



CALLED
together
AN INTRODUCTION
TO ECCLESIOLOGY

CHRISTOPHER McMAHON


ANSELM
ACADEMIC

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Introduction

CALLED TOGETHER

When my siblings and I were growing up, our mother became something of a neighborhood legend. Almost every night at dinnertime, she would stand in front of our house and ring a gigantic handbell. Her voice would ring out with the bell as she called us kids (in the order of our birth), “Maureen, Jim, Sean, Christopher! Dinner is ready!” When we were little, this was a comforting call, and an effective means of summoning us from various parts of the neighborhood. As we grew older, however, the sound of the bell and the tone of our mother’s voice became, shall we say, less endearing, and our response became correspondingly less eager and less prompt. My sister, four years older than I, had to endure this humiliating “cattle call” far longer than she deserved. Memories of this custom often come up at family gatherings these days, and we find it amusing how parenting sensibilities have changed. The image of young kids roaming around the neighborhood unsupervised and unprotected makes today’s parents as uncomfortable as the clanging bell once made us children. Yet, the experience of the bell and my mother’s voice resonates strongly as I consider what it means to be Church, because to be Church is to be “called together,” and I wonder

how much of the human response to such a call echoes the experience of being called when we were children—a little resistant but nonetheless assured by its ringing call.

“Called together” is the root meaning of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which the translators of the New Testament render as “church.” Within the world of Judaism and early Christianity, the call of God was associated with the people of Israel and their experience as a nation, a people set apart, constituted by God’s call. In fact, as many historians of ancient Israel have long noted, however the origins of Israel were connected with the patriarchal figures Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, by the time of the Exodus and the entry into the land of Canaan, the Israelites were a patchwork of different tribes with a loose sense of corporate identity.¹ The common identity of the Hebrew people was solidified over the course of generations by the experience of being called together by God, for God’s purpose. We see this unity in diversity being carried over into the New Testament, particularly in the Acts of the Apostles, when Jews of every nation and social standing, and Gentiles from around the world, come together through the power of God’s call.

So it is with any account of the Church: God calls humans together, and out of this diversity, a common identity and common mission are discerned. However, this discernment is not

always easy; diversities endure, and the story of God's call and our response is uneven, fraught with struggles. In the current age, the very notion of being "called *together*" is in question. Rather, the call of God is often portrayed as intensely personal, even to the point of being an utterly individual and private experience. The present book seeks to offer a balanced and inclusive account of the Church, its shortcomings and its mission. Although written from the perspective of contemporary Roman Catholic theology, this book hopes to offer an account of the Church and its mission that resonates with Christians from other traditions and even with those who hold a wide range of beliefs and convictions.

An area of some concern for Protestant Christians when addressing Roman Catholic Christians on the subject of ecclesiology (the study of the Church) is that the Catholic approach seems to place too great an emphasis on the Church, almost deifying it.² As a sign of this excessive ecclesiology, Protestants may point to the Roman Catholic tradition's custom of capitalizing the word *church* when used in reference to the one Church of Christ as it subsists in the Catholic Church. Throughout this text, the word *church* will be capitalized in accordance with customary practice in Roman Catholic theology. This move should not be interpreted as a challenge to, or a repudiation of, an ecumenical ecclesiology. Obviously, there will be occasion when "the Church" clearly refers uniquely to the Catholic Church, but readers should also learn to apply the use of "the Church" beyond those boundaries, notably in reference to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church as expressed in the Nicene Creed. This includes the broader community of Christians, including Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and evangelical churches. While learning to think about the Church so broadly may challenge some readers, discomfort and confusion often accompany theological discussions of the Church.

In the theological education of the laity, few areas are more important and yet more neglected than ecclesiology. Undergraduate courses on scripture, ethics, Christology, and even world religions tend to proliferate, while ecclesiology often takes a backseat. Theologians, on the other hand, have devoted considerable effort to this study, especially in the post-Vatican II era (since the mid-1960s). They argue powerfully about the connection between ecclesiology and the history of the Church, the structures of the Church, and the way authority is exercised by the Church's hierarchy (e.g., Roger Haight's recent multivolume study, *Christian Community in History*, and Hans Küng's post-conciliar manifesto, *The Church*).³ Richard Gaillardetz's recent book, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, nicely blends all of these concerns in an effort to summon the Church to a self-understanding that will enable it to engage a new globalized world.⁴

