

# *The* Church

*A Theological  
and Historical Account*

Gerald Bray



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# Preface

Since ancient times, almost all Christians have confessed their belief in the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” as the Nicene Creed puts it. At the time the creed was composed, that definition of the church was not particularly controversial, and for centuries thereafter hardly anybody thought seriously about what it meant. The church had its quarrels, but although some of them proved to be intractable and led to permanent divisions, most people continued to think that with a little goodwill on all sides, the differences could be patched up and the visible unity of the ancient church restored. It was not until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century that this assumption was seriously challenged, although even then the Reformers continued to insist that the words of the creed expressed their understanding of the church, and they hoped that their proposals would bring back the unity and purity that everyone wanted.

Yet whether they realized it or not, the Reformers were developing conceptions of what the church was that differed from what was commonly believed at the time. They were not interested only in cleaning up corruption or getting rid of obvious abuses in the traditional system. They wanted a church structure that was based on their understanding of New Testament principles, which they believed had been abandoned or forgotten in the course of time. In England there was a serious attempt to marry this new biblical understanding with the traditional pattern of the church, and those who promoted that combination believed that they had hit on the best of both worlds. Unfortunately, as they soon discovered, traditionalists did not accept their doctrines and the more radical Reformers chafed at what they thought were surviving relics of the past that should have been completely rejected.

The result was a civil war in which different visions of the church competed with one another. In the end, the original compromise was reinstated, but it could no longer claim a monopoly, and the English-speaking world became a place where rival groups of Christians developed their own ecclesiologies in the form of what we now call “denominations.”

For better or worse, these denominations are still with us today, with the result that people who are of one mind on the other articles of the creed find themselves interpreting its statement about the church in ways that reflect and perpetuate these post-Reformation divisions. The entire Christian world is affected by this, but whereas in other countries there is usually one dominant church or tradition, it is in those that have been directly affected by the fallout from the English Reformation that ecclesiological issues are most likely to affect the daily life of the average worshiper. It is not for nothing that labels such as “episcopal,” “presbyterian,” and “congregationalist” are commonly used to define particular churches—it is their polity, more than their doctrine, that sets them apart from one another. This is even true of “baptists,” since the refusal to baptize infants is as much a statement about the nature of the church as it is about the state of a newborn child in the mind of God.

This book is not a history of the church, nor is it an exposition of the church’s doctrine. Rather, it is an attempt to understand how and why the different Christian bodies that now exist have come to understand the church in the ways that they have and why they persist with their own interpretations of ecclesiology even when they know that by doing so they are perpetuating the disunity of the Christian world. The eccentric Anglican ecumenist William Palmer (1803–85) believed that the church was like a tree that over time had grown and produced different branches. To his mind, the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and the Anglican Church were the most important of these, and he hoped that they would be able to recognize one another, if not actually reunite, on the basis of their common foundation in the original trunk.

Palmer’s “branch theory” of the church did not win much favor at the time and is now regarded as a curiosity rather than as a serious model for ecclesiology, but properly understood, it has more to commend it than might appear at first sight. It is certainly true that over time, the church has grown and expanded across the world. In the process it has split into different branches, not naturally (as Palmer thought) but as the result of conflict, misunderstanding, and political expediency, as well as of incompatible doctrines. The sad fact is that if the church is the body of Christ, it has the wounds to prove it. Many people have written about this history, almost always from their own

denominational standpoint, which they want to justify in light of theology, history, and practical experience. Sometimes they portray their own spiritual forebears as saints and heroes who were persecuted, or at least misunderstood, by their contemporaries, who are cast by default in the role of villains. This black-and-white approach is now in retreat, particularly in academic circles, but no one is entirely free of bias, and the old fault lines are often still visible, if only in the way the subject is approached and examined.

As a result, very often ecclesiology is an exposition of what a particular theologian thinks the church ought to be, and not of what it actually is. Sometimes the apologists for a particular position solve this problem simply by excluding from the church those who do not fit their picture of what the church ought to be. The most obvious examples of this can be found in the Roman Catholic tradition, whose theologians, in line with official church teaching, have frequently asserted that anyone not in communion with the see of Rome is outside the church. Others may be more generous when dealing with Christian groups that are not of their own persuasion, and even the Roman church has moderated its stance since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), but those who feel strongly that their model of the church is the right one are bound to find it difficult to do justice to other points of view. Only by setting them in historical context and trying to see why each tradition has become what it now is can we gain some perspective on this and look for common elements that underlie our differences and may help us to overcome them. There is no prospect that the church will recover its ancient unity any time soon, and perhaps it never will. But if we can understand one another, we can at least come to terms with one another's traditions and perhaps even learn from them. That is the aim of this book.

Given the nature of the subject, it is only right that the author should disclose his own ecclesial identity. He is an ordained priest of the Church of England and is of the Evangelical persuasion within that church. Over the years he has worked, and at various times has worshiped, with Presbyterians, Baptists, Plymouth Brethren, Churches of Christ, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox and has learned to appreciate them all without abandoning his own denominational allegiance. He hopes that something of that depth of commitment to one tradition that allows for a corresponding breadth of sympathy for others will convey itself to the reader of this short introduction to the doctrine of the church. When all is said and done, Christians are men and women who have been born again of the Spirit of God and who belong to the church because that Spirit has united them in the body of Christ. The lifeblood of that union is love, and it is when we learn to love God that we begin to understand who he is and what his purposes

for his people are. It is my prayer that he will bless you as you read these pages and open your eyes to the wonder of the grace by which he has reached out to a world of sinful human beings and called his chosen ones to be his church, now and in eternity.

Gerald Bray  
August 20, 2014

# 1

## The Origins of the Church

### The Church and the Old Testament People of God

Unlike the world, the Christian church was not created out of nothing. Its beginnings can be dated to the period immediately following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who was its inspiration and perhaps even its founder. Whether Jesus deliberately intended to establish a body of followers who would carry on his teaching after his departure has been disputed in modern times, but the belief that he did was universal for many centuries. It is hard to explain why Jesus chose and trained a body of disciples if he had no thought of perpetuating his ministry. The New Testament tells us that it was at the feast of Pentecost, seven weeks after the resurrection, that Peter stood up in Jerusalem and proclaimed that the ancient prophecies had been fulfilled. God's Holy Spirit was then poured out on the three thousand people who believed his message, and the church as we know it was brought into being.<sup>1</sup>

The Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit was understood by those who took part in it to be a fulfillment of the promises that God had made to their ancestors, promises that could be traced back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Israel itself was the name that God had given to Jacob because he had fought with God and prevailed—an extraordinary statement that

1. Acts 2:14–41.

demonstrates how privileged Israel's relationship to God was.<sup>2</sup> The biblical accounts do not hide the fact that Israel was closely related to the surrounding nations, some of which were also the offspring of Abraham and Isaac, though they make it clear that these other nations had not been chosen by God. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, the language they spoke came to be called Hebrew, a word apparently taken from the otherwise unknown Eber (or Heber), who was a great-grandson of Shem, one of the sons of Noah.<sup>3</sup> Why this was so is never explained, but the use of this term has never been questioned. For a time, the name Israel was used to describe the ten northern tribes that broke away from the kingdom centered on Jerusalem, which was then called Judah after the name of its dominant tribe. But after the ten tribes were taken into exile, the terms "Israel" and "Judah" merged to the point where they became virtually synonymous, a situation that still obtains today.<sup>4</sup>

This was the situation that prevailed in the time of Jesus. Israel was a single Jewish nation, based in Palestine but with a significant Diaspora population in both east and west. The easterners were mainly located in Mesopotamia, where they had remained after the Babylonian exile. The Old Testament books of Daniel and Esther remind us that these Jews played a significant role under the Persians, and several centuries later they would flourish again as major contributors to the development of the Talmud, a repository of Jewish learning that is of central importance for later Judaism. But in the New Testament, the voice of this Diaspora community is virtually silent. It is possible that the wise men who came to find the baby Jesus had heard of Jewish messianic hopes from members of that community, but if so, nothing is said about it.<sup>5</sup> Babylon is mentioned in the New Testament book of Revelation, but it is generally agreed that this is symbolic and not intended to refer to the historical city. Peter greeted the people he wrote to from "Babylon," but again, most commentators take this as a code word for Rome as there is no evidence that Peter ever went to Mesopotamia.<sup>6</sup> But on the day of Pentecost, we are told that there were pilgrims from what was then the Parthian Empire, the successor state to ancient Persia, and we can assume that some of them must have become Christians at that time.<sup>7</sup> But what happened to them

2. Genesis 32:28.

3. Genesis 10:24; 1 Chronicles 1:18. In Luke 3:35 he appears as one of the human ancestors of Jesus.

4. Thus, the modern state of Israel is a Hebrew-speaking nation populated mainly by Jews.

5. Matthew 2:1–2.

6. 1 Peter 5:13.

