



# The Council of Jerusalem

One of the most difficult concepts for my high school students is that the first “Christians” weren’t Christian. They were Jews. Jesus was a Jew. All of the disciples of Jesus mentioned by name in the gospels are Jews. The first written proclamation of the *kerygma*, the core of the good news about Jesus, begins by stating, “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3). Jesus is identified as “Christ,” the Greek translation of the Hebrew “messiah,” and the Scriptures being referred to are the books of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament).

The disciples of Jesus saw him as the Messiah long promised to Israel by God. Though a messiah “rising from the dead” was not what they expected, the first Christians saw themselves as Jews and understood their new faith through traditional Jewish beliefs and concepts. In the Acts of the Apostles, which is the only written account we have of the activities of this first generation of Christians, we learn that even after the Pentecost event this first generation of the Church continued to go up to the temple to pray (see Acts 3:1, for example).

## Enter Saint Paul

All of this changed with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Better known to us as Paul, this great Christian missionary to the Gentile (non-Jewish) world, redefined the Christian message so that non-Jews could be baptized as disciples of Christ. A close look at Paul's conversion experience and ministry reveals that this "revolution" was not really planned by Paul. When we first meet Saul of Tarsus, he is persecuting an unusual group of Jews who refer to their movement not as Christianity but as "the Way" (Acts 7:58; 8:1–4). Saul is a Pharisee (Acts 26:4–5), a fervent student of the Jewish Torah, and he is well versed in all of the particulars of Jewish ritual that are derived from the Torah.

Saul's religious fervor also extended to worshiping God in the temple in Jerusalem as often as he could. He believed, as most Jews did at that time, that through the rituals performed at the temple, the people of Israel had special access to God. Pharisees like Paul differed sharply with the Sadducees, the Jewish priests who ran the temple complex and performed the rituals of sacrifice. Yet both groups understood that both temple worship and study of the Torah were necessary.

The followers of the Way, however, added another element. They were suggesting that a direct encounter with God was possible through a relationship with the risen Christ. Saul saw in this belief a serious threat to the two great pillars of the Jewish religion. "Breathing murderous threats," Saul headed off to Damascus with the authority to arrest any disciples of Jesus he might find there. The Acts of the Apostles portrays what happened next in a dramatic narrative:

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." (9:3–6)

The rest is history. Temporarily blinded, Saul of Tarsus was led into Damascus by his traveling companions. Three days later he was baptized by Ananias, a Christian disciple in Damascus, and "something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored" (Acts 9:18). After a period of discernment and introduction to some of the leaders of the Christian communities in Jerusalem and Antioch, Saul began

the first of his missionary travels. In the rest of Acts, he will be referred to by his Roman name, Paul, signifying his ultimate destiny as apostle to the Gentiles.

### **History Revisited**

Paul's destiny was not immediately clear, however. It unfolded gradually and not entirely as it is described in Acts. The Acts of the Apostles is not a primary "historical" source, so we need to look at the process through which the book was created. Acts is actually part of a two-volume work that also includes the Gospel of Luke. It was completed sometime in the late 80s or possibly early 90s of the first century AD. This means that Paul had been dead for about a generation (Church tradition holds Paul died around 64 AD) and his legacy within the Church had been firmly established before Luke told the story.

The story that Luke does tell is of an irresistible enterprise. Rooted in the Jewish faith, fully revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and brought to the Gentile world under the guidance of the Holy Spirit after the Resurrection, Christianity takes the Roman Empire by storm. Even the most fervent attempts to stop it by temple authorities and Roman governors prove futile. From the time of Paul's conversion, Luke makes it clear that his ultimate success is inevitable; he is God's special "instrument" (Acts 9:15). This is a perspective that would only have been possible in the later part of the first century, and certainly not during the early days of Paul's ministry. It is much more likely that Paul himself understood his mission after his conversion to be to his Jewish brothers and sisters. Given Paul's zealotry for his Jewish faith, it would be inevitable that once he was convinced Jesus was the messiah Israel anticipated, he would enthusiastically preach this good news throughout the synagogues of the Eastern Roman Empire.

And that's exactly what he did. The next time we see Paul after his conversion he is preaching in the synagogues of Damascus. During his first missionary journey with Barnabas and other traveling companions the pattern is always the same: they head for the local synagogue (see Acts 13:4, for example). Probably the best way to understand Paul's conversion experience is that Paul's personal encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus convinces him that the fulfillment of all of God's promises to Israel can be found in the risen Christ. In other

words, Paul believes his Jewish faith is *fulfilled* through Jesus in whom temple and Torah are united and transcended.

