3

HOW THE NEW TESTAMENT CAME INTO BEING

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH BEGAN WITHOUT ANY CHRISTIAN BOOKS

In the second letter to Timothy in the New Testament (2 Tim. 4: 13) you may read the following request: 'When you come, bring the cloak I left with Carpus at Troas, and the books, above all my notebooks.' What were these books and notebooks that this writer was so anxious to get back, together with his warm wrap for the winter? One thing is clear; they did not include what we call the New Testament. It is difficult for us to picture any body of Christians without that book; but there had been Christians for something like a hundred years, before its separate parts had even all been written, let alone gathered together into the collection which is now known as 'the New Testament'.

As a matter of fact, the actual title 'the New Testament' did not begin to be used for this collection of Christian writings until round about A.D. 300. But the title implies something which had long before then become evident—that these books contain the story of God's new 'testament', that is, his new 'covenant' or 'agreement' with his people—the continuation and renewal and crown of the 'old covenant' made through Moses with Israel. In Jer. 31: 31 the prophet looks forward to the new covenant that God was going to make, to meet the situation caused by the breaking of the old covenant. The writings of the New Testament contain the story of the fulfilment

of the prophet's hopes. And just as these Christian writings were called the New Testament, the pre-Christian Jewish writings eventually came to be called, by Christians, the Old Testament.

Substantial parts of what was thus to become the New Testament, such as the Gospel and Letters of John and the Revelation, were probably not completed until about A.D. 100, when there had already been Christians for some 70 years. 2 Peter may be even later; and more time still went by before these writings began to be collected together. Therefore, the writings already mentioned by the author of 2 Timothy cannot have included the New Testament as such. 'The books' in that verse are likely to have been scrolls containing the Jewish scriptures—which, as has just been said, Christians today generally call the Old Testament—and 'the notebooks' may have contained jottings by the writer himself.

So here is a reminder that the body we call 'the Church'—that is, Christians everywhere—set out on its long journey with no distinctively Christian books. Neither, for that matter, had it any buildings of its own. There was 'the Church'—that is, all Christians—but there were no churches—that is, special buildings for Christian worship. Neither were there at first any professional, full-time ministers; still less did schools or universities have the Christian religion in their syllabus.

THE CHRISTIAN BOOKS SPRANG FROM THE CHURCH'S WORK AND LIFE

Until all this is grasped, it is impossible to begin to understand how the New Testament, as we now call it, came to be written and collected and accepted. It grew

up after the Christian Church itself had been launched, and its different books were the result of all sorts of different situations and crises and needs. The Christian writings grew out of the heart of a living, witnessing, suffering, worshipping companionship of ordinary people. In these writings we can hear their cries and prayers, their praises and their arguments. In the same way, it was out of the actual needs and circumstances of people that there sprang the final decision about which books were to be treated as authoritative, that is, recognized by the Church as a whole as carrying weight.

Naturally, each writer had a great deal to do with the shaping and arranging and phrasing of his own writing; but we shall get the whole picture out of proportion if we lose sight of the communities to which these individual persons belonged and of which they were mouthpieces. We have to remember the needs and plans and intentions of each whole community, as it tried to find and follow God's will. It was the community's needs that led to the moment when at last an individual picked up a pen and actually set the words down in writing.

THE CHURCH AS WITNESS RATHER THAN AS TEACHER

The early Christians, remember, were, for the most part, not learned people or scholars. As Jews—and the earliest were all Jews—they had probably all learned to read and write in some village school, organized in connexion with the local Jewish place of worship, the synagogue. As children they would have been taught here to read and learn by heart the Jewish scriptures, either in the original Hebrew or, in some synagogues, translated into Aramaic

or Greek, just as devout Muslims today are trained on the Quran, the sacred book of Islam. And they had, no doubt, learnt the numerals and could do arithmetic. Thus they were literate—indeed, within certain limits, well educated; but certainly they were not scholars nor in most cases learned in the literature of Greece and Rome. They did not face the world as teachers, they had no new ideology or philosophy. They had a new life, but no new theory of life or system of ethics. The one distinctive thing about them was their witness to Jesus as the 'King' of God's choice—or, to use the Jewish terms, the 'Christ' or 'Messiah', that is, the one whom God had chosen to be ceremonially anointed as king. They knew about his life and teaching, they were convinced that, though he had certainly been put to death, he had been seen and heard again after this, by good witnesses. This same Jesus had been seen and met with, truly alive; and they believed that in him God's plan for the world, of which their Jewish scriptures spoke, had reached its climax. In this sense, the scriptures had been 'fulfilled', and Jesus of Nazareth had turned out to be the centre of the pattern of fulfilment: he was the coping-stone of the building, the meaning of all that God had been doing in his dealings with his People from the very beginning.

