

The Bible is universally recognised as the handbook of our faith and the New Testament as the written record of God's revelation in Christ. We know it, love it, trust it—and yet how did it come to be?

This thought-provoking book examines the origins of the New Testament: the test of canonicity in the early days of the church, the process by which the canon was formed, and the close relationship between the content of the gospel and the concept of an apostle.

*Faith's Framework* shows how, rather than being a dead part of church history, the question of the canon is a live question for Christians today, especially as they re-examine their own faith in the light of the original New Testament writings.

*The author was formerly Archbishop of Sydney in the Anglican Church of Australia. A graduate of the Universities of Sydney and Cambridge, he has taught in Moore Theological College and the University of Sydney.*

# Faith's Framework

The Structure of New Testament Theology

Donald Robinson

New Creation Publications Inc.



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**Donald Robinson**

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## PREFACE

In 1981 I was honoured to give the annual Moore College lectures, under the title of 'The Structure of New Testament Theology'. They have been slightly edited for publication, and I am indebted to Mr John Waterhouse of Albatross Books for his advice in this regard. I also wish to thank the Reverend Dr Peter O'Brien for his assistance in checking (and in some cases finding!) the references. I offer this little book about the gospel and the New Testament canon as a token of gratitude to my former colleagues and students at Moore College.

The lack of theological unity in and among the churches today is disturbing. Although many perceive the need for agreed principles of New Testament interpretation, there is little sign of an agreed science of hermeneutics emerging. Reflection on the role of the canon, and on the nature of the original gospel and of the apostolic tradition to which the canon testifies, may assist in giving us a right perspective. That at least is my hope in putting my thoughts on paper.

**Donald Robinson**

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The New Testament is the shape it is because of the peculiar authority of Christ's apostles and the nature of the gospel they were entrusted with. That gospel was, in short, the proclamation that 'the kingdom of God is near'. Both the implications of that proclamation and its timing were determined by what the Hebrew scriptures ('the law and the prophets') already disclosed about God's rule over the world and his promise to Abraham that Israel and all nations would be 'blessed' through his 'seed'.

This book is an attempt to link together these crucial ideas. Thus, in indicating the structure of the New Testament, it also provides an outline of Biblical theology as a whole.

The way into this study via a historical sketch of the formation of the New Testament canon may be daunting for some. Fear not! Start with chapter 2, 'The "Gospel" and the "Apostle"'.

I am grateful to my old friend Geoffrey Bingham for his encouragement in making possible a re-printing of *Faith's Framework*.

**Donald Robinson**

**1**

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**THE CANON AND APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY**

IT IS EASY for contemporary Christians to take for granted the most obvious fact about the Christian faith: that it derives its inspiration and information from a book, the Bible. That book describes the Founder of our faith and the Head of the church: Jesus Christ.

If the Messiah is in the Old Testament concealed, he is in the New revealed. The New Testament is our *primary* document: the historical account of the life and ministry of Jesus on earth and his work through the Spirit in the lives of the first Christians.

Yet the New Testament is itself not a single account by a single author. It is a collection of twenty-seven documents: four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen epistles of Paul, eight other letters and the Revelation of John. As a collection of canonical scriptures, this New Testament was the product of a long and relatively obscure process by which the churches of Christendom partly recognised, partly created an authorised standard of faith and doctrine. As such, it was essentially an instrument of an emerging Catholicism—a recognised constitution or point of coherence for the universal ‘church’ by which it distinguished itself from heretical and schismatic groups.

The churches of *the first century* did not have this constitution, nor did they exist as a universal body. The writings which we now have in our New Testament had not yet been formed into a collection. Nor did they exercise the function of a catholic canon in the first century, though all were in existence and most (if not all) were presumably read and valued – with varying degrees of acknowledgment – somewhere or other in the churches around the Mediterranean Sea.

The canon took shape from the second to the fifth centuries. The idea of such a canon and the first evidence of such a collection being made come only in the second century. The final shape of the twenty-seven-book collection was reached in the fourth and fifth centuries, with general agreement among both the Greek-speaking leaders of the eastern church and the Latin-speaking leaders of the western church.

#### THE PURPOSE OF THE CANON

What was the purpose of this canon? It appears to have come into being to provide documentary evidence for apostolic witness to ‘the rule of faith’. The rule of faith may be defined simply as ‘what the church teachers taught and what orthodox Christians believed’. Simple creeds or confessions of faith were framed from early times to give formal expression to this rule of faith. There were other ways, too, in which Christian belief was summarised, such as in hymns or prayers used in regular worship:

These are the facts as we have received them,  
 These are the truths that the Christian believes,  
 This is the basis of all of our preaching... <sup>1</sup>

So, we may have reason to believe that early Christians, like modern ones, liked to assure themselves and to exhort each other as to the core of their faith.

What was the origin of this rule of faith, this *regula fidei*? The belief of the early Christians must substantially have been what was derived from the preaching of missionaries. This teaching was first received by the hearing of the ear and then transmitted verbally to others. In a particular place or church this oral message would have been reinforced and given formal definition by, say, a letter from a rounding apostle. For example, the rule of faith operating among the Corinthians in the first and second centuries must have owed its common expression – the *form* in which it was held and passed on – to certain passages in Paul’s first epistle to that church (eg. 1 Corinthians 15:3–7). As is well-known, many phrases from the creeds can be traced to various books of the New Testament. Yet the framing of such a creed and its use as a confession of faith represent a test of Christian truth that is distinguishable from, even earlier than, the formation of a New Testament canon. The early confessions of faith preceded the New Testament.

Today, many scholars attribute the development of the canon to some sort of defence mechanism. It is usually held that the need to authenticate the apostolic witness by documentary evidence was due to various *challenges* to the basic Christian faith, eg. challenges from Gnostic and Montanist expressions of Christianity. Later we will ask: What elements or qualities in the apostolic writings themselves made for the perpetuation and special recognition of these writings—quite apart from the need to defend the faith against deviations? But it is also reasonable to suppose that there was a positive purpose for defining

<sup>1</sup> *Psalm Praise*, London, 1973, no. 51 by M.J. Sward

the limits of a canon. An accepted collection of books was necessary to confirm and authenticate the faith and teaching of the churches.

Equally clearly, the basis of recognition of certain books over others was not simply what was being denied. The test of canonicity was apostolic authority. The whole point of having a canon was to establish that the faith of true Christians was that which 'was declared at first by the Lord, and attested to us by those who heard him' (Hebrews 2:3). It was possible to believe and to spread the faith without recourse to the primary documents, but it was not possible to defend the faith successfully against spurious substitutes without original witnesses. We are not here asking why the various books of the New Testament should have been written, or even why they should severally have been preserved. Rather we are asking why they should have come to form a specific collection – a canon, a measuring rod. The answer seems to be: so that the authority of the original apostles could be claimed for what responsible church leaders believed was 'the faith once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3). Remember this was a time when alternative versions of Christianity were available and were in danger of leading astray the very elect.

#### **THE FORMATION OF THE CANON**

The purpose of the canon might be clear, but the process by which the canon came to be formed is far from certain. By the time it is evident such a process was taking place, it is also evident that four Gospels and thirteen Pauline letters were the irreducible core of such a collection. It is not surprising that Paul's letters should have been collected, or that they should have come to be venerated by the churches which owed their foundation to him. Nor is it too difficult to imagine a

process by which this collecting of letters may have been instigated and achieved.

What is more surprising is that the four documents we know as 'Gospels' (bearing, as they did from early in the second century at least, the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) should have come together—probably from widely separated places of origin—and should have constituted such a phalanx of canonical literature, secure against all rivals, so early in Christian history. Also it is difficult to imagine the process by which this may have come about. This development is the more surprising in that another Gospel (the Gospel of the Hebrews), despite its authentic character, early date and use by many Hebrew Christians, was never part of this general process of canonisation, though it continued to be used for centuries by the churches which venerated it without rival.

Whatever the process, four Gospels and thirteen Pauline letters within the second century came to be regarded as 'gospel' and 'apostle' – that is, the word of the Lord and the word of his apostle Paul. 'Gospel' and 'apostle', once written and received, constituted an indisputable test of what Christians must believe and do.

By the end of the second century, the Book of Acts and the letters of 1 John and 1 Peter were almost as basic. The status of Paul was certainly dominant – if one were a Gentile believer and took the Apostle's own testimony seriously, this could hardly be otherwise. Marcion of Rome sought to have Paul, with his companion Luke, as the sole witness and interpreter of Christ's gospel of salvation. But Paul's own testimony was against this. His Epistle to the Galatians told of the 'right hand of fellowship' (2:9), linking himself and Barnabas on the one side with James, Peter and John on the other. Thus Paul clearly recognised *two*

missions: one to the circumcision (the Jews) and Paul's own to the uncircumcision (the Gentiles).

A Gospel according to Peter (for so Irenaeus explained and defended the work of Mark, Peter's interpreter) and a Gospel according to John could hardly be denied. Nor could a Gospel according to Matthew, which (so it was said) was first written in Hebrew and authenticated by a genealogy linking Jesus to David and Abraham by a list of all the apostles and by an orderly account of Jesus' life and teaching. Although Luke himself was not an apostle of Christ, he was Paul's friend and had examined all things accurately from the very first.

The Acts of the Apostles was authenticated primarily because of Luke's authorship of his Gospel, but in addition it contained the actual testimony of the *apostles* – the Twelve as well as Paul. The late nineteenth century German liberal scholar, Adolph von Harnack, believed that Acts was the lynch-pin of the canon. He held that the New Testament, in the general shape that we now have it, effectively was created by the church of Rome towards the end of the second century when it deliberately attached to the four Gospels the Acts of the Apostles *under that name* (this was not its original title) and then appended to it the letters of Paul and one each of Peter and John, thereby vindicating their claim to authority.<sup>2</sup>

This basic structure of the New Testament was assumed by the end of the second century: there was no dispute between the eastern and western branches of the Christian church as to the twenty books which it comprised. Within this canon resided the panoply of apostolic authority. Not all the books had the same form or function, but *together* they represented the apostolic witness, the witness of those who had seen

with their eyes and heard with their ears, and whose hands had handled the word of life (1 John 1:1).

But what of the other seven books which are now within our New Testament? How did they come to be included? The apostolic authority of these seven New Testament books – Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation – was for long a matter of disagreement between the eastern and western churches. They were spoken of for many centuries as the *antilegomena*, the disputed or debated books. This usually meant that one part of the church revered and used them, while another part doubted their apostolic authenticity or value. Alexandria, centre of eastern theological learning, was always more accommodating than Rome in the West. There was in fact great variety in the lists of books actually recognised by various churches in the third and fourth centuries.

The smaller catholic (non-Pauline or general) epistles were sometimes in, sometimes out. How could their authenticity be proved or disproved? Who was 'the Elder' who wrote two of them? Which James and which Jude were supposed to have written the letters bearing these names? Amidst a mass of writings attributed to Peter, what special claim to authenticity had his so-called second epistle? The discussion died down; the smaller letters seemed to survive.

The situation was somewhat different with the two large books, Hebrews and Revelation. The church at Rome knew better than to accept Hebrews as by Paul, while the church at Alexandria had profound suspicions about the Revelation of John, despite its popularity in Rome and in other circles. It is widely thought that the fourth century theologian Athanasius' compulsory stay in the West during the Arian controversy had a decisive influence on his willingness to recognise Revelation as canonical. Controversies conducted at a distance often take a new turn when the

<sup>2</sup> A. Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament*, London, 1925, p.67

protagonists have occasion to meet and get to know each other in the more generous context of Christian fellowship. Kurt Aland suggests that Athanasius not only came to know ‘the esteem in which this book [the Apocalypse] was held by the western church’, but that he had ‘reached a kind of understanding and inner affirmation of the Apocalypse; the fact that it was contested and rejected by his theological opponents probably made his decision to accept it into the Canon easier.’<sup>3</sup> In any case, Irenaeus had defended it as by the apostle John and that opinion won the day.

It may be more than coincidence that the church in Rome accepted the book to the Hebrews as Pauline at about the same time. Certainly the Roman Christians would have learned at first hand of Athanasius’ ‘strong advocacy of its orthodoxy and apostolic authority. At all events, it was the generous list set out by Athanasius in his thirty–ninth festal letter of AD 367 – a list in which he distinguished twenty–seven books of ‘God–breathed scripture’<sup>4</sup> from a whole range of other books, good, bad and indifferent, known or used in churches – which was eventually to prevail throughout the Christian world as the New Testament canon. Not that it prevailed everywhere at once. Individual churches and individual writers continued to have their reservations for a long time. But there was relative unanimity when Jerome of Bethlehem and Augustine of Hippo–born within nine years of each other in the fourth century–both lent their weight to the inclusive list of Athanasius. Shortly after a number of local councils of the western church set their seal to the twenty–seven–book canon.

<sup>3</sup> K. Aland, *The Problem of the New Testament Canon*, London, 1962 p. 11

<sup>4</sup> A. Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*, revised by C.S.C. Williams, London, 1954, p.198

It is worth noting that the decision regarding the contents of the New Testament canon was reached not by a general council, but by wide practical consensus after a slow process of discovery, familiarity, usage, discussion and controversy. The spiritual or doctrinal value of a particular book – or its appropriateness for reading in public worship – was under consideration in various ways throughout the long process of the centuries. But, as a formal principle, apostolic authentication seems to have been what was sought by those who put their energies into determining a canon or measuring rod of ‘God–breathed scripture’.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CANON

#### (a) To the early church

To us, the books of the New Testament stand so far apart from all other writings of the Christian era that any question of possible rivals seems remote. Today, only scholars explore the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha of the early centuries. Even the apostolic fathers are not read or pondered by parish clergy in their studies as once they were. A popular article in a Sunday paper may draw attention to the discovery of the text of the Gospel of Thomas or the (Valentinian) Gospel of Truth and may even venture an extravagant claim or two about ‘the new light it throws on Christian origins’, but this makes little difference to the stocks in Christian bookshops.

It was all a much livelier question, however, when you were accustomed to hearing the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache of the Twelve Apostles or the Epistle of Barnabas read in church and when your copy of the Bible included such books within its covers. Or when, like Priscillian of Avila, your favourite devotional reading was the apocryphal Acts, or when the keener members of your congregation were using at their Bible studies secret writings alleged to have

come down from apostolic times. The magnificent *Codex Sinaiticus* of the Bible, made early in the fourth century, contains the Shepherd of Hermas as well as the Didache. *Codex Alexandrinus*, another complete Bible made a century later, contains the first and second Epistles of Clement and the Psalms of Solomon.

‘Are not Clement and Hermas both mentioned in the letters of Paul?’ ‘May we not heed the word of Barnabas as the word of an apostle?’ ‘Can we do better than receive the teaching of the twelve apostles themselves?’ These were the sort of questions and comments one might have heard in the first three centuries. But the early Christians were not entirely uncritical. There was some historical evidence in early writers like Papias as to the origins of Christian literature. Also there were crosschecks with the rule of faith itself. Before he himself had read it, Bishop Serapion of Antioch allowed the Gospel of Peter to be read in certain churches in his diocese. But when he discovered defective teaching concerning the person of Christ, Serapion inquired more closely, then rejected the Gospel as ‘not handed down to us’. He seems to have discovered who its actual author was – or at least where it originated. His conclusion was that the book was falsely ascribed to the apostle Peter.

While apostolic ascription was not necessarily a guarantee of authenticity, it was assumed that genuine apostolicity was the test of authenticity. For the purposes of the canon, apostolic authorship or origin was essential. There was some flexibility in how apostolicity might operate. The Gospel of Mark was guaranteed by Peter, the Gospel of Luke by Paul and perhaps the Jerusalem apostles. Much of the uncertainty about the lesser catholic epistles was due to it not being known whether they claimed to be written by apostles or not. Hebrews won its place in the canon

on the ground of its Pauline authorship. To Origen, the third century biblical scholar of Alexandria, this meant that ‘the thoughts are the apostle’s, but... the style and composition are the work of someone who called to mind the apostle’s teaching and wrote short notes, as it were, on what his master said’.<sup>5</sup> But this was Origen’s hypothesis only, not resting on any historical evidence, as Mark’s relation to Peter did. It was inevitable that discussion as to the authorship – and as to *authority* – of Hebrews should continue.

#### (b) To the Reformers

For us in the English tradition, the question of the *antilegomena* is part of the history of the Reformation. It is little more than a curiosity that some copies of Wycliffe’s Bible included an English translation of the Epistle of Paul to the Laodiceans. This spurious epistle of considerable antiquity was often included in Latin Bibles. This was due to the belief that, though uncanonical, it was nevertheless written by Paul and therefore was worth preserving. The English preacher of the twelfth century, John of Salisbury, said that ‘although the Epistle is rejected by all, as Jerome says, yet it was written by the apostle. Nor is this opinion based on the conjecture of others, but confirmed by the testimony of the apostle himself, for he mentions it in his Epistle to the Colossians...’<sup>6</sup> This reasoning is naive, but at least it testifies to the feeling that apostolicity was of prime importance.

The question of the ‘genuine’ *antilegomena*, however, was raised in the first printed New Testament in

<sup>5</sup> Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vi.25.13. Loeb edition, Harvard, 1964, vol.2, p.77

<sup>6</sup> The following section depends largely on B.F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, London, 1870, pp.431ff. See also W.G. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, London, 1975, pp.503ff.

English – that of William Tyndale in 1525. The order of the books is that of Luther, to whom Tyndale was much indebted. This means that, although 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John remain unquestioned with 1 Peter and 1 John respectively, the other four traditional *antilegomena* – Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation – are grouped together at the end of the Bible. Luther did this deliberately. He did not number them with the rest on the ground that they were not ‘capital’ books and ‘have been regarded in former times in a different light’. He referred to doubts as to their authorship, but now introduced a new criterion which in fact enabled him to sit light to critical questions of authorship.

Luther received Hebrews with honour, as there is much good instruction to be had in it. Because it is the work of a disciple of the apostles and not of an apostle, Luther does not ‘place it absolutely on the same footing as the apostolic epistles’.<sup>7</sup> The Letter of James was admired by Luther, though he noted that it was rejected by the ancients. He still held it as good, since it ‘lays down no teaching of man and presses home the law of God’.<sup>8</sup> But the Letter of James was not the writing of an apostle, nor would Luther give it the epithet of apostolic. It contradicted Paul and all other scriptures by giving righteousness to works and did not preach Christ. It is in his preface to James’ epistle that Luther’s famous test of what is apostolic scripture is explained:

Therein all true holy books agree, that they preach and urge Christ. That too is the right touchstone whereby to criticise all books, whether they urge Christ or not, for all scripture testifies of Christ... That which does not teach Christ is still not apostolic, even if it were the teaching of St Peter or St Paul. Again that which preaches Christ,

<sup>7</sup> Westcott; *Canon*, p.450

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

that were apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate and Herod preached it.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly the Letter of James fails by this test. Luther said he could not place it among the capital books. On the other hand, he noted ‘there are many good sayings in it’.<sup>10</sup> As for the Letter of Jude, Luther regarded it as merely an extract from 2 Peter, saying it did not lay the foundation of faith. It was not a capital book, though to be commended. Luther rejected the book of Revelation as ‘neither apostolic nor prophetic’.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear from all this that Luther was, in practice, endorsing a category of deuterocanonical books like the Roman Catholics. They were in the Bible, but on a lower level of value. He was not entirely consistent in his judgements, his impact on biblical studies and attitudes lying elsewhere than in his critical assessments. But his discussion clearly shows that the notion of *antilegomena*, a still mobile group within the twenty–seven–book canon, was alive and even adaptable. It may be significant that subsequent Lutheran confessional declarations produced no binding list of canonical books of the New Testament.

Tyndale was more cautious in his comments than Luther, though his prefaces were based on Luther’s. He acknowledged the doubts that had been held about the authorship of Hebrews, but regarded this as a matter of indifference. Tyndale defended Hebrews against opponents as a ‘catholic and godly epistle’ on the grounds of its consistency with the rest of scripture: ‘How should it not be of authority and taken for holy scripture?’<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> . *ibid.*, p.451

<sup>12</sup> *The New Testament translated by, William Tyndale, 1534, reprinted Cambridge, 1938, p.502*

Similar arguments were applied by Tyndale to James and Jude. Certainly, the Letter of James was ‘refused in the old time and denied of many to be the epistle of a very apostle’, nor did it ‘lay the foundation of the faith of Christ’.<sup>13</sup> But Tyndale differed from Luther by reconciling the teaching of James with that of the rest of scripture. He considered ‘it ought of right to be taken for holy scripture’.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise with Jude: ‘Though men have and yet do doubt of the author’, though its matter seems to be taken out of 2 Peter and though it ‘alleges scripture that is nowhere found’, yet ‘seeing the matter is so godly and agreeing to other places of holy scripture, I see not but that it ought to have the authority of holy scripture’.<sup>15</sup>

Tyndale provided no preface for the book of Revelation. In this he was being prudent. Luther had written in 1522 of this book: ‘For several reasons I hold it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic... My spirit cannot acquiesce in the book... I abide by the books which present Christ clear and pure to me’.<sup>16</sup> By 1534 Luther had somewhat revised his estimate and could pen a short but quite positive precis of the book as something ‘a true Christian can use for consolation and warning’,<sup>17</sup> because it showed Christ in heaven, yet still near and with his saints. Yet Revelation is for all that ‘a dumb prophecy’,<sup>18</sup> lacking clarity of interpretation. Its authorship Luther regarded as a matter of indifference.

Thus, though Tyndale followed Luther in relegating

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.521

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.522

<sup>16</sup> Westcott, Canon, p.451.

<sup>17</sup> . *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

four of the seven *antilegomena* to the end of his New Testament and in admitting the traditional doubts as to their apostolic authorship, he did not doubt that Hebrews, James and Jude at least should be regarded as holy scripture, on the ground of their consistency with the rest of scripture. Tyndale’s relegation of the four *antilegomena* to the end of his New Testament had no sequel. This remained the order in the 1534 revision of his New Testament, but the traditional order was restored in the Great Bible of 1539. The Articles of 1553 simply affirmed the sufficiency of holy scripture for salvation without enumerating the books or defining the canon.

But English churchmen were well aware of the debate on the Continent, in both the Roman church and the Reformation churches, about the canon of scripture and the status and character of the *antilegomena*. Erasmus had led the debate on the character of the New Testament books and his views were well-known. Karlstadt wrote books on the canon which recognised that the seven *antilegomena* were in a class inferior to the accepted books, the *homologoumena*, though he defended the authority of the former. Oecolampadius took a similar position.

Calvin was equally aware of the traditional doubts about the *antilegomena*. He discussed them in his commentaries, defending the authority of Hebrews and James. Although he did not regard Hebrews as Pauline, he nevertheless classed it without hesitation as among ‘apostolical writings’ whoever its author may have been, suggesting that it is only through the craft of Satan that any had been led to dispute its authority. The *doctrine* of Hebrews was what mattered and this, apparently, decided the issue. The Letter of James was approved, despite Calvin’s freely expressed uncertainty as to its authorship, because ‘it contains nothing unworthy of an apostle of Christ’. Doctrine,

even thin doctrine—he seems more sparing in proclaiming the grace of Christ than it behoved an apostle to be<sup>19</sup> – again determines the matter. The Letter of Jude was accepted by Calvin ‘because it is useful for reading and does not contain anything inconsistent with the purity of apostolic doctrine’.<sup>20</sup>

The Letter of 2 Peter puzzled Calvin. He was impressed by the reasons Jerome recorded for doubting Petrine authorship, but he liked the epistle so much that, since he could not allow it to be canonical if Peter was not in some sense the author, he adopted a somewhat precarious solution: ‘if the epistle be deemed worthy of credit, it proceeded from Peter; not that he wrote it himself, but that some one of his disciples at his command included in it what the necessity of the times required’.<sup>21</sup> Note that Calvin asserts Peter must have authorised it. The letters of 2 and 3 John and the Revelation of John, Calvin passed over without comment—the only books of the New Testament so ignored by him.

#### (c) To the Roman Catholic Church

The Council of Trent (1546) discussed the question of scripture and tradition and gave the Roman church, perhaps for the first time, an authorised list of canonical books. But apparently it was decided not to enter into the ‘difficult matter’<sup>22</sup> of the status of the *antilegomena*—the deuterocanonical books as they were coming to be called.

