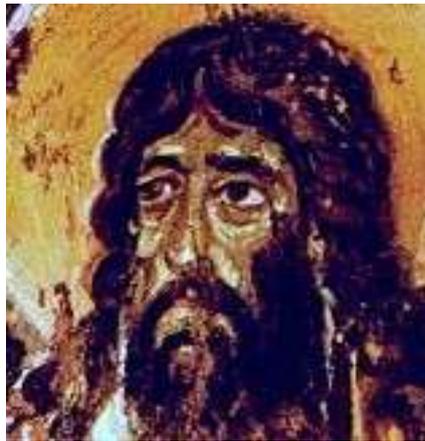


Mr Mordaunt's
Hard Bible Class



An ambitious course of Bible study
designed to prepare young people to
debate issues of Christian faith at
university level

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Part One

Introduction to the Old Testament

1. The History of Israel

>> Hebrew consonants: Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth, He, Waw, Zayin, Cheth (hard 'ch'), Teth, Yod, Kaph

The history of Israel is contained (for our purposes) in the 2000 years before the birth of Christ. In this first talk I want to map out for you the very broad outlines of that period, so that you can relate the Old Testament to history.

The OT is not a reliable guide to history. Most of it was written long after the event by people whose main interest was in Jewish religion and traditions, rather than in history as such. To be fair to them, history as we know it had not yet been invented. It was not until 400 BC that the world's first work of objective history was written, and that was in Greece, not in Palestine.

The OT is essentially about the relationship that the Children of Israel had with God, how that relationship formed, how it was tested and how it deepened into a more profound understanding of what mattered to God. For the writers of the OT that can be illustrated by myths and legends as well as by actual history. Myths and legends are not without importance for the historian, however: there are often nuggets of historical information tucked away in them.

One problem for the historian is that the Israelites had no reliable system of recording dates. They spoke about 'the sixth year of the reign of so and so', but our only way of pinning down an actual year is usually when the event in question is referred to in contemporary Egyptian, Assyrian or Babylonian records. The fact that they did not go in for a lot of inscriptions on stone (so the archaeological record is poor compared to neighbouring countries) doesn't help. We estimate that Kings

David and Solomon were in the region of 1050 – 1000 BC, but we cannot be more precise.

The first period, down to the time of Moses – the C 13th BC - is very sketchy. Abraham and the other founding fathers are figures of legend rather than historical persons. The most we can say is that it looks likely that in the period 2000 to 1600 BC tribes were migrating from the area of modern Iraq to Palestine and that some of them moved on into Egypt, where there are records of a substantial immigrant population with a name something like 'Hebrews' between around 1600 and 1300 BC.

In the reign of Ramses II of Egypt, in the middle of the C 13th, the 'Hebrew' tribes seem to have migrated back to Palestine. They may have been expelled, or economic circumstances may have caused them to move. It is unlikely to have been as sudden or dramatic as the book of Exodus would have us believe. Probably not all the tribes had come down into Egypt in the first place, and they may have drifted back piecemeal to rejoin those who had stayed in Palestine.

There is no archaeological evidence for a violent conquest of Canaan. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that the Hebrew tribes assimilated fairly peacefully with the existing inhabitants, who were after all of the same ethnic group and spoke closely related languages. The book of Joshua is therefore not strictly historical.

The book of Judges contains pointers to the more likely real state of affairs in the period

between Moses and Solomon, though even it is misleading in that it presents as national leaders people who were actually just tribal leaders in a loose confederacy.

At some point, either while in Egypt or on the way back, the Israelites picked up a monotheistic religion, perhaps from the desert Arabs they encountered (according to Exodus, from Jethro, the priest of Midian, whose daughter Moses married). Their new commitment to Yahweh (Jehovah) was a source of tensions both with their neighbours and among themselves once they were back in Palestine. Many of them intermarried with the locals and picked up the worship of the local deities as part of that deal, while others wanted to maintain a separate tribal identity and a separate religion.

That was paralleled by a difference of views about the proper way to organise their society. The traditionalists favoured a loose form of democracy, such as you still find in Bedouin society, and an informal religion, without priests or temples. The indigenous Canaanite tribes had their own kings and organised cults to worship their gods.

Eventually, with misgivings, the Israelites adopted the institution of monarchy and their kings, David and Solomon, attempted to centralise worship in the new Temple in Jerusalem. Solomon imported into the Temple a lot of the features of the old Canaanite religion in an attempt to keep everyone on board, but there continued to be opposition from traditionalists, which was reflected for centuries in the teaching of the great individual Prophets.

The reign of Solomon, although celebrated as a golden age because of the building of the Temple and the extension of the borders of Israel, was actually a disaster. Solomon raised heavy taxes and imposed forced labour on the people, and he weakened Israel to the point that, shortly after he died, the kingdom split into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, the Northern based on Samaria and the shrine at

Bethel, and the Southern based on Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple.

Both kingdoms enjoyed a period of prosperity in the C 8th BC, but they were in a vulnerable and unstable position, poised between the much stronger powers of Egypt in the South and Assyria to the North and East. In the last third of the C 8th the Assyrians launched successive invasions which ended with the demise of the Northern Kingdom. The Southern Kingdom, under Hezekiah, survived by the skin of its teeth.

All through the C 7th the Southern Kingdom of Judah was living on a knife edge, its rulers alternately trying to placate the Assyrians and the Egyptians. There was a strong pro-Assyrian party in Israel, and the worship of Assyrian deities became prevalent. The Northern Kingdom was in Assyrian hands by that time.

At the end of the C 7th there was a revival of Judah's fortunes, and King Josiah was able to re-establish orthodox religion, but it was short lived. The Assyrians were overtaken by the Babylonians, and at the beginning of the C 6th Judah came under heavy pressure from the latter. At first the Babylonians took only selected members of the ruling class away, hoping that that would enable them to establish political control; but when the puppet government they had left behind proved unreliable they returned in 587, destroyed the city and took a much larger section of Jewish society into captivity in Babylon.

The Exile was not a genocide. The Jews taken to Babylon were put to productive work there, and, though it was hard for them to begin with, many of them prospered and reached leading positions in the service of the Babylonian court. At the same time Babylon left a caretaker government in place in Jerusalem. Some of the Jews hated being in Babylon, where they were separated from the Temple and everything they held dear, but many of them made the best of it

and never returned, even when they were allowed to.

The going into exile happened in two phases, and the return happened in perhaps four stages, very untidily. It was only in the middle of the C 5th that there was a move, as described in Nehemiah, to rebuild Jerusalem and re-establish a Jewish state. But Jewish society by that date was impoverished by emigration; it had forgotten how to speak classical Hebrew, which was the language of its religion; and it was never again going to enjoy political independence.

In 331 BC Alexander the Great conquered the whole of the Middle East, and Palestine came under the rule of one of Alexander's generals, Seleucus. Alexander established the new city of Alexandria as the capital of Egypt under his general Ptolemy, and Jews flocked to Alexandria to provide the merchant class in that new metropolis. There were soon more Jews in Egypt and elsewhere around the Mediterranean than in Palestine. Because they did not speak Hebrew the Alexandrian Jews translated the Old Testament into Greek, which was their everyday language.

Finally, the Romans occupied Jerusalem in 169 BC. Whereas the Seleucids (the Greek dynasty founded by Alexander) had been fairly accommodating to the Jews, the Romans were ruthless. They deliberately defiled the Temple and drove the Jewish population, such as it was, to a frenzy of religious rage. For the next 300 years, down to the time of Jesus and beyond, Jewish zealots were launching suicide attacks on the Roman colonial government, which suppressed their frequent revolts with savage efficiency.

From 66-70 AD there was another revolt against Rome, which was put down when Titus sacked Jerusalem in 70 and severely damaged, if not actually destroyed, the Temple. The last act was the revolt of Bar-Cochba ("Son of the Star") in 133-135 AD, after which the Emperor Hadrian

destroyed the Temple utterly and banned Jews from their homeland.

The history of Israel is a catalogue of under-achievement by a nation who thought of themselves as God's chosen people. Over the thousand years before Christ Israel contributed little to science or architecture, visual arts or the development of institutions of government. It was consistently behind the times in relation to its neighbours: a conservative, even backward, nation, hampered by its exclusiveness, its refusal to embrace other cultures and by the primitive language and system of arithmetic it used. Compared to, for instance, the Egyptian and Assyrian sections in the British Museum there is next to nothing from ancient Israel.

Israel developed a degree of theological insight, but even in that it scarcely advanced from the first prophets, Amos and Hosea, and actually went backwards after Jeremiah. Its culture was marred by being nationalistic and materialistic. Israel produced some wonderful literature, including psalms and prophecies of enduring beauty, but overall its literary output was limited. Jews were noticeably more productive outside Palestine than they were at home.

On the positive side, though, Israel's attention to a book of scripture which needed to be preserved and taught to successive generations (in what was by then a dead language) produced a tradition of scholarship, hard work and close attention to detail that would stand the Jewish people in good stead in many walks of life. The Jewish techniques of text criticism and of exegesis, though often unscientific and even fanciful to our eyes, laid the foundations of a methodology that could in due course be applied to scientific enquiry. The exceptional contribution of the Jewish people today in many walks of life owes much to the rabbinic discipline that was developed in the latter years of the OT.

And let us not forget, Judaism gave us Jesus.

2. Wellhausen and the Pentateuch

>> Hebrew consonants: Lamedh, Mem, Nun, Samekh, Ayin, Pe, Tsadhe, Qoph, Resh, Sin/Shin, Taw

In 312 AD the Roman Emperor Constantine defeated his rival Maxentius in the battle of the Milvian Bridge, just outside Rome, and became supreme ruler of the whole Roman Empire. The empire in those days still stretched from Hadrian's Wall to the far south of Egypt, from Syria to Portugal, from the North coast of Africa to modern Bulgaria and Romania.

Constantine did two important things. He made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, and he moved the capital of the Empire from Rome to Constantinople, or modern Istanbul. Constantinople had long been a rival to Rome as the centre of the Christian Church, and Constantine's departure was a huge blow to Rome's status. The treasures of the city were shortly after stolen by invading tribes, and when later Emperors from time to time returned to Italy they set up court in Milan or Ravenna, not in Rome.

The Church effectively split into the Greek speaking Eastern Church and the Latin speaking Western Church, though the schism did not become official until the C 11th, when the Patriarchs excommunicated one another. Rome continued to be the capital of the Western Church, but that Church was very weak. Rome did not begin to regain its importance until the Middle Ages.

In the meantime the Eastern Church flourished with Constantinople as its capital. As Western Europe went through the centuries known as the Dark Ages Constantinople preserved and continued to transcribe many old manuscripts from the Classical world, in Hebrew as well as in Greek.

In 1453 the Turks under Suleiman the Magnificent seized Constantinople after a long siege. The Turks were Moslems, and the priests and scholars of Constantinople could see that

their days were numbered. As they fled from the city they packed their handcars and donkeys with all the ancient manuscripts they could carry, partly out of love and care for those treasures, and partly because they needed some assets to live off wherever they would settle in the West.

In a world where there were still very few books, all still copied out by hand, those manuscripts were like gold dust. They were seized upon by the new universities of the West, and scholars immersed themselves in the new resources. For many of them it was the first time they had the opportunity to learn Hebrew and study the Old Testament in the original.

There had been one earlier influx of ancient texts from the south of Spain. Under their Moslem rulers from the C 8th the cities of Seville and Granada had given shelter to Jewish scholars, who preserved a lot of ancient texts, often, oddly enough, by translating them into Arabic. When the Christians eventually drove the Moors out of Spain they were quick to show their zeal for Christ by persecuting and driving out the Jews, and it may in part have been those Sephardic Jews, finding their way to cities like Pisa, Venice and Paris, whose arrival triggered the earliest stages of the Renaissance.

Be that as it may, by the beginning of the C 16th the Dutch scholar Erasmus was good enough at Hebrew to begin to be able to detect different styles in the writing of different passages, leading him to wonder whether the first five books of the Old Testament had more than one author. Traditionally, they had all been ascribed to Moses: the Jews called them (and still do) the Torah, or the Law of Moses, and the belief was that he had written them all in his lifetime, i.e. prior to about 1250 BC.

Erasmus raised the question, but it fell on deaf ears. Everyone else was too used to reading the

Old Testament in translation – the Latin translation by St Jerome known as the Vulgate – and the problem with a translation, even a very good one (and Jerome is rightly acclaimed as one of the Doctors of the Church), is that it tends to obscure the differences of style, so that it ends up being uniformly the style of the translator and you can't hear any differences there may be.

In the following century many others also questioned the single authorship of the first five books, but it was not until the last quarter of the Eighteenth Century that a group of German scholars in Königsberg got together to try to resolve the question once for all through careful analysis of the text. Round about the turn of the C 19th Prof. Wellhausen published the theory that there were at least four hands at work in those books, working at different times, probably centuries apart.

Wellhausen called the four hands E, J, D and P, and although later scholars have elaborated on the theory, so that nowadays people would tend to think in terms of many more hands, the basic analysis still holds. The four hands were:

E (or the Elohist): the traditions of the Northern Kingdom

J (or the Jahwist): the traditions of the Southern Kingdom

D: the Deuteronomist, i.e. the author of the book of Deuteronomy, and

P: the priestly hand.

Some of the stories in the Old Testament are particular traditions of the Northern tribes, others of the Southern tribes; others again, like Adam and Eve, Noah and the Tower of Babel, are very ancient stories which will have featured in both traditions. They are stories that Jewish mothers had been telling their children round the fire for a thousand years or more, but had probably never been written down.

The best guess, based on arguments we shall come to later, is that these old stories were written down for the first time in the C 8th BC. Wellhausen thought the writing down would have happened a little earlier than that, but estimates of these dates have tended to move later since his day. So let's think of E and J as C 8th. The original date of D, the Deuteronomist, tends to be associated with the re-discovery of the scriptures (as it is described) under King Josiah at the end of the C 7th. But the Deuteronomic school - for it surely was a school, not one individual - continued its work during the exile in Babylon.

The priestly hand, P, is associated with the return from Babylon and the restoration of the Temple, and with a new liturgical use of the scriptures, as described by Ezra: let's say basically the C 5th.

How do you distinguish between the different hands? The first indicator that was used (though it is not perfectly reliable) is that they use different names for God. In the oldest traditions God is called Jahweh (though after the C 7th they never pronounced the name, but said Adonai or 'Lord' even when they wrote Jahweh – as Jews still do). Then there are different regional names, such as El-Olam and El-Shaddai, that distinguish different periods and different regional traditions.

You can see the hand of the editors at work in many places in the first five books and beyond. They obviously had access to different versions of the text, and were desperately concerned (since all were sacred) never to lose a word of any of them. That is why we find a lot of repetition in the text: what we call 'doublets'. Not a word was to be wasted.

Wellhausen's work on the first five books of the OT was only the start. Like all the greatest discoverers, Wellhausen not only produced a specific individual discovery: he created a new branch of science, the systematic analysis of the origins of the Biblical texts. A lot of people

reacted badly to the new science, as they always do: conservative clergymen thought it would be the end of religion as they knew it. But there is never any stopping a genuine discovery once it has been made.

They were particularly slow to accept it in England, first, because all the work was done in German, and not many English scholars could read German, though they would be good enough in other languages. And then the

English church was very conservative, and it is a characteristic of the English that the less they understand something the more keen they are to rubbish it. But eventually, by the middle of the C 19th, England too was beginning to accept the 'higher criticism' (as it was called), and remarkably, as we shall see, for a while in the second half of the C 19th an English team led the way in applying these techniques to the analysis of the New Testament.

3. The writing of the Old Testament

>> Hebrew pointing: Qamets, Tsere, Chireq, Cholem, Shureq, Pathah, Seghol, Qibbutz, Daghesh, Shewa

So what do we know about the dating of different parts of the Old Testament, who wrote them, when, where and why?

The OT was divided by the Jews themselves into three sections: The Law or *Torah* (the first five books); the Prophets or *Nebi'im*; and the other Writings (*Cathovim*). If you look at a Hebrew Bible you will see that the books are basically in the same order as our own, except that the Wisdom Books like Proverbs, Psalms and Ecclesiastes come later, as do Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, which were among the last books to be completed.

Some of the books that we would regard as 'histories' - Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings - retain a high place in the batting order, presumably because they were seen as having 'prophetic' content (the Jews sometimes referred to them as 'the former prophets'), but perhaps also because the Deuteronomist, as editor and to some extent author of this part of the OT, was able to secure a prime position for his work.

The most reliable way of dating a book is by its historical references, if there are any. For example, the prophets of the time of the Exile, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, are easy to date. Isaiah is in three parts: 1st Isaiah is dated close to the time of the Assyrian invasion at the end of the C 8th. 2nd Isaiah is dated very precisely by the date of accession of Cyrus as king of the Medes and Persians. Haggai and Zechariah can be dated to approximately 520 BC by reference to the accession of King Darius.

How do we date other books? Psalms is impossible, because it was like our own Hymns and Psalms: there are some really old psalms there, but over a period of six or more centuries people kept adding new ones and dropping old

ones, and unlike our book, they didn't record the names and dates of the authors. The oldest psalms are probably pre-Jewish Canaanite praise songs. I love the hymn "His chariots of wrath the dark thunder clouds form", but it always gives me a frisson to think that in Ps 104 we are probably singing what was originally a hymn to the Canaanite sky gods, adopted by Solomon along with so much else that he took over from the Canaanite religion.

Some of the psalms, like Ps 24, are clearly associated with processions and rituals involving the early kings of Israel, the 'royal' psalms, and they have a good claim to be really ancient. Others could be from any date down to the C 4th. The book of Proverbs, too, contains some of the oldest material in the Bible. Part of the original may have been modelled on Egyptian wisdom writings, which would have been known to King Solomon. But it was no doubt expanded later.

I'd be confident about giving genuine early dates (C 8th) to Amos and Hosea, partly because of the historical context but also because of the style in which they are written. They are condensed, contain some difficult words and in many places the text is corrupt and we have to guess what they meant. These are good signs: no-one who is faking a text later builds in these sorts of difficulty. But many of the other prophets, especially those that are imitative of Isaiah, could have been written at any time over a long period.

When we come to the 'historical' writings it gets more difficult still, and we have to use our hunches about the style in which things were written. There are two things that always need to be borne in mind when assessing different types of writing: one is the state of the

technology of writing, the other is the state of literary development.

Even in Jesus' day writing was incredibly laborious. If you wanted to write a scroll, you needed to kill a young sheep or goat and wait six months or so for the skin to be dressed. You then found some camel hair to make a small brush, mixed a bit of lamp-black with some thin glue to make ink, cut the skin into pages, ruled your lines and started writing painstakingly. The earlier back in time you were, the more difficult the process would have been, so you didn't write things down unless they were really important, and you kept them short when you did. Really old documents tend to take the form of lists: the bare facts. If you get long, chatty sentences you can be fairly sure that the document is late.

So we have now reached a period in the C 6th when writing was comparatively free and easy. The 'chatty' parts of the OT are probably after that date. By the C 5th Hebrew had gone out of use as a spoken language, as we have mentioned,

and people writing in Hebrew were increasingly writing to make a political point, rather than because it was their natural language, or else they were writing to create books for the teaching of Hebrew to children, as is done in Sabbath schools to this day. Ruth, Esther, and the first half of Daniel are in that category.

We saw in the first lesson how in the last three centuries of the millennium Judaea was colonized by the Greeks and then the Romans, sapping Jewish morale and making them question their special destiny. Jewish Bible-writing followed this downward spiral into increasingly desperate expressions of nationalism and imaginings of the end of the world, when God would settle scores with the Romans once for all. We find these in the second half of Daniel, which is written in Aramaic – they had given up on Hebrew by then – and what are known as the Intertestamental writings, some of which appear in the Apocrypha in old editions of the English Bible.

Appendix: Parallels from Greek writing

The development of writing technology goes hand in hand with literary development, and it can be helpful to draw parallels across to Greek literature, about we know a bit more. A lot of people seem to treat Greece and Palestine as separate universes, just because the languages are so different, but in fact the countries are not far apart. Traders since time immemorial would have been sailing along the coast of Turkey and trading with the Greek city states. Greek traders would have seen Solomon's Temple and witnessed the processions, and Jewish traders would likewise have seen the Greek dramatic performances, which grew out of the Greek mystery religions.

In addition to traders, there were actually resident aliens, *metoeci*, living with permission in Greek cities because their special skills were valued, and no doubt there were also Greeks resident in Jerusalem. There could not have been a technical innovation or a literary development in one society without it immediately being observed by the other. So if we look at how Greek literature developed it probably gives us at least a clue to the sort of thing might have been expected in Judaea at the time.

There are four main pieces of Greek literature I want to refer to: Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus and the dramatists. Homer, you will remember, wrote the epic story of the Trojan War in his mega-poem the *Iliad*. That war took place at about the time of King David, C 11th BC, but it is doubtful if the legends about it began to be written down for several centuries. They survived and developed as an oral tradition, like the Norse sagas, passed on from one generation of professional singers and story tellers to another (all these works, like the Hebrew prophecies, were sung, not spoken). When did they begin to be written

down? Certainly by the C 7th, but probably not much before, pretty much in line with the first of our OT prophets, Amos and Hosea.

However, it is important to realise that the 'Homer' we have today is not Homer as it was sung, or even as it was first written down. What we now have in a book called 'Homer' is a school edition prepared in Alexandria, maybe C 4th BC, neatly divided into 24 chapters, a lot of which is padding added by later imitators of Homer. The Odyssey is even worse: it's mainly, if not entirely, later imitation (quite good, though!).

But if for that reason Homer is not a terribly good reference point, at least we have Hesiod. He is a slightly obscure poet, who wrote some not terribly interesting poems about agriculture and seafaring, but the text is genuinely old and we can put it back at least to the first half of the C 7th. He gives us an example of writing roughly on the scale of First Isaiah, at roughly the same time.

Then we have Herodotus, who wrote a marvellous miscellany of interesting information from all around the known world. He tried to write something approaching a history of the world, but unfortunately history hadn't been invented yet, so he just put anything in his book. It's a long book, which shows that there was great fluency of writing and the ability to get lengthy manuscripts re-copied by that time, and it is dated to the middle of the C 5th.

There are also the Greek dramatists. The earliest dramas we have, which are liturgical tragedies, date from about 480 BC, so again C 5th. There had undoubtedly been dramas written and performed in Athens (in particular) for a hundred years before then, and they would have needed to be written down – probably with more than one copy, because a number of actors would have had to learn their lines, and the poetry, especially the lyrical parts sung and danced by the chorus, was complicated. But if earlier dramas were written down, they were not re-copied again later, so we have lost them. That suggests that the writing of substantial chunks of text, of the order of, say, 1000 lines, started in the C 7th but did not become easy enough to permit a lot of re-copying until the next century, when it may have been facilitated by the increased use of slaves.

The first real work of history was written by Thucydides in around 400 BC. It was a history of the 30 years' war which had just concluded between Athens and Sparta (the Peloponnesian War). Some of it Thucydides was able to report from his first-hand knowledge of events – he had served as an Athenian general. For the rest he meticulously weighed the evidence provided by different sources. Instead of just writing down what people told him he thought carefully about whether it was likely to be true. And when he inserted speeches in his narrative he was honest that they may not have been the exact words that the speakers used but that the speeches are meant to be illustrative of the thinking that was going on at key stages of the conflict. Nobody produced a work of such quality again until perhaps the C 18th.

The great philosophers Plato and Aristotle wrote voluminous works in the C 4th BC which exercised a huge influence over the whole civilised world. Jewish writers were aware of these developments, but they produced nothing remotely comparable. Ecclesiastes shows what could be a Stoic influence, and some of the inter-testamental writers like Ben Sirach are aware of Greek philosophy, but they more largely reflect their own Jewish wisdom traditions.

Finally it is worth mentioning the poetry and drama that was written in the court of the Ptolemies in Alexandria in the C 3rd BC. There was a fashion for pastoral poetry depicting idyllic scenes of shepherds and shepherdesses – a bit like the French court in the C 18th. I think you can hear echoes of that in the Book of Ruth and some of the stories in the Apocrypha, which may also come from Alexandria.

