

THEOLOGY IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE SERIES

Peter C. Phan, General Editor

ECCLESIOLOGY
FOR A
GLOBAL CHURCH

A People Called and Sent

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THEOLOGY IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE SERIES

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A People Called to Community

Much of Christianity's developing communitarian consciousness was inherited from ancient Israel. Indeed, many of the tensions and conflicts that would mark the history of Christianity had already emerged in the history of Israel. Ancient Judaism began as a small religious movement inspired by a remarkable vision of God and the unique communal life their God called them to. It is here, in the story of Israel, that Christian ecclesiology really begins.

EARLY YAHWISM'S UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY

We look to what contemporary Jews refer to as the Tanakh and Christians as the Old Testament for insight into ancient Israel's sense of itself as community. This task is not as straightforward as it might seem, for in fact the Tanakh is not one book but many books written over a period of almost ten centuries. It includes multiple written traditions that are themselves dependent on more ancient oral traditions. Often these traditions, separated by centuries, were subsequently interwoven. We must also make a distinction between concrete experiences of community in ancient Israel and theological conceptions of community. The former is a much more complex and differentiated reality and can only with great difficulty be reconstructed using various historical methods. The latter, theological understandings of community, is somewhat more accessible through careful biblical scholarship. What I will be exploring here is the biblical testimony to certain theological conceptions of community, while leaving aside the question of who in fact would have adhered to these theological understandings at any given point in history.

When we consider the earliest stage of the faith of Israel, what might be referred to as "early Yahwism," we discover a sense of community thoroughly shaped by one event: the exodus. The narrative of a small nomadic people, enslaved by Egypt, liberated from their captivity by a God who refused to be named, would be decisive for early Hebrew identity. Their identity as a people was forged by this tale of emancipation. Virtually all of the earliest oral and

written traditions belonging to ancient Israel revolve around the exodus. “The starting point of the Yahwistic community, therefore, was neither a cosmic vision, nor a timeless code of law. It was an experience of God entering the concreteness and particularity of human life to save humans from their bondage.”¹

In a world and a time in which most ancient religions appealed to gods who supported rigidly stratified social structures, the ancient Hebrew people professed belief in a God who initiated a covenant relationship with slaves, the marginal, and the powerless. The originary event of early Hebrew identity was interpreted as a repudiation of divinely sanctioned caste systems in favor of a rough communal equality grounded in an event that established their shared dependence on their Liberator God. As Michael Walzer has observed, the liberation accomplished in the exodus was not merely a freedom *from* oppression but it was a freedom *for* the formation of a covenantal community.²

One of the earliest strands of the Yahwist tradition envisions Israel as a priestly people: “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). From the very beginning we can see a tension between Israel’s idealized image of itself as a consecrated or priestly people and the historical record that suggests that Israel shared the practice of most other ancient peoples in having a priestly caste responsible for religious sacrifice.

The origins of ancient Israel’s sense of itself as a community, at least in its own telling, begins not with any human act of organization but with divine initiative. The Hebrews believed it was God’s action, not their own, that forged them as a people. Moreover, for ancient Israel, the exodus represented not merely a solitary divine action; it was followed by an ongoing redemptive presence and activity in their history. God’s relationship to Israel was described as *hesed*, “steadfast love,” and referred to an experience of God’s fidelity to the covenant relationship established with the people. God’s activity in history was interpreted as the in-breaking of a divinely constituted order, a cosmic harmony, *shalom*. This *shalom*, in turn, could be realized in Israel only to the extent that it imitated God’s own acts of justice and compassion.

Two words, *sedeq*, often translated as “righteousness,” and *mishpat*, often translated as “justice” or “judgment,” actually have overlapping fields of meaning. The translation of *sedeq* as “righteousness” is particularly problematic, John

¹ Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1986), 56. Much of my treatment of ancient Hebrew conceptions of community is drawn from Hanson’s magisterial study.

² Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 53, 73-90.

Donahue claims, because the English term suggests a sense of personal virtue, whereas the biblical term is more concerned with right relationship in the legal and communal sense. Donahue contends that the biblical sense of justice, both referring to the justice of God and the justice demanded of God's people, is "fidelity to the demands of relationship."³ Israel's developing sense of its communal identity was shaped by its understanding of its God. Walter Brueggemann sees in this early Yahwism the construction of an "alternative community." In early Yahwism we find

[t]he emergence of a new social community in history, a community that has historical body, that had to devise laws, patterns of governance and order, norms of right and wrong, and sanctions of accountability. The participants in the Exodus found themselves, undoubtedly surprisingly to them, involved in the intentional formation of a *new social community* to match the vision of *God's freedom*. That new social reality, which is utterly discontinuous with Egypt, lasted in its alternative way for 250 years.⁴

It is in the light of this alternative vision of community that we can appreciate the social significance of Torah.

Torah emerged in ancient Israel as a response to God's initiative in establishing a covenant community. Christians have suffered from a skewed and often reductive understanding of Torah as "law" and have opposed it to the freedom of the gospel. This view, based on a limited and noncontextual reading of the Gospels and St. Paul, does not do justice to the ancient Hebrew sense of Torah. Torah was before anything else a grateful response to God's initiative. It was manifested in communal structures and ordinances, to be sure, but above all, it was manifested in ancient Hebrew worship. The importance of worship for understanding Torah and Israel's own self-understanding as a community cannot be exaggerated. The response of Israel to God's covenantal love in the form of worship served as a perpetual reminder that all social and organizational structures were relativized in the face of their fidelity to Yahweh, their one true king. It was also, at least implicitly, a repudiation of imperialism. As Brueggemann notes, the stirring doxological statement "The Lord will reign for ever and ever" (Ex. 15:18) implied a whispered countertheme, "and not the pharaoh."⁵ Thus, Torah can be understood as ancient Israel's understanding of

³ John R. Donahue, "The Bible and Catholic Social Teaching: Will This Engagement Lead to Marriage?" in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, edited by Kenneth R. Himes (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 9-40, at 14.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

the concrete demands of right relationship with one another and with God. Both communal structures and worship were responses to God's redemptive activity in the exodus.⁶

As important as this insight is, Torah must not be overly romanticized. Biblical scholarship makes it abundantly clear that the earliest Hebrew traditions freely borrowed from other ancient religions and cultures as they sought to give form to their communal identity. There is an irreducible tension in early Hebrew traditions between often conservative social and legal structures borrowed from other ancient societies that appeared to preserve a stratified and thoroughly patriarchal social structure, and elements that clearly challenged that stratification. This tension can be found in the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 20:21-23:19). Here we find two sets of laws, case laws largely borrowed from other ancient cultures, and Yahwistic laws that reveal a much more distinctive sense of Hebrew identity. The latter laws reflected a conviction that their communal identity was to mirror the actions and concerns of the God who saved them and called them into being as a people. Consequently, these laws call for a special concern for the stranger ("for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" [Ex. 23:9]), the widow, the orphan—in short, ancient Israel was to be especially sensitive to the needs of the vulnerable in their society. Paul Hanson points out that, while other ancient religions affirmed an obligation for the poor and powerless (the Code of Hammurabi demanded that the king show concern for the poor), Israel was unique in its conviction that the responsibility for the well-being of the powerless fell upon the whole community, not just the king.⁷ Torah was to mirror the justice and compassion of Israel's God.

This ancient Yahwistic vision of community is never abandoned by Israel, but it does go through a series of modifications and developments over the course of Israel's history. One of the most significant of these occurs with the introduction of the monarchy. Prior to the monarchy there was only an attenuated sense of Israel as a coherent nation. Israel existed after the exodus as a loose confederation or league of tribes that functioned more or less independently and shared a primitive form of early Yahwistic belief. Indeed, at this early stage, the most dominant sense of community was rooted in the extended family and was based on kinship.

