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The Ministry Begins

Matthew's chapter 3 picks up the story some thirty years later with the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, and in 4:1-11 the temptation narrative. At 4:12 Jesus returns to Galilee, not home to Nazareth but rather to Capernaum, where he begins to enlist disciples, beginning with Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. His itinerant ministry takes him throughout Galilee, his fame extending north to Syria and attracting crowds from the Jerusalem area, from the ten cities along the Mediterranean coast, and from the other, or eastern side of the Jordan.

Those that repent and embrace
the Faith and do what is right
shall be admitted to Paradise.

—Koran

With chapter 3 the narrative has bypassed Jesus' childhood and young adulthood, which by the second century had become the stuff of legends. It is now the spring of AD 28 (perhaps) and a significant event occurs: the baptism of Jesus by his cousin and great predecessor, John the Baptist, now often called the "Baptizer," or, among Baptists, "John the Immerser" (or, less reverently, the "Big Dipper"). Repentance, for John, entails baptism, to which Jesus also submits ("to fulfil all righteousness"), although the event itself is not described and it is unclear what the sinless agent of God's redeeming has to repent.

John is a wilderness figure resembling Elijah the Tishbite ("an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins" [2 Kgs. 1:8]), preaching the need for repentance and the nearness of a mysteriously undefined "kingdom of heaven," a message Jesus will repeat at 4:17. His proclamation is so brief and abrupt that readers are not told if divine forgiveness is assured by repentance or what sort of life the repentant sinner should live after baptism. Here he appears suddenly and unexpectedly, but he will be generally absent from Jesus' ministry, though his unhappy fate, described in 14:1-12, foreshadows Jesus' rejection and his crucifixion. John was a model ascetic, and that the word of God came to him while he was "in the wilderness" (Isa. 40:3) helped justify the earliest monks when they withdrew from civilization to be "alone with God,"

though Calvin warned against turning John into a proto-monk.¹ It is symbolically appropriate that he performed baptism, a ceremony of transition, in the Jordan River, the traditional boundary between the wilderness and the promised land.

Baptism is something of a problem, being uncertain in its origins and meaning, unexpected in a life of Jesus, unparalleled in the Old Testament, unclear in its theology, and uneven in its acceptance and practice among Christian denominations, though it eventually came to rank with the Eucharist as the fundamental Christian sacrament. It is even questioned in its English rendering, as some would prefer "immersion," pointing out that the Greek of 3:11 is literally "in water" and "in the spirit and fire." Jews were accustomed to purifying themselves through ritual ablutions and bathing, as can be seen from the records of the Essenes or in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where the Qumran community seems to have practiced frequent washings. But quite different is the rite of baptism, which by contrast has an indelible character and is not repeatable (though baptism vows can be renewed). Thus, it may have served as an initiation for converts to Judaism who were not circumcised and needed to be cleansed of their Gentile impurities, though it is unknown when or where or why it became an initiatory rite for Christian converts. Nevertheless, Jews did not baptize other Jews, so John's insistence on its accompanying their acts of repentance must have seemed a surprising innovation. Baptism recurs at the end of Matthew when Jesus orders his disciples to baptize converts in the name of the Trinity (28:19). But there is no indication that it was formally instituted by him, and only once (John 3:22) is he said to baptize anyone himself.

Jesus' baptism is recorded in all four gospels, but the presence of the Holy Spirit suggests that his is a special Spirit-baptism, not a cleansing from sin. For ordinary Christians, it became a sacrament that would remit all sin, so it was normally delayed in the early church until candidates had undergone months of probation and instruction, particularly in the forty days of Lent that ended on Holy Saturday. It was then performed at Easter in order to assimilate its "rebirth" symbolism with the death and resurrection of Christ, an association popular with Paul. Baptisms were performed at a cathedral but in a separate building called a baptistery, usually a round structure recalling the rotunda in Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built over the traditional sites of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. There the candidate would customarily face west while renouncing the devil and his works (baptism is also a quasi-exorcism, a part of the ceremony that the Reformers eliminated), and east while reciting the Apostles' Creed. The candidate underwent a triple immersion, one for each member of the Trinity (or recalling Jesus' three days in the tomb), or else a sprinkling ("aspersion") while standing in the font, then was clothed in a white garment. But as the sacrament came to be administered privately to infants in local churches and by sprinkling instead of immersion

(which the Baptist and Orthodox churches still retain), its location was moved inside to a special area supplied with a basin or font, and the basin was smaller and elevated.² Baptismal fonts were often richly decorated, usually with reliefs of the sacraments, and their shape reproduced baptism's death-and-rebirth meanings: four-sided, like a coffin; six-sided for Good Friday; or eight-sided for the Day of Resurrection (or the eight people saved in Noah's Ark, or the eight Beatitudes). Or the font could be round for the womb of rebirth, with the catechumen emerging from its waters as a child of God. Visitors to Ravenna in northern Italy can see the so-called Arian Baptistery, with its dome mosaic of Jesus' baptism, built in the fifth century and octagonal in shape.

Many of the first Christians seem to have waited as long as possible in order to avoid the harsh public penances levied on sins committed after they were baptized. So the first Christian emperor, Constantine, who was a great murderer of his enemies and had disposed of his son and wife, was baptized on his deathbed in 337 (Voltaire said the Christian emperors "had discovered the secret of living criminally and dying virtuously"); and St. Ambrose, then the governor of Northern Italy, was not baptized until he was about to be acclaimed bishop of Milan in 374.³ As the medieval church established auricular confession and penance as the accepted ways to have personal sins forgiven, and as diseases were dooming many Christian children, the baptism of infants (pedobaptism) became the rule, intended, under the influence of Augustine, to remit the original sin incurred by the child's humanity within the family of Adam and to impart the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Not to be baptized meant that an infant was consigned to the nonbiblical "limbo" (Latin: *in limbo*, "on the border"), a featureless annex of hell that entailed a loss of that heavenly union with God known as the Beatific Vision but not the hellish pains inflicted for personal mortal sins.

In subsequent tradition, baptismal "bathing" came to reproduce the first action whereby a convert is received into the life of the community, and the use of water as its visible sign involves one of the Bible's most suggestive symbols, implying both death and rebirth. In Genesis the waters meant the judgment and destruction of the Flood, but they also meant purity and refreshment and creation. In Exodus the Israelites pass through the waters of the "Red Sea," and in Joshua they enter the promised land through the waters of the Jordan River. Hence, new Christians, called "catechumens," were "reborn" from the "death" of their old lives, as they responded "I believe" to a series of questions about their new faith. They were then "sealed" with the sign of the cross, indicating, as Christ did by his death on the cross, a victory over the devil, and could "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4) and be eligible to participate in the ceremony of the Eucharist, the truly distinctive Christian sacrament. The minister of baptism was normally a priest, though in emergencies it could be performed by laypeople. The Donatists, a powerful group of early

Christian heretics in North Africa, were the first to argue that the sinfulness or unworthiness of priests invalidated the sacraments they administered, but it has always been Christian teaching that Christ is the true minister of all the sacraments and that what mattered was the inherent efficacy of the sacrament and the intention, not the character, of the ministrant.⁴

The water of baptism was invoked in one version of the medieval "ordeal by water," whereby the accused was bound and lowered into water. If he—or, very often, she—did not sink, it was assumed the pure water had rejected him and he was guilty. Baptismal water also survives today in the "holy water" available in fonts to Roman Catholics to bless themselves with the sign of the cross as they enter and leave church, and in the *Asperges* ("You shall sprinkle") liturgy whereby the priest in procession sprinkles water over the faithful. Along with the cross, it has always been considered a potent safeguard against devils. On the other hand, the medieval Cathars ("Pure Ones," 11th–13th centuries), who were dualists and heretics, dispensed with water altogether in favor of an imposition of hands, arguing that water represented the material world from which the soul must be freed.

That no one seems surprised by John's baptizing suggests that baptism was an accepted if not standard ritual in the time of Jesus, deeply grounded in the Jewish equation of ritual purity with holiness, though it appears that whereas John can bring his followers to confession, repentance, and immersion (evidently without any probationary period), only Jesus will be able to forgive them their sins. Unfortunately, neither the Bible nor Christian churches today are clear or consistent on its sacramental status or the elements of its conferral or its theology, such as the difference between water-baptism and Spirit-baptism (the latter an experience of empowerment popular with Pentecostal Christians); the relative efficacy of immersion or submersion in water, pouring or sprinkling of water, anointing with the "oil of salvation," and laying on of hands (Acts 8:17); the use of salt on the tongue to symbolize the preservation of the faith; the priest's spittle on his hands as he touches the ear and nose to "open" them to God's word; the use of Latin or the vernacular; the exorcism-like renunciation of "Satan and all his works," whether by the candidate or the godparents; and, most importantly, its power to remit sins and "put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). These multiple uncertainties have been a continuing source of division in Christian history, and they persist today, where baptism continues as the first Christian sacrament but is usually performed on children, traditionally eight days after birth, and represents God's first declaration of grace to the new Christian before he or she can commit actual sins.

The practice of baptizing infants who are innocent and can make no personal act of faith has always been a particular problem for theology, sometimes addressed by defining the rite as *ex opere operato*, that is, conferring grace simply "by the action performed," and an example of how God provides grace for

those who have done nothing to merit it. Children can also be justified vicariously by the faith of the church (Aquinas) or of the child's sponsors (Luther and the Anglicans) or by their potential for faith (Calvin). Still, it did provide children with instant "salvation" at a time of widespread infant mortality; and although the NT evidence is distressingly scanty (it is assumed that when Lydia "and her household" were baptized at Acts 16:15, this included small children), it had an OT precedent in infant circumcision. It also publicly celebrates the child's entrance into the church and honors the families who will help to cultivate his faith. But questions were raised in the early church as to whether one can simply be made a Christian or must become one, and some denominations, known first in the sixteenth century as Anabaptists, or "re-baptizers," and now represented worldwide by Baptists, reserve it for young adults who have reached the "age of accountability"—"believer's baptism." The Mennonites in contemporary America follow the words of their founder, Menno Simons (1496–1561), who found it "an invented rite" and "a harmful superstition" without scriptural warrant: "It is not of God nor of His Word but of Antichrist and of the bottomless pit." Simons cited 19:14 ("Suffer little children . . . to come unto me.") to show that "Christ has promised the kingdom of heaven to small children without baptism."⁵ They point out that Jesus was an adult when he was baptized and that he instructed his disciples at the end of Matthew (28:19) first to teach "all nations" and then to baptize them. The Anabaptists (for whom Matthew was the preferred gospel) suffered for this belief, as did the Baptists, who liked to use local rivers for the immersion rite they called "dipping." In 1526 a Zurich edict ruled that they be "drowned without mercy," this being considered an ironically appropriate punishment—the "dippers dipped"—for those who preached adult baptism.⁶

The Quakers, noting that Jesus did not baptize his disciples, and privileging the inner workings of the Holy Spirit over external rites, dispense with what William Penn called the "watery dispensation" altogether. Voltaire quoted a Quaker as saying: "We profess ourselves disciples of Christ, and not of John."⁷ The Salvation Army does not baptize, whereas the Mormons perform proxy baptisms "for and on behalf of the dead" partly as a way to seal families together, partly to bring its spiritual benefits to those historical figures (Alexander the Great!) who did not know about Christianity.