These convictions were visibly expressed among the Christians by two things. First, there was baptism 'into the name of Jesus'; that is, the person to be admitted into the Christian Church was plunged in water, or had water poured over him, as a symbol of his acceptance of Jesus as Lord and of his belonging to Jesus Christ, crucified and raised to life again. This was done once and for all. Then, secondly, came the repeated communal meal at which bread and wine were associated with the death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ; and with it came a strikingly new quality of fellowship. This is how the newly formed Christian community is described in Acts 2: 42ff.:

> They met constantly to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life, to break bread, and to pray. A sense of awe was everywhere, and many marvels and signs were brought about through the apostles. All whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common: they would sell their property and possessions and make a general distribution as the need of each required. With one mind they kept up their daily attendance at the temple, and, breaking bread in private houses, shared their meals with unaffected joy, as they praised God and enjoyed the favour of the whole people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those whom he was saving.

Of course, that picture drawn by the author of the Acts must not mislead us into imagining that the early Christians everywhere simply knocked off work and spent all their days in religious exercises. The situation in Jerusalem was, in any case, not typical. In the first place (Acts 2: 1–11), a considerable proportion here was probably made up of Jewish pilgrims from elsewhere who had come to keep the festival of Pentecost, so called because it fell on the fiftieth day (in Greek, *pentecoste*) after a certain day in the preceding festival of Passover. These pilgrims, drawn into the Christian Church, had then stayed on, away from their homes and their normal occupations. And secondly, it is likely that they expected a dramatic climax—the return of Christ—very shortly, and this, too, made them less ready to return to settled occupations. We may be sure that elsewhere, after a short time, Christians were to be found faithfully pursuing their ordinary occupations as traders, shopkeepers, and so on.

But, even if the Acts picture is not absolutely representative, it nevertheless throws into relief the distinctive marks of the Christian Church wherever it may be: the apostles' teaching about Jesus and the resurrection; the communal life, in which each member has a concern and responsibility for the others; and, at its centre, the Christian sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, Eucharist or Lord's Supper.

THE APOSTLES' PROCLAMATION

The apostles' teaching: what, precisely, was this? Probably there was nothing that more decisively moulded Christian writing than this pattern of apostolic preaching.

If you look back in Acts 2 to the passage which leads up to what has just been quoted, you will see the explanation of their existence offered by these followers of Jesus of Nazareth, these Nazarenes, as they were called. Notice, incidentally, that they were not yet called Christians. That began later, at Antioch in Syria—see Acts 11: 26; and then it seems to have been not the Christians' own choice of name, but a mocking nickname given by non-Christians. Their explanation of themselves, spoken in the passage in Acts 2 by Peter, ran something like this:

(i) the plan of God, as reflected in the Jewish scriptures, has reached its climax, its critical moment (Acts 2: 16–21);

(ii) Jesus of Nazareth, a man who had recently lived among them, had been attended wherever he went by exceptional signs of God's power and presence (verse 22);

(iii) the Jews had handed him over to the gentiles and had him cruelly executed, fastened up on a wooden cross and left to die (verse 23);

(iv) but even this turned out to be under God's control

and used by him as part of his design; and God had raised him from death and vindicated him as more than merely a man—as Lord (verses 23–36).

That was the explanation, in outline; and then followed its application:

(v) if you admit all this, and accept Jesus as Lord, then you must change your attitude; you must submit to the rite of baptism: you must be plunged in water while declaring your acceptance of Jesus as Lord. This is a mark and a means of coming penitently to belong to Jesus Christ and of being forgiven; and then you will receive this new power of God's presence which is beginning to show itself among his people (verse 38).