The present text does not seek to duplicate these efforts. Rather, it seeks to address the apparent marginalization of ecclesiology as a focal point of theological education. It does this by focusing on the nature of the Church and its mission in the world from a soteriological perspective—the perspective of how the Church promotes salvation by participating in the saving work of God in Jesus Christ. In short, this book will focus on both what the Church does, as well as what it is, without letting the history of the Church or its power structures dominate the discussion. *Called Together* articulates a theological understanding of the Church primarily in terms of its soteriological mission. This is but one manner, one pathway, for introducing students to ecclesiology as a theological discipline, and it must be pursued without excluding other approaches. However, this orientation will help to center the conversation about the Church on the work of God in Christ.

Certainly the issues confronting the Church are myriad, and ecclesiology must be capable of

addressing these issues. This book seeks to function as an introduction to, or an initial frame of reference for, ecclesiology. In other words, it seeks to provide a theoretical and practical basis for thinking about the Church, what it is, and what it does. With this foundation in place, conversations about power, ministry, structures, globalization, and enculturation may be more fruitfully pursued, and both readers and instructors are invited to make these issues part of their approach through incorporating supplementary materials as well.

THE PLAN FOR WHAT FOLLOWS

Ecclesiology is both descriptive and prescriptive. From a descriptive perspective, ecclesiology must address how the Church actually works in the life of believers within history, what some would call *ecclesiality*.⁵ Yet, ecclesiology also makes certain claims about how the common life of believers *ought* to unfold. It is within this prescriptive dimension of ecclesiology that the soteriological mission of the Church will find its place, particularly in the two opening chapters.

Chapter 1 presents the story of Jesus as a narrative of diverse and complex people—the people of Israel. The diversity of Gospels within the New Testament suggests that the Christian tradition understands that the story of Jesus is sensitive, deep, and inexhaustible. This chapter sets forth a theological and historical reading of the Jesus story in a manner that will highlight the communal and redemptive dimensions of that narrative. While some of this material may already be familiar to readers, such a review is often helpful in introducing a new subject. In chapter 2, the focus moves to the soteriological tradition and how it has reinforced various understandings of the Church and its mission, particularly from the Middle Ages through the

Counter-Reformation. That chapter concludes with the soteriological reflections offered by Bernard Lonergan and the model of the Church his soteriology informs.

Chapters 3–5 briefly describe the Church, its practices, and its self-understanding over the course of history. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the development of ecclesiology from the early Church through the early twentieth century. While this snapshot of developments is necessarily selective, it helps to highlight the connection between the form the Church has assumed in history and the sociocultural location of the Church. In other words, it shows how the Church's social setting has affected its understanding of itself and its mission. Chapter 4 treats the Second Vatican Council as a watershed in the life of the Church, particularly in its account of the Church and its relationship to the world. The chapter treats the events at the council, the context of those events, and the two major ecclesiological documents produced by the council itself. Chapter 5 bridges the descriptive accounts of the Church in chapters 3 and 4 and the recommendations for Church practice outlined in chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 5 extends the conversation about the Church and the world that was started at the council by addressing the post-Christian, globalized marketplace culture of the twenty-first century. The chapter briefly discusses the emergence of small-group structures and new ecclesial movements as a response to a growing dissatisfaction with parish life, and the way these movements present alternative models of believing and acting as Church. The chapter includes a cautionary note suggesting that Christians must avoid the temptation to retreat from a world that has become increasingly post-Christian, and instead focus on the Church's vocation to be an instrument of redemptive recovery in world history. Such a vocation requires critical engagement and cooperation with those outside Church boundaries.

The final two chapters outline proposals for what it means to be “called” and to be “sent” by God as a community that embodies and promotes conversion and redemptive recovery in history. Chapter 6 focuses on the dynamism of being “called” to conversion, to life with God (*communio*), through the celebration of the liturgy. The liturgy constitutes the Church and gives it its orientation to the world. Chapter 7 then addresses the dynamics of being “sent” into the world (*missio*). The social teaching of the Church, in particular, the tradition of Catholic Social Thought provides the framework for the discussion. Two issues, in particular, focus the conversation: war and family. These two issues may not be the most urgent or relevant for some readers, but they provide good examples of the mission of the Church in the world, and they resonate with the experiences (and failures) of local parish living. Many readers may relate to these issues, and their impact on the world and on history is evident.