During the Reformation, the Swiss Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) broke with Luther in regarding baptism, like the Eucharist, as no more than a spiritual aid, a ceremonial pledge to the community that the child will live a Christian life. Others regarded baptism, not as an efficacious instrument of grace, but as a purely external rite, not unlike circumcision, to be completed and confirmed (hence "confirmation") in adulthood by a baptism of belief, but important enough to be retained as a recollection of Jesus' own baptism and circumcision and as an exercise of faith for the child and its sponsors. Luther's

position on infant baptism was conservative. Paradoxically, in the light of his elevation of Scripture over human traditions, he acknowledged that its biblical basis was weak (the same held for the Trinity), but in this case he appealed to "ecclesial infallibility," maintaining that it was validated by the practice of the universal church. He also saw it justified in Jesus' welcoming little children, and he argued that to do away with it in favor of a "believer's baptism" would emphasize individual works over sacramental grace as the condition of becoming a Christian.⁸

The Western church has sought to ratify infant baptism with the adult sacrament of confirmation. Designed to add strength to the graces of baptism, it is a kind of higher baptism, using consecrated oil on the forehead ("chrismation," as the sacrament is called in Orthodoxy), not water. It is usually administered with laying on of hands by a bishop to children old enough to understand their faith commitment. Originally, confirmation immediately followed baptism, and the Eastern church still administers the two sacraments together, regarding them as inseparable, with confirmation recalling the descent of the Holy Spirit in Matthew 3:16b. Confirmation was also a Reformation casualty. Calvin disapproved of this "gross and greasy liquid," for which he found no authorization in Scripture, and he argued that the laying on of hands was limited to the apostles. Better, he thought, that adolescent Christians be catechized, that is, "give an account of their faith before the church."⁹

The Kingdom of God

Mine eyes have seen the glory
of the coming of the Lord.
—Julia Ward Howe

Jesus foretold the kingdom, and
it was the Church that came.
—Alfred Loisy

John's message, that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2), is the first of twenty-nine distinctly Matthean references to God's "kingdom," a concept almost completely absent from Hebrew scriptures, but one that adds a social, even cosmic dimension to Jesus' message, even though, oddly, God is never referred to as its king. Matthew, unlike Mark and Luke, usually calls it the kingdom "of heaven" rather than "of God," partly out of deference to an audience whose Jewish sensibilities made them reluctant to pronounce the divine name, partly to emphasize that the power of that kingdom, encompassing heaven

and earth, also belongs to Jesus. What can puzzle readers is that the familiar words “at hand” generally refer, often bewilderingly, to a situation that is both spiritual and material, a new order of things that is local and universal, here on earth and there in heaven, now with Jesus and perfectly in the future.

Matthew records this ominous message at the very beginning of his gospel (also at 4:17) and will return to it fleetingly in the Beatitudes (5:10) and in the Lord’s Prayer (“Thy kingdom come” [6:10]), more specifically in two verses of the Mission Charge (“The kingdom of heaven is at hand” [10:7] and “Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come” [10:23]), and at length in the Olivet Discourse of chapters 24–25. The expectations aroused by these passages pervaded much of first-century Christianity.

Beginnings and endings have a fascination of their own, and Matthew’s gospel that begins with a birth and ends with a death also tells of a God who created the world and will preside at its end, which it often suggests is alarmingly close. Thus, eschatology and apocalyptic take up some of the most vivid, if perplexing pages in all of Scripture. Although they are often used interchangeably, *eschatology* (a nineteenth-century coinage) refers to prophecies about what will happen in the end time, usually seen as the Four Last Things: death and judgment, heaven and hell; whereas *apocalyptic* refers to their revelation in literature and historical writings that are usually anonymous and always both imaginative and obscure. They both loom large in the intertestamental literature, the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha, which are, for Protestants, noncanonical and hence often neglected. In the New Testament they are the great subject of Revelation, a book that brings the world—and the Bible narrative—to an end.

The problem is that nothing came of all these urgent and fearsome warnings, and the fact that the world did not end or significantly change has concerned Christians, for they are caught between the plain sense of Jesus’ predictions and the historical fact that they did not materialize—which can make Jesus seem not only mistaken but like just another deluded doomsayer, not much different from those slightly ridiculous figures who are always heralding the world’s end. Christianity’s critics have regularly made the failure of the Parousia one of their main objections to the credibility of the gospels. “Unbelievers,” said Voltaire, “want to make us blush for our faith, when we consider that the world is still in existence.”¹⁰ A classic of late-nineteenth-century Bible-bashing, George Foote’s *Bible Handbook for Freethinkers and Inquiring Christians*, listed a number of end-time prophecies among what it called “Absurdities,” “Contradictions,” “Atrocities,” and “Obscenities”: “Either these prophecies were spoken by Christ, or they were not. If he uttered them, he stands ignominiously condemned as a false prophet. If he did not, the Evangelists have put them into his mouth without warrant, and the Gospels are ‘unreliable fabrications.’ In either case Christianity is based on falsehood.”¹¹

And the English editor and controversialist Robert Blatchford in *God and My Neighbour* (1903), a popular tirade against all things Christian, said of the prophecies, “They are distinct, and definite, and solemn, and—untrue.”¹²

But the dissonance between Jesus’ statements and the historical record is thus an argument for their scriptural authenticity, though some would attribute these predictions to the early church, not to Jesus, and would emphasize the presence of God’s kingdom in Jesus—dramatically so in his miracles (12:28: “But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you”). That this was also a problem for first-century missionaries is clear from a letter attributed to the Apostle Peter, in which he acknowledges that “scoffers” have mocked Christians for their unfulfilled expectations. But he reminds his readers that God’s time is not theirs, since “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day,” that the delay offers more time “that all should come to repentance,” and that when the “day of the Lord” comes, it will be like “a thief in the night” (2 Pet. 3:8-10).

Others have seen Christianity’s first great achievement in internalizing and allegorizing the “kingdom of God,” based on such texts as Luke 17:21: “the kingdom of God is within [better: among] you”; John 18:36: “My kingdom is not of this world”; and various sayings attributed to Jesus in the noncanonical *Gospel of Thomas*. Similarly, Matthew 24:36 (“But of that day and hour knoweth no man”) helped explain to disappointed apocalypticists why a kingdom of God was not established by Jesus on earth following his resurrection. And it is significant that with the exception of 5:28-29, John replaces the “coming kingdom” with “eternal life” (e.g., 11:25: “I am the resurrection and the life”) and in 14:16 looks forward, not to the second coming of Jesus, but to the coming of the “Comforter” (Holy Spirit). There is little eschatology recorded in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles, Paul preferred to emphasize Jesus’ death and resurrection, and there is no evidence that these failed predictions caused widespread defections among first-century Christians. Finally, with the wild imaginings of Revelation in mind, to what extent should Matthew’s readers allow for rhetorical exaggeration—what Matthew Arnold called “turbid Jewish fantasies” of “the grand consummation”?¹³

To rationalize this situation and give it contemporary relevance, there has been in Christian thought a progressive spiritualization (exegetical gymnastics?) of NT apocalyptic, so that its doomsday warnings and “adventist” message yielded to one of personal salvation. Origen (185–254) wrote: “It is clear that he who prays for the coming of the Kingdom of God rightly prays that the Kingdom of God might be established, and bear fruit, and be perfected in himself.”¹⁴ And Augustine claimed that Christ’s coming “is happening all the time in his Church.”¹⁵ Continuing this process, modern critics have spiritualized these predictions—“The ‘kingdom of heaven’ is a state of the heart” (Nietzsche).¹⁶ So the general understanding is “already, but not yet”—that if

the world is not yet about to end ("imminent eschatology"), then the "kingdom" is somehow in Jesus already (for Matthew in the resurrected Jesus), or in the hearts of believers (all examples of "realized eschatology"), or in the visible church. Thomas Hobbes, arguing in his *Leviathan* (1651) for the absolute power of civil authority, would call this last identification "the greatest and main abuse of Scripture."¹⁷ A proof text for this figurative interpretation is the Great Commission of 28:19-20, for why would Jesus instruct his disciples to "teach all nations" and promise to be "with you always, even unto the end of the world," if in fact he was about to return and establish his kingdom on earth?

For others in antiquity, eschatology seems to have been taken less as a timetable than as an expression of hope, an imaginative metaphor to account for present sufferings and to anticipate a future upheaval that would transform lives and alter the course of history in ways that could be left largely undefined. For Jews it had been Israel's hope that God would vindicate her in the face of her enemies, perhaps through the establishment of a messianic kingdom. But now in Matthew it takes the usual two forms: one in the present ministry of Jesus, which was a transforming experience and inaugurated a new age; the other in the anticipation of a second coming that was sometimes seen as near, at other times as distant. For if Jesus by his incarnation, death, and resurrection had not completely defeated Satan (since evil still flourished in the world), then it must have been only a provisional victory, and Christians must await his return—the Parousia—to see the final defeat of evil and the establishment of a new order on earth.