Cardinal Cajetan, devoted to Jerome, had argued a few years earlier that some at least of the seven

<sup>19</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. J. Owen, Edinburgh, 1855, p.276

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Catholic Epistles*, p.427

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Catholic Epistles*, p.363, and Westcott, *Canon*, p.457

<sup>22</sup> *The Cambridge History of the Bible. The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, Cambridge, 1963, p.202

*antilegomena* were of less authority than ‘those which are certainly holy scripture’.<sup>23</sup> Hebrews must be regarded as doubtful because ‘unless it is Paul’s, it is not clear that it is canonical’.<sup>24</sup> His practical conclusion from this premise is interesting: ‘Whence it comes to pass that if anything arise doubtful in faith it cannot be determined from the sole authority of this epistle. See how great a mischief an anonymous book creates’.<sup>25</sup> No wonder the fathers of Trent regarded the matter as difficult!

How little the matter was decided by Trent can be seen in the biblical encyclopaedia published in 1566 by Sisto of Sienna, a converted Jew who became a Dominican. Sisto (or Sixtus Senensis) made a clear distinction between protocanonical books and deuterocanonical books, applying this distinction to the New Testament no less than to the Old. The deuterocanonical portions of the New Testament were the seven *antilegomena*, together with certain doubtful insertions in the Gospels, i.e. Mark 16:9–20, Luke 22:43–44, and John 7:53 – 8:11. Sisto may be somewhat confused in his definitions and inaccurate in his history, but his contribution is nonetheless illuminating. He summarised the history of the *antilegomena* from their origin to the Council of Trent as follows: they consist of those books which ‘formerly the ancient Fathers of the Church held as apocryphal and not canonical, and at first permitted to be read only before catechumens... then allowed to be read before all the faithful, not for the confirmation of doctrines, but merely for the instruction of the people, and... at last willed that they should be adopted

<sup>23</sup> Westcott, *Canon*, p.443

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

among the scriptures of irrefragable authority'.<sup>26</sup> Clearly both Rome and the Reformed churches wanted to settle the matter somehow. Trent had decided that sacred tradition and sacred scripture were to be received with the same sense of devotion and reverence. Since the limits of the twenty-seven-book canon was part of the tradition of the church, it should now be received with the same devotion and veneration as sacred scripture itself. There was apparently no way out of that solution. The doubts about authorship remained, but they were shut up within the dogmatic decree of the Council.

(d) To the Church of England

The English Reformers were moving towards another solution. In 1563 what is now our Article 6 was altered by an addition which, in the light of the contemporary debate, sounds curious to say the least: 'In the name of holy scripture we do understand those canonical books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the church'. Still no list of New Testament books is given: only the statement that 'All the books of the New Testament, as they are commonly received, we do receive and account them canonical'.

Bishop Westcott pointed out last century that a strict interpretation of the Article implies a distinction between canonical books, that is all of the twenty-seven books, and those canonical books whose authority was never in any doubt in the church – which would exclude the seven *antilegomena*. Only the agreed or undoubted books, the *homologoumena*, would then qualify for the definition of holy scripture: that which contains all things necessary to salvation. Is it possible that this was the intention of the addition to the

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<sup>26</sup> Westcott, *Canon*, p. 447. See also *The Cambridge History of the Bible.* 'The West from the Reformation to the Present Day, pp.206f.

Article? Westcott thought it possible that 'the framers of our Articles were willing to allow a certain freedom of opinion on a question which was left undecided not only by the Lutheran but also by many Calvinistic churches'<sup>27</sup> –and, we may add, by the Roman church, though in a different way.

Whatever the explanation, the words of Article 6 do not mean that there was no controversy about the matter at the time. The usual doubts about these books were rehearsed by Theodore Beza in his edition of the New Testament, which he presented to Queen Elizabeth of England in 1564. Dr Whitaker, Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, published his *Disputation on Holy Scripture* in 1588. In it he took note of the doubts of the Lutherans as well as of Cardinal Cajetan regarding the seven *antilegomena*. Certainly Beza took the view, which gathered strength among the churches of the Reformation in those years, that the evident inspiration of the books outweighed any doubts which had been held, or might still be held, about their origin or authorship. But the very manner in which this Reformed view took shape is itself evidence that traditional doubts about certain books of the New Testament were common knowledge in the mid-sixteenth century.

If there is a concession to ancient and persistent doubts about the *antilegomena* in the language of Article 6, it certainly does not reflect any uncertainty on the part of the leaders of the Church of England themselves as to the authenticity or authority of those books or to their divine inspiration. There may, however, be another element in their caution, if caution it be. This was an awareness that holy scripture was a possession of all the churches and all believers, not merely of certain sections, and that if limits had to be determined

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<sup>27</sup> Westcott, *Canon*, pp.466f.

they should be determined by the consent of all. Nor were the English leaders likely to have been happy with Trent's solution of the problem by putting tradition on a par with scripture.

Consequently, where recognition of certain writings had been or still was lacking by significant portions of the church, those writings should not be used as the ground for establishing catholic doctrine which a person must believe for his eternal salvation. They may even have had in mind the words of Augustine in his *de doctrina Christiana*: 'Now, in regard to the canonical scriptures, the skilful interpreter must follow the judgement of the greater number of catholic churches... Among the canonical scriptures he will judge according to the following standard: to prefer those that are received by all the catholic churches to those which some do not receive.'<sup>28</sup>

If there is a concession in the words of Article 6, it should not be thought that very much hung to it in terms of the Article's main intention. The four Gospels had never been in doubt in any sense envisaged by the Article, nor had the epistles of Paul – except for Hebrews. Here, in the gospel and the apostle, was truly the heart of the Christian faith. Although there was memory of a time when even the church of Rome considered no epistles beyond those of Paul, this had not been for doctrinal reasons. The first epistle of Peter and the first epistle of John had long since established themselves in all the churches without controversy. Moreover, the *antilegomena* were still more closely connected with church life than many other writings and, except for the Revelation, had their place in the lectionary. Beyond them were the real apocryphal books: 1 Clement, Barnabas, Hermas and the rest

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<sup>28</sup> *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*, vol. 9, trans. M. Dods, Edinburgh, 1873, p.41

once received and read, but now not canonical though still valued—and beyond them the spurious and generally heretical writings.

It may seem surprising to think that any concession existed at all. No English New Testament since Tyndale has given any hint of a distinction and the concession has had little or no practical application within English theology. But its existence in the sixteenth century is at least a reminder that our Reforming fathers viewed the matter of the canon in the light of the patristic evidence in a way we are not accustomed to doing. Where we are now merely dogmatic, they were historically minded as well.

### THE DISPUTED BOOKS

It is worth while to enquire, however, what was the nature or strength of the doubts surrounding the disputed books as these doubts appeared in the sixteenth century for the doubts fall into different categories.

#### (a) The Letter to the Hebrews

Hebrews gained its recognition at first only among the Eastern churches—and then on the ground of its assumed Pauline authorship. Rome and its allies, though devoted to Paul, would not recognise it, at least not until the fourth century. Its *authenticity* was never in doubt, that is, it was not considered fraudulent or pseudonymous. It was known to Clement of Rome at the end of the first century, and perhaps to Justin. When, in the fourth century, the churches of the West were persuaded to accept it, it was on the ground of its alleged Pauline authorship. But doubts were never entirely silenced, and they were vigorously awakened at the Renaissance.

The question was not about the orthodoxy or authenticity of Hebrews (though some passages did occasion discussion), but whether, not being of

apostolic authorship, it had any claim to recognition as holy scripture. After all, 1 Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas had long since been disallowed. This was despite the fact that all three books were regarded as authentic (doubts about Barnabas being more modern), and written by men of the apostolic age, who were all associates of Paul and who were, it was thought, mentioned in the New Testament. Why should then the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews be accepted?

Although Reformation scholars like Tyndale and Calvin thought the authorship of Hebrews a matter of indifference, the book was received by the English church and took its place in the English New Testament as an epistle of Paul – a designation still given in the Revised Version of 1881! But the authorship question was really secondary for the English leaders. Almost certainly the *spiritual quality* of the epistle as it spoke to their hearts was what secured its place in their estimation, even while the existence of the doubts of others was acknowledged. (The Geneva Bible of 1560 did not ascribe Hebrews to Paul, whom it thought was not the likely author. Its preface welcomed the anonymity prescribed by the Holy Spirit!)

#### (b) The Revelation of John

The Revelation of John was considered doubtful on three grounds. First, it was known to have been rejected by the Greek church for many years. All knew this from Jerome. Even Athanasius' acceptance of it in the fourth century was not followed by everyone in the east. Second, scholars like Erasmus believed the style of Revelation was far removed from that of the Gospel and the First Epistle of John. This and the general content led them to believe the work was not that of John the Evangelist.

Third, the obscurity and questionable character of

some of its contents did not encourage some scholars to recognise apostolic authority in the book of Revelation. It was hardly a repository of serious doctrine: was it not the sole source of the dubious millenarian fantasy – the 'Jewish dotage' as the 42 Articles described it? The English Reformers defended the book in general, but it is hard to say what they really made of it. It had never found a place in the lectionaries of the Orthodox churches and, except for a few special passages, it was not included by Cranmer in his great lectionary designed to cover the whole New Testament three times a year.

#### (c) The Letter of James

The Letter of James was late in finding acceptance in any part of the Christian church. Origen, who seems to be the first to quote from it, already mentions that the epistle was unacceptable to some. Its specific Christian content was slight and it was generally thought to be not up to the standard of an apostolic writing.

And who was 'James' anyhow? Hardly the apostle of that name—though the Geneva Bible asserted this. And it was not to be assumed without question that the law-keeping president of the Jerusalem church should command universal attention throughout Gentile Christendom. After all, there was the problem of conflict with the teaching of Paul on justification. Although both Erasmus and Luther approved what the epistle said, they did not think it said very much to the point of the apostolic gospel. Its problem, therefore, was not so much authorship as a lack of apostolic 'dignity'.

#### (d) The Second Letter of Peter

Of all the disputed books, only 2 Peter exhibits the problem of pseudonymity or use of a false name and the possibility of pseudonymity was the main ground of doubt about its status. The epistles of James and

Jude and the Revelation of John may have gained credence on the assumption that they were written by the apostles of these names, but there was no suggestion that the names themselves were false or calculated to deceive. The Letter to the Hebrews is anonymous, while 2 and 3 John have only 'the Elder' as their designated author. But the view was widespread that 2 Peter was not at all the work of the apostle whose name it bears and whose personal companionship with Jesus is described within it in the first person.

Today we are familiar with views denying the apparent authorship of a number of New Testament books, but only 2 Peter was in this class in the sixteenth century. There were a number of reasons for this suspicion. The epistle came late to the notice of many parts of the church. It suffered by association from the existence of an extensive body of literature, under Peter's name or associated with him, which had long since been rejected as unauthentic by the church at large. It manifested a quite different style and atmosphere from 1 Peter which was generally accepted as authentic. Lastly it seemed to be heavily dependent on Jude—a circumstance which, quite apart from doubts about Jude's own status, did not do much for the notion of apostolic dignity.

Yet 2 Peter unquestionably had its own appeal and the Reformers, Luther and Calvin in particular, had no problem in regard to its contents. Apostolicity was the crux. Calvin knew all about the doubts and sympathised with them. But he was reluctant to reject the letter in view of 'the majesty of the Spirit of Christ [which] exhibits itself in every part of the Epistle'.<sup>29</sup> We have already recorded his solution. If it is to be received as canonical, its apostolic authorship must be

acknowledged; it cannot be accepted as a pseudonymous writing. According to Calvin its claim to be written by Peter (or by his authority) and its claim that its author had been with Jesus are integral to the authority of the book. If it is not from Peter, it is not canonical.

(e) Jude and 2 and 3 John

Jude seems to have been listed as 'disputed' mainly on the evidence of Eusebius that this was the case, though presumably it was somewhat dependent on James for its status, especially if James was the brother of Jesus. Luther thought it dependent on 2 Peter and therefore not of 'capital' value. The two lesser Johannine letters were doubtful because of the obscurity of their authorship ('the Elder'), and no doubt because their local and now irrelevant subject matter hardly qualified them as 'catholic' epistles.

We may make two observations as a result of this brief survey of the traditional *antilegomena* or disputed books at the time of the English Reformation. First, many *more* doubts have arisen in individual minds and schools of thought since the sixteenth century concerning various New Testament books, especially on the score of authorship. I Peter and 1 John have been denied their apostolic authorship. Not only is Hebrews now universally regarded as not from Paul or in any way dependent on him, but the Pauline *homologoumena* have been reduced by some from thirteen to as few as four letters, even comparatively conservative scholars being uneasy about Pauline authorship of the Pastorals or the Letter to the Ephesians. Many regard the Acts of the Apostles as little more reliable than the second century Acts of Paul and assign it a similar date of writing. The authority lent to the four Gospels by the names of the four evangelists is, for many, a conventional device of no real substance.

<sup>29</sup> Westcott, *Canon*, p.457

This is not the place to discuss such views in detail. The question which arises is this: What is the status of such doubts? What is to be the response of the church at large, or of particular churches or individuals, to the existence of new categories of *antilegomena*? Does the admittedly limited position of the Reformers and others in the sixteenth century help in any way to a solution?

A second observation to be made is this. The English Reformers had very little room within which to manoeuvre. There was little they could investigate for themselves. Critical study of the modern kind, which has opened large windows into ancient practices and modes of thought and writing, was not an option. They were strong on the concept of the 'internal witness of the Holy Spirit'. If Luther was too inclined to individuality in his judgements, his sensitivity to the heart of the divine revelation in the capital books was something of a divine dispensation for his time. Certainly, there was a capacity for self-deception in the subjective judging of content in terms of doctrinal consistency. But the Reformers were also acutely aware of the need to eschew mere individual preference where catholic doctrine was at stake. Hence their caution where doubt was known to exist. In regard to pseudonymity, it was impossible for them to work backwards from sixteenth century definitions of canonicity towards any real solution.

What is the importance of all this for the structure of New Testament theology? The answer is that it provides a necessary starting point. Neville Birdsall begins his article in the *New Bible Dictionary* (IVP) on the canon of the New Testament with the statement that 'Biblical theology demands as its presupposition a fixed extent of biblical literature'.<sup>30</sup> There would be no

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<sup>30</sup> J.N. Birdsall, 'Canon of the New Testament', *NBD*, p.194

New Testament to study – and no New Testament theology – if it had not been for the formation of the New Testament as a canon, a rod with which to measure the more volatile oral 'rule of faith', indeed a canon which could become itself the complete rule of faith.

The principle underlying the search for and eventual formation of this canon was apostolic authority. Up to and at the time of the Reformation there was no doubt in the church about this apostolic authority so far as the four Gospels, the thirteen Pauline epistles, Acts, 1 Peter and 1 John were concerned – twenty books. But there was some doubt about the other seven, the *antilegomena*.

Some of the Reformers, eg. Tyndale and Calvin, could argue for the apostolic authority of these seven (or some of them) not on grounds of apostolic authorship – about which they freely admitted doubt – but on the grounds of *consistency* with other scriptures of acknowledged apostolic authority. There is some justification, though, in Westcott's comment that the controversy on the canon in the sixteenth century was 'really conducted by feeling rather than by external evidence'.<sup>31</sup>

We are not talking here about the character of holy scripture, but about the *extent* of it. The character of holy scripture is or may be a biblical doctrine, but the extent of scripture – if we do not simply accept the decree of Trent on the one hand or retreat into a position of personal and subjective judgement on the other – is surely a matter of historical probability. Christopher Evans wants us to abandon the whole notion of 'canon'. He recognises that this rests on the principle of apostolicity, but he frankly regards the apostolic 'image' in this connection as a fantasy. The

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<sup>31</sup> Westcott, *Canon*, p.437

concept of 'holy scripture' or a sacred book is, for him, scarcely Christian at all.<sup>32</sup> But the Old Testament and the 'agreed' New Testament as they stand do not allow us to adopt this solution, for they both contain the notion of 'holy scripture'.

Nor is C.F.D. Moule's solution really satisfactory. He states:

The distinctiveness of the canonical scriptures... is that the common mind of mainstream Christianity ultimately gave its sanction to these writings, not as the only true ones, but as those alone which the church regarded as normative. And, broadly speaking, the New Testament canon does in fact comprise precisely the earliest and the most authentic and representative documents of the church's infancy – historically the best evidence for Christian beginnings. There is no other body of writings that fits that role... This does not mean that the canonical scriptures are without error, or that they must not be critically sifted like any other documents of antiquity. But it does mean that they serve a unique purpose and are indispensable for that purpose and therefore incomparably precious. And the ultimate selection of them was not a sudden thing but a slow process of trial and error – the Work, if you like, of the Holy Spirit in the understanding of church leaders.”

Professor Moule is content with the 'best evidence for Christian beginnings'.<sup>33</sup> He will have nothing to do with any notion of special scriptural inspiration. But what constitutes the *best* evidence – not merely for Christian beginnings, but for the truth of God amid those beginnings? We must go back to what lies at the heart of those documents which *first* impressed

themselves on the churches as a canon or measuring rod, looking there for the structural elements of their theology and then work from the clear to the less clear.

A sixteenth century Christian who honestly doubted the apostolicity of James or Revelation, for example, on the ground that he thought they mistakenly had been taken as emanating from Jesus' own circle may have had little option but to allow them to stand in the second rank of canonical books. The same may be said of a modern Christian who has persuaded himself that the Pastoral Epistles or 1 Peter were produced without the authority of Paul or Peter. But he would also have to consider the corollary: that these books may not be holy scripture either.

Unfortunately, we cannot rest with this as a final solution: much less can we settle the question by perusing the pros and cons set out in the usual standard New Testament introduction. The answer lies in the content of the *gospel* which the basic documents point to as their precipitating word, and in the role of the *apostle* who was sent out to preach and teach that gospel to the world. If the rule of faith was dependent on apostolic witness, we need to identify more closely what was the essential kernel of this preached message – the gospel – and who were its prime exponents – the apostles. It is to these twin concepts we now turn.

<sup>32</sup> C.F. Evans, *Is 'Holy Scripture' Christian?* London, 1971, pp. 21ff

<sup>33</sup> C.F.D. Moule, *The Holy Spirit*, London, 1978, pp. 68f

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## THE 'GOSPEL' AND THE 'APOSTLE'

WE ARE SEEKING TO IDENTIFY the framework for our faith – the structure of New Testament theology. But if we are to talk intelligently about 'the theology of the New Testament', it is obvious that our starting point must be the existence of the New Testament as we have it. We saw in Chapter 1 that, even when our present New Testament acquired its final endorsement in the sixteenth century by ecclesiastical decree or confessional assent – and even more effectively by the mass production of identical printed copies – there was a consciousness that some of the twenty–seven books, i.e. the disputed books or *antilegomena*, were in a different category to the rest. This was because of uncertainty as to their origin, even though they were finally accepted as canonical on the ground of their consistency of doctrine with the undoubted books or *homologoumena*. The distinction may have a bearing on the question of the structure of New Testament theology. We may be right not to use James, Hebrews or Revelation as *the foundation* of doctrine, but only as secondary support of doctrine.

We may think of the theology of the New Testament, to quote Stephen Neill, as 'systematic and

ordered presentation of its teaching'.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, as C.F.D. Moule remarks, 'theological study of the New Testament certainly begins as soon as you take the small volume in your hands and ask: Where did it come from and how did it come by its name?'<sup>2</sup> Thus, the very term 'theology of the New Testament' is somewhat ambiguous. It may refer to the content of the twenty–seven books – its 'teaching' as arranged and interpreted by this scholar or that – or it may refer to those convictions and beliefs of Christians which led to the New Testament coming into existence as a body of writings in the first place, i.e. the theology which produced the New Testament.

Here we should make a further distinction between the theology which lay behind the writing of any particular gospel, epistle or other document now in the New Testament, and the theology which consciously or unconsciously governed the process by which a canon of writings was achieved in response to a felt need. This is not to suggest that these two theologies were necessarily at variance – only that any investigations of the two must proceed along different lines. Conclusions must await investigation.

In a recent survey of the state of New Testament studies John Bowden, the English translator of the two German scholars Hans Conzelmann and Joachim Jeremias, speaks of the 'disarray' in the area of theological interpretation of the New Testament:

The narrower area of 'New Testament theology' [here he is speaking of New Testament theology in the first sense defined above] has yet to acquire permanent contours. No 'theology of the New Testament' seems to have been written in English between 1899 and 1958, and on the

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<sup>1</sup> S. Neill, *Jesus Through Many Eyes*, Philadelphia, 1976, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> C.F.D. Moule, 'The New Testament', in *What Theologians Do*, F.G. Healey, Grand Rapids, 1971, p.35

Continent the field has been dominated by individual scholars in whose writings the number of presuppositions and prejudices, which must colour any interpretation, affects their approach to such a degree that works with the same title bear little relationship to one another. In perspective these works appear as a series of glorious failures, great and distinctive interpretations which are none the less each flawed in some way; for all the shafts of light which they may shed, their overall conception is sooner or later undermined by the combined effort of those working on less comprehensive themes.<sup>3</sup>

One reason for this 'disarray' is the lack of a common understanding of the relationship between the *historical criticism* by which the sense of the various parts of the New Testament is determined and the broader *theological interpretation* of the New Testament which, as R.C. Morgan says, 'is the purpose, crown and climax of all specifically Christian study of the New Testament'<sup>4</sup> The most recent tendency in New Testament theology has been to emphasise diversity of doctrine and opinion within the twenty-seven books, even making a virtue of this as a theological datum.

It is not the intention of this book to contribute to the 'disarray' noted by Bowden, though we intend to study what gives unity to the New Testament and some of the 'less comprehensive themes' as well. But in setting out to identify the structure of New Testament theology, we need to consider what the New Testament is saying from a prior examination of what appear to be the presuppositions of the canon itself: What does the New Testament *as a collection*

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<sup>3</sup> J. Bowden, 'Great Expectations? The New Testament Critic and his Audience', in *What About the New Testament?* ed. M. Hooker and C. Hickling, London, 1975, p.5

<sup>4</sup> See especially the essay of R.C. Morgan, in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, London, 1973, pp.1-67

claim to be? This brings us back to C.F.D. Moule's proposition: 'Theological study of the New Testament certainly begins, as soon as you take that small volume in your hands and ask: Where did it come from and how did it come by its name?'

### THE ORIGIN OF 'NEW TESTAMENT'

The term 'New Testament' comes from the Latin *novum testamentum*. It occurs as a title for the first time, so far as we know, in Tertullian. Writing against Praxeas in about AD 200, he used the term in contrast to 'the old scripture' (*scriptura vetus*), at once explaining that he was referring to what is contained in 'the gospels and the apostles'.<sup>5</sup>

*Novum testamentum*, or in its Greek form *kaine diatheke*, was to become the standard term for this unique collection of books and letters. But the important point at the moment is the looser description: 'the gospels and the apostles'. This is its more primitive designation. A little earlier we find Clement of Alexandria in quoting from Paul's letters, using the expression in the singular: 'the gospel and the apostle'.<sup>6</sup> In the same context he spoke of a verse from the Psalms simply as 'the scripture'. The fact is that there is no canon known to us, whether designated *kaine diatheke* or not, which did not comprise as its main components 'gospel' and 'apostle'. This is true for Marcion's canon about AD 150 as well as for the other canons made in response to his. (Strictly speaking, of course, the terms 'New Testament' and 'Old Testament' were largely anachronistic in the period

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<sup>5</sup> *Adversus Praxean*, xv. Note the text in Tertullian's *Treatise against Praxeas*, ed. E. Evans, London, 1948, p.196

<sup>6</sup> *Stromateis*, vii.3.14. See the text in Clement of Alexandria. *Miscellanies Book VII*, ed. F.J.A. Hort and J.B. Mayor, London, 1902, p.22

under consideration, though Paul does speak of 'reading the old covenant [testament]' in 2 Corinthians 3:14.)

Harnack believed that there were four motives that led to the creation of the New Testament. The first motive was the supreme reverence in which the words and teaching of Jesus were held from the beginning. There was never any doubt among Christians that the words of Jesus were the words of eternal life. So there existed the strongest motive to discover, preserve and treasure them.