7. Acts 2:9.

afterward is unknown, and we have to say that the eastern Diaspora played no significant part in the emergence of the Christian church.

It was very different with the western Diaspora. This had emerged after the time of Alexander the Great (336–323 BC), whose conquest of the Persian Empire brought Palestine into the orbit of the Greek, and later of the Roman, world. Jews were soon to be found in significant numbers in Alexandria and in the other major cities of the Mediterranean. They became Greek speakers, and within a few generations had translated their Scriptures into that language. By the time of Jesus, they were producing great scholars, of whom Philo of Alexandria (d. AD 50) was the most important. He wrote commentaries on the Bible that were widely read in the early church, though they do not appear to have had any impact on the New Testament writers themselves. Saul of Tarsus was one of these Diaspora Jews, and it was in large measure because of him that the early church expanded into the Greco-Roman world.

In the late nineteenth century it was fashionable to portray the birth of Christianity as a kind of fusion between Jewish and Greco-Roman culture, but this hypothesis is no longer tenable. The New Testament was written in Greek, but the Gospels are clearly centered in Palestinian Judaism. We do not know whether Jesus spoke any language other than his native Aramaic, but even if he could speak some Greek, there is no sign that he ever ministered in it or that he was familiar with Greek literature and philosophy. His teaching can be fully explained within its Jewish context, which is where the surviving records place it, and modern scholars generally respect this. Today, it is the links between Jesus and his Jewish background that dominate academic discussion of the origins of Christianity. Greco-Roman influences were certainly present later on, but they are usually regarded as secondary and unconnected with Jesus himself.

It is now universally agreed that Jesus was born a Jew, that he chose his disciples from among his own people, and that the first Christian believers were for the most part also Jews.<sup>8</sup> The Gospels tell us that Jesus occasionally ministered to individuals who were not Israelites, but such cases were exceptional and were perceived as such at the time. When he got into controversy with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus did not hesitate to tell her that “salvation is from the Jews,” a statement that explicitly denied the claims of her own religious group.<sup>9</sup> He could also be quite harsh toward non-Jews (or gentiles, as they are usually known) who approached him for help, though

8. This seems so obvious to us that it is easy to forget that in the early twentieth century, anti-Semites and those under pressure from them (as in Nazi Germany, for example) tried to disprove it, or at least did their best to ignore its implications.

9. John 4:22.

when they did so, he normally responded to them positively and could even observe that their faith was greater than anything to be found in Israel.<sup>10</sup> In sum, Jesus made it clear that he was sent to the Jews and not to others, but when others came to him of their own free will, he did not turn them away.

This approach was to be of particular relevance for the early church. One of the most significant controversies it had to face was whether non-Jews could become Christians without first becoming Jews. The Samaritans, whose beliefs were a kind of syncretistic and primitive form of Judaism, belonged in a special category, and we know that Jesus was prepared to reach out and embrace them to some extent.<sup>11</sup> Shortly before his ascension into heaven, Jesus commissioned his disciples to take the gospel to Samaria, which they duly did, but at first the Samaritans were baptized in the name of Jesus only and did not receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup> We are not told why this was so, but it may be that Philip, who evangelized them, thought they were second-class Jews and therefore ought not to receive the full blessing promised to Christians. That is speculation, of course, but we know that it was an anomaly, because when the apostles in Jerusalem heard about it, they rushed down to Samaria and put things right by laying hands on those who had been inadequately baptized.

Their attitude toward gentiles, on the other hand, was distinctly less welcoming. Over the years, a few gentiles had become familiar with Judaism and attached themselves to synagogues as “God-fearers,” so they were among the first non-Jews to be evangelized. Cornelius, a Roman centurion stationed at Caesarea Maritima on the Palestinian coast, was a test case, which is why his story is recounted at great length in Acts 10–11. He was a gentile who was very sympathetic to Jews and had done as much as any outsider could to make himself acceptable to them. An angel of God appeared and told him to seek out the apostle Peter, who was staying in nearby Joppa at the time. Peter, however, was not prepared for an encounter with someone like Cornelius. Before the two men could meet, God had to teach Peter in a dream not to consider anything unclean—a reference to Jewish food laws, but one that could easily be extended to cover gentiles. When Cornelius’s messengers arrived, Peter agreed to go with them, but although he understood that what was happening was of God, he still went somewhat reluctantly. Only when he heard Cornelius’s story did his resistance break down, and he preached the gospel to gentiles for the first time.

10. Matthew 15:21–28; 8:10. See also Luke 4:27.

11. See Luke 17:16. But there were limits to this. When Jesus sent his disciples out to preach, he expressly forbade them to have any dealings with the Samaritans. See Matthew 10:5–6.

12. Acts 1:8; 8:14–17.

Cornelius and his household believed in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit fell on them (which had not happened to the Samaritans), so Peter baptized the entire household. He had been won over by these events, but the members of the Jerusalem church were another matter. When Peter reported back what had happened, they resisted him until he explained the situation, whereupon they accepted it in much the same way that Peter had. But we know that was not the end of the story, because later on, when Peter was in Antioch having fellowship with gentiles there, members of the Jerusalem church appeared and put pressure on him to desist—which he did.<sup>13</sup> That provoked a dispute with Paul, which was finally resolved in the gentiles' favor, though with certain conditions attached. Gentiles could join the church, but they were expected not to offend Jewish Christians by eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols or that had been killed in a way that contravened the Jewish food laws.<sup>14</sup>

A tug of war was going on at this time between those who thought like Paul and the so-called Judaizers, who seem to have set up a kind of rival mission in order to counteract his “liberal” policies.<sup>15</sup> Today, Jewish Christians are a small minority in the church, and much of this ancient controversy sounds petty and irrelevant to us, but its significance should not be minimized. The fear of the Judaizers was that gentile converts would take the church away from its Jewish roots, and they were not entirely wrong to think that. Non-Jews almost never learned Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, and had little or no feeling for Jewish laws and customs. The Judaizers were wrong to oppose letting them become church members, but they were right to believe that the church could not just walk away from its Israelite inheritance. Somehow, Christians had to come to terms with that ancient tradition, whose promises they claimed to have inherited, without becoming enslaved to it.

The difficulty that Paul had to face was that the church was not just a continuation, in slightly modified form, of ancient Israelite tradition. As Jesus told his disciples, the law of Moses and the message of the prophets were authoritative until the time of John the Baptist, but in Jesus's ministry a new era had begun.<sup>16</sup> Jesus claimed that those who knew how to read the Hebrew Scriptures properly would find that they spoke about him—in other words, that their true meaning would only be understood as they were read in light of the revelation that he proclaimed in his teaching and worked out in his life and ministry.<sup>17</sup> He even said that not a single letter of the law would be overturned;

13. Galatians 2:11–14.

14. Acts 15:22–29.

15. Acts 15:1–2; Galatians 2:4–5.

16. Luke 16:16.

17. John 5:39–40.

it would all be explained and fulfilled by him.<sup>18</sup> At the very least, this meant that the Hebrew Bible would continue to be regarded as a sacred text whose message would inspire Christians as much as it had inspired generations of Jews before them. The first two generations of the church had no other sacred Scripture, or at least not a body of literature that was clearly recognized as such.<sup>19</sup> Even if most of the writings that now form the New Testament were in existence as early as AD 70, Christian writers hesitated to quote them as authoritative until the middle years of the second century—more than three generations after the events they described.