Readers have wondered why, if, as so often claimed, the events of Jesus' career were later formulated in such a way as to bring them into conformity with the early church's understanding of its faith, the gospel editors left untouched these predictions of events that they knew had not come to pass, at least not directly after the resurrection. Was the anticipation of the Parousia still so keen that toward the end of the first century it continued to preoccupy the evangelists and their communities? In the notorious chapter 15 of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon (1737–94) summed up the evolving views and persistent appeal of an imminent end time from the viewpoint of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment: "Though it might not be universally received, it appears to have been the reigning sentiment of the orthodox believers; and it seems so well adapted to the desires and apprehensions of mankind that it must have contributed, in a very considerable degree, to the progress of the Christian faith. But, when the edifice of the church was almost completed, the temporary support was laid aside. The doctrine of Christ's reign upon earth was at first treated as a profound allegory, was considered by degrees as a doubtful and useless opinion, and was at length rejected as the absurd invention of heresy and fanaticism."¹⁸ And the familiar words of Im-

manuel Kant (1724–1804) can summarize the Enlightenment view: "We have good reason to say that 'the kingdom of God is come upon us' once the principle of the gradual transition of ecclesiastical faith to the universal religion of reason . . . has become general and has gained somehow a universal foothold."¹⁹

Thus the kingdom of God is (somehow) both immanent and imminent, present and anticipated in the New Testament; and the same phrase is used to describe both God's redemptive sovereignty in Jesus, with its emphasis on individual salvation, and a future end time of justice and peace. The second understanding has recurred periodically in the crises of Western history, notably in the Reformation, where the instability of the times, the resurgence of biblicalism, and the identification of the pope as the antichrist seemed to some radical Reformers to signal a purification of the church and society that would prepare for a second coming. On the continent it was the Anabaptists, particularly Thomas Müntzer (1489–1525), and in England the militant "Fifth Monarchy Men" among Cromwell's followers, who combined gospel passages such as these with the millenarian materials of *Daniel* (7) and *Revelation* (20) to imagine an earthly and, if necessary, violent transformation. But Article 17 of the *Augsburg Confession* (1530), the first creedal formulation of Lutheranism, condemned what came to be known as "Judaizing," abjuring "certain Jewish opinions which are even now making their appearance and which teach that, before the resurrection of the dead, saints and godly men will possess a worldly kingdom and annihilate all the godless."²⁰

Nevertheless, many Christians have been obsessed with fixing the end time, and the "dating game" survived among Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. For the nineteenth-century followers of William Miller (1782–1849), an early progenitor of Seventh-day Adventism, the "advent" was to occur on October 22, 1844, a non-event later known to Millerites as the "Great Disappointment"; and the expectation of Jesus' early return is still an Adventist doctrine. Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), the founder of Jehovah's Witnesses, favored 1914; and according to "Dispensationalism," popular in some fundamentalist groups and teaching that God has divided history into a series of periods, we are now in the "dispensation" that will precede the second coming. But for liberal Christians the whole subject remains something of an embarrassment, particularly since end-time preaching has so long been a staple of fundamentalism.

The great humanitarian Albert Schweitzer (1876–1965) was among those convinced that Jesus had meant these predictions seriously and that this expectation determined much of his preaching. So Schweitzer concluded that Jesus' moral teachings must have been an "interim ethic," their radical commands relevant only to the brief time before—or so his Jesus believed—the world would end. He theorized that Jesus was a Jewish apocalypticist who re-

garded himself as the messiah (but not divine) and who resolved to bring on the kingdom of God by personally enduring the traditional sufferings that had to precede its establishment, only to be disappointed when it did not happen. Jesus, "in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving in that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him."²¹ But Schweitzer's approach tended to make Jesus eccentric in his own time and irrelevant in ours. It is hard to imagine that the full range of Jesus' teachings, which have enlightened and inspired for centuries, were meant as emergency regulations for only a restricted time; and Schweitzer's critics have shown that the "tradition" of messianic sufferings he invoked hardly existed. The Old Testament can speak eloquently of the suffering of the righteous (Christians especially favored Ps. 22), but there is no record of Jewish expectation that their messiah would die and be resurrected.

As anticipation of the end time weakened amid the realities of an industrializing world, many American Christians, mostly Protestants, sought to create at least a version of the "kingdom of God" on earth through the kinds of human efforts that they hoped would lead to social progress, moral improvement, and even material prosperity—a secular kingdom to match the spiritual kingdom preached by Jesus. One such effort was the creation of interdenominational agencies such as settlement houses, the YMCA, the WCTU, and campus organizations, which, along with evangelism, would provide worldly benefits. Another was the worldwide spread of missionary societies in the late nineteenth century, building schools and hospitals along with churches, particularly in the Far East and Africa.

The eventual establishment of God's "kingdom" was also the goal of a Baptist minister and seminary professor named Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918), who with like-minded colleagues preached a "Social Gospel" of public justice and reform to the rapidly developing America of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a series of books, Rauschenbusch addressed and sought to empower Christians, not just as individuals, but as members of social institutions. Martin Luther King Jr. said that reading his *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) left "an indelible imprint on my thinking."²² Departing from traditional Protestant theories of human depravity and individual sanctification under the influence of Albert Ritschl (1822–89) and Adolf von Harnack (1856–1930), liberal Lutheran theologians, and drawing on his years of experience as an evangelical minister in New York's "Hell's Kitchen," Rauschenbusch offered a message of social betterment that he claimed was authentically biblical in that it considered Jesus not only as a divine individual but also as a historical figure in the context of his imperfect society.

For the proponents of the Social Gospel, original sin was greed and selfishness, not pride, and sin was an offense not only against God but against hu-

manity. Hence faith was also a confidence in the "feasibility of a fairly righteous and social order," and creating the "reign of God," not founding a church, was Jesus' true purpose during his ministry. His explicit message may have been of personal repentance and salvation, but implicit in his law of love was a criticism of society's injustices (why else would the Romans have crucified him?) and a vision of "humanity organized according to the will of God."²³ This was an exegetical position that was strong on principles—brotherhood of man, fatherhood of God—but weak on specifics, and one that required its proponents to urge reforms in, for example, labor relations, while maneuvering around passages indicating an imminent end time and without upsetting the capitalist system or alienating those Christians who supported it. It was not helped by the oft quoted "Ye have the poor always with you" (26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8), and its confidence in social progress was undermined by the catastrophe of two world wars. But its advocacy of a struggle for social justice, now militant and Marxist, was revived in the liberation theology popular in Latin America in the 1960s.

Jesus' baptism traditionally took place about five miles south of the Allenby Bridge, the location of the Greek Monastery of St. John. It is now in a military district inaccessible to visitors, but for those wishing to be baptized in the Jordan, the Israelis have built a facility where Lake Tiberias empties into the Jordan.

Jesus' baptism marks the first appearance of his (and probably Matthew's) opponents, "the Pharisees and Sadducees," an odd coupling that appears only in this gospel (also at 16:1, 6, 11, 12), and unexpectedly, since the two groups were opposed to one another. The historical record is meager, but *Pharisee* may mean "separatist." They were a close-knit group numbering about six thousand in a first-century population of some two million Jews and had been in existence for some two hundred years. The Pharisees taught that God had revealed two laws, written and oral. They were concerned to interpret them both, particularly purity regulations for fasting, dieting, and tithing, in ways that would enable observant Jews to sanctify their lives by observing (some would say "bending") the law, which was often vague and ambiguous in its injunctions, especially in the difficult conditions of Greek and Roman rule. For the Pharisees, holiness was virtually synonymous with purity, and they taught that observant Jews would be rewarded by bodily resurrection and eternal life, while the faithless would find suffering in a lower world. The Pharisees were assisted by the "scribes," who were teachers of the law; however, their power was limited, since they did not control the temple, which was under the Sadducees and administered by priests and their assistants, the descendants of Jacob's son Levi, who were called "Levites." After the Romans conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in AD 70, they conceded some power to

the Pharisees, allowing them to open an academy in Jamnia on the Mediterranean, where they undertook to establish a rabbinic Judaism, that is, without sacrifices and temple cult but centering on the interpretation and application of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Their work eventually produced a collection of laws known as the Mishnah (Hebrew: "repeat and study") and the Mishnah commentary, the Talmud (Hebrew: "study, learn"). Unfortunately, their portrayal in the New Testament as advocates of an external purity seemingly contrasted with the interior holiness of Jesus, their exclusiveness opposing his inclusiveness, has made them into officious and sanctimonious legalists obsessed with formalistic details. Jesus openly and repeatedly denounces them, virulently in chapter 23 ("Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees"); their name has become a synonym for bigoted hypocrites; and Protestants have often seen them as prototypes of the Catholic hierarchy. But all worship entails formalities, and hypocrisy and self-righteousness are not reserved to any one group. Thus, as fashions changed in biblical scholarship, the Pharisees have been rehabilitated to the extent that Jesus himself is associated with them at least in his concern to "fulfill the law."

As for the Sadducees, they were a smaller group of aristocratic Jews associated with the temple and concerned to maintain good relations with their Roman masters—they were, in effect, the Jerusalem Establishment. Since only priests could perform animal sacrifices, they were more involved with the temple's cult practices than with purity regulations, and they recognized only the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. It was they who provided the high priest and dominated the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body that met in the temple area, and they appear prominently in the Passion Narrative of chapters 26–27. Finally, there were the scribes (first mentioned at 5:20). So called because they had to copy the Torah by hand, they were also its interpreters. It is not clear from the Bible how much overlap there was among Pharisees, Sadducees, Sanhedrin members, scribes, and chief priests; or how their jurisdictions were defined, assigned, and administered; or how they normally interacted with the Roman authorities.

Here John addresses these "generations of vipers" by name, whereas Luke has him speak to "the multitude that came forth to be baptized" (3:7). In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678–79), John's warning, that they should "flee from the wrath to come," are put in the mouth of "a man named Evangelist" who starts the hero on his journey to Mt. Zion.²⁴ This warning was also cited in 1743 by John and Charles Wesley as the motive for the meetings, beginning in 1739, that were the origin of the societies that became Methodism.²⁵ John's cryptic command at 3:8 and his admonishment at 3:9 suggest that it is not enough for the Israelites to trust their status as Abraham's children; nor will the water of baptism save those who do not also perform good works. Since the Greek of verse 8 is as ambiguous as the literal KJV translation, this became

an important proof text in Reformation controversies. For Catholics it meant that good works could contribute to contrition, could in fact earn remission of some of the temporal punishment due to sin; whereas for Protestants it meant that good works were the fruits, or results, of true contrition. Hence, the KJV's "meet for repentance" and the English translation of the "Repentance" entry in the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530) as "Bear fruit that befits repentance."²⁶

Verses 11–12 are, with Luke 3:16, the source of the "baptism of fire," foreshadowing the appearance of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' apostles in tongues of fire at Pentecost, when the church is born (Acts 2:2–3). It can suggest warmth and light, but it also suggests access through suffering, perhaps with reference to the fire and flood tribulations of the end time. Later, martyrs were said to undergo a "baptism of blood," and for those unable to undergo the ordinary rite there was a "baptism of desire." "Baptism of fire" is now used to designate any initial exposure to danger and hostility. The motto of the Salvation Army is "Blood and Fire," with the fire of the Holy Spirit symbolized by the bright sun in the official crest.