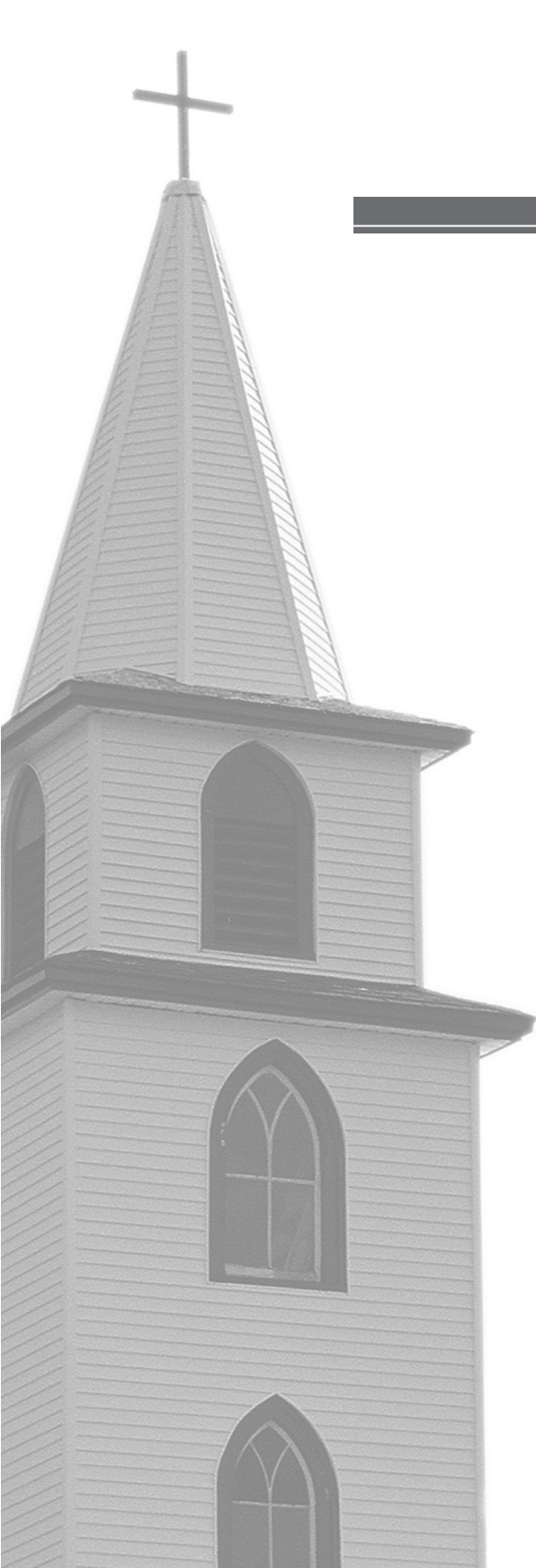
Each of the chapters includes several pedagogical features designed to promote classroom discussion. First, every chapter includes two sets of questions: “Questions for Understanding” and “Questions for Reflection.” “Questions for Understanding” asks basic questions about content; it is designed to highlight some of the

more important aspects of each chapter. “Questions for Reflection” asks students to engage the material in a way that takes them beyond the text and even beyond the classroom. Instructors may use or ignore these questions and exercises as they see fit. Second, each chapter includes a brief selection of books “For Further Study.” These books, along with those cited throughout the chapters and in the chapter endnotes, while by no means exhaustive or even representative, should nonetheless lead readers to discover additional resources for thinking about the Church. Finally, throughout the text are sidebar presentations intended to supplement and advance those issues most central to the text.

The text may be judged a success if readers and instructors find here resources that will help to animate a conversation about the Church that resonates with their experience and challenges their assumptions about what the Church is and what it is called to do. Those who find the scope of the book somewhat narrow are again encouraged to make use of supplemental material to move the conversation in other directions. In the end, it is hoped that *Called Together* will provide a helpful orientation to the Church via the fundamental theological claim of the Christian tradition, namely, that in Christ God is reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Endnotes

1. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Fourth Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 133–137. Bright is not alone in this assessment, and his account of Israel’s history is still a standard work in the field. See also Mark S. Smith, *Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), 7–27.
2. For example, see Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 237–251.
3. Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 3 vols. (New York: Continuum, 2004, 2005, 2008); Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967).
4. Richard Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (New York: Orbis, 2008).
5. See Paul Lakeland, “Maturity and the Lay Vocation: From Ecclesiology to Ecclesiality,” in *Catholic Identity and the Laity*, College Theology Society Annual Volume, 54, ed. Tim Muldoon (New York: Orbis, 2009), 241–259.