These tribes were led by charismatic leaders or "judges," who, in response to some external threat, could rally all the tribes together to engage in battle against a common enemy. Yet these leaders generally returned to their local tribes after having led the confederation in a common cause. A decisive break

⁶ Hanson, 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

with this practice is reported in 1 Samuel, a complex text that underwent considerable redaction by the Deuteronomist.

AMBIVALENCE ABOUT MONARCHY

Discerning the historical core underlying this heavily worked narrative on the rise of the monarchy is a complex task. Most scholars see a tension in the narrative's assessment of the rise of Saul as the first king of Israel. As with the judges, the narrative tells of Saul's emergence as king, chosen by God and acclaimed by the people. The central difference is that Saul is apparently called to a permanent office (1 Sam. 10:27b-11:15). There are obvious political reasons for this new development, foremost of which would have been the need for greater centralization of leadership in the face of hostile forces. Yet 1 Samuel reveals simmering political and theological tensions regarding this new development. Those in favor of the emerging monarchy sought to characterize it as a kind of "limited kingship."⁸ This new institution could be reconciled with early Yahwistic conceptions of community only insofar as the king served by the will of Yahweh and the assent of the people. Strictly excluded, however, was an absolute dynastic kingship of the kind that would emerge later under Solomon. Both of these elements are dominant in the story of Saul's anointing by Samuel. Yet also embedded in the narratives of 1 Samuel is another tradition that sees any form of monarchy as fundamentally at odds with a conception of a community that submits exclusively to the kingship of God. In any event, as the monarchy emerged under first Saul and then David, we see a related compensatory development in the form of the prophet, a charismatic figure who emerged as a kind of check against the monarchy. The prophet echoed the ancient Yahwistic traditions of unconditional fidelity to covenant relationship. The role of the prophet to ensure the king's fidelity to the ideals of Yahwism is reflected in the distinctive relationship between King David and Nathan, and nowhere more so than where Nathan challenges David for having placed himself beyond the demands of covenant community by having Uriah the Hittite killed that he might make his wife, Bathsheba, his own (2 Sam. 11-12).⁹

A second stage in the emergence of the monarchy occurs under Solomon. Almost all vestiges of a limited kingship still bound by a Yahwistic vision of community disappear with Solomon. Underlying significant legendary material celebrating the glory of Solomon is a more troubling historical record.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 89-100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

Solomon takes the throne by dynastic succession. Under his rule authority is centralized, a standing army is created, alliances with other kings are engaged, and the court is patterned on the more hierarchical models found in Egypt and elsewhere. The construction of the temple cannot be separated from the construction of a royal palace. "The Solomonic temple was constructed completely in the style of Canaanite models. An authentic imperial shrine had come to replace David's rustic tent as the new home of Yahweh."¹⁰

The shift in worship effected by the building of Solomon's temple was momentous. The once central theme of Israel's deliverance by Yahweh from slavery is supplanted by a royal ideology that distracts from God's redemptive deeds to celebrate Yahweh's choice of David as king and the temple as God's dwelling place. This shift is captured in the mythic poetry of the royal psalms: "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill" (Ps. 2:6).

George Mendenhall has harshly judged the reign of Solomon as "the paganization of Israel."¹¹ Brueggemann sees in the reign of Solomon the antithesis of the alternative community envisioned by Moses and early Yahwism. According to Brueggemann, the reign of Solomon possessed three characteristics: (1) conspicuous affluence, (2) oppressive social policy, and (3) the endorsement of state-controlled religion. Here we have the foundations of what Brueggemann calls a "royal consciousness," espoused by a religious community that sees its religious convictions as a means of supporting the status quo.¹² For him what we have at work is a type of religious community that has reappeared at various points in human history. It is a communal vision numb to the gap between what is and what ought to be. It is a community bereft of a "prophetic imagination," incapable of mourning its failure to live up to the demands of the covenant and incapable as well of hoping for a new and different future.

What can be said about the conflicts regarding a monarchy in ancient Israel? The earliest strands of Yahwistic belief struggled with a tension between the need for a stable ordering of the community that led the ancient Hebrew peoples to borrow freely from other cultures and the demands of covenant relationship, which called for the creation of a community determined to mirror the justice and compassion of their God. With the rise of the monarchy an analogous tension emerged, now between the need to preserve absolute fidelity to God as the one true ruler of the people and to live according to the radical demands of the covenant and the practical need for institutional structures that could provide unity and protection for the people.

¹⁰ Ibid., 106.

¹¹ George E. Mendenhall, "The Monarchy," *Interpretation* 29 (1975): 155-70, at 160.

¹² Brueggemann, 25-37.

PROPHETIC CALLS TO RETURN TO COVENANT COMMUNITY

With the split between the northern and southern kingdoms after Solomon, the monarchy continued in rather different forms. The north sought to recover the ancient model of the limited kingship and protested against a centralization of worship in the temple. The south continued the Davidic dynasty. In a real sense, neither preserved well the conceptions of community honored in early Yahwism. This is a point that will be made continually by prophets in the north such as Elijah and by the Deuteronomic reforms in the south. Later Amos would exemplify the prophetic tradition in his searing indictment of Israel for its failure to live up to the most ancient Hebrew convictions regarding right relationship with the community:

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his statutes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked. So I will send a fire on Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem. Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed. (Amos 2:4-8)

Amos's message is clear; Israel had departed from the very essence of Yahwistic community, that is, a commitment "to protect the poor and vulnerable as an expression of divine righteousness and compassion."¹³ The only recourse, Amos contended, was through conversion. Israel must forsake empty sacrifices and "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

The message of northern prophets like Amos and Hosea was amplified during the Deuteronomic reform in the south. It was a reform that offered a renewed vision of community that emanated from pure worship of the one true God and a recommitment to the centrality of the sacred narrative of God's liberating activity in the exodus. The life of the community was to be sustained by fidelity to the demands of covenant relationship. The Deuteronomic

¹³ Hanson, 154.

rearticulation of the Torah was comprehensive in its attempt to apply the demands of covenant relationship in every aspect of one's daily life and, in particular, with one's communal relationships. If anything, the demands of covenant community preserved in the ancient Yahwistic traditions are further radicalized. This is apparent in the ways in which earlier discrimination against women is, if not eliminated, at least softened.

A discernible shift in conceptions of community is evident in the seventh century B.C.E. in the writings of Jeremiah. Here we see for the first time a distinction between the spiritual status of the community and that of the individual. The covenant is now a pact not only between God and the people but between God and the individual. This concern for the individual in the community is further developed in the following centuries in the wisdom literature, perhaps nowhere more poignantly than in the Book of Job. In Job the righteous sufferer speaks out in dissent against a received tradition that saw calamity as a punishment for sin. Job's refusal to capitulate introduces a new tension, the claims of the individual against the received wisdom of the community. Somewhat surprisingly, we find an argument for the value of theological dissent within the community embedded in the structure of the biblical canon itself!

Finally, if the exodus remained the seminal event in Israel's core narrative of its identity before God, the Babylonian exile, following upon the fall of the southern kingdom and the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E., would be seared in the subsequent self-understanding of Israel. During the exile, Israelites would find themselves severed from two crucial features that shaped their identity—the temple of Jerusalem and the land itself. This is given poignant expression in Ps. 137:1-4.

By the rivers of Babylon—
 there we sat down and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion.
 On the willows there
 we hung up our harps.
 For there our captors
 asked us for songs,
 and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
 "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
 How could we sing the LORD's song
 in a foreign land?

Some of the most profound literature of the Tanakh attempts to respond to the crisis of faith posed by the exile.