In verses 14–15, Matthew wants to make it clear that Jesus, being without sin, did not require baptism. Commentators have suggested that he may have submitted to it in order to set an example for others and show them the way to "righteousness" (a favorite word for Matthew) or to show his solidarity with sinful mankind. Perhaps, too, it was a tribute to John and his ministry. Nevertheless, Jesus' baptism remains problematic: Mark has John baptize Jesus, but Matthew records a protest; Luke does not say who baptized Jesus; and John omits it entirely. Still, the account of Jesus undergoing a rite required of sinful converts is so incongruous that it meets historians' "criterion of dissimilarity," whereby the recording of events that apparently contradict an argument speaks for their authenticity.

Jesus' baptism is validated by the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is always associated with his baptism in the New Testament. Its descending "like a dove" on the water (16) recalls two other beginnings: the "spirit of God" that "moved upon the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2), and the dove that Noah sent out to discover if the flood waters had abated (Gen. 8:8–12). So once again Matthew suggests that a new creation is at hand. The Holy Spirit is usually understood in terms of power, "tongues of fire," so the dove may seem an odd symbol, since in Greek paganism it was emblematic of the lustful Aphrodite. But its whiteness suggests purity, and it was also believed to be without bile and hence a symbol of gentle virtue. After first appearing carved on the famous sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (359; Vatican), it came to represent the Holy Spirit in medieval art; and it regularly appeared in the lives of saints, notably when it flew through a church window with a vial of holy and sweet-smelling oil for St. Remigius as he was baptizing Clovis, the first Christian king of France, on

Christmas Day 493.²⁷ The Holy Spirit is sometimes illustrated as a dove descending within a seven-pointed star, which represents its seven gifts: wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, godliness, and holy fear; and Calvin compared its manifestation of the Holy Spirit with the bread that manifests Jesus' body at the Last Supper.²⁸ Some have even seen the Holy Spirit in the animating finger of God that gives life to Adam in Michelangelo's celebrated painting on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Its presence here along with Jesus and the voice of the Lord (often depicted in art by a hand appearing from above) makes this one of the New Testament's few Trinitarian proof texts, with the Father's "voice from heaven" making explicit the divine sonship of Jesus that was implied by "Emmanuel" ("God with us") at 1:23. Conversely, for some of those who claimed that Jesus was born and died a man, it was the Holy Spirit that here at his baptism filled him with the divine powers he exhibited in his ministry; and after his death and resurrection Jesus will in a sense "return" in Acts as the Holy Spirit. Early Christian representations of the baptism often added a river god personifying the Jordan, either in alarm or retreat, as befits a pagan counterpart of Satan.

Matthew's "This is my beloved Son" is a more public announcement than the "Thou art" versions recorded by Mark (1:11) and Luke (3:22), where the Holy Spirit speaks to Jesus—but neither John nor the crowds seem to hear it, and it is surprising that no one makes subsequent reference to this event. Though Jesus' divinity is also implied in the infancy narrative and elsewhere by his authority and powers, and his messianic status by the oft-repeated "Son of David," this expression of divine Sonship will recur explicitly at 8:29 (by devils), at 11:27 (by Jesus himself), at 14:33 (by his disciples), at 16:16 (by Peter), at 17:5 (by a voice from heaven), at 26:63 (by the high priest, accusingly), at 27:40 (by mocking passersby), and at 27:54 (by a Roman centurion). The significance of another title, "Son of Man," occurring some thirty times, is less certain, though it recalls the visionary "Son of man" who comes "with the clouds of heaven" at Daniel 7:13, a figure traditionally seen as a prototype of the returning Jesus.

The Temptation Narrative

In those three questions the whole subsequent history of mankind is, as it were, brought together into one whole and foretold, and in them are united all the unsolved historical contradictions of human nature.

—Dostoevsky

Chapter 4 presents one of Matthew's most dramatic episodes, a direct confrontation between Jesus and Satan that has come to be known as the Temptation of Jesus or the temptation narrative. "Temptation" is a traditional but misleading translation of the Greek *peirasmon*, since it suggests a kind of moralistic enticement. And though it persists in the familiar words from the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation," it should rather be understood in the New Testament as a trial or a test or an ordeal—and that is how it is rendered in the *New Jerusalem Bible* (1985). Its first appearance is in Mark, where it was worth only two verses (1:12-13): "And immediately the spirit driveth him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him." But even Mark's brief description, with the surprisingly forceful "driveth," provided the outline: Jesus in the wilderness for forty days; the attendant and presumably empowering "spirit"; the wild beasts, who perhaps were also harmless; the confrontation with Satan; the tempting; and, at its conclusion, the ministering angels (only the fasting is absent, and Mark does not make it clear when in the forty days the temptations occur). So it was in *Q*, the "Sayings Source," that both Matthew and Luke must have found the substance of the conflict between these mighty opposites, with Matthew influencing Luke as each evangelist shaped the story to fit his narrative and theological needs. A factual basis for this event is harder to determine, since there were no eyewitnesses, though Jesus might have described it to his disciples. Origen early noted its physical implausibilities, and some have thought that it might have originally been a parable that was subsequently dramatized. But many today prefer to regard it as an exclusively spiritual experience, a psychodrama of Jesus' preparation for the trials and vicissitudes of his ministry.²⁹

The Sinai desert would have been an appropriate setting, but the traditional location of the wilderness is on Mt. Quarantina (Latin for "forty"), now Deir el-Quruntul, just outside Jericho and the site today of a Greek Orthodox monastery. The second temptation takes place atop the temple in Jerusalem. For the third trial there is no "exceeding high mountain" in Judea (Mt. Quarantina is only 1,200 feet), so Matthew's reference here may be to Mt. Pisgah, from which Moses was shown the Promised Land (Deut. 34:1), just as Jesus is shown—and offered—"all the kingdoms of the world." Voltaire wondered how this was possible, but the reference may be to the known world, for otherwise the fact that they could all be seen from this mountain might convince a literal reader that the earth was in fact a flat, round disk, which has made this the subject of many an ingenious speculation.³⁰ Did Satan do it with maps or mirrors? Or simply point in their general direction? Or, grotesque as it may seem, did he carry Jesus on a round-the-world flight? Or does the word "kingdoms" stand for worldly power? But it may be that Matthew intended this final "temptation" to be wholly visionary. In the *Geneva Bible* (1560), the Bible

of Shakespeare and the Puritans, the marginal note was emphatic: "In a vision."³¹ This was also Calvin's view, and he added, "In a doubtful matter like this, where ignorance does no harm, I prefer to pass no judgment, rather than to provide contentious people with something to quarrel about."³²

The episode begins with Jesus being led into the wilderness by "the spirit," that is, the "Spirit of God" of 3:16, usually understood as the Holy Spirit, though nothing more of its activity or influence is reported. There, after forty days of fasting, the devil appears, here called the "tempter," although Matthew also calls him the "devil," as well as "Satan," the name used exclusively by Mark and Paul before him. His appearance here is unparalleled in Scripture, though Matthew makes no mention of his being a fallen angel, or coming from hell, or arriving with infernal attendants, or sporting a tail, horns, and pointed ears (borrowed from paganism's fauns and satyrs)—details that would later be added by the church's demonologists. But he at once subjects Jesus to three temptations, which are often classified as personal (food), religious (worship), and political (power), though it is well to remember—and often forgotten—that these are tests of Jesus' fitness for his mission, not of his resistance to "sin." So although he is being "tempted" by Satan, he is really being "tested" by God.³³

Satan's motive is not specified, but most commentators tend to infer from "If thou be the Son of God" that he is using these tests to determine Jesus' status and test his obedience, especially now that he is alone and hungry, and, if possible, to subvert his ministry before it begins. In any case, the tests are not meant to evoke the Seven Deadly Sins, since few of God's creatures are ever tempted to change stones into bread, leap off temple roofs, or accept world rule from the hand of Satan. Nevertheless, they had to be made part of the Bible's moralizing tradition, so the earliest commentators saw them as replicating, and reversing, the temptations offered to Adam, in that he succumbed to Satan and ate the forbidden fruit so that he and Eve might "be as gods" (Gen. 3:1-6); and they saw Jesus' situation foreshadowed in Job, where another good man assailed by Satan (though not personally) would maintain his faith in God.

Satan directs his first temptation at Jesus' fasting, a physical ordeal that is usually interpreted as a sign of his human nature. He challenges him to appease his hunger by performing a magic feat, changing stones into bread. Jesus answers with Moses' words from Deuteronomy 8:3, where he reminded the Israelites that the Lord had provided manna when they hungered in the desert—and "man doth not live by bread alone" has become one of the Bible's best known citations. Later Jesus will, in fact, miraculously provide bread—but for others, not for himself (14:19, 15:36).