That, in outline, is what the apostles proclaimed, and how they drove it home and applied it when it had made its impact on the hearers. You will notice two very important things about it. The first is that items (i) to (iv) are not mere exhortation to be good, but statements. You may or may not believe them, but they are statements: grammatically speaking, they are in the indicative mood —not exhortations in the subjunctive or commands in the imperative. They do not moralize or reprove or plead or command: they just state or declare. That is why New Testament scholars make much of the Greek word *kerygma*, which means a herald's announcement. *Kerygma*, proclamation or announcement, well sums up this 'indicative' quality of the Christian good news. It is only *after* the statement that the appeal or exhortation comes (no. v); and the second point is that, even then, it is not an appeal to be good, or to try to be like Jesus, or to improve one's morals. It is an appeal to 'belong'—to be, by baptism, made a part of the People of God.

Many people think of the Christian message as a pious

summons to be good; but according to the specimen we are examining it is a plain statement—'Here is a God who has shown that he can give you the power to live a full and true life'—followed by an appeal—'Let yourself be joined to him!' This involves penitence—acknowledging God's goodness and admitting where we have gone wrong; trust—relying on God as he shows himself to us in Jesus Christ; and loyalty—responding to him with our undivided affection and energies.

THE GOSPELS: WHAT ARE THEY?

This statement which the Christians offered is repeated, one way and another, in other parts of the Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament, and forms the structure underlying the Gospels. Here is one more instance from the Acts:

> You know about Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we can bear witness to all that he did in the Jewish country-side and in Jerusalem. He was put to death by hanging on a gibbet; but God raised him to life on the third day, and allowed him to appear, not to the whole people, but to witnesses whom God had chosen in advance—to us, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to proclaim him to the people, and affirm that he is the one who has been designated by God as judge of the living and the dead. It is to him that all the prophets testify, declaring that everyone who trusts in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10: 38–43).

'Gospel' is an Anglo-Saxon word for good news. 'Evangel', which is also sometimes used, is from the

Greek word for good news, *euangelion*. An evangelist is thus one who writes a Gospel or who preaches the gospel; and it is precisely because our Gospels contain essentially this same statement of good news that they are so named. They are about Jesus as the fulfiller of God's design in the Jewish scriptures, as one accompanied by exceptional signs of God's presence, as crucified, and as raised from death.

The Gospels tell the same story as is contained in the apostles' proclamation, examined on pp. 69 f. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, at any rate—we shall come to John later—are not primarily exhortation any more than the sermons in the Acts are. Like the sermons, they are primarily statement. What mainly distinguishes them from the proclamation of the Acts is that they all three contain actual anecdotes to illustrate what is barely alluded to in Acts 10. They give actual examples of how Jesus went about helping those who were in need, and of what wonderful and extraordinary cures he worked. They describe what led up to the clash with the Jewish authorities; and they also, especially Matthew and Luke, contain a great deal of Jesus's own teaching, which scarcely appears in the sermons in the Acts. But they are not 'lives' of Jesus or biography in the ordinary sense: they do not describe what Jesus looked like or give a connected story of his life. Instead, they press home, by anecdote and illustration, the apostles' witness and the apostles' view of who Jesus was and how he stands as the very coping-stone of the building which God had designed from eternity.

In other words, the figure of Jesus and his teaching, as they are presented in the Gospels, concern the kingdom of God, that is, God's reign over his world. The reign of

God is the theme of the Gospels. But Matthew, Mark, and Luke—John, again, is rather different—do not go on to the apostolic exhortation, 'be baptized! be incorporated!' This was an exhortation which could not be given, in any distinctively Christian setting, until after the death and resurrection of Jesus; and these Gospels although written after these events, represent, in the main, the message about what led up to them, not what followed and sprang from them. It is true, of course, that the fully Christian response to the message, is, in a sense, anticipated even in the story of Jesus. Every disciple who follows him is, to that extent, responding to his challenge. But this is still not the same as entry into membership of the Christian Church. Broadly speaking, Matthew, Mark, and Luke represent items (i) to (iv) in the analysis on pp. 69 f. above, but stop short of (v).

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

The adjective 'synoptic'—derived from Greek *syn*, 'together', and a verb-root connected with 'seeing'—is applied to Matthew, Mark, and Luke as the three Gospels which follow the same general pattern and can therefore be arranged in parallel columns in a 'synopsis', and seen together.

