before he began his public ministry occurred when he went to Jerusalem at the age of twelve and spent several days with the teachers in the temple.⁸ However there is no indication that he learned anything from them; on the contrary, it appears that even as a boy he was teaching them as their equal. It is true that during his adult ministry he was frequently addressed as “rabbi,” but this was a courtesy title bestowed on him by people who did not know what else to call him.⁹ Neither his training (if he had any) nor his message could be described as “rabbinical” in the usual sense of the word.

Admittedly, rabbinical Judaism was still developing in Jesus’ day, so there may have been more freedom for Jews to recognize the kind of freelance teacher that Jesus was than would have been the case later on. But even if that is true, what Jesus said was often quite different from standard rabbinical teaching. The main differences between them can be sketched as follows:

1. The rabbis were concerned to interpret the law and apply it to situations that were not envisaged in the original text, or not fully expounded there. Jesus said that he had come to fulfill the law and make it redundant. In this sense, he was not really messianic, as Jews understood it, because he did not see his mission as the establishment of a Jewish state in which the law of Moses would be perfectly observed. On the contrary, he said that his kingdom was not of this world, something that was beyond the comprehension of most Jews of his time.¹⁰ Messianic movements remained active among Jews until AD 135, when the defeat of Bar-Kochba’s rebellion finally put an end to them, but Christians did not get involved in them because, in their view, the Messiah had already come!

2. The rabbis understood the law essentially as the performance of particular tasks, whereas Jesus saw it more as the adoption of a certain attitude. While it is too simple to say that the rabbis thought of righteousness as something external whereas Jesus internalized it, there was definitely a difference of emphasis between them along these lines, as can be seen from particular incidents in the life of Jesus. For example, the rabbis believed that it was wrong to heal people on the Sabbath because it was a sacred day of rest, whereas Jesus

⁸Luke 2:41–52.

⁹It is also confined to the Fourth Gospel. See John 1:38, 49; 3:2; 6:25; 20:16.

¹⁰John 18:36.

thought it was appropriate and sometimes even necessary, because meeting human needs was more important than observing divinely appointed regulations that might get in the way.¹¹

3. The rabbis took their cue from Moses the lawgiver, whereas Jesus went back to Abraham as the true source of Israel's faith. According to Jesus, Moses stepped in to bolster that faith because the people were unable to keep it, but his law was a stopgap to prevent further degeneration, and not a pathway to eternal life.¹²

4. The rabbis wanted to *protect* Israel from contamination by the outside world, whereas Jesus wanted to *transform* Israel by raising it to a higher plane. For Jesus, the things of the world could not pollute those who were pure in heart, and so there was no need to fear or avoid them as a matter of principle, even if they had to be used with discretion.¹³

None of these things by themselves, or even all of them taken together, need have caused a breach between the Christian church and the Jewish world. If Jesus had been no more than a reformer within the Jewish culture of his time, it is quite possible that his ideas would have been taken on board after his death. After all, the Jews had persecuted the prophets but then canonized their message, and presumably the same thing could have happened to Jesus.¹⁴ What made him different was the nature of the authority on which his teaching was based. Both the rabbis and Jesus believed that all authority came from God and that it was contained in the law of Moses. But Jesus taught that the written law pointed to him as its author, its content, and its fulfillment, and he claimed authority over it.¹⁵ If Jesus was right, it could only mean that, in his view, the Hebrew Bible taught that he was God in human flesh, come to earth as the prophets had promised that he would.¹⁶ The signs of this are there in the Gospels. Not only did Jesus reinterpret the law, but he forgave sins, which was something only God could do.¹⁷ In his duel with the Devil at the beginning of his ministry, he was tempted in ways that only God could be. A mere man could not have turned stones into bread, but the Creator of all things could do so.¹⁸ Once that is understood, the rest of Jesus' ministry falls into place and his resurrection becomes inevitable—how could death have held the One who made all things and who is eternal life in himself?

¹¹ Mark 2:27–28; Luke 6:5.

¹² Matt. 19:7–9; compare John 7:19–22 with John 8:39–40.

¹³ Matt. 15:16–20.

¹⁴ Matt. 5:12; John 15:20.

¹⁵ John 5:39–40; Mark 2:28.

¹⁶ Isa. 7:14; 9:6–7; Mic. 5:2.

¹⁷ Mark 2:5–12.

¹⁸ Matt. 4:1–11.

Putting Jesus at the center and interpreting the law as something that was meant to be fulfilled in him caused a seismic shift in biblical interpretation as it affected Christians. No longer was it a matter of applying the law to previously unknown (or unforeseen) circumstances, as the rabbis typically did. Now the main subject of discussion became how the law revealed Jesus—who he was, where he came from, and what his relationship was to God, whom he called his Father. It was questions of that kind that brought Christian theology into being and set the church on an intellectual journey quite different from anything that could be found in rabbinical Judaism.

Theology as an academic discipline did not exist in Old Testament times, nor has it developed very much in modern Judaism, where “theological studies” focus more on religious laws and their interpretation than on the being of God. The ancient Israelites knew that their beliefs were different from those of the surrounding peoples, but they never developed a “doctrine of God” to explain this. That term did not exist in ancient Hebrew, but if it had, it would have meant something quite different from what we mean by it today. When we talk about the doctrine of God in the writings of Paul, we focus on what Paul taught about God. But if Paul had used the term, he would have meant not what he (or anyone else) thought about God, but what God had told them about himself. The “doctrine of God” would have been the teaching received from God, not what its recipients thought about him, and in thinking this way Paul would have been typical of his time.

The ancient Israelites knew about other belief “systems,” if we can call them that, but they were not interested in dialoguing with those who held them or in trying to persuade them to accept Israel’s understanding of God instead. Foreigners could worship the God of Israel if they wanted to, but it was extremely difficult for them to become Israelites, if only because they were not descended from the ancestors to whom God had revealed himself.¹⁹ Jews saw little need to explain their faith to outsiders, and their leaders were more concerned with the practice of worshiping God than with developing a theory of monotheism.²⁰ Of course they knew that there was only one God, but that knowledge was less important than the fact that he had established a relationship with them, a “covenant” that demanded obedience to a set of laws rather than a confession of certain beliefs.²¹ But what for Jews was their

¹⁹ Apart from specific cases like Ruth and Naaman (2 Kings 5:15–17), there are a number of references to “all the nations of the earth” who will be blessed by Israel (Gen. 18:18) and worship the true God (Psalm 67). But on the whole, the message was that salvation belongs to the Jews, as Jesus told the Samaritan woman (John 4:22), and if non-Jews were to benefit from it, it could only be in and through Israel.

²⁰ See the encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal for a good example of this (1 Kings 18:20–40).

²¹ See Isa. 35:8, where the prophet says that even fools will not go astray if they do the right thing.

national covenant became for Christians the *Old Testament*, a body of law and tradition that was superseded by a new and fuller revelation of God in Jesus Christ. That revelation was not another law but a new relationship with God that was rooted in a deeper understanding of who he is and of what he has done to save us.

Instead of creating new laws, the Christian church developed theology, which is the understanding of God based on his self-revelation.²² In itself, the New Testament is not a textbook of theology any more than the Old Testament is, but what it says shows us why the church would have to create such a discipline. Christians had a commission to preach the gospel to the nations, which meant that they had to explain what it was and why it mattered. People who did not understand even the rudiments of Jewish thought would find it very difficult to grasp the Christian message, as Paul discovered when he went to Athens.²³ Furthermore, Jewish beliefs had to be presented to them in a coherent and systematic way, since otherwise they would either have made no sense at all or else would have been absorbed in a piecemeal fashion, which might have been even worse.

A religion or culture that adopted certain Jewish beliefs without understanding the context in which they had emerged might easily end up misunderstanding and even perverting them. A good example of this was the widespread adoption of the Hebrew week in non-Jewish circles. A cycle of time that for Jews was closely connected to creation and the worship of the Creator was borrowed by others and applied to the seven recognized planets—the sun, the moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn. It was then used for astrological purposes that had nothing to do with Judaism. The Christian church was eventually able to rescue the week from this aberration and restore the sense of harmony with the created order that had originally been intended, but the fact that most Western European languages still use the planetary names for the individual days serves as a reminder of how the biblical concept had been misinterpreted by those who did not understand or accept the context in which it first appeared.²⁴

²²It should be said that Christians did not use the word “theology” to describe their beliefs for a very long time. They preferred to call it their “doctrine” (*didachê* in Greek; *doctrina* in Latin) or their “teaching” (Greek *didaskalia*; Latin *disciplina*). The Greek word *theologia* first appeared in the writings of Plato (429–347 BC), who used it to mean what we would now call “mythology,” and it may have been avoided by Christians for that reason.

²³Acts 17:16–34.

²⁴In English, the names of the Roman gods have been replaced by Germanic equivalents, but the principle is the same (Mars=Tiwi; Mercury=Woden; Jupiter=Thor; Venus=Freya). The main exception in Western Europe is Portuguese, which numbers the days as “second,” “third,” “fourth,” and so on. The same is also true in many Eastern European languages, particularly where the influence of the Greek Orthodox church has been strong. It may be noted in passing that Muhammad also adopted the Christian names for the days of the week, with the result that many Islamic societies use them in their Arabic forms without realizing where they originally came from.

Jews believed that God was eternal, almighty, and so on, but they seldom speculated about the implications of these attributes for their understanding of how he interacted with the world. Their approach was essentially practical and subjective. As far as they were concerned, God was who he said he was because what he did demonstrated that his claims were true. Rather than speculate about mysteries that were too great for the human mind to bear, they thought that it was better to do what God commanded and reap the rewards that obedience would bring. This does not mean that the ancient Israelites were free to ignore the nature of God's being. On the contrary, they were forbidden to make idols representing him, because he was invisible and could not be contained within limitations imposed by the human mind.²⁵ Neither were they encouraged to speculate about how an invisible, infinite Creator could enter into a relationship with his finite creatures. They often talked about God in human terms, but at the same time they insisted that he was not a man, and the possibility that he might become one never crossed their minds.²⁶ When the Jews of Jesus' day were presented with that idea, most of them rejected it as blasphemy and left it at that.²⁷

It was in the Gentile world that questions about the nature of God's being were important. Greek philosophers had long speculated about the nature of ultimate reality, and they wanted to know how the God of the Bible fitted into that picture. Lacking a doctrine of creation or an understanding of how spiritual and material realities interacted, Gentile converts needed clear guidance about these things. In the Gentile imagination, the line between the divine and the human was permeable, so why should the incarnation of the Son as Jesus Christ be regarded as unique? Jesus was not the first or the only man to claim divinity; nor were his claims particularly impressive. He may have risen from the dead, but how could he have died in the first place if he was God? Could he do that and still be the ultimate good and transcendent being? The gospel had to be explained to Gentiles in ways that most Jews had never thought about, and Christian theology was to some extent a result of the struggle to do this.

