Introduction

One day in early August 1942, when a German nun called Sister Benedicta was at prayer in the chapel of the Carmelite convent in the Dutch town of Echt, members of the German SS presented themselves at the convent door. They told the prioress to inform Sister Benedicta, whose original name was Edith Stein, that she had ten minutes to pack all that she needed for a journey to Germany. From Germany she was transported to Auschwitz, in Poland, where she was murdered. She was fifty years old. Ten years earlier she had entered the Carmelite order. Edith Stein was Jewish; but one day in 1921, at the age of thirty, she had picked up and read from cover to cover a copy of the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila. She had been interested in Christianity for some time, but for her this book was the last step in her long search for truth. On finishing it she said to herself, "Das ist die Wahrheit!"—"That is the truth." Looking back, she realized that this was the moment both of her decision to become a Catholic and of her vocation to the Carmelite Order. She went to tell her mother, a fervent, practicing Jew, who was horrified and wept. Edith was very close to her mother, but she had never seen her in tears before. Shortly afterwards, on Yom Kippur, the two women went together to the synagogue. When the rabbi intoned the words, "Höre O Israel, Dein Gott ist ein Einziger" ("Hear, O Israel, your God is One"), Edith's mother leaned over and whispered to her daughter, "Hörst Du? Dein Gott ist ein Einziger"—"Do you hear? Your God is One, and only One."

Here is the boundary line: one God. Christianity also proclaims one God, but its two central doctrines, Incarnation and Trinity, sharply differentiate it from the other "religions of the book," Judaism and Islam. These two doctrines are found in the Gospel of John, the first spelled out explicitly on its first page, the second clearly adumbrated in the part of the Gospel we call the Farewell Discourse (chs. 14–16). They situate it poles apart from Judaism, further away than any other writing in the New Testament, and consequently make it the hardest of all to explain. Even considered in isolation, with no consideration of its relation to Judaism, it is an astonishing, bewildering, mysterious work. So we should not be surprised that the great German scholar Adolf Harnack declared in 1886 that "the origin of the Johannine writings is, from the standpoint of a history of literature and dogma, the most extraordinary enigma which the early history of Christianity presents."[1] What Harnack actually wrote was "das

wundervollste Rätsel," the most marvelous riddle, or a puzzle full of mysteries. The Gospel of John is indeed "a puzzle full of mysteries." How are we to explain it?

The Jewish religion as we see it today is far from uniform. But although there are considerable differences between the Ashkenaz and Sephardic traditions, and between the three main groupings, Orthodox, liberal, and Reform, the differences are not great enough to warrant our speaking of a plurality of Judaisms. Similar differences between the two great branches of Islam, the Sunni and the Shia, and between the various regions of the world where Islam has taken hold, are too small to justify our talking of a plurality of Islams.

The differences today between some branches of Christianity are great enough, in my opinion, to make them into different religions. Yet we never hear people speaking of different Christianities any more than we do of different Judaisms or Islams. No branch of Christianity could possibly have emerged from any of the modern varieties of Judaism. Why? Fundamentally because the two religions, though both profess belief in one God, have completely opposed conceptions of God's definitive revelation to humankind. For Jews this can be summed up as the Torah, the law revealed to Moses. For Christians it is summed up in the very person of Christ.

One of the best summaries of the ineradicable difference between the two religions comes in the Prologue to the Gospel of John: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). This statement, bleak, blunt, uncompromising, illustrates more clearly than any other in the whole of the New Testament the incompatibility of Christianity and Judaism. It announces a new religion. Yet whoever wrote it (it comes towards the end of the Prologue of John's Gospel) had worshiped in a Jewish synagogue. This Gospel tells among other things of the decision of "the Jews" to expel from the synagogue anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah. Yet, unlike the proclamation of a Jewish Messiah (which can only be made *from within* Judaism), the rejection of the law of Moses clearly implied in the statement above amounts to a rejection of Judaism itself. So how are these two related? How could someone who once claimed that Jesus was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah go on to abandon the traditional beliefs without which such a claim could have no meaning? How, within roughly half a century, was the move made from one religion to the other? The answer to this question lies hidden somewhere in the pages of John's Gospel, and one of my aims in this book is

1. Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma* (7 vols.; New York: Russell & Russell, 1958), 1:96-97 (first German edition, 1886).

to tease it out. I will be arguing, in fact, that the Gospel represents a deliberate decision to supplant Moses and to replace him with Jesus, thereby substituting one revelation, and indeed one religion, for another.[2]