Throughout this period, the Old Testament (as Christians call the Hebrew Bible) remained the basic reference text of the church; defending it as a revelation that God intended for them rather than for Jews who rejected the claims of Jesus was a major preoccupation of Christian writers.<sup>20</sup> When Marcion (d. 144?) sought to break away from this tradition by rejecting the Old Testament and substituting a rump collection of New Testament texts divested of all trace of Judaism in its place, he was roundly condemned and refuted by most Christians, who were just as opposed to potential Judaizers as they were to him.<sup>21</sup> Like it or not, Christians could not get away from the Old Testament, but neither could they allow it to be interpreted by Jews in a way that excluded their own claims for Jesus as the one who fulfilled its prophecies.

There were two reasons for this. First, it is impossible to understand the New Testament without having a good idea of what the Hebrew Scriptures are all about. This is true even of a book such as Revelation, which never quotes the Old Testament directly but is incomprehensible without it. Second, the New Testament makes it plain that Jews before the time of Christ could have a saving relationship with God through their faith in his promises to them, even if they were not fully aware of how those promises would be fulfilled and would have to wait until that happened before they could fully benefit from them.<sup>22</sup>

18. Matthew 5:17–20.

19. An exception to this can be found in 2 Peter 3:15–16, where the letters of Paul are classified as “Scripture” and are clearly recognized as having authority in the church. Many scholars have used this as evidence that 2 Peter must be a late, pseudonymous work dating from the mid-second century, but even if they are right, this would still be the earliest evidence that part of what we now know as the New Testament was regarded as canonical Scripture.

20. See, for example, Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, where he argues the case for the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament against the famous rabbi Tarphon.

21. The most famous work of this kind is Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, which was written about AD 200 and has come down to us in five books. On Marcion, see H. Räisänen, “Marcion,” in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian “Heretics,”* ed. A. Marjanen and P. Luomanen (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 100–124.

22. Hebrews 11:39–40.

A key figure in the early church's self-understanding was Abraham. Jesus taught his disciples that Abraham had foreseen his coming and rejoiced in it, though he did not tie his remark to any particular Old Testament text.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps he was thinking about the tithe that Abraham offered to Melchizedek, the king of Salem, who is presented as a type of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews.<sup>24</sup> Or he may have been thinking of the sacrifice that Abraham was asked to make of his son Isaac, only to be told at the last minute that God would provide something better—presumably his own Son.<sup>25</sup> We do not know, but it is clear that the first Christians claimed Abraham as their ancestor in the faith every bit as much as contemporary Jews did, but in a different way. Jews claimed him as their physical ancestor, but Christians insisted that Abraham's real descendants were those who shared his faith. This was made explicit by the apostle Paul, who did not hesitate to remind his readers that Abraham had been given the sign of circumcision because of his faith in the promises of God, and that it was that faith which was Israel's true justification.<sup>26</sup>

The law of Moses presented a greater challenge for the early Christians because Jesus apparently rejected significant parts of it, including the food laws and the observance of the Sabbath, both of which had become sacrosanct in strict Jewish circles. Jesus justified his attitude by pointing out that Moses had given the law because the Israelites had shown themselves to be incapable of maintaining the high standards of Abraham. As he explained it, the law was a barrier against further spiritual decline, not a light that was meant to lead Israel to a higher truth.<sup>27</sup> He also said that the law had to be internalized in order to be properly understood. Thus, whereas Moses had said that murder was wrong, Jesus went further and told his disciples that even to harbor an evil thought against someone else was a sin.<sup>28</sup> By pointing his hearers to the principles underlying the law, Jesus could deepen the force of its application and at the same time override specific details (such as strict observance of the food laws) that got in the way of that. It was by reading the law in this way that Jesus taught his disciples how to reconcile the obligations imposed on the ancient Israelites with his own teaching.

Jesus and his disciples claimed that they were adding nothing to the Hebrew Bible but were merely showing how it ought to be interpreted. From that point of view, it might be said that they were preaching the true message that had

23. John 8:56.

24. Genesis 14:17–24; Hebrews 7:1–2.

25. Genesis 22:1–14; Hebrews 11:17–18.

26. Romans 4:1–12.

27. John 7:19–24; Matthew 19:7–8.

28. Matthew 5:21–26. The same principle applied to committing adultery, Matthew 5:27–30.

been overlaid and corrupted in the course of time. But after all was said and done, how much did the Christian church look like its Jewish parent? Were the similarities between them enough to encourage mutual support and dialogue, or were they merely superficial resemblances and more likely to cause misunderstanding than harmony?

From the very beginning, Christians saw themselves as the true heirs of the Old Testament people of God and regarded Jews who had not accepted Christ as blind to the truth. However, even as severe a critic of that blindness as the apostle Paul did not hesitate to recognize that all Jews, including those who had rejected the gospel, remained beloved by God for the sake of their ancestors. Paul taught that this blindness was actually a blessing for the gentiles, because it provided an opportunity for the apostles to preach the gospel to them. When that mission was completed, God would remove the blindness of his chosen people and integrate them into the church, so that “all Israel” would be saved in the end. It is not clear whether by “all Israel” Paul meant believing Jews and Christians combined, or whether he meant everyone who belonged to the Jewish people, whether they had any faith or not. Either way, God would eventually honor the promises he had made to the patriarchs.<sup>29</sup>

In the meantime, the church, as the offspring of Israel, had to come to terms with that legacy and learn to appreciate to what extent it was the same and in what ways it differed from its apparently wayward parent. Let us take a quick look at Israel’s heritage and see how far (and in what ways) the church could appropriate it.

When God called Abraham to leave his family and his people, he told him to go to a land that would become his inheritance, even though he had never seen it. As part of this calling, God promised Abraham that he would receive the following:

1. His descendants would become a great nation.
2. He would be blessed and become a blessing to the whole world.
3. Those who supported him would be blessed, and those who did not would be cursed.<sup>30</sup>

To what extent had these promises been fulfilled in the time of Jesus? Nobody can doubt that Israel had become a nation, though whether it could really be called “great” was problematic. After a brief sojourn in the land promised to Abraham, Israel had gone down to Egypt to escape famine

29. Romans 11:1–32.

30. Genesis 12:1–3.

conditions and eventually been enslaved. More than four hundred years passed before that condition was altered, and then it was only by a mass exodus following a persecution that amounted to attempted genocide. Under the leadership of Moses, the people of Israel abandoned the fertile banks of the river Nile for the challenges of the desert, where their faith and commitment to the God whom they served would be tested to the limit. Finally, after a generation of wandering, they were able to enter the promised land, but it would be several more centuries before they were firmly established there. It was not until about 1000 BC, nearly a full millennium after Abraham, that they established a kingdom under the leadership of David, whose descendants would rule over them “forever,” according to God’s promise to him.<sup>31</sup> But no sooner was that promise given than it appeared to be broken. After the glorious but ruinously expensive reign of David’s son Solomon, his kingdom fell apart, and only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were left as his grandson’s subjects.

The kingdom of Judah struggled on for a few hundred years, usually as a pawn in the diplomatic struggles of the great powers of the day, but in 586 BC it was finally extinguished. A remnant was left in the land, but most of the people were transported into exile in Babylon, from which they did not return for almost two generations. They were then able to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, but apart from a century or so (roughly 150–63 BC), Judah (also known as Judaea) never again became an independent state. In Jesus’s day, the Jews had spread across the known world, but their homeland was subdivided and ruled by client kings in the name of the Roman Empire. They had survived and spread, thanks to the liberal policies of Persia and Rome, but to call them a “great nation” surely strains the facts.

Whether they had been “blessed” is equally problematic. Subjects of David and Solomon saw God’s hand at work in the establishment of the great kingdom of Israel and counted it a blessing, as would the returning exiles who were allowed to rebuild the temple, but in the bigger picture it is hard to see how anyone could regard a nation subjected to foreign rule as “blessed” in the sense that God had intended when he made his promise to Abraham. Nor (and for the same reason) could Israel be regarded as much of a blessing to others. In fact, so defensive and ingrown did it become that it was more concerned to keep others out than to attract them. The Diaspora communities tolerated the presence of gentile “God-fearers” in their midst, but there was little attempt to absorb them into the Jewish nation, and active proselytism was rare. On the contrary, the most zealous Jews were those who wanted to

31. 1 Kings 11:36; 2 Kings 8:19.

practice the Mosaic law with such precision that even other Jews might find it hard to gain recognition as such from their coreligionists.