The church also had to explain how Jesus Christ was related to the Jewish God. This meant that biblical monotheism had to be interpreted in a way that could accommodate the divinity of Christ. The Old Testament talked about the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the Wisdom of God in ways that sounded personal, but Jews understood those terms as poetic metaphors more than anything else. On the whole, Christians agreed with them about this, but

²⁵ Ex. 20:4–6.

²⁶ See Ps. 50:7–15.

²⁷ Matt. 26:65; John 10:31–33.

they also had to consider such expressions in a wider context in which Jesus Christ was identified with the divine Word and Wisdom, and the Spirit was a distinct person, not just the breath of the one God.

Given their different perspective on such matters, could Christians not simply have abandoned Judaism and created an entirely new religion? The snag with that solution was that Jesus had come to fulfill the promises of the law that had been proclaimed and renewed by the prophets of ancient Israel. So even if parts of the Old Testament were no longer applicable after the coming of Christ, abandoning the Hebrew Bible was not an option for the early church. Whether they liked it or not, Christians shared a common inheritance with Jews, although they interpreted it in different ways. We cannot appreciate what the origins of Christian theology were unless we come to grips with this two-edged phenomenon, which has been the cause of so much misunderstanding between the Old and the New Testament people of God.

The relationship between Christians and Jews is complex and has often been the subject of intense controversy. It has always been possible for a Jew to become a Christian without ceasing to be Jewish, a situation that was all but universal in the time of the apostles, but the other way around is more problematic. There were Jews in the early church who thought that non-Jewish converts to Christianity had to become Jews in order to be Christians, but that was vigorously contested by Paul and the idea was soon rejected.²⁸ Paul was not against the Jewish law as such; nor did he see anything wrong with Jews who observed it. He did so himself,²⁹ and when he took Timothy on as his assistant, he had him circumcised so as not to offend Jewish opinion.³⁰ This was important to Paul because in the first Christian churches there were many people who retained close business and family ties with fellow Jews who remained unconvinced of the claims of Christ. Only as those bonds weakened over two or three generations was there a clear separation between Jews and Christians at the grassroots level.³¹ Gradually non-Jewish converts became more numerous and Jewish Christians mixed more readily with them than with other Jews. When that happened, the sense of a

²⁸ Gal. 2:11–3:29; Rom. 2:17–4:25.

²⁹ See Acts 21:20–26.

³⁰ Acts 16:1–3. Timothy was the son of a mixed marriage. His father was a Gentile, so he was not circumcised as a baby, but his mother was Jewish, which in the eyes of other Jews made him Jewish as well. Interestingly enough, Timothy had been brought up as a Christian by his mother and grandmother, who were both believers (2 Tim. 1:5). We do not know whether they had wanted Timothy to be circumcised, but his father (presumably an unbelieving Gentile) probably did not allow it.

³¹ It must however be remembered that the Romans distinguished Christians as a separate group at a very early date. The emperor Nero blamed them (and not the Jews) for having caused the great fire of Rome in AD 64, and Pliny the Younger recognized them as a distinct group when he was governor of Bithynia (AD 111–112). Apparently Pliny had no idea that Christians were related to Jews, which gives us a clear indication of how they were perceived less than three generations after the beginnings of the church.

wider Jewish solidarity disappeared and the two communities went their separate ways.

By the mid-second century Christians were writing treatises against the Jews, and it was even possible for Marcion of Pontus (fl. c. 144) to argue that Jewish influence had no place in the Christian church, that the Hebrew Scriptures should be rejected, and that any sign of dependence on them ought to be rooted out of the New Testament.³² Marcion's was an extreme view, and he never persuaded a significant number of people to adopt his position, but the fact that it could be aired at all shows how far the church had moved away from its Jewish origins in little over a century. At the same time, Judaism was also developing its own postbiblical identity, which in many respects was no closer to the Old Testament than Christianity was. While modern Jews have never rejected their ancient Scriptures, they depend for religious guidance more on the Mishnah and the Talmud, both of which were the products of rabbinical teaching in the centuries after the birth of Christ, than they do on the Bible.³³ In sum, both religions draw on the inheritance of the Hebrew Scriptures and claim them for their own, but each has moved on from them in its own way and each has become a stranger to the other.³⁴

Christianity and the Hebrew Canon of Scripture

It is obvious to anyone reading the Gospels that Jesus assumed that the Jewish Scriptures were of divine origin. The redemption Jesus proclaimed was the inheritance of the Jewish people that had been promised to them by the law and the prophets, and he told them that he was fulfilling it before their eyes.³⁵ His disciples claimed the same thing, using the Hebrew Bible in order to preach the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. To the apostles, the law of Moses pointed to Christ because it established the standards of holiness that God required of his people. It reminded them that they could never attain those standards on their own, and it outlined a way of escape that would eventually be realized through the once-for-all sacrifice of the Great High Priest, the sinless Son of God who had given his life for theirs. As they and their associates produced the books that would form the New Testament, they were conscious that they were expounding the Hebrew Bible and explaining what they were convinced was its true meaning.

³² See Sebastian Moll, *The Arch-heretic Marcion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

³³ See Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

³⁴ See Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire AD 135–425* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); originally published in French (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1964).

³⁵ Luke 4:21.

In principle, the text of the Old Testament used by the first Christians was the same as that used by their Jewish contemporaries. The Christians made no attempt to add to it or to modify it because they believed it was the Word of God that had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Because they thought that every part of it pointed to him, they were convinced that if they were to doctor it in some way they would lose or misunderstand the meaning of some aspect of Christ's mission. As Jesus himself had said, "Until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law."³⁶ They also knew that it would have been impossible to preach the gospel to Jews if they had modified the biblical text merely to suit their own theological preferences. The church therefore had powerful motives for keeping its Old Testament as close to the Jewish original as it could, although the text was not fixed to the degree that it is now, nor had the limits of the canon been finally determined.

As far as the Old Testament text is concerned, the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls at Qumran in 1947 has shown that in the time of Jesus even the Hebrew original was not as uniform as it later became. The extent of the variations should not be exaggerated, and generally speaking the Qumran scrolls are close to the now standard Masoretic form of the text, but sometimes the latter preserves inferior readings that can be corrected by appealing to the evidence from Qumran.³⁷ There are even cases where Hebrew versions discovered at Qumran support the readings of the Greek translation begun at Alexandria in the third century BC and known to us as the Septuagint or "Seventy" (LXX), because it was supposedly produced by seventy (or seventy-two) scholars.³⁸ The origin of this translation is covered in legend, but it seems likely that a group of Jews in Alexandria, aware that their community was rapidly losing its knowledge of Hebrew, decided to translate the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy) into Greek so that their faith would be maintained by the younger generation. This probably occurred around 250 BC, and the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures were gradually translated over the next 200 years or so. By the time Jesus was born, most if not all of the Hebrew Bible was available in Greek, though the standard of translation was extremely variable. Books like Job and Daniel were paraphrased rather than translated literally, and the LXX version of the Psalms

³⁶ Matt. 5:18.

³⁷ The Masoretic text was prepared by the so-called Masoretes, whose name derives from the Hebrew word *masorah* ("fetter"). By fixing the form of the biblical text, the Masoretes were meant to be putting limits, or fetters, on its interpretation. They were active from the seventh to the eleventh centuries AD.

³⁸ "Septuagint" derives from the Latin word for "seventy," the approximate number of translators, which explains the abbreviation LXX, the Roman numeral for seventy. On the nature of this translation and its authority in the early church, see Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000); and Martin Hengel, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture: Its Prehistory and the Problem of Its Canon* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002). See also Abraham Wasserstein and David Wasserstein, *The Legend of the Septuagint: From Classical Antiquity until Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

often bore little relation to the original. Some passages were either omitted or transposed elsewhere, and a number of mistakes were made by the translators.

Doubts about the accuracy of the Greek version were apparently quite widespread and seem to have led an anonymous Jewish writer to compose the so-called *Letter of Aristeas* sometime around 150 BC, with the purpose of shoring up the prestige and authority of the Greek Pentateuch. The Pseudo-Aristeas, as this writer is known, claimed to be one of the seventy-two scholars who had been sent from Jerusalem to Alexandria in order to undertake the translation, which (he assured his readers) enjoyed the approval of the temple establishment. But although this argument might have persuaded Jews outside Palestine who had abandoned the use of Hebrew to accept the LXX, there were always those who had not lost contact with Jerusalem, where there were Greek-speaking synagogues and many people (like the young Saul of Tarsus) who were fluent in both Hebrew and Greek. People in those circles were well aware of the defects of the LXX, and from time to time they produced revisions of the text in order to make it reflect the Hebrew more accurately. These revisions circulated freely, making what we now call the LXX more like a family of translations than a single text.

As this was happening, the legends attributed to Aristeas were taking on a life of their own. By the time of Philo (d. AD 50) it was being claimed that the seventy translators had worked independently but had all come up with exactly the same version—evidence that the LXX was divinely inspired!³⁹ That gave it an entirely new status and made it possible for advocates of the LXX to explain the differences between it and the Hebrew text as the will of God. Philo's endorsement of the LXX undoubtedly strengthened its authority among Diaspora Jews, though it did not displace that of the Hebrew originals, at least not among those who were able to consult them.

By the time the New Testament was written, the LXX was circulating in a number of different forms that were tolerated as long as there was no definitive Hebrew text against which they could be judged. That situation began to change after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The dispersal of the temple establishment led to a retrenchment that eventually eliminated the various Hebrew versions in favor of the one that later became the Masoretic text. Once that happened, the pressure was on to make the Greek versions conform to the increasingly standardized Hebrew one as much as possible. Despairing of the LXX, some individual Jews undertook the task of translating afresh, preparing one very literal translation (Aquila) and at least two relatively idiomatic

³⁹ Philo, *De vita Mosis* (*Moyse*) 2, ll. 33–44.

ones (Symmachus and Theodotion). There is some evidence that the text now attributed to Theodotion was actually much older, but if so, it shows that the need for a more accurate translation than the LXX was felt even before the fall of Jerusalem. Theodotion's version is important mainly because its text of Daniel quickly replaced that of the earlier LXX, a fact which proves that the legend of the LXX's divine inspiration was not universally believed!

Much of the knowledge we have of this translation process comes from Origen (185?–254?), a Christian from Alexandria who tried to provide the church with a viable LXX text by revising it in the light of these subsequent Jewish versions. His corrected form of the LXX became the Old Testament of the Greek church, which it remains to the present day. Jews, however, soon abandoned the LXX almost entirely, preferring to use Aquila's translation or to revert to the original Hebrew, which they eventually did.