But while it is true that all three of these Gospels follow broadly the pattern of the apostles' proclamation, each of them sprang from a particular situation and has its particular plan and purpose and its special features.

(*a*) *Mark*

In about A.D. 320, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, wrote in Greek a history of the Church. Eusebius reports that

Papias, who was bishop of Hierapolis, in Asia Minor, in about A.D. 130, had recorded a tradition that Mark's Gospel was a translation into Greek of the teaching which the apostle Peter had given in Rome. Peter himself presumably used Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew. It is generally assumed that the Mark who wrote the Gospel was the young man called John Mark in the Acts (12: 12, 25; 15: 37, 39), who was indeed a companion of the apostles. This identification is not absolutely certain—Marcus was a common name—and how far this Gospel depends upon traditions associated with Peter has been questioned. But parts of it do, in fact, read like a direct, eyewitness account; and a recently discovered copy of what seems to be a genuine letter of Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 190), also speaks definitely of Peter's notes as forming part of Mark's material.

It is very widely believed to be earlier than Matthew or Luke, but much hard thinking about this question is still going on, and rather startling new ideas may yet emerge. On any showing, however, Mark's Gospel is separated from the events it describes by, at most, a generation—perhaps less. Peter was martyred round about A.D. 60. Even if the Gospel was put together after that, it is not much later. At latest, it was probably written not more than some thirty to thirty-five years after the death of Jesus; and the traditions it draws on take us, in some cases, right back to the very words of Jesus himself.

Thus, we may say with confidence that Mark is at least a very early example—and possibly the first ever to exist—of an arrangement into a connected whole of the traditions previously circulating as separate units, whether spoken or written. It is one of our earliest examples—if not the earliest—of the piecing together of separate units

of written and oral tradition into a continuous whole, with the apostles' proclamation as its framework.

It presents its brief anecdotes with impressive directness and simplicity and swiftness. Without any preliminary account of Jesus's birth and childhood, it dives straight into the story by introducing John the Baptist and recounting how Jesus came to him for baptism. Then, in quick succession, specimens are given of what Jesus did and said, of how the crowds responded but the religious leaders resented him, and of how he trained his small band of close friends and followers. About two-fifths of the whole book are devoted to the closing days of his life; and then the narrative breaks off abruptly at the empty tomb. What follows (16: 9ff.) is a summary of the traditions about the subsequent events. It is generally recognized that this is a later addition, patched on by some other writer; but it was early enough, even so, to get into the Gospel in its accepted form.

Thus Mark is a little handbook for basic Christian instruction, simple, yet brilliantly dramatic—a stark, powerful presentation of the Christian facts: not a biography, but a portrait of Jesus as the spokesman and bringer of the kingdom of God, and as far more than a martyr—as the triumphant and victorious Son of God. It was probably written for the leader of some Christian community, to help him in teaching his people. It may well have been some time before there were enough copies of it to distribute to the leaders of other communities—and longer still before there were enough for individuals to possess one for themselves. Remember, a book had to be laboriously copied out by hand, and papyrus, the paper of those days, was not always easy to obtain in quantity.

(*b*) *Matthew*

But, sooner or later, Mark evidently came to be copied and sent round and widely known and read outside the circle for which it was first written; and Matthew seems, to most scholars, to be based on Mark. There is a great deal of additional material in Matthew, and the writer has followed an arrangement of his own; but very little of Mark's material is omitted, even though it is rewritten. The word 'rewritten' is here used on purpose, because careful examination suggests that, where Matthew gives the same material in different words, he is often using Mark as his source and rewriting it so as to improve the style or condense it or otherwise adapt it to his own purposes.

There is much uncertainty about the origin and circumstances of this Gospel; but its character and contents suggest that it was written to help Christians to understand the origins of their faith and to defend and explain themselves before non-Christian Jews. Its material is very skilfully arranged, for the most part in great sections such as the 'Sermon on the Mount' (chapters 5–7), or the collection of parables in chapter 13. It contains a great deal more of the teaching of Jesus than Mark does, and it is even more explicit about the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. It seems to be a handbook of instruction for Church leaders as they trained their people to understand and defend their convictions.

