

## ORIGINS OF ISRAEL AND CHRISTIANITY

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks repeatedly about the coming of the kingdom of God. In the Lord's Prayer, we continue to ask for that coming. However, we seldom, if ever, reflect on the actual meaning of this. What did Jesus have in mind? Was it merely some non-specific state of perfection? How could it be defined more specifically? To understand where the expression originated and what it has to do with the history of the church, including the present period of turmoil, one has to go back to the foundation of Israel, from which it all has evolved. There has been a great deal of writing on the subject of the Kingdom by many biblical scholars. One relatively recent book is particularly worth reading: George E. Mendenhall, in collaboration with Gary A. Herion, in *Ancient Israel's Faith and History, An Introduction to the Bible in Context*, Liturgical Press, 2001.

To encapsulate the story, what we think of as ancient Israel began in the Sinai desert with the covenant between the escaped slaves from Egypt and Yahweh. They later formed a dispersed community in Palestine and Transjordan, and for about 200 years they submitted themselves to what they considered the rule of Yahweh. Ultimately, many of them decided that they were a disadvantaged people without a tangible king. Starting with Saul, their religion evolved into a vehicle for political control, and over the next millennium this led to much corruption, defeat, exile, return from exile, and finally the destruction of Jerusalem. The ministry of Jesus can be seen as preaching a return to the time of the rule of Yahweh, and after his death a new sect of Judaism formed to accomplish this, and it spread in the movement known as the Way. [This movement lasted for a few hundred years until it was taken over by Constantine, after which it, like ancient Israel, became enmeshed with the problems of empire.]

The following is a synopsis of this book (containing direct quotes from the book where appropriate). It is merely a skeleton giving some of the main ideas and is by no means an adequate substitute for the book itself. It will achieve its purpose if it motivates people to read the actual book.

### Background to Israel

The three main empires of the Late Bronze Age in the Ancient Near East (1400 - 1180 BC) were:

The Egyptian in the "New Kingdom" or "Empire" period (1150-1200 BC). It had uncontested control as far north as Lebanon and Damascus

The Mitanni - farther north in Syria. This empire collapsed by 1350 BC, having been squeezed out by the Assyrians and the Hittites

The Hittites, whose capital was in central Anatolia. They conquered the Mitanni and took over smaller kingdoms that had been under Egyptian control.

Thus the Egyptians and Hittites became the two regional super-powers.

In the period 1390-1336 BC, Egyptian control over the Syria-Palestine region deteriorated. Regional kings competed to extend their power bases. Thus began a period of social chaos.

Various kings tried to convince the Pharaoh that they were the true ally of Egypt. They referred to hostile forces as *habiru*, originally meaning "transgressor," or someone from beyond some sort of established border. The Egyptians called them *apiru*, and to them it meant an "outlaw," someone outside of an established social or political order.

The term Apiru was used to refer to the early Yaweh-worshippers who were not loyal to any local ruler. It is the origin of the word "Hebrew." They were social and political outsiders.

The acquisition of wealth and power became the dominant value among the Canaanites. Worship of the god Baal was synonymous with the veneration of power. Along with Baal, another important Canaanite deity was Asherah, and worship of her was to celebrate wealth and prosperity. The struggles of people to acquire more wealth and power eventually led to the destruction of the whole society. The Hittites and Egyptians clashed in major conflicts before making a peace treaty in the mid-thirteenth century, but the population of the region had been impoverished and the region devastated by marauding armies.

As a result of the southward migration of the refugees, the population of the hill country of Palestine and Transjordan increased greatly in the time around 1200 BC, and new villages were formed. This early Iron Age period between roughly 1200 and 1000 BC is a kind of historical "dark age" about which there are few archaeological records, but there are biblical traditions that speak of early Israel as a confederation of around twelve tribes or clans and other smaller social groups. This area was a kind of new frontier in which people were receptive to new value systems and new patterns of social organization different from those of the societies they had abandoned.

### The Foundation of Israel

While all this was going on, around the year 1200 BC, the precursor of Judaism was beginning to take shape under the leadership of Moses. Moses was part of the Egyptian culture who, for some reason, was sympathetic to the plight of the Apiru/Hebrew slaves. The slaves were an ethnically diverse lot who were brought into Egypt and were captured from the refugees from northern regions in the Egyptian-controlled territories in Palestine and Transjordan and who had come down from the collapsed civilizations in Anatolia and north Syria.