4. Wisdom

>> Key Hebrew words: *chokhmah*, wisdom; *mashal*, a proverb or didactic poem; *torah*, law

It may seem odd to start with the Wisdom books, because there are just three of them in the standard Old Testament: Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, and they are not very exciting books or very much used in worship nowadays. You get the occasional reading from Job or Ecclesiastes, but rarely from Proverbs.

And yet the Wisdom tradition is a very ancient one, and it had a pervasive influence on later writings in the OT. The Prophets constantly use the concepts and the stylistic devices of Wisdom writing; the Psalms are full of Wisdom (it's not an accident that they are placed in the middle of the Wisdom books: many of them can be regarded as part of the family of Wisdom writings); and in the post-exilic period writers personalised Wisdom and promoted her to being an aspect of divinity, paving the way for St John to refer to Jesus as 'the Word'.

Wisdom writing had its origins in very remote antiquity. We know that the Sumerians compiled Wisdom books, which we still have on clay tablets, and at the time when the history of the Old Testament begins each of Israel's neighbours already had some form of Wisdom writing.

There were two main forms of Wisdom: one was what is known as 'onomastic' writing, which means writing down lists of the names of things. The other was the writing of proverbs or rules for the conduct of a successful life. We have examples of that from Egypt before the time of Solomon, and it is quite likely that Solomon derived some of his interest in Wisdom from Egypt as well as from the Canaanites and Philistines (like Hiram of Tyre) with whom he traded and collaborated.

Both sorts of Wisdom are referred to in connection with Solomon:

"He also uttered three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; he spoke also of beasts and of birds, and of reptiles and of fish." (1Kings 4,32-33)

This making lists of things, both of rules and of natural science, was the first sort of writing to be practiced. Lists are compact, and they do not require much development of syntax: hardly any verbs, in fact. Many of the proverbs were memorised and passed down as an oral tradition within families, but from the time of Solomon they were also used as the mainstay of the public education system. Solomon needed officials who could read and write for his expanded court and civil service, and copying out the proverbs was basically how they were trained. And that continued to be so right through the period of the OT.

Some wisdom was in prose form, but much of it – especially the sorts of moral teaching which would have been passed down in the oral tradition – was metrical (which makes it easier to memorise). The Book of Proverbs as we have it is a mixture of material of different dates, edited together in the post-exilic period. There are four main parts, which can be further subdivided:

1. 1.1 to 9.18, which are late, probably Alexandrian with their personification of Wisdom and Folly, and represent the work of the person who edited the book as a whole for use in his school.
2. Books II and IV (10.1-22.16 and 25.1-29.27) which are separately entitled 'Proverbs of Solomon': they bring together several different collections of sayings, with some overlap or

repetition. The second lot of Solomonic sayings begin with the prescript "These also are the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, copied." – but whether Hezekiah, who modelled himself of Solomon, had access to an old manuscript or composed proverbs himself in the spirit of Solomon's is uncertain.

3. Book III (22.17 to the end of ch. 24) which reflect the Egyptian writing of Amen-em-ope (date uncertain, but later than Solomon).

What is the point of the proverbs? Most of them are simply rules for successful living: sobriety, self-control, thrift and sexual morality. There is in origin nothing theological about them, as evidenced by the fact that many of them have antecedents outside of Israel. They are just prudential. There is in the Egyptian writings a concept of the proper way for a person to live his life which leads to certain unchanging rules of conduct. If you follow the rules you will prosper, and if not you will fail.

But the later editors, if not the original authors, have given them a spin which puts them into a theological context. The rules become God's will for us, and the punishment for disobeying them becomes not an automatic matter but the exercise of God's justice. But this does not take us much further forward.

The rules in Proverbs are not to be sneezed at: they stand the test of time as good advice. Most of us have done things which we would not have done if we had heeded Proverbs and have lived to regret it. But Proverbs is not rocket science. There is no attempt to bottom what it means to live a good life or why we should behave ethically. There is no philosophy of ethics, such as we find in Plato and Aristotle, even though the final editing of Proverbs postdated them.

The interest of Proverbs lies more in the style than in the content. There are a number of features which, because educated Jews were immersed in the Proverbs at a young age, come through in later writings.

One is the parallel structure of verses, in which the second half of a verse echoes the first half but either states the contrary, e.g. "A wise son make a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother", or repeats the thought with more emphasis, e.g. "A liberal man will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered". These are known as 'aphorisms' and they are a very common literary form in the Prophets. They are always in verse, because the shape of the aphorism fits the metre.

Another is the formula "X, X+1", e.g. "There are six things which the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to him", followed by a list of seven things. This is also used by the Prophets, from Amos onward. These numerical sayings have something of the quality of riddles, which were one of the traditional, very early forms of Wisdom. See, for example the riddle that Samson told at his wedding to Delilah, and the 'hard questions' that the Queen of Sheba asked of Solomon. Riddles were part of the Greek and Egyptian traditions too.

Finally, it is important to note the similes that can be seen to be the precursors of Jesus's parables, which are found everywhere among the aphorisms: "Go to the ant, o sluggard, consider her ways and be wise". Parables and fables appear all through the OT, for example the story of the poor man's lamb that Nathan told to bring David to his senses, very much in the Wisdom tradition. The sermon on the mount echoes the Proverbs at many points: "Consider the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they spin". Jesus knew his Proverbs.

That brings us to the Book of Job, which as it stands is post-exilic. It is a brilliant piece of extended dramatic writing. It is not a philosophical work that could stand with the

Greek philosophers of the time but it is a compelling theodicy. A theodicy is an answer to the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" We shall look at the problem of evil in more depth when we come to St Augustine, but Job sets out at least one way of answering it.

Job is based on a very ancient folktale which was known in other parts of the Middle East even before the time of Solomon. Job is a good man, indeed an exemplary man, and everything that can possibly go wrong goes wrong in his life. His friends turn out to be a fat lot of use. But whatever happens he does not lose his faith in God. He refuses to curse God and die. And in the end he is vindicated by his faith, and his prosperity returns.

God does not explain himself in answer to Job's enquiries. The answer is simply that He is God and it absurd for man to question Him, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements: surely you know?" It may not seem to be much of an answer, but actually it is a good theodicy. God could presumably have created the world so that we never got sick and all died at a ripe old age, but what would he have had to change to make that a viable alternative universe? Can we begin to envisage the way God would have had to re-draw the rules so that we could evolve without micro-organisms evolving in parallel (and in competition) with us?

Then we have Ecclesiastes, the School Man. This is a very late book and the commentators often express surprise that it made it in to the canon of the OT, because it seems to owe most to Greek (Cynic?) philosophy and has very little religious content (especially once "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth" is corrected to read "Remember your grave". It contains some good aphorisms, however, in the Wisdom tradition and its tone of pessimism has good precedents in the tradition.

As we have noted, Psalms are closely linked to Proverbs. A couple of psalms actually refer to themselves as *mashals*. Psalms 37, 39, 73 and 91 are all on a Wisdom theme of concern over the prosperity of the godless and the affliction of the devout. Ps. 1 and 128 (see also Ps. 127) start with 'Happy is' or 'Blessed is', which is a Wisdom formula; likewise Ps. 133, "Behold, how good and pleasant..". And the alphabetic psalms, 34, 111 and 112 also show the influence of Wisdom writing, where the alphabetic device is common.

In the late OT and intertestamental period there was a move to personalise Wisdom and write allegories about her almost as a feminine aspect or partner of God. Wisdom became larger and more mysterious, tending towards the sort of secret, arcane wisdom which formed the basis of gnosticism: a far cry from the practical economic and moral teaching, right down to table manners, which we found in the book of Proverbs.

5. Prophecy

>> Key words: *nabi'*, plural *nebi'im*, a prophet; *chozeh*, a seer; *mishpat*, justice; *tsedaqah*, righteousness

Prophecy is the best part of the Old Testament. The books of the Prophets contain the best theological insights, and they have the advantage of being the most real, authentic components of the OT, unlike other books which often pretend to be older than they are in reality and to be written by someone else. The prophetic books were not immune to the assaults of editors and later additions to the text, but by and large they survived remarkably intact. They are generally built up out of collections of sayings, which have been edited together with a tendency to put the most important sayings first.

At least in the case of the main prophets, leaving aside their later imitators, we can place their prophecies in a clear historical context. Amos and Hosea in the middle of the C 8th; First Isaiah (Ch. 1-39) mostly in the later years of that century, but with a few later additions; Jeremiah at the beginning of the C 6th; Ezekiel very soon after, immediately before and during the first 25 years of the Exile; Second Isaiah (Is. 40-55) around 540 BC, towards the end of the Exile; and Third Isaiah (Is. 56-66) mainly towards the end of that century, when the people of Israel were drifting back to Palestine.

The major prophets were basically warning Israel that it was not behaving well, both ethically, in terms of social justice, and in terms of religion, where it was always being tempted to make accommodations with indigenous Canaanite and new foreign religions. As a result, they said, Israel could not expect God to ward off the assaults of the Assyrians, and later of the Babylonians. Their covenant status could not be relied upon as a trump card.

The message was, firstly, that a thoroughly deserved doom was imminent, but secondly that if the people repented they might still have a chance, and thirdly, that it would turn out all right in the end: Israel would go through the

mill, but God would be faithful and a remnant would survive and would regroup to worship God in a proper way.

Amos is mainly on the first theme, with just a hint of the second and none of the third if, as we must, we exclude the cheery postscript someone has added to the book. Hosea has more of the second and a distinct element of the third. First Isaiah has elements of all three, perhaps looking forward to the relatively successful reign of Hezekiah. Jeremiah and Ezekiel have all three, with the theme of 'the remnant' becoming more prominent. Second Isaiah is basically about the remnant and the deliverance from Exile, as is Third Isaiah, looking forward to a new age of peace and justice in a restored Jerusalem.

But where did prophecy come from? How do we suddenly find Amos, a sheep farmer by trade, standing up in the capital city of the Northern Kingdom, pronouncing judgment in such powerful terms? This is one of the most difficult questions in Old Testament studies, and it requires us to think ourselves into the mindset of a really primitive society, a society which is just moving from the bronze age to the iron age.

In primitive societies all over the Middle East (and in early Greece and Italy for that matter) there was a tradition of ecstatic prophecy. In the oracle at Delphi the priestess of Apollo would inhale hallucinogenic fumes and make 'delphic' pronouncements about the future. The Canaanites had prophets associated with their worship, like the prophets of Baal against whom Elijah contended. These prophets seem to have worked in teams: there were travelling bands of them, with whom, for example, David joined in ecstatic dancing to worship the Lord. They got high in one way or another, and were believed to speak words from God (maybe 'speaking in tongues').

The prophets associated with the Temple and the organised religion are called 'cultic' prophets. They became domesticated, as it were, around the Temple and other shrines, and performed functions as singers (probably contributing quite a bit to the development of the psalms we have) and as advisers to the kings of Israel and Judah. Being a prophet became a profession, even if it didn't start out like that. And the hallmark of the cultic prophets was that they were relentlessly optimistic. They emphasised that Israel and Judah were the chosen people, under the special protection of God, and they were bound to be all right.

Their specialty was composing songs which pronounced doom on Israel's neighbours and vindication for Israel. In primitive societies such songs were believed to be like spells which had a magical effect. People believed in the power of cursing your enemies, and some of the psalms still have echoes of that magic.

But there was another tradition of prophecy, which came from the nomadic, Arab traditions of Israel. Israel had been a nation of 'wandering Arameans' until it settled in Canaan, and there was a stream of Israelite thought which was never entirely reconciled with adopting the settled, town-based life of the Promised Land. It preferred tabernacles to Temples, it wanted to preserve the old style of desert austerity (cf. Samson, the Nazirites and the Rechabites). And it had its own tradition of seers, people who had the second sight.

So it is that when Amaziah the priest tells Amos to stop prophesying on his territory Amos replies that he is not a nabi', nor one of the bands of the nebi'im. Amos is a seer, chozeh, in the nomadic tradition. Amos, like Hosea, First Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, never set out to be a prophet. All of them were called to do it. Some of them, especially the last three, graphically describe the manner of their calling. Amos doesn't, but he had seen visions (Ch. 8) which forced him to drop what he was doing

and go and speak out in the centres of population and of government.

Another feature of the great prophets is the way that they did not just speak, but conveyed their messages by symbolic actions: Hosea by marrying a prostitute, Jeremiah buying property very formally at a time no-one else would, Ezekiel miming (lying on one side for so many days and then lying on the other) to indicate what was going to happen, several of them giving their children mysterious and significant names (what the children thought about being burdened with such names is not recorded!). There is a magical element even to the work of the great individual prophets.

Too much emphasis can be placed on the extent to which the prophets were foretelling the future. Of course they often were, and the fact that they had been right was an important criterion by which the composers of the OT decided to include them in the canon. But the nature of prophecy was not in essence that it was prediction. It was that the prophets were authentically pronouncing God's view of the current situation. 'Prophet' sounds as though it refers to speaking in advance, but it actually just means speaking out in public. Hebrew doesn't distinguish between the present and the future tense, and in any case often the prophets would prophesy in the past tense, as though what they had foreseen had already happened.

The validity of the prophets is not that they got it right as regards what would happen next but that they were right in their diagnosis of the current situation. In the case of Amos and First Isaiah it was essentially a socio-political diagnosis: massive inequalities of income and a practice of religion that was purely formal, with no ethical content. In the case of Hosea and Jeremiah it was more a diagnosis of the psychology of the nation and of its personal relationship to God, which both of them expressed in metaphors of sexual unfaithfulness. In the case of Amos, "Practice justice and true

worship"; in the case of Hosea, "Be faithful to your God, who loves you".

The earlier prophets were all the time contending against the reassurance being offered by the priests and the cultic prophets that it was all going to turn out all right. No, they said, it will not, unless you get your act together and adopt a right attitude to God and to your fellow man. In the absence of that, no amount of religious observance and no amount of covenant privilege is going to protect you.

We know that there were individual prophets, isolated from the cult, operating in the centuries before Amos. We come across several of them in the Book of Kings. But Amos and Hosea were the first to have their words written down. Quite possibly it was (paradoxically) the accession of wealth under Kings Jeroboam and Uzziah against which Amos protested that made it possible for longer pieces of scripture to be written. We certainly seem to find the first sustained pieces of writing emerging from this period. The book of Amos must have been among the scrolls that Hilkiah found at the back of the Temple in 621 BC because we find that King Josiah immediately acted on his instructions and sacked the shrines at Bethel and Gilgal (1Kg. 23).

It is not possible in the scope of this lesson to talk about each of the prophets in turn, but it is worth giving special attention to Second Isaiah, because it was so important in the formation of Christianity. In general it is bad practice to read

the OT as though it was foretelling the coming of Jesus. For instance, the bit of First Isaiah that Handel borrowed for the Messiah 'Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given' was probably a prophecy for the much shorter term. But in the case of Second Isaiah even if the prophet was not looking forward to Jesus (there is dispute about whether the 'suffering servant' refers to an individual Messiah or to the future role of the nation of Israel) there is no doubt that it influenced Jesus's own perception of himself and the way the Jewish early Church regarded him.

As we have said, the later prophecies, from Second Isaiah onward, majored on the hope for the restoration of Israel. But there was a still later phase of quasi-prophecy in the last two centuries of the millennium, at a time when Israel's fortunes looked extremely bleak and they began to look to the end of the present age as the only way out. That is reflected in the second half of the Book of Daniel (Ch. 7 onward), where Daniel has visions (owing much to Ezekiel for their imagery) of the end of the world and the coming of 'one like a son of man' who will take command. We shall look at this in a later lesson under the heading of 'apocalyptic'.

6. The oral traditions

>> Key Hebrew words: *Yahweh*, the name of God; *Elohim*, God; *Adonai*, Lord; *ruach*, breath, spirit

We are now going to go back to the Pentateuch or 'five scrolls', the name given to the first five books of the OT, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The reason for taking Wisdom and the Prophets first was that it is comparatively straightforward to date them. The Pentateuch is more complex, because it contains elements from many different sources, written down over a long period of time.

We saw in Lesson 2 that in the C 18th German scholars for the first time established a sound framework for the analysis of the Pentateuch, dividing it up into four main sources or groups of sources: E, J, D and P. The first distinction scholars had noticed was that some parts of the Pentateuch used the word *Elohim* to refer to God, while other parts used the proper name *Yahweh*. So they called these sources 'the Elohist' and 'the Yahwist', E and J (as it is in German). The Elohist is associated with the stories preserved in the Northern Kingdom and the Yahwist with those passed down in the Southern Kingdom (Judah).

But that is only part of the story, and it is not a simple split between E and J. The two sources have a great deal in common. So the scholars postulated that there was a common source, which they called G, the 'Groundsource' of the oral tradition; and they found that there were also various fragments of legal codes, which they called C, and holiness codes, which they called H, that got added in to the oral traditions when they were written down. Some scholars identify two stages of G: G1 and G2; and they see a separate Nomadic tradition, N, which split off from G1 so that it was not present in G2, but ran in parallel with E and J as a continuing oral tradition. Some would see it as a branch of J, because it was more of a Judah thing.

As you can see, this tracing of sources gets incredibly complex, generations of German

scholars have devoted their lives to rival theories and there is no agreement among them.

The Groundsource is an oral tradition, and probably none of this material (except for a few fragments of legal codes) was written down until after Israel had split into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. E and J were written down at some stage, maybe in the C 8th, but G itself was not and neither was N.

The common ground of G reflected the fact that the people of Israel had at an early date come to have a shared set of oral traditions. These comprised the stories of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which we find in Genesis, and the story of the return from Egypt, which occupies most of the rest of the Pentateuch. We could include with the Patriarchs the Joseph novella at the end of Genesis, although it probably had a slightly later origin, and may have drawn on Egyptian sources. It provides a neat (but artificial) bridge between the Patriarchs and Moses.

The thing that binds all these stories together are the twin themes of the unity of the Israelite people as descendants of a common ancestor and the theme of the Promised Land. Abraham sets out from Iraq and starts to settle in Palestine. Hundreds of years later Moses returns from Egypt and again God promises the Children of Israel that they will inherit the land of Canaan. It is all about legitimising a claim to territory for an Israelite nation.

So what have we got in the Pentateuch? Genesis 1 is a Babylonian creation myth, dating from the time of the Exile. In Genesis 2 to 11 there is a series of very ancient myths, many of them of Sumerian or Akkadian origin, implying that they may have travelled with 'Abraham' in the original migrations of the second millennium BC. These were stories that were told from

mother to child throughout antiquity, and they probably did not make it into a written version of the Pentateuch until quite late on. They have been adapted for Judaism, but they were not Judaic in origin.

Even in these stories there are alternative versions that have been preserved, such as the two versions of the Flood, which must have found their way into writing separately and then had to be combined by a later editor.

'G' really starts with Abraham being instructed to leave his home in Iraq, with the promise "To your descendants I will give this land". There is then a series of legends about the Patriarchs, which are genuinely old but have been rationalised over time to provide an apparently more coherent account of the history of Abraham's family. Scholars suspect that some of the stories may have had independent origins among different tribes but they were gradually fitted together, with more and more attributed to Abraham as an individual.

The identification of Israel with Jacob is an example of rationalisation. Presumably at one stage there were separate legends belonging to different tribes which had these two characters as their heroes. In G they mysteriously become one person. The variant names for Abraham and Sarah may reflect a similar process.

There is a repetition of themes in the stories, such as the mistaking of Sarah for Abraham's sister, and the returning to Iraq to find Rebecca as a wife for Isaac and Rachel as a wife for Jacob. It looks as if there were versions of the stories in which incidents were attributed to different characters. For instance, the friendly neighbouring King Abimelech has dealings both with Abraham and with Isaac, and oddly enough he is still accompanied by the same military commander a generation later.

Many of the stories are what is called 'etiological', in other words, stories which were invented to explain the names of things: either

people or places. There may not be a factual basis to such stories, but the names themselves are often of interest. Names are one of the best clues to the age of the stories. In antiquity names were given with great care, and in a very traditional way, so different sorts of names can be dated like flies trapped in amber. In historical times for Israel names usually incorporated a reference to God, for example ending either with -jah or with -el. Names like Isaac (Yitzhak), Jacob (Ya'akov) and Esau are very old.

Another sign of the age and authenticity of this material is the different names for God that are preserved. Names like El-Olam, El-Shaddai, El-Roi and El-Sabaoth probably represent the local deities associated with different shrines, and only later came to be identified with Yahweh. Indeed, when 'Yahweh' appeared on the scene is uncertain. According to Exodus, it was not until the time of Moses that God revealed his Name, and that may be right. Maybe that is about when the Children of Israel discovered monotheism.

Abraham and his family back in Iraq were quite likely moon-worshippers in origin, and note that Rachel steals her father Laban's household gods when she elopes with Jacob: no sign of monotheism there. The story of Abraham being saved from sacrificing his son Isaac is surely a folk memory of a time when these tribes did practice human sacrifice.

The ethics of these old stories are pretty alarming generally, but that does not necessarily place them back much before the C 8th. The sort of ethics we associate with civilisation, such as not promising to be best friends and then murdering one another, are a later invention. At this point in time duplicity was often celebrated as a heroic quality.

Let's just work through the text and pick out a few examples which illustrate the way the different sources come together.

Genesis 1 and 2

Here we have two incompatible creation stories, dated maybe a thousand years apart. Gen. 1 is source P and comes from the time of the Exile; Gen. 2 is source G, i.e. ancient oral tradition. The order in which things are created is different (plant, animal, man; and man, plant, animal), and in Gen.1 men and women are created together, not one from the other. The one version uses Elohim for God, the other originally used Yahweh but that has been edited to Yahweh Elohim, to bring it more into line with chapter 1.

Genesis 4 and 5

Gen. 4 is old oral tradition G, Gen. 5 is source P again, recapitulating and giving a more systematic genealogy, as the priestly source loves to do.

Genesis 6

Verses 1-4 are a fragment of very ancient mythology, reminiscent of the demigods and giants of polytheistic Greek mythology. We then have two versions of the legend of the great flood: the old version from the oral tradition which runs from v.5 to v.10, and a second, source P version from v.11 to v.22. The old version picks up again at the start of chapter 7. The versions alternate through chapters 7 and 8, with different numbers of animals saved, and a different duration for the flood.

Exodus 6

Similarly at the beginning of the book of Exodus we have the original oral tradition story of the call of Moses, which includes some remarkable evidence of its antiquity, e.g. 4.24-26. Then in chapter 6 to 7.7 we have a priestly version P, with a long list of the names of Levite families, obviously of particular interest to the priestly class.

Exodus 14

The different traditions have different versions of the details of the crossing of the Red Sea. (N.B. It wasn't actually the Red Sea, but the Reed Sea that they went through: yam suf, not yam sof. You will recognise that they are written the same in unpointed script. The Red Sea wasn't called the Red Sea until after the Greeks named it the *pontos erythros* many centuries later. The Reed Sea was a swampy lake some way north of the end of the Red Sea and subject to seasonal flooding.) In 14.19 the priestly version speaks about 'the angel of the Lord', while the oral tradition speaks of the shining pillar of cloud protecting the Israelites. Both versions are preserved in parallel in the one verse.

Genesis 16

The treatment of angels in the Pentateuch is very interesting. Different sources have different ideas about them. In Gen.16 the angel who visits Hagar is clearly God in human form, not just an agent of God, because Hagar addresses him in v.13: "She called the name of Yahweh who spoke to her, 'Thou art a God of seeing'". Likewise with the three men who visited Abraham in ch.18, one of whom turned out to be God. Again in Gen. 23.10-12 the 'angel of the Lord' who speaks to Abraham is none other than the voice of God himself, but this time he is not on the earth, but speaking down from heaven – altogether a more dignified position for a deity to adopt, reflecting the priestly influence.