As for the books that were included in the biblical canon, we know that the Pentateuch, which the Jews called the Torah or the five books of Moses, was foundational to all forms of Judaism and that Christians agreed with this. Jesus frequently referred to "Moses" (Matt. 8:4; Mark 1:44; 10:3; 12:26; Luke 24:44; John 5:45–46; 7:19) as the presumed author of the Torah, which is often quoted in the New Testament. Next came the section known as the Prophets (Nevi'im). This included Joshua to 2 Kings (but not Ruth) and Isaiah to Malachi (but not Lamentations or Daniel). Here again there was general agreement by the time of Jesus, although the LXX separated the historical from the more obviously prophetic books, putting the former immediately after the Torah and the latter at the end of the canon.

More problematic were the books that are now included in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, where they are known simply as the Writings (*Ketuvim*). These are the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah (a single book) and Chronicles, in that order. It is an interesting fact that while the New Testament often refers to "the Law and the Prophets,"⁴⁰ it never mentions the Writings as a distinct collection of books. Does this mean that the Writings were not regarded as Scripture in the first century AD? That is hard to say. The books themselves were certainly in existence and enjoyed canonical status among the Jews, and there is no reason to think that Christians disagreed with that assessment. After all, the Psalms are quoted in the New Testament more than any other book, and their prophetic quality was highly valued. The early Christians could refer to the "Law" in a way that included the entire canon of Scripture (see, e.g.,

⁴⁰ Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; Acts 13:15; 24:14; Rom. 3:21.

1 Cor. 14:21), so we cannot assume that the New Testament phrase “the Law and the Prophets” was meant to exclude the Writings.

The only book that produced serious doubts among Jews was Esther, which is not found among the Qumran scrolls and is not quoted in the New Testament either. The main reason for these doubts appears to have been that Esther does not mention the name of God, which made it seem unlikely that it could be inspired Scripture. It is not mentioned in the New Testament, but that cannot be taken as evidence that Christians rejected its canonicity, since several other Old Testament books are not quoted in the New Testament either,⁴¹ and they were certainly regarded as inspired Scripture. Arguments from silence prove nothing, and there is no indication that the early church ever rejected Esther in the way that some Jews were thought to have done.

Much less clear is the status of a number of books or parts of books that are found in the LXX but not in the Hebrew Bible. Some of these were probably translated from Hebrew into Greek, but the original text has been lost and only the Greek now survives. In the case of Esther, the LXX version contains substantial additions to the Hebrew text that mention God frequently, making us suspect that they may have been added for that reason! The additions to Daniel and Jeremiah take the form of appendices (*Bel and the Dragon*, for example, or the *Letter of Baruch*) which can stand alone if need be. Most of the other texts are either historical (like the books of the *Maccabees*) or form part of the wisdom literature that is associated with the name of Solomon.

Taken together, these books have come to be known as the Apocrypha and have been clearly rejected by the Jewish tradition, even though they are all of Jewish origin.⁴² None of them is quoted in the New Testament, though there are possible allusions to some of them, and they are included in Christian editions of the LXX. It seems that they were used in the church as morally edifying texts without being regarded as divinely inspired Scripture, though the tendency to canonize them as such grew over time. Debate about the status of the LXX, and therefore of the Apocrypha as well, flared up between Augustine and Jerome in the late fourth century. As a distinguished Hebrew scholar, Jerome plumped for the exclusive inspiration of the Hebrew original while Augustine, as a theologian, argued that because the apostles used the LXX it should be the canonical text adopted by the church. Augustine’s view prevailed and the Apocrypha later had some influence on the development of medieval

⁴¹ There are no quotations in the New Testament from Ruth, 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, or Obadiah.

⁴² The word “apocrypha” means “hidden,” which the books in question obviously are not! A more accurate term, and the one now generally preferred by scholars, is “deuterocanonical,” though it must be admitted that it has not caught on outside specialist circles.

theology, but in the earliest period of Christianity it was an irrelevance. No commentaries were written on it, which means that it was not in regular use in the church's preaching and teaching ministry.⁴³ In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformers revived the position of Jerome, which they regarded as more scientific, so that today Protestant Bibles follow the Hebrew text, though the influence of the LXX can still be seen in the names given to some of the books and in the order in which they are placed in the canon.⁴⁴

Having said this, it must be admitted that the New Testament, which was originally written in Greek, normally uses the LXX when it quotes from the Hebrew Bible, even when the Hebrew text is different. Various explanations for this have been given, which may be summarized as follows:

1. Quoting the LXX was mainly a matter of convenience. Christians were writing in Greek for Greek-speakers who were already familiar with that translation. It was more important for the early Christian evangelists to tap into that tradition than to correct it by referring back to the original Hebrew, because they were claiming that Christ had come to fulfill the Scriptures, a point that could only be credibly made if people recognized those Scriptures when they heard them. Had the evangelists translated directly from the Hebrew, many Greek-speaking Jews might have thought that they were doctoring the text to make it fit their agenda. Since Christians were not trying to bend the text to suit themselves but only to communicate the gospel to their hearers, using the LXX seemed to be the best means to that end. Given that neither the Hebrew nor the LXX then existed in a single form, it was always possible for a New Testament writer to use a version of the Greek that was closer to the Hebrew than the original LXX, and that seems to be what Paul actually did, particularly when he was quoting from Isaiah.

2. The differences between the Hebrew and the LXX did not really matter. The exact meaning of many Hebrew words, especially those that refer to plants and animals not found outside the Middle East, was unknown even to the original translators. What on earth is a pygarg, for example?⁴⁵ Would it matter if the lilies of the field turned out to be daffodils or daisies? Not really, and in cases like these the LXX readings may be just as good as any others. It would have been different if Christians had been expected to obey the Jewish food laws, but since they were not bound to them, they could allow the identity of

⁴³ An exception may be made for Tobit, on which Ambrose (339?–397) wrote a commentary, and also for Ecclesiasticus, which was commented on by Theodoret (d. 466?). But both of these were late and they had no imitators until the time of Bede (673–735).

⁴⁴ This influence, such as it is, was mediated through the Latin Vulgate, translated by Jerome from the original Hebrew and Greek.

⁴⁵ Deut. 14:5 (KJV); the ESV has "ibex."

many of the “unclean” creatures they mention to remain uncertain, since this did not affect their faith in any practical way.⁴⁶ That was the approach taken by the early church and even by Jews, who were forced to admit that they did not always know exactly what they were supposed to avoid eating.

It also happens that the Hebrew can sometimes be read in different ways because the original text had no vowels. A famous example of this occurs in Genesis 47:31, which says that Jacob “bowed himself upon the head of his *mt̄h*.” The Hebrew word *mt̄h* can be read either as *mittah* (bed) or as *matteh* (staff). The Masoretic text preferred the former, which makes more sense, but the LXX chose the latter, and its version is the one given in Hebrews 11:21.⁴⁷ The only way to reconcile these two readings is to translate the Genesis text as “staff,” taking the Hebrews citation of the LXX as evidence for that, but this seems to be forced.⁴⁸ Perhaps the writer to the Hebrews knew that “bed” was a better reading, but thought that his audience was used to the LXX and would have spotted an “error” had he used it instead of “staff.” What can we do about something like this? Does it matter one way or the other? Whatever solution we prefer, we should be able to admit that it makes little difference in practice, and this was the way that most early Christians looked at discrepancies of this kind.

3. Christians believed that the LXX was a divinely inspired translation and so if it diverged from the Hebrew, it was to be preferred as a more recent (and therefore superior) revelation from God. That was certainly what many Christians in later times maintained, but the New Testament writers were too conversant with the Hebrew text to say this. They were happy to quote the LXX as the Word of God because to them the inspiration of Scripture was “plenary” but not “verbal.” This is a modern distinction that requires some adaptation when applied to ancient Israel and the early church, but it is important nonetheless.⁴⁹ Both Jews and Christians believed that the Hebrew Bible was fully inspired by God and that, as Jesus famously said, not “one jot or one tittle” of it would be unfulfilled or made redundant.⁵⁰ But neither Jews nor Christians attached so much importance to the precise words of the text that only one version of it could be authoritative. Above all, they did not think that translation into another language was impossible or that Scripture could only be read in the original Hebrew.

⁴⁶ This is the case in Deut. 14:12–18.

⁴⁷ The ESV follows the Masoretic text in Genesis, but leaves the word “staff” in Hebrews.

⁴⁸ It is, however, what the New International Version does.

⁴⁹ In modern times, “plenary” inspiration has sometimes been used to allow translators to paraphrase the original text, as long as its basic meaning is preserved, with the result that it is suspect in the eyes of those who maintain “verbal” inspiration and prefer more literal translations. In the ancient world, however, belief in “verbal inspiration” would have meant excluding the possibility of translation altogether.

⁵⁰ Matt. 5:18 (KJV). The “jot” is the letter *yod* (equivalent to our *i*) and a tittle is a small stroke that distinguishes some Hebrew letters from others (e.g., *resh* from *daleth*, *nun* from *waw*, and *beth* from *resh*). It may be compared to the distinctions made in our alphabet between *C* and *G*, between *O* and *Q* and between *P* and *R*.

In later centuries Jews would retreat to their Hebrew text and adopt a strictly “verbal” doctrine of divine inspiration that ruled out translation. This view would also be adopted by Muslims, who believe that their Qur’an can only be truly read in the original (and divinely inspired) Arabic, but Christians have never embraced so narrow an approach to the biblical text. The Eastern churches retained the LXX as a divinely inspired translation and forgot the Hebrew, though they were not averse to translating their Greek version into other languages.⁵¹ For its part, the Western church regarded the Latin translation made by Jerome in the late fourth century (known as the Vulgate) as infallible, and insisted that it should be used to the exclusion of all others, although it never went so far as to say that it was divinely inspired.⁵² The Roman Catholic Church canonized it at the Council of Trent in 1546, at a time when humanist scholars and Protestants were challenging both the authority and the accuracy of the Latin.⁵³

Protestants wanted to go back to the original languages but also to translate the Bible directly from them into the vernacular tongues of Europe. In doing this they returned to the view of the early church, which was that the text was fully inspired but not in a way that rules out any possibility of translation. The big difference between the sixteenth-century Protestant (and generally modern) approach and that of the ancients is that the original texts are now fully recognized as the standard by which the church’s teaching and preaching must be measured. Not everyone learns the languages concerned, but there is now no danger that they will be lost or disregarded as they were for many centuries; nor can any translation take their place in the way that the LXX and the Vulgate once did. Today all serious theology and scholarship must engage with the original texts, and even make new translations of them if the existing ones are unable to convey their meaning with sufficient accuracy.

At the same time, we have to recognize that our standards were not those of the early church, which was often prepared to advance theological arguments on the basis of readings that would be universally rejected today. Whether (and to what extent) the conclusions drawn from such a procedure must also

⁵¹ But note that a Modern Greek version is called an “interpretation” (*hermêneia*) and not a “translation” (*metaphrasis*).