Then the scene changes to Jerusalem, the center of the world and the "holy city," a designation found only here and in Revelation 21:10. The "tempta-

tion" changes too, since now Jesus is asked to "test" his divine Father, unless, as some church fathers have held, he is actually referring to himself as Satan's "Lord" and "God." This test entails his leaping from a high part of the temple, and since it might have been precarious for them both to stand on a "pinnacle," this may refer to a parapet, probably on the southeastern corner of the Temple Mount, overlooking the Kidron Valley, the place from which St. James would later be thrown to his death. (One wonders in passing how what Milton called a "tottering and giddy act" might have played itself out before the crowds that daily thronged the temple courts, though the pinnacle may have been hidden from public view.)³⁴ The Lord will then be forced to interfere miraculously with the natural order and "bear up" the falling Jesus, probably by a flight of rescuing angels. Jesus' response is again from Deuteronomy, this time based on the passage (6:16) where Moses reminded the restive Israelites of how they had tempted the Lord at Massah (a word that itself means "test": Ex. 17:1-7) when they were thirsty, and how they had forced Moses to get water from a rock, a sign that would prove that God was with them. For Chrysostom, one of Matthew's first commentators, this was proof that in the face of temptation we should rely on our own faith; we must not presume upon God, test His providence, and hope to be rescued by a miracle from on high—which is coercion, not trust.³⁵ But in a ninth-century Muslim version of this temptation that denies his divinity, Jesus responds with "God ordered me not to put myself to the test, for I do not know whether he will save me or not."³⁶

The final and climactic temptation (the third, Matthew being fond of groups of three and of seven), this time without the "Son of God" formula, is on a mountaintop, from where they can see "all the kingdoms of the world," which Satan offers to Jesus in return for his submission and worship. Longfellow wrote: "These kingdoms all are mine, and thine shall be, / If thou wilt worship me."³⁷ In the Salem witchcraft trials the same charge was brought against George Burroughs, formerly a Puritan pastor there, that among his other devilish offenses he had bewitched a woman by carrying her "into a very high mountain, where he show'd her mighty and glorious kingdoms, and said, He would give them all to her, if she would write in his Book." This contributed to his reputation as a "wizard"; and even though he recited the Lord's Prayer, a traditional antidote to the devil, he was hanged on August 19, 1692.³⁸ Of course, Satan may be lying, since he is after all the "Father of Lies" (John 8:44), but Jesus also calls him "the prince of this world" (John 12:31), so we may understand that at this point the power and the glory of this world, sometimes understood as the Roman Empire, belong to the devil and are his to give—a sobering consideration for those who seek worldly power. Interestingly, Jesus rejects Satan's demand for submission but not the power to rule the world. He will later claim his own kind of kingdom, but not before he has

to wear a crown of thorns. This is a forceful reminder that Jesus' ministry is ultimately cosmic and redemptive, going beyond teaching, preaching, and healing to become a rescue operation, a story of human salvation from the powers of evil. Another attraction of this third offer is that Satan promises what many Jews must have yearned for, a messiah who would appear as a mighty warrior and world ruler. But Jesus' kingdom is not of this world; he is answerable to his Father; and again he cites Deuteronomy, this time a free version of 6:13, with "worship" replacing Moses' warning that the Israelites should "fear the Lord thy God."

There is no response from the devil, and he leaves him to the angels who "came and ministered unto him," which probably means no more than that they brought him food. This is the subject of Carracci's *Christ in the Desert, Served by Angels* (1608-10; Berlin). But even this detail is meaningful, for it is a way to show that the episode has ended happily (comedies, as opposed to tragedies, often end with a banquet, and a messianic banquet is part of some end-time scenarios). Jesus, successfully initiated into the power of evil and emerging unscathed from the wilderness, can now rejoin society and commence his ministry.

All three versions of the temptation narrative look before and after, back to the distant past of Israel and the immediate past of Jesus' baptism, and forward to Jesus' testing by his opponents—including Peter himself—and ultimately to the final struggle with Satan that will mark the end time. Thus, they are rich in echoes, allusions, and associations, evoking in these few lines some of the most momentous events in Scripture. Like the Israelites in Exodus 14-16, Jesus passes from the water of baptism (Red Sea) to the desert of temptation (Sinai). And the motif of testing is in the Bible from its beginning: Adam and Eve by Satan in Eden (Gen. 3:1-6); Abraham ordered to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22:1-18); Jacob wrestling at night with a mysterious figure before he can enter Canaan and meet Esau (Gen. 32:24-32); Joseph questioning his brothers to find out if they have changed (Gen. 44:17-34); and Moses challenged again and again by the "murmuring" Israelites (e.g., Ex. 15:24, 16:2).

More specific is the mention of "forty days and forty nights," often indicating a period of hardship, such as fasting, which may have been required of candidates for baptism in the early church. Although forty can often stand for little more than a biblical designation of a large number, readers cannot help remembering that Moses was on Mt. Sinai for "forty days and forty nights" (Ex. 24:18) and that after breaking the tablets of the law he again fasted there with the Lord "forty days and forty nights" (Deut. 9:18), or that Yahweh made the Israelites "wander in the wilderness forty years" (Num. 14:33), or that Elijah would later fast on Mt. Horeb for "forty days and forty nights" (1 Kgs. 19:8). One might go further back and see in Jesus' fasting an indictment of Adam's eating, or associate this ordeal of forty days with the ordeal of the

Flood (Gen. 7:4). But the wild beasts of Mark 1:13 are something of a puzzle. Was there once a version in which Jesus, like some mythic hero alone in the forest, perhaps being prepared for kingship, had to prove his worth by overcoming them, too? Are we to recall Samson and the lion in Judges 14:5-6? Or are the wild beasts the servants of Satan (even the source of his horns), just as beasts, including a "great red dragon," accompany the antichrist in Revelation (12:3)? Or should we think of Isaiah 11:6-9, where in the messianic age the lion will lie down with the lamb (though if we are to believe Woody Allen, the lamb won't get much sleep) and imagine that Jesus' presence somehow tamed them? Or can this refer to Eden before the Fall, where Adam and Eve lived peacefully with animals, just as stories were told of certain early monks, anchorites who enjoyed power over the animals they encountered in their desert retreats? In the popular *Meditations*, Jesus is seen "humbly conversing" with them. In any case, wild beasts, like demons, belong to a wilderness, though this location rather belongs to the Israelites' wanderings as they slowly made their way from Egypt to the promised land, particularly since for them this was also a period of trial and temptation, one that even extended into their history in Canaan.

Reinforcing these references to Moses is the typology of the infancy narrative: both Jesus and Moses are leaders and liberators who survived an endangered birth and the threats of a hostile ruler, and both had to seek refuge in a foreign land. But a more immediate source is the preceding event: Jesus' baptism. In 3:17 "a voice from heaven" publicly proclaims, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," words overheard by Satan (according to Chrysostom) and repeated in 4:3 and 6, "If thou be the Son of God."⁹ This is not the only instance of the devil quoting Scripture, for in verse 6 he quotes Psalm 91:11-12 in praise of the righteous believer: "For he shall give his angels charge over thee. . . . They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone" (though being the devil, he omits the reassurance of "to keep thee in all thy ways"). And in turn, Jesus' Deuteronomy citations witness his observance of the Mosaic law: the proverbial "Man doth not live by bread alone" is from 8:3; "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" is from 6:16; and "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God" is from 6:13. All of this reminds Christians that, yes, the devil can quote Scripture, but, as Jesus shows, Scripture can also be used to defeat him. In fact, readers often fail to note that the only words Jesus speaks that are not scriptural are his final dismissal: "Get thee hence, Satan."

It is not surprising that the temptation narrative is laced with these references to the Hebrew Bible, and Matthew's fulfillment citations are regularly introduced by the formulaic "This was done that it might be fulfilled, which was spoken by the prophet" (e.g., 1:22, 2:15, 2:17, 2:23, 4:14, 8:17, 12:17, 13:35, 21:4, 26:56, 27:9). This formula, with slight variations, often specifies

the prophet, usually Isaiah or Jeremiah, but there are many other instances, such as the Deuteronomy quotes here in 4:1-11, where the references are less explicit, even buried in minor or extraneous details of the narrative, and require secondary interpretation. However, in every instance Matthew wants to show that the Hebrew Bible also belongs to Christians and that its composers, particularly the prophets, gifted with a kind of divine clairvoyance, were preparing its readers for the ministry of Christ. The fulfillment citations may often be obscure and oblique and divorced from their context (as the Bible's critics never tire of insisting), but for Matthew and his readers they show that both Testaments offer a single, unified, and unfolding plan of salvation. Or, to paraphrase an old Latin jingle: What is "latent" in the OT is "patent" in the NT. The promises of the Old are fulfilled in the events of the New, an evolutionary process of revelation that for Matthew valorizes the writings of the Israelites, however much his critics may complain that it also undercuts the uniqueness and authority of the Hebrew Bible.

The temptation narrative also looks forward, foreshadowing subsequent events in Matthew's gospel and in the Christian Bible itself. The "exceeding high" mountain location of the third temptation is the first of a number of mountains that provide the setting for the "high points" of Jesus' ministry: the Sermon on the Mount (5:1), which Luke puts on a plain; the Feeding of the Four Thousand (15:29); the transfiguration (17:1); the eschatological discourse on the "mount of Olives" (24:3); and the Great Commission (28:19). Here Matthew deviates from Luke, who places the third and most spectacular temptation on the temple in Jerusalem (4:9), thus reflecting the latter's interest in Jerusalem and paralleling the sequence of temptations with the progress of his narrative, which will climax and conclude in Jerusalem—or, as John Lightfoot suggested in the seventeenth century, replicating the temptations to Eve: hunger; lust of the eyes (Gen. 3:6 "pleasant to the eyes"); and a "leap" (of pride).⁴⁰ By contrast, Matthew's sequence is symbolic, a progress of ascent, with the ascending scale of temptations matched geographically by a rise from the desert to the temple roof to a mountain. There Satan offers Jesus the highest temptation of all, universal power in exchange for submission and worship, and there Matthew can exploit the dramatic and authoritative effect of Jesus' final rebuke, "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve"—which later became a Reformation proof text against the veneration of saints. (A more familiar, almost proverbial, equivalent is the famous "Get thee behind me, Satan" from Mark 8:33.) This is the same rebuke that Jesus will later deliver to Peter, the "Prince of the Apostles," when even his faith falters and he will not believe Jesus' prediction of his passion (16:21-23). It is remarkable that this latter rebuke so closely follows Peter's "Confession" (16:16: "Thou art Christ, the Son of the

living God") and his commissioning (16:19: "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven"), but it reinforces the message of the temptation narrative: Peter, like Jesus, must have the faith that will enable him to survive failed expectations, in his case that Jesus would be accepted as Israel's triumphant messiah.

The mountain setting of verses 1-11 also evokes the traditional image of "sacred mountains"—lofty, inaccessible, imposing—and their association with gods (Mt. Olympus is the most familiar example; even the pyramids in mountainless Egypt). So it is appropriate that here is where the evangelists oppose Savior and Destroyer, the Son of God with the Prince of Darkness, lords of their respective realms. Next, the "forty days" of 4:2 recur in Acts 1:3, where the apostles, like Jesus himself in the temptation narrative, are preparing for their ministry. And 4:1-11 also reaches to the very end of the New Testament, where, in the apocalyptic vision of Revelation, Jesus and Satan, represented by the forces of Good and Evil, meet in the final cosmic battle of the end time. Finally, the forty days of fasting remain a present reality for Christians, the season of Lent, when for more than five weeks of self-denial and penitence—the "fast before the feast"—they can prepare spiritually to celebrate the resurrection on Easter Sunday.

