

There are indications that, for a time, at least, there was some uncertainty about whether the early Christian movement would remain a Jewish sect or whether, on the contrary, it would become a new and independent religion. But while there may have indeed been some uncertainty about this, I incline to think that there was much greater uncertainty about something else, and that not only for a time, but permanently—namely, whether the early Christian movement would develop primarily into a religion of law like Judaism or whether, on the contrary, it would become a new and different type of religion based on grace.

What makes it hard to think that the early Christian movement could have long remained a Jewish sect is the decisive significance it evidently assigned to Jesus. On any account, it took Jesus to be either its primary authority or its explicit primal authorizing source, the apostles being its primary authority. Either way, it could hardly have remained a sect within Judaism, any more than the early Islamic movement could have been a Jewish sect. Even if it took Jesus to be only its primary authority, thereby taking his experience of God's will to be its explicit primal authorizing source, it would as surely have moved outside of Judaism as did early Islam in taking the Koran to be its primary authority, thereby taking Mohammed's experience of the Koran to be its explicit primal authorizing source. The early Christian movement could have remained a sect within Judaism only by regarding Jesus as merely a nonconstitutive Jewish teacher or prophet whose authority was secondary to the primary authority of one or another Jewish tradition of interpreting the Hebrew scriptures. But to have so regarded Jesus would have been precisely not to assign him decisive significance, as the early Christian movement clearly seems to have done.

But what did remain uncertain even after Jesus had been assigned such decisive significance was exactly how it would be understood. Is Jesus thus significant—as he clearly is, for example, for the evangelist Matthew—because he is the divinely authorized/vindicated teacher of a new law and a better righteousness (than that of the scribes and Pharisees), and so, in effect, a "second Moses"? Or is he of decisive significance, as he clearly is for Paul, precisely because he is the liberating judgment of God upon Jews as well as

gentiles and therefore "the end of the law," new and old, as the way of salvation?

The fact that Matthew's gospel and Paul's letters both found and have continued to have a place within the Christian canon attests not only to this other, much greater uncertainty, but also to its permanence throughout the church's history—as do any number of other things, such as the real differences between Pauline and deuteropauline theology and ethics and the "two missions" of, or the continuing conflict between, "Petrines" and "Paulines."

5 December 1994; rev. 23 January 1997