Not many Jews buy Paul's message. He suffers under two enormous disadvantages that he simply cannot overcome. One, especially in the regions of Syria and Palestine, is a deep anger of the Jews who see him as a traitor. Paul was their champion of orthodoxy and now he is a spokesman for the very heresy he was entrusted to root out! But an even more intransigent problem is a messiah who saves through dying and rising, something most Jews found difficult to accept.

### **Suffering**

The idea of a Messiah who liberates through suffering simply doesn't exist in the Old Testament. This sounds surprising to the modern Christian reader. Wasn't everything that Jesus does and says in accordance with the prophets? Wasn't everything that happened to Jesus during his Passion foretold?

Well, that depends on how you look at it. Certainly the Christian authors of the gospels believed this was so, as did their church communities, as do we. For about two generations before the gospels were written, memories of Jesus' words and deeds were preserved and connected with particular prophecies of the Old Testament. (I cover this process in more detail in my first book, *Unlocking the Treasures of the Bible*.) Even the way the stories were told reflect the Christian conviction that the Old Testament points to and is fulfilled in the New Testament. Compare, for example the way that Matthew portrays the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:2) with the story of Moses' birth recounted in Exodus (Exodus 1:2). For another example, see how Psalm 22 functions as a basic outline for the crucifixion account portrayed in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 15).

As Church tradition has always maintained, however, this Christian insight is only possible in the light of the Resurrection experience. Yet according to the Christian Scriptures themselves, this is an experience most Jews did not have. The most generous estimate of those who met the risen Christ in person, given by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, amounts to little more than 500 people (1 Corinthians 15:3–8). That number would've represented a minute proportion of the population of Galilee and Judea, the two principle Jewish population centers in Palestine.

When you look at the Old Testament prophecies without a Christian filter, the messianic oracles of such prophets as Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Zechariah make no mention of the need for the Messiah to suffer. (See Isaiah 11:1–9 or Zechariah 9:9–17, for example.) The well-known “Servant of the Lord” songs in the book of Isaiah (42:1–4; 49:1–7; 50:4–11; 52:13–53) paint a picture of innocent suffering and are often quoted in the Passion account of the New Testament. There is no indication, however, that these oracles were originally intended as *messianic* prophecies. It’s not surprising, therefore, that with a few notable exceptions, such as Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18), Paul’s ministry to his Jewish sisters and brothers soon reached a dead end.

### **Here Comes Everybody**

During the course of Paul and Barnabas’s first journey, however, something unexpected begins to happen. As the two men and their traveling companions make their way through Cyprus and southern Asia Minor, they begin to attract the attention of some Gentiles. Studies of Church history have revealed that the roots of Christianity as we know it extend into the cities of the Eastern Roman Empire. More specifically, while early church communities likely included a few wealthy patrons, Christianity’s appeal was mostly to the masses of urban poor. (Notice how Luke, who is writing for a Church with a large Gentile population, emphasizes the poverty and simplicity of Jesus’ birth in a way that Matthew never does; compare Luke 2 with Matthew 1–2.)

There are two main reasons for this unexpected turn of events. Religion in the Roman Empire has been compared to a carnival: numerous gods and goddesses were competing for the attention of the devout. Exotic cults from Egypt and points East came into the empire through conquest and trade. And among specific groups within the empire, such as the wealthy or the military, particular mystery cults that included secret ceremonies and rights of passage were popular. Although the Romans were coldly efficient and often brutal in governing the peoples they conquered, they were extremely tolerant of the rich stew of religions being practiced. Learning about a new religion being preached in town, therefore, offered an opportunity for at least entertainment and perhaps knowledge and insight.

More importantly, Jesus' message promised liberation from the oppression that was characteristic of the lives of the poor. Even today the most fervent Christians are in some of the poorest areas of the world. The Gentiles had no preconceived notions or interest in the Jewish idea of a messiah, or any of the particulars of Jewish laws; they offered Paul and Barnabas a clean slate upon which they could develop their teachings about the risen Christ.

There's a wonderfully dramatic story in Acts that gives us a window into how the ministry to the Gentiles might have unfolded. Paul and Barnabas arrive at Lystra in Asia Minor, and in the course of their preaching they encounter a man who has been crippled and lame from birth. Just as the power of the Holy Spirit was made manifest through Jesus in Luke's gospel, now that same power flows through the apostles in Acts. Paul commands the man to stand up straight and immediately he does. As soon as he realizes what has happened to him, the man begins to shout and jump around attracting a large crowd. Chaos erupts as the crowd makes preparations to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving in the main temple in the town square. The reason? The townspeople are convinced that Paul and Barnabas are gods who have come to bestow special blessings on their town.

