

Progressive Christian Network
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 Jesus of Nazareth in 2010

'Mary and Joseph, and the baby'

1 Introduction: On maintaining a critical faith

A critical faith which takes history, and therefore tradition history in the case of the Gospels, as a non-negotiable *sine qua non*, stands firmly within the parameters of scripture, tradition and reason. The matter was, if I may say so, summed up succinctly and sharply by the former Archbishop of York, John Habgood:

'I believe that Christians have to accept the vulnerability of a faith which bases its universal claims on events which are subject to historical scrutiny. The one is as essential as the other, both a coming to terms with the immensities of space and time, and an acknowledgement that they can only be given a Christian interpretation through a faith which is rooted in the contingencies of history, and so can give meaning to individual lives.' (Habgood 2000: 30).

If Christianity dares to make 'truth claims' it cannot countenance the creation of so-called history out of theology, for all that scripture itself shows that process to be at work from the earliest days. In studying the infancy narratives in particular, with their focus on the mother of Jesus, that is bound to mean that, as Alastair Kee has put it (2006: 310), 'what we need is not a Marian reading of the Bible but a biblical reading of Mary'. And a biblical reading of Mary cannot but be alive to the facts of biblical life, critical, tradition-historical, respectful of reason, aware of the distinction between what *might* be believed and what *should* be believed (*contra* ARCIC 2005).

The classic credal formulations of the Christian faith show no interest in the mission of the historical Jesus, Thus, typically, the so-called Nicene Creed:

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate ...

In respect of patterns derived from the Gospels this combines two schemes: (i) the Johannine Wisdom-dependent 'myth' (in the strict sense of that word) concerning the pre-existent heavenly emissary/revealer who descends and ascends, and (ii) the entirely human person whose significance is defined by a birth story that details divine purpose. The two are intrinsically quite distinct, as can be seen from a very important fact in the Gospels stories: (i) the Johannine scheme does not invest in, and certainly does not need, the idea of a virgin birth, a fact that is all the more striking if as seems likely John knew the Gospels of Matthew and Luke; (ii) the overall interpretation of the meaning of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke does not involve any idea of his pre-existence. We are therefore dealing with two quite distinct patterns of indebtedness to biblical tradition.

More can be said, even more than that. For theologically it is arguable that the Nicene Creed attempts in its loyalty to the NT to combine ideas which cannot and should not be combined. For the notion of a virgin birth is not only distinct from the idea of heavenly origin but it is also arguably at odds with the full and complete human-ness of Jesus. That unequivocal human-ness must be a given.

At this point it is worth listening to the words of the late John Macquarrie, Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford during the years 1970-86. Macquarrie was inclined towards Marian doctrine of a catholic sort, an inclination that left him open to severe criticism (Kee 2006: 307-313), his firm respect for historical method and keen awareness of the theological down-side of the virgin birth hypothesis remain salutary.

'No doubt the details of both Matthew's and Luke's birth narratives are legendary, though they also illustrate the power of a concrete story when one considers how these nativity scenarios have impressed themselves on Christian imaginations.' (1990: 95)

'Our historical information is negligible ... The birth narratives are manifestly legendary in character ... In spite of the fact that the virginal conception of Jesus (commonly called the 'virgin birth') has the status of a dogma of the church, I think we have to look at this dogma very critically and ask whether it makes any worthwhile contribution to christology.

'Would the belief that Jesus was born of one human parent alone in any way enhance his stature in our eyes or his authority as one sent by God or the claim that he is the paradigm of humanity? I do not believe so. On the contrary, it would encourage the wrong kind of christology, the 'divine man' christology which still lingers in some quarters today and which demeans Christ by turning him into a miracle-worker. And that leads to the further point, that if we suppose Christ to have been conceived and born in an altogether unique way, then it seems that we have separated him from the rest of the human race and thereby made him irrelevant to the human quest for salvation or for the true life. We would be saying not that he is the revelation of God shedding light in our darkness, but that he is an altogether unintelligible anomaly, thrust into the middle of history.' (1990: 393)

Significant as those observations are, we must not allow theology to dictate our conclusions concerning the underlying history, so it is to a study of the history of the Gospel traditions that we now turn, and all with a view to reaching provisional decisions concerning the beginning of the life story of Jesus of Nazareth.

2 The contribution of Mark

Mark has a highly developed, resurrection-influenced christology but no infancy narrative. He does not align himself with the tendency of many ancient biographies to interpret 'great heroes' by telling legendary stories about their births. However, the historian is still greatly helped by the evidence of Mark (and even John) that the relationship between Jesus and his mother was so strained that any notion of a supernatural conception is rendered highly improbable.

- a. Mark 3.20-21, 31-35 'sandwiches' the controversy about whether Jesus performs exorcisms by divine or demonic power (3.22-30) within the story of intra-familial tension. Jesus keeps his relatives, especially his mother, at arm's length as 'those outside', a term which is used again in the next sandwich structure – 4.10-12, inside 4.3-9, 13-20 – to set up a sharp contrast with 'those around him [cf. 3.34] with the twelve'.

- b. Mark 6.4 adds 'those who are related to him and those in his own home' to those 'in his hometown' who reject the prophet.

The fourth Gospel supports and reinforces the evidence of Mark. John 7.1-9 amplifies the allusion to 'his brothers', following the wedding in Cana (2.12), and confirms that although they accepted Jesus as a miracle worker 'not even his brothers believed in him' (7.5). In so doing, John categorizes Jesus' mother in the same way: she accepts Jesus as a miracle worker, but the space between him and her is recognized by the question, 'Woman, what have I to do with you?' (2.4).

What exactly does he mean? The answer is that parallels for 'what have I to do with you?' point to the sense of a *disavowal of connection* of one sort or another. Thus

Judges 11.12 describes a situation in which Jephthah sends a message to the king of the Ammonites, asking why invasion and conflict have been threatened: 'What is there between you and me that you have come to me to fight against my land?' It is not just that there appears to be no *casus belli*, but also that the line between separate spheres of existence is being crossed.

2 Samuel 16.10; 19.22 details David's moderate response to the cursing of Shimei, one of the devotees of Saul, which stirred Abishai son of Zeruiah to request permission to go and take off the head of Shimei: 'What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah?' The alternative wording is 'What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should today become an adversary to me?' It is a formula of separation and rejection of the proposal that has been made.

1 Kings 17.18 has the widow using this formula in a protest to Elijah after the death of her son: 'What have I to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!' Essentially she does not want Elijah as a God-connected person to be part of her life.

2 Kings 3.13 uses the formula to insist on the gap between Elisha and Jehoram, the king of Israel, who 'did evil in the sight of the Lord' (vv. 2-3): 'What have I to do with you? Go to your father's prophets or your mother's.' Again a case of distancing and dissociation.

2 Chronicles 35.21 puts this phrase in the mouth of Neco, king of Egypt, when speaking to Josiah and indicating that he is attacking Judah and has no quarrel with Josiah himself. The implication is that Neco dissociates his action from Josiah.

Mark 1.24 has the demoniac, speaking as the mouthpiece of the demon, saying: 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' There is 'a consciousness of difference in nature from Jesus' (Marcus 1999: 187), a way of asking the question, 'Why are you interfering with us?' (Hooker 1991: 64).

So this idiom expresses distance or separation, and when used by Jesus to his mother indicates that in spite of kinship they belong to two different and unconnected spheres of life.

Finally, the Q tradition provides further evidence of family tension by quoting the current critique of both John and Jesus (Luke/Q 7.33-34):

³³For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon"; ³⁴the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!"

The critical allusion to Jesus as a 'glutton and a drunkard' classifies him slanderously as a 'stubborn and rebellious son', someone who is guilty of a capital offence for disobeying his parents (Deuteronomy 21.20).

It is highly unlikely that the Marcan and Johannine schemes in particular would have been constructed if there had been no historical basis for so negative an assessment of those who came to be members of, and prominent in, the early church (cf. Acts 1.14; 15.13; Galatians 1.18-2.14).

3 From pre-Luke to Luke

- 3.1 The story of the annunciation of Jesus' birth to Mary by the angel is set in an ongoing narrative that is dominated by the story of the birth of John the Baptist. The underlying, pre-Lucan narrative concerning John was probably preserved in the circle of his followers (who did not all disappear after his death and the beginning of the mission of Jesus, cf. Luke/Q 7.18-23; Acts 18.24-19.7), and can be reconstructed (cf. Vielhauer 1965).
- 3.2 There is an important preliminary issue that needs to be tackled before we analyse where the material came from, and what it is trying to say. In Luke's narrative as he wrote it, who did he have singing the *Magnificat*? Answer: very likely, Elizabeth!
- a. There is variety in the manuscript tradition of v. 46, with a significant minority of manuscripts reading 'And Elizabeth said ...' over against the majority reading 'And Mary said ...'. It is easier to think of manuscript copyists changing from Elizabeth to Mary than the other way round. What would be the motive for that?
 - b. After the *Magnificat* we read (v. 56) that 'Mary stayed with her ...', which presumes that Elizabeth was the previous speaker. Otherwise, v. 56 should read 'She stayed with Elizabeth ...'. It doesn't.
 - c. The strategy of the *Magnificat* is to move from the situation of a woman to that of the nation, and the woman's position is defined in v. 48 as 'humiliation', a term which within a culture which saw infertility as the 'fault' of the woman and a cause of shame fits the predicament of Elizabeth and not in any way at all the situation of Mary.
 - d. The strongest biblical echoes that can be detected in the *Magnificat* come from the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2.1-10). Elizabeth's problem matches that of Hannah: Mary's situation is not parallel at all. In this vein it is striking that after the birth of John, Elizabeth's friends and relatives 'heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her' – and mercy is the great and overarching theme of the preceding song, the *Magnificat*: 'His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation ... He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy' (vv. 50, 54).

So Luke 1, as it left Luke's own pen, probably presented Elizabeth as the person who burst into song with the *Magnificat*. And this produces the following structure for the chapter as a whole:

vv. 5-25:	the narrative of the annunciation by Gabriel to Zechariah concerning the birth of John, and Elizabeth's pregnancy
vv. 26-38	the narrative of the annunciation by Gabriel to Mary concerning the birth of Jesus (including sideways allusion in vv. 36-37 to the pregnancy of Elizabeth)
vv. 39-45, 56	the visit of Mary to Elizabeth
vv. 46-55	the <i>Magnificat</i> , the song of John's mother, Elizabeth
vv. 57-66	the narrative of the birth and naming of John
vv. 67, 76-79	the <i>Benedictus</i> , the song of John's father, Zechariah
vv. 68-75	the acclamation of the Davidic saviour
v. 80	the early life of John prior to public mission

3.3 The 'atmosphere' of the story of John is intensely Jewish. Note:

- a. the priestly pedigree of Zechariah and Elizabeth (v.5): (i) Zechariah belongs to one of the 24 orders of priesthood (cf. 1 Chronicles 24.1-19), each involving 4-9 families; (ii) Elizabeth is of priestly descent, the highly preferred background for the wife of a priest (failing which, strict purity requirements had to be satisfied);
- b. the classic Jewish pattern of piety (v. 6);
- c. the pain and shame of childlessness (vv. 7, 13, 25, 58; cf. Psalm 127.3-4; 128.3-4): cf. the pain of Sarah/Abraham (Genesis 17-18), Rachel/Jacob (Genesis 30), and especially Hannah/Elkanah (1 Samuel 1);
- d. the appearance of the angel Gabriel (v. 19), the angel specially entrusted with the affairs of Israel (Dan 8.16; 9.21), and on the *right* side, the place of honour and authority;
- e. the naming of the child as the particular right of the father (vv. 13, 59-63), with God's interest being specially indicated by this means, cf. Genesis 16.11; 17.19; Isaiah 7.14: John = 'God is gracious' => God's grace to be particularly experienced through John's person and mission;
- f. John's destiny as someone specially dedicated to God (vv. 15-17), using the patterns of Nazirite (Numbers 6.1-21; Judges 13.3-7) and prophet (Isaiah 49.1; Jeremiah 1.5), especially Elijah/Elisha.

The story of John is controlled by (i) the message of the angel, who defines his status and the work he has to do, and (ii) the two songs sung by his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah – the *Magnificat* (1.46-55) and the *Benedictus* (1.68-79). Angelic messages and hymns, by virtue of their poetic form and formal structure, are always taken to be inspired truth!

3.4 The defining tradition concerning Jesus which Luke inserts into the essentially Baptist narrative is his 1.26-38. Does he wish the message of the angel to be interpreted in terms of a virgin conception? Very likely, yes.

In Luke 3.23, he says, 'Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his work. He was the son (*as was supposed*) of Joseph son of Heli ...'. The verb 'to suppose' (*nomizō*) is used in Luke 2.44; Acts 7.25; 8.20; 14.19; 16.27; 21.29 for an *incorrect* inference, though in Acts 16.13; 17.29 it is used in the sense of a *correct* one. Luke 3.23 seems to imply an *incorrect* view, in which case Luke registers his view that Joseph is not the father of Jesus.

But does the tradition of the annunciation to Mary convey that same view? We are left with two possibilities: *either* the pre-Lucan story in Luke 1.26-35, 38 (see below) did envisage a 'virgin conception', *or* it did not envisage a 'virgin conception' but Luke took it that way. In the latter case, his thought would presumably have been influenced by widespread legends in the Graeco-Roman world which saw the births of hero figures as brought about by a mating of a human person and a god. We shall see!

- 3.5 If the narrative in Luke 1 is primarily the pre-Lucan and non-Christian story of John the Baptist, into which the story of Jesus has then been threaded, then part of the 'threading in' is the inserted material:

³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.

This is an echo of God's saying to Abraham, "Is anything impossible with God? At the set time I will return to you in due season, and Sarah shall have a son" (Genesis 18.14), which draws attention to a divine intervention that brings about a pregnancy – though not without a father! The artificial presence of vv. 36-37 within vv. 26-38 is, it must be stressed, about Elizabeth, but it may encourage the thought that Mary's becoming pregnant is a result of a divine intervention, but it would be going too far, in view of the precedent, to infer no male involvement in the act of God that is promised.

As for the story about Jesus, this is the original with which we have to work:

²⁶... the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you! ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.' ³⁶Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

- 3.6 The story of the annunciation to Mary is unlikely to be a Lucan construction, partly because of the literary awkwardness brought about by the allusion to Elizabeth (vv. 36-37), and partly because of overlaps between the two traditions in Matthew 1.18-21, 24-25 and Luke 1.26-35, 38. Those include:
- timing during the period of engagement to Joseph, a man of Davidic ancestry;
 - the typical epiphany motif of overcoming fear;
 - the involvement of the Holy Spirit;
 - the naming of the expected baby as 'Jesus';
 - the definition of the role of the baby in the history of Israel; and
 - the obedience of the recipient of revelation.

However, the independence of the two traditions is reinforced by significant non-overlaps, which also constitute a warning against over-hasty inferences of historicity. These are

- a. the different recipient of the epiphany (Mary *versus* Joseph), requiring us to suppose, if we were operating (wrongly!) in harmonizing mode, that the 'explanation' of Mary's pregnancy is known in advance to her but never disclosed to Joseph, even in the teeth of his plan to divorce his fiancée; and
- b. the overcoming of an objection (Mary engaged but not married *versus* Mary engaged but already pregnant).

In and of itself, Luke's story conforms to the standard pattern of 'angelic appearance' story, much used in the OT, in connection with prior announcements of births, cf. the following parallels:

Genesis 16.11: 'And the angel of the Lord said to [Hagar], "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael [=God hears], for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man."

Judges 13.3: 'And the angel of the Lord appeared to [Manoah's wife] and said to her, "Although you were barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son ... the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from his birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

In view of such a literary family classification, the hinge of Luke's story must be the word of the angel, which discloses the future role of the coming child. So for the Lucan story the stress is on vv. 31-32, amplified in v. 35: Jesus is the holy liberator of Israel!