How the additional material reached the writer can only be guessed at: it probably represents converging streams of tradition flowing through several different channels, and worked in by him in his rewriting of Mark. As for Mark, so for Matthew, Eusebius quotes Papias's

opinion. Papias said that the apostle Matthew wrote the *logia*, that is 'sayings', in Hebrew—he probably means Aramaic—and that these were translated in various ways. This implies that as we have it in Greek Matthew is a direct translation of something actually written by an apostle. It is now, however, generally agreed that our Matthew is not simply a translation of an Aramaic Gospel. There may well have been an original apostolic document in Aramaic: Papias's tradition is hard to explain if it does not contain a core of truth. But our Greek Gospel was evidently put together by someone who could write his own Greek, however much he may have copied and transcribed and even translated bits and pieces of tradition that had reached him from earlier days. It is impossible to say who that someone was. His character and gifts can only be guessed at, if at all, by studying those parts of the Gospel which seem most obviously to be the work of his own editorial hand.

(*c*) *Luke–Acts*

Luke and Acts both open with a dedication to someone named Theophilus, and, in the Acts, there is an explicit reference back to 'the first part of my work'. Thus the two clearly belong together, and there is every reason to believe the early tradition, appearing in various places, notably a very old prologue to Luke's Gospel, that both the books are by Luke. Luke is actually mentioned as a companion of Paul in Col. 4: 14 (where he is called a doctor), in Philem. 24, and in 2 Tim. 4: 11. Moreover, there are sections of Acts where the writer says 'we' did so-and-so. These are: Acts 16: 10–17, where they left Asia Minor and crossed over to Europe, and went to Philippi; 20: 5 — 21: 18, where Paul left Greece and went

to Jerusalem; and 27: 1 — 28: 16, the journey to Rome, with shipwreck on the way. These 'we-sections' confirm the idea that the author was a fellow-traveller of Paul's.

Luke, like Matthew, evidently used Mark's Gospel. A great deal of its other (non-Marcan) material is similar to or identical with material in Matthew. This has led to the conclusion that among the sources used by both Matthew and Luke was not only Mark but also some other source generally labelled 'Q' by modern scholars. It is not certain who first gave it this label, or why. The fact that the German for 'source' is *Quelle* is not necessarily the reason. But more important than the origin of the label is the nature of this source. Perhaps the best theory is that 'Q' was the Aramaic collection of *logia* or 'sayings' of Jesus which Papias said the apostle Matthew had written. Of course, it is possible to think of other explanations for the sharing of the same material by Matthew and Luke—for instance, that Luke copied from Matthew or Matthew from Luke, and that Mark is not a source but an abridgement of Matthew. But Mark shows quite independent signs of being earlier than Luke and Matthew. This makes it most likely that it is one of the sources of them both; and Matthew and Luke are so different in their arrangement and manner that it is not easy to believe that one copied from the other. So the 'two-document hypothesis'—that Matthew and Luke both used Mark and 'Q'—remains a strong one.

But each has, in addition, material all his own. Matthew's 'Sermon on the Mount' contains much that can be found scattered over Luke, but more besides. Matthew has other teaching and parables found in no other Gospel, and a great many stories, such as that of

Peter walking on the water, and Pilate's wife's dream, and Judas's death. Luke, similarly, contains whole sections which have no parallel in Matthew. The long section Luke 9: 51 — 18: 14 contains a particularly large amount of material found in no other Gospel, such as the sending out of the seventy messengers, and the stories of the good Samaritan, the two sons (commonly called 'the Prodigal Son'), the dishonest bailiff, the rich man and the beggar, the Pharisee and the tax-collector. It looks, therefore, as though there were special traditions lying behind Matthew and Luke respectively—very likely from different centres: possibly Antioch for Matthew, and Caesarea for Luke, but these are only guesses.

To return to Luke–Acts, it looks as though the author had in fact carried out the intentions he expresses in the first words of his Gospel and of the Acts—to write a connected account of the story of Jesus and its sequel. He evidently sees the story in clearly marked stages or phases. The birth of John the Baptist, with which he starts, is itself the climax of the long story of the Jewish people—the story of the Old Testament. Then comes the ministry of Jesus, with his death, resurrection, and ascension as its climax. There follows the era of the missionary expansion of the Christian Church, with the arrival of Paul in Rome as its climax. Each stage or phase closes with something that leads on to the next; the reader is given a most vivid sense that God is in control of the whole sequence; and the writer has an exceptional gift for drawing word-pictures which sum up and represent important aspects of the whole story. Here is Jesus in the synagogue in his own town of Nazareth, fulfilling all God's plans for his people, yet blindly rejected by them and resented:

At these words the whole congregation were infuriated. They leapt up, threw him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which it was built, meaning to hurl him over the edge. But he walked straight through them all, and went away (Luke 4: 28–30 (see verses 16–27)).