Genesis 12, 20 and 26

We have already mentioned the various references to Abraham passing Sarah off as his sister rather than his wife. The first is in 12.10-20, where the setting is Egypt and it is Pharaoh who fancies Sarai (as she is then called). The next is ch.20, where the setting is Gerar, to the south of Palestine, and it is King Abimelech who takes Sarah. And then in Ch. 26 we have Isaac going to dwell in Gerar with his wife Rebecca, and the same Abimelech (now called

'King of the Philistines') takes a fancy to her too.

This is exactly what oral traditions and soap operas do. They pick up classic narrative themes and use them over again.

The oral traditions don't stop with the Pentateuch. They are present in the first half of Joshua (though the second half is Priestly); in Judges and in 1 and 2 Samuel, but in all cases they are edited by the Deuteronomist, to whom we must now turn.

7. The Deuteronomist

>> Key Hebrew words: *berith*, covenant; *mitsvah*, commandment; *shema'yisrael*, Hear, o Israel; *lo tirtsach*, thou shall not kill

The Deuteronomist was a hugely important influence on the shape of the Old Testament. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the Deuteronomist composed the first half of the OT (generally drawing on already existing material), and the Priestly hand edited and supplemented it.

But the Deuteronomist is not just one person. He has to be thought of as several generations of scribes, quite likely fathers and sons and grandsons, working between the reign of King Josiah in the last quarter of the C 7th to the Exile and the middle of the C 6th.

The Deuteronomist marks the point at which Jewish authors consciously set about Bible-writing, as opposed to just recording for posterity some wisdom texts, some hymns and the words of some eminent prophets. The key text is the report of the discovery of the Book of the Law under the reign of King Josiah in 2 Kings 23, 8-11:

“Hilkiah the High Priest said to Shaphan the Secretary, ‘I have found the Book of the Law in the House of the Lord.’”

But what exactly had Hilkiah found? Certainly not the Torah as we know it, because as we have seen, large parts of it were added by later hands. Perhaps just a brief version of Exodus, recorded in the Judah (‘J’) tradition, transferred from oral tradition into writing maybe 100 years earlier. But that discovery would seem to have been the trigger, backed by the enthusiasm of Josiah, for the Deuteronomist to begin building upon that document, and over the next 50 years creating a much more complete ‘history’ of Israel.

When we say ‘history’, though, we cannot avoid the inverted commas. It was nothing like a history. No-one could have made a worse job

of writing the history of Israel than the Deuteronomist did. It is wrong or fanciful at almost every turn. At least the Egyptians, the Assyrians and the Babylonians kept some sort of chronology: it is impossible to date things recorded by the Deuteronomist unless we can link them to some known event in one of those neighbouring regimes.

To be fair, the idea of writing history as we know it had not yet been invented. The first book of real history was written by Thucydides in about 400 BC, in which for the first time he weighed evidence and critically evaluated his sources. The Deuteronomist was not interested in the facts. He was writing a religious history. He was what we would call a spin doctor: he was spinning for God. ‘This king did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and he flourished. The next did what was evil, and got his comeuppance.’ That’s not history.

Compare Joshua and Judges. Joshua presents a fanciful picture of how Israel conquered the promised land: it is at no point supported by the archaeological evidence, which suggests that the infiltration of Canaan happened gradually and for the most part peacefully. Judges is also edited by the Deuteronomist, and contains his preachy introduction, but at least it preserves some old traditions, which he must have retrieved from individual tribes, which cast a bit of realistic light on what was happening in Judaea at that time.

The Deuteronomist was handed the Book of the Law that had been found in the Temple, and probably various other scrolls that had been dusted off containing legal codes and bits of what was originally oral history and prophecy, and he was tasked firstly with re-copying them all and secondly with trying to make them coherent for use as scripture in the Temple.

Some scholars think that the Book of the Law he was given was already an early version of the Book of Deuteronomy, composed in the Northern Kingdom at the time of its peak prosperity under Jeroboam in the C 8th. That is possible, but it is probably safer to think of most of the composition occurring later.

Be that as it may, the Deuteronomist who worked under King Josiah certainly put his stamp on the Book after which he is named. He took the basic history and the law codes and distilled them into this definitive book of the Law ('Deuteronomy' means 'the second law', so called because it is a re-expression of the law of Moses first sketched out in Exodus and the following two books). Interestingly, there is not much trace of the Deuteronomist in the earlier books of the Pentateuch. His hand is evident in the account of the institution of the Passover in Exodus 12, but only in fragments apart from that.

The Deuteronomist went on to try to put the history of Israel into some sort of shape, from the time of Moses to the time of writing. The history of the conquest of Canaan in Joshua 1-12 reflects folk-tales passed down in the tribes, but he used a free hand to make a story of it. He edited the legends of the Judges, which preserve real ancient history and cast a more reliable light than Joshua on what was happening in Canaan in the years between Moses and King David. You can see his fingerprint in the form of the stock words, "And the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord", which appear over and over again.

And he made a major input into the historical books which follow, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, though again he had written sources to work from, and sometimes competing sources between which he had to arbitrate or which he had to balance. As in the Pentateuch he was reluctant to throw anything away, so there are 'doublets' throughout the histories.

Let us start, though, with the legal codes which are the essence of Deuteronomy. We think of the most important code being the Ten Commandments, which Moses brought smoking hot from Mt Sinai. But the Ten Commandments we find in Exodus 20 may not have been the originals, and maybe they do not belong at this point in the narrative. More likely the original commandments were all prohibitions, and just two words each, like 'Do not kill', 'Do not steal', 'Do not commit adultery' – each just two words in Hebrew.

In fact there are several lists of 'ten commandments' or decalogues dotted around the Pentateuch. The Hebrews liked to memorise things in lists of ten, so they could count them off on their fingers, presumably. You might like to look at the decalogues in Exod. 23.10-19, Exod. 34. 14-26, Lev. 18 and Lev. 19. 3-12 (which is the only one in the plural). It may be that the decalogue in Exod. 20 was compiled by the Deuteronomist from several sources, some of them being decalogues of three word commands some of four words (or, strictly, four metrical beats in Hebrew). The Deuteronomist has added his own commentary to the first items and turned them into prose, instead of a neat, sharp list.

But the great list of commandments, recited by Jews to this day, is in Deuteronomy 5, prefaced by the words, 'Hear, O Israel ..' . That (or strictly 4.44) is the original start of Deuteronomy, and the preceding chapters are a later preface, just as Deuteronomy ends with a succession of blessings and curses which have been added on. At the core of the book, following the decalogue, there is a series of legal and religious codes that the Deuteronomist has stitched together:

1. The laws about centralising the worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem, which Josiah very promptly proceeded to carry out;

2. Laws developed from the original covenant code in Exodus in chapters 15, 16 and 19;
3. The abomination laws, in which God declares that such and such is an abomination to Him;
4. The humanitarian laws and laws about civil justice in chapters 21-25.

The laws have clearly come from different sources, because they are expressed in different styles: sometimes the commands are in the singular and sometimes in the plural, but they are all (in their present form) the work of the Deuteronomist.

Some bits are later additions, just like the beginning and end of the book. They are mainly on topics that would have been of special interest to the priesthood and can be attributed to the Priestly hand.

The history flows straight on from Deuteronomy to Joshua, and indeed at one stage Joshua was bracketed together with the Pentateuch to form a 'Hexateuch'. When the next part of the Bible started with Judges an introductory chapter was added to that book, recapitulating the story of the conquest of

Canaan. The account in Judges is, as we have said, more realistic than that in Joshua.

There are two sections of the Deuteronomic history that deserve special attention. One is the passage in 1Sam. 8, where you can see that there are two rival versions of the decision to adopt a monarchy in Israel: one which is in favour, and another, more old fashioned, reflecting the nomadic tradition, which is more sceptical. It is interesting that the Deuteronomist preserves both, given that he is by inclination a monarchist and a centraliser. Perhaps he cannot bear to throw anything away.

The second is the account of proceedings in the court of King David in 1 and 2 Samuel. This presents one of the greatest puzzles in the OT. On the face of it, it is an extraordinarily detailed history, which sounds so authentic that it might be almost contemporary. Many of the most eminent scholars believe that it must have been written by a member of Solomon's court who remembered the events. And yet it is hard to believe that such a full and polished piece of historical writing could have come out of that period. I don't know the answer: it just confirms that there is an awful lot that we don't know about the origins of the OT.

8. The priestly hand

>> Key Hebrew words: *cohen*, priest; *baikehal*, temple; *shem*, name; *shekkinah*, presence; *cabod*, glory

The priestly hand, P, is responsible for most of the really boring parts of the OT. P and his successors started writing after the Exile had ended, but before the all the priests had moved back to Jerusalem. We can picture them as priests with no Temple to worship in and not much else to do, imagining how they would have liked the Jewish religion to have been observed since the time of Moses.

The Jews in general had prospered in Babylon, and rich Jews were probably well able to maintain a priestly caste in comfort. So they worked on the scriptures, editing and embellishing them. But their sense of loss led them to fantasise about an ideal past for Israel, and if the Deuteronomist had an over-simple view of the course of history the Priestly hand had even less respect for the reality.

We can date P only roughly. The best guide is that several of the Exilic and immediately post-Exilic prophets (Second Isaiah, Haggai, Malachi and Zechariah) seem to have been aware of Deuteronomy, but not of P. That places P no earlier than about 500 BC, and writing in the P tradition probably continued right through the C 5th.

The Priestly hand moved away from talking about God in a matter of fact way. Not only did he substitute 'the Lord' for the name of God, which became universal practice, but he developed the convention of referring to God obliquely as 'the Name', 'the Presence' or 'the Glory'. When God interacted with men He did so through an angel, not directly. When St Paul talks about 'the Name that is above all names' he is using terminology which derives from P.

The Priestly hand appears all over the Pentateuch and in the second half of Joshua. He is keenly interested in the Pentateuch (and the Hexateuch as it was for a time) because of

its use in worship. The reading and study of scripture naturally became a more important element in the absence of a Temple in which to offer sacrifice. P's hand is not so much in evidence in the rest of the Deuteronomistic history (through to 1 and 2 Kings) but it is very evident in the Chronicles, with their greater emphasis on religious rather than political history. Chronicles can be seen as a direct descendent of the school of P.

Some scholars think in terms of a separate book that was written by P, which was incorporated into the Pentateuch, but it is probably better to think of P as writing supplementary bits into an already existing Deuteronomistic Pentateuch. P's aim is a theocratic state in which everything is subordinate to the priests of the Temple, and the whole thrust of his writing is to emphasise the divine authority of the priesthood and the supremacy of religious law. Ordinary Levites are pushed to the fringes of the cult, and the emphasis is on God being mediated through the priesthood.

The history of Israel, as he sees it, centres on the covenant with Moses at Sinai and the divine ordinances which flowed from that. The way that covenant was mediated through Moses and especially Aaron, as the original High Priest, is the model for the way the religion should be. Aaron is P's role model.

P starts with the creation story of Gen. 1, which is borrowed from Babylonian scientific speculation but serves to enshrine one of the first religious laws, the law of the Sabbath. P always emphasises the transcendence of God, and Gen. 1 presents a suitably lofty picture of God, not getting his hands dirty, as in Gen. 2, but creating just by speaking a word.

He then goes on to the other covenants prior to the covenant with Moses: the covenant with

Noah, the covenant with Abraham and the covenant with Jacob. He is very interested in these. He is also interested in genealogies: most of the genealogies in the Pentateuch and the list of tribes and nations are attributable to P. They are probably based on pre-existing sources rather than being completely invented by P, but how far they ever had a historical basis is anyone's guess.

P is also obsessed with numbers. He tries to establish a chronology for the pre-history of Israel, but it is obviously fanciful. He also inserts numbers into various parts of the Exodus narrative, all of them wildly exaggerated. Fohrer has shown that many of the numbers are made up by the technique known as 'gematria', where you take a word or phrase like 'Children of Israel' and assign values to the letters and then add them up (and multiply by 1000, if the fancy takes you). This sort of numerology became a feature of the Jewish 'secret wisdom' known as the kabbalah. It probably came out of Babylon, where they were rather good at maths.

Obviously the main contribution of P is the Book of Leviticus, with its stringent rules on religious purity and practice, but there are many other passages that bear his fingerprints. We have mentioned Gen. 1, the Creation; Gen. 5, the genealogy of Seth; Gen.9, the covenant with Noah; and Gen. 17, the covenant with Abraham. The story of the death and burial of Sarah in Gen. 23, with the account of the purchase of the field at Machpelah, and the death and burial of Abraham in Gen. 25 are also P, as are the genealogies of Ishmael and Isaac later in that chapter.

The account of the call of Moses in Exod. 6 is by P, and P has elaborated the story of the negotiations with Pharaoh and the plagues upon Egypt. P makes a big contribution to the Passover narrative in Exod. 12, which is obviously a subject of much interest to the priesthood. After the Sinai encounter, from Exod. 25 on there are all the regulations about the setting up of the Tabernacle, where the

Priestly hand comes into its element, and that goes on through Leviticus into a substantial part of the book of Numbers. The first ten chapters of Numbers are pure P, and there are substantial traces of P throughout the book.

There are bits of P in Deuteronomy, but mainly the account of the death of Moses at the end of the book. And then P contributes the second half of the book of Joshua, which is all about the tribes and their possession of territories: it is the sort of list-making, historically based or not, that the Priestly hand specialises in.

Apart from the law of the Sabbath, dietary laws and circumcision, all of which are given earlier origins by P, most of the rest of Jewish religious law is ascribed to the covenant with Moses. Some bits of the laws in Exodus and Leviticus undoubtedly had earlier origins than P: they were not all invented by him, but already existed in the form of some form of Holiness Code, which may have been written down at an early date.

The fact that there were separate previous sources from which P was working is shown by the little inconsistencies that appear from time to time. For instance, some passages in Exodus and Leviticus refer only to the altar of burnt offering, others also to the altar of incense. Some passages refer to the anointing of all priests, others to the anointing only of Aaron. Lev. 4.14 specifies a young bull as a sin offering, but other passages in Leviticus and Numbers specify a male goat. Num. 4 says that a Levite becomes eligible for service at the age of 30, but Num. 8 says at age 25. Again, as with the Deuteronomist, there is a preference for preserving alternative traditions rather than ensuring consistency.

However, whatever sources P used for the Holiness Code the elaborate details of worship practice in the time of Moses are certainly imaginary. They never happened, any more than the Year of Jubilee ever happened, and there is no indication that the extraordinarily severe

sanctions for sexual misdemeanours provided for in Leviticus were ever implemented.

For all that, P contributed an important part of the legacy. Not only Jewish liturgy, but Christian liturgy in its turn, grew out of the hymns and prayers P composed, many of which were incorporated in the Books of Chronicles. And we owe to P the shape in which we now find the Torah, as well as significant contributions to other books.

9. The post-exilic period

>> Key Hebrew words: *go'alech*, your redeemer; *messiach*, anointed; *chesed*, loving kindness; *chaim*, life

You may be surprised that I am going to start post-exilic with Second Isaiah, who belongs to the time of the Exile, though towards the end of it. Second Isaiah is often seen as the high point of OT prophecy – he was certainly very important to Jesus – but in a way he also marks the beginning of its decline.

Second Isaiah (unlike First and Third Isaiahs) is a single author, writing at a precise turning point in the history of Israel. It is almost impossible nowadays to read him objectively, partly because of the sublime poetry he writes but also because we hear Handel playing in the background. What was he really saying?

Isaiah was writing in about 540 BC. Cyrus had been king of the Medes and the Persians for a few years and was poised to take over the crumbling Babylonian empire. Babylon was to fall in 539. The Jews in exile there were already looking to Cyrus to rescue them and restore them to Jerusalem – or at least, some of them were.

Cyrus seems to have given them permission to return, and probably to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, soon after he took over, but there was no stampede back to Palestine: it was by then an unattractive option in economic terms.

By 520 BC, a year after Cyrus was succeeded by King Darius I, Jerusalem was still in a miserable state and no progress had been made on rebuilding the Temple. Hence the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah in that year, urging the High Priest Joshua and the current Jewish ruler Zerubbabel to get on with it.

But to go back to Second Isaiah, the message is essentially this. God is extraordinarily great and powerful. He is the God of Creation, in the grand terms of Gen. 1 (which was, as we have seen, Babylonian in origin: Second Isaiah had

picked up a Babylonian view of the world). God loves Israel as he loves no other people. Israel has been unfaithful and has rebelled against Him repeatedly, and for this He has punished her severely with the exile. But the time is now coming when she will be delivered and restored to Jerusalem.

She will not just be put back where she was, but at that time her enemies will be confounded. Babylon will be destroyed, obviously, (Ch. 47) but Israel will be revenged on other nations too. God will elevate her from a position of slavery to one of the highest honour. The passage about the 'suffering servant', which we read from a Christian viewpoint, is actually saying that the nation of Israel, which had been 'despised and rejected' and 'wounded for our transgressions', will be lifted up to a position of dominance, based on Jerusalem. The 'Redeemer' in Second Isaiah is not a nice, Christian sort of Messiah, but a military avenger, and the coming prosperity of Israel is described in distinctly down-to-earth, materialistic terms.

Second Isaiah puts these themes together to say that God is so great, so universal and eternal that the redemption of Israel will not just be a temporary upturn of the country's economic and political fortunes but will be permanent. It will be the coming of a new age. Look at Ch. 51. 4-7:

“The heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, but my salvation will be for ever, my deliverance will never be ended.”

Second Isaiah thus strikes the new note which will characterise Jewish theology from this point on. Up to that point he had been preaching on the conventional lines of the professional prophets of Israel, pronouncing doom on

Israel's enemies and salvation for Israel herself. But now, against the backdrop of Babylonian cosmology, he is putting it in 'eschatological' terms: that means, in terms of the 'last things' or the 'end of the age', however that might come about.

Zechariah, preaching in 520 BC, picks up on that and continues the tradition of eschatological prophecy with his striking visions about the status of the restored Jerusalem, centred around the new Temple which he is urging the authorities to build (Ch. 8. 1-15). It is not completely original: the style of Zechariah's prophecy owes a lot to the visions of Ezekiel, who also envisaged the nations converging on a new Jerusalem. But Zechariah is more explicit than previous prophecies had been about the concept of the Messiah (Ch. 6. 9-14). He identifies two contemporary Messiahs: Joshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel, the ruler of the people who returned from Babylon, and he looks to both of them to rebuild the Temple and usher in the new age of peace and prosperity.

This idea that there might be two sorts of Messiah, one the Davidic kingly Messiah (referred to by Zechariah as 'the Branch') and the other the priestly Messiah, was influential in what followed, right down to the time of Jesus, where the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, as we shall see, were framing their expectations on exactly those lines. If Jesus was to be an authentic Messiah for the early (Jewish) Church he had to be both a 'Branch of Jesse' and a 'great High Priest' (as in the Letter to the Hebrews).

The new Temple was dedicated in 515 BC, but the walls of Jerusalem were not rebuilt and the city remained impoverished until the middle of the next century. In those days a city had to be fortified if people were to have the confidence to invest in it and make it a centre of trade. And then Nehemiah, cup-bearer (a top-ranking official) in the court of the King of Persia, got permission from the king to commandeer timber from the royal forests and set about the

rebuilding of the walls. That was around 450 BC. A little later Ezra the priest came back from Babylon – belatedly, you might think – bringing with him the Priestly version of the Pentateuch, on which Jews in 'exile' in the comfort of Babylon had been working while Jerusalem struggled to recover.

The books of Ezra and of Nehemiah are confused as they stand. They are really one book, parts of which have got in the wrong order. It is all written towards the end of the C 5th.

Ezra read the Torah to the people, with twelve assistants giving simultaneous translation into Aramaic, since no-one in the audience understood Hebrew any more. He created a religious revival, which manifested itself in the enlightened policy of requiring all true Jews to divorce their non-Jewish wives. The ethnic nationalism which had so often been a feature of Judaism had become more exclusive, and the religion had become more hardline and fundamentalist, centred on the detailed prescriptions in the new, expanded book of the Law.

The books of Chronicles were written at about this time too, possibly by the same hand or hands that wrote Ezra-Nehemiah. They show a distinct priestly influence with their preoccupation with religious matters. They are of little independent value as history, being largely dependent on other, already existing, books of the OT as their source.

Alexander the Great conquered the whole of the Middle East in 331 BC and established his general Seleucus as sole ruler of the province of Syria, which included Palestine. Jerusalem did not fare too badly out of this. There followed a period of relative peace and prosperity which allowed the city to rebuild its position as a centre of trade and finance. The religion continued to be observed, but it had become formalised and there was not much life to it. It came to be accepted that there was to be no more prophecy.

The most significant thing Alexander did from the point of view of the Old Testament was to found the city of Alexandria as the new capital of Egypt. There were already a lot of Jews living in Egypt – there had been Jewish settlements on the Nile since the beginning of the C 6th, probably Jews who could see that trouble was coming in Palestine with the imminent threat from Babylon. But now the new capital city provided employment opportunities for literate people, and emigre Jews became its middle ranking civil servants, as well as its merchants and financiers. By the turn of the C 3rd BC there were probably more Jews in Egypt than in Palestine.

And none of them could read Hebrew. So they translated the OT into Greek, which was the language of business and administration not only in Egypt but all round the Mediterranean, and their synagogues became Greek speaking, ready to embrace St Paul and his fellow apostles

when they were ready to take the Gospel outside of Palestine.

Some books of the OT date from the Alexandrian period, and possibly from Alexandria itself. So-called Third Isaiah (Ch. 56-66) is a mixture of prophecies from different periods, but some of it at least is probably this late. Prophets like Joel are hard to date, but may be around 300 BC.

Most interestingly, some of the books that are aimed particularly at children and young people, such as Ruth, Esther, Jonah and the first part of Daniel, could well have been written in Alexandria as material to help young students learn Hebrew in the Sabbath Schools for the middle class. The stories are all based on older versions which may have been written or may just have existed in oral tradition, but they look very much as though they have been edited for teaching purposes.

10. Colonialism, jihad and apocalyptic

>> Key Aramaic words: *'attiq yomin*, Ancient of Days; *c-bar-enosh*, one like a son of man;

We now come to the last phase of the Old Testament, and the point at which Jesus found it, which is obviously of crucial importance in the emergence of Christianity.

You will recall from the history that in 169 BC the Romans annexed Syria and Palestine, adding them to their fast-growing empire. Rome's great enemy for the previous 60 years had been the city of Carthage in what is now Tunisia, which was then a great sea power and a rival to Rome for the control of the Mediterranean. Carthage was a Phoenician state, founded by colonists from the coastal towns of Palestine and speaking a Semitic language close to Hebrew, so the Romans were not naturally well-disposed towards Palestinians. They took a hard line when they seized Jerusalem, and tried to demoralise the Jews by deliberately desecrating the Temple.

It had the opposite effect, and provoked two centuries of passionate, often suicidal resistance to Roman occupation. The books of the Maccabees, which are part of the Apocrypha in our modern Bibles and are not part of the Jewish Bible, record the dreadful consequences of rebellion against Rome. It is reminiscent of the effects of Western colonialism (British, French and American) on the Islamic world, which has led to such intense resentment and the proclamation of holy war or jihad against the West.

Most of the books that were written in this period are what is called 'intertestamental', appearing neither in the Old Testament nor in the New. Some of them, including Maccabees, were added in to the Septuagint (the Greek OT) though not into the Hebrew one – presumably because they were always written in Greek. Others in that category are the stories of Judith, Tobit, Bel and the Dragon, and Susannah; some wisdom books (the Wisdom of Sirach, which we

call Ecclesiasticus), and the Wisdom of Solomon; and the first book of Esdras, though not 2, 3 and 4 Esdras.

The wisdom books are rather tedious attempts to reproduce the style of the Proverbs. They reflect a bit of Greek philosophical thinking, but have little new or interesting to say. They were important, however, for Judaism at the time of Jesus, and even for the early Church, which drew on them for some of its liturgy.

The first books of Esdras are similarly tedious attempts to write imitation scripture, pretending to date from the time of the return from exile and the days of Ezra, after whom the books are named (using the Greek form of Ezra's name). They purport to relate correspondence between Jewish dignitaries and the Kings of Persia and other imagined stories, but it is all historical fiction.