3.7 There are six elements of the story that need careful evaluation:

- the initial description of Mary as a virgin (v.27: *parthenos*);
- the language of grace (vv. 28, 30);
- the implications of Sonship (vv. 32, 35);
- the idea of 'overshadowing' (v. 35);
- the implications of Mary's question (v. 34); and finally,
- the so-called step-parallelism whereby a wondrous birth in the case of John supposedly needs to be followed by an even more wondrous birth in the case of Jesus, and hence the necessity of a virgin conception (Fitzmyer 1981: 337-338; Brown 1993: 299-301).

3.7.1 The term *virgin* simply refers in a Jewish context to a woman without previous sexual experience. As OT specialists regularly insist, the famous text of Isaiah 7.14 ('Behold, a virgin shall conceive ...') was never understood – whether in the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint – as pointing to a woman about to become pregnant without any male involvement. The important thing about virginity is that newness/priority implies specialness, cf. the Palm Sunday colt 'that has never been ridden' (Mark 11.2), as is fitting for a king, and the tomb that had not previously been used (Matthew 27.60/Luke 23.53).

Marriage customs at the time of Jesus, one must recall, meant that betrothal counted formally as marriage, except that the woman remained in the care of her father, and sexual relations with the spouse did not take place until completion of the legal procedures. That is Mary's situation. At the time of Gabriel's visit she is contractually engaged, appropriately still without sexual experience, and on the point of marriage, in which context she would normally anticipate pregnancy. According to the story, she will indeed become pregnant with a baby who (in the line of the father) will be qualified to be messiah.

[Note that in Matthew 1.24-25, the couple moves beyond engagement into marriage before Jesus' birth, whereas in Luke 2.5, quite unrealistically in terms of cultural norms, the engaged woman is in the care of her husband-to-be and the birth takes place prior to marriage.]

- 3.7.2 In respect of '*grace*', the initial term translated in the NRSV as 'favoured one' in v. 28 is subsequently interpreted by means of 'you have found favour' in v. 30. The term 'to find favour' is almost a biblical commonplace (rightly, Brown 1993: 289): thus, as examples of human persons in relation to God, Noah (Genesis 6.3); Abraham (Genesis 18.3); and Moses (Exodus 33.12-17).

As far as the individual person is concerned, the stress is normally on how the people of God will be affected for good by forthcoming events centred on that person. This represents the tradition into which Luke 1.30 fits: Mary is about to be the means for a decisive, saving intervention by God. It does not require more to be said about her than about Noah, Abraham or Moses.

- 3.7.3 In respect of *Sonship*, the parallelism between 'he will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord will give him the throne of his ancestor David' (1.32) and 'he will be called Son of God' (1.35) is the crucial consideration. We are in the sphere of Israelite kingship, where the expected Davidic promise is about to be fulfilled (cf. 2 Samuel 7.14).

It is all the more important that we take seriously the royal Davidic element, for failure to do so leaves unexplained why the tradition should be so careful to define Joseph as being 'of the house of David' (cf. 1.69; 2.4 alone elsewhere in the NT, with which relate 'house of Jacob', 1.33). The story as it stands functions in the same way as the genealogies in Matthew 1.2-16; Luke 3.23-38, that is to say, to secure the messianic status of Jesus by means of the pedigree of his father Joseph.

- 3.7.4 In respect of '*overshadowing*', which has no connotations of conception (Fitzmyer 1981: 337; Brown 1993: 290), we have rather limited LXX precedents with which to work. Examples: Exodus 40.35 concerning the visitation of divine glory to the tent; Psalm 90(91).4 concerning the shelter, protection and deliverance of the person who trusts in God; Psalm 139(140).8: 'Lord, Lord, power of my salvation, you have overshadowed my head in the day of war', concerning the exercise of divine power.

The implications for Luke 1.35 would seem to be conveyed by the subject of the verb, 'power', and the parallelism with 'the Holy Spirit will *come upon* [or 'make contact with' you]. The terminology of that last statement is typically Lucan and without any sexual overtone, cf. Simeon, 2.25; Jesus, 3.22; 4.18; the gospel messengers, Acts 1.8; humankind, Acts 2.17; the audience of the gospel, Acts 10.44; 11.15; 19.6).

So a more traditionally Jewish reading suggests that *the interventionist power* of God, represented by the Holy Spirit, will bring about the pregnancy of which Gabriel has spoken. In and of itself, against the background of the texts assembled below, which declare direct divine participation in a specific and entirely normal process of procreation (cf. Galatians 4.29: Fitzmyer 1981: 338), this does not in itself exclude Joseph as the natural father.

- 3.7.5 In respect of *Mary's question*, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?', there is an important issue of meaning to be clarified at the outset. When Mary asks her question, what does she mean by 'this'? It can hardly be anything other than the birth of the Davidic Son of God. If v. 35 is genuinely an answer to the question generated by the declaration in vv. 31-33, the meaning of 'Son of God' must be identical: to change the meaning *en route*, as it were, would be to take the word 'this' insufficiently seriously. For this reason the suggestion that after 1.35 we move to a literal understanding of 'Son of the Most High' and an indispensable notion of Mary's virginity (thus Bovon 2002: 44, 52) is likely to be a misunderstanding.

Then, secondly, we must also recall that 'the pattern of OT birth-announcements calls for a question or objection' (Fitzmyer 1981: 337, 348: cf. Luke 1.18), so the answer must be in terms of literary function. It is 'part of the literary device of dramatization' or 'rhetorical, inviting further information from the angel' (Green 1997: 90). Its function is that of enabling the angel to provide further clarification in v. 35 of the 'how?' question after the initial announcement in vv. 31-33, cf. Fitzmyer (1989) 68: 'a story-teller's [*sic*] device to advance the heavenly communication to her', citing Genesis 17.17 and Judges 13 (though the latter is a less exact parallel).

The 'how?' question is artificial (Bultmann 1963: 295: 'an absurd one for a bride') but *a standard device in epiphany stories*. It is intended to give an opportunity for clarification of what has previously been said. (For another example, cf. John 3.4, a 'dumb question' designed to facilitate the discourse that follows.) The unreality this time stems from Mary's being already in a formally confirmed relationship about to be consummated. Luke begins the story by drawing attention to it – and then saying nothing more about Joseph! Mary's question, in other words, exists for the sake of the answer and is indeed generated by the answer, thus highlighting *the prospective intervention by the Holy Spirit*. That intervention does not modify the normal process of procreation, as the following examples confirm. We note:

1. how the conception and birth of Cain came about – 'I have produced a man with the help of the Lord', cries the mother (Genesis 4.1), notwithstanding the narrator's comment that 'the man knew his wife Eve' (4.1);
2. how 'the Lord raised up another seed' (*Jubilees* 4.7) in place of Cain from the Adam-Eve partnership (Genesis 5.3);
3. how the promise to Abraham that 'I will give you a son by her ... I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son' was fulfilled when 'the Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said' (Genesis 17.16; 18.10, 14, cf. *Jubilees* 16.12);

4. how it was said of both Leah and Rachel that 'the Lord opened her womb and she conceived and bore a son' (Genesis 29.31; 30.22-23);
 5. how the Targums (Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible) use a heavenly voice to say of the pregnancy of the unfortunate Tamar with the deceitful Judah that 'It is from me that this thing comes from me/God' (Schaberg 1995: 24), while *Testament of Judah* 12.6 records that Judah's discovery of Tamar's pregnancy made him want to kill her, but he was prevented for it was 'from the Lord';
 6. how in the story of Ruth 'Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; when they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son' (Ruth 4.13);
 7. how the difference between conception and non-conception for the distressed and shamed Hannah, enjoying throughout normal sexual relations with her husband, was the change from 'the Lord had closed her womb' to 'the Lord remembered her' (1 Samuel 1.5-6, 19).
- 3.7.6 In respect of the *step-parallelism*, the answer is already indicated by the discrepancy in the status and functions assigned to the two babies – a prophet (vv. 15-17) overtaken in significance by the ultimate king (v. 32) – within a tradition which is conceded to be primarily christological. Moreover, the comparison with John belongs not at the stage of the pre-Lucan tradition but at the stage when this tradition is adopted and incorporated in the present narrative.
- 3.8 in sum, the pre-Lucan tradition shares with the Matthean tradition (Matthew 1.18-25) the deep-seated theological conviction that God's providential programme for Israel reaches a high point with Jesus. Angelic announcements say so; the careful naming of the baby says so; the involvement of the divine Spirit in the procreative process says so.

4 Matthew on the birth of Jesus

Just before Christmas 2008 the BBC reported on a survey carried out by *Ecclesia*, the Christian survey organization, which found that 750 out of every 1,000 people questioned did not believe in the virgin birth, the shepherds or even the wise men. Many of those questioned claimed to be Christians – plainly critical Christian thinking is alive and well, at least in some circles.

In the same week Rowan Williams, when asked by Ian Hislop whether he believed in the magi visiting the stable, responded cryptically and elliptically, 'I think we can trust the early chapters of Matthew's gospel' – which simply provokes the further question, 'Trust in respect of what and for what?' Was it a direct answer affirming historicity? Or was it a diversionary answer, sidestepping the historical issue?

- 4.1 Matthew provides us with an alternative story about the situation prior to the birth of Jesus. Told from Joseph's point of view, it is markedly different from Luke's story, which is told from Mary's point of view. For all that there are the minor points of overlap (listed above, §3.6), the two stories proceed in total ignorance of one another.

Matthew 1.18-25 does not introduce any idea of Jesus as Son of God, for all that the evangelist is interested in that idea (see 2.15). The specialness of Jesus is defined in terms of his being the saviour of Israel.

4.2 The tradition of the angelic epiphany to Joseph (Matthew 1.18-25) is as follows:

^{18b}When Mary the mother [of Jesus] had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit.¹⁹Joseph, being a righteous man, and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly.

²⁰But when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel."

²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,^{25a} but had no marital relations with her until ^{25b}and she bore a son; and he named him Jesus.

The story has, following Matthew's editorial intervention, grown in the telling.

- a. The first reference to the involvement of the Holy Spirit (v. 18b) relaxes the tension and anticipates the authoritative explanation by the angel (v. 20).
- b. Joseph was under an *obligation* to divorce his fiancée, given that she had become pregnant (and not by him) during the period of betrothal (Bockmuehl 2000). And a divorce was a divorce: privacy and secrecy do not enter into it, unless the procedure of public testing concerning the woman's responsibility is involved. The word 'secretly' is used again shortly afterwards in Matthew 2.7. It is likely to be Matthew's editorial work.
- c. The fulfilment quotation (vv. 22-23) is typical of Matthew's interest in the fulfilment theme (cf. 2.5, 15, 17, 23), and the duplication of names suggests secondary expansion. The story reads more smoothly, and is consistent and complete in itself, if we move straight from v. 21 to v. 24.

This leaves the following pre-Matthean tradition:

^{18b}When Mary the mother [of Jesus] had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant. ¹⁹Joseph, being a righteous man, planned to divorce her.

²⁰But when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until and she bore a son; and he named him Jesus.

- 4.3 The key phrase in the pre-Matthean story is 'from the Holy Spirit' (v. 20). This connects with the many OT stories we listed above (§3.7.5), in which the providential agency of God is affirmed or understood in situations of normal sexual activity involving both a man and a woman.

In all such cases the intervention of God is effected through, and not by circumventing, the normal process of procreation – and nothing in the pre-Matthean story of the birth of Jesus suggests anything different.

- 4.4 Joseph is the hero of this story. Once the key phrase 'from the Holy Spirit' has been assessed, it becomes possible to focus on the nature of his dilemma: he decides that divorce rather than death should be the outcome of this shaming (to him) pregnancy, that is, he takes account of the clear distinction in biblical law between voluntary and involuntary sexual activity by an engaged woman, cf. Deuteronomy 22.23-24, 25-27.

²²If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

²³If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, ²⁴you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbour's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

²⁵But if the man meets the engaged woman in the open country, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. ²⁶You shall do nothing to the young woman; the young woman has not committed an offence punishable by death, because this case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbour. ²⁷Since he found her in the open country, the engaged woman may have cried for help, but there was no one to rescue her.

At the start Joseph is said to be 'righteous', in that he recognises that violation of the bond of engagement always requires divorce procedure, and at the end he abstains from sexual intercourse with his pregnant wife, bearing in mind current convention:

'None who has intercourse with a woman who is with child can be considered pure.' (Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.202)

'Do not lay your hand upon your wife when she is pregnant.' (Pseudo-Phocylides, *Sentences* 186)

Joseph intends a living together (v. 20), and is told to marry (vv. 20, 24), so is not in the business of an unconsummated relationship and perpetual virginity. He is thinking about what Jewish people would regard as a proper marriage, but that is for a later date. Meanwhile, before, during and after the encounter with the angel, he is the very model of punctilious law-keeping.

In the body of the story, he only deviates from the requirement (*sic*) to divorce his fiancée because he is specifically and directly instructed by the angel. As we have already seen, the angel's message about the Holy Spirit's involvement in the pregnancy activates for the reader the memory of that series of other pregnancies in biblical literature, pregnancies brought about by normal sexual relations between a man and a woman, where God had been

providentially involved. That was just another way of saying that what had happened, even if it represented a problem of colossal seriousness, could be set within the ever-paradoxical, unpredictable, but providential programme of God. After all, the expected child would, according to the angel and therefore according to God, be the restorer of Israel.

4.5 As for Mary, the nature of the liaison which brought about the pregnancy is left undefined – and the distinction drawn by legal texts treating this problem between a woman's being complicit or forcibly violated (Deuteronomy 22.23-24, 25-27; Philo, *Special Laws* 3.72-78; Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.251-252) is not picked up explicitly.

- If the death penalty was in place at the time for both complicit partners, the initial decision of Joseph to do no more than activate divorce proceedings would suggest that forcible violation had occurred, in which case Philo's reference to the 'mercy and understanding' which the woman deserved would come into the reckoning.
- If the death penalty was not in place at the time, the text of Matthew leaves the background quite unexplained.

On any showing, however, the colossally serious problem was a pregnancy that proved sexual intercourse to have taken place with someone other than Joseph after engagement to Joseph had been agreed.

4.6 While the angelic/dream feature recalls the many such angelic/dream stories in biblical literature, stirring the usual doubts about historicity in consequence, the desperate and all too human problem that is thus 'solved' is perhaps unlikely to be an unhistorical Christian creation (cf. Schaberg 1995).

The main restraint on such a conclusion is the multiple attestation of Joseph's fatherhood in a series of traditions.

It is therefore difficult to draw conclusions with any confidence. All one can say is that either explanation – ordinary and legitimate sonship to Mary with Joseph, or illegitimate sonship to Mary and an unidentified male, with Joseph's acting later only as legal and 'official' father – provides a more credible backdrop for the subsequently strained relationship between Jesus and his mother than the suggestion of an abnormal conception can ever do. Such a suggestion is, in the end, historically and theologically dubious.

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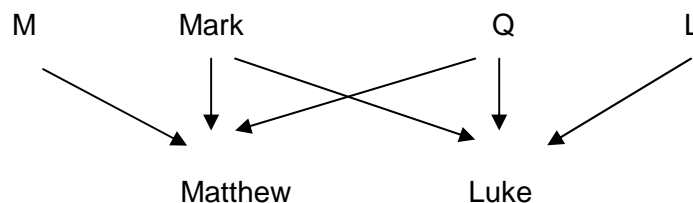
Progressive Christian Network
 St Deiniol's Weekend Conference
 21-23 May 2010
 Jesus of Nazareth in 2010

‘Not a Christian but a Jew’?