The Story of Jesus

Some years ago, many Christians started wearing bracelets or pins inscribed with the initials WWJD—“What Would Jesus Do?” The question was meant to provoke one to consider how everyday choices were to be modeled after Jesus. “Should I tell a lie to protect my friend?” “Should I ask the kid sitting alone in the cafeteria to join my friends and me at our table?” “Should I go on a mission trip to Guatemala, or should I take a vacation instead?” Well, what would Jesus do? Although the industry that grew up around WWJD was widely criticized, and some suggested that the question itself grossly oversimplified moral reasoning, the sentiment behind the question has merit, even if the application of the biblical narrative is not always readily apparent or even advisable. If Christians are not formed by the story of Jesus, what it means to be “Christian” becomes convoluted and hopelessly abstract. Accordingly, one needs the story of Jesus, but one might fairly ask—Which story? How does one put the story together? Is it simply a matter of picking up the Gospels and reading?

Anyone can simply read the Gospels, but it is important to recognize that one always reads selectively, with certain predispositions and with certain ends or purposes in mind. Of course, reading with a purpose is a good thing, but by doing so, one necessarily limits one’s field of vision. In what follows, this text does not pretend to present *the* story

of Jesus or even a normative account. Rather, what this text offers is *a* reading of the story of Jesus—one of many possible readings. In doing so, it hopes to highlight aspects of the story that will contribute to a well-formulated sense of Jesus’ mission and the nature of the Church. As such, it is a story that will resonate with other readings of the Jesus story and, above all, with the contemporary expression of the Church’s tradition. For it is through the story of Jesus that Christians are formed and called to union with God and fellowship with one another, so learning to narrate this story is crucial to an understanding of what it means for a Christian “to do” and “to be” Church.

JESUS AND THE STORY OF ISRAEL

The story of an individual is also the story of a community. A person cannot be fairly understood or rightly appreciated without an awareness of the family, friends, and culture(s) that have formed the individual. The story of Jesus is no exception. Without an adequate appreciation of the people and cultures that informed Jesus’ life and ministry, one cannot understand him or his destiny. The author of the Gospel according to Matthew makes this point emphatically in his opening chapter.

Matthew opens by narrating the family tree of Jesus. Although this list of generations (*Toledot* in Hebrew) may look like a fairly straightforward account of Jesus’ ancestry, the device is actually quite complex. *Toledot* are found in several places throughout the Old Testament, especially in the opening chapters of Genesis in which they provide the transition between various narrative cycles (e.g., the transition from the creation narrative to the story of Noah and from Noah to the Abraham cycle of stories; see Genesis 6 and 11).¹ As such, Matthew signals a transition from the

story of Israel’s return from exile, the latest episode in the ongoing story of Israel, to the story of Jesus. Matthew provides a link between Jesus and the story of Israel, and without that connection, the story of Jesus would be lost or distorted.

The basic contours of Israel’s story, particularly as it pertains to the story of Jesus, may be summarized in three interrelated themes: covenant, monarchy, and eschatology. Each of these themes, though rich and complex in its own right, nonetheless resonates strongly with the contemporary experience of Church and provides an important backdrop for the struggle to understand the Church and its mission today.

The Story of Israel: Covenant

Stories are integral to how one understands the nature of the universe and one’s place within it, what is often called one’s worldview. The stories of Israel’s ancestors and especially the recurring themes of covenant and mercy need to be understood, not as pious fairy tales, but as the embodiment of Israel’s worldview. Of special importance in the story of Israel, and therefore integral to Israel’s self-understanding, is the call of Abraham in the book of Genesis.

As the story goes, Abraham is called, or chosen, by God in Genesis 12, and Abraham responds to this election with trust, or *emunah* (the Hebrew word for “faith”). A key point in the story is that although Abraham is described as responding to God with faith and trust, God’s call, or God’s election, precedes Abraham’s trust. In other words, God’s election of Abraham is utterly gracious; Abraham has done nothing to deserve his election.² At this point, one may rightly ask about the fairness of this election. Such an election may sound like favoritism and an affront to the common understanding of God’s love for all of humanity. An accounting of the covenant ceremony in Genesis 15 might help respond to this question.