Harnack draws attention to the early formula, 'the scriptures and the Lord'.<sup>7</sup> Here we see the kind of estimate placed on the words of Jesus by the early Christians: the 'Lord' stood alongside 'the scriptures'. His teaching spoke to them as the scriptures or Old Testament spoke to them – both were from God. The formula 'the scriptures and the Lord' was interchangeable with the formula 'the scriptures and the gospel'. This was natural since the gospel was comprised of 'what the Messiah had said, taught and revealed'.

The second motive was the intense interest of the early Christians in the death and resurrection of the Messiah. As we know from Acts, 'that the Christ should suffer' was something to be defended and expounded as of central importance. It would be felt that 'an account of the critical moments of the life of Christ must take its place side by side with the Old Testament history regarded as prophetic'.<sup>8</sup>

It hardly needs stating that in these two elements, the words of Jesus and the passion narrative, we have the two main features of what we now know as the Gospels. If Harnack is right, we have an explanation

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<sup>7</sup> , Harnack, *Origin*, p.7

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* , p.10

not only of why the Gospels came to be written, but also of why they came to be generally received and preserved.

The third motive relates to the fact that Christians were convinced that 'what Christ had brought with him, in spite of its connection with the Old Testament, was something "new"—a 'new creation', a 'new covenant'. Then, says Harnack, 'the conception of the "new covenant" necessarily suggested the need of something of *the nature of a document*; for what is a covenant without its document?'<sup>9</sup>

Harnack is careful to point out that this was a motive which only developed as time went on. At first, the only document actually needed was already there—the holy scripture. Here, testifying of Christ in all its parts, was the only written instrument absolutely needed by the earliest Christians to assure them of the fulfilment of God's salvation. Harnack's point, however, is that as the dispute proceeded with Jews and others concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament, a further document was needed which 'gave *a priori* the right standpoint' in showing the true meaning of the Old Testament.

While these three motives may, plausibly enough, have been factors in the creation of a New Testament—either by encouraging the writing and circulation of the gospels or by providing reasons for valuing certain Christian writings, such as Paul's letters – it was the fourth motive advanced by Harnack which was most closely concerned with the creation of the canon in the strict sense. This was the need to differentiate the authentic apostolic writings from a mass of other Christian writings of extremely varied content, especially those of Gnostic tendency, which proliferated in the second and following centuries.

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13

## THE CRITERIA FOR CANONICITY

Harnack's general analysis may well be right. It is not our intention to pursue the question between rival claimants in the second or succeeding centuries. Enough to observe that, in the process, authoritative claims made by certain writings were in fact acknowledged and that what was acknowledged was that the writings were either 'gospel' or 'apostle'. As such these writings were received in circles far beyond those in which they were first read and for which they were first intended. The term 'gospel' meant the Lord Jesus Christ, while the term 'apostle' meant Paul. Here we can make a start in understanding the structure of New Testament theology. What really motivated the production of our New Testament, as finally recognised and canonised, was whatever was understood by *euaggelion* and *apostolos*.

Before exploring this further, we should fill out the concept of *kaine diatheke* a little. The term 'New Testament' was the eventual name given to the canonical collection; without doubt it is a highly theological one. Moreover, it is clear from the writings of the second century apologists Justin and Melito, even the Apostolic Fathers, that such writers warmed to the idea of Christianity being a 'new covenant', especially in terms of the prophecy of Jeremiah chapter 31. There seems no reason to doubt that it was this theology that provided the title *kaine diatheke* or *novum testamentum* for the books of the canon, which came into use about the end of the second century.

But neither this title nor the theology behind it was the criterion by which recognition of the authenticity of the books or their suitability for canonical status was determined at first. That criterion was the category of 'gospel' and 'apostle'. Furthermore, the term 'new covenant' does not provide us with an adequate or likely theological basis for determining the theology of

the books themselves. Justin and Melito got the idea of interpreting Christianity as the new covenant by direct extrapolation from the Old Testament, not by deduction from the Gospels or the letters of Paul. The title 'New Testament' really testifies to the second century method of interpreting the Old Testament, rather than to the impression made by the contents of the books which constituted the first canon.

Within our New Testament, only the Letter to the Hebrews discusses the concept of a 'new covenant' at any length. In view of this epistle's doubtful position in the history of the canon, it is not likely that its theology had any influence on the original concept of the canon. It is easier to suppose that the exposition in Hebrews of the 'new covenant' helped to win it a place in the canon after the term 'New Testament' had become the title of the canon, than that its exposition influenced the concept of the canon. Not that what Hebrews says is not appropriate; it gives an explanation of Jesus' ministry in terms of the prophet Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant, which was to replace the Mosaic covenant (as distinct from, say, the Abrahamic or Davidic covenants). But the promise was to the nation of Israel only. In the Letter to the Hebrews there is no sign of any application of the new covenant to Gentiles. Its appropriateness, therefore, is limited (though, in fairness, a person like Justin or Melito may not have noticed that).

The term 'new covenant' occurs elsewhere in the phrase 'the new covenant in my blood'. This is recorded by Paul in the passion narrative in 1 Corinthians 11:25 (and interpolated in Luke 22:20), perhaps reflecting an interpretation of Jesus' words (Mark 14:24), which in turn originally echoed Exodus 24:8 in the light of Jeremiah 31. But it is hardly a developed theme in Paul.

The only other use of the phrase is in 2 Corinthians

3:6 – ‘ministers of a new covenant’. But Paul has no place in this passage for a new covenant as a *written* document. The letter from Christ delivered by the apostle is ‘written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God on tablets of human hearts’. Significant as these two uses of the phrase ‘new covenant’ are – being related to what lies at the heart of ‘gospel’ on the one hand and ‘apostle’ on the other – it seems unlikely that these occurrences were responsible for the emergence of the term as a criterion to determine canonical books.

Nor do any of the New Testament books *themselves* claim any covenantal or instrumental purpose. So far as the writers express themselves at all, their books are mainly for instruction and information. Mark sets out to tell ‘how the gospel of Jesus Christ began’ (Mark 1:1). Luke offers an ‘account’ (*diegesis*) of certain events to confirm previous instruction (Luke 1:1–4). John recounts significant incidents ‘that you may believe... and have life’ (John 20:31). Paul is conscious of writing ‘letters’ in which he exhorts and instructs. There are few enough statements of purpose, but none relates to any covenantal procedure.

Thus, however appropriate the term ‘New Testament’ may have been when eventually it was adopted as the title for all the canonical books, it does not appear to represent the theological starting point for understanding the structure of the theology of these books, or the theology underlying them.

If ‘gospel’ and ‘apostle’ are basic pointers to the theology of the New Testament, they must also be the basic tests as to the *limits* of the New Testament. Paul, to whom we chiefly owe our highly theological assessment of both ‘gospel’ and ‘apostle’, was acutely sensitive to the danger of ‘another gospel’ and of the ‘false apostle’. The criteria for detecting these were always prominent in Paul’s letters, wherever those

letters were known. We may assume that the questions ‘Is it true gospel?’ and ‘Is it true apostle?’ were decisive in determining the limits of the canon.

Two consequences may be thought to follow from this. First, we would expect a certain coherence in the theology of the New Testament, not just a collection of disparate ‘theologies’. This does not mean complete uniformity. Paul in Galatians chapter 2 contemplates a gospel to the Jews and a gospel to the Gentiles, which suggests some kind of difference in presentation and apologetic according to audience, while maintaining a basic unity in one promise of salvation. But the very concept of a New Testament rooted in ‘gospel’ and in its correlative ‘apostle’ presupposes a single theological foundation.

Second, we must anticipate the problem, whether it arises from historical criticism or elsewhere, of books which may be alleged to be pseudonymous – i.e. falsely ascribed to the apostle or evangelist whose name they bear as author, but on whose credibility they depended for their acceptance into the canon. The question in principle is: Is the canon corrigible, i.e. capable of being corrected? Is it conceivable that books have been wrongly included which should now be rejected? Without enlarging on the question, we should ponder the implications for it of regarding ‘gospel’ and ‘apostle’ as the basic tests of New Testament theology.

### THE MEANING OF ‘GOSPEL’

What do we mean by the term ‘gospel’? Nowadays everybody uses the word and approves of it. It is in the forefront of Christian vocabulary, though we should not assume that current usage is identical with the original meaning in connection with the origins of the New Testament. It is a distinctively Christian word,

though it is occasionally borrowed for metaphorical use by others.

In time, it came to be used as a title for the four books: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. That usage has remained with us. But whereas for us this is purely a conventional or literary usage, in the second century there was an obvious awareness of the relationship between the gospel which Jesus preached and the term by which the literary form was coming to be known. The fact that the singular 'gospel' is so often used for the four books collectively is evidence of this. Sometimes it is hard to know whether the word refers to the *message* of Jesus or to a *book* containing that message, as when the Didache says: 'Pray, as the Lord commanded in his gospel, 'Our Father, who art in heaven...' or 'Perform your prayers and alms and all your acts as you find in the gospel of our Lord'.<sup>10</sup> Even when a text is quoted from John, Justin cites it as 'written in the gospel' – without finding it necessary to particularise.<sup>11</sup>

What we must ask is: Does the meaning of the word 'gospel' as it occurs within the four books explain the theological significance of those books as canon under the designation of 'gospel'? To answer, we must look at what *euaggelion* means in the original documents.

#### (a) In Greek literature

The word has a long history in Greek literature, going back to Homer, but there is something quite fresh and distinctive about its use by Paul and the evangelists. In the Greek of the time, the plural form *euaggelia* was used to describe the sacrifices and celebrations conducted in response to certain official announcements. It was also used, generally in the

plural, for the announcements themselves.

Gerhard Friedrich, in his article in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, indicates two contemporary contexts in which *euaggelion* occurs – indeed the two uses to which the word is practically confined. The first is as a technical term in connection with victory in battle. To cite Friedrich's description of this first context:

*Euaggelion* is a technical term for 'news of victory'. The messenger appears, raises his right hand in greeting and calls out with a loud voice: *chaire... nikomen* ('Rejoice... we are victorious'). By his appearance it is known already that he brings good news. His face shines, his spear is decked with laurel, his head is crowned, he swings a branch of palms, joy fills the city, *euaggelia* are offered, the temples are garlanded, an *agon* is held, crowns are put on for the sacrifices and the one to whom the message is owed is honoured with a wreath. Political and private reports can also be *euaggelia*. For them, too, sacrificial feasts are held. But *euaggelion* is closely linked with the thought of victory in battle.<sup>12</sup>

The second context in which *euaggelion* appears as a technical term is in connection with the imperial cult. The emperor unites in his own person the concepts of 'the divine man', 'good fortune' and 'salvation'

This is what gives *euaggelion* its significance and power. The ruler is divine by nature. His power extends to men, to animals, to the earth and to the sea. Nature belongs to him; wind and waves are subject to him. He works miracles and heals men. He is the saviour of the world who also redeems individuals from their difficulties... He has appeared on earth as a deity in human form. He is the protective god of the state. His appearance is the

<sup>10</sup> *Didache* 8. Note *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. J.B. Lightfoot, London, 1926, p.221

<sup>11</sup> Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 100.1

<sup>12</sup> *TDNT* II, p.722

cause of good fortune to the whole kingdom. Extraordinary signs accompany the course of his life. They proclaim the birth of the ruler of the world. A comet appears at his accession, and at his death signs in heaven declare his assumption into the ranks of the gods. Because the emperor is more than a common man, his ordinances are glad messages and his commands are sacred writings. What he says is a divine act and implies good and salvation for men. He proclaims *euaggelia* through his appearance, and these *euaggelia* treat of him. The first evangelium is the news of his birth... Other *euaggelia* follow, eg. the news of his coming of age, and especially his accession... Joy and rejoicing come with the news. Humanity, sighing under a heavy burden of guilt, wistfully longs for peace... Then suddenly there rings out the news that the *sorer* is born, that he has mounted the throne, that a new era dawns for the whole world. This *euaggelion* is celebrated with offerings and yearly festivals. All cherished hopes are exceeded. The world has taken on a new appearance.<sup>13</sup>

(b) In the New Testament

It is difficult to believe that the way *euaggelion* is used in the New Testament is not coloured by this contemporary use. In fact, there seems to be no other explanation of its origin and appropriateness—though there was a ready justification for borrowing the term from current usage. The related verb *euaggelizomai* was already familiar in highly significant portions of the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. Yet there are some important features of the New Testament usage to be noted.

First of all, there is only one *euaggelion* in the New Testament. Always, either directly or by implication, it is the *euaggelion* of God. No secular reference is even alluded to. The contrast between the plural form of *euaggelia* in contemporary usage and the singular form

of the New Testament *euaggelion* is very striking. The reason is obvious. As Friedrich rightly says: 'To the many messages, the New Testament opposes the one gospel, to the many accessions the one proclamation of the kingdom of God. The New Testament speaks the language of its day. It is a popular and realistic proclamation. It knows human waiting for and hope of the *euaggelia*, and it replies with the *euaggelion*.'<sup>14</sup>

Second, even more than the contemporary *euaggelia*, the gospel of God proclaims judgement and demands repentance. It is linguistically naive to translate *euaggelion* in the New Testament as simply 'good news'. There is certainly in the background the expectation that, for those who are ready for it, the *euaggelion* brings hope and rejoicing. But the word itself is much more loaded than that, having connotations of authority and power, as well as of a certain pomp or flourish appropriate to the significance of the announcement.

My own belief is that the Christian use of the word 'gospel' is due to Paul. He daringly borrowed it from its rather specialised secular usage – as he did certain other words from the popular religious philosophies of the day – to demonstrate more forcefully the relevance of his own theology to current thinking.

But one use of *euaggelion* in the New Testament originates apparently right outside the Pauline circle – in Revelation 14:6. Here the dependence on, and contrast with, the secular use is even more striking. An *aggelos*, a messenger, flies in midheaven with a *euaggelion* to proclaim to all who dwell on earth. It is described as an *aionion euaggelion*. The adjective is usually translated 'eternal', but it is chosen to indicate that the origin of the proclamation is not from earth but from heaven, not from Caesar but from God. It is

<sup>13</sup> TDNT II, p.724

<sup>14</sup> TDNT 11, p.725. See also New Documents illustrating Early Christianity, 3, Sydney, 1983, pp. 12-15

from the *aion* to come, not from this age. Like secular heralds, this *aggelos* also cries with a loud voice and the *euaggelion* is this: 'Fear God, and give him glory, for the hour of his judgement has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water.'

This sovereign proclamation of God's coming judgement, with the call to repentance, is of the very essence of the *euaggelion* in other occurrences as well. Most notable is Mark 1:14, where Jesus 'came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel".' (Compare 2 Thessalonians 1:8 and 1 Peter 4:17.) There is much to be said for Jeremias' view that the gospel that will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations before the end comes (Matthew 24:14) is the same gospel as in Revelation 14:6, proclaimed not by man but by the divine messenger to herald the end. It is true that the evangelists, especially Mark, seem to link this *euaggelion* with the testimony of the disciples, but there may be room for both in the full picture of the New Testament: 'He comes, whose advent trumpet drowns the last of time's evangel's'.

We may add that Jeremias suggests a similar reference for the preaching of the gospel throughout the whole world, spoken of by Jesus in Mark 14:9. The woman's obscure good deed to Jesus will be remembered, not merely everywhere in the world where men happen to preach, but at the summons to the last judgement, when God will render to everyone according to his works.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF 'GOSPEL'

Is the concept of 'the gospel of God' uniformly significant throughout the New Testament? Are we right to make it the cornerstone of our structure of

New Testament theology? Some caution may be necessary.

#### (a) Paul

Paul is undoubtedly the principal user of the term 'gospel' and, if we are right in thinking that he borrowed the term from contemporary political usage, then we must recognise that it is, up to a point, a figurative or parabolic use. However, it will not be too difficult to observe where, without the actual use of the word *euaggelion*, the same notions of authority and summons may be present. For Paul there is no question as to the word's importance and prominence. It occurs about sixty times and in all his letters.

#### (b) Mark

Mark uses *euaggelion* possibly as the subject of his book: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1:1). This may mean 'the [divine] message *concerning* Jesus Christ', or it may mean 'the [divine] message *proclaimed* by Jesus Christ' – how it all began. The force of the opening verse is uncertain. But there is no uncertainty about his choice of *euaggelion* to convey the force of the message which Jesus came to deliver – as we have seen in Mark 1:14. It was the gospel of God; it proclaimed the end of the age, the imminence of God's kingdom and the call to repentance and faith. The phrase 'for my sake and the gospel's' occurs twice in Mark (8:35, 10:29). This must refer to the demands of the kingdom which were at the centre of Jesus' proclamation. Thus, though not so frequent in Mark, 'the gospel' can be seen as expressing the central theme of his account of Jesus. While 16:9–20 are not part of Mark's original book, their inclusion of the command of Jesus to the eleven ('Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation') is not out of character with Mark's understanding of the paramount importance of the concept.

## (c) Matthew

The word 'gospel' is less prominent in Matthew than in Mark. Matthew's contribution is the phrase, thrice repeated, 'the gospel of the kingdom', clearly indicating that the term was central to this evangelist's understanding of the essential message of Jesus. True, it is something of a cliché, but the context in which it is introduced – the teaching and healing ministry in Galilee, followed by the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus 'evangelises the poor' – shows how central the expression was to Matthew's understanding of Jesus' mission.

So far we may say that Mark and Matthew stand with Paul in giving a significant place to the concept of 'gospel', though with a more restricted reference than Paul. Although the phrases 'the gospel of God' or 'the gospel of the kingdom' are used, they refer only to the verbal message on the lips of Jesus or on the lips of his disciples. (The only other possibility, already noted, is that the reference in Mark 13 to the gospel of the kingdom being proclaimed in all the world relates not to Jesus or his disciples, but to an angelic message immediately prior to the end.)

## (d) Luke

For some reason, Luke seems deliberately to avoid the use of the term *euaggelion*. As a companion of Paul and one familiar with Mark's account, Luke must have been aware of the term 'gospel' and of its significance. Indeed, he does use the word twice in Acts, but only in reporting Peter's address at the Jerusalem council ('You know that God made choice among you that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe' Acts 15:7), and in reporting Paul's address to the Ephesians elders ('...if only I may accomplish the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God' – Acts 20:24).

One wonders whether Luke thought *euaggelion* was a word with too much of a political edge to it. Throughout his two volumes, Luke seems to be at pains to dispel any suggestion that the Christians had a quarrel with the Roman authorities and, though he faithfully reports the use of the term *euaggelion* by both Peter and Paul, these are in rather soft contexts. Luke may well have deliberately avoided the use of the word on his own account. He compensates wonderfully, however, by his elaborate use of the verb *euaggelizomai*, to 'preach' or 'evangelise'. Although it, too, had a prominent place in the vocabulary of Roman and Hellenistic political publicity, the verb had the sanction of the Greek Old Testament, which the noun *euaggelion* did not.

In his record Luke portrays Jesus as beginning his public ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth with the words from Isaiah chapter 61: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to evangelise the poor.' This is Luke's equivalent of Matthew's account of Jesus preaching the *euaggelion* of the kingdom in Galilee and saying 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' But the connection with the prophecy of Isaiah is much more explicit in Luke. The key to the connection of Jesus' ministry with the prophetic promises of Isaiah chapters 40 and 52 (as well as of Isaiah 61) is the prominent use of *euaggelizomai* to describe Jesus' activity throughout Luke's work. Not only in his first volume, but also in Acts, Luke continues to use *euaggelizomai*, first to describe the preaching ministry of the Jerusalem disciples and apostles, then to describe Paul's ministry.

## (e) John

John's Gospel uses neither *euaggelion* nor the verb *euaggelizomai*. (They are absent also from the Johannine epistles.) This may simply be because this work was

produced in circles which had not been influenced by the peculiar vocabulary of Paul, There is certainly no need to ascribe the absence of the word, as Friedrich does, to John's alleged 'realised eschatology'. John's Gospel is rooted in a theology of the word of God, not only in the general sense of the Word becoming flesh, but in the particular sense of Jesus speaking the words of God to the people of Israel, thereby bringing them under the judgement of God and, at the same time, offering life to those who believed them. Jesus proclaims a *euaggelion* of God as surely in John's record as in the records of Matthew, Mark or Luke.

Indeed, John is at great pains to represent the mission of Jesus in terms of one who was sent to declare the command of God. The final message of Jesus to Israel, at the end of the first part of the Gospel, well illustrates this:

If anyone hears my sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him... the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority; the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What therefore I speak, as the Father has bidden me, so I speak (12:47-50).

Thus we may conclude that the gospel of God is the theological foundation of all four records of the ministry of Jesus; it is the same gospel of God of which all four speak. These records may not set out explicitly, or draw out at length, the theological relation between the gospel as preached by Jesus and the suffering which he underwent. But all four accounts agree in juxtaposing the gospel ministry and the passion narrative, in seeing the passion as an inevitable consequence of the gospel ministry, and in presenting Jesus himself as the central figure in whom

the word of God is focussed and fulfilled according to scripture.

I have suggested that it may have been Paul who borrowed the actual term *euaggelion* from secular/political usage to designate that sharp point of the word of God which came to Israel—and then to the world through Jesus. This can only be a suggestion. But one cannot help observing the richness and flexibility with which Paul uses and develops the term. Fundamentally for Paul the gospel is the gospel of God, as in Mark 1:14 (or Rev. 14:6). Three times in his earliest letter to the Thessalonians, he so describes it (1 Thessalonians 2:2, 8 and 9). Paul is talking about the message which he preaches as an apostle of Christ. For instance, 'We had courage to declare to you the gospel of God' (1 Thessalonians 2:2). Twice in Romans he uses the same expression, but now it is enlarged or hypostasised, becoming not just what he says with his lips, but a great operation or enterprise in which he, Paul, is engaged as an executive.

That, of course, is not Paul's metaphor. His image is of a religious cult, or system of worship in which he has been appointed the priest – a spiritual not a material cult, of course. His priesthood is to instruct and direct the Gentiles in such a way as to enable them to offer a true and acceptable worship to the deity – in this imagery, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is thus Christ's liturgical servant.

Nor is Paul merely one among others in this role. It is his special privilege, given him by God, to be Christ's minister 'in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles' offering may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit' (Romans 15:16). When Paul speaks of 'my gospel', he means of course this same gospel. The gospel is 'his' because it has been entrusted to him to preach, and because his life and energies are fully absorbed in the task. The gospel

is also for Paul the *euaggelion* of God's Son, the gospel of Christ. Paul, in common with the first believers among the Jews, had come to see the place of Jesus' passion and resurrection in relation to this ultimatum of God, 'the word which he sent to Israel, preaching the evangel of peace by Jesus Christ' (Acts 10:36).

Paul's most comprehensive definition of the gospel is in the opening of Romans. First, the gospel of God is that which God promised before through his prophets in the holy scriptures. Second, it is the gospel concerning his Son, the Messiah: descended from David according to the flesh; designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead. Third, it is the gospel to which Paul has been assigned as an apostle: to bring about the obedient yet believing submission of the nations, for the glory of the name of Jesus Christ the Lord.

Little wonder that *euaggelion* is used everywhere in the letters of Paul! It colours his world. Practically everything he says concerning the gospel, and every connection in which he employs the term, can be extrapolated from his comprehensive definition of gospel in Romans 1: 1–5.

### THE OUTWORKING OF THE GOSPEL

I hope we have established, sufficiently for our purpose, the primacy of the concept of 'the gospel', both for understanding the central thrust of the documents written by the four evangelists and for understanding the overriding motivation of Paul. But we may now observe, as we combine the references to *euaggelion* and *euaggelizomai*, that the proclaiming of the gospel of God really occurs at more than one point in the historical process. We may discern six such points.

#### (a) In the Old Testament

First, there was an 'evangelising' in the history of Israel. We have already referred to Jesus' quotation of

Isaiah 61 ('the Lord has anointed me to evangelise the poor'). Though 'fulfilled' in Jesus' own ministry, the saying had a much earlier expression in the life of Israel. This was not merely when the prophet first uttered the words, but when Moses declared in the Law the Year of Jubilee (to which Isaiah 61 itself alludes) and proclaimed to the enslaved, the dispossessed and the indebted the year of the Lord's release.