⁵² The distinction between “Eastern” and “Western” churches is based on the division of the Roman empire in the late fourth century. For the most part, the West was Latin-speaking, so that “Western” and “Latin” can be used synonymously for theological purposes. The Eastern situation was more complex. Greek was the *lingua franca* in the Eastern part of the empire, but there were important communities where it was not spoken, and translation into the different vernaculars was more common. The Western church was also united around the see of Rome, whereas the East recognized four centers of authority—Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, each of which constituted a separate “church.”

⁵³ The decree was issued at Session 4 on April 8, 1546. See *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta* (Bologna: Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, 1973), 664–665.

be rejected is a matter of debate. In some cases, the points being made can be supported from other texts that have not been so misinterpreted, and so they can be allowed to stand for that reason. Other cases are more problematic, and Christians have differed as to how much weight should be given to the force of tradition as a guide for interpretation. All that can be said here is that the texts concerned have to be considered on their own merits and that blanket judgments either for or against accepting traditional understandings of them must be avoided.

In the course of time Christians and Jews would come to differ about what the text of the Old Testament was, as well as about how particular verses should be interpreted, but this did not worry the New Testament writers or the churches to which they wrote. It was only after the Hebrew text was standardized that this became a significant issue, particularly in dialogue with Jews. The desirability of making the Greek text correspond to the Hebrew was often accepted by educated Christians, but not when it came to Isaiah 7:14, where an important theological principle was involved. The LXX says that “a virgin shall conceive,” using the Greek word *parthenos* to translate the Hebrew *almah*, which means “young woman” (Greek, *neanis*).⁵⁴ It is probable that the translators thought that sexual intercourse marked the transition from youth to adulthood, making the two words virtually synonymous. Christians naturally relied on *parthenos* as a prophecy of the virgin birth of Christ, and the verse is quoted to this effect in the New Testament.⁵⁵ No one objected to this at the time, but the issue came to a head in the mid-second century when Aquila and others corrected this apparent error by using *neanis* instead of *parthenos* in their translations.

The threat that this kind of revision posed to the church is amply demonstrated by Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, which may be dated to about AD 155.⁵⁶ Trypho, who is usually identified as the Jewish rabbi Tarphon, challenged the accuracy of the LXX translation, and Justin responded by offering two counterarguments to this. First, he said (quite rightly, it would seem) that there is nothing special about a young woman giving birth. That is so commonplace that it could hardly be regarded as a special sign, as the text indicates it would be. If a young woman who was not a virgin had had a son, how would anyone have guessed that something unique had occurred? Less persuasively, Justin followed Philo and argued that the LXX was a divinely inspired translation, of which this verse was an outstanding example. The Hebrew was am-

⁵⁴ The Hebrew word for “virgin” is *bethulah*.

⁵⁵ Matt. 1:23.

⁵⁶ Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 43.3–8; 67.1; 68.9; 71.3; 77.3; 84.1, 3.

biguous and somewhat banal but the Greek was clear and prophetic, as inspired Scripture ought to be. In this instance, which was of supreme importance for the teaching of the church, Justin felt that he needed the Philonic myth to buttress his theological position, and later generations generally accepted his logic. The long-term effect of this was that Christians began to ignore the Hebrew and even to regard it as having been corrupted by anti-Christian Jews. Only the LXX could be relied on for theological construction—a belief that was to remain unchanged in the Eastern churches and is occasionally still advocated by some very conservative Western Christians today.

The LXX was to have an enormous impact on the choice of theological vocabulary used by the New Testament writers and by the early Christians in general. It is to the LXX that we owe the translation of “Torah” as “law” (*nomos*), when it might just as easily have been rendered as “teaching” or “instruction” (*didachê*). Likewise, it was the LXX that translated *berith* as *diathêkê* (“testament” or “covenant”) and most importantly, *panim* (“face”) as *prosôpon*, the word later used to mean “person” in the theological sense. The LXX thus created a biblical terminology that prepared the way for the coming of Christ by making the Greek language capable of absorbing Christian theological concepts. Without that, preaching the gospel would have been much harder and the church’s theological tradition would not have developed as quickly and as (relatively) painlessly as it did. In this way, Hellenistic Jews played an important part in the life of the early church without being aware of it. Later Judaism would move off in a different direction, and the Hellenists would cease to exist as an identifiable group within Israel—but by the time that happened the seeds they had sown had grown and helped to produce the fruit that we now call Christian theology.

Christianity and Jewish Biblical Interpretation

Most Christians today do not realize that the New Testament writers often used rabbinical methods of interpreting the Old Testament, despite the great revival of interest in the Judaism of Jesus’ day that has occurred over the past century and revolutionized our understanding of this phenomenon.⁵⁷ It had always been known that Paul received the best rabbinical education available in his time, because he said so himself.⁵⁸ But for centuries little attention was paid to the possibility that Jewish influences seriously affected his interpretation of

⁵⁷ See W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1948). For a Jewish perspective, see Jacob Neusner, *Christian Faith and the Bible of Judaism: The Judaic Encounter with Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987). For an overall summary of the different views held on the subject, see David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible*, 2nd ed. (Leicester: Apollos, 1991).

⁵⁸ Acts 22:3.

the Bible. Now, however, we know enough about Jewish biblical exegesis in the first century AD to be able to assess its impact on the New Testament, and the results show us how important it was, especially when Christians were arguing with Jews. Methods of interpretation that were used in the rabbinical schools are echoed not only by Paul but throughout the New Testament, and they help us to understand how arguments that seem strange to us were accepted by Jews at that time. For example, in Matthew 2:23 we read,

And he [Joseph] went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he [Jesus] would be called a Nazarene.

On the surface, this does not appear to make much sense. Joseph was already living in Nazareth before Jesus was born,⁵⁹ so he was returning home, though Matthew gives the impression that Joseph was going there for the first time. More importantly, there is nothing in the prophets to say that Jesus would come from Nazareth, a place that is not even mentioned in the Old Testament. Matthew was presumably referring to Judges 13:5, where the angel of the Lord says to the wife of Manoah of Zorah, the future mother of Samson,

... behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

The Nazirites were members of a strict Jewish sect, and the word has nothing to do with Nazareth. But “Nazirite” sounds like “Nazarene,” and that was enough to permit this kind of word play, which was very common among the rabbis. Furthermore, there are other, more substantial similarities between the two stories. Like Manoah and his wife, Mary was visited by an angel who told her that she would bear a son, who would also save Israel from its enemies. Samson, the son of Manoah, was certainly not the promised Messiah, but as a judge of Israel he was a prototype of the Savior who was to come and he is mentioned in the list of the great heroes of faith in Hebrews 11.⁶⁰ The fact that Jesus succeeded where Samson failed was further proof that the two men were connected, because the Old Testament was interpreted as a record of Israel’s failure to achieve what only the Messiah could do. Christ therefore fulfilled the promise made concerning Samson just as much as he fulfilled those made to Abraham and Moses. A verse that appears to be mistaken in linking

⁵⁹ Luke 2:4.

⁶⁰ Heb. 11:32.

“Nazarene” to “Nazirite” turns out to have a profound theological meaning and provides a good example of how the early Christians found Christ in all the Scriptures, as he taught them to do.⁶¹

Here we meet a kind of interpretation that we would not accept if someone were to make it today but that seemed perfectly valid to those to whom it was addressed.⁶² The rabbis were accustomed to the idea that divine truths were hidden beneath the surface of mundane realities and did not care that “Nazirite” and “Nazarene” are etymologically unrelated. To them, both words pointed to a higher reality, the clear outlines of which could be discerned only by those who understood the spirit of prophecy. Their relationship transcended human reason, and only those able to rise up to that higher sphere of knowledge could perceive it. They also believed that, in a world ruled by a sovereign God, nothing happened by accident. Joseph went to Nazareth for a reason, even if he did not understand what it was. With hindsight everything became clear, and the “signs” were discovered and interpreted accordingly.

Jewish biblical interpretation can be analyzed into four different types, though in practice these were often combined and can sometimes be difficult to distinguish. The first, and in the New Testament by far the most common of them was literal exegesis. This took the text as it stood and read it accordingly. Clear examples of this can be found in the story of the temptation of Jesus, who answers the Devil by quoting three verses from Deuteronomy.⁶³ It can also be found in Paul, who often quotes the Torah in a perfectly straightforward way.⁶⁴ Stephen’s speech to the Jewish leaders, in which he recapitulates the history of Israel, is another outstanding example.⁶⁵ The early church was firmly grounded in actual events, and it never lost sight of the fundamental importance of the literal meaning of the Old Testament.

Nonliteral Jewish interpretation can be classified as *midrash*, *peshet*, or allegory. Only the last of these is familiar to us today, probably because it is of Greek origin and was applied to nonreligious as well as to religious texts. In the first century it was mainly used by Philo, as we might expect, and hardly at all elsewhere, and its virtual absence from the New Testament shows us that the mind-set of Hellenistic Judaism barely touched the apostles and their colleagues. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul did make some use of allegory, though it is noticeable that this was of a Pharisaic rather than a

⁶¹ See Luke 24:44–47.

⁶² On this tension and how it might be dealt with, see Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

⁶³ Deut. 8:3; 6:16, and 6:13, quoted in Matt. 4:4, 7, and 10 respectively. Deuteronomy is the most frequently quoted book of the Torah in the New Testament, and it was almost always read literally.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Rom. 7:7 (Ex. 20:12–17); 1 Cor. 6:16 (Gen. 2:24); and 2 Cor. 13:1 (Deut. 19:15).

⁶⁵ Acts 7:1–53. The same can be said for Heb. 11:1–38.

Philonic type.⁶⁶ In other words, it was closer to what we would now call typology, using genuine historical events to illustrate spiritual principles rather than ignoring the historicity of the Old Testament stories altogether. The best known example of this is found in Galatians 4:21–31, where Paul compares Jews and Christians to the two sons of Abraham. Ishmael, the son of the slave concubine Hagar, represents Israel because he was the natural son, whereas Isaac stands for the church of Christ because he was the spiritual child and the true heir of the covenant that God had made with his father. Ishmael and Israel both came into being as a result of the natural process of human reproduction, but Isaac and the church existed only because of a promise made by God.

Much more common was *midrash*, a form of interpretation whose goal was to penetrate the spirit of the biblical text in order to uncover meanings that were not immediately obvious. As a method, it was not as fully defined in Jesus' day as it was to be later on, but it was already very popular among the Pharisees and an attempt to regulate it had been made by the great rabbi Hillel in the first century BC. Jesus often used midrashic interpretation when arguing with Jewish leaders, and it seems that it was particularly popular in one-on-one debates.⁶⁷ Paul, as a Pharisee himself, made considerable use of it, often in quite a sophisticated way.⁶⁸ In particular, the influence of Hillel can be detected in several places, much more often than it can be in the teaching of Jesus, perhaps because Jesus had not been taught by rabbis.⁶⁹

The most popular method of Jewish interpretation used by the early Christians, however, was *peshet*. *Peshet* is an Aramaic word meaning "solution," and it stands in opposition to *raz*, which means "puzzle" or "riddle." This is the kind of interpretation we have already met with in the example of Nazirite-Nazarene given above. It assumes that everything has a veiled meaning, which has to be extracted from the text by methods that may seem strange to us. Jews believed that God had revealed mysteries (*raz*) to the prophets and had given the gift of interpretation (*peshet*) to others.⁷⁰ In the Qumran community, the gift of interpretation belonged to the enigmatic Teacher of Righteousness, who was himself a prophetic, semi-eschatological figure. *Peshet* interpretation was not scholarly analysis but had its own charismatic and revelatory quality, which made it particularly suited to the ministry of Jesus. A famous example of it can

⁶⁶ 1 Cor. 9:9; 10:1–4; Gal. 4:21–31.