‘Jesus was not a Christian: he was a Jew. He did not proclaim a new faith, but taught men to do the will of God. According to Jesus, as to the Jews generally, this will of God is to be found in the Law and the other canonical Scriptures.’
 (Julius Wellhausen, 1905)

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In reading the gospels it is vitally important that one remembers that they are formed by resurrection faith and reflect back what had come to be believed about Jesus on to what could be recalled about him as a historical person. Consequently the classic criteria have to be used in order to sift out what genuinely belongs to the mission of the historical Jesus: (i) Palestinian assumptions; (ii) multiple attestation; (iii) embarrassment to the developing Christian communities; (iv) convincing continuity with known developments in early Christianity; (v) internal coherence within the growing body of probably historical evidence; and (vi) harmony with the likely overall profile of the historical Jesus as a prophet.
- 1.2 The gospels can be approached either *synchronically*, i.e. in a way that recognizes the literary wholeness of the total narrative – hence narrative criticism – or *diachronically*, i.e. in a way that recognizes the history of each individual and separable tradition – hence source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism. These two perspectives are not opposed to one another: at their best they complement and balance one another.
- 1.2.1 The main explanation of their relationship is the following (cf. Tuckett 1983):



That means that Mark was used by both Matthew and Luke, and that the material in Matthew and Luke which did not come from Mark was drawn from another source. ‘Q’ is short for the German word for ‘source’ (Quelle). In addition there are traditions that are only present in one gospel: ‘M’ for the material that is only in Matthew, and ‘L’ for the material that is only in Luke.

- 1.2.2 This can be qualified and extended by noting (i) that several times Matthew and Luke seem to be working with a version of Mark that is earlier than the

version we have; and (ii) that whereas many Johannine specialists think that the Fourth Gospel is dependent on synoptic tradition rather than any or all of the synoptic gospels, a strong case can be made for direct dependence on them all.

2 Enter the Christians!

- 2.1 The first reference to 'Christians' in the NT is found in Acts 11.26 at the conclusion of a narrative that documents a momentous development in Christian history. Here is the text itself, followed by some considerations that help us to interpret it.

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. ²² News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'.

- a. This account of the Christian advance to the gentiles has survived in spite of Luke's efforts to pre-empt it by means of the (doubtfully historical) Cornelius story in Acts 10.1-11.18.
- b. The 'gathering together in the church' means sharing in the assembling of the local community. What we know about such gatherings suggests that they followed the model of Greco-Roman celebratory meals, within which there were three components: (i) the meal, (ii) a libation in honour of god/gods, and (iii) a symposium given over to teaching (cf. 'they taught a great many people', Acts 11.26) and discussion. Cf. Smith 2003; Taussig 2009. The scenario in Antioch is also depicted by Galatians 2.1-10, 11-14.
- c. The associations that were widespread within the Greco-Roman world often used titles which expressed the common concern/commitment which drew them together for such meals – thus, 'the Late Night Drinkers' (no comment!) or 'the Society of Rag Dealers'; the 'Dionysiasts' (devotees of the god Dionysius), or 'Sarapiasts' (devotees of the god Sarapis), and also 'comrades' or 'brothers'.
- d. The name 'Christians' plainly had a theological underpinning, and the theology which underpinned it can be accessed through the often controversial Pauline letters. It can be summarized as follows.

While the term 'Christ' continues to be used, thus implying a connection with the Jewish roots of the movement where it would be understood as messianic in some sense, it has actually become a proper name that signifies personal identity. The christology that Paul doubtless taught in

Antioch was strikingly innovative – thus provoking modern people (whether or not they really understand him!) to suspect that he was the founder of Christianity. For him the resurrection initiated a new era in which the polarized opposites that characterized the old creation/world were brought together in a single whole (thus 2 Corinthians 5.17; Galatians 3.26-28). This was achieved by participation in the corporate figure of the risen Christ. The definition of ‘the people of God’ had to be adjusted in this light: now the old equation (the people of God = Israel) has to be replaced by a new equation (the people of God = the non-discriminatory community of those who acknowledge the Lordship of the risen Christ).

The expression of this new oneness in fellowship meals where Christians, irrespective of whether they were Jews or gentiles, was a non-negotiable manifestation of the new ‘freedom’ (Galatians 2.4) or ‘the truth of the gospel’ (Galatians 2.5, 14). By freedom Paul means that the boundary markers or ‘badges of identity’ of the people of God are no longer circumcision, Sabbath and food laws. So a gentile who acknowledges the Lordship of the risen Christ does not have to become a Jew in order to belong to the people of God.

It is fairly clear that this pattern of belief and religion is somewhat at variance with the position of the historical Jesus, and it was also hard for the members of the earliest Jerusalem community of followers of Jesus to take it. This makes it understandable that there were so much conflict between Paul, who had a sophisticated resurrection-galvanized theology, and the leaders of the Jerusalem community, who also had a serious theology conditioned by an unswerving commitment to the definition of the people of God as Israel (cf. Galatians 2.1-14).

- 2.2 There was, however, no conflict over the conviction that Jesus was Christ, as the earliest credal statement emanating from Jerusalem confirms. Those earliest Christians dated Jesus’ messiahship from the resurrection (Acts 2.36; Romans 1.3-4). But the early pre-Pauline Christian faith-statement in 1 Corinthians 15.3b-5, 7 uses the term ‘Christ/messiah’ for the one who *died, and was buried*, before being raised.

^{3b}Christ died | for our sins | in accordance with to the scriptures;

^{4a}he was buried;

^{4b}he has been raised | on the third day | in accordance with the scriptures.

Such language could scarcely have been generated for the first time by the passion (which in Jewish thought was not part of messianic thinking), so there must be some basis in the historical Jesus setting. What would have been meant by the language of messiahship, and does this mean that in some pre-Pauline sense we have to conclude that ‘Jesus was a Christian’?

3 Jesus and Messiahship

- 3.1 The credal formula in 1 Corinthians 15.3b-5, 7 requires some prior stimulus within the mission of Jesus, which the *titulus* on the cross provides.

²⁵It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶The inscription of the charge against him read, ‘The King of the Jews’.

There are near-parallel cases of a condemned person displaying a placard detailing his offence, so what Mark says corresponds with current convention.

Caepio's father freed one of the two slaves who had accompanied his son in his flight, because this slave had wished to defend his young master when he met his death, but in the case of the second slave, who had deserted his son, led him through the middle of the Forum with an inscription making known the reason why he was to be put to death, and afterward crucified him. (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 54.3.7)

At a public banquet in Rome he immediately handed a slave over to the executioners for stealing a strip of silver from the couches, with the order that his hands be cut off and hung from his neck upon his chest, and that he then be led about among the guests, preceded by a placard giving the reason for his punishment. (Suetonius, *Gaius Caligula* 32.2)

3.2 In the background of Mark 15.26 is the Jesus/Pilate exchange in Mark 15.2.

¹As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.

²Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.'

³Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' ⁵But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

The question and answer (v. 2) looks like a clarification amplifying the underlying narrative (vv. 1, 3-5), but it probably represents early tradition, especially since 'You say/have said' is a Semitic formulation. The person concerned feels himself to be at risk and under pressure, cannot deny what is being suggested, but prefers not to state the matter explicitly. A rabbinic parallel confirms this interpretation.

When Rabbi (Judah) was dying in Sepphoris, the men of that place declared, "Whoever comes and announces that Rabbi is dead will be put to death by us." Bar Kappara went, looked through a window, and squeezed himself in, his head being wrapped and his garments torn, and exclaimed, "My brothers, sons of Jedayah, hear me! Hear me! Angels and mortals have taken hold of the tablets of the covenant. The angels were victorious and have snatched the tablets." They cried, "Rabbi is dead!" He said to them, "You have said it, I have not said it."

3.3 From here we need to move back into the body of Jesus' mission to see whether there is any prelude to the passion usage of messianic language. Two key passages are 'Jesus and the sons of Zebedee' (Mark 10.35-40), with which is related the Q tradition about *judging the twelve tribes of Israel* (Matthew 19,28/Luke/Q 22.30).

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'³⁶ And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' ³⁷And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them ... ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

²⁸Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'

The tradition in Mark looks composite. After vv. 38b-39, 41-45 are separated off, the earliest unit emerges as one in which *Jesus' kingship is unmistakably future*, and the assignment of specific places is in the hands of God alone.

This tradition would hardly have been 'invented' after Easter, when Peter had become dominant in the leadership of the early Christian community. Multiple attestation emerges in support when we draw in Luke/Q 22.30.

- 3.4 The next tradition calling for scrutiny is 'the entry to Jerusalem'. This is probably in part legendary, even though its first part shows accurate knowledge of the ancient custom of 'impressment' (cf. Matthew 5.41; Mark 15.21).

¹When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." ' ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, □ 'Hosanna! □ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

The cry of greeting (v. 9 = Psalm 118.26) is combined with a prayer ('Hosanna', cf. Psalm 118.25), and so *looks to the future*. Jesus initiates an event pointing forward to his inauguration by God as messiah, and is hailed as the one through whom God will rule. In *Psalms of Solomon* 17 the rule of God was put into effect by the duly appointed Davidic king.

- 3.5 The famous tradition of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8.27-33) falls under strong suspicion of being a Marcan construction. And overall it is important to remember the relevance of Mark's messianic secret scheme. This was demonstrated a century ago by William Wrede (1901 → Engl. tr. 1971) to be an unhistorical construct which, in his words, places Mark with 'the history of dogma'. Mistaken in some details, Wrede nevertheless was correct to see Mark 9.9 as the key: the true status of Jesus must not be disclosed and cannot be properly understood prior to his being raised from the dead. To this end the disciples are constantly presented as fearful and bewildered, not as a matter not for blame but of necessity in view of their being confronted by transcendent reality in the person of Jesus. (Put otherwise, the Marcan Jesus, ostensibly the man from Nazareth is essentially a heavenly being, i.e. to be seen in his post-resurrection glory, as the transfiguration story illustrates but other stories imply).

But now the question arises as to where the man of Nazareth, the Galilean prophet, stood in relation to Judaism. If not a Christian, was he authentically and in a traditional sense 'Jesus the Jew' (Vermes 1973)?

4 Jesus the prophet

4.1 Jesus' profile was undoubtedly 'prophetic', his own chosen self-definition (cf. 'A prophet is not without honour except in his own country ...', Mark 6.4) and a term that can be defined in either sociological or religio-historical terms.

- A prophet is essentially an 'outsider', who enters the public sphere as the mouthpiece of God, charismatically endowed by God, dependent on none but God for authorization and therefore critically positioned in relation to the institutions of society (Weber). Classically in a Jewish context his/her role is to recall the nation to the first principles of the covenant, which involves preoccupation with the big issues (cf. 'righteousness, mercy and faithfulness, Matthew 23.23) rather than the sort of minute attention to detail that is the concern of the professional student of the tradition. As someone who cannot appeal to any institution for endorsement, s/he is wholly dependent on 'ringing true' in the ears of the hearers.
- A prophet carries out his/her mission on the basis of direct personal encounter with God, which serves to highlight two aspects of prophetic activity – private prayer and public proclamation, a proclamation which may (depending on the situation to be addressed) emphasize either judgement or promise.

The Jewish people could recall as examples of these prophetic principles both the writing prophets (thus Isaiah, Jeremiah) and those who do not write but came to be regarded as classic figures in the nation's history (thus, Elijah, cf. Sirach 48.1-16; 1 Maccabees 2.58).

4.2 Jesus announced the kingdom of God as imminent and in a sense already beginning to be effected (Mark 1.15). The difficulties caused by the emphasis on imminence can be detected in the gospels, so this is firmly historical. Most of the parables are designed to project or defend the new kingdom reality. One of the clearest traditions spelling out the meaning of the future hope centred on God's kingship can be found in the beatitudes (Matthew 5.3-10/Luke 6.20b-21), the earliest version of which probably ran as follows:

Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God;
blessed are the hungry, for they will be filled;
blessed are the mourners, for they will be comforted.

These three sayings are variations on a single theme, since the poor are both the hungry and the grieving in Jewish tradition. And for the poor of today the promise is of a better tomorrow which God will bring about – note the indebtedness to Isaiah 61.1-2. That is the core of 'the kingdom of God'.

4.3 Before embarking on a public mission, Jesus had been a follower of John the Baptist – thus, his tribute to John (Matthew 11.7-9, 11/Luke 7.24-26, 28) and the embarrassing (to Christians) fact of his submission to a baptism of repentance (Mark 1.9). At the time of the baptism he had an ecstatic 'altered state of consciousness' experience, which formed the basis of his mission (Mark 1.10-11; cf. also Luke 10.18). While depending substantially on John the Baptist, and pursuing the same mission to reform and renew Israel, Jesus did not 'carbon copy' all features of John's mission – cf. feasting rather than extra fasting (Mark 2.18-19a; Matthew 11.16-19/Luke 7.31-35).

- 4.4 In carrying out his mission Jesus was dynamically empowered by the divine Spirit (Matthew 12.28/Luke 11.20) – hence his controversial role as prophet and exorcist, cf. Mark 3.22-30, and his being written off as an unbalanced ecstatic, cf. Mark 3.20-21.
- 4.5 Jesus worked with the traditional understanding of the specialness of Israel in relation to God, cf. the principle of holiness (= separateness) in Leviticus 11.44. In this spirit he was unwelcoming to a needy gentile (Mark 7.24-30). But he caused indignation by working with an inclusive definition of Israel, which enabled him to welcome to meal fellowship those who ‘had made themselves like gentiles’, i.e. tax collectors and sinners/prostitutes (Matthew 21.32/Luke 7.29; Luke 15.4-7, 11-32).
- 4.6 Working within the programme for the renewal of Israel’s dedication to God, Jesus did not have in mind any community other than Israel. He did not set out to found a ‘church’ or any ‘people of God’ other than the existing one.
- 4.7 The central core of twelve disciples, called to share his charisma and commitment (cf. the multiply attested mission: Mark 6.6b-13; Luke/Q 10.2-12), reinforces the alignment of Jesus to the traditional hope of Israel. Their initial call had employed the prophetic Elijah/Elisha model (Mark 1.16-20; Luke/Q 9.57-62), and their ultimate destiny was to share in rule over Israel, the definition of which involves comparison and critical contrast with the traditional expectation centred on the patriarchs.

‘After this Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be resurrected to life and I [Judah] and my brothers will be chiefs (wielding) our sceptre in Israel: Levi, the first; I, second; Joseph, third, Benjamin, fourth; Simeon, fifth; Issachar, sixth; and all the rest in their order.’ (*Testament of Judah* 25:1)

- 4.8 Given that Israel’s holiness was the galvanizing concern of the Pharisees, the relationship between Jesus and them was inevitably significant. There do not seem to have been any disagreements about belief, especially the status of the Law of Moses, and certainly no reason for Pharisees to take action to have Jesus removed from the scene. There were, however, disagreements about how the principle of holiness should be put into effect, and the essence of the divergence between them is probably best summed up in the saying (Matthew 23.23/Luke 11.42), which Pharisees would no doubt have contested:

Woe to you Pharisees, for you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness.

Jesus saw the principle of love/mercy as the supreme consideration that should guide the interpretation and application of the Mosaic law, and he did not engage with the extended and detailed process of weighing up detail and forming tradition that was characteristic of the strategy and religious devotion of the Pharisees. As indicated above, in sociological terms his profile was that of prophet whereas the Pharisaic profile was that of priest (cf. Max Weber).

- 4.9 Alongside his respect for the Mosaic law should be set Jesus’ reverence for the Temple (cf. Mark 1.40-45; Matthew 5.23-24). The so-called ‘cleansing’ of the Temple was probably a prophetic sign, pointing to the inadequacy of the worshippers rather than the inappropriateness of the worship (cf. Catchpole

2006: 263-270). Jesus called for reform in the light of the future hope that the Temple would be the scene of a mass final pilgrimage (including gentile converts to Judaism, cf. Isaiah 56.1-8). Failure to respond to the call of God would render the Temple vulnerable to judgement, as it had been on numerous occasions in the past (cf. Jeremiah 7).

- 4.10 Jesus in no way undermined the sacrificial cult, in which his followers continued to participate after his death (cf. Acts 3.1). It is unlikely that he saw his own death as being sacrificial or atoning, though early Christian thought, exploiting the idea of the atoning deaths of martyrs (cf. 4 Maccabees 6.28-29), rapidly moved in that direction.