There were other moments when God confronted Israel with his gospel. In Galatians 3:8 Paul says that God 'preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham' – in the words of the promise, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed'. Paul in Romans chapter 10 discusses the role of the apostle in bringing people to faith. He quotes Isaiah 52:7 ('How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the evangel of good things'), interpreting this as referring to the saving and judging word of God. Paul comments: 'But they did not all heed the *euaggelion*; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?"' (Romans 10:16). Paul had no doubt that what was preached to the Israelites in Isaiah's time was Christ, just as the rock which followed them in the wilderness was Christ.

So far we have avoided mentioning the Letter to the Hebrews, so as to concentrate attention on the basic components of the canon: the Gospels and the letters of Paul. But the conformity of Hebrews to the concept of the *euaggelion* of God is, of course, very remarkable even though it is one of the books which does not use the noun *euaggelion* – though it does use the verb *euaggelizomai*. Like the Gospel of John, it is based on a profound theology of the word of God which speaks from heaven through Jesus, bringing both judgement and salvation. Indeed, so true is Hebrews to the centrality of the gospel witness that the American Jewish scholar, Rabbi Samuel Sandmel, has made the

interesting suggestion that Hebrews was in fact written to be a Gospel.<sup>15</sup> This was not a Gospel using a narrative framework and detailed passion story or including a compendium of Jesus' teaching, but one concerned to set him forth as the word of the living God: incarnate, dying, risen and glorified, but whose blood speaks better things than that of Abel.

In summary, the Letter to the Hebrews, like Paul in Romans 10, assumes that there was an evangel of God in the time of the prophets. Specifically, there was a promise of rest in God's inheritance given to the Israelites in the time of Moses. 'They were evangelised', says the writer, 'just as we have been evangelised, but the word they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers' (Hebrews 4:2). This gospel in the Old Testament is implied also by the many references to the fulfilment of scripture in the account of the ministry of Jesus.

(b) At the dawn of the new era

The second point of evangelising was at the dawn of the new era. Luke represents both Gabriel and the angel who appeared to the shepherds as evangelists – in declaring first the birth of John the Baptist, then of Jesus (Luke 1:19, 2:10). 'I bring you the evangel of a great joy which will come to all the people: for to you is born a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.' (c) *In the ministry of the forerunner*

The third point was in the ministry of the forerunner. John the Baptist himself 'evangelised the people' according to Luke 3:18. This is said presumably because he declared, as from God, the coming of the kingdom of God. The content of his message, as given by Matthew (3:1), is the same as that of Jesus

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<sup>15</sup> S. Sandmel, *The First Christian Century in Judaism and Christianity*, New York, 1969, p.177

(Matthew 4: 17): 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Certainly he points forward to Christ, but not to another gospel. Rather John points to Christ as the very agent of judgement, who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. The words with which John prepared the way of the Lord by 'evangelising the people' are given in Luke 3:3–18 ('Bear fruits that befit repentance...').

(d) In the ministry of Jesus

The fourth and central point of evangelising is in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus himself is clearly the paramount proclaimer of God's gospel. All four Gospels and Acts are united in this, as we have seen. There is also a certain extension of Jesus' preaching through his disciples, the twelve and the seventy, though limited in time and geographic location.

An interesting point is raised when we ask: How far do the epistles see Jesus himself as the 'gospeller'? It may seem curious that Paul does not represent Jesus in quite this light. For Paul, the phrase 'the gospel of Christ' means the gospel *about* him, not the gospel as Jesus preached it: that he died for our sins, that he was raised and so on. Clearly the place of Christ in the saving word from God is absolutely central for Paul. But it remains true that when Paul quotes sayings actually uttered by Jesus, he has in view details of teaching – such as that those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel, or that a woman should not leave her husband – rather than what we would think of as the gospel preached by Jesus. Ephesians 2:17 ('He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near') is really an interpretation of the effect of Jesus' death in terms of Isaiah 57:19, though it is possible the choice of words may reflect the historical tradition that Jesus did actually preach the gospel in the course of his public ministry – see Peter's sermon in Acts 10, for instance.

The Letter to the Hebrews, like Paul, sees the person and work of Christ, who he was and what he achieved, as central, but it goes further than Paul in its concept of Jesus' role as the *declarer* of God's final word. Thus we have the opening contrast between God's speaking 'by the prophets' and then finally 'by a Son' (1:2); of the salvation which was 'first spoken through the Lord' (2:3); of the description of Jesus as 'our apostle' (3:1) – perhaps in contrast to the angels who are also apostles, *apostellomena*, but sent to minister to a generation to come (1:14); and lastly the description of the 'word of God' in 4:12 which is 'alive and powerful'. But the specific references to Jesus' earthly life, more numerous in Hebrews than in Paul, do not really refer to his preaching. In a passage like chapter 12:24ff where the writer develops the idea of Jesus 'speaking', it is by his death, rather than by his public preaching while on earth, that he speaks.

We may add here that 1 Peter, also rich in its description of the saving work of Christ, has Christ preaching, but to 'the spirits in prison' (3:19). Whatever this means, it is something that occurred after his resurrection, not during his earthly ministry. The Second Letter of Peter, whose highlight is the incident on the mount of transfiguration, curiously omits the divine injunction 'hear him' which is recorded in all three synoptic accounts of the transfiguration. By contrast, 1 John emphasises the word spoken by Jesus, much as in the Gospel of John, eg. 'This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you, that God is light...' (1 John 1:5).

(e) In the mission of the apostles

The fifth point of evangelisation is the apostolic mission. In the letters of Paul the gospel is God's, but is declared since the resurrection by appointed messengers, apostles and evangelists. There is, as we have seen, little or no explicit connection with the

gospel preached by Jesus himself. Paul is very clear as to his own commission from Christ to preach the gospel, acknowledging that other apostles before him had a like commission from Christ – though with a different field of work. Paul sees the whole present age, between the resurrection and the coming of Christ, as having the preaching of the gospel as its central feature. He sees the whole world of Jew and Gentile as the objective of the twin apostolates: that of James, Cephas and John on the one hand, and himself and Barnabas on the other. The overriding importance of this all-absorbing activity is confirmed by the book of Acts. For instance Paul's message to the men of Athens: 'Now God commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17:30f).

Paul's apparent lack of reference to the preaching of the gospel by Jesus should not be misinterpreted. To judge from the records themselves, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom largely took the form of parables and signs; these were remembered and transmitted in detail as teaching and discourse, or as stories about Jesus. But there is a strong link between what Jesus and the apostles preached in the Gospel accounts of the sending out of the twelve and of the seventy. There is no reason to suppose that Paul had any other view of what Jesus said and did.

Paul and Acts are not alone in recognising a post-resurrection gospel preaching. The First Letter of Peter identifies the word with which his readers in Asia Minor had been evangelised as the word of Isaiah 40:8 which, unlike the flower or the grass, lives and abides for ever. This no doubt is identical with 'the gospel of God' as Peter calls it, which in 4:17 calls for the obedience of the righteous and unrighteous alike.

## (f) At the end of the age

Sixthly, we add for completeness the yet future final gospel summons of Revelation 14:6, perhaps also referred to in Mark 13:10 and 14:9 and parallels, and also in the Lord's 'cry of command' and the last trumpet before the resurrection of the dead (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 1 Corinthians 15:52).

So then, whether in the dealings of God with Israel and in the prophetic scriptures, in the earthly ministry of Jesus and in his impact on the world as the crucified and risen Messiah, in the activities of the apostles sent out by him into all the world, or in the final warning of God as the end of all things draws near, the gospel of God comes to mankind. Its demand is paramount and overwhelming. When it came on the lips and in the person and work of Jesus, the gospel marked the fulfilment of all that came before. There can be no doubt that this gospel was the mainspring of certain documents which came quickly to be known throughout the Christian communities as 'gospel' or 'apostle'.

Having said that, we are bound to admit that those Christians who eventually designated the records of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as 'the Gospel' may have understood the term in a less vital and exhaustive way than just described – the way Paul, Mark and others understood it. The term became in due time merely a literary cliché; traces of this development can be found in the writings of the late first and early second centuries.

**IGNATIUS AND THE GOSPEL**

Actually, the term *euaggelion* does not occur frequently in either the apostolic fathers or the second century apologists. Goodspeed's index of the apologists gives only three occurrences, all in Justin: twice in the singular (referring to a document containing Jesus'

words) and once in the plural (as an equivalent to his famous phrase 'the memoirs of the Apostles').<sup>16</sup> The word is most frequent in Ignatius, where it occurs half a dozen times; there is no doubt that it is no mere conventional term for him. It stands indeed for the whole new dispensation in Christ. (Ignatius does not use the term 'new covenant'!) It is worth drawing attention to this, for Ignatius shows very clearly *why* the term came to be applied to certain books, even though it is not entirely clear whether Ignatius has a written Gospel in mind in using it. Take his Letter to the Philadelphians, for example:

I make the gospel my refuge as the flesh of Jesus, and the apostles as the presbytery of the church. Yes, and we love the prophets also, because they too pointed to the gospel in their preaching and set their hope on him and awaited him; in whom also having faith they were saved, being united with Jesus Christ, for they are worthy of love and admiration as holy men, approved of Jesus Christ and numbered together in the gospel of our common hope (Philadelphians 5:1–2).

Some scholars think the prophets here mentioned are Christian prophets, perhaps like Hermas, but Ignatius is probably thinking of the Old Testament prophets, their writings speaking immediately about Jesus. A little later Ignatius again takes the gospel as that which authenticates and fulfils the Old Testament. Here the gospel is both the teaching of Christ (*christomathia*) and also the saving facts about him. It is a much disputed passage capable of more than one interpretation, but I give the one understood by Lightfoot:

Do nothing in factiousness, but after the teaching of Christ. For I heard certain persons say, 'If I find it not

<sup>16</sup> Dialogue with Trypho, 10.2 and 100.1, First Apology, 66.3

in the original documents (meaning the Old Testament), I believe it not in the gospel'. And when I said to them 'It is written there', they answered me, 'That is just the question'. But to me, the original documents are Jesus Christ; the inviolable documents are his cross, and death, and resurrection, and the faith which is through him. In these I desire to be justified, through your prayers (Philadelphians 8:2).

Ignatius' friends won't accept the gospel unless they find it in the Old Testament. So far so good. But apparently, like Justin's Trypho and other Jews, they could not see it there. Ignatius sees it there, because the reality of which the Old Testament speaks is actually Christ. It does not merely predict him. He is already there, the subject of the 'original documents' Ignatius goes on to speak of the high priest of the Old Testament as being none other than Jesus, to whom is committed the holy of holies and to whom alone has been entrusted the secret things of God:

He is the door of the Father, through whom enter Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the apostles and the church. All these things are joined in the unity of God. But the gospel has a singular pre-eminence in the coming of the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, his passion and the resurrection. For the beloved prophets in their preaching pointed to him; but the gospel is the completion of immortality (Philadelphians 9:1–2).

The gospel has never been spoken of with greater dignity and decisiveness than by Ignatius. Does he have a documentary gospel in mind? Lightfoot thinks he sometimes does, but it is hard to say when. Take, for instance, the references in his Letter to the Smyrneans. He tells them to keep clear of certain heretics, and to 'give heed to the prophets and especially to the gospel, in which the passion has been revealed and the resurrection has been accomplished'

(7:2). These docetic heretics, he says, 'are they whom neither the prophecies nor the law of Moses have persuaded, nor the gospel, even until now' (5: 1).

Ignatius of Antioch was martyred at Rome before AD 117. It is the opinion of scholars on other grounds that he was acquainted with the Gospel of Matthew or with a Gospel very closely akin to it – and also probably with the Gospel of John. To say the least, the way Ignatius speaks of 'the gospel' makes it easy for us to see why such writings came themselves to be called 'Gospels' or 'the Gospel' and why they were held to be of such supreme importance and authority.

#### THE STATUS OF AN APOSTLE

Finally, let us note a matter concerning the status of 'the apostle'. As we have seen, 'gospel' and 'apostle' are correlative terms. The gospel is authenticated by the apostle, yet the apostle is bound by the gospel. The apostle was acknowledged because of the gospel entrusted to him. But what do the *letters* of an apostle do for the gospel – what status have they?

They do not rehearse the teaching of Jesus to any extent or reproduce the gospel as preached by him – at least they do not profess to be doing this. They do not themselves preach the gospel – they are not tracts designed to convert unbelieving recipients. The recipients are already believers in the gospel. (Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 6:20, 'We beseech you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God', does not prove the contrary. Paul here is describing in dramatic terms his ministry of reconciliation, but it is in general terms; there is no 'you' in the Greek text.) Certainly Paul uses his letters to explain with powerful exhortation the full implications of the gospel and can, as it were, restate the appeal, as in Galatians. (Perhaps Hebrews is the nearest thing to an actual preaching of the gospel in epistolary form, though even there it is a re–

statement to the wavering, and not a new approach.)

Herein is the strong meat of the epistles, which might be summarised as a 'defence and confirmation' of the gospel. The Letter to the Romans most unambiguously qualifies for this description, but all Paul's letters are touched by this intention, with the exception of Philemon. There is also in the letters a large quantity of direction and exhortation regarding the practical consequences of faith in Christ for life and conduct. We have already noted that much of Jesus' teaching as recorded by the evangelists seems to have been brought by them under the heading of his 'preaching the gospel' – no doubt partly due to the challenge inherent in his words concerning the issues of daily life in this world. So we should not too quickly remove Paul's ethical exhortations and teaching from the category of gospel proclamation either. Wherever we are confronted by the kingdom of God and its demands, we are being evangelised. It would be improper of course to isolate this 'practical' ethical exhortation from the total revelatory context in which it is rooted but, rightly understood, the law of God – on which the ethics of the New Testament are based – is itself part of the *euaggelion* of God. For the law must be understood in the context of God's mercy and covenant.

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### 3

## THE GOSPEL AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

EVEN A CURSORY READING of the New Testament demonstrates that the kingdom of God – its reality, its coming, its demands – was key to what Jesus preached and taught. Nothing stands closer to the centre of his message than this. There has been endless discussion as to what 'the kingdom of God' means on the lips of Jesus, but the idea has never lost its power.

Each Sunday, Christians say together 'The Lord's Prayer' including the petition 'Thy kingdom come'. At the present time there is a search for fresh meaning – and the accompanying authority for action – among Christians of all sorts in this model prayer. The World Conference on Mission and Evangelism (Melbourne, 1980)<sup>1</sup> had as its theme 'Your Kingdom Come'. Its theological charter came from a paper by the distinguished New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann, entitled 'The Eschatological Royal Reign of God'. The Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, formed in 1981, has been given the task of exploring the theme of the expected kingdom of God in relation to the experience of being the church

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<sup>1</sup> *Your Kingdom Come*, Geneva, 1980, pp.61ff

in widely differing cultures. Clearly, the concept of the kingdom of God is of contemporary as well as historical significance.

### 'KINGDOM OF GOD' IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

It is in the synoptic Gospels that we find overwhelming evidence for the use of the term 'kingdom of God' as the theme of Jesus' proclamation of the gospel. Mark says that the gospel of God was, in fact, the announcement that 'the kingdom of God is near'. Matthew uses the phrase 'the gospel of the kingdom'. On the other hand, John only records the phrase 'the kingdom of God' in the conversation with Nicodemus. We would hardly work out from this use of it that the kingdom was at the very heart of Jesus' message.

Nor is the expression particularly prominent in Paul. The apostle to the Gentiles speaks of the kingdom of God as a fact or truth which does not require explanation, though it has a distinctly limited meaning for him: it is, for the most part, something believers will inherit. Once or twice Paul gives it a present reference in an almost casual way, when he tells the Corinthians who doubt his authority that 'the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power' (1 Corinthians 4:20), or when he tells the Christians at Rome that 'the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Romans 14:17). The explanation is probably simply one of the use of different terms to suit different circumstances. We have noted earlier that Paul exploits the term *euaggelion* to the full, while the same term has a limited use in Matthew and Mark that could almost be described as perfunctory. It does not occur at all in Luke and John. One could, in fact, make out a case for saying that 'the gospel' occupies the place in Paul that 'the kingdom of God' occupies in the synoptists – not as an exact

synonym, of course, but as a term invested with the same sense of God's imperial demand.

It is also clear enough that 'kingdom of God' is applicable to different things, however related they may be to the central idea of God's rule or reign. The US scholar G.E. Ladd has successfully demonstrated this. He rightly points out that 'the meaning of *basileia* cannot be reduced to a single concept but is a complex concept with several facets.'<sup>2</sup> One clearly established use is to describe what Ladd calls 'the future realm of salvation into which God's people will be gathered to enjoy the blessings of his reign'.<sup>3</sup> This is in Paul's mind when he speaks of the kingdom as the 'inheritance' of believers, or when Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about 'seeing' and 'entering' the kingdom of God.

But this 'kingdom come' is only an aspect of God's eternal rule. The term 'kingdom' may equally be used to describe God's *present* and complete sovereignty over all creation. We cannot read the Psalms without finding ourselves caught up in contemplation of God's kingdom. This sovereign rule is seen not only in creation, but also in what God has already done for his people in the days of old, especially in the exodus and in the establishing of Israel in the land of Canaan.

All creation praises you, O LORD:  
and your faithful servants bless your name.  
They speak of the glory of your kingdom:  
and tell of your great might,

That all mankind may know your mighty acts,  
and the glorious splendour of your kingdom.  
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures through all generations.

(Psalm 145:10–13)

<sup>2</sup> G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, 1974, p.70

<sup>3</sup> . *ibid.*

What is the connection between this kingdom of God, which the Old Testament celebrates, and the kingdom of God, which is still in the New Testament something to come? It is easy to answer that the link between them is the *coming* of Christ into the world. He proclaimed the imminence of God's salvation, and was himself the embodiment and agent of it. But why was such an intermediate act necessary? We may see an answer to this in the very nature of the kingdom as experienced by God's people in the Old Testament.

At this point we may note the contribution of Norman Perrin in his book, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*. Perrin claims that, when Jesus speaks of the kingdom, he is not speaking of a single entity of which the term 'kingdom' is simply a one-to-one equivalent. Rather 'kingdom' is a metaphor, or symbol, which can be used flexibly to describe a number of realities or situations.<sup>4</sup>

There is some truth in this, but our present purpose is to discover the *origin* of the symbol or metaphor which Jesus uses. Here we are directed to the salvation history of the Old Testament and to the kingdom as experienced by God's people in the Old Testament. In a word, it is this: God's power and dominion, seen and known in creation, is also exercised on behalf of the people whom he chooses, first by delivering them from their oppressors, then by ruling over them in the place he has assigned to them – with a view to blessing not only them, but the whole world through them.

There are two distinct phases of this experience as recorded in the Old Testament. The first phase may be called a *historical experience* of God's 'rule' in the blessing of Jacob and his sons, the exodus from Egypt, the possession of the land of Canaan, and the establishment of the kingdom of David and Solomon with all

the benefits of security, plenty and peace. The second phase may be called *the prophetic reflection* on God's rule, when the kingdom of David was no more, the nation divided and scattered, and the symbols of God's presence and blessing – the land, Jerusalem, and the Temple – either ruined or possessed ambiguously to only a very small degree by a segment of the people or a few survivors.

Yet to this second period belong the great prophecies of the establishment or re-establishment of God's kingdom in the land and over all nations: another exodus, another possession of Canaan, another Jerusalem and Temple, the reappearance of David the king to reign in righteousness, a new covenant. Looked at in this way, the experience which Israel had of God's kingdom as presented in the Old Testament is, in both its phases, closely associated with the promise and covenant made with Abraham. Indeed, it can be said that the experience of God's kingdom – whether in the period from the historical exodus to the great days of David and Solomon, or in the period of prophetic hope – was nothing other than the experience of what it meant for the Lord to be Israel's God and for Israel to be the Lord's people. This was the core of the promise to Abraham.

#### 'KINGDOM OF GOD' IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In Genesis 1–11 we see God as the Lord of creation and the disperser of the nations. Against this background, the first part of the Old Testament provides an unfolding of history which gives significance to all the rest. That history begins with the call of Abraham and the promise of blessing made to him. This blessing is to involve not only Abraham, but the people which will come from him. It will take the form of enjoyment of a certain inheritance, namely the land of Canaan. Abraham's seed will be both the object of God's

<sup>4</sup> Philadelphia, 1976, pp.33, 42ff

blessing and also the model and means of blessing for the rest of the nations of the world. It is the God of heaven and earth, the king of creation, who calls Abraham and makes this promise to him. The blessing is to take the form of enjoyment of the earth that God has created, in the special land and its fruitfulness.

#### (a) The exodus

The formation of the people of Abraham begins with his grandson Jacob, called Israel, and his twelve sons who are the patriarchs of the twelve tribes. The exodus is the event, or the series of events, through which Israel – now a numerous nation but enmeshed in the dominion and structures of Egypt – is freed by God, given coherence and independence, and brought into the land which had been promised as its inheritance, where the blessing of God would be experienced. The individual features of this story of the exodus remained imprinted on the memory of the nation: the cry for deliverance, the leadership of Moses, the judgements on Egypt, the passover, the cloud of God's presence, the passage through the Red Sea, the destruction of Egypt's army, the meeting with God at Sinai, the making of the covenant, the giving of the law, the provision of water and bread in the wilderness, the tabernacle and its ministry, the guidance through the desert, the overcoming of opponents, the crossing of the Jordan under Joshua, the conquest of Jericho and the entry into the land. In all this, it is the God who rules the heavens, the sea and the dry land, who exerts his royal powers on behalf of the people he has chosen.

The Psalms which celebrate the exodus celebrate at the same time the kingdom of God in creation. In Psalm 136, for example, it is the same God who by understanding made the heavens and who spread out the earth upon the waters, who made the sun and moon, who also smote the first-born of Egypt, and brought Israel out from among them with a strong

hand and outstretched arm, who divided the Red Sea and dispossessed the kings of Canaan. From all these salvation events, the Psalmist concludes elsewhere:

I know that the LORD is great  
and that our LORD is above all gods.  
Whatever the LORD pleases he does

in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps  
He it is who makes the clouds rise  
at the end of the earth,  
who makes lightnings for the rain,  
and brings forth the winds from his storehouses.  
He it was who smote the first-born of Egypt,

who in your midst, O Egypt, sent signs and wonders  
who smote many nations and slew mighty kings,  
and gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to his  
people Israel.

(Psalm 135:5–12)

#### (b) The kingdom of David

The second great event, or series of events, by which God's kingdom was experienced in this historical period, was the establishment of the kingdom of David. This was a doubtful matter at the beginning, as it called in question Israel's appreciation of the fact that God was already their king. 'They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them' (1 Samuel 8:7), was the Lord's response to Samuel's request. However, God authorised the selection and anointing of a king, in the person of Saul, and set about to establish the kingdom of David as the sign and instrument of God's rule over his people. The promise of blessing, as yet only partially experienced, was fulfilled.

Thus through David the shepherd came the final defeat and subjugation of those enemies who stood in the way of Israel's possession of the whole land as promised to Abraham, the acquisition of Jerusalem as

David's city and symbol of unity for all the tribes, and then the final glory under David's son Solomon. To Solomon God confirmed the promise of the royal covenant, the peace and prosperity, the dazzling glory and excellence of Solomon's royal estate, the building and dedication of the Temple, the wealth and tribute of the nations, and the benefit which flowed both to Israel and to the nations from the wisdom and law of God.

What is not sufficiently realised—especially by those whose chief interest is in observing the *weaknesses* of Solomon and the signs of economic danger in his administration – is that, as the book of Kings tells his story, the reign of Solomon is the very fulfilment of the original promise made to Abraham. It therefore represents the experience of the kingdom of God—the ultimate blessing of Israel, the rest, the peace, the enjoyment of the inheritance—made possible through the redemption from Egypt and the victory of God over all the powers of evil.

Biblical theologians are generally sympathetic to understanding the structure of the Bible's overall theme as a 'promise and fulfilment' formula, but usually with the simple division of 'promise' in the Old Testament and 'fulfilment' in the New. We need have no quarrel with this approach; it is indeed the most ancient of all interpretative principles. But as well there is, *within* the Old Testament story, a clear 'promise and fulfilment' theme in the course of history from Abraham, through the formation of Israel and the exodus to the climax of the reign of David's son Solomon. This pattern, or paradigm, forms the historical experience which was the principal way through which Israel apprehended the meaning of the kingdom of God. The later prophets meditated on this theme as they projected the *further* promise of an experience of God's kingdom – in a form which

would transcend the temporal blessings of the old Exodus and the old kingdom of David.