⁶⁷ For examples, see Matt. 7:11; 10:25; Mark 2:25–28; 12:26; Luke 12:28.

⁶⁸ See Rom. 3:10–18; 9:19–29; 10:18–21; Gal. 3:10–13.

⁶⁹ See Rom. 4:1–12; 5:15–21; 13:8–10; Gal. 3:8–17. It is probable that links between Jesus and Hillel (as in Matt. 7:11) were accidental, whereas Paul would have known his teaching and is more likely to have used it deliberately.

⁷⁰ Note the similarity here to what Paul says about speaking in tongues and their interpretation, in 1 Cor. 14:13–19.

be found in the story of Jesus' preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth, when he read from Isaiah and then told the startled congregation that the prophet's words had been fulfilled in their hearing!⁷¹ Another famous example of the same phenomenon occurs in Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost, in which he compared the events of that day to the prophetic vision of Joel.⁷²

Pesher interpretation lent itself naturally to the theme of the fulfillment of prophecy, and so we should not be surprised to find that it is common in the Gospels, in the opening chapters of Acts, and in the epistle to the Hebrews. Nor should we be surprised to discover that it is relatively rare in Paul, who was less immediately concerned with the theme of prophetic fulfillment.⁷³

It is the Christocentric dimension of New Testament interpretation that distinguishes it most obviously from its Jewish counterparts. Rabbinic methods were used when they could be useful, but they were means to an end that was essentially foreign to the rabbis. As Richard Longenecker has put it,

In the preaching of the early Christians, . . . one looks almost in vain for any clear consciousness of employing various methods of interpretation in quoting the Old Testament. For purposes of analysis we may (rightly, I believe) catalogue their methods and trace out their respective patterns. But the first Christian preachers seem to have made no sharp distinction between literalist treatments of the text, Midrash exegesis, *Pesher* interpretation, and the application of accepted predictive prophecies. All of these were employed, and at times there appears a blending and interweaving of methods. What they were conscious of, however, was interpreting the Scriptures from a Christocentric perspective, in conformity with the exegetical teaching and example of Jesus, and along Christological lines. In their exegesis there is the interplay of Jewish presuppositions and practices, on the one hand, and Christian commitments and perspectives on the other, which produced a distinctive interpretation of the Old Testament.⁷⁴

However strange these methods may seem to us, we have to remember that the people and the circumstances that the apostles were addressing were quite different from anything we are familiar with. In seeking to evaluate their approach, what matters most is that their audiences accepted its validity and were often persuaded by their arguments. Today we think differently, and our message has to be adapted to meet the needs and expectations of our time, but it is still possible to defend a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament,

⁷¹ Luke 4:18–19, quoting Isa. 61:1–2.

⁷² Acts 2:17–21, quoting Joel 2:28–32.

⁷³ Paul does occasionally use it, though. See Rom. 16:25–27; Eph. 3:1–11.

⁷⁴ Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 103.

even among Jews.⁷⁵ God speaks to us where we are, not because he approves of our situation or agrees with our way of thinking, but because unless he does so we shall never hear his voice.⁷⁶ As Paul put it,

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.⁷⁷

Jewish methods of interpreting the Bible faded out of the church as it turned from preaching to them and went to the Gentiles instead. What they took with them was the Old Testament and their conviction that it prophesied the coming of the Messiah for all nations—to the Jews first, but also to the rest of the world. Preaching to non-Jewish people required a different approach, but the underlying message remained the same and the inheritance of Israel was recycled to make it speak to a different intellectual and religious climate. *Midrash* and *peshet* interpretations disappeared and were replaced by allegory, but the literal meaning of the text remained fundamental and determined how the other methods would be used.

In early Christian exegesis, the appeal to allegory was normally permitted only when the plain sense of the text seemed to require it, either because the text as it stood was immoral or unsatisfactory, or because it was not intended to be taken literally to begin with. Thus we find allegorical interpretations of the parables of Jesus (which were not accounts of historical events) and of those psalms that advocated the murder of little children.⁷⁸ The Song of Songs was in a category of its own. Its eroticism seemed strange for a work of spiritual edification, and so it was almost always interpreted in an allegorical way, as an illustration of the relationship either between Christ and the church or between Christ and the individual believer.⁷⁹ But these were exceptional cases, and easily explained by the nature of the texts involved. On the whole, the church read the Old Testament as history, and disputed with the Jews the right to claim it as children of Abraham. But the way they interpreted its details was quite

⁷⁵ The difference of course is that, for Jews, the messianic prophecies have yet to be fulfilled.

⁷⁶ He even spoke to the wise men through astrology! See Matt. 2:2.

⁷⁷ 1 Cor. 9:20–22.

⁷⁸ See Ps. 137:9, for example.

⁷⁹ See Mark W. Elliott, *The Song of Songs and Christology in the Early Church 381–451* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

different and of great significance for the emergence of the Christian church as a missionary organization that was not attached to, and did not create, a distinct ethnicity.

Christianity and the Prehistory of Israel

Differences between the way in which Jews and Christians read the Bible can be discerned from its very beginning. In New Testament times, Jews and Christians both interpreted the pre-Abrahamic period (recounted in Genesis 1–11) as essentially “prehistoric.” This did not mean that they thought the stories were mythical, but that they thought those accounts had been transmitted orally over many generations before being written down. Nothing in Genesis 1–11 could be regarded as an eyewitness account of the events being described, and many of the names that appear in the narrative were either unknown to later history or else “generic”—the eponymous ancestors of historical nations, for example. People read of their existence and of the place they occupied in the development and differentiation of the human race, but did not relate to them as individuals in the way that they related to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were the recognized ancestors of their faith community in a way that Enoch and Methuselah were not.

From the prehistoric period the Jews learned that all human beings were descended from Adam and Eve, and are therefore related to one another. Every man and woman, however “primitive” he or she might be in cultural terms, was made in the image and likeness of God and shared in the dominion over creation that was given to Adam. Jewish tradition always accepted that principle, at least in theory, even if it did not make much of it in practice. This was because their reading of the narrative placed the emphasis on the progressive differentiation of the human race, leading eventually to the emergence of the chosen people of Israel. To them, the appearance of other nations was rather like the creation of the other planets. It was nice to know about them, but with the exception of their near neighbors and close relations, they did not impinge on Israel most of the time and made little difference to their everyday lives.

Christians however, could not adopt a detached attitude to the existence of non-Jews (or unbelievers). With its calling to preach the gospel of Christ to the ends of the earth, the church had to come to terms with the common humanity of all people, not just of those whom Israel recognized as Gentiles but also of those who are not mentioned in the Old Testament at all. There was never any suggestion that northern Europeans, for example, were excluded from the

promises of God merely because their names did not appear in Genesis. The unity of the human race went back to the beginning and covered everyone. In that sense Jesus Christ was regarded as the “new Adam” who came to die for people of every tribe and nation, and the history of the human race was brought together in him.⁸⁰

The creation account in Genesis teaches that men and women are fundamentally equal, since both were created in the image and likeness of God, but that within this equality there is an order of priority and a certain differentiation. The woman was taken out of the man and intended to be his helper, a belief which in later times was enshrined in the concept of male “headship.”⁸¹ This headship was intrinsic to their relationship. The woman was expected to submit to her husband’s authority, and in return the man was expected to take care of his wife and sacrifice his interests to hers.⁸² The pattern established in the garden of Eden carried over into the life of the church, which was called to model male-female relationships as they were originally meant to be.⁸³ Here again, Jews and Christians were in fundamental agreement, but Judaism was (and is) patriarchal in a way that Christianity has never been. The most obvious example of this is that while among Jews only men were given the covenant sign of circumcision, the church has always baptized men and women without distinction because we are all one in Christ.⁸⁴

The creation story also tells us that Adam and Eve had a knowledge of God that might be described as a “personal relationship” with him, but that this relationship was both inferior to what God intends for us now and compromised by their disobedience. On the first point, Theophilus of Antioch (late second century) wrote,

Because he was still a child, Adam was unable to receive knowledge in the right way. . . . The reason God commanded him not to eat [of the tree of] knowledge was not that God was trying to be nasty to him, as some people think. In reality, God wanted to test Adam, to see whether he would obey his commands. At the same time, he wanted man, child that he was, to remain simple and innocent a little while longer.⁸⁵

As for their disobedience, Irenaeus of Lyon (130?–200) had this to say:

⁸⁰ 1 Cor. 15:22, 45.

⁸¹ 1 Cor. 11:4–16.

⁸² Eph. 5:22–33.

⁸³ 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; 1 Tim. 2:11–15.

⁸⁴ Gal. 3:28.

⁸⁵ Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolycum* 2.25.

Disobedience to God brings death. For that reason, Adam and Eve were subjected to the penalty of death. From that very moment, they were handed over to it. They died the same day that they ate . . .⁸⁶

As a result of their sin, human beings can no longer fulfill the tasks that God assigned to them or enjoy the blessings that they were meant to inherit, even though the original divine command has not been rescinded nor have the promised blessings been annulled. Sin has not reduced humanity to the level of the animals, but it has introduced an anomalous situation that is in conflict with God's original intention for us. For this sad state of affairs, human beings are entirely responsible, because it is we who have rejected God and not the other way around. Jews and Christians both agreed that the main purpose of the biblical revelation was to show how God has overcome this problem and restored the right relationship between himself and at least some of his human creatures. Where they differed was over the means he had chosen to accomplish that—the law of Moses or the gospel of Christ.

The first Christians shared the traditional Jewish belief that sin could be atoned for only by sacrifice. Because sin had cut Adam and Eve off from the God of life and brought death into the world, this sacrifice had to include death, but in prehistoric times that was imperfectly understood. The story of Cain and Abel shows us that Abel realized it but Cain did not. Abel's sacrifice of a slaughtered lamb was acceptable to God, but Cain, whose offering of vegetables was rejected as inadequate, turned around and killed him out of jealousy. The lesson drawn from that was that persecution and martyrdom was symptomatic of what would happen to those who offered true worship to God, and Christians did not hesitate to refer to the blood of righteous Abel, whose witness was powerful in the early church.⁸⁷ The apostle Paul boasted of his sufferings for the gospel, and warned Timothy that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."⁸⁸ Furthermore, the early Christians were convinced that the attacks against them would begin among their own Jewish people, who had murdered the prophets of old because of their unwelcome faithfulness to God.⁸⁹

The only other prehistoric patriarchs who made much of an impact on the early Christians were Enoch and Noah. There was a certain fascination with Enoch among Jews in New Testament times, and prophecies attributed to him

⁸⁶Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus omnes haereses* 5.23.2.