Jesus' Family Tree

The genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are quite interesting. In Matthew, the genealogical list begins with Abraham and continues through David and his descendants—the kings of Judah (note the famous names, such as Solomon, Hezekiah, and Josiah). The list ends with the generations from the Babylonian Exile to Jesus. The author contends that the list from Abraham to David, from David to the Exile, and from the Exile to Jesus contains fourteen generations in each. This is not entirely accurate (the generations from the Exile to Jesus only number thirteen), but the number fourteen has more than literal significance. First, it is a play on the name of David, as each of the Hebrew characters in *David* has numerical values that add up to fourteen:

David — דוד (ד=4, ו=6, ד=4)

Some scholars suggest, however, that the significance of the number fourteen rests in that it is a multiple of seven—the perfect number. All of this signifies the timeliness of Jesus' birth: he is a descendant of David, the long-awaited king, who comes at the appointed time.

Additionally, Matthew's genealogy includes mention (directly or indirectly) of four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Each of these women forms an important link in the story of Israel and the ancestry of David, yet none of them is an Israelite. Moreover, the women enter into the ancestral lineage in unconventional ways. Tamar is a neglected widow who seduces Judah, the father of her dead husband(s) (Genesis 38). Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, survives the bloodletting that followed that city's destruction because she cooperated with a pair of Israelite spies (Joshua 2:14; 6:22–25). The story of Ruth includes a journey to the home of her deceased husband, accompanying her mother-in-law, where she seduces a new husband, Boaz (Ruth 3). Finally, the story of David's seduction (rape?) of Bathsheba and murder of her husband is well known (2 Samuel 11).

In Luke, the genealogy runs back from Jesus through David and Abraham to Adam. Luke includes none of the kings of Judah in his list. Luke's genealogy is nonroyal, and in some ways nonmessianic. Jesus is a child of Adam, not just a child of Abraham—Jesus' lineage has a universal quality. The story of Jesus is still intimately bound with the story of Israel, but Luke narrates that story from the perspective of the poor and the dispossessed—the *anawim*.

God does not call Abraham in Genesis for Abraham's benefit, but to make Abraham into a great nation, a goal that requires the possession of land and the proliferation of Abraham's descendents. God promises Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the

communities of the earth shall find blessing in you" (Genesis 12:1–3). Given that God's plan is for the salvation of the world, a nation that is chosen and formed by God will be able to make known God's love, mercy, and fellowship. Yet, from the very moment God gives Abraham these promises, circumstances conspire to frustrate their fulfillment. In fact, Abraham finally becomes somewhat incredulous, and he

questions God's ability to deliver on the promises. At that point, God intervenes, and in a ritual quite strange to modern readers, God makes a covenant with Abraham.

The covenant ceremony that unfolds in Genesis 15:1–21 highlights the profound novelty inherent in the idea of a covenant between God and humans. To the people of the second millennium BCE, however, the ritual made perfect sense. God passes between the two halves of a series of animal carcasses, and as this action unfolds, God swears an oath, saying that Abraham will inherit the land that was promised earlier: “from the river of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates.” This ceremony appears to have been borrowed from the ancient Hittites, who used it as a means of ritually binding an overlord to someone of inferior social standing.³ The idea was that the overlord, who was beyond the grasp of those beneath him, would walk between the carcass halves that had been set out (such a scene no doubt invoked the image of a horrible and painful death). As the overlord passed through the bloody mess, he would pronounce an oath and outline the specific terms of the promise. For example, he would guarantee that a particular piece of land was to be given to the inferior party. If the overlord failed to deliver on the promise, the deity who was the witness to the promise would then rip the overlord in half (note the similarity with the ceremony in Jeremiah 34:18–22). Given this cultural-historical background, the scene becomes even more remarkable—God freely chooses to be solemnly bound to the promise made to Abraham without “needing” anything in return. Certain signs of the covenant, or election, appear later in the story, and these are meant to reinforce the special relationship between God and the descendants of Abraham (e.g., circumcision in Genesis 17). The covenant with Abraham becomes the point of reference in the dramatic story of Israel's foundation, the Exodus from Egypt and the journey

to the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants.