ISRAEL'S RESPONSE TO THE EXILE

Coming out of a priestly tradition, Ezekiel contended that because of Israel's grotesque impurity and the punishment that this impurity incurred (the exile), the future of the people depended entirely on a new creative act of God. This promise of a new creation, God's replacement of a "stony heart" with a "heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26), was contingent on Israel's willingness to reestablish the right worship of God and obedience to divine decrees as central to their identity. The priestly source (P) that gave the Pentateuch its final form in the sixth century shared company with Ezekiel in calling for purification of Israelite worship. The restoration of God's favor after the exile required that Israel recenter its life on worship and temple sacrifice. The consequence was a heightened consciousness of the distinction between the pure and the impure, the sacred and the profane. An elaborate sacrificial system emerged that had as its goal the sanctification of all of Israel's life and gave a dramatically enhanced role to the priests. Although this emphasis on sacral priests would create new difficulties in the centuries ahead, "Ezekiel and the Priestly Writing serve as important reminders that the vision of God's saving action must be translated into the forms of worship and the structures of community that shape the life of faith in this world."¹⁴

One of the more eloquent responses to the tragedy of the exile is found in what biblical scholars call Second Isaiah, Isaiah 40-55. The author shares with the Priestly Writing and Ezekiel a conviction that the exile is a consequence of Israel's infidelity to God. The exile induced a "pedagogy of brokenness" intended to draw Israel back to God.¹⁵ The hope that God might draw forth from the exile a new community rededicated to God was seen on the analogy of the original exodus. Second Isaiah in effect promised a new exodus in which God might create a new community. Yet the new community promised in Second Isaiah broke with that to emerge out of the first exodus by its more universal scope:

And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength—he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isa. 49:5-6)

¹⁴ Ibid., 250.

¹⁵ Ibid., 236.

A restored Israel was now to be a servant community fulfilling God's saving intention for the world. A number of scholars have seen in this text a basis for exploring an Old Testament theology of mission.¹⁶

It is unfortunate that we find few if any attempts to enact the sweeping cosmic vision of Second Isaiah. Too idealistic in its conception, it soon gave way to a more pragmatic program for restoring Israel led by the Zadokite priesthood (a caste of priests who exercised leadership during the exile and were given exclusive responsibility for the temple cult under the reforms of King Josiah). This restoration was built on two planks: (1) a careful accommodation with the Persians, who had permitted the return of the Israelites from exile, and (2) a program for rebuilding the temple and reestablishing the temple cult based on a developed clerical system with the Zadokite priests at the pinnacle of the hierarchy. This restoration was informed by the priestly vision of Ezekiel and the Priestly Writing, which made the authentic restoration of Israel dependent on the recovery of Israel's ritual sanctity. Only through a renewed fidelity to the temple cult and strict obedience to God's ordinances could Israel again become a suitable habitation for God.¹⁷ Yet this program was not without its difficulties. In the sixth and fifth centuries, rival priestly groups, particularly the Zadokite priests and the now increasingly marginalized Levitical priests, fought for power. In place of Second Isaiah's bracing vision of a community called to embody God's *shalom* before the world, we find an ever more restrictive view of communal holiness limited to competing groups of priestly elites. "The people of Judah accordingly entered the fifth century as a hierocratic community dominated by a priestly class dedicated to the pragmatic concerns of consolidating and maintaining control over the land and its cult, and not hesitating to use the political power at its disposal to accomplish its purposes."¹⁸

The restorationist impulse of the Zadokite priests was given a new energy in the effective leadership of two fifth-century figures, the priest Ezra and the royal official Nehemiah. Their program to reestablish the distinctive identity of Israel around the temple cult was remarkably successful. Under Ezra, Torah, which had hitherto referred to that broad complex of communal structures, legal ordinances, and spiritual imperatives concretizing the demands of covenant relationship, had become equated with a written text, the five books of Moses. Torah now came to be understood as a quasi-constitutional document.¹⁹ Fidelity to Torah, particularly as regards worship of God, and ethnic

¹⁶ See especially James Chukwuma Okoye, *Israel and the Nations: A Mission Theology of the Old Testament*, American Society of Missiology Series 39 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), 129-43.

¹⁷ Hanson, 260.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

purity, preserving the “holy seed,” became the defining features of Israel. During this period we witness an unprecedented preoccupation with Israel’s separation of itself from its neighbors. Strikingly absent is the ancient Yahwistic commitment to compassion toward the foreigner.

Israel’s exclusionary policy, defining itself over against all other nations and strictly prohibiting any mixture with other peoples, must be seen, at least in part, as an understandable response to a difficult political situation characterized by external threats to its continued existence. It also reflects the widespread assumption that the exile was God’s punishment for having failed to maintain purity before God. Yet this exclusionary vision was not without its dissenters. Two particularly noteworthy examples of a “dissenting” view are found in the Books of Ruth and Jonah.

Ruth is a non-Jew, a Moabite woman whose marriage to Boaz, a Jew, brings her under the mantle of God’s care. In a surprising reversal of expectations, as the story proceeds the now-widowed Ruth refuses to abandon her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth’s fidelity to her mother-in-law becomes an ironic exemplar of the compassion for the vulnerable that is supposed to be reflective of Israel’s own actions and commitments. The Book of Ruth may plausibly be read as a protest against the exclusionary Zadokite vision of an ethnically pure Israel.

The second dissenting voice is found in the Book of Jonah. Fundamentalist preoccupations with the historicity of Jonah being swallowed by a “great fish” have distracted from the provocative message of this ancient parable. It is a story of a reluctant Jewish prophet, Jonah, called to offer a message of judgment to a sinful, pagan people, the Ninevites. Interestingly, the Book of Jonah and Isaiah 66 offer the only two texts in the Hebrew Bible that recount a prophet being sent to pagan peoples.²⁰ To Jonah’s dismay, the Ninevites respond to this divine judgment by dramatic, communal repentance. Accepting the repentance of this pagan people, the God of Israel relents and shows compassion to this pagan people. The message of this story is that God’s compassion is not limited to Israel; it extends to all who are open to the call to repentance. In both Ruth and Jonah we hear minority voices protesting against the rigidly exclusionary vision of postexilic Israel and harking back to the more universal communal vision of Second Isaiah.

ISRAEL UNDER HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN DOMINATION

Finally we must consider the shifts in communal consciousness that occurred in the final three centuries prior to the Common Era. This was a period begun

²⁰ Okoye, 80.

by Alexander the Great's conquest of the region and constituted by the gradual hellenization of Israel. Responses to Hellenistic rule during these centuries were remarkably varied. On the one hand, there is evidence of an extreme assimilationist program on the part of some Jews who enthusiastically and uncritically embraced Hellenistic culture. On the other hand, we have the Maccabean revolt instigated by the Seleucid leader Antiochus IV Epiphanes' desecration of the temple in Jerusalem. The revolt was undertaken by Jewish parties committed to keeping alive a distinctive Jewish identity centered on fidelity to Torah and a determination to purge the land of Israel of all foreign influences. Ironically, the success of the revolt led the Maccabean leaders, having established a marginal independence for Israel, to embark on programs of political accommodations with foreign powers such as Rome. The priestly tradition of holy separation reflected in the vision of Ezra and Nehemiah gave birth to two quite different responses to the presence of foreign elements in Israel.

One response was undertaken by a group known as the Essenes. This priestly group denounced the defilements of the priestly caste responsible for the temple cult in Jerusalem. They were convinced that fidelity to the sacral demands of Torah required their geographic separation from all sources of defilement. Consequently, they formed quasi-monastic communities in the desert. A second response emerged in the rise of Pharisaism. Equally committed to a rigorous fidelity to Torah, the Pharisees were distinguished by their belief that they could maintain ritual purity amidst external defilements (e.g., the presence of Gentiles in their midst) through a creative and comprehensive application of Torah to every circumstance of ordinary life. What emerged in the Pharisaic tradition was, in effect, two forms of the Torah—the written Torah and an oral Torah consisting in creative applications to daily life. Another distinguishing feature of early Pharisaism was its shift of the locus of Jewish worship from the Temple to the household and the sphere of ordinary existence.²¹

This brief review of the varying conceptions of community in ancient Israel brings to light a number of fundamental tensions. First, in the emergence of the ancient monarchy we saw a tension between an egalitarianism based on common subservience before the sole sovereignty of Yahweh and the practical need for leadership structures that could provide a visible center of unity and effectively regulate the life of the community. Without the monarchy, ancient Israel may not have survived. With the monarchy Israel had to struggle between a

²¹ See Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1971); idem, *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

limited monarchy committed to the service of Yahweh and an absolutist and hereditary monarchy prone to dilute the demands of authentic Yahwist faith. As Brueggemann has so compellingly put the matter, the emergence of the monarchy also raised a question regarding the community's relationship to the larger culture: will it be an alternative community striving to embody God's compassion and steadfast love, or will it succumb to a royal consciousness prone to accept social stratification and the status quo?