⁸⁷Heb. 11:4.

⁸⁸2 Tim. 3:11–12. See also 2 Cor. 11:23–33.

⁸⁹Matt. 23:35–37, which mentions the murder of Zechariah the son of Berachiah (Zech. 1:1) as well as that of Abel. Note too that there was another Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada the high priest, who was also murdered in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 24:20–22).

circulated widely. One of them was actually quoted by Jude, though whether he thought it was authentic is impossible to say.⁹⁰ The book of *Enoch* never became canonical Scripture, partly because the Jewish authorities did not believe that anything written by Enoch could have survived the flood and partly because they had no interest in anything that claimed to be pre-Mosaic.⁹¹ But Enoch retained his fascination among Christians for another reason: he was the seventh in the descent of Adam and had been taken up to God without passing through death, which was a sign of his exceptional righteousness.⁹² As understood by Christians, that righteousness was the fruit of Enoch's faith, and he was held up among them as a prime example of someone who had been justified by faith alone. Moreover, whereas the other patriarchs had enjoyed exceptionally long lives, which the Jews attributed to their good behavior,⁹³ Enoch went up to heaven remarkably young—a mere lad of 365! For Christians this was a sign that to be cut off in the prime of life, as so many of them were, was not a curse but a blessing, especially if they died as witnesses to their faith—even though that interpretation has nothing to do with the text.⁹⁴

Noah was the other prehistoric figure who made a great impression on later generations. As the only righteous man left in his time, he was spared during the great flood that God sent to wipe out the world that had fallen into sin. Because he was faithful, Noah received God's promise that the world would never again be destroyed on account of its sinfulness.⁹⁵ Both Jews and Christians recognized that the world was an evil place, and that it continued to exist only because of this divine promise. Salvation would therefore have to come by redeeming this sinful world, and not at the expense of its destruction. That this promise had implications for the future of Israel was made clear by the prophet Isaiah,⁹⁶ but Ezekiel taught that Noah's righteousness had no power to save anyone but himself.⁹⁷ The conclusion must be that the covenant of preservation that God had given to Noah was not a form of salvation, but only the necessary preliminary for what would later be made available to those who were righteous.

At first sight, it might seem as though the Jews believed that only Israel was

⁹⁰ Jude 14–15, quoting *1 Enoch* 1:9.

⁹¹ Surprising as it seems to us, they may not have realized that Enoch's prophecies were of recent origin, and did not come from him.

⁹² Gen. 5:22–24, quoted in Heb. 11:5. Jude (v. 14) mentions that he was the seventh from Adam—a significant number.

⁹³ See Gen. 47:9 for confirmation of this.

⁹⁴ On Enoch, see Clement of Rome, *Epistula* 1 9; Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus omnes haereses* 5.5.1; Tertullian, *De anima* 50.

⁹⁵ Gen. 8:21–22.

⁹⁶ Isa. 54:9.

⁹⁷ Ezek. 14:14, 20.

destined to receive that salvation, but although that is true, it must be carefully qualified. It was not Israel as a whole that would be saved but only a remnant, as Isaiah had said.⁹⁸ This remnant theology, as it is often called, characterized later Judaism, particularly after the exile, and gave the story of Noah its particular poignancy.⁹⁹ This was brought home by Jesus, who used the flood as a paradigm of the coming judgment.¹⁰⁰ Remnant theology is also found in Paul's great discourse about the future of the Jewish people, and the theme recurs in Hebrews and the Petrine epistles, with specific reference to Noah.¹⁰¹ Peter compared the washing away of sin by the flood to the washing away of sin in baptism, using Noah as a prophetic witness of what God intended to do in Christ.¹⁰²

The main difference between Jewish and Christian interpretations of Noah and the flood was seen in the way in which they understood the righteousness that was needed for salvation. For Jews this meant keeping the law, even though that could not have been true of Noah, who lived centuries before the law was given. Christians, however, interpreted it as the righteousness of faith, and in this respect they were undoubtedly closer to the meaning of the text, since it was because of his enduring faithfulness that God had agreed to spare Noah in the first place.¹⁰³ What was true of Noah was also true of Enoch and of all those who had lived before the law was given, as Irenaeus stated quite clearly:

Enoch pleased God without being circumcised. He was God's messenger to the angels even though he was a man, and was taken up into heaven where he has been preserved until now as a witness of the just judgment of God. . . . Moreover, all the other righteous men who lived before Abraham, and those patriarchs who came before Moses, were justified quite apart from the law and its demands.¹⁰⁴

Both Jews and Christians believed that the human race got off to a new start after the flood, but that rebellion against God continued and grew worse as time went on. In the end, that rebellion led to the emergence of distinct ethnic groups that could not communicate with one another—the curse of the tower of Babel.¹⁰⁵ The loss of a shared language set the seal on mankind's alienation from God, because it was no longer possible for everyone to be of one mind

⁹⁸ Isa. 1:9. The ESV translates this as "a few survivors." See also Isa. 10:22–23, quoted by Paul in Rom. 9:27.

⁹⁹ See, for example, Jer. 23:3; 31:7; 40:15; Ezek. 6:8; Mic. 5:7–8; Zeph. 2:7; Hag. 1:12–14; Zech. 8:12.

¹⁰⁰ Matt. 24:36–39.

¹⁰¹ Rom. 11:5; Heb. 11:7; 2 Pet. 2:5.

¹⁰² 1 Pet. 3:18–21.

¹⁰³ Gen. 6:9.

¹⁰⁴ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus omnes haereses* 4.16.2.

¹⁰⁵ Gen. 11:1–9.

and one understanding with respect to him. If God spoke to one nation, the others would not understand what he was saying and so would not share in the blessing that his word brought. This clearly suited the Jews, who saw themselves as God's chosen people to the exclusion of everyone else. They had a common language, a common law and government, and a common worship with only one recognized center of authority, all of which set them apart as a distinct nation.¹⁰⁶

The Christian church did not deny the validity of this Jewish interpretation of the destiny of Israel, but transcended it. Rather than set up a physical nation-state that would exclude outsiders while at the same time harboring unworthy members within its ranks in the way that Israel did, the church established itself as a spiritual society bound together by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, who gave it its common language and a unity of heart and mind that was otherwise lacking.¹⁰⁷ Somewhat ironically perhaps, it is in their respective answers to the curse of Babel that we can see the essential similarities and differences between Israel and the church most clearly. Both were pledged to worship the one God with one heart and one mind, but what Israel worked out in material terms that were given a spiritual meaning, the church expressed spiritually in ways that made use of material signs like water, bread, and wine, but that were not bound by them. In the church, external rites like baptism had their place, but they did not define the people of God in the physical way that circumcision had defined ancient Israel.¹⁰⁸

The Christian Interpretation of Israel's History

The differences between Jewish and Christian interpretations of Israel's prehistory were only magnified when it came to the historical period. The first question that divided them was also the most fundamental—when did Israel's history begin? Jews traced their national origins to Moses and the law that he gave the people in the desert. That law continued to be the foundation of their religious life long after the political framework created by David and Solomon had fallen apart and the nation found itself exiled, dispersed, and subject to foreign control. According to Jewish tradition, Moses was the author of all five books of the Torah (Pentateuch), but only the last four of them described events contemporary with him. Genesis was important for Israel's self-understanding, but it was essentially a prologue that explained why the law of Moses took the shape it did.¹⁰⁹ Christians, on the other hand, looked back behind Moses and

¹⁰⁶ For the importance of this, see 1 Kings 11:25–33 and John 4:20–22.

¹⁰⁷ Acts 2:5–11.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, 1 Cor. 11:27–30; 1 Pet. 3:21.

¹⁰⁹ A classic example of this can be seen in the fourth commandment, which establishes the Sabbath as a day of rest by comparing it with God's rest after he had created the world. Compare Ex. 20:11 with Gen. 2:2–3.

based their claims to be the people of God on the promises he had made to Abraham. They regarded Abraham, not Moses, as the true founder of Israel because he was the father of all who believe and trust in God.¹¹⁰ Who was right?

The complexity of this dispute can perhaps be understood by comparing it with a well-known modern example. When did the history of the United States begin? Some people would say that it started with the migrations of the Amerindian tribes from Siberia, but this is prehistory, just as Genesis 1–11 is prehistory. No one denies that it happened, but it is shrouded in mist and uncertainty and its relevance to modern conditions is hard to discern. However sympathetic we may be to the Amerindians, we must accept that history in North America began with the European invasions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Between 1492 and 1763 Spain, France, and Britain established colonies and fought for supremacy in what they thought was a virtually uninhabited wilderness. This colonial period can be likened to the age from Abraham to Moses. It is historical and in direct continuity with what came later, yet at the same time it is distinct and separate from it. The United States as we know it today began to emerge only after 1763, when the French were expelled from America and the British colonies came together and rebelled against their mother country. The nation that exists now was created in the years from 1776 to 1789 by a series of events that may be compared to the exodus and the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.

So when did American history begin? Americans themselves are divided on how they answer this. Those who think in terms of the nation state look to the revolution and the constitution as the basis of American society just as the ancient Jews looked back to Moses. But those who think more in terms of spiritual and cultural values are liable to go back to the Pilgrim Fathers of 1620 and trace their origins to the idealism of a group of religious believers who set out to establish a new kind of society in an unknown land. This was what Abraham had done, and the Jews never forgot his call from God, even though it was interpreted through the prism of the Mosaic law. The two origin stories coexisted in ancient Israel, rather in the way that the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving coexist in the United States today.

In both Israel and the USA, the two perspectives can usually be harmonized reasonably well at the level of civil society, but they tend to diverge when religious questions are raised. In the American example, secularists appeal to the constitutional separation of church and state to justify their vision of American society, whereas believers look back to the Pilgrims as the founders of a Christian

¹¹⁰Rom. 4:1–25.

America. Similarly, in ancient Israel, those who thought of righteousness in terms of keeping the law appealed to Moses, but Christians, who saw faith as the essence of their identity, looked back to Abraham instead. The difference between the two cases is that whereas modern Americans have (so far) been able to live together in spite of their contrasting perceptions, Jews and Christians were forced apart because the Christian understanding of justification by faith was incompatible with the Jewish insistence on the need to do the works of the law, however much faith those who did such works may have had.¹¹¹

For Jews, the legacy of Abraham was both ethnic and religious. It was ethnic because all Jews were physically descended from him, at least in theory.¹¹² It was religious because God made a covenant with him that he would find a new home in the land of Canaan and become the ancestor of a great nation. To this day, it is that promise which undergirds the claim of the Jewish people to the land of Palestine, as Canaan is now called.¹¹³ That claim has never been uncontested, and only seldom has it been fully realized: under David and Solomon (tenth century BC), at the time of the Maccabees (c. 164–63 BC), and in our own day (since 1967).¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, it has never ceased to be Israel's national ideal, and over the centuries Jews tried to maintain a presence in the "Promised Land" even when they had no hope of ruling it themselves. "Next year in Jerusalem" is the ancient Jewish Passover toast, but only recently has it once again become a reality for a significant number of Jews.