The books were all pseudonymous (i.e. written in the name of someone long deceased) because, as we noted last week, it had been determined that the days for prophecy were past: there could be no new prophecy, so any message had to be put in the mouth of one of the ancients. Ezra was a favourite among the writers of this period, along with Enoch, because his name had become synonymous with Jewish ethnic nationalism.

The one book from this period that made it into the OT is what is now the second half of Daniel. That book is quite separate from the first half of Daniel, which ends at Ch. 6. From Ch. 7 on, Daniel is written in Aramaic, not in Hebrew. Daniel has a famous vision (Ch. 7) of 'the Ancient of Days' on his throne and of 'one like a son of man' receiving a mandate to rule the world after the present age has passed away.

The fourth book of Esdras (not in the Apocrypha or the Septuagint) is likewise

apocalyptic, foretelling the end of the age and the destruction of the enemies of Israel. (An extract from 4Esdras is appended at the end of this lesson.) There is a whole string of apocalypses (the apocalypses of Enoch, Baruch, Moses and others) written around the time of Jesus, some a bit before and some afterwards, so that they sometimes show signs of Christian influence. The book of Revelation, which looks slightly odd in the canon of the New Testament, represents the continuation of a style of writing which would have been totally familiar to the early Jewish-Christian Church.

But where did apocalyptic come from, and what does it mean?

The first thing you might say is that it is not new: look at the so-called 'Isaiah apocalypse' in Is. 24-27. But that doesn't help, because although we now find it in the middle of First Isaiah it is actually much later, and is referring backwards not forward to Second Isaiah and Zechariah. Then there is Joel, but he isn't early either, despite being placed first among the Minor Prophets. Joel is probably around 400 BC, giving him plenty of time to have been influenced by the earlier apocalypticists. He has some great warnings about 'the Day of the Lord', though, which are worth reading, e.g. Joel 2. 30-32. (It is probably the echo of a similar warning about 'the Day of the Lord' in Amos that caused him to be placed next to Amos in the canon).

So, having cleared those away, we can be reasonably sure that apocalyptic is a post-exilic phenomenon, having its origins in a fusion of the old Jewish idea of a Day of Judgment with Babylonian ideas about the end of the world. The Babylonians had a mythology which involved the world coming out of chaos and going back into chaos again at the end. It was a constant struggle for the state religion to keep the world on an even keel and to stop it slipping back into chaos.

The third factor was the prediction that had been made that the exile would last for 70 years and then Israel would be restored to its former glory. By the time of Zechariah the 70 years was up, and people were becoming impatient. It was hoped that the rebuilding of the Temple in 515 BC would usher in a new golden age, but that did not happen. In fact Israel continued to be in a fairly miserable position even after Jerusalem had been rebuilt. They might have had some of their land back, but they were still subjects of the Persian king and they were conscious that neighbouring states were more advanced and more prosperous. God was not specially favouring them.

The conquest by Alexander the Great illustrated that point: they saw their own capital city eclipsed in every respect by the new city of Alexandria. And a century and a half later there was the ultimate humiliation of the Roman occupation.

Faced with this, and with the failure of repeated attempts to rebel, Jewish thought turned, first, to an imagined ideal past, and secondly, increasingly, to the imaginary future of a world beyond this one. Religious leaders were adamant that the prophecy about the restoration of Israel must be fulfilled, so they re-interpreted the '70 years' of the original prophecy to mean '70 weeks of years' or '70 generations since the start of the world' or something equally arbitrary.

Jews had thought in terms of the end coming with the defeat of the 'fourth empire' (following Zechariah's prophecy: Zech. 1.18). Originally they interpreted that as meaning the Greek empire (the earlier ones being Persian, Babylonian and Assyrian, in reverse order). When nothing had happened under the Greek empire they started to count again from the Babylonian exile and reckoned that the Roman empire was the fourth, when the end must come.

But still nothing happened. No end of the world in smoke and fire. No humiliation of enemies and exaltation of Israel. No commencement of a new age of justice and divine rule, centred on Jerusalem.

The attitude of Jewish intellectuals and the priesthood changed. They ceased to work for reform. In previous generation the prophets had usually argued that God was chastising them but if they mended their ways, obeyed the commandments and other requirements of the Law, God would be reconciled to them and they would be saved. Now it became an attitude of passivity. It was just a question of patiently enduring the evils of the present age while privately obeying the Law and practicing righteousness, in the knowledge that at some time soon, though 'one knew not the day nor the hour', God would intervene to judge the nations and establish his rule on earth.

Along with this came a new concept of life after death, or at least, life on earth after the ending of the current age. Where it came from is not clear: it was not a feature of traditional Jewish thinking, which saw a man's continuation being achieved through his sons, which were physically a part of him (women did not figure in this theory). Sheol or 'the Pit' in the Psalms had been a shadowy concept, rather like the Hades to which the Greeks went when they died: it was not a real life after death. The sect of the Sadducees never accepted the idea of resurrection or life after death.

It seems to have been the call to martyrdom in the course of the Maccabean revolt that led to a lively concept of life after death among some Jews. Macc. 2.7 gives an example of a mother and her seven sons who hope to be re-united after their death by torture. On the one hand it seemed intolerable that martyrs should have no reward; on the other hand if there was a reward of paradise on offer, that provided an incentive to face martyrdom.

These things together produced the frame of thought which surrounded Jesus when he began his ministry. An imminent end of the age, the freeing and restoration of Israel, and a new world order centred on Jerusalem, with the possibility of the righteous being saved from the coming tribulation to survive to enjoy the new world. The days were short, and the message of John the Baptist was urgent: "You generation of vipers! Who taught you to flee from the wrath that is to come?"

At least, that was the mindset for the religious. But most Jews by then, apart from a few Pharisees who made a science of minute religious observance, were not terribly religious. They were more interested in making money, and the Temple had become the centre of commerce and finance ('You have made my father's house a den of thieves') rather than of sincere worship.

Ernst Kaesemann, one of the most distinguished theologians of the last century, said in his Commentary on Romans that "Apocalyptic is the mother of all Christian theology". It is indeed hard to exaggerate the influence apocalyptic had on the thinking both of Jesus and of St Paul.

Appendix: 4Esdras 7.26-36

The apocryphal books are not always readily available, so here is an extract from 4Esdras as an example of apocalyptic around the time of Jesus or a little later:

[26] For behold, the time will come, when the signs which I have foretold to you will come to pass, that the city which now is not seen shall appear, and the land which now is hidden shall be disclosed.

[27] And every one who has been delivered from the evils that I have foretold shall see my wonders.

[28] For my son the Messiah shall be revealed with those who are with him, and those who remain shall rejoice four hundred years.

[29] And after these years my son the Messiah shall die, and all who draw human breath.

[30] And the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the first beginnings; so that no one shall be left.

[31] And after seven days the world, which is not yet awake, shall be roused, and that which is corruptible shall perish.

[32] And the earth shall give up those who are asleep in it, and the dust those who dwell silently in it; and the chambers shall give up the souls which have been committed to them.

[33] And the Most High shall be revealed upon the seat of judgment, and compassion shall pass away, and patience shall be withdrawn;

[34] but only judgment shall remain, truth shall stand, and faithfulness shall grow strong.

[35] And recompense shall follow, and the reward shall be manifested; righteous deeds shall awake, and unrighteous deeds shall not sleep.

[36] Then the pit of torment shall appear, and opposite it shall be the place of rest; and the furnace of hell shall be disclosed, and opposite it the paradise of delight.

Part Two

Introduction to the New Testament

11. The Quest for the Historical Jesus

>> The Greek alphabet: α Alpha, β Beta, γ Gamma, δ Delta, ε Epsilon, ζ Zeta, η Eta, θ Theta, ι Iota, κ Kappa, λ Lambda, μ Mu, ν Nu, ξ Xi, ο Omicron, π Pi, ρ Rho, σ Sigma, τ Tau, υ Upsilon, φ Phi, χ Chi, ψ Psi, ω Omega

In our quick introduction to the Old Testament we got used to the idea that the people who wrote the OT were not always writing from a basis of knowledge when they purported to write the history of Israel, and that their motives were religious, not objective or scientific. This realisation hit Christianity in the C 19th, and caused a huge amount of debate and concern in that period.

It actually started with a German historian called Georg Niebuhr, who wrote a history of ancient Rome that called into question the traditional legends about the early history of Rome preserved in a book by the Roman historian Livy, who lived at about the time of Jesus. Niebuhr showed that Livy's early history was almost completely without foundation: it was a historical romance written to entertain the court of Augustus.

Then other German scholars moved on to the Old Testament, and showed that not only was most of it written long after the period it purported to describe but that much of it, too, was invented. It reported ancient legends and folk tales as if they were historical facts. That was not to say that there were not nuggets of historical truth preserved in the ancient stories, but the stories could not be taken at their face value.

That precipitated a huge row, especially when the revolutionary German thinking hit theologically conservative England. But worse was to come.

It was inevitable that similar questions should start to be asked about the New Testament. Was it historically reliable or was it, too, largely wishful thinking and invention by the Early Church, written long after the event, and on the basis of no real knowledge about Jesus?

The second half of the C 19th was an age of scepticism. The world was still digesting the implications of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which had shown decisively that the creation stories in Genesis were not literally true. Some closed their ears against Darwin and clung to the doctrine of the verbal inerrancy of scripture, while others went to the opposite extreme and questioned the whole basis of Christianity.

There was a popular movement to find a middle path, preserving a sentimental loyalty to Christianity while playing down the importance of anything supernatural in the life of Jesus, and finding alternative explanations for his miracles. Accounts of the life of Christ were written which imposed a modern view of his psychology and motivation and made him out to be the very model of a generous, modest and rational Victorian gentleman.

At the turn of the C 20th Albert Schweitzer wrote a book the title of which (in its English translation, though that was not the title he gave it) was the title of this lesson: *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. In it he poured scorn on these fanciful interpretations of the life of Jesus and tried to bring more realism to the subject. His view was that Jesus saw himself as the last prophet, whose death would usher in the New Age predicted by the apocalyptic writers we looked at in the last lesson.

Schweitzer's book was a major stride forward in thinking about the historical Jesus, but it was soon to be overtaken by a more rigorous analysis. It is one of the strange things about the study of Jesus that it never seems to be possible to put him into a scheme of things: whenever anyone produces a theory of the way Jesus was it is sure to be contradicted by other details of what we know about him.

The next major step, for which Schweitzer paved the way, was to start thinking seriously about Jesus as a Jew, not a Christian. It should have been obvious that Jesus was not a Christian, but the reality of him being 100% a Jew still came as quite a shock. It would scarcely have been tolerable as an idea in any earlier century, since the Jews were so generally hated and despised by Christians. But in the C 19th it so happened that there had been a rehabilitation of, and a fresh interest in, Judaism with the publication of *Daniel Deronda* (admittedly not George Eliot's best novel) and the rise of Benjamin Disraeli to be Prime Minister. Although he had to convert to Christianity to be elected to Parliament, he was still seen very much as a Jew.

We shall come to Jesus the Jew presently, but we are in danger of getting ahead of ourselves. What are we doing when we try to establish the reality of the historical Jesus?

The point is this. The essence of Christianity is that the Christian identifies Jesus of Nazareth, a man born in Palestine around the year 0, with the Second Person of the Trinity, i.e. one of the 'Persons' or faces of God. Now that is a very odd proposition: it is hard to think of any major religion that maintains a doctrine that is quite so extraordinary and counter-intuitive.

The problem is known as 'the scandal of particularity', 'scandal' meaning 'stumbling block' in Greek and 'particularity' meaning specific-ness, God being incarnate in one place and time: 'Our God contracted to a span, Incomprehensibly made man', as the hymn has it.

This doctrine leads to great theological complexities, as we shall see, but it is indispensable, and it is the fact that there is this paradox, this mystery at the heart of Christianity that gives it its richness, its ability to provide an inexhaustible store of metaphors for the big problems of the human situation.

Because we all have a 'scandal of particularity'. The human condition is that we are not God, we are mortal and we are bound here in our less than perfect, fragile bodies in a particular place and time, and a time that is limited. That is what it is to be human. But we carry the treasure of our faith and a consciousness of eternity in our 'earthen vessels', to use Paul's wonderful metaphor.

What we are doing – or what we should be doing – when we look for the historical Jesus is to try to identify as clearly as possible the human end of the human-divine identity, so we can see the scandal of particularity in all its force.

There is a danger in this. The danger is that we do it in a reductionist way, as many writers coming from a non-Christian background have done. We simply strip Jesus down to the human element and throw away anything that doesn't fit into a secular mould. The Christian approach is

to be no less rigorous than the secularist, but to bear in mind all the time that for the Christian this is just one side of a duality.

The Quest involves taking a tough, critical look at the New Testament. The trouble with the New Testament from this point of view is that its picture of Jesus is almost always conditioned by the writers' knowledge of the resurrection and by their belief, ultimately, in his divinity. This later 'divine' perspective on Jesus is allowed to bleed back into what might otherwise appear to be contemporary accounts of his words and actions.

The most obvious problem is with the Gospel of John, where Jesus is portrayed saying things that no religious Jew could conceivably have said. As an observant Jew, Jesus would sooner have asked for extra bacon with his Big Mac than uttered the 'I am' sayings. If he had said them, he would have been stoned to death before sunset.

But that is just the most extreme example. Even in the synoptic Gospels (the other three) Jesus is described as saying and doing some rather odd things - at least, they might seem to us to be rather odd. Some of them can be explained if we understand the framework of thought within which the Gospel writers were working, some of them may be attributable to the 'bleeding back' of post-resurrection insights into current narratives, but some of them will remain genuine mysteries about this completely exceptional individual.

Let us aim for maximum clarity and try to summarise what we know, or think we know, about the actual, historical Jesus.

He was born in Nazareth, not in Bethlehem. Sorry about that, but there is no evidence for Bethlehem, and it is extremely unlikely. A prophecy had said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem because he was going to be the Davidic Messiah, a descendant of King

David, whose home town that was. So for some Jews it was important that he should be born in Bethlehem and the Gospel writers duly obliged with fictional accounts of how that was the case.

If you doubt that Luke was writing fiction, be assured that there was no worldwide census in the time of Augustus (we would know about it), and that the Romans would never, in any case, have done a census on the basis of which home town your ancestors had come from. Think about it: can you imagine a less effective way of setting up a register for collecting taxes?

Secondly, Jesus' father was not a carpenter, or at least, not one who worked with wood. 'Carpenter' was an affectionate Aramaic nickname for a Rabbi, because of the careful way the Rabbis worked with the scriptures. Jesus' father was a Rabbi, and Jesus was brought up to be the same - trades generally passed from father to son before there was school education. There is no other way Jesus as a child could have learned to read the scriptures, which were only available in the synagogue, still less have learned to debate with the scholars in the Temple when he came to Jerusalem as a teenager.

It seems likely that Jesus may have joined a sect like the Essenes, the presumed authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, in his teens. It is possible that there was an Essene settlement in Galilee. There is no indication (*pave* Dan Brown) that he ever married, and that would have been a duty for an orthodox Jew unless he had set himself apart for a sort of monastic existence. The best guess is that he served time in a religious community and then, at age 30, launched himself on a career of peripatetic preaching, like John the Baptist and other figures we know about from that period.

He attracted disciples, as any Rabbi of distinction did. The curious thing is that Jesus's chosen disciples were not men of learning, but for the most part uneducated workers. This

may have reflected Jesus's distrust of the educated elite whom he described as 'scribes and Pharisees'. He could hardly have avoided knowing Greek, being brought up in Galilee as he was, but there is no sign that he ever used it for preaching or teaching. He must consciously have set himself against the use of Greek. That is one of the pointers which associate him with the Dead Sea community, who were in opposition to the religious elite in Jerusalem.

But at the end of the day these are just the externals of Jesus' situation. It would not matter greatly if we were wrong about any of them. What we are really interested in is what Jesus believed and what he taught. But we need to prepare the ground over a few more weeks before we shall be ready to answer that question.

12. Messianism and the Dead Sea Scrolls

>> A Greek inscription: Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτὴρ: ΙΧΘΥΣ

In 1947 a remarkable find was made in a desert hillside near the Dead Sea. An Arab boy who was playing there dropped a stone down a hole in the ground and heard a sound that made him curious. People came and opened up the cave he had discovered, looking for buried treasure, and made an almost unbelievable discovery. There was not just one cave but a set of caves, which had once been used as store rooms. In them were a number of large stone jars, which contained manuscript scrolls of great antiquity.

The scrolls proved to date from around the time of Jesus, give or take 20 years, making them perhaps the oldest complete manuscripts (as opposed to fragments) ever to have been discovered. It was the way they had been stored underground, shielded from sudden temperature change, and in conditions of exceptionally low humidity, that had allowed them to survive. They were extremely fragile, of course, and had suffered damage over the centuries. They had to be unrolled with the utmost care and where they had broken into fragments they had to be pieced together like a jigsaw.

When it became possible to read them (and they were actually very well written scrolls, so reading them as such was not as much of a problem as might have been expected) their significance became clear. They had been the property of a monastic community of ultra-religious Jews who had lived on that site, known as Qumran, around the time of Jesus and probably for 50 years before.

Some of the scrolls were texts from the Old Testament which we can recognise. There was a copy of the Book of Isaiah, the text of which was almost identical with the version we use today. There was a commentary on the Book of Habbakuk. Other scrolls described the rules of

the Qumran Community and their outlook on the world, which was an apocalyptic one. They were shocked by the corruption of the priesthood in Jerusalem; they took the view that the world was going to hell in a handcart; and they looked forward to an ultimate battle between the forces of good and evil at Armageddon, after which a new age would be established.

Was the Qumran Community the fore-runner of the early (Jewish) Church? There are some strong connections. Admission to the Community was by baptism. The members of the Community shared all their worldly goods. The life of the Community centred around a ceremonial meal at which bread and wine were shared: it was known as the 'Pure Meal', to which only members in good standing were admitted. The Community venerated a figure, by then deceased, who was known as 'the Teacher of Righteousness'. They constantly prayed that the end might come.

There are some other details that are suggestive, at least. They were vegetarians, and it is interesting that there is no mention of lamb at the Last Supper, if that was meant to be a Passover meal. Also, in the instructions Jesus gave for how to find the Upper Room he said to look out for a man carrying a pitcher of water. Men did not carry water in ancient Palestine: that was woman's work. The only man who would have been carrying water would have been a member of a community that excluded women, like Qumran.

There is a Jewish historian called Josephus who wrote about Israel between the time of Jesus and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and he mentions a sect called the Essenes, who seem to fit remarkably well with what we know about the

Qumran Community. Josephus says that the Essenes were one of the three main sects into which Judaism was divided in his day, alongside the Pharisees and the Sadducees, so they were pretty significant. He himself as a young man spent time following each sect in turn, before making his choice to be a Pharisee. The identification is not certain, but if they were not the same they must have been similar, and there is not much harm to be done by thinking of the Qumranis as Essenes.

Josephus, by the way, refers a couple of times to John the Baptist and a couple of times to Jesus in his writings, but unfortunately the manuscripts of his work that survive, which date from the C 11th, have been over-written by a Christian hand, so they do not provide a reliable independent perspective.

It is for these sorts of reasons, together with some of the apocalyptic sayings attributed to Jesus and his well-known hostility to the religious authorities in Jerusalem, that we suggested in the last lesson that Jesus might have done time as a member of the Community. It is only a possibility, but at any rate we have in Qumran an example of the sort of thinking and the sort of communal way of life that was shared by the early Jewish Church.

A few quotations from the Scrolls will illustrate the close parallels:

“[The men of falsehood] shall not enter the water (i.e. be baptised) to partake of the pure Meal of the Saints.”

“When the table has been prepared for eating, and the new wine for drinking, the Priest shall be the first to stretch out his hand to bless the first-fruits of the bread and new wine.”

“When these become members of the Community they shall separate from the habitation of ungodly men and shall go

into the wilderness to prepare the way of Him, as it is written, “Prepare in the wilderness the way of ... Make straight in the desert a path for our God (Is. 40.3)”

But there are also contrasts with the teaching of Jesus and of the early Church. The Qumran Community was obsessed with religious purity, and extremely strict about Sabbath observance. Jesus, we know, was willing to associate with sinners; he did not think a man was defiled by what he ate or drank; and he was prepared to waive the Sabbath rules if the circumstances required it: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”. He was a strict Jew, but he did not hesitate to re-interpret the Law when necessary, and he had no time for those who adopted a nit-picking approach “tithing dill and cumin”, which was what Qumran did.

Moreover, the apocalyptic writings of Qumran are different from Jesus' view of the end of the age. Qumran looks forward to a conflict between the sons of light and the sons of darkness in a very concrete, realistic way. The ‘sons of darkness’ are identified with the enemies of Israel, and although they use the name ‘Kittim’ to refer to the main enemy, which is a generic name for Mediterranean foreigners, it is pretty clearly a reference to the Roman Empire. This is therefore seditious literature, advocating revolt, though in coded terms.

The war is to be fought, not between hosts of angels and fallen angels, but on a real earthly battlefield, between large armies which are well equipped and disciplined. God will fight for Israel, but the actual work will be done by soldiers. The armies described are a fantasy: there was never any prospect that Israel could raise and equip such a force; but that does not stop the Qumran Community imagining it. Whatever precisely Jesus' vision was it does not seem to have involved soldiers.

We looked at some other apocalyptic writings at the end of the Old Testament. The ones that are most relevant to the emergence of Christianity are those that refer to a Messiah. But Qumran does not refer to a Messiah as such. The Community venerates the Teacher of Righteousness, who seems to have been the actual historical founder of the sect, but there is no suggestion that he is immortal or will return in the Last Days.

There is a reference to 'one who shall come': "... until he comes who shall teach righteousness at the end of days", which sounds a bit like a priestly sort of Messiah, but it does not provide a close link to Christianity. Qumran eschatology is more conventionally Jewish, more nationalistic and more materialistic than the eschatology of the early Church.

The Qumranis were concerned about their personal righteousness and their justification in the time of judgment, but for them salvation was something for the nation, vindication for Israel against its enemies, rather than individual salvation through a change of heart. Jesus' gospel is more personal, more psychological and more subtle than the clunking legalism of Qumran.

Finally, the Qumran congregation was led by priests. It had appointed its own priests in place of the priests of the Temple, whom it regarded as corrupt. The early Church, on the other hand, shows no sign of priests before the C 2nd AD. Initially the Jerusalem Church stayed around the Temple and worshipped at the times of daily sacrifice, showing that they did not question in principle the legitimacy of the Temple and its priesthood. There were 'bishops' (overseers or superintendents) and 'deacons' in the Church long before there were priests.

13. The writing of the New Testament

>> Greek words: κυριος Lord; χαρις grace; ειρηνη, peace; και, and; απο, from; definite article, ο, η, το.

When we were looking at the Old Testament we found that sections of scripture were written by many different hands over a long period of time. The New Testament is much shorter, and it was written over a shorter period by a smaller number of hands; but it still presents some problems of dating and authorship.

If we are going to set an 'earliest possible' date for the NT we first have to be clear about the dates of Jesus' ministry and death. But that is not at all straightforward. Herod the Great died in 4 BC, so if Herod was a threat to the young Jesus he would have had to be born a couple of years before that, say 6BC. But we cannot be sure of that. Luke says he was born when Quirinius was Governor of Syria, which was not until 4 AD, but we cannot place any reliance on Luke. We are told that Jesus was 30 when he began his ministry and 33 when he was crucified, but those are not dependable facts either. They may just be based on the Jewish convention that a man became fully grown up and able to speak with authority when he reached 30. We do not really know how old he was.

As to the date of his death, it happened under the Emperor Tiberius, and there is a limited number of years in the reign of Tiberius when the Jewish Passover would have been in the right month to make the Biblical account of the crucifixion possible. The latest of those dates is 33 AD. Probably the best bet is to accept 33 AD as the date of death, 6 BC or thereabouts as the date of birth (though it could have been later if Herod had nothing to do with it) and suggest

that his age at death was therefore approaching 40. If so, then the earliest date at which notes could have been circulating recording the sayings of Jesus would have been around 30 AD.