### A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SALVATION HISTORY

We could, at this point, probe the raw material of Israel's history along the lines of historical research. This is a perfectly valid approach, which has been tackled elsewhere. Instead we will adopt a literary theological approach and look at the story more or less as we read it in the Old Testament as it now exists. The stages of this story may be distinguished as follows:

1. In the book of Genesis the promise of blessing is given to Abraham in general and in comprehensive terms. His descendants will be a great nation, have a great name and be a blessing to all humanity (12:2–3).

2. In the book of Exodus Israel, when formed as a people, cannot be the recipients of the promise unless God, acting as their God, delivers them from slavery. Redemption is necessary to bring them before God, a new basis created on which they can participate in the promise of blessing and inheritance.

The remaining four books of the Pentateuch (Exodus to Deuteronomy) are confined to establishing the basis, through redemption, on which the promise of inheritance and blessing is made. All is still future when the Pentateuch comes to an end. The book of Deuteronomy impressively underlines the unfulfilled character of the promise of inheritance, especially from chapter 26 to the end. The portion of the land given to Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh was no more than a pledge of what was to come (Deuteronomy 29:8).

3. With the first book of the Former Prophets, Joshua, fulfilment of the promise really begins. Joshua leads Israel over the Jordan; this is the definite entry into the

promised inheritance. The author summarises the significance of this achievement in terms of the original promise to Abraham:

Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land which he swore to give to their fathers; and having taken possession of it, they settled there; not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass (Joshua 21:43–45).

The same assertion of the fulfilment of the promise is made in Joshua 23:14, by Joshua before he dies, but in a way which seems to recognise a certain ambiguity in the situation. God has not failed in what *he* promised, but the Israelites may well succumb to the temptations of the nations who are still apparently present in the land:

You know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that no one thing has failed of all the good things which the LORD your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed. But . . .

and Joshua warns of the evil things which following other gods will bring – changing the blessing into a curse (Joshua 23:14ff).

4. The book of Judges describes the reality of this position, with the many setbacks and apostasies of the Israelites, as well as the uncertain character of the fulfilment of the promise of inheritance in the days when there was no king in Israel.

5. It is this ambiguity and uncertainty which is resolved by the establishment of the kingdom of David. Not only is the land actually possessed for the first and only time in history to the full extent promised to Abraham and the tribes unified as one

nation; the new fact of the character and role of the one whom God appoints as king over his inheritance emerges. Thus 2 Samuel 7 describes the covenant which God makes with David: 'your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever' (verse 16).

It is in total identification of the role of the Davidic king with the blessings of salvation promised to Israel from of old, that the significance of the description of the reign of Solomon (in 1 Kings 3 to 10) lies. Nothing can take the place of a careful reading of these chapters in full to gain an impression of the unsurpassable blessing that the reign of Solomon represented – not only for Israel, but for all nations. Here the promise to Abraham that his people would be blessed and that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed find complete fruition:

Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy... Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life... and he had peace on all sides round about him... And Judah and Israel dwelt in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig-tree, all the days of Solomon (1 Kings 4:20–25).

The nations round about were also blessed. The old nations of Canaan became bondslaves, but there were covenants of peace with Hiram king of Tyre, Pharaoh of Egypt and the Queen of Sheba. They bring their gifts and themselves receive blessing, not only materially, but through the wisdom of God in the mouth of Solomon: 'men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom... Thus king Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth in riches

and wisdom. The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of them brought his present' (1 Kings 4:34;

The high point of the 'blessing' is reached with the dedication of the Temple, when the king 'blessed all the assembly of Israel'. His prayer for Israel is important for its universal context – 'that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other' – and for its claim that the Lord 'has given rest to his people Israel, according to all that he promised; there has not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant' (1 Kings 8:56–60).

Psalms 7:2 ('Give the king thy judgements, O God, and thy righteousness to the royal son') draws its conception of kingship, and of the kingdom of God as experienced through the reign of his anointed, from this rule of Solomon over Israel and over the nations around about. It is written in language akin to that of the historical narrative and with a similar intensity of feeling. Moreover, the conclusion of the Psalm shows an awareness that Solomon's reign had been a fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise of the blessing of all nations through the blessing of Israel: 'All nations will be blessed through him; and they will call him blessed' (verse 17). In the Septuagint this verse reproduces exactly the original form of the promise as given to Abraham in Genesis 1:2:3, the only difference being the change of 'in you' to 'in him'.

Solomon's reign is not, of course, to be separated from David's. Solomon completed what David began. As David's son, he represents the continuity of David's kingdom and the fulfilment of God's promise to build David a sure house. In the case of both, the earthly king is the vicegerent or deputy of the heavenly king. Here is the foreshadowing of the distinction we find in

Paul between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Christ. The anointed king, the Messiah, reigns for God, eventually delivering the kingdom to God the Father that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:24,28). Even while David and his son rejoice that God has promised to establish a kingdom for them, so David blesses God in words which acknowledge from where that kingdom derives its very name:

Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all (1 Chronicles 29:11).

This earthly paradigm of the kingdom of God, which was the kingdom of David through and in which the blessing of the Abrahamic promise was experienced by Israel and the nations, collapsed and disappeared. The whole benefit of the redemption from Egypt, with the consequent enjoyment of the promised inheritance under a king of peace, slowly dissolved. The dominion of strangers engulfed Israel again, the covenant was broken, while Jerusalem, the Temple and Canaan itself were destroyed or corrupted. If there were short times of material prosperity or political comeback in the course of the decline, they have no real character in the eyes of the biblical narrator. The tribes of Israel are dispersed in exile. A remnant of one tribe returns to Judah and maintains a precarious existence in a tiny area of land and in an inferior Jerusalem. Hope revives, but with little substance.

But this is the time of the prophets. The historical paradigm gives way to prophetic projection of the old experience into a new end-time or last days. First, the pre-exilic prophets seal the doom of the old experience:

there will be no recovery from the brink, no improvement, no peace where there is no peace. The whole fabric of the original Davidic kingdom must disappear. But then in the last days, in the day of the Lord, God will act to restore all things as at the beginning. There will be a new exodus–redemption, not from Egypt but from all countries where Israel has been dispersed: a new covenant, a new law, a new theophany when God will rend the heavens and come down and the mountains will flow down at his presence, a new safe–conduct and sustenance through the wilderness, a new entry into the land of inheritance, a new peace and prosperity, a new Jerusalem, a new Temple, a new David. Nor will the new kingdom collapse like the old, for the Spirit of God himself will be its inner life and the source of its strength.

The return from exile of a remnant of the tribe of Judah gives impetus to these hopes, but it is not to be mistaken for their fulfilment. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, pious men and women were still waiting for 'the comforting of Israel', 'redemption in Jerusalem', 'the regeneration' and 'the restoration of the kingdom to Israel' (Luke 2:25 and 38; Matthew 19:28; Acts 1:6). When Jesus came to Jerusalem they cried, 'Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming' (Mark 11:10).

From this brief excursion into the Old Testament we can see what is the background to Jesus' proclamation that 'the kingdom of God is near'. Plainly he means that *God* is about to act, to exert his kingly rule. May we not suppose that this would occur in a manner which Israel had been led to expect – first from the historical experience of the exodus and the Davidic kingdom, then from the predictions and consolations of the prophets based on that former historical experience?

## THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST

It is 'not our intention to examine in detail the way in which the nature of the kingdom of God is expounded and presented in Jesus' teaching. His teaching was diverse and largely parabolic. But we can see the coming of the kingdom must be central in the gospel of Jesus because it was central in Israel's experience of God. Any structure of New Testament theology must give a central place to the kingdom of God and its meaning.

The Old Testament helps point the way to the relation between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Christ. Both concepts are there in the account of the Davidic kingdom. God rules over all, yet he sets his own king upon his holy hill of Zion. Jesus announces that God is about to manifest his own kingly rule and all its benefits, but it soon appears that Jesus himself is the new David or the son of David, himself 'the Christ, the king of Israel'—as the Jewish leaders taunted him on the cross.

We have already noted the distinction which Paul appears to make between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Christ. Generally, Paul speaks of the kingdom of God as future, the realm of God where God's blessing and salvation is yet to appear finally and therefore a kingdom to be inherited. C.E.B. Cranfield,<sup>5</sup> following Ernst Kasemann, considers that in the two instances where Paul speaks of the kingdom of God as present – the kingdom of God being not in word but in power (1 Corinthians 4:20), and the kingdom of God being not meat and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17)—Paul is actually referring to the kingdom of

<sup>5</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans II*, Edinburgh, 1979, p.718

*Christ*, the present exercise of God's rule through Christ.

This is most likely, particularly if one considers that Paul may well have drawn his observation from the Old Testament picture of the kingdom of David. In the old kingdom, salvation took the form of Judah and Israel eating, drinking and making merry (1 Kings 4:20). But in the fulfilment of the promise in the era of the Spirit, salvation's fruit is not material prosperity, but righteousness, peace and joy. The phrase 'not in word but in power' could be another, though more general formula of comparison between the Old Testament paradigm of the Davidic kingdom and its ultimate fulfilment in the kingdom of Christ: not literal, but spiritual.

We have referred to Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15 that, when Christ has destroyed every rule, authority and power and has subdued all things, even death, under his feet, then he will deliver the kingdom to God the Father. This may depend on Psalm 110:1, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool', with its implication of a terminus when all Messiah's enemies will have been subdued and his rule accomplished. But it also conforms to David's own awareness that, whatever his own role, God's kingdom rules over all.

The only remaining reference in Paul to the kingdom of Christ is in Colossians 1:13: 'God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.' The image here, I believe, is that of God delivering Israel from Egypt and transferring it to Canaan, to the kingdom of David. This is 'the inheritance of the saints' of which Paul speaks in the previous verse, where he qualifies 'inheritance' with the phrase 'in light'. Paul is not speaking of the literal inheritance of Canaan, but of the heavenly or spiritual inheritance.

He might have said 'in glory'. 1 Peter speaks of Israel's 'living hope' as 'an inheritance, incorruptible, undefiled and unfading' and 'kept in heaven'—'a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time' (1 Peter 1:3–5). Paul in Colossians completes his allusion to the historical salvation by adding that in Christ we also have our 'redemption', our exodus–deliverance, which he interprets as 'the forgiveness of our sins' (Colossians 1:14).

### THE SONG OF ZECHARIAH

There is one passage in the New Testament which sums up the relation of the kingdom of God to its antecedents in the Old Testament: the second of Luke's canticles, the Benedictus. The Song of Zechariah accurately and sensitively portrays a Jewish believer's sense of total involvement in the experience of the kingdom of God as old Israel knew it, while waiting at the end of the long night and discerning the first signs of God's new day.

Historically, we have made all three of these Lucan songs into post–resurrection Christian canticles, just as we have with the Psalms. But this has not been without a degree of anachronism and perhaps even some distortion of the text – at least in the case of the Benedictus. The three moments to which the songs belong are Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the birth of John and the presentation of Jesus in the Temple.

In the Magnificat, Mary rejoices that God has exalted her and done great things for her. She sees this as consistent with what God has always done for those who fear him in the course of acting on behalf of his people Israel, according to his covenant promise to Abraham. Filling the hungry, debasing the mighty and scattering the proud are all acts of God of which the Old Testament speaks ever and again. We need not posit that the Magnificat in any explicit way

anticipates the work that God may do through the birth of the child. There is, in fact, no reference to the child or his significance in the song. Indeed, this would support the view that the Magnificat is Elizabeth's song and not Mary's, as some manuscripts have it. Mary knew from the angel what her child would be and do, whereas Elizabeth knew nothing about hers. Simeon's Song, on the other hand, is quite explicit as to the significance of the child born to Mary. He is the Lord's Christ, in whom Simeon sees God's salvation – the message of the evangelist of Isaiah 52:10 and of other passages in Isaiah's prophecies concerning the servant who will bring salvation, not only to Israel but to the Gentiles.

But the Benedictus is more subtle. English translations generally render the aorist verbs in the first two verses as English perfects:

for he *has* visited and redeemed his people, and *has* raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (Luke 1:68–69).

Now a Greek aorist sometimes can only be adequately conveyed by an English perfect. Also a Greek aorist may represent the Semitic idiom by which a past tense is used to convey (in this case God's) habitual activity. However, neither sense need be required here. 'He has raised up' in English inevitably would mean here that he *has just* done so, attributing to Zechariah the belief that the birth of John implies also the arrival of the Davidic Messiah. Zechariah is about to address the child as 'the prophet of the Most High', the forerunner who is to prepare the way of the Lord. But the *berakah*, the blessing of God with which Zechariah begins his prophecy, is not a statement of the salvation to come. Rather it is a grounding of his praise and thanksgiving on what God did in the days of old, the historic exodus

and the historic kingdom .of David, which together were the divine means of security – of 'salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all that hate us'.

Thus Zechariah identifies himself with Israel in its experience of the exodus and the blessings of the Davidic kingdom, as he would often have done as he recited the words of so many of the Psalms. The first eight verses of the Benedictus are a rehearsal of the historical experience of Israel as it had occurred long before in fulfilment of God's covenant with Abraham and the prediction of Nathan the prophet. Gabriel had informed Zechariah that his child would go before the face of God to prepare a people for him. There was no other indication in Gabriel's message about the nature of the coming of the Lord. Zechariah sees it only as the dawn of the new day and the intervention of God – his expectation is in terms of the prophecy of Malachi. Zechariah does not explicitly refer to the role of Messiah himself about whose birth Zechariah has as yet learned nothing.

What does the Song of Zechariah mean? Here is a justifiable translation of the opening words of the Benedictus, setting out the classic view of Israel's historical salvation:

Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, because he visited and wrought redemption for his people, and raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets of old; Yes, salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us. This he did to keep faith with our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to Abraham our father, to grant to us that we, after being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, should serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all our days (Luke 1:68–75).

This is Zechariah's recapitulation of what we have just seen in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. It is clear that, for Zechariah, this ancient experience was still a living hope. Thus he is full of thankfulness that the birth of John heralds the coming day of God – a day which would, as it shone on those in darkness and guided their feet into the path of peace, bring again to fulfilment the salvation of the first redemption and David's reign. But this expectation is implicit, not explicit. The backward look in the Benediction to the old salvation under David should be kept distinct from the specific role of John the forerunner who prepares the way of the Lord by preaching repentance for the remission of sins.

#### **CHRIST AS THE FULFILMENT OF GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAHAM**

If we think of the relationship of the Old Testament to the gospel as a relationship of 'promise' to 'fulfilment', we can see that what is fulfilled (or about to be fulfilled) is God's promise to Abraham. This promise is the blessing of Israel and, through Israel, of the Gentiles. The *form* of the blessing is the enjoyment of God's inheritance under the rule of David, for which an exodus or redemption from slavery is a precondition.

In the New Testament, this paradigm of salvation is sometimes alluded to more or less in toto (as in the Benedictus, I Peter chapters 1 and 2 or Colossians chapter 1). More often one or other of its features is employed to explain the nature of the new experience of the Spirit, who Jesus is or the meaning of his death. Thus we have Christ as our passover, as the one in whom we have our redemption, as the one who fulfils his exodus, as the tabernacle among us, as the bread from heaven, as the living water, as the rock in the wilderness, as the giver of the new law or the mediator of the new covenant, and as Jesus or Joshua (for that

is his name). Again Jesus is described as David or the son of David, as greater than Solomon, as the true wisdom, the builder of the new Temple, the shepherd of Israel and as Jerusalem (the light of the world).

Of course, it must be recognised that the Old Testament expectation is not confined to this paradigm, nor is the concept of the kingdom of God (or God's rule) so confined. For instance, the prophetic announcement of the 'day of the Lord' – as in Amos or Isaiah – is a somewhat different picture of God's sovereignty, in which the imagery of a great assize, or a feast for all nations, appears. The imagery even mingles. There is no one consistent picture in which every part of the Old Testament expectation has a neat and exclusive place. It is generally recognised that there is an apocalyptic way of thinking, with its own distinctive imagery and world-view. Judgement is certainly not absent from the Davidic paradigm, but it is a more central motif in, say, the visions of Daniel. Here the kingdom of God is explicitly proclaimed, but other figures appear, such as the 'one like a son of man' who stands for 'the people of the saints of the Most High' (7:13 and 27) and who himself receives a kingdom which will not be, destroyed. It is clear that the imagery of Daniel – its concept of God's kingdom and of the son of man who is vindicated in judgement – forms part of Jesus' presentation of the gospel of the kingdom.

In the Gospels, the coming of the kingdom is declared – ostensibly at least – to Israel. There are many New Testament scholars who consider that the Gospels took shape in Gentile Christian communities. They interpret them, to some degree or other, as reflecting a Gentile understanding of Jesus' message. But it is hardly necessary to have recourse to this form-critical hypothesis *as long as* the material makes good sense in a purely Jewish setting.

On the face of it, Jesus preached the gospel to his own people Israel, not to the Gentiles. Insofar as Jesus' proclamation of the gospel draws on Old Testament categories of thought, we may expect to find some variety in the way Israel, Jesus' Jewish audience, is addressed. People like Zechariah and Simeon, immersed in the Davidic paradigm, would expect a promise of blessing to Israel – at least to the meek, the poor and those who fear the Lord. There may be surprises as to who are first and who are last, but there will be no doubt that Israel will remain beloved of God according to his covenant. Others may expect a more cosmic judgement scene in which Israel, in its present condition, may expect little mercy among its Gentile neighbours, in which God alone will be exalted and judge with equity the meek of the earth, and where only a new heaven and new earth will reveal the final state of things.

#### 'KINGDOM OF GOD' IN PAUL'S LETTERS

It is not altogether surprising that one of the unresolved questions of New Testament theology should be the impact of Christ's gospel on Israel itself. Indeed, what is the very meaning of 'Israel' in the new era of the Spirit? (We explore this question further in Chapter 4.) Let us take a final sounding in the writings of Paul to discover a little more about the way in which the kingdom of God was interpreted when the gospel was preached by him *beyond* a Jewish audience to Gentiles – people who were, presumably, less likely than Jews to be wrapped up in the finer points of Old Testament paradigms and imagery. What we can see is a consistent application of the fundamental category of 'kingdom of God' – God's rule, God's judgement, God's purpose and God's promise – to the particular situation of predominantly Gentile hearers.

#### (a) 1 and 2 Thessalonians

These provide the earliest dateable evidence about Paul. As we saw earlier, the term 'gospel' has a distinct flavour of 'imperial proclamation' adapted to Christian use, Paul appearing as the ambassador of the gospel of God in Europe.

What did this 'gospel of God' proclaim? We can deduce this from I Thessalonians 1:9–10: 'Turn from idols to the true God, the living God, and wait for the Son of God who, in virtue of his resurrection from the dead, stands ready to deliver you from the divine retribution.' Here is the proclamation of God's judgement and the way of deliverance from it.

Or see what we can gather from 1 Thessalonians 2:12: 'God is calling you into his own kingdom and glory.' There is perhaps a touch of the kingdom of Solomon here, with the Gentiles coming to the light. Certainly, later (2:19 and 3: 13) there is a strong focus on the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ – the coming of God himself with his entourage, his holy ones. The coming of Jesus is the coming of *God*. This is part of the exodus theme – the coming of God from the desert in majesty with ten thousand of his holy ones to destroy the oppressors of his people – but it is also a theme which the apocalyptists magnified and universalised. Thus 1 Thessalonians 4:13 to 5:11 is dominated by this theme: 'The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God and... we shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.' There is a flavour of the hellenistic 'royal visit' about this, but it is also straight out of the account of God's descent on Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 19.

So the gospel in Thessalonica is really a proclamation of the coming of Jesus, as judge and deliverer, to fulfil the expectations of 'the day of the Lord'. The pledge and assurance of both aspects of Jesus' role is

found in his death and resurrection. And all this is presumably what is meant in 2 Thessalonians 1:8 by the phrase 'the gospel of our Lord Jesus'. This gospel is still described as God's summons or call (2: 14), but more explicitly it looks to the coming of the Lord Jesus through which we are to 'obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

#### (b) Galatians

Later evidence partly continues, partly diversifies this picture. In Galatians the gospel is the absolutely unique and crucial message from God to the Gentiles, by which God 'calls' them (1:6). Paul now talks about 'preaching Christ (1:16). What does he mean by that?

The way Paul links this expression with what he says about God 'revealing his Son' to him gives some help, for this points to Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus. Whatever that victory, vindication or exaltation of Jesus meant is no doubt involved in what Paul preached when he 'preached Christ' The opening formula in Galatians is important: 'Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age according to the will of our God and Father' (1:4).

Is 'deliverance from this present evil aeon' the equivalent of 'deliverance from the wrath to come' of Thessalonians? Note the place of Christ's death for sins in the achieving of deliverance. No doubt the vision of judgement is presupposed – as well as the assurance of future deliverance – but it is important to work backwards to understand the place of Jesus' death in the hidden activity of God for mankind's deliverance.

#### (c) Romans chapters 1 and 2

The first two chapters of Romans are generally in line with the vivid flashes of Thessalonians and Galatians, but are presented with more balance—as one would expect. Here again is the 'day' when God will judge

'by Christ Jesus' (Romans 2:16). Is this what Paul means by the gospel 'concerning God's Son' in Romans 1:3 and 1:9? Well, that plus the 'pledge' of it in the resurrection.

The notable addition in the Romans' phraseology of the gospel is the addition of the phrase 'born of the seed of David' (1:3). This is no doubt a messianic formula, though it is not exploited here.

#### (d) I Corinthians

The centrality of Christ to the gospel is especially striking in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. The 'tradition' about his death and resurrection to which Paul refers at the beginning of the chapter links him with earlier preachers, from whom he obtained the tradition. In the light of his own earlier formulations, this does not mean that the gospel he received was merely information about past events. The future dominates this chapter, also: the resurrection means that Jesus now reigns and 'must reign' until all his foes submit, declares Paul. Deliverance and judgement will mark his rule. You cannot preach Christ crucified (2:2) as Paul does, or preach Christ as raised from the dead (15:12) as Paul does, without preaching the kingdom of God (15:50), the call to repentance (15:34) and deliverance from the wrath to come (5:25).

All the ramifications of the Old Testament notion of God's rule are present one way or another in Paul's account of his gospel preaching. It is nothing other than the kingdom of God which he proclaims as being at hand. The particular emphases are determined by the pastoral or didactic needs of the moment. It is all a case of 'the influence of circumstances on the use of eschatological terms' – to quote the title of an article of C.F.D. Moule.<sup>6</sup> In summary, Paul's gospel of the

<sup>6</sup> Prof. C.F.D. Moule, *Journal of Theological Studies* (new series) Vol.IX, Part 2, 1959, p.247

kingdom must be 'concerning Jesus Christ'—with a vital place for his death, resurrection, exaltation and future coming. Titles are perhaps less significant than functions, but the ancient prophetic task of 'announcing the day of the Lord' or proclaiming judgement and deliverance, already strong in the Thessalonian letters, is always implied in the later letters.

The most recent study of Paul by Christiaan Beker<sup>7</sup> of Princeton claims that Paul is essentially an apocalyptic preacher, the coherent centre of whose gospel is the hope in the dawning victory of God. He is not a systematic theologian, says Beker, but is concerned rather to translate the apocalyptic theme of the gospel into the contingent particularities of the human situation. This is, I believe, a correct estimate. We need only add that such a view imposes a stern but important condition on us when we come to interpret the message of Paul for today. We must not evade such a task of interpretation if we ourselves wish to understand the mystery of the kingdom of God and the demand that its proclamation makes on us and our generation.

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<sup>7</sup> J.C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, Edinburgh, 1980

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### JEW AND GENTILE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

TODAY WE CARRY ABOUT WITH US no practical awareness of any distinction between Jews and Gentiles within the one fellowship of Christians, and we have no place for a Jewish church at the heart of Christendom. But the New Testament is acutely sensitive to these two realities. The significance of early Jewish Christianity is that it fulfilled the Old Testament promise of God to restore the tabernacle of David that had fallen and then to use the restored remnant of Israel as an instrument to save the Gentiles. The popular view that God rejected the Jews and that the gospel became a wholly Gentile matter is so far at variance with the New Testament as well as with the expectation of the Old Testament that a complete reappraisal of the New Testament is called for.