Yet another community tension was revisited in the postexilic period, as an essentially hierocratic vision of Israel structured around the priesthood came to dominance, threatening the possibility that individuals might achieve holiness apart from the temple cult. This was accompanied by the tension between the need for Israel to preserve its distinctive identity and a more universal vision that related the mission of Israel to the universal scope of God's saving will. A rigorous program of what can only be called "ethnic purity" espoused by Ezra and Nehemiah was held in check by the universalist vision of Second Isaiah, Ruth, and Jonah.

Third, during the period of the monarchy we find the conviction that God's kingdom could be encountered in Israel under the leadership of a king faithful to God. After the exile, as Israel dealt with the realities of first Persian and then Greek and Roman domination, reflections on God's kingdom were increasingly projected into the future. Only following upon some future day of judgment would the *shalom* of Yahweh be fully realized in a new kingdom of God. Hence, we find here a tension between God's kingdom encountered as a present reality and God's kingdom realized in some future fulfillment.

Finally, we encounter the struggle shared by all great religious traditions regarding the dangers and possibilities associated with engaging surrounding cultures without diluting or distorting the distinctiveness of one's own heritage. The wisdom tradition brought distinctive meditations on Torah into conversation with certain Hellenistic concepts, and the Pharisaic tradition insisted on ritual purity but did so through a creative application of Torah to every aspect of daily life that allowed the Pharisees to avoid fleeing all foreign engagements. As we shall see, many of these tensions will emerge in a new key in early Christianity.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE JESUS MOVEMENT

The first part of this chapter surveyed developing understandings of community evident in the history of ancient Israel. We concluded with a consideration of a variety of Jewish movements that responded in different ways to the question of preserving their covenant identity as God's people in the last two

centuries prior to the Common Era. However, there is one final Jewish movement that demands our consideration. Early in the first century of the Common Era, a man of obscure origins, Jesus of Nazareth, came into contact with yet another figure, John the Baptist. The Baptist bore certain similarities to the Essenes. He came “from the desert” where the Essenes had established their communities; he lived an ascetic existence, wearing a hair shirt and living on “locusts and wild honey.” Like the Essenes, he administered a water baptism, but unlike the ritual of the Essenes, John’s baptism was offered only one time, was not self-administered and was expressly associated with a commitment to conversion.

Both Matthew and Luke offer accounts of John’s central message. It is difficult to know the extent to which these accounts draw from the substance of John’s actual message and the extent to which they are retrojections of the Christian message back to the time of John. However, since virtually all scholars agree on the historicity of Jesus’ baptism by John, it is not unreasonable to speculate that Jesus may have been genuinely impressed with key elements of John’s message and may have embraced that message even as he subjected it to fuller development. If we can accept Matthew’s account of John’s teaching as having some historical core, then it would seem that for all of John’s superficial similarities to the Essenes, he was in fact departing from both their extreme form of Jewish particularism and that of the Pharisees.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Matt. 3:7-12)

John’s message rejects the Jewish particularism that had dominated the post-exilic period in favor of a vision of God’s kingdom open to all who accept the way of repentance and commitment to a life of justice and compassion.²² John stood, it would seem, much more in the tradition of the Book of Jonah.

²² John Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), 97.

It is quite possible that the Baptist's ministry and message had an impact on Jesus, triggering his own public ministry with a striking new message about God's kingdom. The first words of Jesus reported to us by the author of the Gospel of Mark aptly summarize the core of Jesus' message and mission: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Jesus takes the message of God's kingdom as he would have received it from his own immersion in the Hebrew Scriptures and through the ministry of John and reinterprets it in significant ways. First, Jesus combines two distinct traditions, the emphasis on the kingdom of God as a present reality, stressed during the monarchical period, and the postexilic view of the kingdom as a future eschatological reality.²³ As a present reality, Jesus daringly suggested that the kingdom of God was breaking into history *now*, in his own life and ministry. The signs he performed, exorcisms and healings, were not the deeds of a wonder-worker, but signs of God's reign already making itself present in his person through manifestations of dominion over the forces of evil. Yet in many of his parables on the kingdom, for example, that which compares the kingdom to a mustard seed, God's reign is presented as a future reality whose full dimensions cannot be imagined. Other parables suggest Jesus' subversive vision of the kingdom, as when he responds to the question "Who is my neighbor?" by telling the parable of a Good Samaritan, in which a member of the despised Samaritans is offered as a more exemplary neighbor than either a priest or a Levite.²⁴

Perhaps the most radical departure from received understandings of the kingdom is reflected in Jesus' challenge of accepted notions of cultic purity. His teaching represented a fundamental challenge to the purity regulations concerning the Jews' conduct with one another and with outsiders. According to Jesus, it is not the forces from without but those which arise from within that are destructive because they militate against forgiveness and mercy.²⁵ Consider Mark 7:14-15: "Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'"

Jesus employed the language of the *basileia*, or "kingdom," while carefully discarding its associations with either military revolution or ritual purity. Nevertheless, Jesus was able to use the language by appealing to its core meaning: that of God's establishment of divine rule over men and women. This was a meaning that allowed for God's dealings with Jews and Gentiles, and it entailed

²³ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Church According to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of Early Christianity Teach Us Today* (Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 3-4.

²⁴ See William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

²⁵ Riches, 139.

the rejection of any notion of purity as separation from the impure. Jesus' embrace of the marginalized represented one of the more distinctive elements of his ministry. Although the Synoptic Gospels record his explicitly calling forth twelve men, they also report the inclusion of many women among his followers in an unprecedented break with the rabbinic custom prohibiting women from publicly associating themselves with a rabbi. The Gospels further suggest that Jesus counted women not only as disciples but as friends with whom he shared intimate table fellowship, as with Mary and Martha. Two thousand years removed, it is almost impossible for us to appreciate the revolutionary character of Jesus' easy acceptance of the dignity and value of women.

Jesus was able to refocus the notion of the reign of God by recontextualizing it. The new context was his own life and ministry: his ministry to the sick, the possessed, the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed. This context allowed for a proclamation of the kingdom as not just a future reality but as something that was in some way present in the person of Jesus and his work. This represents a distinct modification of the notion of the kingdom, which in the Tanakh was often associated with the destruction of enemies. Thus, Jesus' exorcisms represented a divine power over Satan established by prayer (not by military might).