The *latest* date by which the NT could have been compiled is around 150 AD. A bishop called Irenaeus, who migrated from Asia to the South of France (where Marseilles and several of the cities on the banks of the Rhone going up to Lyon were Greek colonies and had Greek-speaking churches), wrote a substantial work *Against Heresies* around 170-180 AD, in which he referred to all the main books of the NT as we know it, so it must have been an established canon by then. Those, then, are the outside limits.

But in what order was it written? In one way the NT is even more difficult to pin down than the OT, because by the C 1st AD the technology of writing had changed. Whereas the OT had always been written carefully and solemnly on parchment scrolls, and copied in very small numbers, the Roman world had just invented the paper book. Books (*codices*) were written on sheets of papyrus bound together at one edge like modern books, so they were easier to carry and to read.

Preparing papyrus was still a laborious process, compared to the modern mass production of paper. Lengths of Egyptian reeds had to be glued together and then other reeds glued across at right angles to them, then the total page had to be sanded smooth and coated with fine clay to make a good surface to write on. But there

were plenty of slaves in Egypt able to do the work, and paper became readily available.

At the same time the process of book reproduction became industrialised. Again, it depended on the availability of slaves, in this case educated slaves. Factories were set up, called *scriptoria*, where one slave would read out the text to a roomful of writers, who would copy the book from his dictation. This was mainly used, initially, for the production of pornography – scrolls were still used for more serious publications - but it meant that the technology was there and waiting just when the demand began for a mass distribution of Christian writings.

The process had two consequences for the text of what was to become the NT. First, every version of the text was likely to be different from the one before. First, there were bound to be a lot of errors and omissions as a result of the dictation process. Secondly, quite often a church leader would write his own notes in the margin of his 'master copy' before handing it to the *scriptorium* to have copies made, and the slave in charge would read out the marginal notes as though they were part of the text. We shall come later to some principles that need to be applied in judging whether particular passages are original and authentic or whether they reflect the work of an editor or interpolator – or simply a mistake by a weary slave.

The best manuscripts we have to work from today date from about 300 AD, and by that time the texts had been cleaned up and edited into a pretty standard canonical form, so you don't see a lot of variation from then on. But the first couple of centuries must have been much more chaotic. Even the best mss are far from perfect, and for centuries scholars relied on a defective version of the Greek New Testament (known as

the *textus receptus*) until, in the last quarter of the C 19th, Westcott and his collaborators produced the standard version we use today. All English NTs prior to the C 20th were based on the *textus receptus*.

It is generally accepted that the earliest parts of the NT as we have it are the letters of Paul, which started to be written round about 47 AD. Paul carried on writing until his death, which is thought to have been in 64 AD.

There are two sorts of Gospels: the Gospel of John, and the other three, which are known as the synoptic gospels. 'Synoptic' means 'viewed together'. The synoptic gospels are so called because they basically cover the same ground and can conveniently be viewed together by means of a synopsis. I shall show you my synopsis, but what it does is to take each of the three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, draw three columns down the page and copy out the three side by side showing where they talk about the same incidents in the life of Christ, sometimes using the same words and sometimes slightly different words.

There is a lot of commonality between the three synoptics. John, on the other hand, is in a category of his own and though there are a few incidents like the feeding of the 5000 that can be copied in to make a four-column synopsis, most of the time there is no correspondence. What is true of the form is true of the substance, too: John's representation of Christ is completely different from that in the synoptics.

We shall devote a separate lesson to the question of the relationship between the three synoptics, because it is such a vexed issue. But how did they come to be written, and when?

It is likely that some things started to be written down even before Jesus' death. It was common for the sayings of eminent Rabbis to be written down by their followers. Jesus' closest followers were probably illiterate, but he made such an impact in Jerusalem that it would be surprising if no-one was writing down what he said. The style in which sayings were recorded - we have lots of example from other great Rabbis - tended to be very brief; for example, they might have reported Jesus as follows:

Rabbi Joshua bar-Joseph said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged".

Pointing to a child, Rabbi Joshua said, "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven".

We don't have any of those from Jesus in their original form, but we can assume that they existed, were collected together by some student or students, and formed the basis of a number of teaching passages in the gospels.

The next stage was when there started to be a Christian Church in Jerusalem, initially formed of Jews who accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah. The Church evangelised, it explained the gospel and above all it worshipped, and it need text material for each of those purposes. It developed a liturgy, which it needed to write down, and hymns to be sung at services. It developed formulaic ways of speaking, often slightly coded, in which members could talk to one another. This was important, because what they were doing by being Church members and worshipping together was often illegal as well as deeply unpopular with the outside world.

The synoptic gospels grew in response to all these needs. We can see in them fragments of liturgy and hymn writing from an early date. The needs grew and changed as the Gospel was

taken to the non-Jewish world, where more explanation and a reminder of the basic facts of what had happened was required - maybe the Passion narratives were added at that stage. The gospels as we have them come from this later phase: some of them are more consciously addressed to the non-Jewish audience than others, but all of them are looking *beyond* Judaism, as well as to Jewish converts.

All the gospels, John included, are constructed with a view to being read in church as scripture. They are structured into bite-sized chunks called 'pericopes', which make suitable readings and which we still use today. To begin with the Jewish Christian Church would have continued to hear readings from the OT (mainly from the *Torah*), but as the Christian Church began to distance itself from Judaism - or perhaps more accurately, as Judaism began to throw the Church out, which came to a head in the 80s AD, the Church needed its own texts to read in worship, and these were the books of the NT.

Although Paul's letters are the oldest extant Christian writings it is evident from them that there was earlier written material on which he was drawing. At several points he slips into liturgical language which must be reflecting hymns and prayers that were already familiar to a Christian congregation. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that his whole language is coloured by such liturgy, from the prayers and blessings that begin and end each letter to the little quotations that enliven so much of his preaching.

Some have suggested that Paul wrote liturgically because he was designing his letters to be used in worship, perhaps even as introductions to the Eucharist, but it seems much more likely that he was simply speaking the religious language which bound members of the Church together.

That is how Christians spoke to one another, and it is how they marked themselves out from other people.

There are certain key dates to be borne in mind when thinking about the dating of parts of the NT. The first is the fall of Jerusalem and the (at least partial) destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. Passages that refer to the destruction (or likely destruction) of the Temple have to be dated after 70.

The second is the rift with the Jews, which we have mentioned. Passages which are strongly anti-Jewish are likely to be post 84 AD. Some would say that you can see a continuum of increasing anti-Jewishness, so that the more

anti-Jewish a passage is, the later it must be. But that is not a completely safe assumption.

Finally, there were two major periods of Roman persecution of the Early Church, under Nero in the mid 60s and under Domitian in the mid 90s. There was persecution at other times too, of course, but those were particularly bad. So when we see references to persecution in the Gospels it is tempting to think about one or other of those periods, and most likely the Domitian persecution, because the Neronian persecution seems to have been concentrated in Rome. Having been disowned by the Jews, who enjoyed a protected status in the Roman Empire, the Christians were by the 90s in a particularly vulnerable position.

14. The Synoptic Problem

>> Greek words: ευαγγελιον, gospel; τουτος, this; εκεινος that; αυτος, same; ημεις, we; υμεις, you.

We now come to one of the great puzzles of New Testament studies. In a way it is a pity that it has been regarded as such an important issue and that so many scholars have devoted their lives to it when they could have been doing something more productive.

Why did they care so much about it? Because they thought that if they could get down to what was the genuine, original gospel, free from later additions and changes, that would bring them closer to Jesus and they would be able to hear His words as He actually spoke them. It *is* worthwhile to try to strip away the later accretions, and it is something we shall turn to in due course, but the synoptic problem is not the way into it.

Nevertheless, every student of the NT needs to understand the question. It is simply this. We have seen that the three synoptic gospels run side by side with each other a lot of the time. Sometimes one of them will contain a story (a *pericope*) that the others don't, and often the material is in a different order, but they have a lot in common. Moreover, sometimes the correspondence is verbal: they actually use the same Greek words, showing that it is not just an accidental similarity but that one has been copying from the other.

So the question is, who came first, who copied from whom, and where there are discrepancies, what is the explanation for them?

We do not actually know anything about the authors of the gospels or the dates at which they were writing. The names they go under are ones

they have had for a very long time, but they are not part of the original text and they cannot be relied upon as evidence. It is unlikely that any of the gospels were written by the original disciples of Jesus because they were written in Greek, which would not have been their first language, albeit with occasional Aramaic touches, showing that Aramaic phrases were preserved in the Early Church. It is possible that some of Matthew could originally have been written in Aramaic.

Mark is conventionally regarded as the earliest gospel because it is the shortest, and the thinking is that if Matthew was there before Mark, why would Mark write a shorter version? Surely Mark would have used everything that was in Matthew and added to it, instead of discarding so much of it, including, for example, the Sermon on the Mount?

Most people agree that Luke must be the latest, because he seems to copy from both Matthew and Mark, and has extra material that is in neither of them. Also, Acts is obviously late, because it could not have been written as it is – focused on Paul – until the canon of the NT had settled down in that way; and if Acts is well into the C 2nd then the gospel of Luke itself cannot be much earlier.

But there is no consensus about the priority of Mark. Matthew could be an expansion of Mark, but equally Mark could be a shortened form of Matthew. Matthew is long and rambling, and at times it seems to be in no sort of order. The late Enoch Powell, who before he was a controversial politician was a Professor of

Greek and a very good Greek scholar, used to say that Matthew was as though there had been a fire in a library which had hastily been put out, and someone had then picked up all the scattered pages from the floor and stapled them together.

Mark, by contrast, is beautifully structured for maximum rhetorical effect: so much so that the actor Leo McKern used to do a one-man show simply reciting the Gospel according to St Mark, and a gripping performance it was. The pace of the gospel is astonishing. It is much more artful, more designed for performance, than Matthew.

Then again, we say that Matthew has more material and Mark leaves things out. But when Mark does tell a story he often adds in extra details that are not in Matthew, so maybe Mark is developing Matthew even at the same time as he is abbreviating him?

Matthew is written more for a Jewish audience, Mark more for a Gentile audience. Traditionally Mark is ascribed to St Peter, who was said to have dictated it to Mark in Rome. But that is extremely unlikely to be true. Mark is written in slightly rough Greek, and contains a couple of dialect words which suggest that it was written in Asia Minor (modern Turkey).

Matthew is written in Greek influenced by Aramaic, and his original audience was probably an ex-Jewish church in Syria or Palestine. For the sake of argument, let's put Mark in Ephesus and Matthew in Antioch, those being two of the most important centres of the early Church.

The basic facts about the synoptic relationships are as follows (I've adapted this from Sanders and Davies's extremely useful summary):

1. The same passages often appear in all three synoptics: this is called the 'triple tradition';
2. In the triple tradition, the three gospels mainly agree about the order of the pericopes. When they don't, the order in Mark is always followed either by Matthew or by Luke (but not both);
3. 90 per cent of Mark is found in Matthew, and 50 per cent of Mark in Luke;
4. In the triple tradition, there are substantial agreements between Matthew and Mark against Luke, and between Mark and Luke against Matthew, but few agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark;
5. The agreement between Matthew and Luke starts where Mark starts and ends where Mark ends, i.e. starts with the call of the Baptist and ends with the empty tomb. Anything before or after those points is completely independent;
6. Mark is therefore the middle term in the triple tradition. He is the common factor, suggesting that he comes either first or last.
7. Matthew and Luke have about 200 verses in common which are not in Mark. They are mainly the sayings of Jesus. This is what is called the 'double tradition'. It suggests to many scholars that there was another source document to which both Matthew and Luke had access. They call it 'Q', from the German word for a source (*die Quelle*).

8. But, the material in the double tradition is not in the same order in the two Gospels.

Those are the broad facts, though there are exceptions to every rule and it is extremely hard to generalise.

When they are looking at correspondences between Gospels the experts place great weight on whether there is actual verbatim agreement, which they say proves copying, or whether it is just the same sense. I am not sure about that. Since the way in which copying was done was from dictation it seems to me quite likely that a slave may have written the story down in slightly different words even if he was meant to be making a strict copy.

What conclusions are we to draw from those facts? The standard conclusion for a long time was that Mark was the first Gospel and then Matthew and Luke independently copied from him and added material of their own. A further elaboration of that was to say that in adding their own material they drew on the same source 'Q'.

An alternative view was that Mark came last, and copied from Matthew and a bit from Luke. There are strong reasons for thinking that Luke must be quite late, particularly the way he

introduces his narratives (Luke and Acts), which sounds as though he is standing well back from his subject matter, researching it at a distance; and he sounds like a terribly respectable person, writing at a time when Christianity was almost accepted in polite society. That would point to a date well into the second century, as we have said.

So was Mark or Matthew the first gospel? I would argue for the priority of Matthew because it is more Jewish, rougher and therefore more authentic. Mark is a smooth and sophisticated product, carefully engineered out of Matthew's materials.

But the real answer is that the question is a false one. What probably happened is that a gospel grew anonymously, being passed around from hand to hand among the main centres of the early Church: Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Alexandria and Rome. Church leaders would have added extra bits to suit their own audiences: there would have been copying and re-copying. Mark and Matthew are two specimens out of a whole family of different versions that must have been around. Their origins will have gone back to the 50s or even the 40s AD, but people did not stop adding to them and amending them until the texts settled down towards the end of the century.

15. The teaching of Jesus

>> Key Greek words: και and; αλλα but; ου not; ουν therefore; ως as; πατηρ father; τελειος perfect

εσεσθε ουν τελειοι ως και ο πατηρ υμων τελειος εστι

We have established that Jesus was a Jew, a Rabbi and probably the son of a Rabbi, born a few years BC, died around 33 AD, give or take a few years. He had only three years of ministry, according to the tradition, most of which he spent in the countryside of Galilee in the far north of the country. At a certain point 'he set his face toward Jerusalem'. He had decided the time had come to take his message to the centre of the Jewish world, knowing that his criticisms would bring him into conflict with the religious authorities, who were hand in glove with the Roman administration.

His reputation had obviously preceded him, because Jerusalem came out to give him a celebrity's welcome. The Romans were nervous about that, because religious fervour could easily lead to civil unrest, given that there were lots of fanatics around just waiting for an opportunity to cause trouble.

But it was the Jewish hierarchy, the Chief Priests, who were most threatened by Jesus' onslaught. They stood to lose the source of their immense wealth if the Temple were returned to purely religious purposes. They condemned him for blasphemy after an emergency trial which was conducted out of hours in an unconstitutional way. They could not execute him, because the death penalty (*ius gladii*) was reserved to the Roman Procurator. The Procurator hesitated, but eventually deferred to Jewish public opinion. Jesus was executed by crucifixion, to rise again, the Gospels tell us, two days later.

We have established, too, that the copyists and editors of the early versions of the gospels took liberties with the text and added bits that they thought would suit the purposes of the Church. They would not have felt that they were doing anything wrong by that. The Gospels were not designed to preserve the teachings of Jesus meticulously in a scholarly way. They were designed to serve the purposes of the Church. When we are reading the Gospels, therefore, it is important to be critical and alert to the bits that later editors have slipped in. Watch out particularly for:

- Churchy bits, such as "You are Peter, and on this rock.." Examples are Matthew 10:32-33, 11:27, 16:18, 18:17-20 and 19:28-30;
- Long, boring explanations of parables, which are not Jesus' style: e.g. Matthew 13:10, 13:18-23 and 13:36-43;
- References to the destruction of the Temple (which didn't happen till 70 AD);
- References to the persecution of believers, like Matthew 5:11-12. That did not happen in a significant way until the 60's, but more likely the references are to the persecution in the early 90's under the Emperor Domitian;
- Passages which show Jesus talking to non-Jews, such as Matthew 8:5-13. He probably didn't do that much: note Matthew 10:5, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles". There was a big temptation

for the early Church to make it look as though Jesus got on well with the Romans and other foreigners, when the contrary was more probably the case;

- Passages which show hostility to Judaism, as opposed to criticism of the current Jewish religious authorities (more marked in Luke and Acts than in Matthew);
- (especially in Matthew) passages that say that something happened “so that a prophecy might be fulfilled”.

We can be clear about the issue that led to Jesus' execution, which was his assault on the Temple, turning over the tables of the money changers and denouncing the priests in charge. It is clear, too, that there was a feeling among many people (though unfortunately this did not turn out to be the majority view) that just possibly Jesus was the promised Messiah, who was going to restore the fortunes of Israel. He was hailed, not just in Jerusalem but elsewhere as he walked around, as 'Son of David'. That claim would not have been particularly worrying to the Chief Priests – they could have shrugged it off – but it gave them the opportunity to present Jesus to the Romans as potentially a military and revolutionary leader: a prospective King of the Jews, descended from the old royal line of Judah. There is no indication that Jesus ever saw himself in that light. His purposes were entirely peaceful, and he stressed in answer to his accusers, “My kingdom is not of this world”.

But if Jesus was not intent on a political revolution, what did he see his mission as being? Reform of Judaism, certainly. Making it stricter, in some respects: he was not about detracting from the Jewish Law. But his interpretation of the Law was often surprising and disconcerting to orthodox Jews. For him the purity laws and

the Sabbath law were to be respected, but not as absolutes if they stood in the way of doing what was necessary and right. And what was most challenging was the way he reached out to all people, especially those who were disregarded by the religious. Everyone was valuable to God (c.f. parable of the lost sheep, among others).

It is often said that the purpose of Jesus' miracles of healing was to show that the end of time was coming and the kingdom of God was breaking through. But it is impossible to read the synoptics without gaining the firm impression that Jesus was healing for its own sake. He told people to be silent about what he had done. Quite simply, Jesus had compassion on all sorts of people in their misfortune. His miracles were signs of the power of God, but (except in John) they were not done primarily as demonstration exercises.

Jesus taught exclusively in parables: parables about the kingdom of God, about how people needed to observe the Law strictly (but intelligently and not legalistically or hypocritically), about how people needed to give up their pretensions, about how they needed to be humble and about the imperative of forgiving one another if they themselves were to be forgiven. Much of the teaching was orthodox Judaism for his day, echoing familiar passages from the prophets. The distinctive things are the subversiveness of his teaching, the (thoroughly prophetic) impatience with the smug and self-satisfied, the preaching of 'good news to the poor' (Luke 7:22), the insistence on social justice or *tsedaqah*, and the paradoxical nature of the Kingdom of God, in which “the last shall be first” and “he who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:11).

Jesus had a concern for all the 'lost sheep of Israel', but did he also have a concern for the Gentiles? Probably not. The evidence is rather against it. His mission was to Israel, and the stories that point to friendship with the Romans (e.g. the centurion) and other gentiles have been added to the record at some point to make the gospels more gentile-friendly. The conversation with the Syro-Phoenician woman is a good example. His authentic saying (if any) was probably the original hard line: the conciliatory conclusion has been added later.

Jesus in the synoptics does not present himself as the Son of God but as an ordinary man: he refers to himself all the time as the 'son of man', *bar enosh* in Aramaic, which means 'an ordinary man like me'. There is no evidence that he saw himself as divine, and indeed the idea would have been repugnant to him: it would have been an affront to the First Commandment. He could never, ever, possibly, have said the things attributed to him in the Gospel of John whereby he acknowledges his own divinity. He shows no sign of having heard about the miraculous circumstances of his conception and birth. He sees himself as an ordinary travelling Rabbi, of whom there were many, who were often called, as a courtesy title, 'sons of God'.

However Schweitzer, in the *Quest*, thought that at some point Jesus came to have a different perception of his own role and status, and his disciples to some extent began to share that different perception. He began to see himself as a prophet in the OT tradition, and not just as any prophet but as probably the last prophet, on whom fell the burden of warning people that the end of the age was at hand. John the Baptist may have seen himself in the same light.

Schweitzer thought that Jesus believed that it was only by sacrificing himself as an innocent victim that he could bring in the Kingdom of God. But it is hard to show that Jesus' thinking went that far. Certainly he was immersed in apocalyptic and he was looking for the coming of the kingdom, which he believed to be imminent. He could also see that his move on Jerusalem was very likely to result in his death. But it is not safe to put those things together and conclude that Jesus thought he was working some sort of apocalyptic magic by yielding himself up voluntarily to death as a perfect, sinless sacrifice. That sort of thinking, as we shall see, came a little later.

Appendix: The Lord's Prayer

The need to repent, to forgive, to dispense with worldly goods and to be prepared for death and the judgement are captured in the prayer that we know as the Lord's Prayer. Unfortunately, it has suffered in translation, probably because it was originally badly translated into Latin and then, in its incorrect form, became a popular prayer in the Latin-speaking early church. Once that defective Latin version was firmly established, subsequent translators like St Jerome, who wrote the Vulgate, and our own English translators found it impossible to go back to the original text. It is interesting, though, that the most recent prayer books are gradually and tentatively finding their way back.

The familiar version of the Lord's Prayer is a comfortable, workmanlike prayer for everyday use. It has served a hundred generations of Christians extremely well. But it is not what Jesus meant. The original is a rather scary, 'end of the world' prayer. It is the prayer of a small religious community when they are (or imagine themselves being) just about to die. It is not 'our daily bread' that they pray for, but 'the bread of the afterlife' or 'the bread that is to come'. It is not 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us', but 'cancel our debts (to you) as we have (already) cancelled the debts others owed to us'. It is not 'lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil', but 'do not bring us to the time of trial, and deliver us from the Evil One (the Devil)'. It is a prayer for use in the Last Days, or for people who lived every day as though it were their last.

16. The partings of the ways

Key Greek words: πνευμα, spirit; σαρξ, flesh; πιστις, faith; μη γενοιτο, by no means! (may it not happen!)

I have named several of these lessons after classic books on the subject, and this is one of them. *The Partings of the Ways*, by James Dunn, is one of my favourite books in NT studies. The 'ways' in question are Christianity and Rabbinical Judaism, and the fact that 'partings' is in the plural is meant to indicate that there was not just one sudden split but a series of widening divisions over a period of time.

The Church started life in Jerusalem in the days immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection. The original members were the twelve disciples, Judas having dropped out and been replaced by Mathias, according to Acts. Acts cannot be regarded as a very reliable historical source – it was written long after the event - but it is all we have to go on for the very early years and it may preserve some nuggets of truth.

So here we have twelve men, led by James the brother of Jesus, Peter and John – the 'pillar' Apostles – preaching 'with boldness' and building up a sizeable congregation of believers. The Apostles were all Jews and the congregation were all Jews, but they included Greek speakers as well as Aramaic speakers. Most people in Jerusalem would have been able to speak Greek, so when we talk about 'Greek speakers' we mean people who *only* spoke Greek, the people Acts calls 'Hellenists'.

It is an interesting question how far the Hellenists would have been happy worshipping in the Temple, where only Hebrew was used. Dunn suggests that they would have regarded it as a 'cold house' for them, and they would have been happier worshipping in synagogues, which also existed in Jerusalem. On the other hand, they were Jews, and their culture was very much Temple-centred. They would probably have

learnt their prayers in Hebrew as children even if they could not speak the language.

This is important, because attitudes to the Temple were one of the first causes of division between Christian Jews and orthodox Jews. The Aramaic-speaking early Christians and probably many of the Greek speakers to begin with continued to meet in the Temple court and to harmonise their worship with the times of sacrifice. They were not thrown out of the Temple just because they recognised Jesus as the Messiah, though the Temple authorities took action against them when they became too vociferous (Acts 4.1).

But there were differences of view emerging within the Church, and there was some ill-feeling between the 'Hellenists' and the 'Hebrews' (Acts 6.1), the Hellenists feeling that they were treated as second-class Christians. Some Hellenists, represented by Stephen in the narrative of Acts, began to distance themselves from traditional Jewish worship. Other Hellenists then denounced Stephen to the Temple authorities for preaching against the Temple and the Law of Moses. They revived the charge that was brought against Jesus, that he had said he would destroy the Temple.