Finally, there was little or no sign that gentiles who supported the Jews would be blessed and those who did not would be cursed. It is possible to read the story of Esther in that way, but that was the exception that proved the rule. On the whole, there was no advantage accruing to non-Jews by supporting Israel and little sign that those who abused them suffered for it. Sadly, the Jews were entering a period in their national history when discrimination and persecution would become the order of the day, and nobody would experience any divine retribution for their behavior toward God's chosen people. Perceptions vary, of course, and it is true that Jews through the ages have always thanked God for his blessings toward them, but from an objective standpoint it is hard to see that the promises made to Abraham have ever been fulfilled in Israel.

The calling of Abraham was extended to his descendants, but only through the privileged line of Isaac, whose birth was a miracle that lay outside the normal expectations of human generation. Abraham had other children, notably Ishmael, born to him by his slave concubine Hagar, but they were sent away with a separate inheritance and were never reckoned among God's chosen people.<sup>32</sup> In the next generation a similar thing occurred with Esau and Jacob. By an act of trickery it was Jacob, the younger brother, who inherited Isaac's birthright, and Esau was cast out.<sup>33</sup> He became the founder of the Edomite kingdom, and the close relationship of his descendants to Israel remained an important factor in later times. For example, the prophet Obadiah reproached Edom for not coming to Judah's aid in time of trouble, and the Herodians who ruled the Jews in New Testament times were of Edomite (Idumaeen) origin.<sup>34</sup>

After Solomon's death, Israel split into two rival kingdoms, the northern one, which embraced ten of the twelve original tribes, and Judah (with Benjamin), which retained the capital at Jerusalem and the legitimacy that went with being the guardians of the temple there. As the tribe of David, Judah's right to claim the inheritance of Abraham was never questioned, but the history of the northern kingdom was more complicated. Lacking a worship center of their own, the northern kings felt obliged to establish two on the borders of their territory—one at Dan in the north and the other at Bethel, not far from Jerusalem—in an attempt to prevent their subjects from going to offer sacrifice in Solomon's temple. We cannot be sure what happened inside the kingdom

32. Genesis 25:6.

33. Genesis 27:1–45.

34. Obadiah 10–14.

itself, but it appears to have been more susceptible to outside pagan elements than Judah was, and none of its kings was regarded as satisfactory by the chroniclers who recorded their deeds. On the other hand, Elijah and Elisha, two of the greatest Israelite prophets, ministered in the north, and even in New Testament times there were Israelites who claimed descent from one or other of the northern tribes.

Quite what happened after the disappearance of the northern kingdom in 722 BC is uncertain, but eventually a variant form of Judaism established itself in the region of Samaria. The Samaritans claimed to belong to the Old Testament people of God, but they refused to join in the temple worship at Jerusalem and were rejected by those for whom the temple was central to worship. By the time of Jesus, Jews had no dealings with Samaritans, and although Jesus did not adhere to that pattern, he was in no doubt that it was to the Jews that salvation belonged. By then, the pillars of mainline Jewish religion were three:

1. The *priesthood* that went back to Aaron, the elder brother of Moses, and which existed as long as the temple and its sacrifices continued to operate. After the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the priesthood collapsed, although there are still people who claim that Jews who bear the name Cohen belong to it and would be expected to take over the management of the temple should it ever be rebuilt.
2. The *law* given by Moses. It was contained in the Torah or Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) and interpreted by the priests with the help of a growing body of commentary literature, starting with the targumim, which are essentially running commentaries on the texts, and developing from them into the Mishnah and the Talmud, which form the basis of later Judaism.
3. The *Scriptures*, which consisted of the prophetic books and the so-called Writings in addition to the law of Moses itself. The prophetic canon was definitely closed by Jesus's day, but there was some uncertainty about the writings, particularly about the book of Esther, which never mentions the name of God and may have been suspect for that reason. There was also a discrepancy between the Hebrew canon, which corresponds to the modern Old Testament in its Protestant form, and the Greek translations, which included a number of extra books known collectively as the "Apocrypha." These are now accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches but are rejected by Jews and Protestants.

How fundamental each of these pillars was to the Jewish religion can be deduced from the way they appear in the New Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures were authoritative beyond question, and the Torah enjoyed special prestige. But the commentary tradition that had grown up around it was more suspect, and we get the impression that Jesus was opposed to its very existence.<sup>35</sup> That may be an exaggeration, but there is no evidence in the Gospels that he had any sympathy with rabbinical teachings that purported to interpret the Mosaic text in light of contemporary circumstances. The priesthood was also important but less fundamental, and the task of teaching religion to the people fell mainly on the scribes, the rabbis, and assorted groups such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who had no official recognition in the temple establishment, although many Sadducees belonged to it.

In the course of its history, the people identified as Israel gradually became relatively smaller and narrower. Even if there were more Israelites in the time of Jesus than in the time of David, this was only because the natural increase in the population of Judah and their dispersal across the world produced growth in terms of absolute numbers. Otherwise ten of the original twelve tribes had been lost, and there was a steady outflow of Jews into the surrounding pagan world. It is true that there was also a trickle of gentiles into the Jewish community, but they were never numerous enough to make up for the losses. Jews remained a significant presence in Palestine and were probably still the majority population there in the mid-second century AD, but successive rebellions diminished their influence, scattered their leadership, and deprived them of their traditional homeland. They continued to be a common sight in many cities around the Mediterranean basin and in Mesopotamia, but they were a minority. When the Christian church became the leading religious movement in the later Roman Empire, the synagogues were unable to offer any compelling alternative to it.

Deciding who was a Jew was not easy. A male had to be circumcised—without that, he would not be accepted in any Jewish community.<sup>36</sup> Jews were also expected to observe the food laws and ceremonies of the Mosaic law, but this seems to have gone by the board in many Diaspora communities, and the impression we get is that many Jews were content to leave it that way. Observing the commandments to the letter was difficult at the best of times, and a minority in an alien environment would have found it harder than those who lived in Jewish-majority villages in Palestine. Knowledge of Hebrew, on

35. Matthew 15:2–6.

36. See Acts 16:3.

the other hand, was neither here nor there. The rabbis learned it, of course, but ordinary people spoke Greek or Aramaic, supplemented (though only to a very limited degree) by particular Hebrew words and expressions such as *amen* and *hallelujah*. Most of those who heard Peter speak on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem must have been Jewish, but as the text indicates, they all heard him speaking to them in their own languages, which were those of the Jewish Diaspora regions.<sup>37</sup>

The major festivals such as Passover were widely celebrated, but most of what the modern world has come to think of as Jewish culture is of much more recent origin. On the surface at least, there would have been little to distinguish most Jews from Christians, and although the continued practice of Jewish customs among those who were converted to Christianity occasionally caused problems, these were quickly resolved and did not resurface. This suggests that the practices were not deeply rooted in popular culture, whatever their symbolic or theological importance may have been. What kept Jews together was a sense of belonging that was bolstered by prejudice as much as by religious practice. Jews were regarded as odd by gentiles, and they returned the compliment, generally keeping to themselves and marrying within their own community.