The religious and ethnic ingredients of Abraham's covenant were combined in the rite of circumcision, which explains why it was so important to Israelite nationhood. God gave it to Abraham as a reward for his faithful obedience, so its ultimate origin was religious, but it soon became a badge of ethnic identity, because Abraham was told to circumcise all his male descendants. Those who escaped it were not to be regarded as part of the nation or as inheritors of the covenant promises.¹¹⁵

The early Christians also regarded Abraham as their father, as Paul and James both testified.¹¹⁶ They appealed to Abraham as the classic example of what a true child of God was—a man who was justified by his faith and not by the works of the law. When Jews (and Jewish Christians) tried to insist that

¹¹¹ Gal. 2:15–16.

¹¹² See John 8:39, 53, 56.

¹¹³ The name Palestine is derived from Philistine, though modern Palestinians have no more connection to the Philistines than they have to the Canaanites. Both of those peoples vanished centuries ago, but the name Palestine survived because it was adopted by the Greeks and the Romans as the country's name.

¹¹⁴ Israel became an independent state in May 1948, but only since the "six-day war" in June 1967 has it occupied the whole of ancient Palestine.

¹¹⁵ Gen. 17:10–14.

¹¹⁶ Rom. 4:16; James 2:21.

circumcision was necessary for Gentile converts to Christianity, Paul countered with a lengthy exposition of how the rite had come into existence. It had been given to Abraham, not as a precondition of his adherence to the covenant God made with him but as a sign of the faith which made that covenant possible in the first place.¹¹⁷

The Christian appeal to Abraham was primarily a spiritual one, and the early church saw itself as the heir to the covenant promises that had been handed down through the generations, symbolically represented in the trilogy of “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”¹¹⁸ In this connection it is important to note that Christians did not claim alternative descent from Abraham in the way that Muslims were later to do. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad and the Arabs are descended from Ishmael, Abraham’s son by his concubine Hagar.¹¹⁹ The early Christians did not say anything like that. They took over the stories of Isaac and Jacob without any difficulty, but they made less of them than they did of Abraham. Jacob was important to Jews because he was the ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel, to each of whom a portion of the Promised Land had been given, but this was less significant for Christians.¹²⁰

Paul knew that he was a Benjamite, so some memory of the ancient tribes persisted in New Testament times, but this had no bearing on the church. Ten of the tribes had been “lost” as long ago as 722 BC, when the northern kingdom of Israel had been carried away into Assyrian exile, so only Judah and Benjamin were left, though the phrase “twelve tribes” continued to be used to describe the Jews who were dispersed across the ancient world, and the first Christians followed this practice, at least when they were talking to fellow Jews.¹²¹ In the fullness of time, said Paul, all Israel would be saved, and we should not be surprised to find him speaking of the twelve tribes in that context.¹²² For Christians, the tribes of Israel had an eschatological significance that did not correspond to the earthly membership of the church, where Jew and Gentile mingled to form a new people of God.

Of the sons of Jacob, the one who made the greatest impression on the early Christians was Joseph, partly because of the way he had been persecuted by his brothers and had been rescued by God, but mostly because he was the

¹¹⁷ Gal. 3:1–4:31.

¹¹⁸ Heb. 11:9. See Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus omnes haereses* 4.21.1–3.

¹¹⁹ Qur’an, Sura 2:122–128. The Bible tells us that Ishmael became a desert nomad (Gen. 21:20–21; 25:12–18), so some link between him and the Arabs is possible, but it has to be said that the Islamic claim is more fantasy than fact.

¹²⁰ Levi was an exception. As the priestly tribe, the Levites were not allotted any particular territory to dwell in.

¹²¹ See James 1:1. Whether Jesus chose his twelve disciples to represent the Israelite tribes is uncertain, but if he did, it makes his betrayal by Judas, the disciple who bore the name of the tribe of Judah, which had given its name to the Jewish people, even more poignant.

¹²² See Rom. 11:25–26.

one who led Israel into Egypt, where it had time to grow and multiply before persecution led to the exodus and the establishment of the nation as it came to be known in later times.¹²³ Joseph also figures (instead of his son Ephraim) in the list of the twelve tribes that we find in the great vision of the saved in the book of Revelation, though no explanation for this is given.¹²⁴

But however important Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were to Jews at the time of Jesus, there can be no doubt that for most of them Israel had been formed into a nation by Moses, their great liberator and lawgiver. It was Moses who had set up the priesthood and sacrifices that would eventually find their home in the temple at Jerusalem, and it was through him that God had given the law that would bind the nation together in a common set of observances. Even a cursory reading of the Gospels and Acts will demonstrate how significant this was.¹²⁵ As it turned out, the followers of Jesus belonged to the last generation of Jews who would have direct experience of the temple and its worship. The temple plays a major role in the Gospels and even in the Acts of the Apostles, where we are told that the apostle Paul went to worship there on his last visit to Jerusalem, regardless of the antagonism which his preaching had provoked among the Jews and the danger of arrest that he faced. On that occasion he was accused of having taken Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, into the temple with him (though he claimed that he had not done so)—a reminder that the temple could not be a focus for Christian worship in the same way that it was for Jews, because non-Jewish members of the church would not have been admitted to it.¹²⁶

That incident highlights the dilemma that the Mosaic law posed for the early church. Jewish Christians were free to observe it as much as they liked, and many of them did so. But at the same time, Paul insisted that Gentile Christians were free *not* to practice Jewish rituals as long as they avoided giving unnecessary offense to Jews.¹²⁷ The logic that justified this was that the rituals of the Mosaic law had become redundant traditions that Christians could dispense with because they were superfluous to belief in Christ.

Discontent with the way pious Jews observed the law of Moses is an inescapable feature of the New Testament. We find it in the teaching of Jesus, who was born under the law and lived according to it all his life, but who nevertheless found it wanting for different reasons.¹²⁸ In some respects, Jesus thought

¹²³ See Acts 7:9–16; Heb. 11:21–22.

¹²⁴ Rev. 7:8.

¹²⁵ Mark 10:3; Luke 20:37; John 5:46; 7:19–23; 9:28–29; Acts 3:22.

¹²⁶ Acts 21:26–29.

¹²⁷ By eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, for example; Rom. 14:1–23; 1 Cor. 8:1–13; Acts 15:19–20.

¹²⁸ See Matt. 5:17–48.

that the way the rabbis interpreted the law was too lenient. This was the case with its permission of divorce, which Jesus told his disciples Moses had allowed because of the people's hardness of heart, but which was not God's original intention.¹²⁹ In other ways, though, it was too strict, particularly in the details of its food laws.¹³⁰ Nothing that God made could be called unclean, and yet the law of Moses had set up a barrier between what could and could not be eaten that had become a distinguishing mark of Jews in wider society.¹³¹

In essence Jesus and his disciples taught that the law of Moses was a rescue operation, designed to preserve a semblance of Abraham's faith in a nation which was not capable of rising to the spiritual heights that had so distinguished him.¹³² In that sense it was a straitjacket that tied Israel to the right pathway despite their inveterate tendency to err. When the jacket was too tight for comfort, Jewish leaders had a way of letting it out by reinterpreting its more difficult prescriptions in ways that made it easier to bear. Thus, for example, the command to "honor father and mother," which involved taking care of them in old age, could be avoided by paying a tax to the temple in lieu. This tax, known as *corban*, dispensed the person who paid it from any obligation to his parents, and was a superficially pious means of escaping responsibility for them.¹³³ Yet from the standpoint of those who devised such interpretations, it was a practical way of applying a law that was otherwise vague and difficult to keep.

Jesus' criticism of this approach shows that he and his Jewish interlocutors disagreed about what the law really meant. For Jesus it verbalized spiritual principles which, if they were taken seriously, were far more demanding than the literal fulfillment of the written prescription. To the Jewish leaders of his day, however, the law was a set of axioms that had to be spelled out in detail if they were to have any force, and they were afraid that if its commands were unmanageable no one would obey them. They probably thought that Jesus was being impossibly idealistic, which in a sense was true. Neither Jesus nor his followers believed that people could keep the law by following its external rules and precepts. Only a change of heart brought about by the Holy Spirit could do that, and if that happened, the detailed prescriptions of the written law would lose much of their meaning. Who would worry about what he ate if he knew that sin and corruption came from his heart and mind, and not from the food he consumed?

The apostle Paul followed Jesus' teaching about the law closely and developed

¹²⁹ Matt. 19:7–9.

¹³⁰ Matt. 15:17–20.

¹³¹ Acts 10:28.

¹³² Matt. 19:7–9; Gal. 3:17–26.

¹³³ Mark 7:9–13.

it even further. Like Jesus, he had also been born under the law and had done his best to keep and defend it before his conversion. But when he realized what Jesus was saying, the scales fell from his eyes and he understood Moses in a completely new way. Like Jesus, he never doubted that the law of Moses was the word of God. In itself, the law was holy, righteous, and perfect, but it could not be kept to the letter.¹³⁴ A man who had the Holy Spirit of God dwelling in his heart did not need to be circumcised in the flesh because he possessed something more powerful than that. Circumcision was an outward reminder to Jews of what they were supposed to subscribe to, but the presence of the Spirit was an inward compulsion to do what the law required, whether the resulting actions were the same as what it prescribed or not. As Origen (185?–254?) put it,

Christianity was introduced into the world through Mosaic worship and the prophetic writings, but once that introduction had been made, there was progress through the interpretation and explanation of those things. . . . Those who grow in the faith of Christ do not treat the law with disrespect. On the contrary, they give it greater honor, showing what depth of wise and mysterious reasoning those writings contain, something that the Jews do not fully understand.¹³⁵

The consensus of the New Testament was that the law of Moses, good as it was in itself, had to be transcended. This had dramatic implications for the priestly system of sacrifices that Moses had set up and invested in his brother Aaron. It was still in operation in Jesus' time, but as he had come to be the Great High Priest who would make the one, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice that would be valid forever, the days of the sacrificial system were numbered. Jews who believed in Jesus had no more need of the temple sacrifices, and when they disappeared after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Christians had no desire to see them restored. Everything the sacrifices had pictured had been fulfilled in Christ, and so the end of the earthly sacrifices made no difference to them. On the contrary, the end of the sacrifices strengthened their case, because they could claim that God had permitted the destruction of the temple once it was no longer needed. Like the prophets, the early Christians insisted that the temple was merely a symbol, a convenient way of remembering God's presence in Israel, but not essential to his sovereign rule over his people.¹³⁶

Of the post-Mosaic period the early Christians had surprisingly little to say. In the two extended accounts of Israel's history that we find in the New

¹³⁴Rom. 7:7–23.