In his speech to the Sanhedrin Stephen was unrepentant about his anti-Temple views. He described the Temple as one 'made with human hands', which was tantamount to saying that it was equivalent to the idols of the pagans. He went back to the old Jewish tradition that God does not live in a temple, but travels with his people. Generally we should not place too much reliance on Acts, but in this instance the detail suggests that Luke was using a source

which preserved a genuine record of the nature of the argument surrounding Stephen.

That was bad news for relations between Christians and Jews, but it also reflected a split within Jewish Christianity, even before Christianity started to spread out to the non-Jewish world. Some remained committed to orthodox Judaism (the only difference being that they accepted that Jesus had been the Messiah) while others were prepared to break their links with Temple-based religion and develop their own liturgies. James was on the 'Judaising' wing, while Peter and John were more open-minded.

In the end there remained in Jerusalem, and for a long time in the Palestinian countryside, a sect known as the Ebionite Church, who were the descendants of James's party. They took a down-to-earth view about Jesus having been a man, pure and simple, though a remarkable one - as you might well do if you had known him all your life as your brother. ('Ebionite' is from the Hebrew word *'ebion*, meaning poor: one of the names the early Church called itself was 'The Poor').

The row over Stephen led to disturbances in Jerusalem, and Acts says that many church leaders were expelled and found themselves having to go round recruiting in Samaria because they were unwelcome back home. The reception into the Church of Samaritans and even a eunuch (Acts 8.27) further widened the gap with the Ebionites and orthodox Jews, because these were not people who would have been admitted to the Temple. But interestingly Peter and John came out from Jerusalem to join in the mission to Samaria.

But then along came Paul, a Jew with Greek as his first language but competent in Hebrew too, initially persecuting the Christian Church (and present at the death of Stephen) but then, after his conversion, devoting his life to spreading the

Gospel outside Palestine. The pillars of the Church didn't like him (Paul was hard to like) but Peter and John at least were willing to work with him. Paul purchased acceptance from the headquarters of the Church by sending 'The Poor' substantial donations which he collected on his travels.

There used to be a view in NT studies, associated with a professor called Baur at the University of Tübingen, that Peter and Paul were sworn enemies, and that the history of the early Church could be explained by the working out of their rivalry in Jerusalem and in other churches like Corinth and Rome. It is now seen to be more complicated than that. The tension between the Jewish and non-Jewish elements of the Christian Church was present within Paul himself, as we shall see in the next lesson.

There were two major arguments which had already been played out to some extent before Paul arrived on the scene. They were arguments within the Early Church rather than between the Church and orthodox Judaism, but they had a major read-across to the latter.

Following the Stephen affair missionaries from Jerusalem went out to the towns on the Mediterranean coast, and most importantly to the city of Antioch. There they (including the important figure of Peter) started to make Gentile converts, like Cornelius the centurion, which raised two issues relating to the Law. Firstly, the issue of purity, or maintaining the separation of Jews from Gentiles; and secondly the issue of circumcision.

On the dietary laws, Peter has his vision in Joppa (the port of Jaffa) telling him that the Law has been superseded. He goes to Cornelius's house and eats non-kosher food with him. This provoked outrage from the more conservative Church members when he returned to Jerusalem, but according to Acts he had only to give them a full explanation of how this had

come about, with Divine approval in the form of a vision, and the Church fell into line. It is unlikely that it happened as smoothly as that.

The issue of circumcision was left for Paul to resolve. It is important to look at the so-called Council of Jerusalem, mentioned in Galatians 2 and in Acts 15. You will notice how Paul regards the Apostles in Jerusalem as having the power to decide on this question. He succeeds in persuading them, but you can sense how hard it must have been for them. There must have been many who did not regard uncircumcised Christians as proper members of the Church.

The more the Jewish element in Christianity was diluted, the more they used their own liturgy and distanced themselves from Temple worship, the more difficult it was for Judaism to treat them as part of the family. Judaism was not homogenous: it was used to having different sects within it, but the sects all had a common attachment to the Temple (even if, like the Essenes, they were critical of the current incumbents of the priesthood) and to the basics of the covenant law, like circumcision and the purity laws.

Jesus had set a precedent for disregarding the purity laws in pursuit of a higher good (as when he touched a leper) but he had never set himself outside the Law. The controversial things Jesus did were the sort of things the Rabbis could have a lively debate about within Judaism, but the Church was now saying that the rules had changed. Temple worship was not essential. The idea grew (it had not been present in the earliest days of the Church) that Jesus's death had been the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, so the Temple was redundant.

We start to get the imagery of the Church itself being the Temple (as in the letter of Peter), with the Apostles as its 'pillars' – that is presumably the origin of the metaphor – and all the members of the Church becoming a royal

priesthood, who have need of no other intermediary (letter to the Hebrews). By that time the rift between Christianity and Judaism was pretty complete, though the links did not die out in the hearts of individual believers.

Matthew, Luke and John all have a Jewish audience very much in mind when they are writing their gospels, Mark less so, even though Luke was probably not Jewish by background. The author of Revelation was totally steeped in Jewish apocalyptic. And it should not be forgotten that even a hundred years later, when the canon of the NT was being established, the OT was still twinned with it as constituting Holy Scripture. Some wanted to substitute the NT for the OT, but the Church collectively decided to hold on to it.

Judaism received a severe shock in 70 AD when Jerusalem fell to the Romans after a siege and the Temple was destroyed. In the absence of the Temple, Pharisaic Judaism became the predominant form, generally referred to as Rabbinic Judaism. The Rabbis became less and less sympathetic to the Christians, whose numbers were growing and who were becoming more assertive about the unique claims of their faith. In the years between 70 and 100 AD one of the regular prayers of Judaism, the Benedictions, was amended to incorporate a specific curse against Christians: "*May the Nazarenes and the Heretics be suddenly destroyed and removed from the Book of Life*". We start to find some very harsh sayings about 'infidels' in the writings of Rabbis from that period.

Finally, the split between Jews and Christians was reinforced by tax law. There was a tax on all Jews in the Roman Empire (the *fiscus Judaicus*) which started to be imposed more strictly after 70 AD, and it became a clear criterion for deciding whether someone was a Jew or not. If you paid the *fiscus*, you were a Jew; and, as is the way with taxes, the majority of Christians preferred not to.

17. The Apostle to the Gentiles

ουαι μοι εαν μη ευαγγελιζωμαι: "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel"

After the Gospels and the book of Acts, which is really a supplement to Luke's gospel, most of the rest of the NT consists of letters by, or attributed to, Paul. The NT is constructed so as to parallel (very roughly) the OT, which was traditionally divided into three parts, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings: the gospels take the place of the *Torah*, Acts stands for the historical books Joshua through to Kings, and Paul and the other letter-writers plus Revelation take the place of the Prophets.

After Jesus died the Church formed up as a little society in Jerusalem under the leadership of James the brother of Jesus. Although it was an exclusively Jewish society it was not popular with the Jewish authorities, who were officially still waiting for the Messiah, while the Church maintained that the Messiah had already come in the shape of Jesus.

Paul was a fairly prominent Jew, but not one of the Jerusalem set. He came from the coastal town of Tarsus, now in Turkey, and was a Greek speaker. He spoke Aramaic as a second language (Acts 22.2) and claimed to have studied under the Rabbi Gamaliel, so he must have been competent in Hebrew, too, but he basically used the Greek OT, the Septuagint, as his Bible. He started out as a Pharisee, and joined in the persecution of the Christians following the martyrdom of Stephen.

At a certain point, triggered by the dramatic vision recounted in Acts 9:3, he switched sides and joined the Christians; but the conservative Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were never entirely comfortable with him. Galatians 2:1-10 describes the deal he did with them, whereby they licensed him to take the Christian message to the non-Jewish world provided he kept out of

their way and "remembered the poor", i.e. sent them donations. So he became the (or an) Apostle to the Gentiles. He began an astonishing career of travelling, preaching and church founding in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean, leading up to a period in Rome, where he is said to have died around 64 AD.

Paul was a strange personality. He was by no means good looking, and he tells us he was not a great public speaker. He was a totally driven person, both before and after his conversion. He was obsessed with his mission, on the success of which he felt his own salvation depended (slightly contrary, on the face of it, to the doctrine he expounded to others): 'Woe is me', he says, 'if I do not proclaim the Gospel'.

Though he suffered chronic ailments, he revelled in hardships, rejection and imprisonment (1 Corinthians 4:8-13, 2 Corinthians 4:8-12, 6:3-10, 11:23-29). And he was a mystic, who had visions and was drawn to the idea that there was a body of secret knowledge that was the key to salvation (1 Corinthians 2:6-7, 2 Corinthians 12:2-5). He emphasized that there was no distinction in Christ between Jews and Gentiles, free people and slaves or men and women. And yet he was emphatic that women must stay in a subordinate role in church (1 Corinthians 14:34-36).

Un-clubbable as he may have been, Paul's letters to the churches he had just founded and other churches which were struggling to establish themselves were (deservedly) immensely popular and were copied and circulated in great numbers around the Eastern Mediterranean. They became the core of Christian teaching in the Early Church, even more so than the Gospels,

which arrived on the scene a little later and took longer to settle into a stable form.

It is important to remember the chronological sequence. Although Jesus died maybe 15 years before Paul started writing, Paul's letters are the earliest documents we have. It was they that influenced the Gospel writers, rather than the other way round, though (as we have noted before) there are passages in Paul which could be reflections of a prototype gospel; for instance, Philippians 2:15, which – if it is authentic - seems to carry three distinct echoes from Matthew's gospel.

The other odd thing is that Paul had never met Jesus and apparently knew very little about his actual teaching. He very seldom refers to Jesus' teaching: just once or twice in all those letters. His main focus is not on the teaching but on the significance for believers of Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection. His 'Jesus' is not, essentially, the historical Jesus, but his interpretation of what he thought the Messiah, the Christ, really meant.

So influential were the letters that they attracted imitators. The later letters known as the 'pastorals' were not by Paul but by a later writer (or writers) borrowing his name and his style to write general circulars to the Church. There was thought to be nothing wrong with name borrowing: as we saw with the apocryphal writings of the OT, it was done all the time in the ancient world.

The letters which are considered the most authentic are Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians and 1 Thessalonians. Ephesians, though a great letter, sounds a bit late and 'churchy' for Paul. It may be best to think of Ephesians as written by one of his close team and inspired by him but written a little later, and of Colossians (which shares common features with Ephesians and contains authentic detail but

is not in Paul's voice) as a short genuine letter with substantial later editing by the 'team'.

As with the gospels, there are probably some additions and interpolations in Paul's letters. One has to wonder about 1 Corinthians 11:23-32, for example; and Philippians 2:6-11, which is evidently another bit of early Christian liturgy, may be a later addition. The doctrine of 'self-emptying' (*kenosis*) does not seem strictly consistent with Paul's other teaching, but on the other hand it is supported by 2 Corinthians 8:9.

Consistent or not, the doctrines Paul propounded became the bedrock of Christianity. Jesus, as we have seen, was an orthodox (or slightly unorthodox) Jew. He was not about setting up a new religion but about preparing for the end of the age and bringing about a reform of Jewish religious practice if there was time before the end came.

The Jerusalem Church thought of Jesus as the promised Messiah, but Paul went further and started to think of Jesus as 'the Saviour' in a new sense, as a sacrifice and an offering for our sins. It is a moot point (it depends how you read the Greek text of Romans 9:5 and one or two other disputed passages) whether Paul ever actually identified Jesus with God – that would have been almost prohibitively difficult for someone brought up as a Jew – but he certainly thought of him as the Son of God, the one perfect sacrifice, and called him 'Lord', which was how God was addressed, as well as 'the Christ'.

Paul's thinking is complicated, clever and, as we have said, not always consistent, but these are some of the main themes:

1. Salvation is not just for the Jews: the whole Church, Jewish and Gentile, now constitutes the Chosen People and inherits the promises made to Israel.
2. We must be decent and moral people. However, it is no longer necessary for Christians to observe the Law of Moses

as such (especially in diet, circumcision and so forth). The Law can be a trap as much as a helper. It can give you the illusion of righteousness. The important thing is to look through the letter of the Law and 'walk in the Spirit' as imitators of Christ.

3. We cannot make ourselves right with God ('be justified') by our own efforts. We are justified by our belief in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, because that belief opens to us the benefits of his sacrificial death on the Cross.
4. Through Jesus' sacrifice we have become the New Creation free from sin and death, replacing the old, fallen Creation of Adam and Eve. By belief in Him we can become part of the body of Christ, share with Him in His resurrection and live with Him eternally.

These became major tenets of Christian belief, and it would be fair to say that in terms of doctrine Paul contributed more to the development of Christianity than Jesus himself did. But that does not make it 'Paulianity' rather than Christianity. It was still characterized by the essential Jesus themes of humility, sacrifice and subversion of the established order in favour of the new order of social justice described as 'the Kingdom'. Paul was absolutely writing in the spirit of Jesus, even if the historical Jesus might not have recognised some of it.

Paul's most important contribution was arguably the development of a new technical language of Christian theology involving words like sin, redemption, justification, propitiation, the body, the flesh, the spirit, grace and love – often straightforward Greek words to which Paul gave a new significance. Many of the words he used were lifted from the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), and what Paul did was to import their OT meanings into the

contemporary Greek language while giving them a spin of his own.

Especially important are the *kharis* group of words: *kharis* itself, which is translated as 'grace', and is cognate with *khara*, meaning 'joy'; *kharisma*, the 'free gift' of Romans 5:15; and *khariḗsthai*, a new word for 'to forgive', not transactional forgiveness but a term of generosity. These words above all were Paul's gift to Christianity.

The main gap between Paul and later Christian theology was that Paul, as we have seen, did not recognise Jesus as divine. That idea came in with the school of thought reflected in John's gospel, which influenced the final versions of the other gospels in varying degrees. Many of the problems of Church doctrine arose from the difficulty of reconciling Paul's theology with that of John, on the assumption that since both were in the canon both must be divinely inspired and must therefore be consistent.

They are not entirely consistent, but they are closer to one another than critics sometimes allow. We should not ignore the continuity of underlying spirit between the three.

The truth is that Christianity does not belong to anyone. Every believer contributes to the tradition. Christianity is something we are all creating, all the time. It is a project everyone can join in.

18. Romans

>> Key Greek words: *αμαρτια*, sin; *δικαιοσυνη*, righteousness; *λογιζειν*, to reckon

Paul's letter to the Romans is the most theologically important book in the Bible, even more important than the Gospel of John. It contains more than any other book of the raw material out of which Christian theology is constructed. But it is not an easy book, and the difficulty of interpreting it correctly has made it a battlefield for commentators.

Paul wrote it to the Church in Rome during a stay in Corinth in the middle of his apostolic career, round about 54 AD. He had been moderately successful in his Greek mission, and had collected contributions to send back to the mother Church in Jerusalem. He wanted to go back to Jerusalem to deliver them in person, so as to consolidate his position in relation to that Church, and then he planned to visit Rome and if possible travel on to Spain to extend his evangelism into the Western Mediterranean.

The letter was written to the Romans, but he wrote it for publication and it can hardly be doubted that he planned to take copies with him to Jerusalem. It was meant for the elders of the Jerusalem Church more than for the Romans, and it contains the definitive statement of his position in the hope of gaining their endorsement.

In Ch.1 Paul states the first theme of the letter, which is justification by faith. He quotes the saying from Habbakuk, "He who is righteous in respect of his faithfulness shall live", which was poorly translated in the Septuagint as "The righteous shall live by faith in me", *ο δικαιος δια πιστεως μου ζησεται*. He must have known the Hebrew, but used the Septuagint version because it better suited his purpose. In any case the point is that God provides the gift of faith, and if that offer of

faith is taken up, the individual will be saved. The meaning of *πιστις*, faith, has subtly shifted from 'trust' to 'belief' and thereafter hovers somewhere between those concepts, later, particularly in John, moving from 'belief in' or 'on' to 'belief that'.

Paul is clear about what we need to be saved from. He describes all the sins to which the flesh is heir and makes it clear that sinners can expect punishment on the Day of Judgment. He is firmly in the apocalyptic tradition in expecting an imminent intervention by God, associated with the Second Coming of Jesus.

In Ch. 2 he considers the question whether there is one rule for Jews and another for Gentiles when it comes to being saved. Do Jews get any preference, or on the contrary is more expected of them as the covenant people? The answer is that, yes, more is expected of those who know the Law of Moses, but at the end of the day it makes no difference. Everyone will be judged on their conduct, and being formally an adherent of the Law (as indicated by being circumcised) will count for nothing. "The real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal" (2.29)

In Ch. 3 he confirms that. "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift" – absolutely cardinal words. But that sentence has an equally important second half, "... through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith". In that one sentence we have the doctrine of grace as a *gift* (i.e. not earned by merits, such as minute obedience to the Law), and the doctrine of redemption, with the death of Christ being seen

as a sacrifice for sin like the old sin sacrifices that were offered in the Temple.

When Martin Luther read this he thought, "Aha! This is exactly what is wrong with the Roman Catholic Church and why we need a Reformation. The Roman Church has made salvation mechanical so that people can earn their salvation by good works, including giving money to the Church for the saying of Masses and the purchase of Indulgences. That is not the way it should be: we are saved by grace as a free gift, the gift of faith. We are justified by faith alone (*sola fide*)".

He had a point in relation to the way the Catholic Church was in his time, but later Protestant commentators have reasoned back from this that Paul's argument with orthodox Judaism was the same, i.e. that Judaism saw salvation in terms of a mechanical adherence to the Law, so that if you ticked all the 600+ boxes you were saved. Modern scholarship has shown that that was unfair on Judaism and that what Paul was saying was not a million miles away from what one of the contemporary Rabbis might have taught.

The doctrine of redemptive sacrifice is expressed in terms designed to appeal to the Jewish Christian Church in Jerusalem, using classic OT language. Paul rounds off the chapter by emphasising that nothing he has said detracts from the Law. Just like Jesus, he would expect Jewish Christians to obey the Law: it's just that that is not the basis for their salvation. Obedience to the Law is the simple consequence of acknowledging the covenant, not something that confers special merit.

The question Ch. 3 raises is the relationship of the redemptive sacrifice to the business of justification by faith. Is the sacrifice itself effective, in a sort of magical way, or is it our faith that counts (or both); and if the latter, why not just be justified by faith without the need for

the sacrifice? Is the sacrifice the best way for Jews to think of it, and faith the best way for Gentiles? Evidently not, since both have to be justified by faith.

In Ch. 4 he deals with the question of the status of those Jews who lived before the Covenant (and therefore the Law) was in place, and concludes that they were saved by their faith also. Abraham had faith "and it was reckoned to him as righteousness". In the same way if we put faith in the resurrection of Jesus who was put to death for our sins, that will be reckoned to us too as righteousness.

In Ch. 5 Paul talks about a two-stage redemptive process. It is a very dense chapter, but essentially what he is saying is that Jesus represents a second creation: as sin and death came into the world in one man, Adam, so in this new man comes the cancellation of sin and death for all humanity. But it is Jesus' self-sacrifice, not his incarnation, that is effective for us. "One man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (5.18).

But then Paul brings in the resurrection. Stage one, he says, is the sacrifice, which has removed the barrier of sin – we are reconciled by his death; and stage two is his overcoming of death, by participating in which we can share in his eternal life. By being in the sinful Adam we all became mortal; by being in the righteous Christ, we become immortal. This introduces a third element of salvation, the doctrine of being 'in Christ'. It is not clear whether that is independent (a) of the sacrifice on the cross, or (b) of our justification by faith; though faith is clearly the route by which we become one with Christ.

In Ch. 6 Paul continues the resurrection theme and emphasises that since we are now 'walking in newness of life' we must behave as perfectly as we can. We have been saved by grace, not by our own merits, but we should not presume on

that grace. We have achieved stage 1 reconciliation, but we still depend on grace for eternal life.

Ch. 7 is about the relationship of righteousness to the Law. It is really an expansion of the thought in Ch. 3 about the Law being a good thing, but not being enough in itself. There is a danger that it can be a trap. At any rate the Law by itself does not help Paul not to sin: it tells him what he ought to do, but it doesn't assist him in resisting temptation. For that assistance he depends on grace.

And so in Ch. 8, which is the climax of the whole book, Paul puts forward the concept of walking not by the Law but "in the Spirit". If we are in Christ, or if Christ is in us, "our spirits are alive because of righteousness" (8.10). We are now "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ", and we have the strength and confidence to face anything that the world can throw at us.

The next three chapters are particularly addressed to the Jews and are about the relationship of the Christian Church to the traditional concept of Israel. Israel was the covenant people, so how can God change his mind and make the Christians now the chosen people? Paul shows that the covenant people were not just anyone who happened to be descended from Abraham, but that God exercised discretion about who would be chosen. He uses scripture to show that God is able to extend his favour to people who were outside his covenant.

The conclusion is that "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek ... everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (10.12) But that does not mean that the old 'Israel' is excluded: it is still open to orthodox Judaism to come into the fold by accepting Jesus (11.24).

The concluding chapters are more in the nature of a regular pastoral letter, though a particularly exalted one. In Ch. 12 Paul sets out the duties of the Christian believer, urging us to "present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (12.1). In Ch. 13 he says that Christians should be good and law-abiding citizens. In Ch. 14 he urges tolerance in regard to different dietary practices: we should not judge one another. The strong should bear the burdens of the weak (Ch. 15) and we should all support one another and work together in harmony. Ch. 16 concludes the letter with an unusually extensive list of personal messages and commendations.

Note that in 16.22 Tertius, Paul's secretary, slips in his own word of greeting. Paul had dictated all this, and Tertius had transcribed it. But one wonders how much Tertius himself contributed. Did he take it all down *verbatim*, or did he create some of the language in which Paul's thoughts are captured? We shall never know.

19. Corinthians

Greek words: *χαρα*, joy; *χαρις*, grace; *χαρισμα*, free gift, or blessing; *χαριζεσθαι*, to forgive; *γνωσις*, knowledge

The past is another country. No books of the Bible bring that home to us more than Paul's letters to the Corinthians. We know that the Old Testament world was very different from our own, starting as it did in the Bronze Age and with the great prophets coming at the start of the Iron Age. That was a primitive, heroic age. But we are inclined to think that once we get to the time of Jesus, at the height of the Roman Empire, everything was more civilised and life was pretty much as it is today.

Paul's letters show us how untrue that is. Maybe we are misled by films and plays which attempt to depict the ancient world, but which show modern dialogue and modern ways of thinking. The sights and sounds and smells and ideas of ancient Corinth were all stranger than we can imagine.

Here we have two letters that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth while he was staying in Ephesus, round about 52 AD. The first letter can be regarded as one piece (though some have questioned that on account of its length). The second probably comprises three letters, or parts of letters, edited together, as you can see from the fact that Paul seems to conclude and start again a couple of times. But that is not important: they are all genuine Paul, all written to the same church within a short period of a few years at the most.

Paul took particular pride in the church in Corinth, because he could claim to have been its founder. Other apostles had visited since and had made a bigger impression on some members than he had, but he regarded himself uniquely as its father. And at the end of the day his authority seems to have prevailed there.

Corinth was a particularly challenging place to start a church. It was a seaport at a central point in the trade routes through Greece (see a map). Nowadays there is a canal through the isthmus of Corinth, and though that was not there in ancient times there was still a lot of traffic going across from the Aegean to the Gulf of Corinth. Like all big seaports, Corinth was a pretty rough place.

What is more, the old city of Corinth had been destroyed in the Roman civil wars, and the population at the time of Paul consisted largely of the descendants of freedmen (i.e. ex-slaves) who had been settled there by a Roman general. Those ex-slaves would have come from all over the Mediterranean and beyond, so the population of Corinth was not pure Greek, but extremely diverse. But by Paul's time, it was very prosperous.

That is the background to the correspondence of which these letters form one half. A new church, founded only a few years earlier, is seeking the advice of its patron on a range of issues that are causing confusion and division within it. We only have Paul's replies, but it is fairly easy to deduce from them what the questions must have been.

The main problem was a Gnostic tendency within the church. We shall go on to talk more about Gnosticism in later lessons, but the essence of it is that these were rather intellectual people who claimed to have a special knowledge or *γνωσις* of some kind, which set them apart from ordinary people and meant that the ordinary rules did not apply to them.