Moses himself had been forced to flee into the eastern desert after having killed an Egyptian overseer who was beating one of the slaves, and he took up with a Midianite sheep-herding family. Later, he returned to Egypt and gathered up a few hundred A/H slaves and led them into the desert. Moses is not characterized in the OT as a dynamic leader who could compel people to follow him, but rather as a characteristically meek and mild person.

In the Sinai, apparently accompanied by some sort of event, like a violent storm, that the slaves took to be a theophany (a manifestation of God), Moses proposed to them a covenant with the one true God, Yahweh. The form of the covenant was that of ancient treaties, which would have been generally familiar to peoples of the Near East, but this was a unique form of covenant that would link a community of individuals to Yahweh, as opposed to linking one political entity to another. Thus, it was to be the basis of a new community based on religious principles, which would define the basic requirements of human integrity as commitments to Yahweh, rather than the usual set of laws set up by rulers of a society.

Following the ancient-treaty format, the covenant started with a preamble: "*I am Yahweh your God*" and it was followed by the historical foundation of the covenant: "*who brought you out of the land of Egypt.*" The obligations or stipulations were contained in a list of ten items, the "ten words," or, from the Greek, the *deka logoi*. This formed the description of a religious value system, the ethical and personal commitments that would be the binding force of the community. It was to transcend the usual coercive legal mechanisms of social or political control. In this way the new community was giving itself over to the rule of God.

"*You shall have no other gods before me*" meant that the community would not embrace any alternative value systems.

"*You will not make for yourself any idols ... you will not bow down to them or serve them*" meant that the community would not set up monumental art or statuary that had been used elsewhere to cast an aura of sacredness around official political organizations and to thereby sanctify particular socioeconomic agendas.

*"You will not make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh your God"* meant that the name of Yahweh would not be used to swear an oath to Yahweh to something insincere or known to be false.

*"To remember to keep holy the Sabbath"* meant to continue to allow rest for workers and animals on every seventh day, as had been the long-time custom.

*"To honor your father and mother"* meant to protect the solidarity of the family by continuing to support parents even after they were no longer needed for one's economic welfare.

*"You will not kill. You will not commit adultery. You will not steal. You will not bear false witness against your neighbor"* were parts of a personal ethic that were intended to define the core of human integrity.

*"You will not covet your neighbor's house"* was meant to include everything that belongs to another person. This was obviously not meant to be a legally enforceable regulation, since it would not be possible to prove what someone had desired.

By this covenant, the slaves in the desert accepted Yahweh as their "king," whose "government" would bind them together whatever the political conditions of the surrounding society.

After making the Covenant in the Sinai, the escapees appear to have survived in the desert with the assistance of the Midianite clan of the father-in-law of Moses. Later, it appears that Yahwist shepherds moved with their herds into Transjordan, where they were at some point set upon by troops of a petty warlord named Sihon. The shepherds won this encounter and the effect was the collapse of the control of the region by Sihon. The villagers in the region, now pacified, were or became the tribe of Reuben. Still later, another encounter with a warlord called Og produced another victory for the Yahwists and further pacification of part of Palestine.

All this was happening in the two centuries or so before Israel became a political state ruled by a king. During this time, Yahweh, the God of Sinai, was the functional ruler of this federation, which then literally was the "kingdom of God." That is, this federation appears to have been a community whose morale and cohesion - to the extent such existed - was provided solely by a religious ethic regarded as the 'royal policy' of Yahweh. This federation appeared in Transjordan a generation after the escape of the slaves from Egypt into the Sinai desert. It is to be emphasized that this population came from diverse ethnic

backgrounds, as refugees from the collapse of the Late Bronze Age civilizations in the north. It was a time of diminished prosperity, and this federation was composed of people who did not value power politics.