Or here is the group of the friends of Jesus enabled by the Holy Spirit to make their witness understood by all the nations of the world:

Now there were living in Jerusalem devout Jews drawn from every nation under heaven; and at this sound the crowd gathered, all bewildered because each one heard the apostles talking in his own language. They were amazed and in their astonishment exclaimed, 'Why, they are all Galileans, are they not, these men who are speaking? How is it then that we hear them, each of us in his own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites; inhabitants of Mesopotamia, of Judaea and Cappadocia, of Pontus and Asia, of Phrygia and Pamphylia, of Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene; visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, we hear them telling in our own tongues the great things God has done' (Acts 2: 5–11).

Or again, the Jerusalem church meets in conference to make the momentous decision, reached only after prolonged debate, that non-Jews may be admitted to the community without the Jewish rite of circumcision:

It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and our decision, to lay no further burden upon you beyond these essentials: you are to abstain from meat that has been offered to idols, from blood, from anything that has been strangled, and from fornication. If you keep yourselves free from these things you will be doing right. Farewell (Acts 15: 28 f. (see verses 6–27)).

Or here is Paul, in Rome at last, still in conflict with his unbelieving fellow-Jews:

...he spoke urgently of the kingdom of God and sought to convince them about Jesus by appealing to the Law of Moses and the prophets. This went on from dawn to dusk (Acts 28: 23 (see verses 17–31)).

Luke–Acts is a series of incidents, chosen so as to portray vividly the essential steps and stages by which Israel—the People of God of the Old Testament—finds its true fulfilment in the Christian Church, despite the refusal of non-Christian Jews to recognize 'the Nazarenes' as true Israel. It also shows, again and again, how the Christians were supported by the Roman government: it is as much as to say, 'You Romans have really always been on the Christian side'. Possibly 'his Excellency Theophilus' (Luke 1: 3) was a Roman official.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN AND THE LETTERS OF JOHN

This Gospel is distinguished from the other three in many ways. For example, it is not 'synoptic' (see p. 73), it cannot be arranged successfully in a fourth column side by side with the other three: its pattern is different and it does not share the sources which they seem to share in common. It contains no stories of 'exorcisms', that is, of the cure of people possessed by 'demons'. The supreme miracle of the resurrection is, of course, shared by all the Gospels. The only other specific miracle stories that John shares with the rest are the wonderful feeding of the great crowd, and the walking on the water afterwards; otherwise it has its own special stories. The Gospel is largely concerned with Judaea and Jerusalem, whereas the others give more space to Galilee, except, indeed, in their long closing sections dealing with the end of Jesus's ministry—

which was, of course, according to all of them, in Judaea. It represents Jesus as speaking and teaching in ways which are not exactly paralleled in the synoptic Gospels: instead of parables and terse, pointed sayings, there are comparatively long, connected discourses and arguments, and one or two examples of the kind of picture-language which is best called 'allegory' rather than 'parable'. In other words, there is a contrast between, for instance, the parables of the synoptic Gospels—parables such as those of the tiny mustard-seed that grows into a big plant, or of the almost invisible yeast that makes a great lump of dough rise—and the meditations which John gives us in the form of allegories about the shepherd and the sheep or the vine and the branches.

A difference which is still more striking and more far-reaching than these is that, in John's Gospel, Jesus makes explicit claims for himself which, in the other Gospels, are for the most part only hinted at or implied; and he is represented as doing this from the very beginning of his ministry. And, with this, there go allusions to the spiritual union between Christians and Christ which are lacking in the synoptic Gospels. In other words, in these Gospels Jesus is reserved about his own status, and describes the relationship of others to him simply in terms of discipleship, but the Jesus of the fourth Gospel speaks already like the Lord his friends discovered him to be after the resurrection. Already he answers the question 'What must I do to be saved?' 'Everyone who drinks this water'—ordinary, literal water—'will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I shall give him will never suffer thirst any more. The water that I shall give him will be an inner spring always welling up for eternal life' (John 4: 13 f.); '...it is my Father's will that

everyone who looks upon the Son and puts his faith in him shall possess eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day' (John 6: 40); 'I am the vine, and you the branches. He who dwells in me, as I dwell in him, bears much fruit...' (John 15: 5).