Paul and Barnabas determinedly try to correct this misunderstanding. Finally they succeed, but just barely. No sooner have things begun to calm down when a group from the local synagogue arrives and is able to rile up the crowd once again—this time *against* Paul and Barnabas. Paul barely escapes with his life (Acts 14:8–19). Despite all the insanity, some seeds are planted: “When they arrived, they called the Church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27).

### **Two Factions Develop**

News of Paul and Barnabas' successes among the Gentiles filters south from Antioch in Syria to Jerusalem. Within the Jerusalem Church two factions begin to develop. Those who originally come from the Greek-speaking regions of the Eastern Roman Empire—the Hellenists—are used to interacting with Gentiles and with their customs. Temple worship and strict observance of the Torah have never been essential parts of their Judaism.

Others, however, are not so open. The church in Jerusalem consisted in part of Pharisees and Sadducees who had become followers of the way. For this group and the like-minded—known as “the Judaizers”—following the requirements of the Torah and worshiping at the temple were non-negotiable parts of being a follower of Jesus. After all, wasn’t Jesus himself a devout Jew? (Jesus says as much in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.) In the eyes of these early Christians, being a disciple of Jesus meant being a good Jew. If the Gentiles wanted to be in communion, they would first have to accept the teachings of Judaism, starting with circumcision! (Try and imagine how well this went over in the Gentile world.)

But Paul saw things differently. If the risen Christ is the source of our salvation, Paul reasoned, then the Torah and the temple are not. While certainly both were important to Paul, a Pharisee himself, neither seemed essential any longer. He puts it this way in his letter to the Galatians:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Galatians 3:23–27)

Either Christ’s gift is unconditional or it isn’t, Paul reasoned.

Something had to give. Was it absolutely necessary to require Gentiles to become Jews as the Judaizers insisted? Or should the Church adopt a more open-door policy toward Gentiles who wished to become disciples of Jesus? Somewhere in the mid-40s of the first century, a gathering took place in Jerusalem aimed at settling the question once and for all. That meeting is referred to today as the Council of Jerusalem.

### **The Council Meets**

The New Testament contains two accounts of this meeting in Jerusalem. One is found in Paul’s letter to the Galatians written five to ten years after the meeting. The other is the story told in Acts 14, prob-

ably written forty or fifty years after the meeting. Not surprisingly, Luke tidies things up a bit in Acts. Once the council's decision is put into a formal letter signed by the leader of the Jerusalem Church, James, "the brother of the Lord," the controversy never comes up again. Paul's earlier account suggests the process was more complicated. His confrontation with Peter described in Galatians 2 is prompted by the presence of Judaizers in Antioch *after* the council has reached its decision.

Allowing for these differences, the basic accounts are the same. Paul and Barnabas travel to Jerusalem to meet with Peter, James, and "the apostles and the elders" (Acts 15:6). Probably in an example of revisionist history, Peter's waffling over the issue (suggested by Paul in Galatians) is gone. Instead, it is Peter who speaks on Paul's behalf, emphatically stating his belief that the Holy Spirit "in cleansing [the Gentiles'] hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us....We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:9-11).

The assembly sits in silence as Paul and Barnabas get up to speak next and tell the Jerusalem leaders about "the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles." Finally, James settles the issue, announcing in the conclusion of his speech the policy that has governed the Church ever since: "Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:12-19).

The Jerusalem leaders do impose a few minor conditions concerning the laws of ritual purity and the dietary laws of Judaism, but the decision is clear. Gentiles do not have to become Jews in order to be disciples of Jesus. In extending the hand of community beyond the boundaries of its Jewish incubator, the Church took an enormous step toward becoming truly catholic, that is, universal. Having resolved the controversy to his satisfaction, Paul would spend the rest of his life on the road, traveling through Asia Minor, Greece, and eventually finding his way to Rome, leaving a number of new, mostly Gentile, churches in his wake.

And so the Church changed its mind. Challenged by the unanticipated success of the Gentile mission, the first Jewish followers of the Way were forced to prayerfully look more deeply at their understanding of Jesus and of themselves. Over the course of the next generation after the council, these first disciples and their successors gradually came to

see themselves as pioneers in a new way of being in communion with God. Then in 70 AD, a calamity befell Jerusalem that moved the Church irrevocably into the Gentile world.

### **The Destruction of the Temple**

Relations between the Jews in Palestine and their Roman occupiers had never been good. Soon after the Romans under Pompey were “invited” to enter the Jewish lands in 64 BC, the Jews began to feel the weight of Roman rule and taxation. One hundred years later, the occupation had become almost intolerable for most Jews. There had almost been a revolution a few years after Jesus’ crucifixion when Emperor Gaius (Caligula) planned on placing a statue of himself in the sacred precincts of the Jerusalem temple. Fortunately, the Emperor died before the plan could be carried out.