¹³⁵Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.4.

¹³⁶Acts 7:48–51, quoting Isa. 66:1–2.

Testament, that of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, ends with Solomon, and that of the writer to the Hebrews peters out with David and a vague reference to the prophets.¹³⁷ This can hardly be an accident, especially given the fact that Jesus was hailed as the “son of David,” the new Solomon who was greater than the old.¹³⁸ It was Solomon who had built the original temple, of course, and Jesus saw himself very much in that tradition; his body was to be the temple of the new covenant that God was making with his people, and in him priest, sacrifice, and temple would all be rolled into one.¹³⁹

The identification of Jesus with the Davidic monarchy was important because it was the fulfillment of the prophecy that David would never lack for a successor to reign over Israel. In human terms it could be argued that not only had that prophecy not been fulfilled, it had been denied by the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and the deportation of the Davidic royal family to Babylon.¹⁴⁰ Later kings of Israel were not of the Davidic line, and the Herodians were actually Edomites (Idumaeans), a related but nevertheless non-Israelite nation.¹⁴¹ By reestablishing the connection to David, the kingship that the New Testament claimed for Jesus fulfilled the ancient prophecy but in an unexpected way. Many of his followers believed that he would be the new David, but they thought of this in a purely worldly sense. Jesus was expected to raise the standard of revolt against Rome, set up a new Israelite kingdom, and rule over it in the way that Solomon had.

Instead, Jesus proclaimed the message that his kingdom was “not of this world.”¹⁴² Many of his would-be followers were disappointed, and the state authorities of the time mocked his pretensions. But in doing that, they unwittingly confirmed the promises God had made to his people long before and brought about the union of monarchy and priesthood that had eluded Israel throughout its historic existence. The crucified Christ was proclaimed “King of the Jews.” He wore a crown of thorns and his throne was the cross, yet it was in these symbols that the true nature of his kingship was revealed. Jesus was not merely the new Solomon but the eternal king who had triumphed over sin and death, which the old Solomon could never have done. Jesus appropriated the legacy of David but interpreted it in a new and more spiritual way, as he did with the rest of the Old Testament.

¹³⁷ Acts 7:47; Heb. 11:32.

¹³⁸ Matt. 22:42; John 7:42; Luke 11:31.

¹³⁹ Matt. 26:61; John 2:19–21; Heb. 7:11–10:17.

¹⁴⁰ The promise made to David, that his descendants would reign forever on the throne of Judah, is a persistent theme of 2 Chronicles (see 2 Chron. 7:18; 21:7; 33:7), a book which also recounts the decline and fall of the Jerusalem monarchy.

¹⁴¹ They were descended from Esau, Jacob’s twin brother.

¹⁴² John 18:36.

For the early Christians, the history of Israel culminated in the building of the temple by Solomon, and the rest was merely commentary. They made virtually nothing of the subsequent history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The traumatic experience of the exile and return is largely passed over in silence. James and 1 Peter were addressed to the twelve tribes or “elect exiles” of the Dispersion, but what this meant is unclear. Most probably it was just a way of referring to those Jews who lived outside of Palestine, since none of the places mentioned was connected to the historical exile, nor were all twelve tribes removed at the same time.¹⁴³ As an event of theological significance, the exile plays no obvious part in the New Testament at all.

On the other hand, the first half of the millennium that separated Jesus from the time of Solomon was the age of the prophets, who pointed out how the dreams of David and Solomon had failed to materialize, how time and again the people had turned away from God and been punished for it, and how God had raised up spiritual giants to pass judgment on these failures and to proclaim that there would be a future divine intervention that would put everything right.

All the prophets played a part in this, but two stood out above the rest. The first of them was Elijah, whom the early Christians ranked with Enoch in importance and whose ministry was not yet completed. As Tertullian (160?–220?) put it,

Enoch was translated and so was Elijah. They did not experience death because it was postponed (and only postponed). They have been reserved for the suffering of death, so that by their blood they may extinguish the Anti-christ.¹⁴⁴

The second important prophet was Isaiah, who, more clearly than any of the others, foretold the coming of Jesus in quite specific terms. He would be the son of a virgin, the incarnation of God, and the suffering servant who would pay the price for the people’s sins.¹⁴⁵ Other prophets provided additional details that rounded out this picture, but it was Isaiah who was regarded as the great evangelist of the Old Testament.¹⁴⁶

It was the coming together of the priesthood and the kingship in the life and death of Jesus that most impressed the early Christians, as we can see

¹⁴³ James 1:1 mentions the “twelve tribes” and 1 Peter 1:1 the “elect exiles” in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, all of which are in what is now Turkey, not in Babylonia (Iraq). The historical exile occurred in two phases—the ten northern tribes were exiled in 722 BC and permanently “lost”; Judah and Benjamin went in 586 BC.

¹⁴⁴ Tertullian, *De anima* 50.

¹⁴⁵ Isa. 7:14; 53:1–12.

¹⁴⁶ The New Testament quotes his book more often than any other in the Old Testament except the Psalms. On the Christian reading of Isaiah, see Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

from the way they picked up and interpreted the story of Melchizedek. The historical Melchizedek was a king of Salem (Jerusalem) to whom Abraham offered a tenth of the spoils he had gained after the so-called “battle of the kings.”¹⁴⁷ Exactly who Melchizedek was and why Abraham did this was a mystery. Melchizedek was obviously not an Israelite, but nor could he have been like Enoch, a descendant of Adam who had somehow preserved the worship of the true God. He must have been a descendant of Noah, just as Abraham was, but how he had escaped the sinfulness of the world around him is unknown. The incident recorded in Genesis was sufficiently odd to have impressed itself on the Israelites, who long before the appearance of Jesus had spoken openly of a “priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek,” clearly distinguishing him from the existing (and implicitly inferior) priesthood of Aaron.¹⁴⁸

We do not know if Jesus taught that he was the new Melchizedek, but the writer to the Hebrews certainly thought that he was, and he developed the idea as his main interpretation of the life and work of Christ.¹⁴⁹ Identifying Jesus with Melchizedek not only put him on a higher plane than any of the priests of Israel, but it made him greater than Abraham, because even Abraham had paid him a tithe as a mark of his submission to Melchizedek’s priestly ministry. Furthermore, it linked Jesus to that mysterious pre-Abrahamic era in which there were great men who knew God even though they were not recipients of a divine covenant. Jesus was born and lived under the law, and as an Israelite he was the heir to the covenant promises, but there was something about him that went beyond that. In the final analysis, he was not the servant of the covenant promises, even though he fulfilled them, but their lord and master. The covenant, whether in the form given to Abraham, Moses, or David, was a vehicle, a means to an end, a guide to a deeper revelation. That deeper revelation was incarnated in Melchizedek, the priest-king who had neither beginning nor end and who was not bound by any human ties to those who were called to worship him.

The uniqueness of Jesus was that he was a priest forever, like Melchizedek. Of all the prophets and teachers of Israel, he was the only one who came to speak about himself. When talking with the Pharisees, he reproached them for claiming to have a knowledge of the Scriptures but failing to see that they spoke about him.¹⁵⁰ It was an audacious thing to say, but it is the key to understanding his earthly ministry. By focusing on himself, Jesus was changing the way his

¹⁴⁷ Gen. 14:18–20.

¹⁴⁸ Ps. 110:4. The psalm is attributed to David.

¹⁴⁹ Heb. 5:5–10; 6:13–20; 7:1–20.

¹⁵⁰ John 5:39–40.

disciples thought about God. That Jesus was more than just an extraordinary spiritual figure was made clear right at the beginning, in the episode of the healing of the paralytic who had been let down through the roof.¹⁵¹ The man had obviously been brought to Jesus for healing, but Jesus did not heal him as expected—or at least, not straightaway. Instead, he told the man that his sins had been forgiven. This was a dimension of healing outside the purview of a prophet or faith healer because, as the Jewish leaders who heard him were quick to point out, God alone can forgive sins. It was only in reaction to them that Jesus healed the man physically, as evidence that he had the power to forgive him spiritually. He then went on to make the point that, as the Son of Man, he was in control not only of natural phenomena but also of the law of Moses, which had been given to the people as their infallible spiritual guide.

By these actions, Jesus changed the terms of what we would now call the theological debate. He was the paradigm-shifting factor who made all the difference regarding the way in which the material that was otherwise shared by both Jews and Christians was interpreted by the latter. In Christian terms, the purpose of the law was to lead people to Jesus, and it had to be read in that light. With his coming, some parts of the old law ceased to be relevant, either because he had fulfilled them or because circumstances had made them redundant. The temple sacrifices were no longer necessary, so the rules governing them were effectively overturned. The various regulations governing the civic life of Israel were also outdated, because Israelite society had moved on and no longer needed them. On the other hand, there were some laws, especially those contained in the Ten Commandments, that remained valid for all time. “You shall not kill” was just as much a law for Christians as it was for Jews, with the difference that Jesus had extended it to include evil thoughts and desires of the human heart as well as explicit criminal action.¹⁵²

But whatever effect Jesus’ teaching had on particular laws, the overall impact was the same—he was at the center of the way(s) in which they were to be interpreted. This is important because laws are usually given for the well-being of a state or social community. This was true of the law of Moses, which looked forward to the time when Israel would be settled in the Promised Land and governed by a king. It was no accident that Jesus preached the coming of the kingdom, and hardly surprising that his disciples and others believed that what he meant was that he himself would lead a revolt against the Romans. But for Jesus, the coming of the kingdom was the presence of the king among his

¹⁵¹ Mark 2:1–12.

¹⁵² Matt. 5:21–22.

people. To be under his rule was to be united to him, and it was in that union that the destiny of Israel would be realized.

To sum up, the early Christians read the same Bible as the Jews and fully identified themselves with the history of Israel. The fact that they concentrated on Abraham, Moses, and David did not set them apart from their Jewish counterparts, who did much the same thing. Jews interpreted Abraham through the lens of Moses whereas Christians did the opposite, but that difference of perspective need not have provoked a lasting division between them. Where Christians really differed from Jews was in their estimation of the status of Jesus and the meaning of his life and death. Christians believed that the Hebrew Bible pointed to the coming of Christ, that the law of Moses was intended to preserve Israel until that happened (but only until then), and that the covenant God made with Abraham was fulfilled in him. In practical terms, that meant that many of the legal prescriptions in the Old Testament became redundant after Christ's death and resurrection, but the text itself remained the Word of God and continued to function as the Christian Bible, to which the New Testament was later added. The New Testament writers assumed this inherited tradition and built on it; they did not invent something new. It is to a consideration of what these fundamental and enduring principles were that we must now turn our attention.