It is this highly developed, reflective quality of John's Gospel which chiefly led to the view that it must be a comparatively late writing, far removed from the actual story of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and written, perhaps, by some dreamer who, with little contact with the actual history, spun out of his own imagination a picture of the Jesus he had come to know in mystical experience. But the facts are not so simple as that. In the first place, the evangelist himself insists most strenuously on the reality of the physical events. It is he who sums up the whole story in the phrase 'the Word'—that is, God's own utterance—'became flesh' (John 1: 14), and he will not ever allow the reader to detach himself from things and places—from material, historical circumstances such as Aenon near Salim, Jacob's well, the pool Bethesda, a hillside where there was plenty of grass, and so forth. Again, prolonged study has led many to the conclusion that, if not always, yet at least sometimes, John has more accurate traditions than even the synoptic Gospels. Perhaps he even knows a good deal about how disputes were conducted in Judaea with the trained religious authorities.

In other words, it is most unlikely that this writer was only using the form of a Gospel and the mere semblance of a historical story in order to convey an independent message of his own. Rather, he is using traditions about Jesus—some of them apparently very early and historically sound—and retelling them in such a way as to bring home the conviction that the 'Jesus of history', the very

man who lived and suffered in the time of Pontius Pilate, was also and at the same time the divine Son of God, the Saviour of the world—the very one who, after his death and resurrection, was found to be 'the Lord of faith'. This writer, even more clearly than the authors of the other Gospels, writes history so as to make it transparent and luminous—so as to show us the depths beneath it and the infinite vista beyond it.

It is impossible to be certain whether or not the writer of this Gospel was actually the apostle John, writing in his old age and in the light of long experience of the risen Lord. But if it is some other—some disciple of his, perhaps—then at least, it appears, he is using traditions belonging to the eyewitness apostle himself. The Gospel may have been written in Ephesus, perhaps for Christians and non-Christians alike, and for Jews and gentiles alike. It possibly has a special message for that type of religious person later known as a gnostic. *Gnōsis* is simply the Greek for 'knowledge'; but the term (and the derived word 'gnostic', meaning 'concerned with *gnōsis*') has come to be used for a sort of religious speculation which stressed mystical union with God but had little or no concern for the material world or for history—least of all for 'the Word' becoming 'flesh'. John's Gospel uses some of the language of such mystical speculation but keeps the reader's feet firmly on the solid earth and insists on flesh and blood. It would be a splendid reply to this irresponsible sort of speculation. The same kind of speculation is still current now in what is called theosophy.

In sum, then, this writer drew his material from the same main event as the synoptic evangelists, but seems to have largely used a different group of traditions, and to have handled them in such a way as to bring out doctrinal

convictions about the nature of Christ and the way of new life which the synoptic Gospels also imply, but refrain from making so explicit.

The three Letters of John evidently spring from the same circle of ideas, and use many of the same phrases. It is possible that they were addressed, later than the Gospel, by the same writer, to his friends, collectively and individually, when they were in danger of falling away from the great central convictions expressed in the Gospel.

THE LETTERS OF PAUL AND OTHERS

But it is time to go back from the writers of the Gospels, and meet some other writers. Within the New Testament, the Acts is the only narrative account of the Church; and, after chapter 12, even the Acts is largely the story of one man, Paul. But a great deal of light is thrown also by the letters of Paul and others and by the book called the Revelation (not 'Revelations' as it is often incorrectly called).

Paul was very likely the inventor of the particular type of letter which is now associated with him. We possess numberless non-Christian Greek letters from about the same period—scraps of papyrus, the paper of those days, preserved by chance in the hot, dry sands of Egypt, and ranging from the notes of businessmen driving hard bargains to affectionate or angry correspondence between parents and children, or letters of sympathy in bereavement. But among these there is nothing that can be compared to Paul's letters. They are, in the first place, very much longer than the average; and, then, consist almost entirely not of personal news and messages, which are kept down to the minimum, but of teaching and advice to his converts based on the most profound insight into