Jesus' message of the kingdom also occurred in the context of his fellowship meals with tax collectors and other sinners. The table fellowship was a cultic meal, encouraged by the Pharisees, which celebrated divine communion with God's people. By celebrating such a meal with outcasts Jesus offered a complete revision of the conventional understanding of holiness and purity that broke down the exclusivism of both the Pharisees and the Essenes.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's bold attempt at a feminist reconstruction of Christian origins suggests that Jesus' vision of the *basileia* of God was marked by a commitment to "inclusive wholeness." "The central symbolic actualization of the *basileia* vision of Jesus is not the cultic meal but the festive table of a royal banquet or wedding feast."²⁶ As a faithful Jew, Jesus did not repudiate the binding character of Torah. Yet he offered an unusually free and liberating attitude toward Torah by reminding his listeners that the Torah was offered to bring one into God's *shalom* by directing a life of holiness. Torah did not exist for its own sake but as a means for making Israel into a people of justice and compassion. Consequently, it is justice and compassion that must determine the proper interpretation and application of Torah. Jesus would emphasize that in the faithful application of the 613 ordinances of the Torah, the twofold love command, that is, the inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor, must

²⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 119.

guide the fulfillment of all other laws.²⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza contends that the locus for holiness in Jesus' teaching and ministry is not the temple but the people:

The Jesus movement in Palestine does not totally reject the validity of Temple and Torah as symbols of Israel's election but offers an alternative interpretation of them by focusing on the people itself as the locus of God's power and presence. . . . Human holiness must express human wholeness, cultic practice must not be set over and against humanizing praxis. . . . Everyday life must not be measured by the sacred holiness of the Temple and Torah, but Temple and Torah praxis must be measured and evaluated by whether or not they are inclusive of every person in Israel and whether they engender the wholeness of every human being. Everydayness, therefore, can become revelatory, and the presence and power of God's sacred wholeness can be experienced in every human being.²⁸

It is Jesus' radical vision of the *basileia* of God that motivates his outreach and embrace of all who were marginalized in first-century Palestine, especially women.

Jesus' distinctive view of the kingdom is further evident in his own relationship with God. He addressed God with a familiarity, using the Aramaic "Abba," that was a source of scandal to many. Moreover, when teaching his disciples to pray, he invited them into that same relationship of intimacy with God. In conclusion, Jesus of Nazareth was a faithful Jew who creatively reworked his own Jewish heritage by offering a quite distinctive account of God's action. It was an action typified not by judgment of God's enemies but by forgiveness, mercy, love, and generosity.

May we conclude from this focus on the proclamation of the kingdom of God that Jesus did not desire to establish a church? This has certainly been the claim of many scholars. Alfred Loisy, the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century modernist put it provocatively: "Christ preached the Kingdom of God, and the Church appeared instead."²⁹ Such scholars point to Jesus' belief in an imminent coming of God's eschatological reign. Jesus would not have instituted a church because he believed that his coming signaled the imminent end of history. They further note that Jesus' teaching finds its intelligibility within the Jewish thought world. Even his choice of the Twelve seems almost certainly motivated by its eschatological symbolism as a reconstitution

²⁷ Harrington, 5.

²⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, 120.

²⁹ Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 166.

of the Twelve Tribes. Jesus was a Jew, one might well argue. He understood himself to be a Jew, and if he saw himself as leading the Jewish faith in a new direction, there is no evidence that he intended to be the founder of a new religion.

However, the assumption that the apocalyptic character of Jesus' teaching argues against his intention to found a community ignores the example of the Essene community. This community clearly assumed the imminent realization of the day of judgment, yet this expectation did not prevent them from establishing a community replete with structural elements. In any event, this approach to the question unfairly stacks the deck by considering the foundation of the church strictly in terms of institutional structure. Obviously, we will have a hard time demonstrating how the historical Jesus explained the nature and practice of the seven sacraments, dictated the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, and outlined the rubrics for the eucharistic sacrifice!

Is it not enough, however, to recognize that Jesus gathered around him a community of followers? There is ample evidence that he assumed the role of a rabbi who desired to school his disciples in the ways of God's reign. If he did not explicitly intend to found a new religion, it is, nevertheless, not an understatement to speak of him as a religious revolutionary within Judaism, challenging fundamental Jewish structures (e.g., as evident in the "cleansing of the temple"). He invited his followers to share in his work and sent them out in mission. We can assume from the general tenor of his message that he intended that the work for the kingdom would continue after his death.

In one of his early works Hans Küng put it this way:

As soon as men gathered together in faith in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth and in expectation of the coming consummation of the reign of God and the return of the risen Christ in glory, the Church came into existence.³⁰

In other words, the church, properly understood, is a post-Easter phenomenon, and any understanding of the church being founded by Christ must look not primarily to his pre-Easter, historical ministry but rather to the post-Easter encounter with the risen Lord that animated the disciples and constituted them, empowered by the Spirit, as a community. The church can be understood as instituted by Christ not in the sense that the historical Jesus was interested in the establishment of a church; rather, it was as a response to their encounters with the risen Lord and the coming of the Spirit that the early

³⁰ Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 75.

Christians felt the need for the establishment of a community of believers. Hence, the foundation of the church should be understood both christologically and pneumatologically. The institutional and the charismatic must go hand in hand. Nevertheless, biblical scholars have done the church a great service by stressing that Jesus' emphasis was not on the church but on the kingdom of God.

FROM JESUS MOVEMENT TO CHURCH

Jesus' mission and message were continued in the work of his followers, many of whom were zealous in finding converts and creating small communities of faith throughout the Jewish Diaspora. With Paul's mission we encounter a decisive new development in early Christianity. The Christian message was now offered to Gentiles as well. The work of reconstructing the makeup of these early Christian communities is fraught with difficulties, as the documentary evidence, apart from the New Testament, is sketchy. All the communities were centered on Jesus, but many shifted away from a focus on his life and teaching, typical of the Jesus movement while he lived, to the saving significance of his death and resurrection. This is reflected in the writings of Paul, in which scant mention is made of Jesus' historical ministry or the substance of his teaching. Paul preached Christ crucified and risen, the source of our salvation.

Christianity first grew in urban rather than rural areas, and its appeal seemed to span all classes.³¹ Most early gatherings of Christians met in the homes of some of the wealthier members, constituting "house churches" that might have comprised as many as forty or fifty members.³²

Paul's Ecclesiological Vision

It is from the writings of Paul that we get the most fully developed reflection on the theological significance of Christian communal life. Paul's theology of the church was grounded in two insights: first, that salvation came through contact with the saving power of the death and resurrection of Christ, and, second, that this saving contact came through baptism into Christ's "body" the church. Indeed, the early church's theology of baptism might be thought of as

³¹ See Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

³² Harrington, 50.

the first Christian ecclesiology.³³ To be baptized a Christian meant being baptized into a mystical participation in Christ's death and resurrection as one was simultaneously initiated into Christ's body the church. Paul's theological reflections on the Christian community centered on the metaphor of the body. By speaking of the church as a body, Paul privileged the communal nature of Christian life, a spiritual coexistence, and the interdependence of all the members.

If for Paul baptism initiated the believer into the life of the community, the bonds of this community with one another and with God were further nourished through the celebration of the eucharist. The eucharist was a sacred meal that celebrated the twofold communion, or *koinōnia*, that Christians had with God in Christ and with one another.

Paul's theological understanding of the celebration of the "breaking of the bread," gives us further insight into his understanding of Christian community. Here is Paul's account of the practice of this sacred meal:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body (*sōma*) that is for you. Do this in remembrance (*anamnēsis*) of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. (1 Cor. 11:23-29)

Careful reflection on Paul's description of this ancient meal helps us appreciate the ways in which it contributed to the community's memory.³⁴

First, Paul connects this ritual action with the redemptive work of Christ. The death of Jesus constitutes a "new Passover" sacrifice. To celebrate this meal, as with baptism, is for Paul a ritual participation in the dying and rising of

³³ Gerard Austin, "Restoring Equilibrium after the Struggle with Heresy," in *Source and Summit: Commemorating Josef A. Jungmann, S.J.*, ed. Joanne M. Pierce and Michael Downey (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 35-47 at 37.

³⁴ Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996), 31-43.

Christ. Second, Paul's use of the Greek term *sōma*, or "body," is worth exploring in more detail. The word *sōma* in this context does not mean "flesh," nor does it refer to a physical or corporeal reality. Rather, *sōma* refers to the whole person as the subject of a relationship. This is emphasized in Paul's addition of the "... that is for you" to "this is my body." The implication here is that Christ engages the believer with his whole being in a personal relationship or encounter through the eucharistic action.