What the federation shared was their voluntary acceptance of a covenant of obedience to a divine king, namely Yahweh. (This was not unlike what happened in early Christianity as well, which cut across the tremendous cultural diversity of the first-century Mediterranean world and permitted Christians to retain any aspect of their indigenous cultures that did not clash with Christian faith and life.) The Bible calls the ethical commitments that held the community together the "fear of Yahweh," which is what moderns would call conscience. This religious ethic made it possible for the Israelite federation of tribes to exist for almost two centuries without any resort to or reliance on any organized monopoly of coercive force.

Yahwism subsequently spread from Transjordan into the hill country of Palestine, following some skirmishes with local warlords and also Amorite regimes operating out of towns in the lowlands.

In that society a man rose to be king by his superior ability to intimidate and kill people. This kind of rule had brought nothing but trouble to the people of the economically simple villages of Palestine and Transjordan. They generally accepted the alternative of a voluntary community based on the Sinai covenant, in which they became the people of Yahweh and he became their king. By so doing, they established a value system that acted to fulfill the functions of a conventional king. Yahweh was considered to own the land they lived in. He led them in the "holy wars" in which they fought off marauding war lords. The characteristics of these holy wars were that they were always purely defensive, and no individual or group was permitted to profit from them. They were fought by a completely volunteer militia, and they did not result in human glory or advancement.

Mendenhall points out that this federation of Yahwists appears to have been the largest, most widespread population group in ancient history that was not held together by some sort of formal political structure.

During the time in which the kingdom of Yahweh "ruled" in Palestine, the land was never completely Yahwist or completely pacified. Many cities and surrounding villages were inhabited by non-Yahwists. Sometime around 1050 BC the Philistines defeated an Israelite militia in the battles of Ebenezer and

Shiloh and captured the ark of the covenant<sup>1</sup>, removing it to one of their cities on the coast and putting it in a shrine to their god Dagon, a deity of Amorite origin from northern Syria. This may have provided the final motivation to the Israelites for the movement away from the kingship of Yahweh toward a human king.

### The Monarchic Period

Apparently a growing number of Israelites developed a desire for a human king who could do battle against their enemies. Perhaps prestige and materialism were involved. Can one have a proper kingdom with an intangible king? Many people wanted a king so that they could be like other nations.

The prophet Samuel, whom the people demanded to appoint a king was ambivalent, warning of the long-term disadvantages of having a king, who would take over land and put his commanders in charge of it and who would levy taxes on the villagers, and so on. Finally, he acceded to the desires of the people and anointed Saul as their king, introducing him by saying that he was chosen by God. The reign of Saul, who set himself up as not only a political general but also as a religious authority, started the gradual erosion of the Yahwist ethic.

David became a competitor to Saul and hence an outlaw. After Saul's death he was recognized first as the king of Judah and later of the northern tribes. After he became king of all Israel, he captured the city of Jerusalem and made it his capital, the City of David, which remained largely occupied by the former non-Yahwist peoples, some from northern Syria. David used them as administrators and as soldiers in his battles, and he managed to convince them that he was the legitimate choice of their respective gods.

The tradition of a man called Abraham as the common ancestor of Yahwists and non-Yahwists alike was useful in uniting the kingdom. His supposed allegiance to the Amorite god El Shaddai was treated as being equivalent to allegiance to Yahweh. Other Canaanites apparently accepted that Yahweh was just another name for the ancient god Baal. Hence, Yahweh became accepted by all as the

---

<sup>1</sup> According to legend, the Ark of the Covenant contained three items of extreme significance to the Israelites. The first was two stone tablets bearing the divine inscription of the [Ten Commandments](#). The Ten Commandments formed the foundation of God's covenant with Israel, commonly referred to as "The Law" (Exodus 31). The second item in the Ark was the rod of Aaron. God miraculously caused Aaron's rod to bud with blossoms to show the rest of the tribes of Israel that it was God's will for Aaron to be in charge of the Priesthood (Numbers 17). The last item was a golden pot of manna. Manna was the starchy food God miraculously provided for the Israelites during their 40 years of desert wanderings (Exodus 16).

divine patron of the state, but the nearly two-century reign of God in Palestine was effectively finished.