How many of these Jews could be classified as “believers” is impossible to say. It was one thing to avoid contact with pagans but quite another to take on board the faith of the Old Testament in any coherent or comprehensive way. In the time of Jesus there were devotional movements such as that of the Pharisees, which promoted a strict observance of the law of Moses, and the Sadducees, who from our modern perspective were the theological “liberals” of their time because they rejected such beliefs as the resurrection of the dead.<sup>38</sup> There were also fringe bodies such as the Essenes and the Qumran community, who practiced forms of asceticism and withdrawal from the world. But these groups were a small minority. Most Jews must have been more like Joseph, Mary, and the disciples of Jesus—ordinary people with a conventional faith that was seldom challenged or put to the test. The existence of sacred writings ensured that literacy rates among males were higher than average, but although in every synagogue there were men who studied them, there is little sign that this made much difference in the devotional life of the wider community. When Paul preached the gospel at Beroea, he noticed that the people there consulted the Scriptures to verify whether what he was saying about them was true, but the fact that Luke

37. Acts 2:7–11.

38. Matthew 22:23.

recorded it indicates that such diligence was unusual and far from the norm in most places.<sup>39</sup>

What we do know is that there were a number of Jews who paid little attention to their ancestral faith and whose lives made a mockery of the law of Moses. As the apostle Paul put it, they were a disgrace to their nation because their behavior belied the principles that were supposed to identify them. By no means all who called themselves Jews shared the spirit of the Mosaic law, and this contradiction in terms called the nature of Israel into question. Was it a people who were physically descended from Abraham, or was it made up of those who believed as Abraham believed, whether they were his actual offspring or not? Jesus did not hesitate to tell his fellow Jews that there had been gentiles in ancient times who had received God's blessings when Israelites who needed them just as badly had been passed over. Naaman, the Syrian general who was cured of leprosy, was an outstanding example of this, as was Ruth the Moabitess, who was one of his own ancestors. Faith and nation overlapped but were not coterminous, and for Jesus and his followers it was the former that really counted. Yet a certain ambiguity remained. To be born into a Jewish family was a great advantage, although it required a higher degree of spiritual responsibility. Those who knew the truth from birth had a duty to live by it, and if they did not do so, scandal was the inevitable result, because Jews were a people set apart in significant ways, whether they wanted to be or not.<sup>40</sup> The Christian church would be different, but to what extent and with what effect?

### Was Israel the Old Testament Church?

At different times in its history, the Christian church has looked back to ancient Israel and seen in it a model for its own life. Following the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire (in 313) and its establishment as the state religion (in 380), church leaders looked to the Old Testament for models of how a Christian society ought to be governed. The emperors became sacred rulers along the lines of the kings of Israel and Judah. They were anointed in a coronation ceremony that was deeply religious in nature and were given a place of great honor in the church, sometimes even being regarded as equal to the apostles (*isapostoloi*).<sup>41</sup> The Christian clergy were organized into an

39. Acts 17:11.

40. Romans 2:17–24.

41. This was especially true of Constantine I (306–37), who legalized Christianity, and Justinian I (527–65), who built the great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

order of priests on the Aaronic model and given a tithe of all produce for their maintenance, just as the ancient Levites had received.<sup>42</sup> Even church services took on an Old Testament flavor, as the Lord's Supper was transformed into the memorial sacrifice of the Lamb who was slain for the sins of the world—*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi*, as the great medieval Communion hymn put it.<sup>43</sup>

The links thus created were possible because the Old Testament was allegorized to make it fit the needs of the Christian church. For example, Jacob's vision of a ladder ascending to heaven was interpreted to mean that while Israel was asleep in the house of God (Bethel), Christians had woken up and were climbing the ladder, along with the angels and archangels. Echoes of this interpretation remain in the prayer of consecration in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, where it is "with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven that we laud and magnify thy glorious Name." Visitors to Chartres Cathedral in France will discover that the magnificent stained-glass windows are arranged in two matching series, one devoted to the Old Testament and the other to the New. There is a deliberate correspondence between them, so that the story of the Good Samaritan, for example, is placed opposite the story of the sale of Joseph into slavery in Egypt. The logic behind this is that in the Old Testament, the unfortunate victim was condemned to slavery, whereas in the New Testament he was rescued by a figure generally regarded as an image of Christ.

In keeping with Christian tradition, Jewish allegorical parallels are always presented as partial and inferior to the Christian ones, but the fact that they are there at all tells its own story. Christians saw themselves mirrored in the Old Testament, privileged to be able to put right by the gospel what had gone wrong under the law of Moses. To what extent was this perception valid?

In one sense, there can be no doubt that Christians saw their experience of God as the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. That the gospel was superior to the law went without saying—if it were not, there would be no reason for anyone to become a Christian. The apostle Paul did not hesitate to describe the relationship between the synagogue and the church by comparing the former to Hagar, Abraham's slave concubine, and the latter to Sarah, his legitimate wife. Their sons were both Abraham's offspring, but the former (Ishmael) was cast out, whereas the latter (Isaac) inherited his father's blessing.<sup>44</sup> So it was with the church. Jews could claim to be the children of

42. Numbers 18:21.

43. "Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world."

44. Galatians 4:21–31.

Abraham but were slaves to the law and so had been cast out, whereas Christians were the children of the free woman. They were so similar in one way, yet so different in another.

What Paul mentions in passing was developed in a systematic way by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who begins his argument as follows: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”<sup>45</sup> After a lengthy exposition of what this entails, he brings his argument to a head by pointing directly to the great men and women of faith whose lives are recorded in the Old Testament and who serve as examples to us who come after. Yet great though they were, he still concludes: “All these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”<sup>46</sup>

So there we have it. The saints of the Old Testament were great servants of God and, in the final reckoning at the end of time, will be counted among the righteous, just as we shall be. Yet at the same time, they were different from us. They looked ahead to the blessings that we have received and enjoy in a way that they did not. Their lives followed a different trajectory, and they were subjected to burdens and limitations that no longer apply to us. Did they constitute a church of their own, which was the ancestor of the Christian equivalent? Can we now regard them as Christians, even though they lived before the coming of Christ and did not use that term to describe themselves?

Here we are to some extent dependent on the definitions of words. Both ancient Israel and the later Christian church were called “the people of God,” and if that is what we mean by the word “church,” then Israel must be included. But the New Testament does not go that far. The differences between the historic institutions of Israel and those of the early Christian movement were just as significant as their similarities, and the way in which Christians used the word “church” is indicative of that. They recognized that, for all the similarities and connections between them, Christianity was not just a branch of Judaism. If it had been, the disciples of Jesus would never have formed such distinct (and distinctive) worshiping communities. The fact is that although they remained Jews, their spiritual experience could not be contained within the bounds of traditional Judaism. Furthermore, it was possible (and soon became the norm) for gentiles to believe in Christ and enjoy the same experience of him without becoming Jews. There was something new here, and it

45. Hebrews 1:1.

46. Hebrews 11:39–40.

is this that the term “church” expresses. The main reasons why we usually do not (and probably should not) include Israel under the umbrella term of “church” can be set out as follows:

1. Israel and the church both possess a written revelation from God, which is central to their life and faith. The Christian church has absorbed the Jewish Scriptures as its own, but in a different way. First of all, Christians interpret the Hebrew Bible in light of the Christ (Messiah) who has already come, whereas Jews do not. Second, the Christian canon is closed in a way that the ancient Hebrew one was not. Prophecy had ceased in Israel about four hundred years before the coming of Christ, a fact borne out by the Old Testament as we now have it, but there was no settled decision in the time of Jesus as to whether divine revelation had come to a permanent end. There had been times of spiritual dearth in Israel before, but they had been followed by revival and the production of new Scripture. When John the Baptist appeared, he was not rejected as an imposter on the ground that a ministry like his was no longer possible.

Christians, on the other hand, received the Hebrew Bible as a closed canon that cannot be extended because it points to the Christ who has already come. The New Testament is also a closed canon and has been since the first generation of eyewitnesses to its contents passed from the scene. Its precise extent was not universally agreed on for some time, and debates continued about whether certain books were genuinely apostolic in origin, but these are secondary matters. The principle was that since the fullness of time had come, no new revelation was possible. God still speaks to and through the church, but he does so in a different way; no one today can claim the kind of authority that was given to Moses, the Old Testament prophets, or the apostles of Jesus.