Henry Chadwick, in his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford in 1959, describes primitive Christianity as 'a circle with Jerusalem at its centre'.<sup>1</sup> This was plainly the case originally: as recorded in Acts, the first believers assembled there and the Lord added daily such as should be saved. But it *remained* so when the missionary movement spread

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<sup>1</sup> H. Chadwick, *The Circle and the Ellipse*, Oxford, 1959, p.4

outwards to others besides Jews. Thus, for example, Paul went to enormous pains to secure from his Gentile converts in Asia and Europe tangible recognition of their indebtedness to the spiritual bounty of the saints at Jerusalem. The entire story of Paul's contract with James, Peter and John – and of the place of the collection for the poor among the saints in his subsequent dealings with his churches – has, says Professor Chadwick, 'a single theological presupposition at its foundation: Christendom has a geographical centre and this is Jerusalem. Gentile Christians might be free from Judaism; they remained debtors to Zion.'<sup>2</sup>

### THE TRUE ISRAEL?

Circumstances changed, of course, after the Jewish War and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Actually the city itself recovered from the devastation and remained in a peculiar way at the very heart of the Christian tradition for many centuries, with a spiritual authority all of its own. But after AD 70 it became a Gentile Christian community, having lost its exclusive Jewish character. With that loss went a complete transformation of the view of Israel in the purposes of God generally and in the gospel in particular.

#### (a) Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr is apparently the first Christian writer known to us who applies the term 'Israel' to Christians generally.<sup>3</sup> In his Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, composed about AD 160, he combines the prophecy of Isaiah 51—about God's law becoming a light to the nations—with Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant (in chapter 31). He argues thus:

If God proclaimed a new covenant which was to be instituted, and this for a light of the nations, we see and are persuaded that men approach God, leaving their idols and other unrighteousness, through the name of him who was crucified, Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is possible for all to understand that he is the new law, and the new covenant, and the expectation of those who out of every people wait for the good things of God. For the true Israel and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac and Abraham (who in uncircumcision was approved of and blessed by God on account of his faith, and called the father of many nations) are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Later he argues that the very name Israel really describes Christ:

As, therefore, Christ is the Israel and the Jacob, even so we, who have been quarried from the belly of Christ, are the true Israelitic race.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth noting that Justin arrives at his conclusion by using his own methods of interpreting the Old Testament. He does not claim that the Gospels or apostles make the same equation. There seems little doubt that the Jerusalem church as it existed up to the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, the church of the original apostles and of James the Lord's brother, continued to keep the Mosaic law and to maintain its spiritual primacy, notwithstanding its adherence to the praxis of Judaism. The measure of eclipse which this form of Christianity suffered can be seen in Justin, where he tells us that in his time many Christians would have nothing to do with such law-keeping Christian Jews.

Justin himself was more tolerant. So long as Jewish

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p.5

<sup>3</sup> P. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church*, Cambridge, 1969, p. 1

<sup>4</sup> Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 11

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 135

Christians did not insist on Gentile Christians observing the law of Moses, they themselves might observe it and still be saved. He, Justin, would not withhold his fellowship from them. But they are clearly very much on the edge of things by the mid-second century and have totally lost that early prestige they enjoyed when 'out of Zion went forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem' (Isaiah 2:3 – cf. Paul's allusion to this in 1 Corinthians 14:36).

(b) Melito<sup>6</sup>

Melito, bishop of Sardis who is about contemporary with Justin, takes a much harder view of old Israel. He sees Israel as wholly judged and destroyed, on account of its failure to respond to the Christ. But, in any case, Israel's role was only ever to be a prefigurement of the church; its value ceased when the church came. Melito's allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament – in this case in his Homily on the Passion where he deals with the passover – is total and allows no place for any continuing Israel. Even the church is not Israel, though it inherits the fulfilled character of what Melito likes to call simply 'the people'. He uses Israel only of the name of the Old Testament race and of the Christ-slayers. It is, in fact, a term of reproach.

The actual disappearance of the Jewish church at Jerusalem from centre stage was no doubt the main reason for so substantial a shift in the Christian understanding of Israel in God's purpose, but it seems that the methods being adopted to interpret the Old Testament were also responsible. Certainly their legacy was to remain for a long time.

The important point, however, is that the books of the New Testament – possibly all of them – belong

<sup>6</sup> Note G.F. Hawthorne, 'A New English Translation of Melito's Paschal Homily', in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, Grand Rapids, 1975, pp. 147-175

to the time during which the Jerusalem church still enjoyed its spiritual ascendancy,<sup>7</sup> when it was regarded as the fulfilment of God's plan that in Mount Zion and Jerusalem there should be those that are saved and among the remnant those whom the Lord has called (Joel 2:28 and 32).<sup>8</sup>

What do the New Testament writings therefore, have to say about the role of Jew and Gentile within the new era of the gospel and the coming of the Spirit?

### THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Until recently, the view seems to have predominated that New Testament writers themselves transferred all the prerogatives and promises of Israel to an undifferentiated Christian church. In 1957, for example, Earl Ellis in his important book *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* made this statement under the heading 'The True Israel':

Paul, like other NT writers, regards the Christian *ecclesia* as the faithful remnant of Israel, the true people of God. Christians are the true 'Jews' (Romans 2:29), Israel (Romans 9:6), Israel after the Spirit (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:18), the seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:29), the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), the circumcision (Philippians 3:3), the peculiar people (Titus 2:14).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Note J.A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, London, 1976

<sup>8</sup> Cf. C.H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, London, 1952, pp. 46-48

<sup>9</sup> Edinburgh, 1957, pp.136f. I note from a review by S.P. Brock, *Studien zu den Testamenten der Zwölf Patriarchen*, Berlin, 1969, in the *Journal of Theological Studies* 22 (1971), p. 187, that according to J. Jervell the Christian interpolator of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs 'Israel is still Jewry, not the new Israel or the church'. Unlike Melito, however, the interpolator expects the conversion of Israel.

Of course, this summary would not have been universally endorsed, even in 1957. Burton, for example, in his commentary on Galatians, in discussing Paul's use of the term 'The Israel of God' (in Gal. 6:16), claims that 'there is... no instance of Paul's using Israel except of the Jewish nation or a part thereof'.<sup>10</sup> And there were certainly commentators who took the 'Jew inwardly' or Romans 2:29 to refer to the faithful as distinct from the unfaithful Jew – as Jesus said of Nathaniel, 'An Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile' (John 1:47).

Ellis inferred the existence of an 'Israel after the Spirit' from Paul's phrase 'Israel after the flesh'. But in identifying this Israel after the Spirit with the Christian church generally, Ellis was simply assuming, not proving, the point we are now trying to assess: whether Paul does transfer to Gentile Christians descriptions or dignities which really belong to Israel. It is undoubtedly true that Gentile Christians are included by Paul in the 'seed of Abraham' (Galatians 3:29), but this expression is not identical with 'Israel'. Paul's point is that Gentiles are 'seed of Abraham' precisely because the promise concerning them was given while Abraham was uncircumcised and, so to speak, a Gentile himself. Nevertheless, the kind of claim here made by Ellis was common enough.

It may be thought that there was surer ground for regarding the Christian church as 'the true people of God' and for establishing in this way an identity of Christians with 'Israel'. For example, Alan Richardson in his *Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* in 1958 claimed that 'the NT reinterpretation of the OT theology is nowhere more strikingly displayed than in its claim that the mixed

Christian community of Jews and Gentiles is become the new "people of God".<sup>11</sup> While he admits that the word *laos* is often employed 'quite untechnically' in the New Testament, he claims that the expression *laos theou*, which in the LXX 'becomes a technical term for Israel as the chosen people of God (cf. Hebrews 11:25)', in the New Testament 'is taken over as a title for the Christian community'.<sup>12</sup>

Since the Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church devotes a whole chapter to the concept of 'the people of God' as a category of special significance by which to understand the present unity and catholicity of the church, we are bound to ask ourselves what is conveyed by this expression as it appears in the New Testament?

First of all, in the Old Testament Israel was undoubtedly chosen by God to be 'his people' in a special way: 'You shall be to me a peculiar people from among all the nations' – a special *laos* among all the *ethne*, says the LXX of Exodus 19:5. There is nothing in the word *laos* itself, or in any distinction it might have from *ethnos*, which connotes relationship with God. *Laos* simply means a group of persons bound together by certain ties and responsibilities. Israel is often referred to, in both Testaments, simply as 'the people', but this does not mean that we should understand this as 'the people of God' unless the phrase is so qualified.

The term 'people', or 'the people' or even 'the people of God', is not of itself an exclusive term. Even in the Old Testament there is the promise of Isaiah 19 that Egypt, and by implication Assyria, will each one day become 'my people' – not by being added to Israel but each in its own right. All three nations would

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<sup>11</sup> London, 1958, p.268

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> E. De W. Burton, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Edinburgh, 1921, p.358

remain distinct – Israel being actually designated ‘the third’.

There is no reason to suppose that, when God fulfilled his great promise to bless all the nations through Israel, all together would comprise one single people. The distinctiveness of the other blessed nations would remain, each a people for God. Israel will be the measure of blessing and, just as in Solomon’s day ‘every man sat under his vine and under his fig tree’ from Dan to Beersheba (1 Kings 4:25), Micah tells us that they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them afraid in *all* the nations under the dominion of the Lord (Micah 4:4). The phrase ‘all the peoples will walk every one *in his way*’ appears to mean in the LXX ‘in the way of the LORD’.

The Temple may be a house of prayer for all the nations, but nothing suggests that all nations will merge into the one people of the Lord. The variety of the nations and peoples will remain. Jerusalem will be a centre of pilgrimage, the source of the knowledge and wisdom and law of God, and Israel will be the priestly nation (Isaiah 61:5–6). Ten Gentiles will latch on to the skirt of a Jew and go with him to Jerusalem because they have heard that God is with him (Zechariah 8:22f), but being pilgrims they come not to settle, but to return refreshed to their own places. There is nothing in the Old Testament expectation of the universal salvation which would lead us to think that all the nations should become one people, much less that they should all become Israelites.

What then is the position in the New Testament? Is it true that ‘the people of God’ is taken over as ‘a title for the Christian community’ as a whole, as Alan Richardson avers?<sup>13</sup>

The short answer to the question is no. The majority of occurrences of the term *laos* indicate complete continuity with the Old Testament usage, without any reapplication at all. Some are references to Israel of old time and some are Old Testament quotations applied quite clearly to Israel, as distinct from Gentiles, in New Testament times, eg. ‘Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people’ (Romans 15: 10). There are a number of these and included among them are the occurrences of ‘the people of God’ in Hebrews.

We may today think of ourselves as the people of God when we read some of these passages, but we cannot say that such an application was in the mind of the writer. Two occurrences in Revelation (18:4 and 21:3) certainly borrow the Old Testament language regarding God’s people. The first is a quotation from Isaiah 48:20, ‘Come forth, my people, out of her’, referring to Babylon, where we would be unwise to put too particular a construction on the apocalyptic detail. In Revelation 21:3, we have a striking change. The Old Testament covenant promise is quoted (‘God himself shall be with them and be their God’), but in the first part of the promise, the singular *laos* is actually changed in Revelation to the plural *laoi* (‘they shall be his peoples’), which recalls the point made earlier about the plurality of peoples envisaged even in the Old Testament itself.

In two places in Acts, *laos* is used in such a way as to show that the term is quite applicable to Christian Gentiles without any suggestion that the term has been transferred from Israel. When James declares in Acts 15:14 that ‘Symeon has rehearsed how first God did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name’, the people in question is not Israel, but something additional to Israel – as the context shows. It is a further stage after the restoration of Israel. Likewise in Acts 18:10: ‘I have much people in this

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

city' or, more literally, 'there is a considerable people for me in this city'. There is no call whatever to consider this a transference of a title belonging to Israel.

Paul's use of *laos* is somewhat reserved. As Peter Richardson has shown, 'Paul does not use it apart from a quotation, and in the majority of cases he calls to mind a close link with the historic people of God, so that the term is not reapplied to Christians generally or Gentiles particularly'.<sup>14</sup> There are one or two problems associated with Paul's usage which do require more attention, but generally Richardson's conclusion is valid. Paul does not invest the church with the title 'people of God' in the way suggested by some writers.

In all probability, the source of the commonly held view that the Christian church took over the title of 'people of God' from Israel is the First Epistle of Peter. Here, in 1 Peter 2:9 are the words: 'But you are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession... which in time past were no people, but now are the people of God.' Alan Richardson called this 'the most striking affirmation in the NT that the Christian community is now the true *laos theou*... where the author somewhat freely quotes Exodus 19:4-6 and applies what was there said of Israel to the Christian Church'.<sup>15</sup> This opinion is only valid, however, if it can be established *on other grounds* that the Christians being addressed are Gentiles, or a mixed group of Gentiles and Jews. If Peter is writing to believing Jews, the application to them of Israel's charter of Exodus 19:5, or of the formula of Hosea 'once no people/now the people of God', implies no reapplication of the old titles. Rather this is in line with

all those passages in the New Testament, for example in Hebrews, where Jewish Christians are described in terms of their own spiritual heritage.

Unfortunately, 1 Peter stands in the New Testament, like Hebrews, without enough historical context to indicate the situation of the group to whom it was addressed. There are, indeed, many who are convinced that the epistle is addressed to a Gentile or mixed audience. This is chiefly on the ground that the descriptions of the readers' background is thought to accord more with a Gentile situation than a Jewish one. J.N.D. Kelly, for instance, says of 'the futile mode of conduct inherited from your ancestors' (1: 18) that 'An early Christian would never have described the ancestral upbringing of converts from Judaism in such terms'.<sup>16</sup> One can only beg to differ from this opinion. The adjective *mataios*, 'futile', the use of which Kelly thinks is 'decisive' as revealing a Gentile reference, is applied by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:20, quoting Psalm 94, to the reasonings of those who profess wisdom, which both in the Psalm and in Corinth may be within Israel. Similarly, James uses the same word to describe the religion of certain Jews (James 1:26). Titus 3:9 describes the Jewish preoccupation with genealogies and fightings about the law as *mataios*, 'futile'. Jesus himself quotes Isaiah to show that the worship of the Pharisees was 'in vain' or futile – the cognate adverb *maten* is used (Matthew 15:9). As for *patroparadotos*, 'inherited from your fathers', Jesus says virtually the same thing when he condemns the Pharisees for preferring the tradition of the elders to the commandment of God (Matthew 15:2). Paul likewise had to be released from his zeal for the tradition of the fathers (Galatians 1:14, *ton patrikon*

<sup>14</sup> P. Richardson, *Israel*, p.216

<sup>15</sup> A. Richardson, *Theology*, p.271

<sup>16</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude*, London, 1969, p.74

*paradoxeon*). Why should Peter not be referring to redemption from the traditions of the rabbis or from the law or legalism, as in Galatians 4:4, Galatians 3:13 or Colossians 2:8?

The other passage whose language, according to Kelly, 'must imply that they themselves had previously been pagans, not Jews, and that they had been converted to Christianity as adults'<sup>17</sup> is 1 Peter 4:3: 'Let the time that is past suffice for doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness...' Certainly the description is that of pagan behaviour and sensuousness; it is almost a standard catalogue of Gentile vices. But that may be just the point. Here are Jews who had been conforming to a Gentile standard of conduct. There is nothing surprising about such a charge. Paul makes it about his fellow Jews in Romans 2:1: 'for the judges are doing the very same things'. But a more important parallel is in Hosea. The Israelites of Hosea's day had so far lapsed into heathen ways as to incur God's sentence, 'You are not my people'. Now this is the very description which Peter applies to his readers. If it could apply to Israelites in Hosea's day, there is no reason why it should not be similarly applied by Peter in his day. We should not divest the epistle of what may be one of its most effective ironies.

The context and address of 1 Peter remains a crucial issue for New Testament theology. The Greek fathers generally, such as Origen and Eusebius, took it for granted that it was addressed to Jews. The same view was held by Erasmus, Calvin and Bengel. After all, who else would we expect the chief apostle of the circumcision to be addressing in such terms? What else was he likely to mean by 'elect sojourners of the dispersion' than Jews living abroad who have come to

faith in Christ? The increase in support for a Gentile address in recent years may be due, not to any fresh exegetical insight, but simply to the growing assumption that the Church *is* the new Israel or the new people of God. But this is the very assumption which needs to be challenged.

What we must realise is that, if 1 Peter is addressed to Gentiles or to a mixed group, the distinctive prerogatives of Israel have been transferred to Gentile Christians *totally* in a way which is unparalleled within the New Testament. Here alone Jews and Gentiles would be wholly undifferentiated. There is no awareness of tensions or differences within congregations, such as abound in Paul's letters, and no awareness that the wholesale claims might create resentment on the part of any Jews, Christian or otherwise. The theology of 1 Peter would be like that of Melito or Justin but, unlike them, without any recognition even of the existence of Jews who might consider that they had an equal or better claim to the prerogatives.

One can imagine an apologia of this kind being composed at a time when Christians had moved right away from any contact with Judaism or with a Jewish Christian church. What is impossible to imagine is that such a viewpoint should have existed during the lifetime of the Jerusalem church or in any proximity to Jewish Christianity – or that it should have been espoused by, of all people, the chief apostle of the circumcision, Peter, or by someone influenced by him.

### JEW OR GENTILE?

It is necessary to interrogate each book of the New Testament to discover where it stands in relation to the distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Such an interrogation will, except for Paul's letters, mean an examination of internal evidence only, for we really

<sup>17</sup> Kelly, *Peter and Jude*, p.169

know very little from any external evidence about the origins of the books or the situations within which they were written.

We are on safest ground with Paul and Luke. Our wisdom would be to examine their evidence first and use them as a construction against which to assess the point of view of others. Paul is our primary witness, because he deals explicitly with the whole question of the relation of Israel and the Gentiles, as well as with the practical question of the relation of Christian Jews and Gentiles within the churches and among the churches. Luke comes next because he gives us our only account of the progress of the Christian mission from Jewish circles and the leadership of the first Jewish apostles, to the Gentile mission and the leadership of the apostles to the Gentiles – and he has a lot to say about the relationships of these.

(a) Paul

Paul is self-consciously a Jew who has entered into his true inheritance as an Israelite through the redemption that is in the Messiah Jesus and who has been designated, like Jeremiah, as an apostle to the Gentiles. He both fully explores his own understanding of what it means to be a 'fulfilled' Israelite in accordance with the promises, and also uses that understanding to bring the gospel and all its consequences to the Gentiles to whom he has been sent.

But Paul does not confuse the significance of being an emancipated Israelite with the significance of being a Gentile come to the light. In his most important treatment of the dispensation of God in regard to the salvation of mankind, Romans chapters 9 to 11, Israel and the Gentiles remain entirely distinct and meaningful entities on earth both before and after their respective experiences of salvation. The Israel of which Paul speaks is an Israel which, despite a temporary

and partial hardening, will be saved in its integrity in accordance with the irrevocable promise and calling of God.

The remnant according to the election of grace, of which Paul himself is a member, is the guarantee of the conversion of the whole, when the Redeemer will come to Zion and take away their sins. On the other hand, the Gentiles are the Gentiles whose 'fulness' will come in *apart from* what is befalling Israel. In neither case does the 'all-ness' of Israel or the 'full-ness' of the Gentiles necessarily mean numerical totality, but the expressions clearly prove that the two groups are distinct in their experience of salvation. The unity which binds believing Jews and Gentiles of Paul's day is the unity of common participation in the promise to Abraham – the fat root of the olive, or 'the blessing of Abraham in Christ Jesus' as Paul calls it in Galatians 3: 14. But Abraham is shown in Paul's letter to the Romans to be the father of two classes of people: Jews who are not only physical descendants of Abraham, but spiritual children as well through faith; and believing Gentiles who, like Abraham when he was still uncircumcised, believe the promise of God. Unity in sin and salvation does not mean, however, that Christian Jews and Gentiles form a new Israel. They form on the one hand a new or purified Israel – or an elect remnant – and a group of converted Gentiles on the other, conscious of their relationship to and interaction with each other,

It is not only in the theological treatment of Romans chapters 9 to 11 that Paul regards Israel and the Gentiles as distinct. In Romans 15:25ff, this distinction finds embodiment in his description of the church at Jerusalem and the churches of his own mission. The latter he designates 'the Gentiles' (15:27), while the former are 'the saints that are at Jerusalem' or simply 'Jerusalem' (15:26 and 31)–

which in this context is not merely a geographical note, but implies a contrast with 'the Gentiles'. There is unity in Christ and a common participation in spiritual blessings, of which the giving and receiving of 'the collection' is a symbol. But this unity is plainly not something that can be called 'Israel'. The Gentiles remain Gentiles, even under the gospel, and Jerusalem remains Jerusalem. Some at least of Paul's uses of the term 'the saints' in other letters, eg. in the phrase 'the churches of the saints' (1 Corinthians 14:33) or 'fellow citizens with the saints' (Ephesians 2: 19), also refer to the Jewish believers under one of their scriptural titles.

In his book, *Israel in the Apostolic Church*, Peter Richardson agrees that Paul does not explicitly designate Christians generally as being Israel, continuing to regard Christian Jews as having a distinctive place and role within the context of the traditional privileges of Israel. But Richardson thinks a movement towards an undifferentiated single people was afoot, Paul marking an implicit shift in his thinking when in Philippians he says 'we are the circumcision', thereby including all believers within one Israelite category.<sup>18</sup>

However, maybe Richardson is looking for a movement of thought which did not exist and was not to be expected before AD 70. Paul in Philippians chapter 3 is not speaking about believers generally, but about believing Jews. He is distinguishing those Jews (especially Paul himself) who, in accordance with the true meaning of their circumcision, really do serve God in the Spirit from those whose adherence to circumcision is formal only, a mere 'concision' in fact.

This is the case not only in regard to Philippians. Paul's reasoning is similar in Galatians, where he distinguishes the Israel of God, the true pilgrims to

Jerusalem who live by the rule that 'neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision but a new creation', from those Jews who insist on circumcision for all as a condition of salvation through Christ.

If Paul maintains that Jew and Gentile are equal before God both in sin and in the need for salvation by grace alone through faith, how does he resolve the question of their relationship with each other – particularly if he maintains that Israel has a continuing destiny in God's purposes, of which the Jerusalem church is the visible symbol? In Romans chapters 9 to 11, a somewhat bizarre picture is given of Gentiles grafted like a wild olive tree among the natural olive branches representing Christian Israelites. The fat root of the olive represents either Christ or, more likely, the blessing of Abraham in Christ.

The concept of unity in Abraham appears elsewhere in Paul. Abraham is the patriarch of a multitude of nations, not of one only. This idea lends itself to a picture of the Gentiles sharing with Israel in a common blessing without amalgamation, while at the same time all together constituting a single 'seed of Abraham' inasmuch as that seed is really Christ. In Galatians, there is a hint that Paul's mind travelled from this unity in Abraham to the much more basic unity in Adam, within which even more diversity can be comprehended. With apparent reference to the creation story of Genesis, Paul says: 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, neither is it 'male and female'. But you are all one man (*heis*) in Christ Jesus.' It is this idea of unity in Adam – or rather in the last Adam, the new man made in the image of God, in Christ – that Paul develops in the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians. Here Paul's mind finally rests. Israel and the Gentiles-in-Christ form not a new Israel, but something far more comprehensive and original: a new mankind, a new creation of Adam.

<sup>18</sup> P. Richardson, *Israel*, p.200

Some, like Stephen Neill, seem to think that Paul arrived at this concept only after the failure of his last visit to Jerusalem, when he had hoped that presenting the collection as a gesture of homage from the Gentiles churches to the mother church would have provoked Israel to jealousy and precipitated Israel's conversion. When this did not happen, the theory goes, Paul turned from a historical perspective of a mission to the Gentiles proceeding *alongside* a mission to Israel, and developed a transcendental view of the church as a new universal body of Christ.<sup>19</sup> But the various images are not incompatible; the germ of an ultimate spiritual unity in a new Adam is already there in Galatians.