The earliest form of the Eucharistic words envisages a sharing in all that Jesus had stood for, and a renewed commitment to be what Israel was intended to be. Thus, on either side of supper, the sharing of bread – ‘This is (i.e. represents) my body (i.e. myself)’ – and the sharing of a cup – ‘This is cup is the new covenant (i.e. Jeremiah 31-34). Truly I say to you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’

- 4.11 Two special studies are needed to reinforce these conclusions, one of which can be undertaken now, and the other of which requires us first to consider Jesus as a teacher aligning himself with the tradition of Israel’s wisdom.

Did Jesus break with the Mosaic law in his call to discipleship? One crucial and very drastic saying needs to be interpreted by remembering that urgency and the demand not to be distracted characterize the cause of the kingdom. Here is the tradition in question (Luke/Q 9.59-60):

⁵⁹He said to another person, ‘Follow me.’ And he said, ‘Allow me first to go away and bury my father.’ ⁶⁰He said to him, ‘Leave the dead to bury their own dead, and you go away and announce the kingdom of God.’

Three clusters of texts combine to sketch in the background of this prophetic demand of Jesus.

- a. Many texts confirm burial as the final act of respect (e.g. Tobit 1.17-18; 2.4-9; 12.12-13; Sirach 38.16), and others see lack of burial as intensely shaming and repugnant (e.g. 2 Kings 9.10; Psalm 79.3), an offence against nature, and a defilement of God himself.
- b. Many texts affirm the special responsibility of a son to bury his parents: instructions are given by fathers to sons (Genesis 47.29-30; Tobit 4.3), and the pain of a son’s unavailability can be illustrated by the anguish of Josephus’ mother, who appears oddly forgetful of her other son, Matthias (*Josephus, Life* 8), when she thought he had been fatally wounded during the Roman siege of Jerusalem:

‘This then is the fruit that I reap of my blessed childbearing that I am denied the burial of my son by whom I hoped to have been buried.’ (*Josephus, Jewish War* 5.545).

- c. Finally, there is legislation giving the burial of relatives priority over major religious obligations:

'He whose dead lies unburied before him is exempt from reciting the *Shema*, from saying the *Tefillah*, and from wearing phylacteries.' (*m. Berakoth* 3.1; cf. Leviticus 21.1-2)

The essential point of the exchange between Jesus and a possible follower is not just the contrast between burying parents and following Jesus. There is one implicit detail, not spelt out, to which it may be important to give due weight. The potential disciple is apparently not engaged *at the moment* in the process of mourning; therefore, the father has not died; therefore the request is tantamount to saying, 'I will come and be a disciple at some unspecified future time – maybe soon, maybe not so soon.' Urgency is simply not in his mind. But it looms large in the mind of Jesus. The kingdom is coming soon.

The radical sharpness of the demand belongs in the context of discipleship. The Jesus who calls people to follow is emphatically pro-family and insistent on fulfilling obligations to parents (Mark 7.9-13; 10.19), but he still calls a select group – this is not a piece of teaching that is intended to be of general applicability – to cut family ties (Mark 1.16-20; 10.29-30).

'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.

5 'What is the wisdom that has been given to this man?'

5.1 The tradition of Jesus in Nazareth suggests that he gave the distinct impression of being a teacher of wisdom. How would 'wisdom' be defined? Witherington (1994: 4), sums up as follows:

- a. political *savoir faire* (worldly wisdom), i.e. knowing what the politic thing to do in a particular situation would be (1 Kings 5.21);
- b. encyclopaedic knowledge of nature (1 Kings 4.33);
- c. the gift of discernment, of knowing the right thing to do, or how to judge and evaluate various options presented to one (e.g. 1 Kings 3.16-28);
- d. a saying, riddle or proverb that reveals a *secret* about life that gives one true insight into how things really are, allowing one to look at life from the proper perspective, or alternatively allowing one to see into God's mysterious and providential plan for the world;
- e. skill, expertise or artisanship (cf. 1 Chronicles 22.15; 2 Chronicles 2.7).

All of this amounts to 'knowing how to read the ways and moral structure of the world and live according to them so that one not only copes with life but also lives well and in an upright manner'. It is important to note that being allowed to 'see into God's mysterious and providential plan for the world' allows apocalyptic and eschatology to come to the fore within a wisdom context. Thus, Daniel is represented as a notably 'wise' man, and the 'mysteries/secrets' into which he is initiated by God concern the future prospects for the Jewish people.

5.2 In Nazareth there was apparently some puzzlement about Jesus as a possessor of wisdom, since a teacher of wisdom would normally be wholly

given over to study (cf. Sirach 38.24-34), and he was not. He was an artisan (Mark 6.3), and artisans were thought to have no time for serious study!

Jesus' standing over against the normal structures of wisdom teaching and learning is also attested in one of his own sayings (Q/Luke 10.21).

At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.'

And the contrast between Jesus and the standard conventions of wisdom could not be more clearly illustrated than by reference to Daniel 2.20-23:

Daniel said: 'Blessed be the name of God from age to age, □ for wisdom and power are his. □He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. □He reveals deep and hidden things; □ he knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with him. To you, O God of my ancestors, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and power, and have now revealed to me what we asked of you, for you have revealed to us what the king ordered.'

What evidence can we find which helps us to understand why Jesus gave the impression of being a teacher of wisdom, though a very distinctive one?

- 5.3 When characterizing his mission as a whole Jesus set himself in the succession of Solomon, the archetypal source of wisdom (allegedly!), as well as of Jonah, the preacher of judgement, repentance and mercy.

²⁹When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, 'This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah. ³⁰For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of man will be to this generation.'

³¹The queen of the South will rise at the judgement with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!

³²The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

This is a very interesting example of how gospel material 'grows', as it were.

- a. The two sayings in vv. 31, 32 run in parallel and follow the correct Biblical sequence (Solomon, 1 Kings 10.1-13; Jonah, 2 Kings 14.25). They make matching points in a similar way. But
- b. The saying about the sign of Jonah not only has a parallel saying in the refusal of a sign altogether (Mark 8.12), which lacks any reference to Jonah, but if it is intended as a heading for vv. 31-32 it doesn't work! So it is best set on one side as an artificial formulation designed to highlight the Jonah/Nineveh saying rather than the Solomon/Queen of Sheba saying.

The 'something greater' (not 'someone greater', by the way) probably points to Jesus' providing wisdom and prophetic speech that is now conditioned by

the nearness of God's kingdom. Importantly, he sets himself in *both the sequences of wisdom and prophetic teachers*.

- 5.4 There are many examples of Jesus' saying exactly the sort of things that wisdom teachers would say and had said. Thus, consider the precedent for the parable of the rich fool (Sirach 11.18-19 → Luke 12.16-21) and advice on seeking prestige unwisely (Proverbs 25.6-7 → Luke 14.5-10), and the coining of a typical proverb (Luke/Q 16.13). We could also draw in an example of reasoned argument from the way things are to support a surprising feature of his mission.

The dispute about fasting (Mark 2.18-22) refers to a future time when, following the forcible removal of the bridegroom, the practice of fasting will be renewed. But the original unit of tradition probably consisted only of the question and answer (vv. 18-19a). In it Jesus, speaking like a teacher of wisdom, appeals to the logic of wedding celebration. That is the way in which things happen! The remainder (vv. 19b-20, 21-22) moves away from the experience-based argument, and may well be an expansion designed to reinforce early Christian practice.

¹⁸Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why are John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fasting, but your disciples are not fasting?' ^{19a}Jesus said to them, 'The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they?'

^{19b}As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰The days will come when the bridegroom has been taken away from them, and then in that day they will fast.

- 5.5 There is an interesting case of argument from creation rather than biblical historical precedent: Proverbs 24.29 [cf. 22.2] → Matthew 5.44-47/Luke 6.27-28, 32-35:

²⁷Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, ³⁵so that you may be sons of your Father; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

The example of God might seem more than a little surprising. Examples abound in the Hebrew Bible of a judging God's withholding rain from those who resist his purpose or fall short in obedience (e.g. 1 Kings 17.1; Amos 4.7-8; Haggai 1.10-11). And the deep instinct to resist the idea of God's treating the righteous and the unrighteous without discrimination is articulated by Josephus in his plea to the Jewish forces in Jerusalem to surrender to the Romans:

'It is surely madness to expect God to show the same treatment to the righteous as to the unrighteous.' (*Jewish War* 5:407)

But instead a benevolent, non-discriminatory and non-judging God comes into view as the God of Jesus. His primary resource here is not biblical history. Instead it is the creation, where God's indiscriminating provision is a matter of daily experience. Wisdom teachers were fond of reflecting on the meaning of creation, because they were convinced there was an order that could be discerned there, with which humans should align themselves.

5.6 Jesus argues again from creation in persuading his hearers against anxiety about material matters: Matthew 6.25-33/Luke 12.22-31:

²²Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear.

²⁴Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!

²⁷Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ²⁸But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith!

²⁹Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat? Or what shall we drink? Or how shall we be clothed?" ³⁰For your Father knows you need these things. ³¹But seek his kingdom, and these things will be yours as well.

Jesus issues a call to avoid anxiety, then gives two examples from the created order which give reasoned reinforcement to the call, and then gives a rounding-off repetition of the call.

The ravens and the lilies are set over against men (typically engaged in farming) and women (typically at work in the home), and Jesus hearers are therefore encouraged to rely on God even though they do not work! This is quite untypical of the wisdom approach, and it is only sustainable for a short time. So the alternative focus of life – God's kingdom' – belongs to a short-term expectation (cf. Mark 1.15).

5.7 We are now in a position to examine one of the most sensitive of gospel traditions – most sensitive because (i) it touches on one of the most painful of human experiences, and (ii) it is often seen as an example of Jesus' setting aside a clear command in the law of Moses. It therefore touched directly on our estimate of the position of Jesus vis-à-vis the pattern of Jewish religion.

In what follows the argument will be directed towards the conclusion that Jesus did not attack the Mosaic law on divorce but he insisted that the matter be handled on the basis of wisdom rather than law. If correct, that has huge implications and may be something of a personal relief.

6 'What God has joined together ...'

6.1 According to Ed Sanders (1985: 256-260), Jesus' argument from creation probably reflects the Jewish scheme according to which the age to come will replicate the created order. In similar vein, Allison (2005: 186):

The law, designed for the ordinary purposes of life, cannot be unaffected by the coming of God's reign, which brings the extraordinary. If the kingdom is at hand, then the renewal of the world is nigh, then paradise is about to be restored; and if paradise is about to be restored, then concessions to sin should no longer be needed. This is certainly the implicit logic of Mark 10.1-12.

Against this, we could argue that Jesus elsewhere argues from creation, e.g. re love of enemies (Matthew 5.45/Luke 6.35); re anxiety (Luke/Q 12.22-31); re the sabbath (Mark 2.27), and these do not use the Jewish scheme concerning the age to come // the created order. In each case it is typical wisdom-type argumentation.

6.2 The fullest treatment of this topic is provided by Mark 10.2-9:

²Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' ³He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' ⁴They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' ⁵But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.' ⁶But from the beginning of creation "God made them male and female." ⁷"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

The form of the debate in Mark 10.2-9 matches the form of rabbinic debate, discussing whether a definitive position on a controversial topic can be based on a particular passage of scripture. The response is that because the first passage cited belongs in, and is therefore relativized by, a certain limited context, the definitive position which transcends that context, should be based on an alternative biblical passage. Usually this becomes the basis for a concluding authoritative declaration. In this case the initial text of scripture is Deuteronomy 24.1-4:

'Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because *he finds something objectionable about her*, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house, and goes off to become another man's wife. ...'

This passage is intended (i) to limit divorce; (ii) to define clearly, and therefore to protect, the position of the divorced wife and of any man she might subsequently marry – she is said in the document [cf. Jeremiah 3.8] to be 'free to marry any man' – and (iii) to preserve the holiness of the land of Israel, which would be defiled in the event of the resumption of the original marital relationship after the involvement of a third party.

A rabbinic or rabbinic-type discussion of such a passage would belong in the setting of agreed respect for the biblical text. This would mean that in Mark 10.2-9 Jesus is not setting Deuteronomy 24.1 aside. He is only defining (in adverse terms) the context in which it belongs – human 'hardness of heart'. We may note already at this stage that the Christian notion of indissolubility is mistaken and at variance with Jesus' respect for Deuteronomy 24.

6.3 For Jesus the primary principle is the one set out in Genesis 1.27, which describes a new reality created by the procedure set out in Genesis 2.24. In other words 'male and female he made them' is taken to refer not to differentiated humankind but to the unity brought about by marriage, specifically the sexual union which brings children into being (Genesis 1.28).

Since Deuteronomy 24.1-4 is not being set aside, the concluding pronouncement saying of Jesus has to be regarded *not as a law but as a demand. And demands are the stock in trade of the wisdom teacher!*

For additional precedent one might also turn to Malachi 2.16: 'I hate divorce, says the Lord.' In context, that declaration (i) sees marriage as a covenant, i.e. a relationship of *mutual* commitment and obligation; (ii) concludes and climaxes a critique of a husband's sexual permissiveness, which shows inadequate respect for the dignity of his wife; (iii) sees divorce as the

inevitable consequence of sexual involvement with a third party; and (iv) sets against unacceptable male behaviour a reminder of the creator God, whose purpose is 'godly offspring'.

¹⁴The Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyOne be faithless to the wife of his youth. ¹⁶For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless.

The similarity with the approach of Jesus in Mark 10.2-9 is striking. What does not happen in Mark 10 is any explicit discussion of the grounds for a husband's divorcing his wife. And the silence cannot possibly mean that there are no grounds at all. So sooner or later a decision would need to be made about behaviour in the sphere of 'human hardness of heart', i.e. any fault on the part of the husband or, as far as the wife is concerned, what the meaning may be of 'he finds something objectionable in her'.

- 6.4 Demands do not exclude consideration of the variety of problematic human situations, but they also make generous and liberal positions unlikely. So we have to ask what the attitude of the Jesus of Mark 10.2-9 would be to the causes of marriage breakdown. This brings into view the debates that were taking place between the two different schools of Pharisaism. Note, however, that the text below (*m. Gittin* 9.9, like Deuteronomy 24.1-4, but unlike Malachi 2.13-16) is concerned exclusively with fault in the wife.

'The school of Shammai say: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her, for it is written, 'Because he has found in her *indecent* in anything.' And the school of Hillel say: '[He may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, 'Because he has found in her indecent in anything.' Rabbi Akiba says: Even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written, 'And it shall be if she finds no favour in his eyes ...'

In the original context of Deuteronomy 24.1-4 'something objectionable' may well refer to evidence of pre-marital sexual activity *on her part*. But what sense can it make to characterise a divorcing husband as marked by 'hardness of heart' if an act of adultery has been discovered? None! On that basis, the story of Joseph (Matthew 1.18-19), in which an angelic intervention is needed to prevent a 'righteous' man behaving righteously, would be a story of someone marked by 'hardness of heart'.

So there is an implicit distinction between a divorce process when no sexual interference has taken place (i.e. other grounds for divorce are being invoked, as by the school of Hillel) and a divorce process when sexual interference has occurred (the concern of the school of Shammai). As has been well said,

'Any sexual interference with an existing marriage bond produces a state of impurity that precludes the resumption of that marriage.' (Talbert, *Reading the SM*, p. 82)

Against that background, the Jesus of Mark 10.2-9 has probably been interpreted accurately by the MattR changes in Matthew 19.3-9, even though Matthew has 'spoilt' the structure of the original debate by transposing elements of it and incorporating an edited version of the 'divorce/remarriage'

saying. His Jesus opts for the stricter of the two available positions, namely that of Shammai, that adultery was in mind, rather than that of Hillel, Josephus and Philo, that 'any cause' was enough.

³Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife *for any cause*?' ⁴He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female", ⁵and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? ⁶So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' ⁷They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' ⁸He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so. ⁹And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, *except for unchastity*, and marries another commits adultery.'