More significantly, Judaism has generally stressed that the Hebrew Bible is law, whereas the Christian church has understood it more as prophecy. Of course, “the Law and the Prophets” belong together, and neither faith tradition has emphasized one to the exclusion of the other. But whereas Jews find it natural to ask how the law of Moses can be extended and applied in situations not originally envisaged by the ancient Israelites, Christians do not. In the church, the Mosaic precepts are regarded as spiritual principles whose practical application depends on the extent to which they have been fulfilled (and superseded) by the gospel of Christ. This may lead to abolishing them (as in the case of the food laws, which are believed to be no longer applicable) or to a deeper and more stringent application of their teaching—as with the Ten Commandments, where prohibitions on murder and adultery are extended to

include evil thoughts and desires and not limited to external actions.<sup>47</sup> As for prophecy, Jews regard this as belonging to an eschatological future in which they may or may not believe—messianic Judaism is (and has always been) a minority pursuit in the Jewish world. But for Christians, prophecy has been fulfilled in Christ. There is an eschatological dimension to it, to be sure, but that too is bound up with him. The coming of the Messiah at the end of time can therefore only be the return of Christ, and not the appearance of some hitherto unknown figure.<sup>48</sup>

2. Ancient Israel (like its modern counterpart) was a secular, human nation with its own traditions, culture, language, and territory comparable to those of other nations around it. It was possible to join this nation, but that was not encouraged, and as time went on, external influences (such as foreign wives) were increasingly ruled out. In the early days, a woman like Ruth could marry into a Jewish family without difficulty, but that would have been much harder later on, especially after the exile.<sup>49</sup> As a corollary of this, physical heredity played a central part in Israelite life. The priestly caste was a tribe of its own that traced its lineage back to Aaron, the older brother of Moses. No one could choose to become (or refuse to be) a priest, because that was determined by birth. Similarly, Jesus inherited his kingly title from his ancestor David and could not have obtained it otherwise. A man like Herod might rule over the Jews as their king, but in theological terms he was a usurper and could never have been anything else.<sup>50</sup>

In sharp contrast to this, the Christian church was not a nation in the usual sense of the word, even if such language was sometimes used to describe it.<sup>51</sup> Membership was open to everyone, and the miracle of the first Pentecost was intended to demonstrate the universality of its message. The church did not fold in on itself in order to survive but reached out to embrace people of every tribe and tongue. Evangelism, a concept unknown before the coming of Christ, became the chief *raison d'être* of the church, which saw its primary task as the proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Offices in the church, such as they were, were never inherited, and measures were sometimes taken to make sure that this principle would be observed. One of the reasons that celibacy was imposed on the Western clergy in the Middle Ages was to ensure that they would not have legitimate children who could inherit

47. Matthew 5:21–30.

48. Acts 1:11; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17.

49. See Ezra 9–10.

50. See Matthew 2:1–12 and the pointed quotation from Micah 5:2 in v. 6.

51. See 1 Peter 2:9.

their positions. In the church, it was possible to become a minister (and to cease functioning as one) in a way that was inconceivable in ancient Israel. Likewise, kings and other rulers who became Christians were not entitled to a special status in the church, even though that was often granted to them in later centuries, nor did secular government come within the church's remit, though again there were exceptions in the Middle Ages and later.

There have certainly been many attempts to establish Christian states and governments, but none of these has ever enjoyed the kind of divine sanction that was accorded to the Davidic kingship in ancient Israel. It is not too much to say that the idea that civil government should be secular (in the sense of "nonreligious") is the product of Christian thinking and can be traced back to the command of Jesus, who told the Jews that while they should give Caesar his due, they should distinguish that from what they owed to God.<sup>52</sup>

3. Ancient Israel's spiritual life centered on the Jerusalem temple and especially on the great atoning sacrifice, which was made there once a year by the high priest. As the writer to the Hebrews pointed out, the high priest had to perform this and many lesser rituals on his own behalf as well as for the salvation of the people, because he was essentially no better than they were.<sup>53</sup>

By contrast, the Christian church's spiritual life centered on worship in gathered communities. Jesus was present among them wherever two or three assembled in his name; he was not tied to a temple or an earthly location of any kind. The high point of worship was not the atoning sacrifice but the memorial of that sacrifice, which had been made once for all by Jesus on the cross. It was the focus of Christian worship not for what it was in itself but for what it represented. Christian ministers were not priests in the Old Testament sense. They were preachers and evangelists who had been called to proclaim that Christ had put an end to the need for sacrifice and that the Jerusalem temple traditions were now redundant.

It was for that reason that the early church had nothing that could be compared with the Jerusalem temple. There has never been a central building or place where Christian worship has been concentrated or to which it ought to be restricted. Christians can (and do) worship anywhere without distinction. There have been times when they have given special prominence to Jerusalem and the so-called Holy Land; some people still make pilgrimages to various sites, among them Bethlehem and Nazareth, where Jesus was born and where he grew up, but this has never had the spiritual importance

52. Matthew 22:15–22.

53. Hebrews 5:2–3.

that attaches to worship in Jerusalem (and on the Temple Mount) in the Jewish mind.<sup>54</sup>

The church had no use for the temple because its purpose had been fulfilled in Christ, but it was a different story when it came to the synagogue. Synagogues did not exist in biblical Israel but developed at a later date, partly to serve the needs of the Diaspora communities and partly to cater to Jews who lived in Palestine. We know from the New Testament that there were several synagogue buildings in Galilee and elsewhere, some of them built and paid for by gentile admirers of Judaism, including Roman military officers like Cornelius. Even Jerusalem had synagogues, although the temple was near at hand and could easily have been visited at any time. The word “synagogue” originally referred to the congregation of people that met together, but as this normally happened in a designated building, it was soon extended to include the building as well. Synagogues were places where Jews met to pray, to hear the Bible being read, and to be instructed in their faith. They were informally organized, partly because there was no provision for them in the Mosaic law (as there was for the temple) and partly because they were still a relatively new phenomenon.

Exactly who controlled what happened in a synagogue is hard to determine. There must have been important local people who had a say in how it was maintained, and we know that there were people called *archisynagōgoi* who had a controlling interest in them. One of these, a man called Crispus, was converted when Paul preached at Corinth, an event that caused a major stir in the Jewish community because it deprived the synagogue of one of its leading backers.<sup>55</sup> Beyond that though, we are largely ignorant. Presumably the *archisynagōgoi* were expected to ensure that worship was conducted on a regular and orderly basis and that instruction would be provided for the youth, but that is a logical guess with little or no hard evidence to support it. No doubt the *archisynagōgoi* relied on the senior members of the congregation for support, but again, this is speculation, and the pattern probably varied considerably from one place to another. The whole system was run informally, which is one reason why Jesus and his disciples, including Paul on his later missionary journeys, found it so easy to gain acceptance in them—at least initially.

Whether synagogues had teachers who could instruct the people in the meaning of the law is unknown. A growing body of men, whom we call rabbis,

54. It may be noted in passing that Christianity differs from Islam in this respect also. For Muslims, there is a sacred duty to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, but nothing of that kind has ever obtained within the Christian world, even when pilgrimage has been encouraged and developed.

55. Acts 18:8.

were being trained for this purpose, but in the time of Jesus the pattern of later centuries had not yet been established. Jesus was called a rabbi by people who did not know how else to address him, but this did not mean that he had received any formal theological education or that he held an officially recognized post in Jewish society.<sup>56</sup> It was only after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70 and the disappearance of the traditional priesthood that the synagogue acquired the importance that it has since maintained in the Jewish world. Judaism was able to survive the catastrophe because there was an already well-established network of institutions that functioned without much reference to the Jerusalem temple. We should therefore not be surprised to discover that it was the synagogues, and not the temple, that provided a model for the organization of the earliest Christian congregations.

In Hebrew the words “synagogue” and “church” are virtually the same—“synagogue” is *kneset* and “church” is *knesiyah*, both of which mean “assembly.”<sup>57</sup> It is only in Greek that significantly different terms are found—*synagōgē* for the Jews and *ekklēsia* for the Christians, with no real distinction in meaning. *Ekklēsia* was a word used for the assembly of citizens in Greek cities such as Athens, but the Christian version was not really a kind of parliament, as that connection might suggest. Nor was there anything in Israelite tradition that could be compared with it. In the early days, Christians were not allowed to erect buildings for worship, so the natural extension of the word *ekklēsia* from the assembly to the building in which it met took time to develop.<sup>58</sup> But long before that happened, the word *ekklēsia* had acquired connotations that clearly set it apart from the synagogue, not only in terms of religious faith but in terms of practical organization and significance as well.

For a start, the word “church” included all professing Christians. It could be used in the singular as well as the plural, referring as it did to the sum total of believers as well as to particular gatherings of them. The church was described as “the body of Christ,” into which every member was baptized, and

56. See Matthew 23:7–8.

57. *Kneset* in Modern Hebrew is the term used for the Israeli parliament.