The interesting thing, as we shall see, is that Paul only half contradicted them. He claimed to be preaching a simple, open doctrine, and yet at the same time he claimed that he had special knowledge as good as any of them, based on visions he had received.

The first letter runs like this:

Ch.1: Paul says he has heard that they are splitting into factions that support different apostles. In response he emphasises the unity of the body of Christ and the simplicity of the Gospel.

Ch.2: It is the Spirit of God, and that alone, which enables man to attain true wisdom.

Ch.3: It becomes apparent that the main cause of the divisions is a 'wisdom' party within the church, which claims intellectual superiority. Paul warns them off and emphasises unity in Christ.

Ch.4: Paul uses heavy sarcasm to teach them humility.

Ch.5: A new issue: a man is living with his stepmother. Paul emphasises the need for high moral standards.

Ch.6: Church members ought to settle disputes among themselves, rather than going to the city courts. Paul stresses the need for sexual morality.

Ch.7: Paul gives guidance on marriage and divorce. He is not actually in favour of marriage, because he thinks the end is coming soon, but he regards it as the lesser evil compared to immorality. He then widens this out to say that because the end of the world is fast approaching it is better for everyone to remain as he is (married or unmarried, slave or free, Gentile or circumcised) and not to try to change his outward situation. We should just go

through the motions of living as we are in the present world, and our whole attention should be on the world that is to come.

Ch.8: Paul then turns to one of the oddest problems raised by the Corinthian church: the question of whether or not Christians should eat the food offered to idols. Meat was not part of the everyday diet in the ancient world, and the majority of the meat that would have been available to ordinary people to buy came from markets associated with pagan shrines where animals were sacrificed. Some of the Corinthian Christians thought it was wrong to eat such meat, but others thought that since the pagan deities did not exist it did not matter whether the meat had been offered to them. An additional complication was that some of the meat was not merely sold from the pagan temple stalls but was eaten on site in civic ceremonies, which all the leading citizens would be expected to attend. Paul agrees with the 'strong' (i.e. with the more intelligent members of the congregation) that pagan deities are nothing and it makes no difference what you eat, but he warns them that they must be careful not to set an example which would be misunderstood by their weaker brethren.

Ch.9: Paul says that he has been setting an example of self-denial: he has not claimed financial support from the church, but has continued to earn his living as a tent-maker. He has sacrificed himself and put himself in the place of every sort of person in order to win them for Christ.

Ch.10: Paul warns again against immorality and idolatry, and says that baptism and partaking of the Lord's Supper are not enough to guarantee salvation, any more than the corresponding acts sufficed for the ancient Hebrews in the desert.

Ch.11: 11.2 looks as though it might have been the start of a second letter, but that is not certain. The theme is now the place of women

in church (subordinate) and the proper conduct of the Lord's Supper, which must be treated as a sacrament, not as physical food.

Ch.12: This is the classic statement of the doctrine of different spiritual gifts making up the complete body of Christ.

Ch.13: This is the even more classic hymn to love, a favourite at weddings.

Ch.14: Paul then turns to the problem of speaking in tongues. Evidently some of the Corinthian congregation favoured speaking in tongues in an ecstatic way, but Paul does not like that much. He does not rate it highly as a gift. He doesn't rule it out, but he is keen that whatever is said should be interpreted responsibly by someone. If it cannot be interpreted, they should not engage in it.

Ch.15: This long chapter contains Paul's teaching on the factual truth and the significance of the resurrection. As heirs of Christ and as part of his body we shall share in his resurrection and inherit immortality.

Ch.16: Paul concludes by asking the Corinthian church to contribute to the subscription he is raising for the Church in Jerusalem. The letter ends with the usual personal greetings.

The second letter, or the letters of which it is comprised, comes a year or so after the first. It shows that Paul's relations with the church had deteriorated in the interim, and that they had not always heeded his guidance. He says (2.1) that he had paid them a visit which had proved 'painful'. As a result he wrote them a severe letter (perhaps almost an ultimatum), which has not survived. They seem to have responded to that, and this letter is written in a more positive spirit. Let us take it in sections, rather than chapters this time:

Ch.1 and 2: These describe Paul's feelings about his relations with the church in Corinth. The

tone is conciliatory, though he makes it clear how painful things have been recently.

Ch.3: Paul puts the message of the Gospel in Jewish terms, referring to it as a new covenant (quoting Jeremiah 31.31) and comparing the spiritual development of the Christian to the glory of God reflected in the face of Moses, as we are assimilated to Christ.

Ch.4-6: Paul talks about his ministry and his sufferings, saying that everything that can happen to him is of no importance compared to his and our future in heaven. "We have a building from God, a house not made with hands" (5.1). That is a message addressed to Jews, but really to ex-Jews, because it is taking the Jewish imagery of the Temple and rejecting it in favour of the new Temple of the body of Jesus in heaven. If anyone is 'in Christ' he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and the new has come (5.17). Now is the day of salvation, and it behoves us to behave like new people, enduring patiently and setting an example by our moral behaviour. Ch.7-9: Paul is pleased that good relations have been restored, and in Ch.8 reverts to the subject of the appeal for funds for the Church in Jerusalem. The Corinthians have obviously been making some effort in response to his earlier appeal, and he encourages them to send more money.

Ch.10-13: The tone changes with the start of Ch.10, becoming harder and more critical. Some have thought that this may have been the 'severe' letter referred to in 2.4, but more likely it is a later, downbeat letter reflecting further disappointment. Paul obviously had opponents in the Corinthian church, encouraged by other, rival apostles (whom he sarcastically calls 'super-apostles') who accused him of being unimpressive and given to empty boasting. Paul is stung by their criticism, and uses all his rhetorical power to justify his own authority and denounce his opponents as false prophets. He

has suffered more than anyone for his faith (Ch.11), and in Ch.12 he reinforces his claim to authority by saying that he has also had mystical experiences (of the kind known to the Jews as 'merkabah mysticism'. He fears that they have not heeded his warnings and that when he visits again he will find that there has been a lot of backsliding.

The letters, taken together, give us a vivid picture of the difficulty of Paul's task as an apostle. The world of early Christianity was an

intensely competitive one, and the various peoples that were being evangelised came from a variety of intellectual and religious backgrounds. In relation to all of these Paul sets out the Gospel with great force, clarity and consistency – surely better than any of his competitors – and yet, even so, he meets with only patchy success.

Nevertheless in the end, it would seem, he prevailed: the church in Corinth prospered, and most importantly, it kept his letters!

20. The Fourth Gospel

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος καὶ ὁ Λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ Λόγος

The Fourth Gospel is unlike the others. It tells a different history of Jesus' ministry, with him dividing his time more between Judaea and Galilee, and attending three Passovers in Jerusalem, not just one. There are lots of detailed differences in the chronology, most notably that the cleansing of the Temple is brought forward to the start of Jesus' ministry, and whereas in the synoptics that is the act that precipitates Jesus' arrest and trial, in John the decisive act is the raising of Lazarus and the crowd's reaction to that. The miracles have a different character in the FG – more symbolic and less realistic - and they include no casting out of demons. Parables are used in a different way, too, though again much of Jesus' speech is parabolical in character.

But most strikingly, this is a different Jesus. He talks in a different style. Much of the time he is giving monologues, and talking not about the kingdom of heaven but about himself: he is the living water, the bread of life, the door to the sheepfold, the good shepherd, the true vine, the way, the truth, the resurrection and the life. The conversations are very odd and unrealistic. The whole book has a surreal feel to it.

And yet there is clearly a genuine historical tradition somewhere at the core of it, independent of and conflicting with the synoptic tradition. Whoever wrote John was familiar with the mainstream tradition and would seem deliberately to be correcting it at times. Scholars think that some of the details (about the timing of festivals, for instance) are to be preferred to the synoptics. The debates Jesus has with his opponents are vivid and have a ring of authenticity. This is not entirely a work of inspired imagination. But neither is it wholly realistic. It is a stylised interpretation of Jesus superimposed on an authentic gospel source.

The FG, the letters of John and Revelation were at one time all ascribed to the same author, John the favoured disciple, the son of Zebedee, who was one of the 'pillars' of the Jerusalem church. The FG and the letters *could* be by the same hand, but Revelation could not. It is in rougher Greek, and comes from an earlier period, closer to the time of Paul's letters. Revelation we can place in Asia Minor (because of the letters to the churches) and there is a tradition of a church of John in Ephesus which would tie in nicely with it. Polycarp, later to be Bishop of Smyrna, reported that he met the original John bar Zebedee in Ephesus in around 85 AD, and he would not have lied.

It is not impossible, therefore, that the original John wrote Revelation at around that time, but he did not himself write the FG. It was written by a more educated man (or team) and probably one for whom Greek was his first language, neither of which would have been true of *that* John. Perhaps it was some of his disciples at Ephesus, who wanted to honour him? And very possibly the authentic elements of the narrative derived from the account passed on by John bar Zebedee. It was probably his loyal followers who promoted him in this gospel to the status of 'the disciple Jesus loved'.

It used to be thought that the FG must be late because of what they call its 'high Christology', in other words the way that it emphasises that Jesus is God incarnate. The synoptics are not yet ready to say that in so many words, and nor is Paul, despite the fact that he often comes close to the wording of the FG and his 'Christ' is likewise not closely tied to the historical Jesus. The prologue (1.1-14) sounds as though it might have been influenced by Justin Martyr in around 150 AD, but that could be a later addition.

More recently some scholars have argued for a much earlier date, saying that Paul shows that a high Christology was not impossible in the C 1st. The late Bishop John Robinson even argued that John might be the earliest and most authentic of the Gospels, but most people think that is pushing it. Later rather than earlier seems right, and most would put it in the early part of the C 2nd, but the fact is we don't really know. The best guess is that it started to be composed in Ephesus soon after the death of John the Disciple, which may have been in the 90s AD.

Similarly, scholars used to say that John was heavily influenced by Greek thought, so it must have been written by a non-Jew outside of Palestine. Then there was a move to suggest that actually there is a lot of Jewish thinking in John, and what we thought was Greek philosophy was actually Jewish wisdom-teaching of the inter-testamental period. The gospel shows some detailed knowledge of the Holy Land. These Jewish elements all reflect the authentic tradition on which it was based.

It is said that the author (or authors) of John could not have been a Jew because the FG is fiercely anti-Jewish. But that may be a misunderstanding too. When John talks about 'the Jews' he may not always be speaking realistically, any more than he always is about the historical Jesus. The FG (and the Johannine letters) are all about who is in and who is out of the Church: who is a believer and who is not, light and darkness, goodies and baddies; and within that context 'the Jews' are simply the stylised bad guys, the leading representatives of the hostile community.

What, then, does the FG say? It is basically in four parts:

- Ch. 1: The famous opening, followed by John the Baptist and the calling of the Disciples;
- Ch. 2-12: The book of 'signs';

Ch. 13-20: The book of sayings, and the Passion (sometimes called 'the Book of Glory');

Ch. 21: The epilogue

John attaches importance to establishing that the Baptist was not a rival to Jesus (which he almost certainly was) but a supporter. That might suggest that he was writing in an area where there was still a Church of the Baptist to contend with, which might point to Palestine or Syria rather than Asia Minor. But most likely he was following the synoptic tradition on this: the evidence strongly points to Ephesus as the home of the FG.

Then we get on to the 'signs' that Jesus did, which in turn lead to his famous 'I am' sayings. The first sign is the feast at Cana. There is nothing realistic about this, or indeed about any of the 'signs'. They are unlike the miracles in the synoptics, which are down to earth events of healing or whatever. The 'signs' are all symbolic actions. The whole thing is coded in a way that can only be deciphered by those who are inside the faith and know how to understand it.

It is probably a mistake to ask whether John ever thought Jesus actually turned water into wine at a wedding. The meaning of the story lies not in its literal truth but in its symbolism. The jars of water, as John mentions in passing, are those used by the Jews for purification, and they are being replaced by the wine which is the saving blood of Christ. That is why John does not call them miracles, but 'signs' or pointers to the true nature and significance of Jesus.

The 'signs' lead on to the 'I am' sayings: I am the bread of life, the living water, the true light, the word, the shepherd, the door and the way, culminating with "I and the Father are one" (10.30) and "I am the true vine" (15.1). These are not things that the historical Jesus could or would ever have said. They involve reading back into the life of Jesus a significance which

was only apparent after his resurrection. The FG as we have it is a work of theology, not a work of history, and it is significant that the author is called, in the traditional superscription to the book, 'John the Theologian'.

At one time there was a tendency to dismiss the FG because it was 'unrealistic' and to question whether it should ever have been included in the canon of the NT (apparently its inclusion was a matter of much debate at the time). It was argued that the Jesus of the FG was 'docetic', meaning that he was not a man at all, but was just God in the appearance of a man (*δοκεῖν* means 'to seem'). If that was so, the FG would have been heretical, because the doctrine is that Jesus was wholly God and wholly man at the same time.

But the consensus is that the FG is not docetic. Jesus in the FG is fully human. He has real human emotions: he gets distressed about things and he grieves sincerely over the death of Lazarus and the demands it places on his spiritual resources. He calls his disciples his 'friends'. He is not a detached observer of his own trial and crucifixion, as a docetic Christ would have been. He is a real human figure, but John is placing that human character in a stylised drama rather than describing him realistically.

It is not just the clear Greek of the FG and its skilful structuring that convince us that it could not have been written by the son of Zebedee the peasant fisherman. There is an artful way in which the story is written with constant dramatic irony. Irony is not the same as sarcasm: Paul uses sarcasm; John uses dramatic irony. The reader of the FG always knows more than the characters in the drama. We know who Jesus really is, even as we watch the master of the feast, or Nicodemus, or the woman at the well groping towards a glimpse of the reality. John wraps us into the tight little body of those who understand these secrets.

And that marks the transition from the Book of Signs to the Book of Glory. Up to Ch.12 Jesus has been addressing the outside world, where he has been challenged and misunderstood. He has given 'signs' but they have not been appreciated: signs alone are not enough. If people are 'in darkness' they would not believe even if they were told quite explicitly that He was the Messiah. Or if they believed, they would misunderstand and believe the wrong thing.

In Ch.13 he turns away from those who are in darkness and addresses his own people. There is no more challenge or contention. He is talking to his followers and assuring them that though he will die he will rise again and they will live in him. The main thing is that they should stick together and be firm in their belief in him. The FG and the Johannine letters share this concern for the unity of the Church, which was obviously threatening to divide. "Love one another", John pleads, and shun the Antichrist who is trying to pull you apart with false teaching.

How then should we handle the FG when we use it in church? I always feel uneasy when it is read as though it were a synoptic gospel. You feel that there should be some sort of warning to make clear that it is not to be understood as the words that Jesus would actually have said, but as John's dramatisation of the life of Jesus in the light of his profound understanding of Christianity.

But that is hard for a congregation to understand, so maybe it would be better simply to avoid using the FG in the lectionary? That would be a huge loss and probably no church leader could bear to do without John. How could you do a funeral without him? Just handle with care and enjoy the artistry with which the FG is composed. There is something of the real Jesus hidden away inside it.

Part Three

The interpretation of Scripture

21. The very early Church

In the last few lessons we have seen how the Church gradually separated itself from its Jewish origins. But what was it like being a member of the Church in the first century after Christ? Clearly it depended where and when you lived, whether you were a Jew or a Gentile, whether you spoke Aramaic or Greek as your first language, and (if you lived in Jerusalem) whether you attended the Temple or a synagogue.

The original Church, as we have seen, was formed in Jerusalem around the persons of James, Peter and John. They were Aramaic speakers, they worshipped in the Temple and they worshipped in Hebrew, using the traditional Hebrew prayers. But as Acts tells us, very quickly Jews from the diaspora (i.e. Jews from countries round the Mediterranean in which they had settled, especially what is now Turkey and the north coast of Africa) joined them. These would have been Greek speakers, and though they might have known some of the main Jewish prayers, like the *Shema*, in Hebrew they would have read the Old Testament in its Greek translation and would have preferred to attend Greek-speaking synagogues.

The Jerusalem Church stayed in and around synagogues up to about 70 AD, because it was essentially a Jewish Church, but it added on to the celebration of the Sabbath a Sunday morning service when the bread and wine were shared in remembrance of Jesus.

But in the meantime Paul and other Apostles had been taking Christianity to Gentiles, first in Palestine and along the coast up to Antioch, and then further afield to Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Greece and in due course Rome.

There too the original base of operations was the synagogue, and some of the first converts were Jews. But the people who were particularly attracted to the Church in those places were not the Jews but the Gentile sympathisers – known as *σεβομενοι* or 'the religious' - who also attended or gathered around the synagogues.

Judaism was regarded with mixed feelings by outsiders in the ancient world. There was puzzlement about the dietary rules they observed, and some disgust at the practice of circumcision, but there was a lot of respect for the sober and godly lives they lived, for the way they helped and looked after one another and for the antiquity of their religion. Many people could see that Judaism was a religion that 'worked' in the sense that it helped to produce a successful, prosperous society. Many would have liked to become full members of Judaism if they had not been put off by the requirement for circumcision.

These were the people who were low-hanging fruit for Paul. Once he relaxed the requirement for circumcision and liberalised the rules on diet there was no obstacle to their joining the Church, which he described as the 'new Israel', Israel redefined as the people of faith.

The leaders of the synagogues were not too pleased with this development, and Christians had to find other places to meet. But they could not build churches, because they were not a recognised religion. Christianity was unlawful everywhere in the Roman empire up till the middle of the C 3rd, and it was only then that the first churches could be built. For its first two centuries Christianity had to be an underground

movement, and its only meeting places were in people's houses or in secluded places out of doors.

The Roman attitude to religion was strange from our point of view. There were lots of temples to the gods of classical mythology: Jupiter, Minerva, Apollo and so forth, but few people believed in them seriously. However, people believed in luck or fate, and they believed that the worship of the old deities was worth doing because if you didn't do it bad things might happen. Moreover, it was a question of loyalty to your community: it wasn't just you personally that might have bad luck if you didn't worship, but your city might suffer, so you had a civic duty to take part.

All the leading citizens would be expected to attend the ceremonies of the main local deities, and it would be bad form not to. Then, onto that was added the worship of the Roman Emperor. The first half dozen Emperors were not deified until after their deaths (Vespasian's last words were "*Vae, puto uti deus fio*": "Bother, I think I'm becoming a god"), but it soon became the practice for the Emperor, or the *genius* or spirit of the Emperor, to be worshipped alongside the local deities in each town. Now, it might have been bad form not to join in the worship of Minerva, but to absent yourself from the worship of the Emperor looked very much like treason.

That was a big problem for the Christians. It would have been a problem for the Jews, too, but they had done a deal with the Roman authorities. The Romans had found it so difficult to manage Jewish intransigence that they exempted them from Emperor worship provided the Jews sacrificed to their God every day on behalf of the Emperor, thereby showing their loyalty in a different way.

The Christians were not part of that deal. They came to be hated by the Jews and regarded with

great suspicion not just by the Roman authorities but by the common people. Because they were forced underground and had to meet in secret all sorts of myths circulated about what the Christians got up to. They were accused of practising incest, infanticide and cannibalism, the last no doubt because of a misunderstanding of the nature of the Eucharist. When the Emperor Nero in 64 AD needed a scapegoat to blame for the great fire of Rome he picked on the Christians, as the most hated and suspect minority in Rome, and crucified or threw to the lions several thousand of them.

Even 50 years later, Pliny, who was then the Roman Governor of the province of Bithynia (now Northern Turkey) wrote to the Emperor Trajan asking advice about what to do with these troublesome Christians. Pliny was a decent man and he was reluctant to believe lurid tales about what seemed to him to be sensible, God-fearing people, but he could not tolerate their obstinate refusal to take part in Emperor worship. He executed a few of them as an example to others, even though by then the policy of the Empire was less punitive than it had been.

There was a period of particularly fierce persecution under the Emperor Domitian in the 90s, Domitian being the first Emperor to claim divinity in his lifetime, and persecution came and went over the years up till the reign of Constantine in the C 4th. But in all that time it was in principle illegal to be a Christian and you were constantly taking a risk that someone would denounce you to the authorities (prosecutions in the ancient world largely depended on a system of informants, known as *delatores*).

The house churches met for worship on Sundays and no doubt at other times, celebrated the Eucharist and joined in a common meal called the *agape* or 'love-feast' (another fertile source of misunderstanding by outsiders). They

read from the Greek OT and sang hymns based on Jewish models: we can find several of them embedded in the NT, together with Jewish-style prayers and benedictions. No doubt they also read out and venerated the letters they received from eminent Apostles like Paul.

As with Judaism, one of the big attractions of the early Church was the way in which the Church members looked after one another. The Church was a Friendly Society, at a time when there was no welfare state. They visited the sick and those who were in prison, and they distributed food to widows and orphans: the church at Rome in the C 1st is reported to have had 1500 widows on its books. The organisation of this charitable work and the handling of church finances was the responsibility of Deacons, who were some of the first officials of the Church.

The superintendence of the local church was the responsibility of Presbyters, or Elders, one of whom would be designated the Bishop, or Overseer. He was originally just the first among equals among the Presbyters, but gradually came to be a senior rank. All correspondence with other churches was in the hands of the Bishop, and in the face of endless threats from heresy and schism the bishop came to be the firm centre of doctrine in the local church. It was particularly important in dealing with Gnostics that the Church should be able to claim Apostolic authority for its bishops. When the Gnostics claimed secret knowledge of some kind, the best answer was to say that if the Apostles had had any secret knowledge they would have passed it on to the bishops, who were their lawful successors.

In due course, by the end of the C 1st, the Bishops of the main centres of Christianity - Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem - came to have jurisdiction over all the churches in their 'provinces', though it was to be some

while before the Bishop of Rome gained overall pre-eminence.

And what about the membership of the Church? It would have been mainly lower class to begin with. Respectable people would have had other organisations they would rather join. It was actually open to slaves, which must have seemed extraordinary in those days. To call a slave your 'brother', which was how members addressed one another, would have seemed very strange.

Nevertheless, slaves joined and a particularly important group were freedmen, or ex-slaves. As the masters of slaves came under the influence of Christianity they increasingly came to free their favourite slaves (not all their slaves of course - how was a man to live?). And women became an important part of the Church, more important than they had been in the synagogue. It is very striking in Paul's letters how many women he names, and how important they were in their churches.

Married women were probably attracted to the Church because if they could persuade their husbands to become Christians that would help to ensure that they stayed faithful. Wives of Christians were less likely to be dumped, and if they were, they had their friends in the Christian community to fall back upon. When Christianity began to extend into the upper classes, as it did by the end of the C 1st, it was often through the wife being converted first, and then converting her husband; and the Venerable Bede tells us that was the pattern right through into Anglo-Saxon England, five centuries later.

Women generally were the possessions of men in the ancient world. They started off as possessions of their fathers, and were then given, literally, to their husbands in marriage. They had no property of their own. But widows were allowed to hold property, and women who had borne three sons to their husbands were also granted a semi-independent status.

These were the sort of women whose houses, once the children had left, were big enough to house small churches, and who had the time and the energy to devote themselves to the charitable purposes of the Church. They did not get equality of status with men – Paul is clear about that – but they had a higher status than they would have had in any secular organisation at that time.

No doubt some joined the early Church because they were stunned by the clarity of Paul's preaching, but many more will have joined for more practical reasons. And that may be a lesson for the Church today: people join the Church and then hear the Gospel, rather than the other way round.

22. Apologists and ascetics

We are now moving on to the C 2nd, and we are going to look at two things that were going on in the early Church at that time. Books on the Early Church tend to take the subject of asceticism a bit later, because some of the most famous ascetics lived in the C 3rd, but it may be useful to start to look at them now, because asceticism is one of the things the Church had to deal with almost right from its origins.

What do we mean by 'ascetic'? It comes from the Greek word for exercise, and it refers to people who practised some sort of special self discipline as a way of furthering their spiritual development. Ascetics were people who tried harder than the ordinary Church member: they fasted more often; they abstained from sex; sometimes they 'mortified their flesh' by deliberately hurting themselves; often they moved out from ordinary society and lived in the wilderness, where they could pray and contemplate without distraction.