The story of Moses and the Exodus is the foundational narrative for the people of Israel. The experience of enslavement in Egypt and of God's power to bring liberation from the pharaoh, the god-king of Egypt, colors all aspects of Israel's life. The story narrated in the Pentateuch describes not only God's power to defeat enemies and liberate those who are oppressed, but it also describes the failures of the Hebrew people to remain faithful to God and to trust in God's promises. In the familiar scene at Mount Sinai, as God draws near to seal the covenant, Israel turns away (Exodus 32:1–14). The golden calf incident, the wandering in the wilderness, the danger of famine and death, all capture the dynamic of the covenantal relationship between Israel and God—God reaches out to humanity, while humanity turns away to embrace its own destruction. This pattern is pivotal in the Old Testament because it accentuates two ideas central to covenant: humanity's weakness and God's *chesed*, (fidelity, love, and mercy). Even though humans will not live up to the covenant, God always will live up to it and more. God goes beyond the boundaries of a normal covenantal agreement in order to secure Israel and preserve the people from utter destruction. Thus, the story of Israel is not the story of a nation, but of a people formed and sustained by God's fidelity, expressed in his *chesed*.

The Story of Israel: Kingship

Leadership within the People of God has always been a major concern. In Israel, the story of David stands out as a beautiful and tragic example of the glories and the dangers of institutionalized leadership within a community constituted by God. It is noteworthy that in the New Testament Jesus is given the title “Christ” or “messiah”—a title that ties him directly to

David, the one who was anointed king in Israel. There was a hope, an expectation within Israel, that just as God had raised David up to lead the people in obedience to God's covenant, so too would God raise up a new messiah, a new king, to do the same. But as messiah, or anointed one, Jesus reminds the people that God is their king and that institutionalized leadership can only survive so long as God's kingship and God's *chesed* are kept front and center. The story of David serves as an important point of reference on this issue.

The books of First and Second Samuel narrate the story of King David and his rise to power. Even though the narrative is intended to celebrate the achievements of David and honor him as Israel's greatest king, the text also includes those voices in ancient Israel that thought the establishment of a monarchy was a bad idea (1 Samuel 8:1–22; 12:1–25). According to those voices, the true ruler of Israel could only be the God of Abraham, the God who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt (1 Samuel 10:17–19). If a single human was to rule Israel, that human would have to be a special kind of person, an agent of God who did not rule in the same manner as the kings of other nations. The first king of Israel, Saul, presumably had many qualities that made him a good king, though these are not mentioned in the text, as well as many weaknesses (1 Samuel 15:1–35). His successor David, regarded by the people of Judah as the greatest king of Israel, was also a man with great talent as well as many flaws. It is in the story of David, however, that the Old Testament sets forth the paradigmatic example of what it means to exercise authority over God's own people.

Contemporary scholars debate about the character of David and the extent to which he really does provide an appropriate example of how a king of Israel should act. In particular, David Bosworth has highlighted some of the recent scholarship on David—both sensational

and modest—and concludes that although there are many forces at work in the biblical narrative, the Deuteronomistic narrative in first and second Samuel is reasonably reliable.⁴ David is described as a hero in the wars against the Philistines (1 Samuel 18:6–12). His victories are credited to him rather than to God, whereas in Exodus and the book of Joshua, neither Moses nor Joshua is credited with winning military victories. Many saw David's personal charisma as a threat (1 Samuel 18:1–30): it was certainly a political threat to other tribes that wanted power and those who believed that Israel had no king, but God saw it as dangerous.

Perhaps the most familiar story of David's failure to be a good custodian of God's people involves his hubris—but not on the battlefield. While his generals are in the field, along with the Ark of the Covenant, that great sign of God's presence with Israel, David stays home and takes advantage of Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of his best and most devout soldiers. The prophet Nathan, in a remarkable scene in 2 Samuel 12:1–14, denounces David's adultery and subsequent murder of Uriah. Nathan publicly unmasks David's dark deeds and pronounces judgment upon him. In almost any other kingdom, the monarch would have made short work of Nathan and his supporters, as a traditional monarchy could not endure such a public challenge. Because God is the real ruler of Israel, however (David is only a custodian), God will hold David accountable through the words of the prophet (the Greek word *prophētēs* means “one who speaks on behalf of another”). David recognizes that he must submit to the judgment of God, even though it puts him in a difficult political position.

In the words that come from Nathan, one hears a delicate balance among the personal integrity of David, the collective identity of Israel, and the covenantal *chesed* of God. Like the patriarchs, especially Jacob, David exhibits

a character that is at once noble and frail. Such moral paradoxes characterize the people of God and their leaders from the very beginning. Only when the people and their leaders are obedient to God, when they fully embrace God's *chesed*, can authentic leadership be exercised. This is precisely the challenge issued by Jesus in his ministry, and it is the point that arouses stern and even deadly opposition among the leaders of the people.