What Ephesians does emphasise more than other letters is that this new creation, the new mankind made in the image of God, is *already* being embodied in actual churches of mixed Jewish and Gentile membership, where the middle wall of partition has been broken down and a foretaste of the ultimate new humanity is already present, a place where it meets together in a single *ecclesia*. The OT picture behind this is Jerusalem, the centre of universal pilgrimage and worship, where all nations may assemble. The heavenly church of Ephesians is a transcendent body, but its focus on earth is wherever Jew and Gentile meet together in the same local *ecclesia*.

At the same time, there is no epistle in which the actual distinction between Jews and Gentiles is more of a practical reality than Ephesians. This is where this letter differs so completely from 1 Peter, despite the fact that the two epistles are often thought to be related. There is no overcoming of differences in 1 Peter; the churches addressed, or rather their

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<sup>19</sup> S. Neill, *The Church and Christian Union*, London, 1968, pp.80ff, and *Jesus Through Many Eyes*, Philadelphia, 1976, pp.62-68

members, form a single undifferentiated group so far as their spiritual status is concerned. But the people addressed in Ephesians are made acutely aware that they are uncircumcised Gentiles who need special grace to comprehend the nature of the spiritual blessings which, through Christ, they have been enabled to share with their Jewish Christian brethren.

(b) Luke

Luke's theology, both in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, has a clear understanding of the relation of Israel and the Gentiles. The impression made on Jesus' disciples was that he had come as Messiah to 'redeem Israel', there being a definite orientation towards Jerusalem as the place where God would fulfil his purposes. In his Gospel, Luke records a strong note of judgement on Israel and on Jerusalem, but Israel's heritage is preserved in the 'little flock' of disciples to whom is appointed the kingdom and who will sit on thrones as the new judges of Israel. The Messiah is to be a light to the nations as well as the glory of God's people Israel. Those of other nations who show faith, faith not even found in Israel, will one day sit down with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God. But there is really nothing in the Gospel of Luke which goes beyond the pictures of blessing for the nations in the Old Testament. As the Gospel ends, repentance and remission of sins is to be preached to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem – implying a universal salvation, with Jerusalem at the centre.

In Acts, Luke sees the restoration of Israel as taking place in the establishment of the church at Jerusalem. Peter announces the arrival of the last days to 'the whole house of Israel', represented by devout Jews from every nation under heaven. Those who respond to his message constitute the saved remnant of those who call on the name of the Lord in Zion and

Jerusalem as prophesied by Joel. As in Isaiah, certain Israelites are to be the Lord's witnesses to the rest of the world: in Jerusalem, then Judaea–Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. This recalls the role of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah chapter 49, whose task was not only to restore the preserved of Israel, but also to be God's salvation to the ends of the earth. This double-barrelled task is again recalled at the Jerusalem Council, where the relation of Jewish and Gentile Christianity was discussed. James justified the two wings of the mission by quoting Amos, where first the tabernacle of David was to be raised up, so that then 'the rest of men might seek after the Lord, even all the Gentiles upon whom God's name was called' (Amos 9:11f; Acts 15:16–18).

The rest of Acts only confirms this picture. The church at Jerusalem remains Jewish through and through, with many thousands of members 'all zealous for the law'. Luke is at pains to show Paul himself as an Israelite who has entered into the hope of Israel's calling. He even identifies himself in his sermon at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts chapter 13) with the 'servant' of Isaiah chapter 49 who, representing Israel, brings salvation to the Gentiles. Paul's Jewish character lies at the heart of all his apologies. Addressing the Jews of Jerusalem, Paul claims that the gospel is at the centre of the Jewish orthodox tradition (Acts 23:1ff). He himself was a Pharisee, brought up in the best rabbinic tradition, whose Christian commission was confirmed to him through a devout, law-abiding Jew of good repute, Ananias, and through a vision given in response to prayer in the Temple itself. Paul stood squarely on 'the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers, unto which promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day hope to attain' (Acts 26:6f). Certainly, Jews who refuse to hear are left behind. The Jewish leadership is condemned, but the

Jerusalem church remains as does Paul, the Jewish apostle called to represent his nation throughout the mission to the ends of the earth.

Luke and Paul are at one in their differentiation between Jewish and Gentile Christianity, and in their insistence that Jewish Christianity represented the divinely ordained platform from which the salvation of the Gentiles should be launched, and from which the Gentiles should receive their understanding of God's blessing and kingdom.

#### (c) Other NT writers

How do other books stand in relation to this issue? In my view, Hebrews and 1 Peter, James and Jude are all written to Jewish Christians and show no awareness of Gentile Christianity – though 1 Peter is aware of the need for redeemed Israelites to be a witness to unbelieving Gentiles. The second letter of Peter, whether genuine or pseudonymous, does seem deliberately to address Gentiles – 'those who have obtained like precious faith with us'—though not as an encyclical, like 1 Peter. The reference to Paul's letters confirms this as the intention. There is growing support for the view that John's Gospel and epistles reflect an exclusively Jewish understanding of salvation and do not deal with the salvation of the Gentiles. This does not imply an exclusive spirit, but simply that the purpose of these writings is to commend Christianity to Greek-speaking Judaism. At least, J.A.T. Robinson so argues.<sup>20</sup> Matthew has always been regarded as a 'Jewish' Gospel in some sense and, although learned opinion differs about the how it is related to Jewish Christianity, there is general agreement that the Gospel of Matthew stands in close

<sup>20</sup> 'The Destination and Purpose of St John's Gospel', in *Twelve New Testament Studies*, London, 1962, pp. 107ff

proximity to a Judaistic community, if not actually inside it.

(d) Mark

More should be said about Mark and what light it may shed on the question of Jew/Gentile relations. A number of modern scholars have sought to discover in Mark reflections of the experience and thinking of the churches at the time the Gospel is presumed to have been written, say in the sixties of the first century, but this kind of form criticism remains very speculative. The Gospel as it stands is sufficiently illuminating.

Jesus is sponsored by John the Baptist, who comes in fulfilment of prophecy regarding Israel's restoration. He is acknowledged, at crucial points, as 'the Christ'. This is Jesus' own *marturia*, or witness, at his trial – though he at once points to the figure of the son of man of Daniel to indicate his role as the representative figure soon to be vindicated. The kind of messiahship ascribed to Jesus, or suggested by him, has no meaning apart from Israel and its destiny. When he enters Jerusalem, the crowd cries, 'Blessed is the kingdom that comes, the kingdom of our father David'. At the last supper Jesus speaks of 'my blood of the covenant', which relates him to Israel as God's elect. On the cross, despite the awful paradox of it all, he is portrayed as the king of the Jews and as the Christ, the king of Israel.

Yet, there are two sides to 'Israel' as portrayed by Mark. There is a falling Israel and a rising Israel. 'This generation' is condemned as adulterous, sinful and faithless. The fig-tree is cursed and will bear no more fruit. Even his disciples are involved in the condemnation. One of the Twelve betrayed him, and at the end they all forsook him and fled. On the other hand, many did respond to the gospel proclaimed by both John and Jesus. Of those who heard him gladly, Jesus could say, 'Behold my mother and my brethren'

He spoke of those who hear the word and accept it, bringing forth fruit. Many are said to have believed – even in Nazareth the negative response was not total. More than once his actions are described as those of the shepherd of Israel who has compassion on his flock, leading it out – like God in the Old Testament.

The parable of the wicked husbandman has often been taken to indicate that Israel is to be superseded by the Gentiles, but a careful reading shows that it is only the leadership of Israel, the husbandmen of the vineyard, who are to be replaced, not the vineyard. The chief priests and elders recognised that the parable was spoken against *them*. The Twelve are chosen with evident allusion to the Twelve tribes, and their commission to fish for men fulfils a prophecy from Jeremiah regarding Israel (Jeremiah 16:16). The paradox of the disciples' own faith and failure is reproduced in the response of the people generally, and helps to explain the paradox of a falling and rising Israel. Among those who exercised faith in Jesus was a ruler of the synagogue, and even a member of the Sanhedrin who was looking for the kingdom of God. Yes, there is a true inheritance and a true flock of Israel still. It will suffer judgement and loss and be scattered but, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, it will be restored and gathered and Jesus will go before it into Galilee.

Alongside the picture in Mark of the restored Israel which Jesus is gathering and will lead into Galilee after his death and resurrection, there are some indications of the place of the Gentiles in the scope of the gospel. Some scholars believe that in a Gospel like Mark's 'the historical boundaries between the period before and after Easter'<sup>21</sup> have been eliminated and that the much

<sup>21</sup> G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, London, 1960, p.19

later experience of Gentile Christianity is simply to be read back into the Gospel.

James Robinson, in his book on *The Problem of History in Mark*, has a chapter with the title 'History since AD 30 in Mark'. He claims that the impact on Mark of the shift of Christianity from Palestine and a Jewish membership to the whole Mediterranean world and an inter-racial membership of the church is obvious from 'the importance of Gentiles and non-Jewish territory in [Mark's] Gospel (esp. chs 6-8)'.<sup>22</sup> But this is at best hypothetical and, in view of Jeremias' judgement that 'we have no evidence that Jesus ever went beyond the boundaries of the Jewish population',<sup>23</sup> the references to the great multitudes that followed Jesus from Galilee, Idumea, beyond Jordan and about Tyre and Sidon are just as likely to represent a gathering of dispersed Israelites as to suggest the Gentile world, especially as all the areas mentioned where Jesus went once belonged to the kingdom of Israel.

There are really only two (or perhaps three) places in Mark where Gentiles certainly come into the picture. Their exceptional character is what we would expect in an account of a ministry which in its own terms was restricted to Israel, yet they are highly significant exceptions. The Syro-Phoenician woman is a Gentile who anticipates the truth, not yet historically fulfilled, that the Gentile dogs are destined to eat of the Israelite children's bread after the children have first been filled. The incident could hardly be more pointed. There was both the scandal which such a possibility constituted for a conventional Jew, and also

the endorsement of it by Jesus – once the principle of faith has been established together with the recognition (as also by the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4,) that 'salvation is of the Jews'. Here is a foreshadowing of Paul's belief that the gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. But the distinction between the two groups could hardly be more sharply recognised than in the incident of Mark's Gospel.

The other undoubted Gentile in Mark's Gospel is the centurion at the cross. In Mark's narrative he is, in a peculiar way, the representative of the Gentiles, since he is the very man to whom Pilate 'delivered Jesus' for crucifixion. Jesus had said he would be delivered to the Gentiles and that they would kill him. This is the Gentile who actually supervised the killing of Jesus. Yet he is also the Gentile who, while the Jewish leaders derided Jesus for claiming to be 'the Christ the king of Israel', exclaimed, when he saw him die: 'In truth, this man was the Son of God' (15:39). He was thus the first confessor of Christ after his death, foreshadowing Paul's great doctrine that the Gentiles are reconciled to God through Christ's death.

Mark's Gospel does not distort the story of Jesus' life and ministry, despite all the historical limitations of that ministry. But certain incidents do reflect an extension of God's grace to the Gentiles which was yet to come. Mark's testimony confirms the theology of Paul as stated in Romans 15:8 – 'Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy'.

## CONCLUSION

What conclusions should we draw from the position as I have tried to set it out? A case has been presented for

<sup>22</sup> James Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark*, London, 1957, p.64

<sup>23</sup> J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, London, 1958, p.35 endorsing the judgement of Albrecht Alt.

holding that, within the New Testament, Paul, Luke (in both his Gospel and the book of Acts) and Mark present a situation in which Jews and Gentiles are clearly distinguished from each other in the circumstances of their background, their response to the gospel and their relation to each other. What is said to Christian Jews, therefore, is not always applicable to what is said to Christian Gentiles, and what is said to Gentiles is not always applicable to Jews. The Christian Gentiles are identified as having different antecedents in the Old Testament picture of God's dealings with Israel and the nations – and they are the objects of different missions in apostolic times. Their relation to each other, whether between churches of different membership or within churches of mixed membership, is a relation requiring understanding, sensitivity, forbearance and mutual acceptance, without requiring uniformity of conduct or (as between churches) 'churchmanship'.

On the other hand, John's Gospel and probably Matthew's, 1 John, 1 Peter and Hebrews, James and Jude reflect an understanding of Christianity entirely within communities of Jewish believers, with little or no reference to any relationship with Gentile believers or Gentile churches. No New Testament book reflects a purely Gentile Christianity, i.e. a Gentile Christianity which stands apart from Jewish Christianity, in the way the writings of Justin or Melito stand apart from it and simply appropriate the Old Testament and all its promises directly to Gentile use

It is plainly essential that this case I have proposed be scrutinised, to see whether it is in fact correct. This is in the first place a matter of exegesis. I have no doubt in my own mind that the two types of Christian understanding are represented: at the very least we have the writings of the apostle Paul representing

Gentile Christianity (including how this looks from the point of view of believing Jews) and the Letter to the Hebrews representing Jewish Christianity (without regard for Gentile Christianity). Not all will accept my views as to the way in which the other books range themselves behind these two types. But our task is to determine with whatever degree of probability may be possible, the situation of the various New Testament books in relation to this question.

The main conclusion to be drawn is that we Gentiles derive our spiritual understanding of the meaning of salvation from those Jews who themselves entered into the experience of salvation through faith in their own Christ and in the light of their own scriptures. It is *their* inheritance which we have been called to share with them. The witness to what this salvation meant to them is contained in the New Testament.

In some books we hear them speaking among themselves as to what that salvation meant to them (Hebrews, 1 Peter, John, James etc.). But it was the special mission of Paul from Christ to explain to Gentiles the manner in which they might come to partake of the promise of God through the Messiah of Israel. It is therefore the New Testament writers' interpretation of the Old Testament in the light of Christ that we must especially study, not the second and succeeding centuries' theology which had lost sensitivity to the dynamics of the gospel as they were at first. In God's providence the visible expression of Jewish Christianity, the church of Jerusalem and the churches of Judaea, was removed at about the time the NT was completed, but it remains true that we who belong to the Gentiles have been made partakers of *their pneumatika*, their spiritual things, and we are their debtors still.

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## THE FUTURE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

WHEN WAR BROKE OUT between Athens and Sparta in 431 BC, Thucydides the Athenian at once began to write his history of the war believing, he said, that it would be 'a great war, and more memorable than any that had preceded it'. Indeed, he believed he was witnessing 'the greatest movement yet known in history, not only in Greece but over a large part of the non-Greek world—I had almost said of mankind'.<sup>1</sup> And 'for the benefit of those who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, my history has been composed to be an everlasting possession (*ktema eis aei*), not the show-piece of an hour.'<sup>2</sup>

It is unlikely that any writer of a New Testament book held such a view about his own writing. It was not that they lacked a sense of the importance of the event, the Christ-event about which they wrote, or its significance for mankind. But despite the fact that we still preserve and use their writings, as no other

writings have been preserved and used, we cannot suppose that the authors composed them like Thucydides with an eye on posterity. We could express the difference between Thucydides and the New Testament writers by saying that they held a different view of history. Thucydides had the Greek view that history repeats itself and that one series of important events carefully studied is bound to provide a key for understanding a similar series of events many years later. In contrast the New Testament writers were certainly not expecting the events they recounted to be repeated in future generations.

But here the more instructive difference is between the New Testament writers and the Old Testament scriptures to which our writers paid so much heed. For the Old Testament scriptures *were* written for posterity. The law, the prophets and the writings were all to be preserved for the generations yet unborn; the New Testament expects no grandchildren. In the Old Testament apocalypse, Daniel was told to 'shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end' (Daniel 12:4). Again: 'Seal up the vision, for it belongs to the distant future' (Daniel 8:26). But the apocalypse of John has a different role: 'Do *not* seal up the words of the prophecy of this book', John was told, 'for the time is at hand'.

These words, 'the time is at hand', might be written over all the New Testament documents and is the reason why they do not envisage long use or preservation. They were written for the 'now' generation, not for the ages to come. This being so, we must draw a distinction between the purpose for which any one of our twenty seven books was originally written and the purpose which that book, by itself or with others, was held to serve by those who, long after apostolic times, were responsible for the formation of the canon of the New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> Thucydides, i.1.1. (Translation by R. Warner in *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Harmondsworth, 1954, p.35)

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, i.22.5 (Translation in *ibid.*, p.48)

**Discerning the original intent: the four Gospels**

Whenever we are thinking of the interpretation of a New Testament book, whether by the ancient Fathers or by ourselves, it is important for us to keep in mind the author's original intention. This is a primary hermeneutical principle, but one not always observed. Of course, it is not always possible to ascertain the precise intention of an ancient document. Here there is a difference between the Gospels and the epistles.

The immediate purpose of the epistles is much more obvious than the immediate purpose of the Gospels. A whole variety of suggestions have been made in recent years as to what precisely the Gospels were meant for. But C.F.D. Moule has stressed, against many of the form critical hypotheses, that 'the Synoptic Gospels represent primarily the recognition that a vital element in evangelism is the plain story of what happened'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the evangelists were telling a story, or imparting information, that the first intended readers did not already know, whatever preliminary understanding those readers may have had about the main thrust of the gospel.

One aim of the Gospels, on this view, was to convert. Moule suggests that 'Luke and John are more likely to have been intended to be read by the outsider, whereas Matthew and Mark may well represent instruction for Christians, with a view to equipping them in turn for spoken evangelism'.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the precise truth of the matter, the Gospels were presumably designed to make a fresh impact on early readers, bringing them to faith and commitment. They had no expectation of any course of history beyond 'this generation' to which Jesus himself spoke.

<sup>3</sup> C.F.D. Moule, 'The Intention of the Evangelists', in *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, London, 1967, p.113 4.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

The basic impact of the Gospels would not, of course, go out of date, even though history continued. Some adjustment was bound to be made when the destruction of Jerusalem predicted by Jesus was an event of the past and no longer of the future and when the generation whose life seemed destined to terminate in the coming of the Son of Man had passed away. Nevertheless the Gospels possessed an integrity of story-line and a completeness of presentation which were not seriously disrupted by the passage of time – although it must be admitted that there is not much in the writings of the early Fathers which suggests that the evangelistic impact of a Gospel as a whole was much felt. In Justin, they have become 'the memoirs of the Apostles', read in church in such instalments as time permitted.

**Discerning the original intent: the Pauline epistles**

The epistles are a different matter. In their nature they were much more particular and contingent. How could *they* be expected to weather the process of preservation and canonisation? Each letter of Paul is more or less clear as to its specific purpose. It may have one or more objectives, and we may have to use our judgement as to a major or minor objective. Paul often states his motives. We are aided further by various autobiographical material within Paul's letters, not to mention the collateral information of Acts. None of the letters, however, is itself a proclamation of the gospel as if Paul were evangelising the readers by sending them a tract. Each *presupposes* the gospel, both in the sense of proclaiming the kingdom and in the sense of preaching Christ crucified and risen. The readers are all believers already. Nor do any of the letters bring churches in existence. They are not charter documents; the churches are already there.

## (a) The Letters to the Thessalonians

The 'church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' was already there when Paul wrote this first extant letter to it. His letter expresses joy that it was still going strong after some weeks or months of its existence. In the course of this congratulation, Paul happens to describe the way in which the Thessalonians had responded to the gospel as he had preached it to them. For us, this constitutes valuable evidence of this process, although it is only incidental to Paul's purpose. Then Paul adds in what may well be the main purpose of his writing four pieces of instruction, three of which, he says, they are already familiar with.

Two of the four pieces – on sexual morality and on what will happen to the dead in Christ at his coming – Paul ascribes to Jesus, or at least claims the special sanction of Jesus for them. There are some briefer words of encouragement and an exhortation to give proper recognition to those who are over them in the Lord. It is one of Paul's shorter and lighter letters. But what reason was there for the Thessalonians to hang on to this epistle once its contents had been carefully read and conscientiously absorbed? It does not purport to be more than an 'occasional' communication; its four or five main points could easily be memorised and become part of a common store of teaching – an orally transmitted rule of faith.

The answer must lie in the very role of Paul and his relation to them. He was nothing less than the messenger of God, the servant of Christ to them. The 'word of the message' which he brought to them was accepted by them 'not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God' (2:13). What Paul now writes in his letter is a word of equal weight and divine character. His exhortation to sexual purity is part of 'instructions through the Lord Jesus'. To reject it is to

reject 'not man, but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you' (4:2 and 8). Likewise, the word of comfort regarding those who have fallen asleep in Jesus is something which Paul declares 'by the word of the Lord' (4:15). Whether these pieces of instruction are actual teaching of Jesus passed on by Paul or are the product of prophetic inspiration, as the phrase 'by the word of the Lord' (cf. 1 Kings 13:17 and 18, 20:35) may suggest, one can hardly suppose a stronger motive for preserving this letter than that of treasuring, in a written oracle, that which came from the Lord Jesus himself.

Some boost for preservation can be seen in the solemn charge by the Lord 'that this epistle be read to all the brethren' This probably refers to all the churches of Macedonia (cf. Colossians 4:16 and 2 Corinthians 1:1). If the letter had to be *copied* for one or more of the churches of Macedonia, we have the beginning of the process which eventually extended beyond that province and which it would have seemed natural enough to continue.

But what would a distant church, at a later time, want with this letter? The description of Paul's *eisodos*, his entry to the Thessalonians and the warmth of his personal feeling for them (see especially the content of the first three chapters) would not be applicable to such a church, apart from showing how a missionary might conduct himself and how he should be received. If the later church were one whose origin had been due to Paul or one of his colleagues, the description of the planting of the gospel among the Thessalonians would serve as a reminder, even as a model, of its own origin. If the church felt no allegiance to Paul, 1 Thessalonians chapters 1 to 3 could hardly speak to it with the same directness.

However chapters 4 and 5, with two if not three explicit pieces of teaching having the authority of

Jesus, and an instruction on 'love of the brethren' which Paul describes as 'taught of God' could not fail to be received as directly applicable by any church or believer anywhere. There will be one modification. If what Paul says in this letter about 'the coming of the Lord' was framed in the expectation that it would occur in his lifetime, those who take up this letter long after Paul's death do not and cannot read it with the same sense of urgency – or even with the same understanding of the gospel as the announcement of fulfilment as did the Thessalonians to whom it was first addressed. At the very least they are likely to say 'the Lord delays his coming'. And may they not go further and place themselves at a distance from the whole context within which Paul fulfilled his calling, consciously or unconsciously reinterpreting the historical and conceptual framework within which the gospel was first preached?

#### (b) The Letter to the Philippians

Paul's letter to the Philippians was written to a nearby church in Macedonia a few years later than I Thessalonians. It expresses a similar close and cordial relation to his friends as does the Thessalonian letter. He thanks them for a gift of money and commends them for their partnership with him in his further missionary work, putting a positive construction on his imprisonment and other apparent obstacles to his mission. He hopes soon to send Timothy to them and Ephaphroditus is already on the way.

There is some dissension in the ranks at Philippi. Paul urges two of the women among his earlier colleagues, Euodia and Syntyche, to pull together. Who keeps thankyou letters, especially if they happen to contain incidental remarks unflattering to the recipients? Much as we today cherish all the personalia and other incidental references in this letter, we cannot assume that the men and women at Philippi found

them satisfactory grounds for filing the letter.

But there was more in the letter than this, notably an exhortation to a manner of life 'worthy of the gospel of Christ', based on an exposition of 'the mind of Christ' (1:27–2: 18). The authority of this disclosure of the mind of Christ, associated as it is with the basic Christian confession 'Jesus Christ is Lord' with which it concludes, was no doubt sufficient to ensure a lasting regard for the document containing the exposition. Once again, as in 1 Thessalonians, Paul speaks in the name of Christ, though this time by rehearsing the example of his humility and exaltation. Philippians 2 is, in effect, an early passion narrative, and its retention in this memorable literary form requires little more explanation than does the retention of the passion narratives of the Gospels themselves.

A further additional feature of Philippians is Paul's presentation of himself as a *tupos*, an example (3: 17, 4:9 and 1:30) for his converts to follow. Insofar as they accepted this direction, they may be assumed to have valued a permanent record of its form and obligations. Moreover, there was a particular edge to this 'model' Chapter 3 warns that, though salvation is of the Jews, not all Jews can be trusted to exhibit the true marks of the Messiah. The Philippians must learn to distinguish the true circumcision from the false. Paul himself, whose worship is spiritual and whose glory is in Christ and not in the external ordinances, is the true model of the circumcision.