You might think that this was all very admirable, and in a way it was, and they were often much respected by other Christians. But they were a problem for the Church in two ways: firstly, because they took themselves outside Church discipline and threatened to be a rival source of authority to the bishops of the Church; and secondly because their doctrines often became a bit eccentric along with their lifestyles.

The Qumran community, as we saw, represented an ascetic tradition within Judaism, with isolation from society, no marriage, a great deal of fasting and a very simple, meagre diet. Paul had come across ascetics at Corinth, and even more so at Colossae, and typically of Paul, instead of just telling them to be sensible, he does his 'all things to all men' act and claims to be pretty ascetic himself. He tells the Corinthians that he abstains from sex, fasts a lot, subjects himself to great hardships and

'pummels his body and subdues it' (1 Cor. 9.27). The example Paul set proved extremely influential among later generations of Christians.

As a sweeping generalisation, the Church has always had more of a problem with people who wanted to take things to extremes than it has with people who are a bit too moderate. In the early Church there were three things leading towards extremism, and they made a toxic mix. The first was the conviction that the world was about to come to an end soon, so that there was no point looking after your body, or having children: the whole emphasis had to be on getting yourself as pure as possible in preparation for the coming Judgment. The second was the philosophical view, which had penetrated later Jewish thinking but was Greek in origin and goes back to Plato, that the transitory material world was just a shadow of the real, permanent world. We get a lot of echoes of that in Paul. And the third was the body of thought that is known as 'Gnosticism'.

Gnosticism is the term used to refer to any school of thought which claimed to be in possession of some special knowledge (*gnosis*) which was denied to the rest of us. Some of the Corinthians were Gnostics, and therefore felt themselves superior to the rank and file. Paul, once again, doesn't just tell them not to be silly, but claims to have some secret knowledge himself, thereby unhelpfully giving legitimacy to the idea.

The sort of special knowledge the Gnostics believed themselves to have typically involved a myth about the creation of the world. They believed that there had been a war in heaven as a result of which some sparks of divinity had been ejected and had fallen down to earth. Some people contained within them these divine sparks, and therefore possessed a desire to be reunited with God in heaven. Other people

were purely material and belonged to the earth, to which they would return.

Gnostics believed that the seven planets were hostile forces which stood between the divine sparks on earth and their return to heaven, and the '*gnosis*' mainly consisted of details of special charms and passwords which would help the soul to dodge past the planets on its homeward path. This may seem childish nonsense to us but it was taken very seriously in the ancient world, where rival groups guarded their own passwords jealously.

You can see how the notion that you were someone in possession of a divine spark, and therefore predestined for heaven, made the Gnostics 'puffed up' as Paul would say. We have seen they divided into those who felt themselves above the Law, so that they could do as they pleased, and those who practised asceticism. Either way they felt superior to the rank and file. But Paul himself distinguished between people who were 'purely fleshly' (*sarkikoi*), human with a soul (*psychikoi*) and spiritual (*pneumatikoi*), and there was quite a strong element of predestination in his scheme of things. He was closer to the Gnostics than was entirely comfortable.

However, where Paul differed was in relation to the fundamental creation myth of the Gnostics. The sort of Gnosticism we have described came originally out of Persia, and it was based on the idea of a continual, ongoing conflict between good and evil. The war in heaven which showered the divine sparks on the earth was part of that conflict. God in that scheme of things was not omnipotent, but was (almost) equally matched by the power of evil, light matched by darkness, which is such a familiar theme from St John's gospel (ideas like this get everywhere!).

There was a school of thought which said that the world was fundamentally evil, because

anyone could see our lives are nasty, brutish and short, so the world could not have been made by a good God. Instead it was the creation of a bad god, who was the rival of the good one. This is totally contrary to Christian, and indeed Jewish, teaching, but it persisted for centuries as a stream in Christianity, and was influential even on St Augustine, one of the greatest 'doctors' of the Church.

If Gnosticism had stayed in its Persian/Middle Eastern form it would just have been an alternative religion and would have been no special threat to Christianity. But from the time the Christians started proclaiming that Jesus had come to be their Redeemer, Gnostic sects adopted the idea of a Redeemer too, someone who could lead them past the hostile planets and deliver them safely back into heaven. Some Gnostics, especially in Egypt, identified the Greek/Egyptian deity 'Thrice-greatest Hermes' (*Hermes Trismegistos*) as their redeemer, others a charismatic preacher called Simon Magus (Simon the Wizard), while others found that Jesus fitted very well in that role.

In the C 2nd there was a powerful movement of dissident Christians who interpreted Christianity in Gnostic terms. Their heresy consisted in denying that God created this world, in claiming that some were predestined for heaven, rather than dependent on divine grace and in holding that Jesus was never really incarnate. Because God was pure and the world was vile there could be no question that God had taken on human flesh. Jesus must have created the illusion of a human being.

This was a big challenge to the Church. The new heresy appealed particularly to the more intellectual members, and it took a major effort, particularly by Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon, to counter it. Irenaeus's book *Against Heresies* was written in about 175 AD and within a couple of years we find copies of it circulating in Egypt, showing what keen interest it must have

generated to have been copied right across the world in that time.

The Church had started among the lower social classes but as it moved into the C 2nd it found that it was increasingly having to take on the intellectuals of the Roman Empire. Educated people were being drawn into the Church, often through their wives, and they needed to be able to reconcile Christian teaching with their existing philosophical beliefs. Paul might have insisted that he was not going to engage in philosophy and was going to stick to preaching 'Christ crucified' and nothing else, but the new, widening Church membership wanted something more.

There were two main lines of philosophical thought which underlay the mindset of most educated Romans. One was the Platonic view, already mentioned, that the world as we see it is impermanent and changing, and that reality has to be somewhere else. Everything on earth is only a rough approximation of a perfect, unchanging ideal. All reality and all goodness has to come from a transcendent source of complete perfection. It was easy for Christians to assimilate that to their view of God: indeed we can see Paul doing it already in Colossians, "For in Him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1.19).

The other was the Stoic line of thought, which said that what a man (or woman) really was could not be affected by anything external. Being rich or poor, or suffering physical pain, was of no ultimate importance. If a person had the right frame of mind they could endure all these things and achieve an inner calm which allowed them to rise above adversity and be the person they were meant to be. Again, that fitted well with much of Paul's teaching, and with the tendency to asceticism. The Emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote a famous little book on Stoicism, which you can still read.

From quite early in the C 2nd Christians began to appeal to the Roman Court with arguments that Christianity should be legalised. The first was perhaps Aristides in about 125 AD. These writers were known as 'apologists', from the Greek word *απολογία*, meaning a defence in law. They did not have a clear-cut success: Christianity continued to be technically illegal. But the emperors from about the time of Aristides to near the end of the century adopted a lighter touch, so the authorities were probably listening. When there were persecutions, like the one in Smyrna which resulted in the burning of Polycarp in about 160 AD and the dreadful persecution of Christians in Lyon in 177, they seem to have been locally instigated, not the result of central government policy.

The most important of the apologists was Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the century. He came from Syria and trained as a professional philosopher before converting to Christianity. He made Christianity more palatable to the Roman intelligentsia by emphasising the parallels with Platonism. He wrote about Plato with the greatest respect, placing him almost in the prophetic tradition. Plato (or his mentor Socrates) had clearly had no time for the polytheistic religion of his day – Socrates was actually executed for atheism – and had seen that at the centre of everything must be a single, unchanging deity as the source of all goodness.

Justin thought that Plato had gone wrong in suggesting that the soul was immortal and would automatically return to heaven before being reincarnated. The fate of the soul depended on the grace of God. Justin believed in a fairly concrete concept of resurrection. Following the end of the age there would be a judgement, and those who were saved would (on the lines of Revelation) then reign with Jesus for a thousand years before this world came to an end.

Particularly important in Justin's thinking was the concept of the divine Logos, the word or

reason of God. Plato had thought of God as essentially a rational being, who gave order to creation. Justin argued that Jesus was the Logos of God, God incarnate, a separate person from God the Father but of the same substance, 'Light from Light', as one torch is lit from another. The one was God transcendent, the other God immanent, but both were equally and completely God. This was a milestone in the development of Christian theology.

The apologists are interesting because the task they faced was not dissimilar to the one we face today. We have a body of Christian teachings which are at odds with the general assumptions of the thinking world. Christianity is widely dismissed as a backward sort of superstition. We need to show that Christianity is not only a tenable set of beliefs which can co-exist with advances in scientific knowledge but can contribute enormous value to the modern world.

23. The great heresies

In the last lesson we looked at Gnosticism and saw how it contained a number of heresies: God not omnipotent; the created world evil, not good; predestination of the elect; and a docetic view of Jesus, denying the reality of the incarnation. We are now going to take a broad sweep across the whole range of heresies the Church had to deal with in its early years, the resolution of which led to orthodox Christianity as we know it today.

We saw that Justin Martyr introduced the idea of the divine Logos, which was the Person (*prosopon* or 'face') of God which was immanent in Jesus. Divine Reason existed with God from the beginning (Prov. 8.30) but it was incarnate for a period in a specific person, in a specific time and place (John Ch. 1).

Justin's teaching appealed to the Platonists, but it provoked a reaction from the so-called 'Monarchians', who held that there could not be two 'Gods', and that therefore, Jesus must be something less. They went down two lines: the modalist line, which later became called Sabellianism, holding that 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit' were alternative names to be used for the same reality in different contexts, 'Son' being the name to be used of God incarnate in Jesus; and the reductionist line, holding that Jesus was simply a man who was inspired by the Spirit of God to an exceptional degree.

Origen, who was the greatest theologian of the C 3rd, upheld Justin's view and introduced the concept of 'substance' (*hypostasis*) to describe what united the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The three Persons of the Trinity were, he said, distinct entities but of one being (*ousia*), a phrase which still appears in our creed to ward off any latent Monarchians: "...begotten not created, of one being with the Father".

The fact that Christianity was operating in two languages, Latin in the West and Greek in the East, and that words did not exactly translate between the two led to confusion. It was not helped by the fact that the Western bishops regarded the Greek-speaking Eastern bishops as too clever by half and the Eastern bishops looked down on their Western, Latin-speaking counterparts. The West tended to suspect the East of worshipping three *hypostases* (as some of them indeed did), while the East suspected the West of naive Sabellianism.

At the beginning of the C 4th a priest from Alexandria called Arius started a heresy which would survive till the Middle Ages, especially in Germany and Eastern Europe. Arius taught that Jesus could not be 'of the same being as the Father' (*homoousios*), but could only be 'of like being' (*homoioousios*). He was half way to demoting Jesus to the level proposed by the Monarchians.

It may seem a pretty fine distinction to us nowadays, but it caused a huge upset in the ancient world. The Emperor Constantine, who had just adopted Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, found that he had to get personally involved in resolving the dispute, even though he was not yet formally a Christian (he was only baptised on his death bed). He called a Council at Nicaea, which rejected Arianism and agreed on the formulation we still know as the Nicene Creed.

But that was not the end of the matter. A further two world councils of the Church were needed before the position was beyond dispute. And in the meantime other controversies arose about the nature of Christ.

The next phase of it was a dispute around the nature of Jesus, and whether he had two natures (*physeis*) or one. The standard doctrine was that

he was fully human and fully divine at the same time. As we have seen, docetists favoured the 'divine' view, and Arians emphasised the humanity more. But did Jesus, during his lifetime, have two minds or two wills? Did he have a human mind, which was limited in its understanding and subject to normal human emotions and fears, or was he always really omniscient? Was he a divine mind in a human body?

Then there was a dispute (centred on Constantine's new capital of Constantinople, the former Byzantium) about the status of the Virgin Mary. Many people there liked to refer to Mary as 'the Mother of God', but one party in the Church was opposed to that. Curiously, they rejected it not on the grounds that God, having existed through all eternity, could not have had a mother, which would have been up to a point logical, but on the grounds that a baby was too undignified to be regarded as God incarnate.

But the mass of the people thought they were saying that Jesus was not really God. The argument caused great offence and blood was shed on the streets before it was settled on the basis that Mary should be referred to as the 'giver of birth to God', the *Ayia Theotokos*, as she is known in the Orthodox Church to this day.

You will see that all these arguments fall into a pattern of low versus high Christology, roughly whether you align more with the synoptic Gospels or with the Fourth Gospel: that tension is built into the canon of the NT.

But you should note that these arguments were not settled on their merits as a result of calm theological conversations. They were decided by power politics: one bishop would steal a march on his rivals, catch the interest of the Emperor and have his rivals deposed, and it would then be his view that prevailed.

The pattern of high Christology in the West and a fractionally lower Christology in the East in 1054 led to the Great Schism with the Greek Orthodox Church. The issue was whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father, as they said in the East, or from the Father and the Son (*filioque*) as they had begun to say in the West. In the West, you couldn't slide a cigarette paper between the first two Persons of the Trinity; in the East you could – just!

It is interesting to reflect whether it would have made a difference in the long run if the politics had worked out differently. Would an Arian Church, or a Sabellian Church, have been different in practice from the denominations we know nowadays? We tolerate much greater doctrinal diversity these days.

Another line of heresy, which would have been more damaging had it succeeded, came from the Middle East and made its main mark in North Africa (then a more economically important part of the world than it is today). Its originator was an Iraqi prophet called Mani, and it became known as Manichaeism.

Mani started from the same Persian background mythology as the Gnostics. He saw the world as a battleground between good and evil, and he shared with the Gnostics the idea that the created world was evil and the divine soul had to escape from it through ascetic practice. Manichees, like Marcion, rejected the authority of the OT. St Augustine's mother Monica was an orthodox Christian and brought him up as such, but in his youth Augustine defected to the Manichees, and though he only stayed with them for about ten years they had a lasting effect on his thinking. Manichaeism was an underground movement, a sort of secret sect, within Christianity right through the C 5th.

Why do these obscure differences of view, of the sort that give theology a bad name, matter

for us today? Why is it remotely interesting to study them?

Partly because they have never gone away. People still talk about 'fighting the Devil' as though he had not been vanquished once for all in the crucifixion and resurrection. People still divide Christians up into castes of 'real Christians', 'born-again Christians' and the like, as though there were an Elect within the Church and we were not all sinners, equally dependent on grace.

People still have an other-worldly view of the status of this world, which ultimately derives from Platonism. People undervalue this world as though it were shoddy workmanship, and like to imagine a better one. Christians have always prayed for the Second Coming, but there is a good way of doing that, and a bad way. It can be extremely damaging if it leads to people disrespecting the only world we have. We need to remember that "God loved the world" (John 3.16-17).

People still believe in predestination. Calvin picked up the idea from St Paul's letters and gave it, in the view of non-Calvinists, undue weight. John Wesley wrestled with his conscience over it: intellectually he was strongly attracted to Calvinism, and (though he did have reservations about it) it was his desire that Methodism should remain in communion with the Church of England rather than any doctrinal objection that led him to maintain an independent middle course.

As with the Christological controversies of the C 4th, it was church politics that decided the outcome. To this day it is what divides us from many of our Protestant friends.

The argument about *hypostases* re-surfaced in the Reformation debate about transubstantiation, which is one of the sticking points between

Protestants and Catholics. Although the word *hypostasis* is a literal reflection of the Latin word *substantia*, which we naturally translate as 'substance', it does not mean a substance as we think of it, like oil or flour or copper. It is a technical word from Aristotelian philosophy, meaning the underlying nature of something, what it really is, which is not necessarily its physical appearance but more related to its purpose. So, for instance, a box of chocolates looks like food, but if you give them to your Mum their real nature is that they are a present: whether the present takes the form of chocolates or a bunch of flowers is secondary, or as Aristotle would say, 'accidental'.

So when the Catholic Church originally stated that the bread and wine of communion changed their *substantia* to the body and blood of Christ they did not mean that there was a physical change, just a change of purpose. But by the time of Luther it was misunderstood as a sort of witchcraft, and the Church authorities themselves did not have the gumption to explain what they really meant. It's what the elements mean – their symbolism, if you like – and that has been captured in more modern renderings of the Eucharistic Prayer.

The lesson from looking at all these confusions over the ages is that words matter. There is no scientific way of showing that God is one *hypostasis* rather than three, or that Jesus had a particular blend of divine and human attributes. All we have is the scriptures, and our own creative wits to work out for ourselves what to make of the pictures they present us with.

The scriptures are not perfectly consistent, and maybe that is for a purpose, because what is of value in the study of theology is not the learning of a great body of knowledge by rote, but the exercise of thinking through the meaning of these things for ourselves.

24. Language, truth and Logos

“To be imperfect as knowledge is of the essence of faith”- *St Thomas Aquinas*

In about 1950 A J Ayer wrote a book called *Language, Truth and Logic*. Ayer was not an original philosopher, but he was a great teacher and populariser. Having grown up in Vienna, he brought to Oxford the school of philosophy which had prevailed in Vienna in the 1920s. It was a stern, scientific approach. Nothing should be accepted as true unless there was evidence to support it. Any statement for which no evidence could be provided - even theoretically - was deemed to be meaningless.

Plato's speculative way of looking at the world was thereby consigned to the dustbin of history, and with it, according to the Vienna School, the whole of religion. If there was evidence for 'the supernatural' it was not supernatural at all, and if there was not it was meaningless to talk about it.

In the past century there has been a turning away from Plato, though he has still to be venerated as the father of philosophy, and a renewed appreciation of his successor Aristotle. Plato thought in terms of reality as approximation to a transcendent ideal. It was what is called a 'metaphysical' approach. He said that what makes a dog a dog is that it partakes of the nature of the true and perfect dog, which can be imagined to exist eternally in another plane; and what makes justice justice and goodness goodness is similarly approximation to the ideal of the just and the good.

Aristotle showed that that theory would lead to absurd consequences and it was unnecessary to imagine a world of ideals. What made a dog a dog, and what it shared with all other dogs (but with nothing that was not a dog) was the name 'dog'. It was language that created our reality, not a parallel world of metaphysics.

The pre-eminent philosopher of the last century was Wittgenstein, who picked up the Aristotelian theme and explored the way in which we use words to create meaning. He showed that the meaning of the word 'dog' is not some dictionary definition of a dog (e.g. "four-legged, omnivorous mammal") because you could have a three-legged dog, or a dog that will only eat meat. The meaning of the word 'dog' is the way we use the word 'dog' in our everyday language - it's as flexible as that - and sometimes there are families of meanings, not just one-for-one correspondences between words and objects.

The Aristotelian approach is not new in theology. It was big in the ancient world, and was the dominant philosophy of the Church in the Middle Ages. There were always some Platonists around, but the official philosophy of the Catholic Church (known as 'Thomism' after St Thomas Aquinas) is still essentially Aristotelian.

What does that mean for the way we approach theology today? It means that we have to give much closer attention to the role of language in our religion. A lot of what we do and say in church would fail Ayer's test of meaningfulness: God is not the sort of thing (in fact, not a 'thing' at all) that you can subject to evidential tests. He does not 'exist' in the same way that tables and chairs exist, and the Church has never said that He did.

But there are different ways of existing. For instance, numbers exist eternally and immutably, regardless of what you call them or how you write them. Language exists, as distinct from people who speak the language or books written in the language. Physical forces exist (if not quite like Newton imagined), as distinct from

the particles that transmit them. Market forces exist, too: they cause prices to rise and fall and factories to close, but nobody can ever see a 'market force'.

God exists very really and very powerfully, without being part of any physical reality. In theological terms, He could not have a physical existence (not even a ghostly one) because if He did He would be part of His own Creation. If there were a spirit world, or a parallel universe of some kind, He could still not be part of it, because He would have created it. Metaphysics does not help to solve the problem. He has to be something completely different, in a category of His own.

Lots of people over the ages have produced 'proofs' of the existence of God. They are all based on logical fallacies of one sort or another.

The so-called ontological argument is based on Platonism. If something is going to be perfect, as God surely is, it must be eternal and unchanging. It must be more real than anything else, in fact the source of all reality. Because God is the most real thing there is, then by definition He *must* exist (not a good argument!).

St Anselm ended up concluding that God must be 'whatever is the greatest thing imaginable' in all respects. This line of thinking, where you think what God must be like in order to qualify for being God, is called natural theology.

As we have said, philosophers tend not to believe in any sort of absolute reality nowadays. They tend to think that people create their own reality through the language they use to conceptualise things, just as 'the Word' was the medium of Creation in John 1.

A modern version of the ontological argument would be to say that something exists if a meaningful sentence can be constructed using the word for it (since if it did not exist, the sentence would be meaningless); and since

Christians clearly say meaningful things to each other using the word 'God', in that sense at least God must exist. But you would be right in thinking that would be a slightly odd proof.

And in any case the sort of existence which they might prove is, as we started off by saying, probably the wrong sort of existence. We are not looking for an effective cause, because that would have to be part of the physical world. God is something completely 'other', so 'other' that we can only describe Him in metaphors and stories.

Which is exactly what Jesus did. "He taught nothing that was not in parables" (or, as we would say, metaphors) (Matt. 13.34). He said the Kingdom of Heaven was like yeast, or a small seed, or someone who sold everything to purchase one pearl of great price, and so on. This is highly figurative language, and as with so much in Hebrew and Aramaic, we literalise it at our peril. We are far too literal-minded nowadays.

The nature of God transcends any literal description. The great thinkers are always searching around for ways to capture aspects of it, like the 99 names of Allah revered by the Muslims. St John uses an extravagant range of metaphors. In his gospel Jesus is identified with 'the Word', or as we might say, the intelligence behind the universe. He is described as the 'light of the world', 'the bread of life', 'the way, the truth and the life'. Later we read that 'God is love'. These are visionary images: there is no attempt to reduce God to the status of a substantive being. The Jewish philosopher Maimonides thought you could only say negatives about God: you could never speak of Him as He is.

It is certainly true that we do manage to say meaningful things to one another using religious language, so religious language is not meaningless. However, very often what we say

using religious language could be said in ordinary language too. It is often just a different, private, coded way of expressing feelings and desires we share with all members of the human race, believers or not.

Words like 'holy', 'sacrament', 'redemption' and 'sin' (as opposed to good, honest crime) come from a world which modern people no longer inhabit. They are ancient concepts stemming from a pre-scientific culture and preserved for us, as though in amber, in the scriptures. For many of them you can find ways of translating them into ordinary language, though as with all translation you lose something in the process.

'Sin' is recognisable to non-religious people as wickedness of an existential kind which involves the devaluing of oneself or others ('separating us from God', as we would say). 'Salvation' can be understood as finding or giving someone a lasting assurance of worth. 'Heaven' can be interpreted as a representation of how relationships ought to be in order to maximise human worth. The idea of 'sacredness' is still used as an expression of the intrinsic value of the natural world. The word 'desecration' is used a lot in that context.

That raises the question why we use religious language when there is an alternative. Language is very often used to divide, rather than to unite, to show that we belong to a little tribe, and that people who do not speak like us can be identified as outsiders.

We all too often use religious language, which can be baffling to non-believers (all this stuff

about sacraments and grace and redemption) as a barrier between us and the outside world. But it also serves another purpose. It links us back to the scriptures, and therefore to the world of the scripture writers. Rather than living in the modern world, with its current mindset, we are transported back into the mindset of writers at the time of Christ or before, with all their assumptions and understandings (or misunderstandings) about the way things are.

It is important to maintain a link with the past, because the scriptures provide the constant thread which underlies our concept of God. But we need to acknowledge that it was the past, and that the way we look at the world now is different. What we are doing when we study the scriptures is a bit like hitting a tennis ball against a wall while walking slowly backwards away from the wall. It gets harder as time passes, and the temptation to cut corners and retreat into fundamentalism increases.

Our duty is to pass on as much as we can of the wisdom and insight that generations have developed in the Church through that exercise of hitting the ball against the wall, while translating it into language which is accessible to the current generation. We don't want people to see Church as a different realm, where you give up all your modern, scientific mindset and step back into the Bronze Age. We need to be time travellers, and bring the ancient insights up into the modern world for modern people to understand and enjoy.

But don't get me started on the theology of Dr Who!