58. This may explain why the word *ekklēsia* did not always catch on. In the Germanic countries of northern Europe, the preferred term was a variant of *kyriakē* (belonging to the Lord), from which the English words “church” and “kirk” both derive. The same word also penetrated the Eastern Orthodox world, where variant forms of the Russian *tserkov’* are often found. Exceptions often go to the opposite extreme and demonstrate how the word for the building could be applied to the congregation, and from there to the universal church—Romanian, for example, uses *biserică*, from the Latinized Greek *basilica*, and Polish has *kościół* (Czech *kostel*), derived from *castellum* (castle). In Eastern Europe, many languages distinguish Roman Catholic churches from Eastern Orthodox and Protestant ones by using different words for them. Thus, a *kościół* is always Roman Catholic, a *tserkov’* is Eastern Orthodox, and a Protestant church may be called something else—perhaps a *chram* (temple) or something similar.

in which each had a designated place.<sup>59</sup> This body was a unity that had to be preserved as such in order to demonstrate to the outside world that there was one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.<sup>60</sup> The universality of the Christian gospel demanded this, and any tendency to divide into sects that followed different leaders was strongly resisted by the leaders of the main apostolic churches.<sup>61</sup>

Second, and as a corollary to the need to maintain this overarching unity, the church had a highly centralized organizational structure that was quite alien to the synagogue. Overseeing them all were the apostles—the disciples of Jesus, along with Paul—to whom local congregations could appeal and who did not hesitate to “interfere” in them if necessary. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, for example, was addressed to a congregation that he had never visited, but that in no way diminished his authority. No Jewish leader could have written to a synagogue like that. Internally, each congregation was structured to a degree that was unimaginable in the synagogue. We do not know precisely how this was worked out, and there may have been a number of variations across the Mediterranean world that later merged into a common pattern, but it is clear from the New Testament records that a pattern of governance and responsibility was in place. When Paul wrote to a local church, he expected to be obeyed, and that implied that there must have been local people who were able and willing to put his recommendations into practice. Who they were (and by what names they were called) have been matters of considerable dispute, but that they existed can scarcely be doubted.

Third, and perhaps most important of all, the church had a mission to convert the world. It was not a club of expatriates, as the Diaspora synagogue could so easily have appeared to be. There was no hierarchy of membership, with Jews occupying a special place, though no doubt that was part of the agenda being promoted by the so-called Judaizers. To enter the church was not to reinforce one’s ethnic or social identity but to lose it. Christians did not spend their time cultivating a sacred language like biblical Hebrew, even though it was the medium in which the Scriptures had originally been revealed. They used Greek, mainly for practical reasons, because it was the common tongue of the Mediterranean world of their time. Unlike modern Christians, they showed no interest in translating the Bible into any other language, even though Paul occasionally found himself ministering to people who may not have understood what he was saying.<sup>62</sup> Class differences certainly existed within the church, but those who paid attention to them were severely

59. 1 Corinthians 12:27.

60. Ephesians 4:5.

61. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:11–17.

62. Acts 14:11.

criticized.<sup>63</sup> The church was open to all, and even practices that were in themselves unobjectionable could become problematic if they impeded the work of evangelism. Thus, for example, speaking in tongues was tolerated in the Corinthian church, but not if it gave outsiders the wrong impression, because that would have created a barrier to the work of mission.<sup>64</sup> No synagogue would have compromised its Judaism in order to attract others by giving them a good impression—the very idea of doing such a thing would have horrified its members. But Christians were not interested in esoteric exclusivity—as far as they were concerned, the door of the church was open to all who professed faith in Jesus Christ and who had been filled with his Spirit.

This brings us to the final and most theological of the differences between Judaism and Christianity. Both religions worshiped the same God, but whereas Jews saw him in all his majestic unity and sovereign majesty, Christians believed that they had penetrated into his inner life. They were seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.<sup>65</sup> They had access to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.<sup>66</sup> They were born again.<sup>67</sup> None of this made any sense to Jews, as the story of Nicodemus reminds us. When Jesus told him that he had to be born again, he thought that he was somehow supposed to go back into his mother's womb!<sup>68</sup> That was an absurdity, of course (and to be fair, Nicodemus knew it), but it is symptomatic of the different ways in which Jews and Christians approached God. Jews were attached to physical and material things in a way that Christians were not. For Christians, the kingdom of God was not an eschatological hope but a present reality that they knew by their union with Christ in the Holy Spirit. To put it another way, Christians worshiped the one God in a Trinity that was not defined for some centuries but that was a reality in their experience. In the end, it was that experience that made it impossible for them to continue as Jews in the synagogue and that forced them to work out a theology for which Judaism had no need. Jews bore witness to their faith by being circumcised and living according to the myriad precepts of the Mosaic law, but Christians confessed Christ, and it was that confession that led them to give the church an intellectual structure quite different from anything to be found in the synagogue.

Another important sign of the differences between Israel and the church was that there seems to have been little or no carryover of leadership personnel

63. James 2:1–13.

64. 1 Corinthians 14:20–25.

65. Ephesians 2:6.

66. Ephesians 2:18; Galatians 4:6.

67. John 3:7.

68. John 3:4.

from one to the other. None of the disciples of Jesus had any previous standing in the Jewish world that they had to abandon when they followed Jesus, nor did they have a rabbinical education. Paul was exceptional in that respect, but he was also the most vocal in his denunciation of the old order and did not seek to press his advantage in order to gain greater acceptance in the church. There is also no sign that any Jewish priest or rabbi who became a Christian was given a comparable position in the church. It is hard to believe that when new churches were formed out of divided synagogues, none of the leaders passed from one system to the other, but if they did we are not told of it. The criteria for leadership in the church are spelled out on more than one occasion in the New Testament, but knowledge of Jewish learning or experience in running a synagogue are not included among them. In the church, God was doing a new thing, and while knowledge of the old pattern might have been useful at times, it was not essential in the new dispensation.

We must therefore conclude that Israel cannot really be regarded as the Old Testament church. The continuities between the Old and the New Testaments were refracted through the prism of Christ, who changed everything. The final word on the subject surely belongs to the apostle Paul, who wrote to the Philippians:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.<sup>69</sup>

Such was the testimony of a devout Jew who became a Christian, and it would be hard to find a clearer statement of why Israel and the church were not just the same thing in a different guise.

### Did Jesus Found the Church?

No one doubts that the Christian church grew out of the life and ministry of Jesus, whose teaching governs its practice and whose person is the object of its worship. Scholars dispute why this is so, and there is a great gulf fixed between those who believe that Jesus taught his disciples what they should do after his death and resurrection and those who claim that the first Christians

69. Philippians 3:4-7.

pieced together the wreckage of Jesus's failed ministry and relaunched his teaching (in a highly modified form) as the Christian church. Many observers prefer to adopt a position somewhere between what they perceive as these two extremes, but there can be no doubt that the fundamental divide is between those who believe that the church is the product of a divine revelation given in and through Jesus Christ and those who think that it emerged out of complex social factors that coalesced around him.

Either way, both sides in this debate agree that the intense Christian concentration on a single individual was unknown in Judaism and is rare among the world's major religions. Outsiders might think mistakenly that Islam grants a similar position to the prophet Muhammad, but Muslims respond by explaining that Muhammad is only a human being, not a divinity. Buddhists, too, would deny that the Buddha is the object of a cult, though he is certainly venerated in a way that would shock Muslims if anything similar were to surface in Islam. Hindus believe in the possibility of divine incarnations, but they do not focus on one individual god who became a human for a particular purpose. Jesus is unique, because only he claimed to be God and therefore deserving of the highest form of worship known to humankind. But if there is no doubt about that, many questions arise when we start to consider how this came about. Did Jesus himself intend for it to happen? Was he trying to establish a church that would preserve his memory and teaching, or did it grow up accidentally after his untimely death?