When he took over Jerusalem, David built his government on the non-Israelite political system that had existed there. His son by Bathsheba, Solomon, built further upon this system and effectively revived the Canaanite religious system of Baal and Asherah. Using resources he obtained from the Phoenician king Hiram, he built a temple that was similar to the pagan ones that have been excavated in northern Syria and installed the ark of the covenant in it to represent the now-nonfunctioning rule of Yahweh. Worship, which formerly involved mainly following the ethical commitments made in Sinai, now tended to develop into rigid ritual, the sacrificial rites of which are contained in the book of Leviticus. The Jerusalem-based Zadok was installed as the chief priest of the temple, and an elaborate pagan liturgy that employed ritual specialists, priests and scribes, was developed. Mendenhall characterizes this transformation as being from Yahwism to Yahwisticism. The rule by Yahweh was supplanted by rule of a king who would claim to have been chosen and appointed by Yahweh.

Mendenhall points out that, as soon as a power structure is established, those who hold power tend to regard themselves as immune from the ethical obligations that apply to those they govern. This was by virtue of their direct divine appointment. Lord Acton's law that "Power tends to corrupt ..." says essentially the same thing.

After Solomon's death, the northern tribes, who had chafed under Solomon's onerous demands for his military and public construction projects, revolted from the rule of his son Rehoboam and created their own kingdom called "Israel" or "Ephraim," later known as Samaria. The remaining Jerusalem-based regime took its name from the southern tribe of Judah. Ancient Israel thus became polarized between those who deferred to the social, economic, and political interests of the powerful, typical of the Bronze Age, and those who disdained the social system altogether and deferred to the ancient Yahwist ethic regardless of its personal cost.

After the dynasty of David and Solomon came a series of kings and coups that included wars with the Assyrians. This was the time of the canonical prophets, who came mainly from villages and railed against the social structure. They directed their criticisms against the people, who had allowed themselves to be led away from the ethics of Yahweh in the pursuit of prosperity and acceptance by the power structure. Amos and Hoseah were the most prominent, the former giving the following as the words of Yahweh:

I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them,  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

Take me away from the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

In Hoseah 6:6 we find:

... I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,  
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Their theme was that of repentance, literally meaning turning back to the rule and ethics of Yahweh, who was the God of all who would be willing to be ruled by him, from whatever ethnic and social background. As Amos wrote (9:7),

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,  
O people of Israel? says Yahweh.  
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,  
and the Philistines from Caphtor  
and the Arameans from Kir?

Meanwhile, in the southern kingdom of Judah, the official faith (Yahwisticism) was under the control of priestly and scribal specialists, who began to formalize the rituals. Their purpose was to assist the government leaders in preserving social order. Any changes or adaptations in the prescribed rituals would be strongly resisted by the Jerusalem authorities.

Ahaz, who ruled Judah from 735 to 715 BC, declined to join the kings of Syria and Samaria against the Assyrians and was attacked by them. He made a pact with the Assyrians, and this led to Assyrian influences coming into Judah. Ahaz's son Hezekiah, who ruled from 715 to 687 BC, later sought to free Judah from Assyrian control, and this led to attacks by the Assyrians, the destruction of many cities and towns around Jerusalem, and the siege of Jerusalem itself. The city was saved by a deadly epidemic among the Assyrians, which led to their withdrawal, and this, along with the favorable prophecies of Isaiah, gave rise to the idea that Yahweh would never allow Jerusalem to be taken by an invader.

Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, who ruled from 687 to 642 BC and was later regarded as one of the worst kings in the history of Israel, promoting such pagan practices

as Baal worship, child sacrifice, astrology, and divination by the analysis of omens. In 2 Kings (12:16) he is said to have "shed very much innocent blood, until he filled Jerusalem from one end to another."

After Manasseh's son, Amon, who was as bad as his father and who reigned for only two years before being assassinated, his son Josiah was made king at the age of eight. After he reached maturity he set about refurbishing the temple, and this uncovered a forgotten book that was apparently the core of Deuteronomy.

When Josiah learned what was contained in it, he vowed to reform his kingdom, which included deposing the idolatrous class of Canaanite priests, cleansing the temple of the pagan-ritual paraphernalia, and reinstating the celebration of Passover, which had not been done for almost four centuries.