At this point two things may be said:

- a. This would mean adopting the strict and limited interpretation of unacceptable female behaviour. At the same time, if Deuteronomy 24.1-4 is accepted as a yardstick, the same must presumably be true of Deuteronomy 22.23-24, 25-27, where a sharp distinction is drawn between a betrothed woman's being complicit in sexual activity with a second man (vv. 23-24), and her being non-complicit and therefore the victim of rape (vv. 25-27: cf. Matthew 1.18-25?).
 - b. It would also mean a stricture against any male action to dissolve a marriage in any other circumstance. This would need to be conditional on retrieving and interpreting the earliest version of the 'divorce/remarriage' saying in its own right, to which we now turn.
- 6.6 Jesus' position can therefore be summarised: (i) that marriage is a divine construction, a fulfilment of the will of the Creator as set out in Genesis 1.27; (ii) that the dignity of the wife is to be respected by a husband's faithful behaviour; (iii) that divorce is in principle possible; (iv) that divorce on any ground other than sexual misbehaviour by either party is out of line with the will of God, and cannot dismantle that first marriage.

Jesus' position is that, in the style of a wisdom teacher, he is assuming the position taken by the Mosaic law, but at the same time speaking as a wisdom teacher who deals in ideals, i.e. absolute demands. He is voicing a demand, not promulgating a law. And, one may add, the misinterpretation of Jesus' position, turning it into a law that overturns the Mosaic law on the subject, has been and continues to be the cause of untold distress to many who take Christian commitment seriously.

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 Jesus of Nazareth in 2010

‘When from death he passed ...’?

3 Introduction

- 1.1 The Nicene Creed moves smoothly from the incarnation, past the ‘life of Jesus’, and straight to the passion, and then: ‘on the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.’ When read as a *narrative sequence*, that appears to cover three distinct phases in the story of the risen Jesus. But a well-informed reader of the New Testament will see more of a three-in-one statement here: (i) ascension needs to be seen as the conclusion of resurrection disclosure, cf. stories of epiphanies when the appearing person’s ‘going up’ is really a way of saying that the encounter has ended, cf. Genesis 35.9-13; and (ii) exaltation/enthronement was one of the ways the earliest Christians described resurrection itself, cf. Philippians 2.9-11.
- 1.2 The language of ‘resurrection’ had a long history in Jewish thinking as a *metaphor* (cf. Ezekiel 37.1-14) for the restoration of the people of God from disaster. With the crisis of Antiochus Epiphanes’ attempt to crush Judaism and rub out the identity of the Jewish people (168-165 BCE), ‘resurrection’ ceased to be a metaphor and became a *personal* and *ultimate* (eschatological) hope: the justice of God demanded it, since faithfulness to him had not – contrary to Deuteronomy 30.16-20 – proved sufficient to protect his people from suffering and death.
- 1.3 Contrary to the perspectives of Platonism (body *versus* soul dichotomy) Hebrew thought saw the body and the soul as different aspects of a unified human existence – not ‘I have a body’ but ‘I am a body’. Therefore resurrection hope in a Palestinian context was *the expectation of bodily existence*. Logically, there were then two possibilities: *either* God will revive and restore and renew the ‘old’ body *or* he will transform that body into a new existence. A classic statement of the first option is set out in the story of the seven martyrs (2 Maccabees 7):

‘The King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for the laws’ (v.9). He quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, ‘I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again.’ (vv. 10-11). ‘One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him.’ (v. 14)

The second option is probably the one chosen by Daniel 12.2:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever.

What is clearly a standard presupposition of both views is that the 'old' body does not continue to exist as a separate entity, i.e. one could not affirm resurrection while the 'old' body remained in its grave/tomb.

- 1.4 The particular case of Jesus (i) uses the language of 'resurrection', which already has a distinct content; and (ii) brings forward into the present an event that prior Jewish thought had associated exclusively with the great future intervention of God. The key question is therefore what caused those who had belonged to his movement to take such a step.

2 The earliest Christian statement of resurrection faith

The earliest tradition of all relating to the resurrection of Jesus is preserved in 1 Corinthians 15.3b-5, 7. Its pre-Pauline origin is established by (i) Paul's explicit use of transmission vocabulary ('I delivered ... I received'); (ii) its use of non-Pauline phraseology; (iii) its parallelism of form; and (iv) its allusion to 'the apostles' as a defined group exclusive of Paul himself, which was a position Paul hotly disputed.

Its place of origin, in view of the location of the personnel involved, is almost certainly Jerusalem. So the content may well have the stamp of first hand and immediate testimony:

^{3b}Christ died | for our sins | in accordance with to the scriptures;
^{4a}he was buried;
^{4b}he has been raised | on the third day | in accordance with the scriptures;
^{5a}he appeared
^{5b}to Cephas, then to the twelve;
⁷to James, then to all the apostles.

At the heart of this tradition is the single word (ἐτάφη), translated 'he was buried'.

- a. For some it is an indicator of the emptiness of Jesus' tomb – why else, they ask, would it be mentioned? But this does not really work, for 'he died ... he was buried' is just an entirely normal way of referring to the end of life, cf. Luke 16.22: 'The rich man also died and was buried'; Acts 2.29: 'David died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day'.
- b. More cautiously we can say that 'he was buried' in a short and carefully constructed statement of belief suggests that the members of the Christian Jewish community in Jerusalem knew that Jesus had indeed been accorded a proper burial, and presumably knew where and by whom that burial had been carried out. His body had not been abandoned to the carrions, nor thrown into some communal tip.

3 The tradition of the burial of Jesus

- 3.1 Before we submit the tradition of the burial of Jesus to historical testing, we may usefully note what the burial procedures were in the Jewish community. A dead body would be anointed with spices and wrapped in cloth, and then placed in a tomb (often with other bodies) until decomposition was complete. Then the bones would be collected and placed in a small container, an ossuary.

The discovery of an ossuary in a family tomb at Giv'at ha-Mivtar with the skeletal remains of a crucified man in it shows that even under Roman rule the Jews were allowed to bury the victims of crucifixion. This man had a nail in his right heel bone. It could not be removed because of a knot in the wood.

- 3.2 The relevant gospel tradition concerning the burial of Jesus is Mark 15.42-47. Some parts of it may well derive from literary expansion.

⁴²When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, ⁴³Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

⁴⁴Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph.

⁴⁶Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.

⁴⁷Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid.

- a. The reasons for 'boxing off' the two parts of the story are as follows: first, Matthew and Luke, whose sole source is Mark, agree in *not* including Mark's vv. 44-45, and there is no obvious reason why they should have removed them. Therefore the copy of Mark that they both used perhaps did not contain vv. 44-45, and the version of Mark which we possess may be a later edition. Second, the reference to the named women in v. 47 reads like a postscript, as indeed does the similar reference in vv. 40-41, both laying the groundwork for the story of the visit to the tomb on Easter morning. Both these references are detachable whereas, by contrast, the reference to the named women in 16.1 is essential to that story.
- b. The action of Joseph may be compared with that of Josephus somewhat later during the Jewish war with Rome. The text in question makes clear that crucified persons belonged within the sphere of Roman control, and would doubtless have been allowed to stay exposed on their crosses indefinitely (in war time, at least), but a Jewish person of sufficiently high standing might intervene with effect.

When I was sent by Titus Caesar ... to a village called Tekoa, to prospect whether it was a suitable place for an entrenched camp, and on my return saw many prisoners who had been crucified, and recognized three of my acquaintances among them, I was cut to the heart and came and told Titus what I had seen. He gave orders immediately that they should be taken down and receive the most careful treatment. Two of them died in the physicians' hands; the third survived. (*Life* 420)

- c. The pre-Markan version of the burial tradition (vv. 42-43, 46) centres on Joseph of Arimathea, concerning whom we may observe the following:

First, he had, at least according to Mark 15.43, the advantage that an ordinary citizen would not have enjoyed, namely membership of the authoritative body which collaborated with Pilate in bringing about the downfall of Jesus. Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63-64: 'Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, condemned him to be crucified.' His being 'a respected member of the council' also clarifies how, although unrelated, he might be allowed by the authorities to take responsibility, and to act according to the requirement of Deuteronomy 21.22-23, cf. supporting observations by Josephus:

²²When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree [i.e. post-execution hanging: Joshua 10.26], ²³his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession.

Thus shall it be with all who howsoever are condemned by the laws to be put to death. Let burial be given even to your enemies; and let not a corpse be left without its portion of earth, paying more than its just penalty. (Josephus, *Ant.* 4.265)

The Jews are so careful about funeral rites that even malefactors who have been sentenced to crucifixion are taken down and buried before sunset. (Josephus, *War* 4.317)

Second, the very specific name, including place of origin, suggests a genuine memory. This does not *always* work, but one could recall within the passion narrative 'Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus' (Mark 15.21; cf. Romans 16.13), a trustable identification.

Third, that Joseph was 'himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God' suggests commitment to the cause of Jesus. In a general sense *every* member of the Jewish community was looking for the kingdom of God, so to single Joseph out in this way probably implies his identification with the expectation *proclaimed by Jesus*; second, 'himself' has the effect of emphatically bringing him alongside others.

- d. The timing of the burial – within nine hours of crucifixion, if the Marcan scheme is to be trusted (cf. 15.25, 33) – presumes a relatively speedy death. Crucifixion was a Roman mode of execution (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 17.295), and the Roman authorities were therefore responsible for the fate of corpses. Since Joseph is said to have 'dared' to ask for the body of Jesus for burial, the premise is the normal Roman practice of leaving the dead bodies of crucified criminals hanging and exposed publicly for an indefinite period, the purpose being gruesome deterrence (cf. Josephus, *War* 5.450). The fact of occasional exceptions tends to prove the norm, cf. Philo describes on 'the birthday of the illustrious Augustan house':

I have known cases when on the eve of a holiday of this kind, people who have been crucified have been taken down and their bodies delivered to their kinsfolk, because it was thought well to give them burial and allow them the ordinary rites. For it was meet also that the dead also should have the advantage of some kind treatment on the birthday of the

emperor and also that the sanctity of the festival should be maintained. But Flaccus gave no orders [on the occasion of the birthday of Gaius Caligula] to take down those who had died on the cross. (*Flaccus* 83-84)

Why would Pilate have agreed to the request, if he did? Here we must recall the long-lasting and pragmatic alliance between himself and Caiaphas in preserving stability – the Roman prefect had the right to depose and appoint high priests, and Pilate did not exercise that power once! – plus the sheer fact of his presence in Jerusalem as a gesture intended to preserve that stability during the inflammatory Passover season.

The tradition of Jesus' burial makes a great deal of the timing: 'evening had already come'. This does not mean that darkness had arrived, cf. 1.32 'evening having come, when the sun had set', which is the time note introducing a great deal of activity on Jesus' part; 4.35 'on that day, evening having come', which makes clear that the following day which began at 1800 hrs is not in mind. We should think of the time between sunset and 1800 hrs when one day ended and the next began. In this way harmony can be seen between what Mark says and what texts such as Deuteronomy 21.22-23 say, as well as the following:

With us it is ordained that the body of a suicide should remain unburied until sunset, although it is thought right to bury even our enemies slain in war. (Josephus, *War* 3.377)

[Tobit] sprang up, left the dinner before even tasting it, and removed the body [of a dead person who had been strangled] from the square and laid it in one of the rooms until sunset when I might bury it. ... When the sun had set, I went and dug a grave and buried him. (Tobit 2.4, 7)

The concern to provide burial before darkness fell is reinforced by its being 'the day of preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath' (Mark 15.42). One must suppose that what applied on any day was of intense concern on the specific day. And the risk that Jesus' body might remain on the cross and unburied was increased by the absence of any intervention by relatives or those close to him. This is the point at which a religiously careful 'other' comes into the reckoning. Joseph does what others would normally do – but there was no evidence of anyone else waiting to do it.

4 The first visit to the tomb

4.1 The tradition itself, as Mark presents it, runs as follows:

¹When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³And they were saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' ^{4a}When they looked up they saw that the stone had been rolled away; ^{4b}for it was very great. ⁵As they entered the tomb they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him just as he told you. ^{8a}So they went out and fled from the tomb, for fear and trembling had seized them. ^{8b}and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

- 4.2 Like the tradition of the burial of Jesus, this one has also very probably been expanded, this time at the hands of Mark.

The introductory scene setting: The list of women's names is very likely to be traditional and is essential to this story – which is not true of the comparable lists in Mark 15.40, 47 (attachments to stories that come to a fitting climax without them). The time note – 'when the sabbath was over ... very early on the first day of the week' – is repeated, and Mark tends to the repetitive with time notes (cf. 1.32). The anointing gives an unsuspecting explanation for the women's presence at the tomb, but it is inessential and also in tension with the evidence of Mark 15.42-47 that the application of oils and spices was (as, incidentally, it had to be) completed before burial.

The problem of gaining entry to the tomb: There is internal tension here (an *aporia*) inside vv. 3-4: the greatness of the stone (v. 4b) is an explanation for the women's unease about the moving of the stone (v. 3), but it is not an explanation of the rolling away of the stone (v. 4a). The emphasis on the seriousness of the problem is designed to prepare for the amazing involvement of some heavenly agency in solving the problem – for a parallel, cf. Mark 5.3-5 inside 5.1-20.

The message of the angel: This begins (v. 6) with an explanation of what can be seen (or not seen) inside the tomb. But the message then takes a new turn (v. 7), and points back to Mark 14.28, a saying which was an awkward intrusion in its own context of Mark 14.26-31. Thus:

²⁶When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷And Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'

²⁸But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."

²⁹Peter said to him, "Even though all become deserters, I will not." ³⁰Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." ³¹But he said vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of them said the same.

This strengthens the suspicion that Mark 16.7 is also an intrusion in its own context.

The silence-cum-fear motif: This is absolutely typical in Mark's whole story of Jesus (cf. Mark 4.41; 5.15, 33, 36; 9.32; 10.32) and gave rise in the history of New Testament studies to what has come to be called 'the messianic secret'.

Once we have taken into account all these extra elements in Mark's story we can make a tentative reconstruction of what the story was like before he got to work on it. Here it is! And we can immediately classify the story and place it in the family of biblical stories describing angelic epiphanies.

^{1/2}Very early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb. ^{4a}When they looked up they saw that the stone had been rolled away. ⁵As they entered the tomb they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him.' ^{8a}So they went out and fled from the tomb, for fear and trembling had seized them.

Examples of comparable appearance stories are: (1) the angel to Gideon (Judges 6.11-24); (2) the angel to Samson's parents (Judges 13.3-23); (3) 'a man' to Daniel (Daniel 10.1-15); (4) the angel Raphael to Tobit and Tobias (Tobit 5-12); (5) the horsemen and two other heavenly persons to Heliodorus (2 Maccabees 3.24-30); (6) the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist (Luke 1.8-23); (7) the angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1.26-38); and (8) the angels to the shepherds (Luke 2.8-20).

Recurrent features in this family of stories can be observed: (1) the description of the heavenly person as 'a young man'; (2) position (seated / on right side); (3) description of appearance and/or clothing; (4) fear; (5) banishment of fear; (6) heavenly announcement of divine activity; (7) a sign; and (8) fear and astonishment.

The use of a standard 'template' is bound to provoke doubt concerning historicity. Here it becomes significant that in the pre-Markan (and Marcan) tradition, the involvement of an angel is presented as the solution to a problem. The problem may be a matter for recollection, and its existence prior to the angelic solution's being superimposed upon it (cf. Matt 1.18b-19 within the pre-Matthean story of Jesus' birth). Therefore attention must focus on that first part of the tomb tradition, plus (to make the story worth telling at all) something on the disappearance of the body):

^{2a}Very early on the first day of the week, ^{1b}Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome ^{2c}went to the tomb. ^{4a}When they looked up they saw that the stone had been rolled away.

The historicity of this part of the tradition is defensible, not least because of the involvement of these particular named women. And the tradition of a second visit to the tomb by Peter (Luke 24.12 → John 20.3-10) comes into play here, providing a measure of support.