The answers to these questions are complicated by the fact that many modern scholars incline to the second of the views outlined above and therefore reject the traditional "orthodox" account, either in whole or in part. In particular, they believe that Jesus did not intend to found anything, and certainly not an institution that would grow into the Christian church as we know it. Broadly speaking, they are inclined to think that he was a revolutionary prophet who challenged the establishment of his time and was ultimately silenced by it. His disappointed followers then got together and decided to preserve his memory in what we now call the church. What motivated them to back such an obvious failure is the great unanswered mystery, and it is at this point that such theories tend to lose whatever credibility they might otherwise have. There were disciples who followed Adolf Hitler to the grave, but not beyond, and modern neo-Nazis do not worship him or claim that he is still alive. More worthy figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela have been widely admired, but they have left no organized following and have never inspired a religion dedicated to them. Only in cults such as Rastafarianism in the West Indies or the cargo cults of the South Pacific can we find anything remotely similar to the claims made for Jesus Christ,

but they are so obviously false that no one, except members of these groups, takes them seriously.<sup>70</sup>

Jesus is unique in this respect, but why? Even if we accept everything that has been claimed for his divinity and his earthly mission, what evidence is there to suggest that he started a church? And what would the word “church” mean in this case? Those who doubt that Jesus ever intended to found a church can point to the fact that the word occurs only twice in Matthew and not at all in the other three Gospels, in sharp contrast to the idea of the “kingdom,” which was one of the main themes of Jesus’s teaching. At the very least, this suggests that the concept of the “church” was at best marginal to Jesus’s mission and may even be an attempt to recycle his kingdom emphasis for the more prosaic (but also more realistic) limitations of the world in which his disciples had to minister. Those who assume (as many modern commentators do) that the word “church” in Matthew must be an interpolation by some later writer who was concerned to speak to the conditions of his time and does not reflect Jesus’s teaching can use the fact of its rarity to support their position, though other interpretations are also possible. It may be asked, for instance, why Matthew has only two references to the church, only one of which has any real bearing on our subject, if he wanted to emphasize its importance. Would he not have peppered his Gospel with references to the “church” placed in the mouth of Jesus, if he was trying to claim Jesus’s authority for the institution whose origins he was exalting?

There is also the problem that Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek, so Matthew (or the source from which Matthew received his information) must have been translating some other word in this way. Unfortunately, we can only guess what that word might have been, and it is possible that there are two different ones lying behind it. One of the passages in which Matthew refers to the “church” is concerned primarily with the disciplining of a wayward brother. According to the Gospel account, Jesus told his disciples: “If he [the erring brother] refuses to listen . . . tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”<sup>71</sup> In this instance Jesus could have used a number of words that might be roughly translated as “fellowship,” “company,” and so on. If the translation as “church” represents a later interpretation, it is hard to see why the author would have referred to gentiles (who by then would have been fully accepted

70. Rastafarianism is a cult dedicated to the memory of Ras Tafari, who became emperor of Ethiopia as Haile Selassie I. The cargo cults of Melanesia worship such “deities” as John Frum, a mythical American airman, and even the Duke of Edinburgh. They are interesting from a sociological point of view but theologically they are absurd.

71. Matthew 18:17.

as church members) or even to tax collectors, who do not appear as villains in later Christian literature.

We cannot answer these questions, but this text is of minor importance compared to the other one, which was to become and has remained one of the most controversial in the entire Bible. It is the climax to Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, and in it Jesus says: "You are Peter, and on this rock I shall build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."<sup>72</sup> In later centuries this statement, which Matthew attributed directly to Jesus, would be used by Roman Catholics to justify the primacy and jurisdictional supremacy of the Roman see, of which Peter was supposed to have been the first occupant. This interpretation, which has few if any scholarly defenders nowadays, has caused all kinds of reactions in the course of history, not least from Protestants who have attacked the papacy's modern pretensions by denying its authenticity.

Polemic of this kind makes it difficult to come to a balanced conclusion about the verse itself, but one important fact may be noted. Jesus speaks of the "church" in the singular but in a way that clearly refers to the entire body of believers and not just to a single congregation. Elsewhere in the New Testament, a "church" is usually a specific gathering of believers in a particular place. In that sense it is frequently used in the plural. There are relatively few occurrences of the word in the singular, which would make us conclude that it must refer (at least in those instances) to the entire Christian world. Once again, we may legitimately wonder what the original Aramaic term was and whether "church" is the best translation for it. But whether it is or not, it is the term that has come down to us, and we must try to make sense of it as it stands.

One thing that can be said about this verse is that Jesus was talking about the future. He was not making plans for the immediate establishment of a church himself but thinking of something that would come into being later. We know that "later" means after his death and resurrection, in which case Jesus built his church at one remove—not directly but in and through his Holy Spirit, as the Acts of the Apostles attests. This interpretation is backed up by the so-called farewell discourses of Jesus in John 13–17, where he tells his disciples that he must go away, but that after his departure he will send them the Holy Spirit, who will guide them into all truth. Interestingly, Jesus never mentions the establishment of the church, but it is hard to see how the first readers of the Fourth Gospel could have interpreted his words in any other way—after all, they knew all about Pentecost!

72. Matthew 16:18.

If this interpretation is accepted, the question of whether Jesus should be called the church's "founder" becomes largely a matter of definition. As the earthly Jesus of Nazareth, he did not (and did not claim to) set up an organization that could conceivably have been called a "church." But as the risen, ascended, and glorified Christ, he was the church's founder, because it was in that context that he sent the Holy Spirit to put his intentions into effect. Given that the incarnate Jesus and the heavenly Christ are one and the same person, the question must be posed in a different light. It is not so much whether Jesus founded the church as it is when and in what circumstances he did so.

Jesus did not set up an evangelistic movement when he was still on earth, but he did train his disciples to preach and baptize and then sent them out to do so, which shows that he must have had some sense of organization, even if it was ad hoc and temporary. What happened to those who were baptized by the disciples? Did they simply fade away, as though their baptism meant nothing, or were they the seed that was being sown, so that when the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, they would be ready and willing to receive him? The fact that Jesus deliberately chose disciples—they were not merely fans attracted to his message—surely shows that he had some long-term purpose in mind. The disciples themselves certainly thought so, and they fought with one another over what place would be allocated to them in the coming "kingdom" that they believed Jesus was planning to set up.<sup>73</sup> They may have misunderstood his plans completely, but at least they knew that he was intending to use them for something.

Those who deny that Jesus had any desire to set up a church often have in mind the institutional structure that was to emerge in later centuries. They may be prepared to accept that he had some idea that his message would survive his death, but not that it would develop into a vast network that in some of its later manifestations would become very worldly and appear almost as a kind of spiritual tyranny. Jesus could hardly have intended that! But while we can agree with the skeptics on that point, it also seems to be the case that Jesus did have a vision of spreading his message to the ends of the earth, a vision that sooner or later would have required a structure that we could call a "church." Whether the form that structure eventually took was what Jesus originally envisaged is impossible to say and would have been meaningless to his disciples, who could not possibly have thought that far ahead. But to conclude that Jesus never intended to found a church at all is surely going too far. The evidence points to a different conclusion, and we must follow it where it leads.

73. Matthew 20:20–28.

Another factor that has influenced modern perceptions has been the Catholic tendency to connect the incarnation of Christ with the church, which the apostle Paul described as Christ's "body." Paul's imagery is clearly symbolic when it is used in 1 Corinthians 12, for example, where it follows hard on the breaking of bread in worship, which is described in detail in the preceding chapter. This connection has been picked up by liturgists who have made a neat link between the bread used in Holy Communion, the "body of Christ" imagery in the epistles, and the idea that the church is in some sense the ongoing incarnation of the Son of God. On that reading, the idea that Jesus came into the world and left behind the church becomes more plausible, and variations of that theme have been found in devotional literature of a Catholic tendency.

The difficulty with that interpretation is that it is clear from the New Testament that the physical body of the resurrected Christ ascended into heaven, leaving nothing—not even a relic or two—behind. The church as we know it did not exist at that point; it only came into being ten days later when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples at Pentecost. It is true that Jesus predicted this, and that before his departure he promised that he would send his Spirit to them, but this was not the same as staying behind himself, albeit in another form. If this is the model that a theologian has in mind when asking whether Jesus founded the church, then it is understandable that the answer will be negative. Jesus did found the church, but he did so in and through his Holy Spirit and not by leaving his body behind on earth. Once that is understood, there should be no difficulty in allowing the claim that Jesus was indeed the founder of the society that worships in his name and propagates his teachings.