Following the decline of the Assyrian kingdom, Josiah re-conquered Samaria and destroyed the pagan idols and killed their priests. Later, he himself was killed in battle against the Egyptian pharaoh, but his reign saw a burst of writing of history, as in the books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings. Josiah is depicted as having used biblical faith to further his own political ambition. This was one of his more tragic legacies, which continues to the present day. One of his critics was the prophet Jeremiah, who castigated him for substituting superficial ritual for the transcendent ethical values of true Yahwism. (See Jeremiah 7:4-10, 12-15.)

In 586 BC, the armies of Babylon attacked Israel and destroyed Jerusalem, taking into exile the leaders of the Israelites to ensure that the kingdom would not be able to reorganize itself. The lasting result of this was that the exiled Judaeans rediscovered the Yahwism of the Sinai Covenant, and they readapted it to their new circumstances. They came to understand that the Israelite state had become completely incompatible with the religious purposes for which the community began, and they finally understood that they could not assume that Yahweh would guarantee the protection of their political structures.

Mendenhall describes the work of the four authors who developed a profound interpretation regarding the destruction of the kingdom of Israel. The first was Jeremiah, who gave the prophesy of the "new covenant," which was really a re-statement of the original Sinai covenant, but which Yahweh was now writing into the heart of each individual person, since there was no longer a corporate body with which a covenant could be made. So, the "knowledge of Yahweh" is not to be contained in the written body of traditions and doctrines compiled by professional scribes (in effect, religious lawyers), but rather it is to be an aspect of personal character that is independent of social distinctions or class rank.

The second of the great authors was Ezekiel, who defined the role of the ideal king, which he placed in a new conception of the Promised Land. This was an organization of the land of Israel into thirteen east-west strips, one for each tribe and one containing Jerusalem, where the servant king would reside. The king would be supported by the income from the thirteenth strip, so that the others would not have to be taxed for his support. The king would not be there to exert power and coerce people, but rather to follow the model of Yahweh and work selflessly for the welfare of all the people.

The third was the anonymous author of the book of Job. This book is generally misinterpreted in the opinion of Mendenhall, who sees it as teaching that the future of Israel does not require deference to established religious teachings or systems. He sees that it illuminates a unique concept of the Yahwist faith: that the preservation of familiar traditions, doctrines, and forms alone cannot ensure a religion's future, and that it insists that a commitment to this particular God - Yahweh - must not be based on the expectation of reward. Rather, it must be based on the intrinsic value that consists in the faith and trust in Yahweh. This must come from a dynamic relationship with the reality of God, and it does not come from traditional doctrines and teachings.

The fourth author is also anonymous and is referred to by scholars as "second Isaiah," the poet responsible for chapters 40-55 of the book of Isaiah. This author experienced the fall of the kingdom of Babylon to Cyrus of Persia in 539 BC and is therefore not the same as the 8th-century author of the first 39 chapters. (The Persian kingdom was to endure until it was in turn conquered by Alexander the Great in 331 BC.) Cyrus encouraged the exiled Judeans to return to their country and to compile the history of their people, leading second Isaiah to call him Israel's messiah.

Second Isaiah formulated the concept of servant Israel, in which Israel is to be a light to the nations through which the salvation of Yahweh will reach to the ends of the earth, the "nations" here meaning the "Gentiles." Servant Israel must renounce the use of coercive force, even in self-defense. As Mendenhall puts it, the Israelite community must exist for some purpose other than preserving its own cultural traditions within its own traditional boundaries. Its purpose is a missionary one: enlightening the whole world to those ethical principles that transcend particular social and cultural differences. This vision of the unity of all humanity relates back to the religious emphases of pre-monarchic Yahwism.

Mendenhall says that after the return from exile in 538, there began to develop a new concept of the meaning of Israel, one that focused on ethnic distinctions. This was to become the third stage of the 800-year evolution from religious community to political regime to an emerging ethnic group. The Judeans began

to rebuild the temple, disdaining the volunteered collaboration of the people in the north, thereby drawing a boundary between Judea and Samaria. Quoting from Mendenhall: Over the next century, other Judean traditionalists would seek to establish additional formal criteria to define social and cultural boundaries increasingly considered sacrosanct. Among these were commitments to temple ritual and the Jerusalem priesthood, to dietary laws, to circumcision, to Hebrew names and language, to Sabbath observance and other sacred holidays, to the avoidance of pronouncing the name "Yahweh," and to the social application of the Torah as enforced law. They were so successful in this endeavor that by the first century AD, these traits had become part of the distinctive hallmark of Judean religion (i.e., Judaism) and among the most tangible emblems of Judean identity."