This kind of differentiation was of pressing and practical importance to members of the early churches, and this letter would be valued as a ready reckoner when Judaizers were pressing their claims. Paul the apostle, Paul the teacher and Paul the exemplar became vital to the faith and life of Christians such as those at Philippi. They did well to preserve a letter in which he remained such a clear focus for their

understanding of citizenship in the colony of heaven.

But for how long would the letter retain this value? What will others make of it when Paul is no longer a living example to imitate, someone they actually knew, and when the 'dogs, the evil workers and the concision' have ceased to bark and bite? The *imitatio Christi* passage, with the poetic formula of his obedience as a servant and his exaltation, would remain of compelling validity for all who acknowledged Christ as Lord. But what of the *imitatio Pauli*? Since those features of his life which he put forward for emulation are in fact described in this letter (as in others), an actual and personal knowledge of him was not essential to an acceptance of his exhortation to 'follow' him.

Such an acceptance also required an acceptance of the role professed by Paul as the uniquely designated apostle to the Gentiles. How did this claim appear to those who acquired his letters when he was no longer alive? With that claim went the basis of his refutation of the 'dogs, evil workers and concision', namely that he, Paul, and his associates were 'the circumcision who serve God in the Spirit' (Philippians 3:2-3). What did this claim mean to the second or third generation of those who received Paul's letters?

#### (c) The Letters to the Corinthians

Paul's Corinthian letters reveal a very close and particular relationship to the church at Corinth in the fifties of the first century—so close and particular that much of what is said is non-transferable in any direct sense. The reason why the Corinthians themselves would wish to preserve the letters—at least after they had settled their quarrel with Paul—is not hard to see: Paul claims to be the lather and founder of the church and also, again, the model (*tupos*) they are to imitate.

More than that Paul is, as in the other letters being considered, acting in the name of Christ. The

foundation he has laid in Christ and his other instructions are 'my ways that are in Christ' (3:11 and 4: 17). The best way of maintaining their allegiance to Christ was to keep what Paul says before their attention. When, in chapter 5, Paul rebukes them for failure to deal with the special case of the incestuous man, his directions are not only based on a general principle, 'a little leaven leavens the whole lump', (verses 6-8), but are extended to cover a whole range of possible situations (verses 9-13). So even a particular problem is given wider relevance. Likewise in dealing with lawsuits in chapter 6, a broad principle based on a theological truth (the judgement of the world by 'the saints') and an appeal to Mosaic precedent are invoked. Again, a local aberration is put into a vast context.

When dealing with the inquiries of the Corinthians, Paul's reply includes specific teaching of Jesus, the command of the Lord (7: 10). Even when he speaks for himself, he claims the spirit of prophecy for his words (7:40). His regulations are what he ordains in all the churches (7: 17). Again, Paul's letters not only demand attention and obedience as an essential part of the Corinthians' Christian response, but almost demand to be preserved as a continual reminder of the teaching and mind of Christ as mediated by his chosen apostle (see also 11:23, 14:37, 11:1 and Paul's claim to a prophetic word, a 'mystery', in 15:51). Similarly in the second letter Paul alludes to 'Christ speaking in me' (13:3).

It does not follow that other churches stand in the same relation to Paul: 'If to others I am not an apostle, yet at least I am to you' (9:2). For other churches to appropriate these letters to themselves, there must have been an enlargement of their view of the role of Paul and some recognised way of identifying themselves with the Corinthian situation.

## (d) The Letter to the Galatians

Galatians is the first letter written to a group of churches – though some of those already mentioned were intended to be read in other churches of the province. This sharpens the question we have been considering. The churches of Galatia were not in Achaia or Macedonia (Europe), but in Asia Minor and were certainly of Paul's founding. The occasion is as precise and specific as could be imagined.

Paul writes to put a stop to a defection from the original gospel through which his converts came to faith. That defection was the result of Gentile Christians adopting the Jewish law of ceremonies, especially circumcision, as a badge of respectability or even of first-class Christianity. The strength of Paul's voice is clue to his usual claim to having been commissioned by God and his Christ to preach the gospel – the test and foundation of it all – to the Gentiles. His argument is that the Gentile believer has a direct relation to God, not via the law of Moses or the Moses-to-Christ episode of divine history. The Gentile has a direct pedigree as son of Abraham, being like Abraham justified by faith apart from any code of particular works or ceremonies.

This argument clearly sets out the status of the Jew both before and after being 'redeemed from the law', and provides the test by which the Jew who acts according to the right 'canon' can be recognised and gladly saluted in the name of the Lord. It further describes the kind of life which is consonant with 'freedom' and the 'Spirit'. Historical and human interest may well have played a part in the preservation of this letter once the immediate crisis which it was written to meet had passed. The autobiographical element is of considerable importance and no doubt was so for some years after the event – though we should not confuse our academic reasons for valuing

this evidence with those of the Galatians or other early churches. Yet long after the urgency of the circumcision issue had faded, other features – the assessment of the Old Testament, the evidence for the two apostleships – continued to have direct implications for the expanding church movement. If, as Moule says, the Gospels 'filled a place broadly comparable to the narrative parts of the Hebrew Scriptures'<sup>5</sup> within the congregation, Paul's letters must have looked more and more like the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, say Jeremiah.

## (e) The Letter to the Romans

Although not written to a church of Paul's founding, Romans sought to establish and confirm Paul's apostleship to the Gentiles nevertheless. It is for this reason that Paul expounds the gospel as he does in this letter. It is hardly necessary to ask why it should have been preserved. It is offered by Paul to the Romans as a *pneumatikon charisma*, a spiritual gift, in written form. Perhaps he had also a practical purpose in reconciling Jewish and Gentile elements within the Roman community. But essentially his letter is a treatise on the gospel by way of memorandum 'because of the grace that was given to me by God' (15:15).

## (f) The Letter to the Ephesians

Finally, Ephesians is devoted to the theme that Paul's apostleship is the key to the evangelisation of the Gentile world; Gentiles must recognise this if they are to be truly incorporated into the body of Christ. Thus Ephesians gives the theological justification for preserving Paul's letters. Because of Paul's special relation to Christ and the task given to him as an apostle, it was inevitable that his written words should have been first *received* and then *preserved* by those who received them so that the foundation truth – and the

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p.101

traditions of faith and conduct proceeding from it – should not be lost. Finally, Paul's written words were received by *other* churches to whom they were not addressed, but who were the subsequent product of the mission of which Paul was the divinely appointed originator. Everything depended on an acceptance of the authority with which Paul claimed to speak in the first place and a recognition of the task to which he had been appointed.

We have distinguished between those parts of Paul's letters which are incidental to the particular occasion of his writing (and whose preservation it is difficult to explain in isolation) and those parts which so clearly rest on his role as apostle to the Gentiles, or which contain teaching of Christ or in his name. Philemon may have survived simply as an appendix to the letter to the Colossians. But being a model of how the relationship of a master and slave was transformed 'in Christ' – as well as of the way in which Paul exercised his pastoral concern – it may have been seen as valuable in itself. Philemon, though specific as to occasion and purpose, is not entirely personal: it includes 'the church in your house' in the address, along with Apphia and Archippus.

#### (g) The Pastoral Epistles

What of the Pastoral Epistles? These are not addressed to churches, but to his lieutenants. How did they come to be preserved and why? It is possible that Paul always intended them to be shared and that this would be an understood convention. But their content, setting forth Paul's 'ways in Christ' as he taught them in every church, ensured their preservation by church leaders once they came into other hands.

The starting point was that Paul's letters were received, acted on and preserved by the churches which received them. This was because Paul's role and authority as he set this forth within the letters was

acknowledged by those churches. He was God's emissary through the risen Lord Christ to them, the instrument of their salvation, their teacher and their model of faith and obedience. His letters contained the traditions by which their personal, family and social life and the conduct of their churches, were to be governed. Some of these traditions rested on explicit teaching of Jesus which Paul conveyed, some on the divine law as applied to the believers and some on common formulae adopted by the first Jewish churches. Paul's claim to be a prophet, i.e. to have the Spirit of God and the mind of Christ even in his personal judgements, was accepted – as was his exposition of the revelation of the scriptures, his interpretation of the present role of Israel and of Jews in the churches, and his expectations concerning the future.

The next step was the seeking out and adopting of these letters by churches to whom they were *not* addressed and for whom the particular concerns were not directly relevant. This step was taken because Paul's role and authority as an apostle and as a 'teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth' was acknowledged by those who took it.

It was at this point that certain questions of interpretation must have been raised – or at least problems must have been present. Some portions stood without modification, such as general statements of the gospel, scriptural exegesis and interpretation, the *verba Christi* and all the traditions which Paul laid on his churches. But particular and occasional matters could serve only as examples. It would have been appropriate for the receiving churches to view these incidents and matters in the same way as Paul viewed certain incidents of the Old Testament. As Paul says in I Corinthians 10:11: 'these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our

instruction'. But adjustments would have been called for, nevertheless.

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE GOSPEL AND PERSONAL CONDUCT

In chapter 2 we saw that before the term 'New Testament' came into use as a descriptive title for certain books in the process of canonisation, the terms 'gospel' and 'apostle' were being used. What really motivated the production of our New Testament as finally recognised and canonised was whatever was understood by *euangelion* and *apostolos*.

The distinction between these two groups of books is obvious enough. The term 'Gospel' was used of some books because they contained the words and works of Jesus, while the term 'apostle' was used of others because they were the letters of Paul the apostle. The terms were correlative: 'gospel' implies an apostle to convey gospel; 'apostle' implies a gospel as his credential. It is clear, however, that even before there existed written documents, the early Christian church must have had some form of 'gospel' and 'apostle' in the form of a 'tradition'.—in a form of words which the church had received and was able to transmit to new members or to others beyond them.

We can scarcely imagine a first-century Christian who, on becoming a member of a church, was not 'handed over to a form of teaching' (to use Paul's interesting expression in Romans 6:17) . which contained some statement as to what the gospel was and the principles of conduct expected of him or her. The statement as to what the *gospel* was may have been in a variety of forms: perhaps of the dynamic type – 'the kingdom of God is near', 'the judge is standing at the door', 'the night is far spent the day is at hand' or 'maranatha, the Lord is coming'; or of the static type – 'Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

he was buried; he was raised the third day according to the scriptures; he appeared to witnesses', 'Christ gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age' or 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (Mark 1:15; James 5:9; Romans 13:12; 1 Corinthians 16:22 and 15:3–5; Galatians 1:4; John 3:16). Any of these forms would fit into the pattern of gospel as we examined it earlier. The statement as to *conduct* would cover both personal and social ethics: 'this command we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also', 'bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ', household duties, duties to those in authority, duties towards those outside (1 John 4:21; Galatians 6:2). Also covered would be rules for the conduct of the affairs of the congregation: 'how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Timothy 3:15).

It is clear that the substance of both the gospel and of 'a manner of life worthy of the gospel' (Philippians 1:27) must have been imparted to any church at its foundation and to new members as they were joined to it. Such teaching would have been associated with the apostle or missionary whose ministry brought the church into being. Thus each church must have had both a 'gospel' and an 'apostle' from the beginning of its life and in a more or less fixed oral form, if not written form.

For Paul's churches – the typical Gentile churches – we have in his surviving letters a record of what the terms 'gospel' and 'apostle' in this sense meant for them. There are many succinct statements of the gospel in both dynamic and static form reflecting Paul's original preaching, as well as much more elaborate expositions of this gospel and its

implications. We also have a very clear idea of the 'traditions' regarding personal and corporate conduct which Paul imposed on his churches. This meant that these churches learned from the apostle a certain attitude to the Old Testament scriptures and their meaning – including how to share the salvation already being experienced by those who 'first hoped in Christ'. They became initiates into the great mystery, God's secret now revealed to the saints – 'Christ in you [Gentiles], the hope of glory'.

Not all churches were as fortunate as Paul's. Some were led to believe that they owed nothing to the Old Testament. Marcion's circle of adherents in the first half of the second century were told that 'the God of the Jews, the creator of this miserable world, was quite different from the God and Father of Jesus of whose existence the world had no inkling until the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar'<sup>6</sup> Marcion was excommunicated in AD 144 in Rome but, in view of the tendency of the Gnostics generally to depreciate the created order, one wonders how early there may have been Christians who were discouraged from seeing the Jewish scriptures as the source of truth about God. There were certainly some who taught that Gentiles could only be saved if they were circumcised and kept the law of Moses in all its ceremonial and ritual aspects. In Paul's time and later there were 'apostles' who went about as missionaries. Some Paul called 'false apostles', as did John in Revelation. We do not have any records of their exact teaching, but no doubt they had some kind of gospel and some kind of catechesis.

We do possess, however, records of what 'gospel' and 'apostle' meant in churches of Jewish believers. I

John, 1 Peter and Hebrews clearly indicate the terms in which the gospel was received in the churches to which these letters came and also the pattern of sound words by which the lives of these believers were to be regulated. The dual responsibility resting on an apostle to confirm his church or churches in both aspects of his message is well illustrated in all these documents. We need not hesitate to see the epistle of James in the same light, despite a marked difference of form and style. The gospel in James is actually more closely akin to the gospel as attributed to Jesus. The urgency of repentance is there in the face of the imminence of the last days – 'the judge is standing at the doors' (5:9). If we are right in seeing Jesus' actual mode of preaching the gospel built into his ethical and parabolic teaching – not a mere moralism but a challenge to the will demanding decision in face of the prophetic message – then we have something very similar in James. What is absent from James is any delineation of the role of Jesus himself, except in the phrase 'the coming of the Lord'. But this does not mean that James' readers were unaware of Jesus' role. What we don't know from any of these Jewish epistles is how the Christians of these churches viewed Gentile Christians.

At this early stage when the Pauline and other letters were written, the apostle of a church was the single source of both the gospel and the manner-of-life tradition thus articulated for the church. But when the canon was formed, the 'gospel' was what Jesus said and did (according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), while what was 'apostolic' was what Paul exhorted and taught in his churches – to which, in due time, was added what Peter and John taught their churches. The *antilegomena* were letters held by some (but not all) to be further models of apostolic exhortation, together with an apocalypse which was finally

<sup>6</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Harmondsworth, 1967, p.39

admitted, not because it claimed to be a word of prophecy but because it had the authority of an apostle. As we have seen, conformity of doctrine to the existing corpus, if not in every case acceptance of ascription, finally won them all a place in the canon of scripture.

We have seen the process by which a number of early Christian writings, though not written for posterity, came to have a literary future in the form of the New Testament canon. Also we have observed certain shifts as to the way in which some of their contents were viewed and applied by later generations into whose hands these writings came.

#### **POSSIBLE LOOPHOLES IN THE MAKING OF THE CANON**

Before looking at the future of the New Testament after it was canonised, we should clarify two matters raised by the process of canonisation. First, did the process of canonisation confer authority on the books which the books did not already possess? Second, in the case of doubtful or disputed books, did their acceptance settle for good the question of their authority, regardless of whether or not their origin had been accurately determined? A corollary of the second question is whether the authority of any of Paul's letters can *now* be called into question if doubts as to their origin are entertained?

The claims made by Paul and the credentials he offers are as astonishing as they are unique. But he is in the canon because those claims and credentials were in fact acknowledged. Like the prophet Jeremiah, or the special servant of the Lord of Isaiah's prophecy (42:1 and 6), Paul was sanctified from the womb to be the apostle to the nations. The churches at large came to accept Paul's claim, not merely because they accepted what they found written in certain documents at their face value. Behind the collecting of Paul's

letters stands the authority with which they were received in those churches to which each was individually sent. In other words their authority was due to the status of the author vis-à-vis the first recipients. Paul's letters to churches were instruments of the authority he possessed in regard to those churches.

We are not in the dark about the nature of this authority. It is the subject of considerable discussion in his writings and the letters are clearly part of the exercise of Paul's apostleship to the Gentiles according to the will of God. This fact must have been recognised when, late in the first century or early in the second, the corpus of Pauline letters was given an acceptance and recognition wider than that of the original recipients. Presumably the new circle of recipients saw themselves as within the scope of those to whom the gospel as expounded by Paul was sent. But they did not confer any additional authority on Paul, nor did his authority grow by reason of the wider acceptance of his letters. The situation can be described in this way.

Take as an example the first letter to the Corinthians. This letter was invested with full apostolic authority, claiming to be accepted as 'God's word through his minister, as soon as it had arrived in Corinth in, say, AD 54. The Corinthians had already received the gospel from Paul—with much instruction consequent upon it – but the letter, we must assume, crystallised the rule of faith in which the belief and conduct of the Corinthians were to be governed.

This estimate of the character and status of 1 Corinthians was not an estimate imposed on it by a later age. It was claimed for it by the writer. To the best of our knowledge the claim was accepted and acted on by some at once and by the whole church at

Corinth soon after. Before long this same claim was recognised by other churches and Christians, as 1 Corinthians was copied and passed around among the churches of the Pauline connection. The final stage of canonisation was reached when there was universal agreement among churches, quite outside the original circle to whom the letter had been specifically addressed, that 1 Corinthians was to be regarded in the same light.

This process may be regarded as reasonably likely for all the genuine letters of Paul – though we cannot of course trace it in all its stages in every book of the New Testament. Similarly, we can assume this process must have operated in the case of the four Gospels. Each must have been acknowledged in some church somewhere in the first place on the authority of its author or sponsor and received as ‘the gospel’, able to bring the readers to faith and to make them wise to salvation. But, to confine ourselves for the moment to Paul’s letters, may we not say that the test of whether the process resulting in canonisation was valid is this: was the authority of the apostle *correctly* perceived and accepted?

Here, of course, lies the problem of pseudonymity. Our access to all the letters ascribed to Paul is due to their having passed the final examination of acceptance in the canon. But they only attained this status because they were held by all at that time to be from Paul the apostle – instruments of his continuing authority in regard to the gospel which Christians must adhere to. What if, with reasonable probability, it now appears that one or more of these letters was not written by the apostle, or with his authority?

I should say at the outset that I do not in fact consider such a probability to be very high. It cannot be decided by tests of style or vocabulary. We are not considering literary authorship – ie. whether Paul

composed the letters all by himself– but whether or not these letters were sent with his authority. Furthermore, by what means and at what stage are we to suppose a pseudonym found acceptance in the process outlined above? Paul himself explicitly repudiated letters purporting to have come from him, according to 2 Thessalonians 2:2 putting his own seal or signature on his genuine letters. It would not perhaps have been surprising had letters come down to us written by Timothy to some church or other, claiming that they be acknowledged with the same esteem as Paul claimed for his letters, since we know Paul invested Timothy with authority to speak as his delegate. There are, in fact, no such documents.

But a letter *purporting* to be from Paul, yet not in reality by him or from him, would be in a different category and would not accord with Paul’s own notion of his authority. If it was pious fraud – that is, received and accepted by some unsuspecting church as having been addressed by Paul – or if it was discovered by a church at the second stage of canonisation and innocently believed to have been written by the real Paul to a real church some years earlier, by what argument could its credibility be sustained? It is often urged, of course, that pseudonymity was an acceptable literary device, and that no fraud would have been either intended or to be suspected. The document would have been regarded as a genuine piece of Christian teaching in the artificial but attractive guise of a Pauline letter from the start. But in the light of the known or generally assumed process regarding the undisputed letters of Paul – and in the light of Paul’s own teaching regarding his authority and his relation to the gentile churches – it is impossible to see at what point the cuckoo could have intruded her egg into the nest. It is almost as difficult to imagine at what point the free recognition

of an innocent pseudonymous letter changed into the mistaken acceptance of the letter as genuinely Pauline. Whether or not pseudonymity in letters, as distinct from pseudonymity in certain other literary forms, was a creditable practice in those days, there really is no room for such a possibility in the process up to the point of the first formation of the Pauline canon.

However, for the sake of argument, let the hypothesis stand. Suppose Ephesians, the Pastorals, 2 Thessalonians or Colossians were demonstrably pseudonymous and without Paul's authority, one would still have to conclude that they had wrongly been included in the canon. Why? Because they would lack the only authority which could validate their contents as Pauline teaching to which a believer would be bound to submit his conscience: Paul's authorship. In respect of actual doctrine, if the latter proved to be agreeable to the 'gospel' and the genuine 'apostle', it might safely be allowed to repose in a category of apocryphal books like 1 Clement or Hermas, read by individuals for instruction in life and manners. But it should not be regarded as holy scripture, controlling the life and worship of the church.

This argument can be applied to other letters claiming apostolic authority, whereas a different kind of testing is called for in the case of writings not claiming immediate apostolic authority and not enjoying the advantage of a fairly speedy process of wide recognition, such as Paul's letters obviously enjoyed. Paul the apostle must himself stand to be tested by the gospel as he admitted. So must Hebrews, Jude or the Revelation. All these may have been known to have, or have been assumed to have, apostolic authorisation of some kind. But we have no place for a category of letter which puts itself forward to be judged as apostolic in the name of an apostle who was not involved in its writing or authorisation.

Once the canon of the NT was established, the distinctiveness of its various parts tended to be lost and the whole corpus became a quarry from which to construct doctrinal formulations: the church to teach, the Bible to prove. It mattered little where the text came from. The NT, like the OT, became subject to the allegorical interpretation which enabled churchmen to project their theology back into the scriptural text. Historical exegesis revived with the Reformation, with a new appreciation of the distinction between principles of faith and order and the contingent situations of the first century in which those principles were first enunciated. Then with the rise of modern historical criticism new questions emerged for the future of the NT, including the question of pseudonymity which we have just been discussing.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

What then is the present outlook for the New Testament?

Kurt Aland, in an important essay on *The Problem of the New Testament Canon* (1962), argued that, while all Christian churches accept the same official canon of the NT and while any question of *adding* to the twenty-seven book canon is impossible to contemplate, in practice particular churches, confessions and schools of theological thought have all narrowed and shortened the canon. They have done this by their theological emphases – in their exegesis, teaching, and preaching. He believes this situation must be accepted realistically: the task before us is 'the discovery of the correct principles of selection from the formal canon and of its interpretation with the purpose of achieving a common, actual canon and a common interpretation of its contents'.<sup>7</sup> His counsel is that we begin by taking

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<sup>7</sup> Aland, *Problem*, p.31

the formal canon seriously and that we then question our own actual canon. We should also take seriously the actual canon of others with a view to establishing some sort of common understanding of its content. Aland seems to suppose that we might eventually achieve a different New Testament from the one we now have, though he does not imagine this would be properly achieved except by a new *consensus fidelium* and confidence in the power of the Spirit to interpret the providence of God to us.

But is this really how we should be facing the future? We may recognise that the formation of our twenty-seven book canon is essentially an ecclesiastical consensus based on certain presuppositions and that, if those presuppositions prove questionable, then in principle a modification of the canon could result. But that is not a likely course.

The apparent phenomenon of a 'canon within a canon' can be evaluated in another way. It is preferable to see within the canon certain books that are more surely based than others, regarding these as primary witnesses. If there is truly a canon within the canon, it is the canon of the apostolic gospel as testified by the primary witnesses: the fourfold Gospel and the epistles of Paul. There is no difficulty in a principle of interpretation which relates all other writings to these and which exercises caution, should need arise, in the rare event that these writings present us with otherwise unsupported teaching.

## CONCLUSION

The problem of eschatology is with us regardless of how we limit the canon, but this does not prevent us from opening our minds and hearts to the word of God speaking in this mode. The New Testament is still the primary witness to the gospel, which itself is the fulfilment of the Old Testament scripture. The interaction

of the NT writings with the OT is therefore of special importance – interaction with law as well as promise, indeed with every part of the OT. The NT says nothing to our time or our church except what it said to its first readers. This does not mean that we are to model ourselves on the New Testament churches – even if that were a possibility. Rather we are to respond to the urgency of the gospel of the kingdom of God, to open our ears to the word of Christ and of his apostles. This is not a question of failing to value our church traditions; it is a question of the ultimate significance of these traditions in the light of the kingdom of God.

This study has concentrated somewhat on the original strangeness and freshness of the NT documents and their scene. This is essential if we are to address ourselves to the task of our own time: being 'in' our generation, but not 'of' it. Yet, in the end, it is not our task at all. If we have rightly discerned the truth, it is God who acts, who acted before and who will act again. It is God who calls us into his own kingdom and glory. What we need is for the eyes of our heart to be enlightened – to know the hope that belongs to our calling, and to be ready for him to fulfil his will in and through us.

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