The tempting of Jesus by Satan also foreshadows the opposition his ministry will provoke as he is constantly challenged by the Jewish leaders. Here in the wilderness, the messianic vocation announced at Jesus' baptism (3:17: "This is my beloved Son") is being put to the test for the first time. It will not be the last, however, and four times Matthew records an explicit tempting. In 16:1 "The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came, and tempting him" wanted him to prove his divinity by "a sign from heaven"; in 19:3 the subject is divorce, and "The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him"; in 22:18 it is the question of rendering tribute to Caesar, when Jesus said, "Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites?"; and in 22:35 one of their number, a lawyer, "asked him a question, tempting him." Moreover, the words of divine Sonship that Satan uses to tempt Jesus will recur when he hangs on the cross and a passerby mockingly tempts him, "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross" (27:40).

If the infancy narrative brought Jesus onto the world scene, then the temptation narrative does the same for Satan. His prominence in the Synoptic Gospels (though he is allowed little to say in his own behalf), particularly in exorcisms, meant that his influence would not be limited to Scripture. It contributed to the establishment of the devil in Christianity as a personal and external force of evil with considerable autonomy, not just the "Accuser" of the prologue to Job (1:6-12, 2:2-7), or the folklore figure he became in normative Judaism, or the rebellious and fallen angel of Christian legends (described in

to "forsake the devil and all his works, the vain pomp, and glory of the world."⁴⁵ This might be seen as a homiletic understanding of 4:1-11, that Jesus' resistance was exemplary and didactic, an inspiration for individuals confronting life's temptations, though it took some hard interpreting to bring Satan's cosmic challenges into the orbit of common experience. Nonetheless, it is an understanding that can be found today in two of the most popular of Lenten hymns. One is attributed to St. Flavian: "Lord, who throughout these forty days, / For us did fast and pray, / Teach us with you to mourn our sins, / And close by you to stay" (Hernaman trans.). In the third stanza of the other hymn, "Forty Days and Forty Nights," even pleasure is perilous: "Shall we not thy sorrows share, / And from earthly joys abstain, / Fasting with unceasing prayer, / Glad with thee to suffer pain?" (Smyttan and Pott trans.). Praying was here added to fasting since it was assumed that Satan's visits left Jesus with a good deal of time on his hands that he undoubtedly spent in prayer. For whom? For sinners, that they might learn to repent their wrongdoings and amend their lives. Thus the forty days of Jesus' fasting became a period of prayerful intercession, and his time of preparation evolved into an opportunity for Christian penitence.

This curious interpretation of a gospel text that itself said nothing of prayer or repentance did not satisfy the Reformers. As for fasting, Augustine noted that Jesus celebrated the first Eucharist while he was eating with his apostles, though he also allowed for the custom of fasting before receiving the sacrament.⁴⁶ And in one of his few surviving sermons, John Knox, the founder of Presbyterianism, complained that "gluttony appears little to agree with the purpose of the Holy Ghost." He also argued that Christians should follow Christ's commandments, not imitate his actions, or else they would find themselves trying to walk on water, raise the dead, and go forty days without eating.⁴⁷ Calvin also objected to associating Jesus' hunger with gluttony, even with appetite, and he saw nothing meritorious in Lenten fasting, a practice dating from the fourth century and established by the Council of Orleans in 541.⁴⁸ It was yet another of the Roman practices that he deplored and was humanly impossible to imitate since no one but Jesus could last forty days without food (though Voltaire noted that the poor have to observe Lenten fasting all year).⁴⁹ Luther allowed for limited fasting as an "outward Christian discipline," since it seems to have been practiced by John the Baptist and his disciples, confirmed by Jesus' words at 6:16-18 ("when ye fast") and 9:15 ("then shall they fast"), and continued by his disciples (Acts 13:2, 14:23). Thomas More disagreed, pointing to 17:21 (a verse of doubtful authenticity), where Jesus connected fasting with prayer as weapons against the devil.⁵⁰ But for Luther, like Calvin, fasting smacked of "works-righteousness," and he cautioned that it not be done "for the purpose of making it an act of worship or a means of meriting something and reconciling God."⁵¹ So while these Protestant leaders saw

Jesus' behavior as admirable and instructive, and acknowledged that his resistance offered a model for Christians facing less exalted temptations, they preferred to see his responses as representing, not the overcoming of temptations, but the victory of faith, a victory won through trust in God and His Scriptures.

Calvin's position was witnessed in literature, where John Milton's *Paradise Regained* (1671) is an extended version of the temptation, based on the Lukan sequence of tests, that plays down any exemplary role for Jesus.⁵² Milton's version was preceded by a play, *The Temptation of our Lord* (1538), by a bishop named John Bale, and by a poem, *Christ's Victory and Triumph*, by Giles Fletcher (1549-1611). But it is *Paradise Regained*, with its emphasis on the power of faith (Jesus to Satan: "Why dost thou then suggest to me distrust?" [1.355]) that remains the classic Protestant treatment of the temptation narrative. Milton's "brief epic" also supplied a wealth of information that was missing from the gospels' severer accounts. Jesus and Satan engage in lengthy debates replete with biblical and classical references to geography, history, and philosophy; and Milton mined the tradition for poetic effects. The wilderness was "dusk with horrid shades" (1.296); the wild beasts confronting Jesus, including the "fiery Serpent" and the "noxious Worm," grow mild "at his sight" (1.310-312); Satan is first disguised as "an aged man in rural weeds" (1.314), later claiming that he too is a "Son of God" (4.518). The second temptation is preceded, somewhat unexpectedly, by an elaborate banquet scene (2.33-405); the third, by a storm (4.394-431); and the "kingdoms of the world" are a panorama of cities, kingdoms, and their peoples (3.267-385), culminating in Rome and Athens (4.25-284). The sight of Athens, the center of pagan learning, evokes another kind of temptation, a kingdom within: "Be famous then / By wisdom; as thy Empire must extend, / So let extend thy mind o'er all the world, / In knowledge, all things in it comprehend" (4.221-24). But Satan offers only learning, not divine wisdom, so Milton, who saw the temptations as largely a test of trust, has Jesus offer a good Protestant reply: "Alas, what can they teach, and not mislead; / Ignorant of themselves, of God much more, / And how the world began, and how men fell / Degraded by himself, on grace depending?" (4.309-12).

When T. S. Eliot later did his version of the temptation narrative in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), he too added a fourth temptation, the insinuation that Archbishop Thomas Becket's resolve was only a prideful desire for martyrdom ("But think, Thomas, think of glory after death").⁵³ But Becket's final tempter fails ("No! / Who are you, tempting with my own desires?"); and after the last temptation in Milton, on the temple's "highest Pinnacle" (4.549), it is Satan who "Fell whence he stood to see his Victor fall" (4.571), while angels provide Jesus with "A table of Celestial Food, Divine, / Ambrosial, Fruits fetcht from the tree of life, / . . . and as he fed, Angelic Choirs / Sung Heav-

only Anthems of his victory / Over temptation and the Tempter proud" (4,588-95). Charles Dickens, in his retelling of the Gospels "written for his children," omits Satan and has Jesus "praying that He might be of use to men and women, and teach them to be better."⁵⁴ In a less reverential reference to the temptation narrative, the young Philip Carey, the protagonist of Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, recalls Matthew's third temptation when he looks down from a hill in Heidelberg at "the whole world which was spread before him" and now divested of his religious faith accepts it as his to enjoy "free from degrading fears and free from prejudice."⁵⁵

In his personal revision of Christ's life and teachings, *The Gospel in Brief*, the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) reduced the temptation narrative to a contest of spirit (Jesus) and flesh (Satan), an interpretation that works only with the first temptation.⁵⁶ But it was Dostoevsky who in 1880 provided a darkly pessimistic interpretation of this event in the "Grand Inquisitor" section of his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which, in a story told by the protagonist, Ivan Karamazov, Jesus makes a brief appearance on earth, in sixteenth-century Seville, only to be arrested, imprisoned, and condemned to be burned at the stake by the Inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor, a ninety-year-old cardinal, comes to his cell to explain why he must die. He accuses Jesus of having caused immeasurable unhappiness in the world by giving people a spiritual freedom they could not endure, and says that it is his church's mission to remedy the harm Jesus has done: "We have corrected Thy work and have founded it upon miracle, mystery, and authority." What Jesus has done, he says, is give "some promise of freedom which men in their simplicity and their natural unruliness cannot even understand, which they fear and dread—for nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom. But seest Thou these stones in this parched and barren wilderness? Turn them into bread, and mankind will run after thee like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient, though for ever trembling lest Thou withdraw Thy hand and deny them Thy bread." It is the first temptation that interested Dostoevsky, so the Grand Inquisitor argues that in fact most people *do* live by bread alone, but that rather than having to earn it in the sweat of their faces (Gen. 3:19) their greatest hope is that someone will miraculously turn their stones into bread (and here readers will recognize Dostoevsky's usual complaints about the utopian promises of socialism). They do not want to follow Jesus in his faith, for faith entails anxieties and insecurities, so they prefer "mystery"—symbols and slogans, spectacles and superstition. They do not want freedom, they yearn for "authority," someone to guide them, to assume their responsibilities, make their decisions, guarantee their happiness.⁵⁷

It would be easy to demonize the Grand Inquisitor, but given his premise, the weakness of human nature and its need for sustenance, his argument is sound and his actions benevolent and compassionate. He is in fact a tragic fig-

ure, caught between the spiritual inspiration of the temptation narrative and the nagging needs and discouraging debilities of his flock. He accuses Jesus of appealing to an elect, whereas he must deal with the frailties of real people, whom he characterizes as children and sheep. He insists that he loves his flock and that his church cares for its members, offering them bread and signs, forgiving their sins, punishing their enemies (he has just returned from torching a hundred heretics), and satisfying their worldly needs and ambitions—giving them the very rewards that Jesus had spurned. Some might want to point out that Christian freedom can be compatible with human happiness and that Dostoevsky's view of a spiritually elitist Jesus who makes impossible demands is too narrowly based on the special conditions of the temptation narrative, where Jesus is alone and subjected to tests that apply exclusively to his divinity. For all its drama and profundity, Ivan Karamazov's story does not account for the Jesus of the incarnation and the passion, and it ignores the kinds of "miracle, mystery, and authority" that are present elsewhere in the gospel, where Jesus ministers to the needs of his humblest followers. But Dostoevsky's Jesus seems to understand and forgive the Grand Inquisitor: "He suddenly approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on his bloodless aged lips."