Sometime shortly after the mid-fifth century the Persian king appointed Nehemiah the governor of Judea and Ezra, a Judean priest and scribe, to administer Judean religious affairs. The centerpiece of their reform was a pledge to observe the "law of Moses" as the religious standard of behavior. This presumably written law may have been the book from Deuteronomy discovered during the reign of King Josiah; it may have been the law code contained in Leviticus, or it may even have been the recently compiled first five books of the Bible. The effect of this pledge was to identify religious tradition with purely political ambitions and economic interests. It led to the identification of the proper or "orthodox" religious community with, as Mendenhall writes, formal patterns of ritual and economic behavior sanctioned by specific interpretations of scriptural laws.

After the conquests of Alexander the Great and the imposition of Greek language and culture throughout the Near East, the Judean community began to debate internally about the proper way to be authentically Jewish in the midst of the surrounding Hellenism. Around 170 BC the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes IV forcefully encouraged the leaders in Jerusalem to adopt Greek culture. He was later defeated in the revolt of the Maccabees, who installed the Hasmonean dynasty as kings and leaders of the Temple. This loss of control of the temple by the Davidic line caused the Essenes, recently characterized as right-wing fundamentalists, to withdraw from Jerusalem and take up residence on the shores of the Dead Sea. Others actually invited the Roman general Pompey to come in and rid them of the Hasmonean rulers. This effectively marked the end of the period of the Hebrew Bible, the so-called Old Testament, which was later collected and canonized around AD 100 by the successors to the Pharisees who survived the Jewish war with Rome and the final destruction of the temple in AD 70.

The Essenes did not survive the war with Rome, nor did the Sadducees, the wealthy conservatives who controlled the temple and who had essentially collaborated with the Romans. That left the Pharisees, who later made their headquarters in the coastal city of Jamnia and began the formation of what became normative, or rabbinic Judaism. From this movement came the Mishnah and the Talmud.

A few decades before the Jewish war there appeared on the scene a religious-reform movement begun by Jesus of Nazareth. The central theme of his teaching was a return to the kingdom of God, by which he meant a return of the pre-monarchic community of Yahweh that was bound together by the Sinai covenant and that had begun to be corrupted a thousand years before. After the death of Jesus, his followers gathered themselves in a movement that they called the Way, dedicated to putting his teachings into practice. They preserved the religious content of their Bible, but they felt that their Gentile converts were not bound to follow the forms that had been developed in the Judean religious culture. The scriptures that came out of this movement are based largely on the Hebrew Bible as the background for the emergence of Jesus and the Way. Mendenhall gives examples of how the new movement actually went back to ancient traditions of Israel, including the interpretation of Abraham as the ancestor of all people who come to accept the rule of Yahweh. He points out that the ancient traditions were much better preserved in the rural areas than by the religious elites in the cities, as exemplified by the origins of Jesus himself. The rural people generally were not associated with the secular forms of Judaism that were centered in urban areas.

The books of the New Testament were not composed by technically trained scribes or by religious sectarians who were trying to define and control the public institutions of religion. They were not produced by a class of religious elites, nor did they dwell much on doctrinal or philosophical minutiae. They were written in common (koine) Greek and were accessible to the common people. They provided a new religious option that proved attractive to people of many different cultural backgrounds, and the movement spread far beyond the land of Palestine, with the great majority of converts coming from the Gentile societies.

Mendenhall characterizes the New Testament as the library of a popular religious reform movement that arose within the context of first-century Judaism, rather than a political reform movement. In fact, the reformers took pains not to compete with the political norms of the Roman empire. They simply applied the ancient framework and perspectives of Judaism to understand the current religious crisis and the factors that brought it on. In that sense they were

following on from the reforms advocated by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, and the author of the book of Job.