5 A provisional decision concerning historicity

- 5.1 Some would say that the question of the emptiness (or not) of Jesus' tomb is irrelevant. The argument here is that Christian theology (cf. 1 Corinthians 15 as the earliest extended reflection on this topic, as well as our own reflections) links the resurrection of Jesus Christ with the resurrection of others. Those others have died, and their bodies have been subject to the normal processes of decomposition – hence, arguing from Christians back to Christ, the body of Jesus could be left to decompose in the tomb, and vibrant resurrection faith could be sustained nonetheless. This is an attractive line of argument, and it has the benefit of *an investment in transformation rather than physical revival*, cf. 'God gives a body as he has chosen' (v. 38) ... 'We will not all die, but we will all be changed' (v. 52). That said, we cannot use a *theological* argument in order to establish an *historical* conclusion.
- 5.2 The impression we have is that visionary experiences were necessary as the basis for the conclusion that Jesus had been raised. But, as we shall see, visionary experiences alone would not by themselves sustain such a conclusion. This suggests that the emptiness of the tomb was a *sine qua non*.

- 5.3 This conclusion is reinforced by the consideration that the language of resurrection could hardly have been used in a Palestinian context if the corpse of Jesus had still been in the tomb in the early days after his death. And the use of the language of resurrection was hardly prepared for. Its use *for an individual person and in advance of the coming of the kingdom of God* was precisely what the pre-Pauline mini-creed quoted by Paul (1 Corinthians 15.3b-5, 7) shows to have been the conclusion of the very earliest Christian community.

6 Seeing and being seen in Jewish literature

- 6.1 Given the importance of the idea of ‘appearance’ in these early Christian traditions, it is important to note Jewish usage, i.e. the implicit connotations when the early Christians resorted to the use of such language. The verb ‘to appear’ is used in biblical tradition to cover a range of experiences: thus, divine and angelic epiphanies (Genesis 12.7; 17.1), sometimes presented as conscious encounters and sometimes at night and/or in dreams (Genesis 31.13; 1 Kings 3.5; Daniel 8.1), sometimes to individuals and at other times to more than one person (Numbers 20.6; Tobit 12.22), usually to favoured persons but sometimes to an opponent (2 Maccabees 3.24-39), sometimes in the form of a cloud or ‘the glory of the Lord’ appearing to an assembled community (Exodus 16.10; Leviticus 9.4, 23; Numbers 14.10), usually without physicality but sometimes with terrifying tangibility (2 Maccabees 3.25).
- 6.2 At this point we return to the pre-Pauline statement of faith in 1 Corinthians 15.3b-5, 7, remembering that no one came to belief in the resurrection on the basis of the tomb’s being empty – if it was! Therefore a crucial role was apparently played by the alleged appearances of Jesus. This brings us back to the pre-Pauline statement of faith in 1 Corinthians 15.4b, 5, 7:

^{4b}he has been raised | on the third day | in accordance with the scriptures;
^{5a}he appeared
^{5b}to Cephas, then to the twelve;
⁷to James, then to all the apostles.

A separate appearance to Peter has not been preserved in story form: all we have is the summary statement at the end of the walk to Emmaus: ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon’ (Luke 24.34).

- a. Both of the terms ‘the twelve’ and ‘all the apostles’ suggest a concern with authority figures in the Church: they are probably legitimated by the claimed encounter with the risen Jesus. The institution of the twelve probably goes back to the mission of Jesus himself to Israel (though some used to suggest it was a post-Easter development); ‘all the apostles’ probably overlaps with ‘the twelve’ and has in mind the call dimension of an appearance experience, cf. Isaiah’s vision which represents the basis of a call to go as a ‘sent one’ on God’s behalf (Isaiah 6.1-8).

The group appearance is presented in narrative form more often than any other. It figures in Matthew 28.16-20; Luke 24.36-43; John 20.19-23; 21.1-14, and is hinted at in Mark 16.7: ‘... he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you’. We note the serious divergences between the accounts, which again underlines the need for a (constructively) critical approach.

- b. Since Peter belongs to 'the twelve', it is probable that James the brother of Jesus belongs to the group described as 'all the apostles'. So these are not *exactly* the same as the twelve, a group to which he did not belong. (That is to say, the twelve are probably all apostles, but not all the apostles are members of the twelve.) James had had no part in, and indeed was critical of, the mission of Jesus, cf. Mark 3.31-35; 6.4, so the experience of 'seeing Jesus' looks as if it was a conversion-cum-call experience for him as it was later for Paul (1 Corinthians 15.8-10; Galatians 1.13-17).
- c. If this early Christian faith 'formula' took account of particular persons' status and function within the Christian community, it may be (as argued by some) that the first experience of 'seeing Jesus' belonged to Mary Magdalene, cf. Matthew 28.9-10; John 20.11-18. According to the argument, Mary was, as it were, displaced because she was a woman, and the witness and function of women was inferior within the culture. We shall have to assess the Mary Magdalene tradition in its own right.

The Mary Magdalene tradition is not the only one to make no mark on the pre-Pauline formula. The same is true of the appearance to the two travellers on the walk to Emmaus (Luke 24.13-35).

7 The angelic Jesus of the Emmaus walk

- 7.1 The story of the walk to Emmaus is one of many masterpieces of story telling from within a culture that excelled in that art. Because there are no parallels elsewhere in the gospels, and because so much of it fits Luke's special interests, and because he was such a talented writer, it has sometimes been suggested that he created the story! This is not likely, since we can discern literary and theological features that suggest the existence of a pre-Lucan version. It had been expanded – which suggests that there was something there to expand.

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered them, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' ¹⁹He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ^{21a}But we hoped that he was then one to redeem Israel.

<p>^{21b}Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were</p>

with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.'

²⁵Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

³²They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

³⁴They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!'

³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

- 7.2 Two additions to the story can be recognized: (i) vv. 19-21a report events and then give a concluding evaluation, all of which is sufficient in itself and not needing the appendix about the tomb, which summarizes some of the content of Luke 24.1-12; (ii) v. 34 is an interruption which spoils not only the smooth flow of the story but also distracts from its main conclusion.
- 7.3 The pattern of the story emerges when we set alongside it the story of Tobias's journey with the unrecognized angel Raphael in Tobit 5-12. There are no fewer than fifteen formal correspondences!

(1) A problem; (2) an angelic mission to solve the problem; (3) a journey designed to achieve a human purpose; (4) precise definition of start-point and end-point of the journey; (5) the need of a companion, who then becomes available, for the journey; (6) the withholding of the true identity of the travelling companion, matched by disclosure of that identity to the reader; (7) vital information about the solution to the problem being possessed by the travelling companion but not recognized even after authoritative declaration; (8) the companion's providing the solution to the problem that dominates the journey; (9) the solution to the problem found within the Mosaic writings; (10) Each stage of the journey's ending with the provision of hospitality and a celebratory meal; (11) an outpouring of emotion over the solution of the problem; (12) disclosure of the identity of the fellow-traveller; (13) reference to the safeguarding of the permanent influence of the experience; (14) ascent of the angel to the presence of God and his becoming invisible; (15) description of the reaction of the two most affected persons.

This means (i) that we can classify Luke's story as a member of the family of journey-type epiphanies, cf. also Genesis 18-19; and even more importantly (ii) we can classify the risen Jesus of the Emmaus story as angelic, cf. Daniel 12.2; Mark 12.25. Resurrection existence is understood, in relation to the normal human bodily existence, as transformed rather than revived.

- 7.4 How would this story have functioned? As a distinct and independent unit its purpose is indicated by its conclusion – ‘made known to them in the breaking of bread’, which in turn picks up ‘When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them’, itself an echo of Luke 22.19 (though these two were not present on that occasion). Of course the defence of the role of Jesus’ death in God’s providential plan is important, but the main thrust of the story, which would be celebrated whenever the story was used, was the *recognition of the risen one at the key Eucharistic moment*. One could say that any Christian theological tendency to preoccupation with death is altogether subordinated to the great theme of resurrection.
- 7.5 The story conforms to an already existing template, so its historical contribution is probably its conveying the currency of a particular understanding of the risen-ness of Jesus and the related understanding of what happens in Christian worship.

8 The angelic and non-angelic Jesus of the group appearance stories

- 8.1 We shall shortly come back to the component parts of Luke’s narrative in Luke 24, but before that we turn briefly to Matthew 28.16-20:

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The tradition is not Matthew’s creation, for all that several features suggest Matthew’s editorial work and theological concerns. Three factors combine to interpret Jesus as a heavenly being: (i) cosmic authority; (ii) universal presence, unlimited by time and space; and (iii) the reaction of ‘doubt’, v. 17. He appears *from heaven*, as it were, and his existence is *angelic*.

- 8.2 Luke’s version of the group appearance (24.36-43) takes a different view, and shows that while Luke is happy to adopt the Emmaus story he wishes to promote a more firmly ‘physical’ interpretation of resurrection existence. He does not always think things through thoroughly and consistently!

³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a spirit.

³⁸He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened and why do doubts (διαλογισμοί) arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving (ἀπιστούντων, cf. 24.11] and still wondering (θαυμαζόντων, cf. 24.12), he said to them, ‘Have you anything to eat?’ ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate it in their presence.

It is important to note (i) that Jesus has to make more than one attempt to achieve his purpose, i.e. the first attempt was not a success, and (ii) that the

terms used to describe the disciples' reaction to the first attempt are exactly the terms used to describe the non-faith position of the men in vv. 11, 12.

Why, we may ask, does eating succeed where sight and touch had failed? The answer is to be found via Jewish texts which indicate that in the C1 CE it was thought that angels do not eat ordinary human food, and therefore anyone who eats such food is not angelic!

The ancient story in Genesis 18 of the visit of the mysterious trio to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre leaves no doubt that Abraham's hospitality, including the food, was accepted: 'He took the curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them *while they ate.*' (Genesis 18.8). Centuries later, Philo revised the account. According to him, the three angels 'did not shrink from stopping and receiving hospitality from men', and they would not have given the impression of feasting except as a sign of their sharing with their host the service of God. Yet the giving of an impression was precisely what it was: 'though they neither ate nor drank *they gave the appearance* of both eating and drinking' (Philo, *On Abraham* 115-118). A few years later still, Josephus responded to the unequivocal statement of the Genesis text by producing the so-called 'docetic paraphrase': the visitors are again 'three angels', and as for their accepting hospitality, 'they *gave him to believe* that they did eat'. (*Antiquities* 1.196-197)

The second piece of evidence also appears in the *Testament of Abraham*, a text belonging to the same period of time as Luke, or perhaps a little later. In it the archangel Michael visits Abraham in advance of his reception into the presence of God, and an elaborate ruse has to be devised so that the hospitality offered by Abraham may be accepted – and yet not accepted! The reason for the ruse is set out in Michael's own reminder to God, 'Lord, all the heavenly spirits are incorporeal, and they neither eat nor drink.' (4.9).

The third piece of evidence is contained in a much earlier text, the apocryphal book of Tobit. At the climax of the long story of Tobiah's journey in the company of the unrecognized angel (Tobit 5-12), in the course of which there had been a lot of eating and drinking, it emerges that there was one non-participant in all the meals. In private, with the mission safely accomplished, the angel explained: 'I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord ... Although you were watching me, I *really* did not eat or drink anything – but what you saw was a *vision.*' (12.19)

8.3 Where does the gospel of John stand on this issue when the group appearance is presented?

The story of the group appearance in 20.19-23 has one of the famous Johannine dislocations (aporias). These aporias, which occur frequently in the text of John, are the main reason for thinking that this gospel came out in two editions – 4G¹, which was relatively short, and 4G², which resulted from extra sayings material and narratives being inserted. One of the purposes which lay behind the expansion of 4G¹ into 4G² was the felt need to insist on the uncompromising and unqualified human-ness of Jesus, cf. the addition of the prologue (1.1-18), which comes to a climax with 'And the Word became flesh ...'.

In the present text of the group appearance, there is a manifest awkwardness: Jesus' initial greeting of the disciples is said twice!

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them

^{19b}and said, "Peace be with you." ^{20a}After he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side

^{20b}Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

The gospel writer's intention is clear: to prepare for the encounter with Thomas, to which he attaches a confession of faith – 'My Lord and my God' (20.28) – and a statement of principle which is intended to be taken very seriously by subsequent generations: 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (20.29). The material physicality of the Jesus of John is plainly what 20.24-29 asserts; it is what 20.19b, 20a picks up; it is what 19.31-37 prepares for.

³¹Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of high solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. ³²Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

³⁴Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. ³⁵He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.

³⁶These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.'

³⁷And again another passage of scripture says, 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced.'

The statements about the piercing of Jesus' side interrupt the main flow of the narrative and again look like an aporia. They are easily marginalized. If so, John provides us with yet another piece of evidence of a movement in early Christian resurrection thinking from the 'angelic' view to the flesh-and-bones-physical view.

9 From first to last: Peter and Paul, with Mary and James in between!

9.1 The appearance to Peter is documented in 1 Corinthians 15.5 and Luke 24.34. It has been explained (controversially!) by Gerd Lüdemann in terms of depth psychology.

This explanation centres on the mourner's sense of forgiveness and liberation from guilt. It understands 'he appeared to Cephas/Simon' as the coming to Peter of Jesus' word of forgiveness 'as something living, as an encounter with the whole Jesus himself, in an image'. Here the historical Jesus becomes a primary influence.

The supporting argument builds on the proposal that a bereaved person's mourning process is liable to be impeded by three factors – 'a sudden death;

an ambivalent attitude to the dead person associated with guilt feelings; and a dependent relationship'. Peter seems to qualify for all three – immersed in deep grief and despair, shocked by the pitiless suddenness of it all, keenly aware of his recent defection, and cast adrift in a situation where following Jesus had involved abandonment of all the normal human support systems. Being overwhelmed by grief, his seeing Jesus might well be formally similar to 'reports by mourners, which occasionally also contain the element of the image of the presence of a beloved person who has died', and it might indeed address therapeutically his trauma.

Much of this makes very good sense. Perhaps one can still ask: did the grief induce the 'seeing'? Was it a matter of freeing him *to* grieve, and of mourning being 'enormously helped ... by a vision', or rather of being freed *from* mourning and grief? And would a vision, which enabled him to go on mourning healthily, serve at the same time to install him as leader of the continuing community? Above all, would such an experience have called for the use of the language of resurrection by that community?

- 9.2 When discussion of Peter's encounter with Jesus takes it to be the first such visionary experience, something needs to be said about the alternative scheme which puts Mary Magdalene forward as the first to have such an experience. There are two versions of this story (Matthew 28.9-10; John 20.11-18).

Matthew 28: [⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.] ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

John 20: ¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.'

¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means My teacher).

¹⁷Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'

¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The conventional pattern of argument in favour of Mary Magdalene as the first witness here runs as follows:

- a. The stories in Matthew 28.9-10 and John 20.11-18 overlap, and therefore point to the existence of a tradition older than either of them.
- b. The early church, aware of conventional gender assumptions in the society of the time, would not have created a story of an appearance to a woman.

- c. The same considerations, together with a preoccupation with authority positions within the church, explain why the pre-Pauline tradition places Peter first.

These arguments are unfortunately not compelling.

- a. The content of Matthew 28.9-10 appears to be drawn from Mark 16.1, 7, cf. Matthew 28.1, 7. The journey motif in particular is only part of the story by virtue of Mark's editorial work within Mark 16.1-8. The fear motif has already been introduced (Matthew 28.5, 8, cf. Mark 16.6, 8); the worship motif will be central to the final story (Matthew 28.17). The named women are, as it were, made available by the preceding story.
- b. The appearance to the women in Matthew is strictly preparatory to Matthew's great climax in 28.16-20, cf. preliminary appearance of the angel to the mother of Samson in advance of the definitive appearance to the father, Judges 13.
- c. John is likely to have depended on Matthew: thus the disciples are called 'brothers' (John 20.17 = Matthew 28.10 *contra* Mark 16.7) and the journey motif (20.17) is a Johannine remodelling of the journey motif in Matthew/Mark. He is likely to have exploited the story in Matthew 28.9-10, since he was keen to emphasise the role of women, cf. the very prominent and powerful role assigned to the Samaritan woman and Martha (4.42; 11.27). On gender questions he is the most enlightened of the four evangelists, probably because his Christian community finds itself in sectarian mode, and sects are (in theory) strong on equality.