No occupation is ever really welcomed by the people who have been conquered. The Roman occupation in Judea was particularly bitter for two specific reasons, however. For one thing, Jerusalem and the surrounding territories were located near the eastern frontier of the empire. Every major town was equipped with a garrison of soldiers whose job was to be on the lookout for threats from the Parthians to the East or internal rebellion by Jewish zealots. (Notice how often Roman soldiers are on the periphery—and sometimes in the center—of gospel stories.) Jesus’ crucifixion was probably typical of the way the Romans handled real or potential rebel movements. Surviving records suggest that hundreds or even thousands of Jews were crucified during the Roman occupation.

A second source of conflict was the unusual nature of the Jewish religion. Virtually all of the peoples in the Roman Empire worshiped multiple gods and goddesses. As a result, they had no real problem with performing public acts of sacrifice on behalf of the Roman emperor. The Jews, however, believed in only one God, and the first commandment clearly prohibited them from worshiping idols. Throughout the entire time of Rome’s control, Jews fervently resisted any attempts to institute a cult of emperor worship in Palestine, and this led to many violent confrontations between Jews and Roman soldiers. (See Acts 5:35–37 for examples of conflict.) At least one massacre took place during the governorship of Pontius Pilate. You will even find the name of

a zealot (a guerrilla fighter of the Jewish resistance) in the list of Jesus' twelve apostles (Luke 6:15).

In part, the conspiracy to eliminate Jesus was motivated by a desire to put off the day of the final confrontation between the Jews and the Romans, a battle the Jews had no practical hopes of winning. The inevitable became reality in 66 AD when, provoked by the last Roman procurator of Judea, the inhabitants rose up in revolt. By the time Rome had crushed the insurrection four years later, the city of Jerusalem, including the temple complex, lay in ruins.

### **Regrouping of the Jews**

In the wake of this failed revolt, Judaism was reeling. For the next generation, the focus of Judaism shifted more and more toward strict observance of the Torah and showed less and less toleration for “fringe” sects that might complete the dissolution of the faith that the Roman army had started. The final divorce between Christianity and Judaism came in 100 AD at a meeting of the Jewish Pharisees at Jamnia, a coastal town in northern Palestine.

From the Jewish point of view, the now explicit Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus seemed to be a blatant violation of the first commandment. Following the meeting in Jamnia, Jews were pressured to choose: either leave the Way or leave the synagogue. Jewish communities all over the Eastern Roman Empire must have been torn asunder as families and individuals within families made their choices. The resulting hurt and anger against the Jews is frequently mentioned in the Gospel of John, which was written during this period. Of the four evangelists, only John consistently and with vehemence refers to the enemies of Jesus as “the Jews.”

### **Estranged Siblings**

As the second century began, the destiny of the Church as a Gentile community was sealed. One by one, Jewish-Christian communities were either absorbed into larger congregations (John's gospel shows some evidence of this) or disappeared as their numbers dwindled. Christianity and modern rabbinical Judaism went their separate ways. It is one of the darker chapters of Christian history that the relationship of these two “siblings,” grounded in a misunderstanding of John's gospel and of the

Jewish faith in general, has too often resembled the relationship of Cain and Abel—with the Christian Church in the role of the persecuting Cain.

In modern times, however, things have been changing for the better. When we discuss the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, we will look at the process through which the Church began to understand and take the first halting steps to purge herself of anti-Semitism. Perhaps another turning point is just ahead, a time when the two people of the one covenant will stand together in harmony and see themselves as the children of Abraham and sisters and brothers of one another and of Jesus.

### **For Thought and Discussion**

- 1) Read about Paul's conversion in Acts 9. Compare it to the disciples' encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). How are the encounters similar and different? What insights do you gain from them into the Resurrection experience?
- 2) Reflect on your own conversion experience(s). When have you “seen the light”? How has this affected your life?
- 3) Paul's challenge was to communicate the essentials of discipleship to both Gentiles and Jews. Who are the people and groups who are communicating the essentials of Christian discipleship today? How are they doing it? What are the “essentials”?
- 4) Why was Paul's mission to the Jews a limited success? Why do you think he was more successful with the Gentiles?
- 5) Paul is sometimes referred to as the true founder of Christianity. Do you agree or disagree with this assessment? Why?
- 6) How does this period in Church history illustrate the Holy Spirit's shaping of the *sensus fidei* through the interaction of the magisterium and the faithful?