Despite its drama and importance, the temptation narrative has not left a distinguished record in art. For one thing, artists had the problem of simultaneously rendering three actions in three radically different locations, and for another there was the problem of representing Satan. Visitors to St. Mark's in Venice can see a mosaic with the three temptation scenes arranged in Matthew's order, as three dark and dwarfish Satans tempt three Jesus figures, the first seated, the next two on the temple and on a mountain, before Satan hurls himself down at the approach of angels. Another tradition, beginning with his appearance to St. Anthony (250-356), the first of the "Desert Fathers," had Satan disguised as a monk, which carried the absurd implication that he hoped to deceive Jesus, though artists could hardly be expected to dispense with his devilish features. In his version, Joachim Patnir (1485-1524) has a monk pointing at Jesus in the foreground, two tiny figures atop a steep crag instead of a mountain on the left, and in the background an undefined landscape representing the world's kingdoms. But some painters, like Juan des Flandes (fl. 1496-1519), combined both features: a web-footed "monk" with horns (1500; Washington, National Gallery). Botticelli did much the same in his version, which can be seen as a wall fresco (ca. 1482) by those visitors to the Sistine Chapel who are not preoccupied with Michelangelo's masterpieces. According to standard typology, whereby Moses foreshadows Jesus, it balances another fresco, *The Trials of Moses*. It is also a confused composition, with the three temptations in the middle distance and an apparently unrelated incident, the cleansing of a leper (8:2-4), in the foreground. As Satan falls off the moun-

tain at the right, the wind blows open his habit and reveals the twisted body of a demon. Satan is an aged man, the wilderness a grove of leafy trees, and the blurry “kingdoms of the world” less than tempting in the twelve watercolors William Blake did for Milton’s epic in 1817—not the poet/artist at his finest. But the picture that many readers know best is a dark engraving often included in illustrated Bibles, *Get thee hence, Satan* by Gustave Doré (1832–83), which shows Jesus standing on a dark and lonely cliff as a naked, horned, and winged Satan begins his flight into murky depths—another “Fall of Satan.”

In film this episode seemed to Franco Zeffirelli to be a possible source of “dangerous confusion,” and too “interior” to be included in his 1977 film *Jesus of Nazareth* (though he found room for the extra-evangelical betrothal ceremony of Mary and Joseph). But it indirectly inspired Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), based on the novel of the same name by Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957). The temptation itself is in a deserted place and occurs before the entrance into Jerusalem. It shows a Jesus, confused and uncertain about his role in life, sitting in the middle of a circle he has drawn on the ground and enduring temptations, or rather, choices: sex from a devil in the guise of a serpent and with the voice of Mary Magdalene; revolutionary militancy from the voices of Judas and John the Baptist; and, finally, the voices Jesus heeds, that of a roaring lion within him and a fiery archangel without, both urging him to “enter your kingdom” and “become God.” But the last temptation comes to him on the cross when a young girl, identified as his “guardian angel,” appears in a fantasy sequence and leads him away to experience what might have been: a life of domestic tranquility and sexual fulfillment with Mary Magdalene (“God wants you to make children”) and then with Lazarus’s sister Mary, as the two women seem to compete at bearing him children. If this was his last temptation, then Judas offered him his first, since he is shown as a militant zealot, angrily—but vainly—urging Jesus to lead an uprising against the Romans (Jesus is first seen in the film as something of a collaborator, making crosses for Roman crucifixions). All of these temptations are designed to illustrate for Kazantzakis—and for Scorsese—the conflict of body and spirit, a theme they find embodied in the life of Jesus, caught, they claim, between the attractions of normalcy and the imperatives of a divine vocation.

The temptation narrative has not always been popular with those who look to the Gospels for Jesus the wise teacher or gentle Nazarene, and Thomas Jefferson chose to omit it from his deist version of the Bible.⁵⁸ But it has an assured place in the Synoptic Gospels, strategically positioned between baptism and ministry, and its range of affinities and resonances is astonishing. It is partly an initiation ritual, a confirmation following Jesus’ baptism, or a kind of liminal experience whereby the young hero prepares himself spiritually for leadership by entering the wilderness alone, sustained only by his “spirit” and

a knowledge of his tribal traditions, there to confront not only wild beasts but the reality of evil itself. It is partly an academic debate, with the disputants, like two rabbis, quoting Scripture at one another. It is partly a legend, a story bereft of any historical verification yet reproducing the motifs and themes that pervade both Testaments and have enjoyed a continuing influence. It is partly a drama, with towering antagonists, quotable dialogue, spectacular settings, sudden changes in scenery, mounting action, and victory for the main character. It is partly a mystery, since the presence of the Holy Spirit and the question of the “Son of God” lead directly to the Trinity, the presence of Satan raises the problem of evil, and Jesus’ “victory” suggests the atonement. It is partly a lesson in doctrine, showing how the vagaries of interpretation could make it exemplify for Catholics an *Imitatio Christi*, while it demonstrates for Protestants the power of Scripture and the effectiveness of faith. But for all believers it remains one passage in Scripture that will be replayed in the lonely wilderness of their moral lives whenever the stakes are high, the temptations are powerful, and all choices are hard.

Meanwhile, Jesus hears of John’s imprisonment, so for his own protection he goes home to Nazareth in Galilee, and from there to the nearby town of Capernaum (vv. 12–13). Again emphasizing the outreach of Jesus’ ministry, Matthew notes that Capernaum (not mentioned in the OT) was a predominantly Gentile town. It is located on the northwest shore of the Sea—or Lake—of Galilee, which is now called Lake Gennesaret, suggesting the Hebrew word for harp, supposedly its shape. Capernaum was the home of Peter, Andrew, and Matthew; and “St. Peter’s House,” or what remains of it, is shown to visitors today. Buried under an octagonal Byzantine-style church (the first of its kind in the Holy Land), it is currently administered by Franciscans. Some claim that Jesus preached in a nearby synagogue that now lies beneath the imposing ruins of a much later synagogue. Most of Jesus’ ministry was in villages like Capernaum, with almost no mention of the nearby Galilean towns such as Sepphoris, Scythopolis, or Tiberias (the last built over a cemetery and hence “impure” for pious Jews).

Jesus begins his preaching in 4:17, though “preach” is a lame translation for a Greek word that suggests a proclamation that is delivered with assurance and authority.⁵⁹ Here he begins with the apocalyptic message of John the Baptist, “Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Verse 17, repeating 3:2, happens also to be the verse, in Latin, that on the Eve of All Saints’ Day 1517 led off the *Ninety-five Theses* that Martin Luther was said to have nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg (an event Luther never mentioned in his later life and that many believe was fabricated by his biographer, Philip Melancthon). He was denouncing, as others had before him, the sale of papal indulgences providing for the remission in whole (plenary) or in part (partial)

of the temporal punishment due to sins after the repentant sinner has had the guilt of sin removed by the grace of God and the act of confession. His denunciation eventually led to a frontal attack on the church's doctrines of penance and purgatory, a consequence Luther had not envisaged but one that made him famous—and that led to yet another division of Christendom.

Scripture has a good deal to say about sin, but only at 3:6 (also Mark 1:5) does it mention that sins are to be confessed, so it was the church, basing its authority on Matthew 16 and 18, that had to develop procedures of penance and reconciliation. The principle behind Catholic teaching on indulgences is that sin entails both guilt and punishment. The guilt is forgiven by God through a priest's absolution in the confessional, but the penalty, since justice demands that sin be punished, is assigned and administered by the church. This was called "temporal satisfaction," and in early times it imposed public and often lengthy acts of contrition, with heretics sometimes obliged to wear penitential garments for life. Serious sinners would be required to do penance throughout the Lenten season, a procedure they could undergo only once in their lifetime. They were barred from military service or ordination, and, if single, they could not marry. Naturally, sinners faced with such arduous penalties put off their acts of contrition as long as they could, often until their deathbeds. But if they could not complete this public contrition, or if the sin required extra contrition, then the remaining punishment would be inflicted in purgatory, with days and years specified. Since purgatory, that "halfway house on the highway to heaven," has no time, these specifics referred to the duration of penalties analogously, in terms of the sinner's lifetime.

As penance became a private sacrament, not a public demonstration, a practice first developed in sixth-century Irish monasteries between monks and their spiritual directors, the priest would normally levy a "fine," that is, assign a penalty in the confessional according to prescribed schedules. ("Anyone who gets so drunk as to vomit shall fast forty days if he is a priest or deacon; thirty days if he is a religious; twelve days if he is a lay person"—though later it became variations of the familiar "For your penance say five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys."⁶⁰) But just as the church, acting for God on earth as Jesus directed (the "binding" and "loosing" of 18:18), could through the priest's mediation forgive the guilt of sin as Jesus had done, analogously it could also provide a "relaxation" (hence "indulgence") of the temporal penalty in return for good works of piety or charity performed by the offender. This it could do by drawing on the repository of spiritual merits earned by Christ, Mary, and the saints—that is, merits that were "works of supererogation," or in excess of what was required by divine law for their salvation. And since prayers for the dead in purgatory were—and still are—an important part of Catholic devotions, it seemed logical that these merits could, as indulgences, also be used to benefit the dead who had not yet attained eternal salvation (Luther's Thesis 27

as a jingle: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, / The soul from purgatory springs").

This custom of "time off for good behavior" was open to abuse, and it began at the top, as theological distinctions were ignored and noble intentions were betrayed by corrupt practices, first when it was expanded to offer "plenary" indulgences that would remit both guilt and punishment. In 1095 Pope Urban II, "through the power of God vested in me," granted full indulgences extending over "this life and the life to come" to participants who might perish in the First Crusade; and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) extended them to "Catholics who assume the cross and devote themselves to the extermination of heretics."⁶¹ What was actually being granted was only a remission of ecclesiastical penance, the "temporal satisfaction" that had already been assigned, and only for those who were "truly penitent and have confessed" (though these requirements, often evaded, were waived for those applying indulgences to the deceased); but it was widely understood that the Crusaders would automatically win forgiveness of their sins and salvation for their souls.