Conclusion: It is unlikely that the appearance to Mary Magdalene is historical. [Sorry! I'd like it to be otherwise!]

- 9.3 Concerning what happened to James, the brother of Jesus (cf. 1 Corinthians 15.7), we know absolutely nothing – except that he has in common with Paul the 'turn around' experience of change from opponent to supporter.
- 9.4 Paul speaks of his experience in such a way as to lead us to see an equivalence in content between it and the experiences of others who 'saw' Jesus (cf. 1 Corinthians 15.8). Can we get a handle on whatever it was that happened to him? He is, after all, the only person who speaks at first hand about it. Galatians 1.14-16 reads:

¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to ¹⁶reveal (ἀποκαλύψει) his Son to (or in) me ...

The language of 'revelation' suggests a disclosure from heaven, and in this respect Paul's own account agrees with the trio of narratives provided by Luke in Acts: 9.1-9; 22.3-11; 26.12-18. In all three there is a combination of the visual and the auditory; in all three Paul is accompanied by others. But there is variation in respect of whether the companions see and/or hear what Paul sees and hears. This undermines an unqualified 'objectivity' in what occurs. If we want to assign the stories to an existing family of stories, the obvious prototype is in Daniel 10.2-9:

²At that time I, Daniel, had been mourning for three weeks. ³I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth, and I had not anointed myself at all, for the full three weeks.

⁴On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris), ⁵I looked up and saw a man clothed in linen, with a belt of gold from Uphaz around his waist. ⁶His body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of many waters.

⁷I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, the people who were with me did not see the vision, though a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled and hid themselves. ⁸So I was left alone to see this great vision. My strength left me, and my complexion grew deathly pale, and I retained no strength. ⁹Then I heard the sound of his words; and when I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a trance, face to the ground.

So we again encounter the angelic pattern and the implication that the 'appearance experience' is a vision of a heavenly reality. It is an experience that is not necessarily fully available to anyone other than the designated recipient.

- 9.5 Perhaps the most important book on the resurrection of Jesus to have been written for many years is that by Dale Allison (2005) *Resurrecting Jesus*, London: Continuum. Allison comments on Lüdemann's hypothesis:

This is an interesting hypothesis, although I do not see that it can be, depending on one's inclination, either established or falsified. Even if we accept Lüdemann's suppositions, we are still left with the question why a hallucination led a first-century Jew to confess that Jesus had been "raised from the dead". (242-243)

What is particularly interesting in Allison's book is his treatment of appearances of those who have recently died, who have with remarkable frequency either been *seen* or been the subject of a *sense of the presence*.

'There are many firsthand accounts of several people seeing at once the apparition of a person recently deceased. Whether or not they are persuasive, the truth of the matter, welcome or not, is that the literature on visions of the dead, is full of parallels to the stories we find in the Gospels. (270) ...

'Although the facts are too little known, surveys from various parts of the world indicate that perceived contact with the dead is, however we interpret it, a regular part of cross-cultural experience. (271) ...

'In case after case, and from different regions of the globe, we have learned that up to half of all widows and widowers believe that they have run into their dead spouses, that is, have seen them and/or heard them and/or felt their presence. This is clearly a normal part of the mourning process: the bereaved frequently report contact with the dead. (273) These experiences are, moreover, often experienced as quite vivid and real. (274)

'Perhaps it is not out of line here to relate my own experience. One of my best friends was, in 1987, tragically run over by a drunk driver. After several weeks in a coma, she died, along with her unborn baby. About a week after this, I awakened in the middle of the night. There, standing at the end of my bed, was my friend Barbara. She said nothing; she simply was there. Her appearance did not match the traditional lore about ghosts. She was not faint or transparent or frightening. She was to the contrary beautiful and

brightly luminous and intensely real. Her transfigured, triumphant presence, which lasted only a few seconds, gave me great comfort. Although she said nothing, this thought entered my mind: this sight is ineffably beautiful, and any person in that state would be ineffably beautiful. Whatever the explanation, this is just exactly what happened.

'This was not my only ostensible encounter with the deceased Barbara. One early afternoon several weeks later, in the full light of day, I was typing in my study, wholly focused on my work. All of a sudden I felt a strong physical presence, which I sensed as being up, behind, and to my left. I immediately knew, I do not know how, that this was Barbara. Unlike the first time, when I saw something and heard nothing, this time I heard something and saw nothing. As clear as could be, my mind somehow picked up the words: "You must go and see Warren [Barbara's distraught husband] right now." Overwhelmed by this communication out of the blue, I instinctively obeyed. I called Warren and made a late luncheon date. In the event he seemed to me to be doing as well as could be expected; there was no emergency that I could see. The voice, however, had been urgent, and I unhesitatingly heeded its request.' (275-6)

'The first point for historians of the New Testament is that the sort of experiences just recounted [Allison describes similar experiences by different members of his family after the death of his father] are common and they typically seem quite real to percipients. (277)

In ways reminiscent of New Testament traditions, there are numerous reports of apparitions in which the departed

- a. are both seen and heard,
 - b. are seen now by one person and later by another,
 - c. are seen by more than one percipient at the same time,
 - d. are sometimes seen by some but not all present,
 - e. appear to individuals who did not know them in life,
 - f. create doubt in some percipients,
 - g. offer reassurance and give comfort,
 - h. give guidance and make requests or issue imperatives,
 - i. are overwhelmingly real and indeed seemingly solid,
 - j. appear and disappear in unusual and abrupt ways and display what has been called "four dimensional mobility",
 - k. are not perceived as apparitional at the beginning of the experience,
 - l. manifest themselves so convincingly that the percipient undergoes changes in belief, and
 - m. are seen less and less as more and more time follows their death, with most appearances (although certainly not all) taking place within a year of the death of the person represented by the apparition.'
- (278)

- 9.6 The earliest Christians' affirmation that 'he has been raised [by God]' depends on more than visionary experiences. These were necessary but not sufficient to provoke the use of 'resurrection' language. Equally, the emptiness of a tomb, while necessary, would not be sufficient. So resurrection faith relied on *both* seeing Jesus *and* the discovery that his tomb had become empty. We cannot claim that no alternative explanation to that favoured by the earliest Christians is viable. But Christian faith opts for the explanation that they chose, contrary to their own expectations and with the encouragement of so many witnesses.

Progressive Christian Network
 St Deiniol's Weekend Conference
 21-23 May 2010
 Jesus of Nazareth in 2010

From 30 to 2010: Jesus in his world, and we in ours

'All Christians alive today are the heirs of the Church which Paul created. The other type of Christianity once headed by the brother of the Lord has disappeared.' Dairmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, London: Allen Lane, 2009, p. 106.

With an eye to the question of whether Jesus can be viewed as the founder of Christianity we draw in a 'theologically significant other', and ask whether the religion of the carpenter's son was truly that of the tentmaker Roman citizen, and vice versa.

1 On getting one's bearings

- 1.1 There are several aspects of Paul's thought that are worth noting at the outset in order to set up a comparison between him and Jesus, and thus to decide whether Christianity is the religion of Jesus or, as one of the alternatives, the religion of Paul. We need to assess the significance of
- his view that 'the people of God' should no longer be understood as Israel, though members of Israel can belong to the trans-ethnic body;
 - his redefinition of the 'righteousness' that really counts as a relationship with God that is not defined by conformity to the badges of Jewish identity, i.e. circumcision, dietary laws and Sabbath (= 'works of law'), but by participation in Christ;
 - his new understanding of Christ as a corporate person, in whom people participate by faith: hence the term 'in Christ';
 - his disinterest in the historical Jesus, matched by keen interest in the death and resurrection;
 - his conviction that the new age, God's 'new creation', has dawned in the resurrection of Jesus, and constitutes 'gospel';
 - his appeal to the Spirit as the necessary and sufficient confirmation of reality in faith and life – the 'occupying power' replacing Sin.
- 1.2 What is Christianity, that one can go on to talk about anyone as it founder? In the earliest days there were diverse developments from the Jesus movement – thus, the religions of James and Peter (leading to Matthew); Paul (probably leading to Mark and Luke); John Were they all 'Christianity'? This leads us naturally to a consideration of

2 The other type of Christianity

Paul is most often remembered for the conflicts in which he became embroiled. Many of the issues that arise for interpreters of his thought demand that we are careful to define the identity of his opponents. These were not, as those attentive to the thought of Martin Luther are inclined to presume, representatives of Judaism. They were Christians, who belonged to or were aligned with the church in Jerusalem. That church existed before Paul's 'conversion', so we must attend first to the position and, equally important, the developments/changes which characterized that community.

Paul's own record of his dealings with the Jerusalem leadership over about 15 years (ca. 36-50 CE) is a rich mine of information, so here is the text of Galatians 1.11-2.16

11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

18 Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days; ¹⁹but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! ²¹Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, ²²and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; ²³they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.' ²⁴And they glorified God because of me.

1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ²I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. ³But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. ⁴But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us — ⁵we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. ⁶And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me. ⁷On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised ⁸(for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), ⁹and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; ¹²for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for

fear of the circumcision faction. ¹³And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ^{14a}But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all,

14b 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? ¹⁵We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

The faith of the post-Easter Christian community in Jerusalem can be recovered by bringing together a number of scattered pieces of data.

- 2.1 The leadership was Galilean, but they made a decision to base themselves in Jerusalem. This was probably for tactical reasons, i.e. a mission to Israel is most effectively led from the capital (cf. Jesus' own forays into Jerusalem: Matthew 23.37-39/Luke 13.34-35; Mark 11.1-11), but also for principled theological reasons, i.e. Jerusalem/Zion and its Temple are the location for the final intervention of God (cf. Isaiah 2.1-4, and the text used by Jesus in explaining the meaning of the 'cleansing' of the Temple, Isaiah 56.1-8).
- 2.2 Persistent future-oriented expectation of God's kingdom, that had been announced by Jesus, acquired a post-Jesus and post-Easter definition. The Aramaic acclamation, quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 16.22, '*Maranatha* (Our Lord, come)' expressed the conviction that the risen Jesus could now be addressed as Lord (probably using Psalm 110.1, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand ..."'); his own resurrection was an anticipation of the general resurrection which would introduce 'the kingdom of God'; his messianic reign (the idea had been partially transformed) would be established after *his* coming.
- 2.3 The necessary effort to explain and incorporate the ghastly and shameful death that Jesus had died, a problem intensified by the fact that no Jewish text documented any expectation that the messiah should suffer or die, produced a formula of faith, which Paul later quoted: 'Messiah died *for our sins* according to the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15.3b). The word 'our' would refer primarily to Israel, with which the Christian community of course identified. And the underlying thought is probably a theology of martyrdom: God would not have allowed a faithful servant to die if there were no purpose, so it must be that the dislocation in the relationship between him and his people needed to be repaired, and was repaired, cf. the cry of two of the seven martyred brothers:

'We are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God.' 'We are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants.' (2 Maccabees 7.18, 32-33)
 'They became a ransom for the sin of the nation ... and through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice, divine Providence preserved Israel ...' (4 Maccabees 17.21-22).

- 2.4 The Christian community made a habit of assembling together, and its sense of being the assembled people of God led them to adopt the title 'the church of God'. The language of 'church' is not essentially religious and is normally

local in connotation (cf. Paul's reference to persecuting 'the church of God' and being unknown to 'the churches of Judea', Galatians 1.13, 22).

- 2.5 The leadership of the Christian community in Jerusalem saw itself as authorized by the experience of 'seeing' the risen one. The two defining leadership terms were 'the twelve' (among whom Peter occupied a special place, cf. 'he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve', 1 Corinthians 15.5) and 'the apostles' (among whom the previously sceptical James the brother of Jesus quickly assumed pre-eminence, cf. 'he appeared to James, then to all the apostles').

The two terms 'twelve' and 'apostles', which Luke treated *almost* all the time as equivalent (exceptions are Acts 14.4, 14) are not in fact synonymous, though they could overlap (thus, Peter belonged to both).

- 'Twelve' implies a correspondence with and commitment to Israel, and matching that a future destiny to rule over Israel (cf. Matthew 19.28).
- The term 'apostle [= 'sent one'] goes back to the sense of calling that characterized Jesus and was extended to those who were sent out in his name to proclaim the kingdom of God (cf. Luke 10.16: 'Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me').

It is important to note that the term 'apostle' proved capable of being formalized, the effect of which was the loss of its originally looser and more 'charismatic' nuance (cf. Max Weber on 'charisma'). Paul would come to feel some distaste for the formal view and a distinct preference for the charismatic view – which enabled him to be included in the company of 'the apostles', also on the basis of 'seeing Jesus' (cf. 1 Corinthians 15.8, 9: 'Last of all, ... he appeared to me ... I am the least of the apostles ... but I worked harder than any of them!').

A further term that was adopted by the leading trio in Jerusalem was 'pillar' (Galatians 2.6, 9), a term which had prehistory in Jewish usage for someone who was entrusted with the guardianship and transmission of authoritative tradition. Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, who was responsible for rescuing Judaism after the catastrophe of the war with Rome (66-73 CE) was called 'light of Israel and right pillar'. The use of this term by Jerusalem Christianity also reflects a formal solidifying of community life and, in the view of the later Paul, an unhealthy devaluation of 'the grace of God', the only true foundation of authentic leadership.

'And from those who were thought to be something – what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality – to me those who were thought to be something contributed/added nothing. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised) ... when James and Cephas and John, who were regarded as pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship' (Galatians 2.6-9).

- 2.6 The Israel-consciousness of the Christian community in Jerusalem unsurprisingly expressed itself in commitment to the Law of Moses. This was a shared religious tradition, enjoyed equally by the Jewish people as a whole and the Jesus movement within it. It can be understood in broad terms (the

'pattern of religion' = 'covenantal nomism', cf. E P Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, London: SCM, 1977) and in narrower terms, i.e. how they handled the question of the 'badges of identity' or 'boundary markers' of the Jewish people (male circumcision, sabbath and dietary/food laws). These, incidentally, are what Paul probably has in mind when he refers to 'works of law'.

The 'pattern of religion' was joyful commitment to and observance of the law (cf. Psalm 119). The law set out the obligations and responsibilities of the 'covenant' relationship between God and his people, which was grounded in its unutterable grace and maintained by mutual faithfulness. Obedience to the law was not a guilt-generating burden. Much hinged on the *intention* to obey – the 'direction of the heart'. But when a failure of obedience occurred, there existed the means of coping with it, i.e. repentance and the atoning sacrifices. This pattern of religion was not conditioned by anxiety about gaining entry to the world to come – on the contrary, 'all Israelites have a share in the world to come'.

2.7 The NT provides evidence of a steady move to the right and even a move in the direction of Pharisaism on the part of the Jerusalem community. Here are the discernible stages.

- Stage 1: Jerusalem-based conservative intruders infiltrate the 'liberal' church in Antioch, where visible unity between Jewish and gentile Christians is expressing itself in table fellowship over a meal that does not conform to the dietary laws of Judaism. (Rightly or wrongly, Acts 15.5 describes the anti-Pauline group as Christian believers who were Pharisees. If so, they were able to train their guns on one who had formerly been 'one of us'.)
- Stage 2: The matter is thrashed out at a six-person meeting in Jerusalem (*circa* 50 CE): James, Peter and John *versus* Paul and Barnabas, with Titus present as a representative gentile Christian believer. Circumcision is not imposed as a necessity for full membership of the people of God, nor is the requirement to share table fellowship in accordance with the dietary laws. So the church in Antioch can continue without change of policy or practice. Nothing changes when Peter visits and shares its communal life.
- Stage 3: James changes his mind during Peter's absence, and a second group of conservative Jerusalem-oriented visitors, authorized by him, arrives and exerts pressure to introduce separate tables in the Christian assembly meal. Their pressure succeeds in winning over all the Jewish Christians – apart from Paul! And in the subsequent debate, Paul loses, and therefore the demand that the gentile Christians should 'judaize' by accepting circumcision is also revived.
- Stage 4: Following his defeat in the debate in Antioch, Paul loses his base in that community, and his subsequent expanded mission is dogged by recurrent interventions by Christian Jews who urge the necessity of circumcision (thus the occasion of the letters to the communities in Galatia, Corinth, Philippi).
- Stage 5: When James falls a victim to the macho politics of the Sadducean high priest Annas II, it is the Pharisees who object! This

suggests not only their long antagonism towards the Sadducees but also their sympathy with the Christian movement as it has developed under the leadership of James, and correspondingly his sympathy with them, cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.200-201:

[During an interregnum in the sequence of prefects, when Festus had died and Albinus had not yet arrived, 62 CE] the younger Ananus [son of the Annas of the NT] convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned. *Those of the inhabitants of the city who were strict in observance of the laws were offended at this.* They sent secretly to king Agrippa, urging him, for Ananus had *not even been correct in his first step*, to order him to desist from any further such actions.