Third, the reference to eating the bread and drinking the cup in an "unworthy manner" is alluding to the passage immediately preceding the account of the eucharist's institution by Jesus. It would appear that Paul had heard of a scandal in the behavior of the church at Corinth occasioned by the gathering together for their common worship.

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (1 Cor. 11:17-22)

Paul believed that the celebration of the Lord's Supper placed certain ethical obligations on the community. His admonishments suggest that some social stratification within the Corinthian community may have endured wherein the poor did not have equal access. It may well be that the wealthy were either meeting earlier to eat a more sumptuous meal on their own, before the poorer members of the community arrived, or that they were eating in a separate room. Paul sternly admonished the community that this action was not appropriate for those who had entered into the covenant of Christ. They were eating the bread and drinking the cup "unworthily." For Paul, the question was not one of irreverence in the reception of the eucharistic elements (a common concern with some Catholics today); the Corinthian community was irreverent because of its divisions and, perhaps, because of its insensitivity to the poor in its midst.³⁵

³⁵ For further consideration of the ethical dimensions of the eucharist in Paul, see Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), esp. chap. 4.

Fourth, Paul believed that the eucharist effected a fellowship or communion (*koinōnia*) with Christ and with one another by the power of the Spirit:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing (*koinōnia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing (*koinōnia*) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor. 10:16-17)

Here, as with baptism, the eucharist is seen as a ritual that draws believers into relationship, one referred to as *koinōnia*, in which believers are drawn simultaneously into communion with God and communion with fellow believers.

Finally, Paul's theology of church presupposed a primary role for the Holy Spirit, who constituted the *koinōnia* or communion of all believers. The church is not an aggregate of individuals; it is a new relational reality that confers identity upon those who enter into its life. By baptism into the Christian community one participates in a new reality; one is a new creation. Yet this communion among believers is not the fruit of mere human effort. The *koinōnia* among believers is the consequence of a *koinōnia* in Christ and in the Spirit.

Paul's theology of community is dynamic and organic. It conceives of Christian community as constituted by a shared life in Christ begun in baptism and nurtured in the eucharist. Paul, like others, referred to the church as an *ekklēsia*. The term was taken over from Greek civic life, where it referred to participation in a public assembly. Individuals were "called out" to deliberate on common matters. As applied to Christian community, the *ekklēsia* was the community of believers called by God by the power of the Spirit into common life in Christ.³⁶

Other Pauline Ecclesiological Trajectories

Aside from the authentic Pauline literature—1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Romans, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon—there are a number of New Testament texts that lay claim to the Pauline tradition even though many are in fact written a good generation or so after Paul's death. These Deuteropauline texts reveal churches at a significantly different state of development than what we encounter, for example, in the church of Corinth reflected in Paul's correspondence. All borrow, in varying degrees, from Paul's theology, yet their distinctive ecclesiological contexts produce interesting variations on a Pauline ecclesiology.

³⁶ Harrington, 49.

The first post-Pauline development we might consider is found in the Deutero-Pauline letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians. These letters, written approximately twenty years after Paul's death, reveal an innovation in Pauline ecclesiology. When Paul used the term "church," he did so primarily with respect to the local community. That is, he wrote of "the church at Corinth" or "the church in Jerusalem" (1 Cor. 1:2; see also 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; Rom. 16:16). As we shall see in a later chapter, Paul certainly had a sense of the spiritual connectedness of all the churches, but his writings attended almost exclusively to the pastoral questions and concerns of local communities.

In Colossians and Ephesians we find Paul's vision of church expanded. Now the *ekklēsia* can also refer to the whole church. The one church encountered in each and every local church is the one body of Christ with Christ as its head. It should not surprise us that in letters that push Christology in a more universal direction, with their vision of the cosmic Christ recapitulating or summing up all creation into himself, we would also find a more universal vision of the church.

A second Deutero-Pauline trajectory of church development is found in the Pastoral Letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, texts likely written near the end of the first century. These letters depict a community that is much more developed and has learned to accommodate itself to its surrounding culture. This is reflected in several passages that encourage women to conform to the social expectations of the larger Greco-Roman culture. These are communities that have not forgotten Paul's expansive vision of a church animated by many charisms, but they are more aware than even Paul was of the problem of divisions in the church. Consequently, without precluding a place for charisms, the church of the Pastoral Letters is more concerned with stable leadership structures that can help preserve the unity of the church and ensure its authentic teaching. It is in these letters that we find in-depth discussions of stable church offices and a concern for a careful discernment of suitable candidates for these offices.

Other New Testament Visions of Christian Community

The universality of the church is evident in another biblical trajectory found in Luke-Acts. This two-volume work offers us first in the Gospel of Luke a compelling narrative of Jesus' inexorable journey toward Jerusalem, where his destiny as savior of the world would be publicly manifested. Part 2, the Acts of the Apostles, follows with a theologically rich account of the early church discovering its missionary imperative to bring the gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth. We shall return to consider the Acts of the Apostles in more detail in the

next chapter. Undergirding this two-part journey, first toward Jerusalem and then out to the whole known world, is a theology of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's presence permeates the Jesus narrative. It is the Spirit who overshadows Mary, fills her sister Elizabeth and later Zechariah, rests upon Simeon and finally anoints Jesus at his baptism by John. Prior to Jesus' ascension he commissions the disciples: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). It is that same Spirit who falls upon the believers at Pentecost and who empowers them in their ministry to bring the gospel of Jesus to the whole world. When Paul and Barnabas come to Jerusalem to make a case for their mission to the Gentiles, the decision is announced in the following form: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials" (Acts 15:28). Luke's appreciation for the pneumatological conditioning of the church is central to his theological vision. It is the Spirit that transforms a collective of individuals into a living communion of believers. Without this pneumatological dimension, there is a danger of the concept of communion degenerating to secular conceptions that ignore the way the believer is reconfigured in communion with other believers and with God. Luke's pneumatological perspective provides him with a more universal scope in his presentation of Jesus' mission. It is the power of the Spirit that allows the message of Jesus to transcend its Jewish context, and it is the Spirit that impels the church outward to bring the gospel to the whole world.

Another distinguishing feature of Luke's work is his relatively positive treatment of women. Although some scholars have argued that certain passages may be functioning to keep women in their place (e.g., the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42), the dominant treatment of women in this Gospel stands in striking contrast to the patriarchal presuppositions of the time.³⁷ In the infancy narratives, Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna embody the best features of the Israelite tradition. We find women in the public company of Jesus, and women appear much more frequently as positive characters in Jesus' parables.³⁸

Another very influential image of the church hinted at in other places but explicit in Acts of the Apostles is the image of the church as a "community of brothers and sisters." Some form of the Greek term *adelphos*, or "brother/sister," appears fifty-seven times in Acts of the Apostles. It is commonly, though not exclusively, used to designate all the followers of Christ, particularly those in

³⁷ Barbara Reid, *Choosing the Better Part?: Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996).

³⁸ Harrington, 111.

Jerusalem.³⁹ The term stresses the establishment of new bonds of community like those established by kinship but now on the basis of a kinship of faith rather than blood.

Earlier we recalled Israel's sense of itself as a holy people called into covenant relationship with God, not by virtue of its own merit but as the result of God's free election. Some early Christians returned to this vision in their reflection on their own identity before God. It is now commonly accepted that 1 Peter was not written by the apostle Peter but may have come from a Petrine tradition with its origins in the preaching of Peter. It was probably written between 70 and 90 C.E. The text draws on images found in the Hebrew Scriptures in the Book of Exodus of Israel as a priestly people:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner,”

and

“A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet. 2:4-10)

The hope of Israel has now been fulfilled in Jesus such that those who believe in Jesus are now part of God's people. The people of God is no longer to be defined by race but by faith in Christ. Membership into God's people is

³⁹ Jean Rigal, *L'ecclésiologie de communion: Son évolution historique et ses fondements* (Paris: Cerf, 1996), 19.

brought about by baptism. A central theme in the Tanakh returns here: just as membership in the covenant with Yahweh was the consequence not of human effort or merit but of God's election, so too the Christian community is constituted by election at God's initiative.