The Story of Israel: Eschatology

The custodians of God's people, the anointed kings of Israel and Judah, often failed to live up to their lofty vocations. In the centuries that followed the reign of David, the political situation of Israel deteriorated with internal weakness and the rise of great regional powers such as the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Eventually, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed and subsequently, the Southern Kingdom of Judah went into exile in Babylon. With the return from the Babylonian Exile, one sees the emergence of a distinct religious identity centered in Jerusalem and the rebuilt Temple (the Second Temple). The many forms of Judaism that emerged over the centuries after the Babylonian Exile reflected the political, cultural, and social developments that took place with successive foreign powers controlling Jerusalem (587 BCE–70 CE). The dominant theme of this period is the tension between Israel's covenantal vocation to be a people set apart as "a light to the nations," and the fact that Israel's destiny now seemed to be determined by the whims of a pagan empire (the Greek Seleucid Empire and then the Roman Empire). There was a sense among the people that God would intervene and resolve this situation, and it was this sense of impending intervention that modern scholars identify as the eschatological worldview of first-century Judaism.

N. T. Wright, the eminent Anglican New Testament scholar, nicely summarizes first-century Jewish eschatology as a response to four basic questions: Who are we? Where are we? What is wrong? What is the solution? Though various sects, or strands, of Judaism (e.g., Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, etc.) might disagree with particular answers to these questions, the general parameters are consistent as they deal with Israel's basic worldview.

1. **Q:** Who are we?

A: We are Israel, the chosen people of GOD the creator.

2. **Q:** Where are we?

A: We are in the land promised to our fathers, but we are still in exile because of the oppression we suffer at the hands of the pagans (and lax Jews).

3. **Q:** What is wrong?

A: We endure suffering and oppression at the hands of foreign rulers and our own rulers.

4. **Q:** What is the solution?

A: All problems will be resolved when God intervenes and establishes his kingly rule.⁵

As God works to bring about this solution, Israel becomes more keenly aware of just who God is. As such, the monotheism of Israel, the centerpiece of God's identity for Israel (Deuteronomy 4:6), undergoes significant development. Many Jews of the late Second Temple period were able to read such texts as Daniel 7 and the description of "one like a son of man" standing before God and acting on behalf of God as suggesting that God encompassed a plurality of divine beings. In fact, the first-century Jewish philosopher and theologian Philo argued that God's Word, through which the world was created (Genesis 1) and through which the prophets were called and the Torah was given, was actually

“another God.”⁶ Such speculation regarding God’s Word (or Wisdom) and the “son of man” figure in Daniel are evidence of a growing twofold concern in Judaism after the Babylonian Exile: (1) God must be understood as separate from the world in which evil and sin reign, and (2) God is not remote but is active in the history of Israel and the world in order to combat and defeat the power of evil. Apropos of the latter, God had elected Israel, made a covenant with Israel, continued to bless Israel in the course of history, and was as the Word (Wisdom) or as “the son of man” entering into history at the *eschaton*.

The *eschaton* for which Israel hoped was not the end of the world; instead, Israel’s stories, symbols, and practices, and especially its propensity for revolution, suggest that its hope was very earthy, very political. For many Jews of the first century, the hope of the *eschaton* was also a hope for resurrection, and this hope did not represent a desire to flee from the world, to escape into some distant space away from the political turmoil that was engulfing Israel. Rather, resurrection was an important symbol that affirmed the belief that God was going to transform the present reality and not destroy it. According to N. T. Wright, the resurrection was not simply a pious hope about the deliverance of the righteous who suffered in this world; it was the indispensable way of expressing the hope of future vindication of the righteous amidst the suffering Israel had been undergoing since the time of the Exile. As such, it was an integral part of Jewish apocalyptic expectations.⁷ The resurrection was the primary means by which Israel expressed their hope for a “return from exile,” the forgiveness of sins (the cause of its continuing exile), and the reestablishment of Israel as the true humanity intended by God.⁸ If first-century Jews literally expected the world to end at the *eschaton*, as so many interpreters of New Testament apocalyptic literature have suggested, then there would be no resurrection—it would make no sense. Wright,

rather, speaks of Israel’s apocalyptic literature as envisioning a renewal of the created order established by God. That order would supplant the current order in which pagans dominated; in the new order, the true Israel would dominate.