The great mass of the Jewish people had little confidence in the temple priests and the Sadducee class. Mendenhall characterizes the temple as, in effect, a great meat market and the national treasury. The meat, which was sold on the open market, came from the abundance of sacrificed animals, and the treasure came from the contributions of rich people, which were collected and controlled by the temple authorities. The priests licensed the sellers of sacrificial animals and the dealers who ran the currency exchanges for pilgrims from outside Jerusalem. The Gospels tell the story of Jesus' confronting the temple leadership that was exploiting people in the guise of religion in the action that led directly to his execution by the Romans, essentially for disturbing the peace and order of society.

While acknowledging the difficulties in extracting actual history from the records of the New Testament, which was written largely to glorify Jesus as the messiah, Mendenhall cites three aspects of Jesus' teaching that establish him as a reformer who found religious meaning in the remote Israelite past. The first is Jesus' reference to God as Father, which Mendenhall considers to be uncommon in that day, but which can be found in Deuteronomy (32:1,6):

Do you thus repay Yahweh,  
O foolish and senseless people?  
Is he not your father, who created you,  
who made you and established you?

The second aspect is Jesus' challenge of the religious system's legal distinctions between "clean and unclean," which Mendenhall characterizes as instruments of social control. In so doing he was reviving the archaic Yahwist perspective of the pre-exilic prophets that religious leaders, wanting to define Jewish identity formally and ceremonially, had lost.

The third aspect is Jesus' use of the parable form, which was a throwback to the pre-exilic prophets, and his usage in the parables of the phrase "kingdom of God," which was his shorthand for the pre-monarchic understanding of the rule or kingship of Yahweh.

Mendenhall sees the Sermon on the Mount as an update of the Covenant Code of Exodus (21-23). The Beatitudes restate claims made many times by Israelite prophets. The teaching about the Good Shepherd is basically a homily on Ezekiel 34. These were not features of first-century Jewish religious interpretation.

Mendenhall finds it doubtful that Jesus would have allowed himself to be referred to publicly as the messiah, because that would have been interpreted as meaning the anointed one who would come as king and deliver Israel from its oppressors by political and military action. This would have been antithetical to the concept of servant-king found in Deuteronomy 17:16-20 and to the teaching of Jesus found in Mark 10:42-43:

"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you: but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant."

Mendenhall is doubtful that the first-century religious authorities would have taken the humble-king idea very seriously. He says that, given their framework of values and expectations, it is more likely they would have assumed that a proper messiah would be a warrior king, entitled to conscript and tax and to impose political obligations on the people. The prophecy of Zechariah (9:9-10) of the humble king was conveniently ignored.

Finally, Mendenhall gives an interpretation of the Eucharistic meal instituted at the Last Supper as a new covenant bound by an oath, as in ancient times that saw the ritual consumption of bread and wine as an instrument ratifying a binding agreement. By identifying the bread and wine with the person of Jesus, the early Christians were identifying *themselves* with the person of Jesus by taking his body and blood into their own bodies. The idea of the Eucharist as equivalent to the taking of an oath comes from the fact that the word "remembrance" (the Greek *anamnesis*) would have been spoken in Hebrew as *zakar* (*dakar* in Aramaic), which commonly means remembrance, but can also mean "to swear an oath." Mendenhall gives examples of this second meaning in the Hebrew Bible.

Thus, if Jesus used the word *zakar* in this archaic sense, he would have meant that the ritual eating and drinking represented a covenant oath of loyalty to himself. Mendenhall notes that in the description by Pliny the Younger, writing to the Roman emperor Trajan about the ritual of the Christians, he used the word *sacramentum*, which was normally used to refer to the soldier's oath of loyalty to the emperor. The actual substance of the Christian oath involved swearing to embody Christ. This alternative meaning of "remembrance" as "swearing" is characteristic of the Semitic languages, but not of Greek, so it is easy to see how it would have been overlooked by the writers of the NT.

Mendenhall concludes as follows: "Within a century or two the original character of the Eucharist was forgotten, as Christians no longer viewed it in the ethical context of an oath of allegiance but now in the mystical context of a supernatural

"elixir of immortality" (as one church father called it). The function of this rite shifted as Christianity, like so many other religions before and since, adapted and eventually entered a traditional period."

CJM  
10/9/08