1 Peter also explores the image of the church as a brotherhood or sisterhood captured in the use of the term *adelphos*, as we saw in the Acts of the Apostles. In 1 Peter the Greek *adelphotēs* (fraternity) is used as a technical term to refer to the church in which believers have become brothers and sisters by Christian initiation—it is the church itself that now is called a fraternity.⁴⁰ While “fraternity” is not a dominant term for the church in the New Testament, it will be a favorite image of the later church writers.

Discerning a nascent ecclesiology in the Synoptic Gospels is no easy task. One must draw a number of inferences from each Gospel's presentation of Jesus' life and ministry in order to posit a distinctive vision of the Christian community. Regarding Mark's Gospel, for example, the spare narrative does not provide a wealth of clues about the evangelist's understanding of community. Mark's Gospel is from first to last a story of Jesus, the suffering Messiah whose true identity is disclosed only on the cross. Yet we do find in this Gospel a theme that plays itself out in all three Synoptic Gospels, and that is the theme of discipleship. When we consider the significant role that blood relations played in ancient Jewish identity the following pericope is particularly illuminating:

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:31-35)

Communal identity is no longer to be attached to kinship or ethnicity but to a more profound spiritual bond established through common discipleship. Moreover, the shape of Christian discipleship is determined by the model of the suffering Messiah. Christian discipleship, that is, will be marked by the cross.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Michel Dujarier, *L'Église fraternité: les origines de l'expression adelphotēs-fraternitas aux trois premiers siècles du christianisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 33.

⁴¹ Harrington, 104.

It is commonly accepted today that the authors of both Matthew and Luke had Mark's Gospel in front of them and adapted it freely in order to present the Christian message most effectively to their particular audiences. The predominantly Jewish-Christian character of the community associated with the Gospel of Matthew provides a distinctive ecclesiological perspective. Matthew's Gospel is the only Gospel actually to use the word *ekklesia*. Struggling with the extent to which Judaism would continue to lay claim to Christian identity, the community of Matthew seemed much more interested in structural continuities with Judaism. Jesus' own teaching is resituated within first-century rabbinic debates, such as the question of working on the Sabbath. The teaching responsibilities of the synagogue are transferred to the early Christian communities, and the apostles are portrayed as the new rabbis (with Peter offered as the chief rabbi possessing the power to "bind and loose," an expression imported from synagogal authoritative structures) who will be called to teach the new law of Jesus Christ.

The ecclesiology of the Johannine community stands in sharp contrast to that of Paul. Where Paul's principal ecclesial metaphor, the body, stressed ecclesial interdependence among its members, the Johannine model focuses on the vertical relationship between Christ and believer. This is reflected in the two images of the church found in John's Gospel, the vine and branches (John 15:5) and the sheep and shepherd (John 10:1-16). In both sets of images it is the vertical relationship with Christ rather than the horizontal relationships among church members that is stressed. This suggests a vision of the Christian community that is much more egalitarian. The primary category within the community of followers of Jesus is not that of the apostle but that of the disciple. In fact, the Greek word *apostolos* never appears in the Johannine literature. After Christ's resurrection it is the Paraclete-Spirit who continues Christ's presence in the Christian community, and it is this Spirit that preserves the community in truth.

The Johannine literature is well known for its so-called love mysticism. It is a theme not without its implications for Christian community. The followers of Jesus ought to be distinguished by their life of love: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). This teaching had already been enacted in a story, unique to John and placed at the Last Supper, namely, the washing of feet. In this story Jesus offers his own actions as an example of that loving service that should characterize the actions of the Christian community. In the First Letter of John, love defines the spiritual bonds of community. Here we see a distinctive appropriation of the notion of *koinōnia* that already appeared in Paul's writing and in the Acts of the Apostles. "We declare

to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). For the author of the first Johannine epistle, there is a mystical unity between love of God and love for one another:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. . . . Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:16b, 20-21)

By recognizing the inseparability of the life of love and communion with God, the Johannine tradition, in its own way, affirms the unity of the so-called vertical and horizontal dimensions of communion.

Ironically, the egalitarian nature of the Johannine community, with its emphasis on the equality of discipleship and its claim that each believer possesses the Spirit, may have ultimately contributed to its demise. In this epistle we find evidence of a fierce polemic between competing Christian factions. We, of course, get to hear only one side of the polemic as the Johannine community claims the Spirit for itself and dismisses the other factions as "Antichrists."

STRUCTURING OF MINISTRY IN THE CHURCHES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

We cannot speak with any real historical exactitude about the nature of ecclesial ministry in the first few decades of the church's existence. Because of the initial Christian expectations for the imminent second coming of Christ, there was very little concern for lasting ministerial structures. Only as the church began to realize that the *parousia* was not necessarily imminent did stable ministerial forms receive more attention.

The first Christian communities were predominantly Jewish-Christian, and so it was natural that certain leadership structures borrowed from the Jewish synagogue would be adapted to the demands of the Christian community. Some communities were apparently led by a group of elders (*presbyteroi*) modeled after the leadership of the elders in the synagogue. Other early Christian communities included a leadership role for itinerant prophets who would move from community to community proclaiming God's message to the Christian people. There is some evidence to suggest that these prophets may even have

presided at the eucharist. This less institutional style of leadership, however, soon became associated with certain heretical sects such as Montanism and Gnosticism and would be opposed by a greater emphasis on a stable church office. Even among those communities who were not led by the prophets, these itinerants held a very important role in the early communities.

Our best sources for learning about the nature of ministry in the early church are the writings of Paul. In his letters Paul describes largely urban communities which met in households and were sustained by a plurality of gifts, or charisms. Much has been made of the place of charisms in the early church, with the result that some scholars have assumed a more technical and precise understanding of charism in the early church than may be warranted by the evidence. Paul uses the term to refer to any among a variety of spiritual gifts. In general, however, it can be said that Paul did not view charisms as gifts given to an individual; rather they manifested themselves in an individual believer for the sake of the church: “since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church” (1 Cor. 14:12). What we think of as formal ministries would appear to have been simply one form of the more general category of charisms. Paul assumed that all believers would participate in the building up of the life of the community and its mission in the world. At the same time, Paul did acknowledge more stable forms of service in the life of the community that he referred to as *diakonia*.⁴² The term *diakonia*, often translated as “service,” did not refer to some menial activity but to one’s having been sent or commissioned to fulfill the work or mandate of another. Paul recognized a rudimentary ordering of these ministries:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. (1 Cor. 12: 27-31)

According to Paul, although there might be an ordering of charisms or ministries, no one ministry was superior to the others.

⁴² At the forefront of this scholarship is the work of John N. Collins. See his *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); idem, *Are All Christians Ministers?* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992); idem, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse, 2002).

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Rom. 12: 4-8)

These various gifts and ministries both enriched and, on occasion, divided the communities. There appeared to be a gradation in the stability of these many gifts with some being relatively occasional and others manifesting a certain degree of permanence. Lists such as this reveal less about the specific character of any of these ministries than about their diversity and fluidity.⁴³

At various points Paul refers to “apostles,” “rulers” of local communities (1 Thess. 5:12) and “hosts” of house churches (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5). His letter to the Philippians mentions “bishops and deacons” (*episkopois* and *diakonois* [Phil. 1:1]), titles that, however, were not yet anything like the developed offices those terms would designate a century later. At this point it is probably better to stay with a more literal rendering of those terms as simply “overseers” and “helpers.” Whatever the precise meaning of these terms, they do suggest some degree of formal ministerial responsibilities differentiated from the charisms exercised by each baptized member of the community.