What constituted the *true* Israel would be a cause for debate within Judaism in the two centuries before the time of Jesus. There was, in fact, substantial room for differences at the level of what one might call secondary beliefs, and these differences would create rival descriptions of who could be counted as part of the true Israel and, therefore, would be saved from destruction.⁹ The existence of rival sects within Judaism testifies to this reality. For the Pharisees, the true Israel would be those Jews who embraced their renewed emphasis on Torah observance; for the Essenes, the true Israel would be defined by those who had adhered to the Teacher and abided by the rules of the community. One could go on through the list of various first-century movements and find issues that helped to redefine the boundaries between the true Israel (those who would see resurrection) and God’s enemies (those who would be destroyed). The sectarian literature from Qumran, the early rabbinic literature, and even the Gospels themselves testify to these attempts to define boundaries. In trying to create boundaries, first-century Jews were not just speculating about future salvation—who would receive rewards at the resurrection and who would be destroyed; rather, these boundaries were manifest in the present. Faithfulness to the covenant in the present time of distress would be vindicated in the future with resurrection and participation in a new world that God would soon usher in with the *eschaton*.

Jewish eschatology highlights God’s fidelity, God’s *chesed*. The covenant and the monarchy both point to a consummation of God’s saving plan whereby Israel’s exile comes to an end, the kingly rule or reign of God is established, and the nations are brought into fellowship with

God. None other than God has promised this and none other than God will accomplish this for Israel. It was into this context that Jesus was born, and it was this context that the Gospel of Matthew highlighted in its use of the *Toledot*.

THE “KINGDOM” STORY

The story of Jesus, as told by Mark, begins with Jesus’ announcement, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14). Such an announcement, while familiar to most Christians, remains obscure. Yet, the preceding section should help to bring this announcement into clearer focus through its connection to the story of Israel. The announcement of the “kingdom of God” powerfully binds the words and deeds of Jesus in the Gospels. Modern readers, however, are often tempted to dismiss or domesticate this symbol simply as a description of heaven, yet careful attention to the text will yield some intriguing results. If the story of Jesus is narrated as the “kingdom” story, it may be reengaged in a powerful way. In what follows, this text makes no pretense that this is the only way to tell the story of Jesus but insists that it generally reflects a reading of the story of Jesus from the perspective of contemporary New Testament criticism and theology.

Jesus and John the Baptist

Any discussion of Jesus’ life and ministry must include mention of John the Baptist. In fact, all four canonical Gospels agree that John’s ministry provides the basic context for understanding Jesus and his own proclamation. In short, Jesus’ proclamation about the in-breaking of the kingdom rests on John and his ministry of baptism and repentance.

The synoptic Gospels portray John the Baptist as an antiestablishment figure who conducted his ministry in the wilderness near the Jordan River (Luke 1:80). Many have speculated about the connection between John and the sect known as the Essenes, whose main settlement was nearby at a place called Qumran. Of particular interest is John’s baptizing activity, which is remarkably similar to Essene water purification rituals. Such parallels are not unheard of in first-century Judaism, but the geographic proximity of John and his antiestablishment message raises interesting questions about how much John borrowed from the Essenes (see 1QpHab, the commentary on Habakkuk from the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were probably produced by an Essene community).

In Matthew 3:7–10, John the Baptist calls those who have approached him for baptism (a sign of repentance in the face of impending eschatological judgment) a “brood of vipers.” He challenges them not simply to come to him out of fear of God’s judgment but in *metanoia*, or repentance. John demands a swift decision to be baptized and a radical reformation of both inner attitudes and external conduct. In Matthew 3:11–12, John looks to the future when someone “stronger than me” will come and exercise judgment. The righteous will be spared if their repentance is sincere, and their baptism is the appropriate sign of sincere repentance.

American New Testament scholar John Meier believes that Jesus was actually a follower of John the Baptist.¹⁰ Such a suggestion rests largely on the testimony of the Fourth Gospel (John), often regarded by biblical scholars as the least historically reliable of the four Gospels. In John, one finds the only explicit evidence regarding Jesus’ direct association with the Baptist. For example, in John 3:22, Jesus spends time with his disciples baptizing, while at the same time, John the Baptist continues his ministry of baptism nearby. Meier suggests that the so-called