While I was writing this book, it was borne in on me that its central argument rests on three basic propositions, none of which can be taken for granted. My guess is (for I have made no attempt to verify this supposition by combing through the hundreds of books and articles that have been published on the Gospel of John within, say, the last five years) that the great majority of contemporary experts would either reject these propositions outright or feel themselves justified in ignoring them. So I have set out to prove in three excursuses that (1) the Gospels are not to be thought of simply as Lives of Christ; (2) that the Gospel of John was not written as a continuous composition over a short stretch of time but went through at least two editions; and (3) that it was composed by a member of a particular community for the benefit of his fellow members. Introducing a collection of essays published the same year as the second edition of *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, Richard Bauckham takes issue with what he calls "the dominant approach in Johannine scholarship," which he associates in particular with Raymond E. Brown, J. Louis Martyn, and myself.[3] (Having seen many more references in the secondary literature to Bauckham's book than to my own, I rather doubt if my views on John could be said to represent the dominant approach.) Finally, I have added a fourth excursus to defend the proposition that the main theme of the Prologue is not creation (as is generally assumed), but God's plan for humankind.[4]

Because Moses was so important in the experience of the evangelist, and therefore in his thinking too, I have prefaced my new book with some

2. Garry Wills, reviewing a recent book on changing Catholic attitudes to Judaism (*New York Review of Books*, vol 60, no. 3, March 21–April 3, 2013, 36–37) does not disguise his abhorrence of what he calls *supersessionism* (ugly word), which he clearly associates with anti-Semitism. He ascribes this to the Letter to the Hebrews, which he contrasts with Paul's Letter to the Romans. But Paul too, like John, had to choose between Christ and the law. The root difficulty is the ambiguity of the word *Jewish*, which has both a religious and a racial reference, as it did at the turn of the era. If we blanket out the racial reference altogether, then of course Christianity is anti-Jewish, just as Judaism is anti-Christian. The two religions are incompatible. But it does not follow that Christians and Jews can't be friends. The adoption of a new religion by New Testament writers, most of whom were Jewish, did not turn them into anti-Semites. One reason for beginning this book with the story of Edith Stein is to illustrate what should in any case be an obvious truth.

3. Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). Apart from the introduction only one chapter in the book directly attacks "the dominant approach," and I deal with this in excursus II.

4. The excursuses are attached to the chapters they are designed to support.

reflections on his changing role, taking my illustrations not in the order in which they appear in the Gospel as we have it, but in the order in which the evangelist himself came to them. (The first two, I think, were present in sources he took over; the last two were added at a later stage of his work.)

In chapter 2, "Consciousness of Genre," I argue that the evangelist, fully aware of the problems inherent in the gospel genre that he had chosen for his work, reflected upon them and exploited them for his own purposes. In chapter 3 I attempt to explain the phrase "chief priests and Pharisees" as it is used in the Gospel. Both of these groups have been fully investigated by scholars, but there is no satisfactory short account available either of their history or of their essential nature. Since they both play a significant part in John's Gospel, a summary description of their history and nature furnishes a useful introduction. A secondary aim of this chapter is to indicate where I believe we should look if we wish to understand the great debates of the Gospel, mostly with "the Jews" but also with the Pharisees—namely, in first-century Palestine (Jamnia). Indirectly, therefore, I am taking issue with the views of two great scholars who have written extensively about the Fourth Gospel. Were we to follow Rudolf Bultmann we would be looking rather to Iraq (where, apparently, the Mandaean writings were composed, no earlier than the eighth century c.e.); and if instead we followed C. H. Dodd we would be looking to Egypt (where the *Hermetica* were written, in the second and third centuries c.e..) A third aim of the chapter is to explain the evangelist's puzzling use of the term 'Ιουδαῖοι (Jews) to refer to Jesus' adversaries—puzzling not least because he and his disciples were Jews themselves.

The relevance of the fourth chapter, on the Essenes, is less immediately evident, because this sect is never mentioned in the Gospel (or, for that matter, anywhere else in the New Testament). But in the course of a more general discussion of the history of this sect, and of the scrolls that formed the library of the Qumran community, I shall argue that, besides writings that demonstrate their incontestable allegiance to the Mosaic law, there are others that show a surprising affinity to the Gospel of John.

Some may think that these two chapters (3 and 4) are of only marginal relevance to the book as a whole. But the third chapter anchors the Gospel in its historical setting and thus avoids the risk of allowing it to float free, and the fourth provides some useful and relatively accessible information about a sect that is still little known except to specialists.

In the fifth chapter, taking an historical approach, I inquire into the circumstances of the Gospel's composition and follow this by offering a radically altered version of a chapter of my earlier book entitled "Intimations

of Apocalyptic."[5] I conclude this by asking in what sense if any the Gospel might be called "an apocalypse in reverse." The seventh chapter, one of two to deal with the evangelist's adaptation of Jewish traditions, is concerned with the claim that Jesus fulfilled the prediction of a Moses-like prophet, and the eighth ("Human or Divine?") deals with two other Jewish traditions, Wisdom and the Son of Man. In the final chapter I attempt to explain the difference between the Johannine portrait of Jesus and the much more readily comprehensible picture of the Synoptic Gospels.

5. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1st ed. 1991; 2nd ed. 2007). Unless otherwise noted this work will be cited from the second edition.