The scholarly appraisal of the ministerial structures of the Pauline communities has been hampered for centuries by Protestant–Catholic polemics. Many Protestant scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emphasized the charismatic structure of the Pauline communities.⁴⁴ Catholic, Anglican, and Reformed scholarship, on the other hand, stressed the priority of institutional apostolic office.⁴⁵ This tension between office and charism is hardly a new development. Indeed, we should recall that even ancient Israel

⁴³ Thomas F. O’Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 67.

⁴⁴ The classic articulation was by Rudolph Sohm, *Kirchenrecht I: Die geschichtlichen Grundlagen* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1892). Twentieth-century figures influenced by this approach include Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1969), and Ernst Käsemann, “Ministry and Communion in the New Testament,” in idem, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964), 63–94.

⁴⁵ For the Reformed perspective, see Philippe-H. Menoud, *L’Eglise et les ministères selon le Nouveau Testament* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1949). From the Anglican perspective, see Gregory Dix, “The Ministry in the Early Church,” in *The Apostolic Ministry*, ed. K. E. Kirk (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), 183–303. Finally, for a mid-twentieth-century Catholic viewpoint that contrasts the necessary role of church office with the strictly optional role of charisms, see Joseph Brosch, *Charismen und Ämter in der Urkirche* (Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1951).

struggled with a similar tension in its ambiguous assessment of the monarchy begun with Saul. A thousand years before Jesus of Nazareth, Israel sought to hold in tension the need for stability in leadership with the conviction that, for Israel, God alone was king. This tension simply continued in Christianity, albeit in a new key.

In the last fifty years, however, a more balanced perspective seems to be emerging. This perspective recognizes the anachronistic character of both the “charism-versus-office” framework when applied to first-century Christianity and the assumption that a technical understanding of charism was already present in Paul’s thought.⁴⁶ Contemporary scholars are more inclined to assert a more fluid continuum of gifts in the Pauline churches that were exercised in more or less stable forms.⁴⁷

When we turn to the communities out of which the Pastoral Letters emerged, perhaps a full generation after Paul, evidence of more structured church leadership abounds. Daniel Harrington contends that what we may be seeing here are two distinct models of leadership structures: the first coming from predominantly Jewish-Christian communities and offering a presbyteral structure, and the second coming from Pauline communities that were largely Gentile in makeup and employed the bishop-deacon structure drawn from leadership models found in the Greco-Roman world. If this is the case, the Pastoral Letters may reflect a later stage in which these two models are beginning to come together.⁴⁸ Titles such as *diakonos*, *presbyteros*, and *episkopos* (deacon, presbyter, bishop) emerge, but with unclear distinctions; the latter two titles may at times have been used interchangeably.

Given the importance of the question in the contemporary church, we know surprisingly little about who actually held these early church leadership positions. Regarding the role of women, for example, contemporary biblical scholars have highlighted evidence suggesting the role that women may well have played as church leaders and ministers. These studies draw attention to Pauline references to Phoebe (Rom. 16:9), whom Paul refers to as a *diakonos*, and Prisca and her husband, Aquila, who are referred to by Paul as “co-workers” (Rom.

⁴⁶ Albert Vanhoye, “The Biblical Question of ‘Charisms’ after Vatican II,” in *Vatican II: Assessments and Perspectives*, volume 1, ed. René Latourelle (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 439-68.

⁴⁷ Enrique Nardoni, “Charism in the Early Church since Rudolph Sohm: An Ecumenical Challenge,” *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 646-62.

⁴⁸ Harrington, 162. For more on the influence of synagogal structures on the emergence of Christian leadership structures, see James T. Burchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For more on the influence of the Greco-Roman social world, see Meeks; and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 60 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

16:3-5).⁴⁹ However, by the time of the Pastoral Letters (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus), likely written a full generation after the authentic Pauline letters, we see the influence of household codes that discouraged the leadership of women.⁵⁰ If a form of gender egalitarianism ever existed—and there is some evidence that it did at least as an ideal—it was unable to survive against forces both internal and external to the community.

As we assess the broad range of ecclesiological trajectories evident in the biblical literature, a number of points need to be made.⁵¹ We must resist trying to identify some *ur*-ecclesiology underlying the diverse traditions. For the first generations of Christians, their communal consciousness was marked by a startling diversity of theological starting points. Yet it is possible to recognize some central and frequently recurring themes. First, when we begin with a consideration of Jesus' own teaching and ministry, we recognize the priority of the kingdom of God. Although it is difficult to assert that Jesus established anything like an institutional church, it is undeniable that he called forth a community of disciples in order to share in and continue his mission to proclaim and realize the coming reign of God. The call to mission is grounded in Jesus' own ministry and teaching. This theme receives dramatic development in Acts of the Apostles.

Second, whether or not the term *koinōnia* was explicitly employed, the relational underpinnings of Christian community can be recognized in virtually every biblical trajectory. There is little extended consideration of the spirituality of the individual Christian; the Christian life is conceived always as a life of shared belonging and discipleship. Third, this shared belonging was articulated in a rich diversity of metaphors each of which suggested a spiritually grounded solidarity among believers (e.g., “the body of Christ,” “a priestly people,” “a flock” a “fraternity”). Fourth, relative to our contemporary ecclesial setting, it is striking to realize that, with the possible exception of the communities associated with the Pastoral Letters, specific church structures received relatively little attention. Where formal structures of ministry were considered at all, they were conceived relationally as a call to public communal service rather than as an opportunity for the discrete exercise of power. We can see in numerous passages concerns regarding the Christian analogue to the “royal con-

⁴⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, 160-84; Carolyn Osiek and Kevin Madigan, eds., *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁵⁰ Hervé Legrand, “*Traditio perpetuo servata?* The Non-ordination of Women: Tradition or Simply an Historical Fact?” *Worship* 65 (1991): 482-508.

⁵¹ For an excellent survey of these trajectories, particularly as they relate to the rise of leadership structures, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

sciousness” associated with the ancient Israelite monarchy. In the Synoptic Gospels there are injunctions against exercising ecclesial authority in the manner of Gentile rulers (Mark 10:42-45; Matt. 20:25-28) or the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:1-7). Paul defended his authority as a service of the gospel (cf. Gal 1:1-9) directed toward the building up rather than the tearing down of the church of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 13:10).

This chapter’s brief survey of ecclesiological themes and perspectives in the Scriptures cannot do justice to the richness of the many biblical treatments of community. It is hoped, however, that this sketch demonstrates that there was no single theology of community from which all later views were derived. From the very beginning, conversion to the life of discipleship, the way of Jesus Christ, gave rise to divergent yet complementary accounts of Christian community. This ecclesiological diversity will continue throughout the history of the church, often in spite of sporadic attempts to impose one ecclesiological vision upon the church. It is beyond the scope of this work to trace the history of ecclesiology over two millennia. For that one might well turn to Yves Congar’s magisterial *L’Église de Saint Augustin à l’époque moderne* or the more recent two-volume work of Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*.⁵² In the chapters that follow, we will explore some fundamental perspectives on the church based on a reconsideration of the four marks of the church in global perspective.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What was gained and what was lost with ancient Israel’s adoption of the monarchy? How has Christianity had to struggle with the same temptations?
2. What are some ways in which a Christian theology of mission can be informed and enriched by the Hebrew Scriptures?
3. What are some of the benefits of considering the origins of Christianity as an emerging Jesus movement rather than as a fully developed religious institution?
4. Christian politicians today often speak of “family values.” How does Jesus’ teachings about discipleship and the reign of God turn conventional understandings of family values on their head?
5. How do two distinct metaphors—Paul’s metaphor of the body and John’s metaphor of the vine and branches—complement each other and illuminate important aspects of Christian community?

⁵² Yves Congar, *L’Église de Saint Augustin à l’époque moderne* (Paris: Cerf, 1970); Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 2 vols. (New York: Continuum, 2004-5).

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