This is the Christian community, developing over the years, with which Paul found himself interacting. But what of Paul's own development over the years?

3 The Pauline revolution

'This is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity.' E P Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, London: SCM, 1977, p. 552.

- 3.1 Paul portrays himself as one of 'those who were strict in observance of the laws' – a Pharisee. 'I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.' (Galatians 1.14) The complementary classic text, though one that may be at times a piece of polemical exaggeration, is Philippians 3.4-6:

⁴I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

We should note that some of Paul's credentials he could not help; others he had chosen, and the concluding trio represents his chosen religious path. All three have to do with the Mosaic law: especially important for our purpose is the second, for religious 'zeal' has to do with unswerving commitment to the one God and the law that he has given, and this second item in the list is sandwiched between the other two, in which the law is explicitly mentioned.

The models of 'zeal' were Phinehas and Elijah, and their sturdy and indeed violent maintenance of the position of the law in the community of Israel was exercised in defiance of the unfaithfulness of fellow Israelites. See Numbers 25.6-13; 1 Kings 19.10-14; and 1 Maccabees 2.24-27, 50, 54:

¹⁹ But Mattathias answered and said in a loud voice: 'Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to obey his commandments, everyone of them abandoning the religion of their ancestors, ²⁰I and my sons and my brothers will continue to live by the covenant of our ancestors. ²¹Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. ²²We will not obey the king's words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left.'

23 When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice on the altar in Modein, according to the king's command. ²⁴When Mattathias saw it, he **burned with zeal** and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him on the altar. ²⁵At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar. ²⁶Thus he **burned with zeal for the law**, just as Phinehas did against Zimri son of Salu.

27 Then Mattathias cried out in the town with a loud voice, saying: 'Let everyone who is **zealous for the law** and supports the covenant come out with me!' ²⁸Then he and his sons fled to the hills and left all that they had in the town.

49 Now the days drew near for Mattathias to die, and he said to his sons: 'Arrogance and scorn have now become strong; it is a time of ruin and furious anger. ⁵⁰Now, my children, **show zeal for the law**, and give your lives for the covenant of our ancestors.

51 'Remember the deeds of the ancestors, which they did in their generations; and you will receive great honour and an everlasting name. ⁵²Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness? ... ⁵⁴Phinehas our ancestor, because he was **deeply zealous**, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood. ⁵⁵Joshua, because he fulfilled the command, became a judge in Israel. ⁵⁶Caleb, because he testified in the assembly, received an inheritance in the land. ⁵⁷David, because he was merciful, inherited the throne of the kingdom for ever. ⁵⁸Elijah, because of great **zeal for the law**, was taken up into heaven.

...

So it seems as clear as daylight that persecution of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem was motivated by commitment to the law – but here we hit a problem: the Jerusalem Christians were not law breakers! (i) They were the successors of Jesus of Nazareth, who had not shown any disrespect for the law. (ii) Attempts to accuse part of the Jerusalem community of disrespect for the Temple lacked any grounding in fact, cf. Acts 6.8-15; 7.54-8.1. (iii) The community had not welcomed gentiles into full membership in a way that would set aside the badges of identity of the community of Israel. They were not lawbreakers. So what is going on?

Paul describes himself as a Pharisee. That means 'a separated one', living out the principle that the people of God should be just that: special, separate and law-conditioned.

'I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. ... For I am the Lord who brought you up from the Land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy.' (Leviticus 11.44-45)

The recurrent motif in all summaries of the Pharisees' position is their being 'strict in observance of the laws'. That takes us to the wholly legitimate, even obligatory, preoccupation with the study of the meaning and application of Torah (= law) to Israel. The holiness principle and the law that enshrined it would in practical terms need to be interpreted and applied.

Within the whole complex of living according to the principle of holiness, certain specific laws came to be highlighted as special preoccupations of the Pharisees, e.g. the laws of tithing, levitical purity, fasting ... And because they

were concerned that Israel should be 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19.6), lay members of the Pharisaic 'guild' set themselves to conform to the stricter priestly requirements. This was their 'pattern of religion' (Sanders).

3.2 Given that there are some difficulties in achieving precision concerning Paul's reason for finding the law-observing Jesus movement so repugnant, and those difficulties do not seem capable of resolution by finding issues of theological conviction that were at stake, perhaps the best way forward is to note:

- that the sociology of religion confirms that religious groups which are most hostile to one another are often rather closely related in beliefs and intentions, which suggests that one should not be surprised if Pharisaism and the Jesus movement were in fact quite adjacent (though not identical);
- that the Jesus movement had during the pre-Easter period been at odds with the Pharisees, so there was, as it were, a pre-history.

But the change in the religious experience of Paul was not just a movement from Pharisaism to an alternative 'sect'. We may compare *and contrast* Josephus, who was for a time a Pharisee and then left. The revolution for Paul was through and through christological – a shift in the religious/experiential centre of gravity – from the law, and even in a carefully qualified sense from Judaism (cf. Galatians 1.13), to Christ! And therefore the likelihood is that what Paul, secure in his conviction that true religion is the religion of law, had objected to so strenuously was all (apparently) nonsensical talk about an alleged messiah (who had no messianic credentials) who had died as a supposed rebel (and the messiah would not die) and then allegedly been raised from the dead (which was impossible, since the resurrection of the dead belonged exclusively to the future). Only a vision of the risen one could, we must suppose, achieve this revolution. And then the drawing out of a sustainable interpretation of Easter would be determinative. 'God revealed his Son in me', was one way of putting it. But a fuller explanation was needed: hence Philippians 3.7-11:

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

3.3 If the key to understanding Paul – and therefore, in effect, the key to understanding his relationship to Jesus of Nazareth – and therefore, in the long run, the answer to the question of whether he or Jesus 'founded' Christianity – is a '*pattern of religion*' which derives from the resurrection of Jesus, then we need to try and draw out some aspects of the meaning for him of Easter. Here, at last, we stand on the threshold of Pauline Christianity.

For the time being, the Philippians passage (for all that its tone is aggressively polemical against the Christian ‘circumcision party’) serves to show where the centre of gravity of Paul’s thought may be located.

- VV. 10-11 set out a chiasmus (= a-b-b'-a'): two resurrection references enclosing two death references. Participation in both death and resurrection is what Christianity is about. When v. 11 speaks about resurrection it is the *future hope*; when v. 10 speaks about knowing the power of the resurrection of Christ it is coupled with ‘knowledge, which v. 8 said had now been achieved. So resurrection life is *present* and future!
- V. 9 speaks of ‘a righteousness of my own that comes from law’, and it is important to note that he does not deny the reality of this ‘righteousness’. He simply sees it as a matter of *human* ‘pedigree’ (the things that Paul could not help) and *human* activity, however well motivated. In characterizing it as ‘of the flesh’ he means ‘all things human’, but the most telling and explanatory contrast is already in v. 3:

It is we who are the circumcision, who *worship in the Spirit of God* and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.

- And that implies that there are two versions of ‘righteousness, one that counts and the other that doesn’t – and the one that counts is achieved by participation in - ‘getting into’ – the Christ who dies and was raised. What makes that a reality is divine intervention in the form of the Spirit of God. We shall see that the two-sided theme of indwelling/occupation represents the kernel of Pauline faith – being indwelt/occupied by the Spirit (equivalent to Christ himself), and indwelling/participation in Christ.

That is Paul’s distinctive version of Christian faith – participation in the resurrection of the Christ who had died. It takes us well beyond Jesus!

4 The classic formula of Pauline Christianity

‘Paul’s religious message was a world apart from that of Jesus, and although we may be wrong to distinguish it too sharply from Judaism, its most important features are not easily explained simply and solely as modifications of Jewish belief.’ John Ashton, *The Religion of Paul the Apostle*, London: Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 10-11.

- 4.1 The key evidence is found in the pre-Pauline ‘baptismal reunification formula’, excavated by Wayne Meeks (*The First Urban Christians*, Yale: YUP, 1983) in Galatians 3.27-28; 1 Corinthians 12.13; Colossians 3.11. We can easily isolate a text which stands out from, and in certain respects is ill-fitting within, its present context: (i) there is no concern with the slave/free or male/female themes in the context of Galatians 3, which suggests that something is being quoted; (ii) the presence of a similar formula in the three distinct contexts.

²⁷As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

²⁸There is no longer Jew nor Greek;
There is no longer slave nor free;
There is no longer ‘male and female’;
For all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

4.1.1 This was drastically counter-cultural, as Meeks observes:

- Hellenistic man from the time of Plato (428-348 BCE, pupil of Socrates, teacher of Aristotle founder of the Academy in Athens, the first institution of higher learning in the Western world) had ‘three reasons for gratitude – that I was born a human being and not an animal; next, a man and not a woman; third, a Greek and not a barbarian’.
- The Jewish synagogue liturgy incorporated a pattern deriving from Rabbi Judah: ‘Three blessings one much say daily – Blessed art thou who did not make me a gentile; blessed art thou, who did not make me a woman; blessed art thou, who did not make me a boor.’

So Christianity owes an incalculable debt to Paul and his Christian insights, which are intrinsic to the use of the phrase ‘in Christ’.

4.1.2 This had some implications which even Paul had some trouble with – ‘no longer “male and female”’ – but on the ‘no longer Jew nor Greek’ part his vision was clear, and therefore predictably controversial. Although the famous passage 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 is a rather convoluted and contorted attempt to argue Christians into not giving unnecessary offence by their conduct, and shows him relying on some rather regressive arguments, the fact remains that he placed a lot of women in positions of authority and leadership, and thus demonstrated the essential truth that anything and everything relating to the life of the church has to be consistent with the parameters of the defining baptismal confession.

4.1.3 The further, and most important, background to the baptismal reunification formula is the thought of the created order as exhibiting pairs of opposites (see J Louis Martyn). These are now brought together into one and therefore no longer control the existence of those who belong to the new creation. That new creation is embodied in *the corporate and risen Christ*. That is, arguably, the heart and core of all Pauline theology!

- The theme of baptism – the entry rite, or boundary marker, of the Christian community in the Pauline tradition – suggests that the understanding of *corporateness*, i.e. the Christian community, is rooted in christology. So whenever we talk about the Church we talk about Christ.
- The community is the place where what *is real* is *made real*. In a true sense, the Christian community experiences through the Spirit and its involvement in the risen Christ, the intention of God for the creation. The church is therefore not so much set over against the world of humankind (sectarian approach) as representative of humankind.
- Paul never claims that the distinctions mentioned no longer exist in the world at large or, for that matter, among Christians as human beings. But he does indicate that these distinctions are irrelevant to the life of the church: to import them is to prefer era 1 to era 2, or to try and superimpose era 1 upon era 2. That is, theologically speaking, *verboten!*

4.1.4 It is worth pausing over the phrase ‘clothed with ...’. This has a history in descriptions of divine possession. Thus,

- 'the Spirit took possession of (clothed itself with) Gideon' (Judges 6.34) and he sounded the trumpet and issued a call in charismatic style to follow;
- 'the Spirit came upon Amasai' (1 Chronicles 12.18) and he voiced a confessional acclamation of loyalty to David, the royal pretender;
- 'the Spirit of God took possession of (clothed itself with) Zechariah son of the priest Jehoiada' and he spoke as the mouthpiece of God (2 Chronicles 24.20).

This again points us in the direction of the theme of possession and mutual indwelling: the experience of Christ as the experience of the Spirit: 'Christ in me' and 'me in Christ'.

4.2 Since we are interested in the question of Jesus and Paul, one more classic passage in Paul's defence of his position over against his critics is worth examining carefully, namely 2 Corinthians 5.11-21.

11 Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. ¹²We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast on our behalf (*huper emon*), so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.

14 For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for (*huper*) all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for (*huper*) all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for (*huper*) them.

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one 'according to the flesh'; even though we once knew Christ 'according to the flesh', we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for (*huper*) Christ, since God is making his appeal through us: 'We entreat you on behalf of (*huper*) Christ, be reconciled to God.'

21 For our sake (*huper hemon*) he made him to be Sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

To understand this passage one must highlight a few crucial thoughts.

- Paul is defensive and ironic in response to a charge that he is at times an ecstatic, which he does not deny (v. 13). Compare 1 Corinthians 14.18-19.
- The repetitive use of the preposition *huper*, variously translated as 'for ...' or 'on behalf of ...' is critical to the argument. It expresses solidarity, identification, equivalence (not, please note, substitution or any sense of 'instead of'). Theologically, this enables Paul to interpret the death and resurrection of Christ as inclusive happenings: the experience of an individual, yes, but above all the experience of those with whom he identifies and who identify with him.

- The phrase ‘according to the flesh’ in association with a verb of seeing can be used either adjectivally (qualifying what is seen) or adverbially (qualifying a way of seeing). These two are ultimately inseparable. (For Paul’s use of this phrase in other related contexts, see 2 Corinthians 1.17; 10.2, 3; 11.18: ‘in terms that are characteristically and exclusively human’.) And we note that v. 16b, dealing with Christ, is presented as a clarification of v. 16a, dealing with ‘anyone’. Question: what can he mean? Answer: a way of viewing anyone, including Christ, within the framework of the Jew/gentile division of humanity. Implications: the Jewishness of Jesus or anyone else, or the gentile-ness of anyone else, has become irrelevant. Just another way of saying what the baptismal tradition said: ‘in Christ ...neither Jew nor Greek’.
- ‘New creation’, is a term used elsewhere, and makes the same point, e.g. Galatians 6.15:

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but new creation!

The underlying idea is one which had considerable purchase in Jewish thought, namely that the present creation is defined by pairs of opposites, so God’s new world, brought into being by an act of creative power in the form of the Christian community, is one in which the polarized pairs have been rendered obsolete. (This idea is taking some time to get established!)

- The final, rather poetic and symmetrically formed, summary reverts to Paul’s sense that the ‘old world’ is under the sway of personalized Sin. Theologically, his conviction is that Christ came into that world and identified with the people who were there, but without compromising his own obedience to God. His obedience extended up to and including his dying, which by respecting the demand of Sin destroyed that demand. So ‘righteousness’, the new status and relationship with God that the work of Christ is intended to establish, is resurrection life. The death and resurrection of Christ (the corporate Christ) is projected into the life of the individual, for whom there is consequently a clear-cut ‘before and after’.

¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live [resurrection people!] might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

5 A network of progressive Christians!

Where does this leave us as Christians at most two millennia later? Arguably we cannot do better than acknowledge our debt to Paul. At the same time as we recognize that the working out of his theology is often culturally conditioned, the theology itself is severely and refreshingly counter-cultural. What is of paramount importance is his pointing us towards an understanding of authentic Christianity as the faith of ‘the resurrection people’.

We are not required to sign up to all the principles of the mission of the historical Jesus – some we cannot and some we should not, for all that there is continuity alongside discontinuity between the pre- and post-resurrection eras. The resurrection made – and makes – a difference that is profound and liberating. It affects anything and everything to do with the life of the Christian community. The history of Christianity is in part the history of a struggle between the old and the new, between the conviction that the resurrection is a postscript to the main story and the conviction that the resurrection is the story. As Paul said, ‘Everything has become new!’

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