Next, indulgences were commercialized when Pope Julius II in 1510 and Leo X in 1515 offered them to "almsgivers"—contributors, that is, to papal projects (rebuilding St. Peter's Basilica was perhaps the worthiest, certainly more so than the indulgences granted to those contributing firewood for a heretic's pyre) via their local indulgence franchisers (Chaucer's "Pardoner" with his wallet full of pardons "hot from Rome").⁶² This merchandising of a spiritual practice—sometimes called "commutation"—became one of the scandals that helped fuel the Protestant Reformation. Indulgences, said Erasmus in a letter, "were sold in every church (the red boxes, the crosses, the papal coat of arms were everywhere) and the people had no choice but to buy."⁶³ Luther's difficulties were both pastoral and theological: the false sense of security these purchased indulgences offered sinners when they should be performing genuine acts of contrition (he proclaimed, also in his first thesis, that Jesus "meant the whole life of the faithful to be an act of repentance"); the way they objectified sin and penance, putting salvation on sale and distracting the faithful from inner repentance; and the popes' extending them to souls in purgatory, whereas 16:19 specified that their powers were only "on earth." He later complained about Tetzel, the chief indulgence-peddler: "He even sold indulgences for future sins." The story was told of a nobleman who purchased an indulgence for a future sin from Tetzel and then beat him up, explaining that the beating was his future sin. Still, Luther never rejected indulgences altogether (so his Thesis 38), provided that they were kept a minor spiritual exercise, subordinate to sorrow, repentance, confession, and amendment.⁶⁴ And although the Catholic Church still endorses indulgences (if there is true contrition), it no longer assigns days and years to the purgatory time they are supposed to remit.

Repent in the Latin translation by St. Jerome (340–420) known as the “Vulgate” was “do penance” (*poenitentiam agite*), which seemed to confirm penance as a sacrament and to validate the church’s penitential system. This misleading translation was first pointed out by Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) in his *Annotations to the New Testament*, published by Erasmus in 1505, one of the earliest philological commentaries on Scripture. Erasmus’s revolutionary Greek text, published in 1516 with notes and a Latin translation, with one word, *metanoete* (“be penitent”; literally: “change your mind”), established the present translation and profoundly influenced Luther (“My mind was quite in a fever with thinking of these things”), enabling him and other Reformers to drive a wedge between Jesus’ words in Greek that suggested an inner contrition and change, and the church’s practice of auricular confession and subsequent works of penance.⁶⁵ Luther accepted confession as the right of an individual, but he denied its sacramental character, since it was not divinely ordained. He dismissed any church-imposed obligation, and he emphasized personal contrition and faith in the promise that Christ has forgiven sinners (8:13: “As thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee”). For Calvin penance was “neither commanded by Christ, nor practiced by the ancient Church,” and Zwingli rejected it completely.⁶⁶

The next event (vv. 18–21) is the calling of the first four disciples. This is treated very summarily—there is no mention of their being baptized—and without any reason for their selection, except that it seems important for Matthew that Jesus be seen not as a lone charismatic figure but as the founder of a continuing community. Hence, it can be argued that Jesus does indeed found a church, though a counter-argument maintains that he assigns them no “priestly” duties, and his apocalyptic message would not allow time for any ecclesiastical functions. Certainly the original Twelve (whose names varied) had no visible organization and established no holy places or sites of worship to rival the temple or synagogues, but their number obviously recalls Israel’s Twelve Tribes (and Mormonism is headed by a Quorum of the Twelve, also called Apostles). That they were all men has been a traditional argument that only men are eligible for the Catholic priesthood (an otherwise laudable preference for inclusive language is sorely tested when a translator for the NRSV chooses accuracy over familiarity in rendering verse 19 as “fishing for people”), and the Anglican-Episcopal ordination of women has become a serious obstacle to the union of the two communions. Their leaders were Peter, John, and James; and it is they whom Jesus took to witness his transfiguration (17:1). But apart from Peter and Paul, the “thirteenth Apostle,” they left little record of achievement in the history of early Christianity; they are barely characterized, and only Judas affects the gospel story.

It is odd that among the disciples there are no shepherds, but Jesus, from a carpenter’s family, seems to have been more familiar with fishermen working

on the Sea of Galilee. So the fish acquired symbolic force in early Christian art, with water suggesting baptism and the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, serving as an acrostic for “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior.” On the other hand, the role of the shepherd, entailing care and concern for his charges, devolved symbolically on Jesus the Good Shepherd (26:31, regarding his crucifixion: “I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad”). The title of apostle was also given to missionaries who first introduced the faith into pagan lands, such as St. Patrick in Ireland and SS. Cyril and Methodius, the “Apostles to the Slavs.”

These verses also raise the question of how many Jameses there are in the New Testament. Traditionally, there are three. The first is James, “the brother of John,” to be known as St. James the Greater because he is called before the second, St. James the Less (or Younger). He is present at the transfiguration (17:1) and in the Garden of Gethsemane (26:37), and in AD 43 was the first apostle to be put to death (Acts 12:2). He is said to have evangelized Spain, and after his martyrdom in Jerusalem his followers took his body back there and buried it in a Galician forest, where it was found in the ninth century. St. James was then adopted as the patron of Spain, and as “Santiago Matamoros” (“St. James the Moor-Killer”) he appeared in full armor to save the country from the Moors at the Battle of Clavijo in 844. His burial site became the famous pilgrimage center of Compostela in northern Spain. The second James, “son of Alphaeus” and also an apostle, is something of a problem. Some would identify him with the James who is called the Lord’s “brother” (or half-brother if he is the son of Joseph by a previous marriage, or cousin if he is the son of Mary’s sister Salome), a somewhat elusive figure who is not an apostle but becomes the head of the Jerusalem church, which suggests a kind of family succession there. But the traditional, or Catholic view, dating from St. Jerome and maintaining the perpetual virginity of Mary, is that this was a third James, the son of the “other Mary,” described as the wife of Cleophas (a husband other than Alphaeus, unless both names refer to the same man).

Important in the Orthodox Church is Andrew, superior even to Peter, his younger brother, in that in John’s gospel (1:40) he was the first to be called and later he evangelized the Eastern world. He became the patron saint of Russia and of Scotland, where his relics were brought in the fourth century after he had been crucified by the Romans in AD 60. For this he chose his distinctively X-shaped cross, since he considered himself unworthy of a cross shaped like Jesus’. This cross appeared to the Scots in the shape of white clouds in the blue sky before a victorious battle against the Angles in East Lothian in 832, for many Scots the year their country was born. So the Scottish flag has a white St. Andrew’s cross on a blue field, and it also appears together with the red cross of St. George on England’s Union Jack. Legend had Andrew die a martyr, displaying the courage suggested by his name (Greek: “manly”), and

the Vatican gives his statue pride of place next to the altar in St. Peter's Basilica. He was said to have been martyred at Patras, Greece, and in 1469 Pope Pius II received a reliquary containing his skull ("Here were the eyes that often beheld God in the flesh"). In 1965 Pope Paul VI returned his skull to Athenagoras, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.

That the first apostles responded so directly (vv. 20, 22) inspired the young St. Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism, as he was walking to church. He also thought of Acts 4:35, where Jesus' followers gave up their worldly goods, and once in church he heard 19:21, where Jesus says that "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me." The next time he was in church it was 6:34, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow"; whereupon he gave up his property and embarked on a life of study, prayer, and self-mortification.⁶⁷ Subsequently, some monks took their poverty vow so literally that they even sold their Bibles and gave the money to the poor, depending thereafter only on the scripture texts they heard recited during readings and liturgies. But as this was an inspiration for those seeking spiritual perfection in this world, it was also a seedbed for heresy, since dissidents, such as the "Poor Men of Lyons" in twelfth-century France, contrasted this command with the church's worldly prosperity. This disjunction between the austerity of Jesus' message and the extravagances of his churchmen also contributed to the importance of the Bible, not the church, as the ultimate sanction of Christian behavior.

Jesus now begins his ministry of teaching and healing (vv. 23-25). Despite the New Testament's emphasis on private prayer and the prominence of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' visits to synagogues indicate that he was also a regular worshiper, knew Hebrew, and commanded enough respect to be allowed to read from the Law. The "Old Synagogue" in Nazareth is said to mark one place where Jesus taught, and in visiting it, the British writer Harriet Martineau (1802-76), an early and intrepid traveler to the Holy Land, remarked that it "interested me more than any place exhibited by the monks, in all Palestine." Like so many visitors, Martineau, a Unitarian, was often disappointed—and occasionally appalled—by the sacred sites she was shown in Jerusalem, and she deplored the sectarian wranglings of their current occupants. But this venue and the charitable purposes of verses 23-24 responded to her vision of Christianity and made her heart "beat with the true pilgrim emotion."⁶⁸

3

The Sermon on the Mount

Chapters 5 to 7 are devoted to the Sermon on the Mount, and 1-17 of chapter 8 to miracles of exorcism and healing, notably the servant of a Roman centurion and the mother-in-law of Peter. The press of the crowds is such that Jesus leaves for the other side of the Sea of Galilee on a ship that is caught in a "great tempest." Jesus calms the tempest and then lands in "the country of the Gergesenes," but after driving demons into a herd of swine, he returns to Capernaum. There he recruits a tax collector named Matthew, disputes briefly with the Pharisees, consults with some of John's disciples, and performs miracles while preaching the "gospel of the kingdom" in the nearby "cities and villages."

When the protest [in Montgomery] began, my mind, consciously or unconsciously, was driven back to the Sermon on the Mount, with its sublime teachings on love, and to the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance.
—Martin Luther King Jr.

If Matthew is both "the Jewish gospel" and "the church's gospel," it can also be "the Christians' gospel"—and nowhere more convincingly than in the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29). These three chapters are sometimes called Christianity's "Constitution," or at least an early kind of catechism, being derived largely from the sayings of Q, and hence popular among those who prefer "Christianity Light," with a Jesus who was an itinerant teacher—a kind of first-century Jewish guru—and not the Savior and Redeemer of the Passion Narratives and Paul's Epistles. For many Christians the Sermon's apparent emphasis on good works, self-restraint, and personal perfection is preferable to the emphasis on faith, grace, and personal unworthiness in Paul's theology. As for its OT connection, we see again the "Moses motif," here a symmetry between Moses receiving the law on Mt. Sinai and Jesus ascending a mountain to preach a "Messianic Torah," a new law—or, better, a new and radical reorientation of values.