

CHAPTER 19

The Rise of Christianity

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

In the years following Herod's death, messianic expectations intensified. In this milieu a small sect of Jewish believers viewed Jesus as the long-awaited redeemer. As we have seen, there has been considerable scholarly debate about Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes as well as the historical events surrounding his crucifixion. Persuaded of Jesus' messiahship, his followers were determined to spread the good news about his coming. In his quest Paul played a pivotal role. Although it is unclear the degree to which Paul saw himself as loyal to the Jewish tradition, there is no doubt that his thought is a fusion of elements of Pharisaic and Hellenistic thought. For Paul, those who accept Christ are freed from the burden of evil, death and sin.

In assessing the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity, you need to consider a number of crucial issues. First, to what extent was Jesus influenced by the religious currents around him? Do his clashes with the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Gospels indicate that he set himself apart from these two major groups? Was he at some stage part of the Essene community? Second, was Paul a loyal Pharisee who simply saw Jesus as Messiah? Or was it his intention to create a new faith? If so, did he believe that the law should be abrogated in the light of Jesus' messiahship? Third, are the Gospels reliable records of Jesus' life and teaching? Or did the authors of the Gospels read back events into history and shape their accounts of Jesus' life in the accordance with their own religious purposes? Fourth, how are we to understand the trial and crucifixion? Were the Jews responsible for Jesus' death as the Gospels record, or were the Gospels imbued with hostility toward the Jews due to the rivalry between the emerging Church

and the synagogue? Finally, are Jews correct in their assessment of Jesus' claims to be the Messiah. Traditionally, Jews claim Jesus did not fulfil messianic expectations: is such a judgement valid? (See Chapter 70.)

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Amazon.com. You will find a wealth of material dealing with Jesus' relationship to Judaism. The same applies to Paul. You should look for books dealing with this topic.
- Stay in Amazon.com. Look again for books dealing with the interconnections between Judaism and Christianity as well as books about Jewish–Christian dialogue.
- Go to Google. Again there is an enormous amount of information about a wide range of subjects connected with Judaism and Christianity. Type in 'Judaism Christianity', 'Jewish Christian dialogue', 'Jesus Judaism', 'Paul Judaism', etc. You will need to sift through this mass of material for information relevant to your interests. There is a website specialising in Internet resources for studying Judaism and Christianity at www.jcrelations.net.

A TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Read out the account of Jesus' confrontation with the Sadducees to your class. Divide the students into groups. Ask them to evaluate Jesus' arguments. Reconvene the class for a discussion.

- Again, read the account of Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees. Ask the students to write a short play based on this narrative.
- Tell your students to read Romans 11. They should then write a letter to Paul, asking him to explain what role they have in God's plan for his people.
- Stage a debate. Ask one side to defend the Jewish view that Jesus failed to fulfil messianic expectations; the other side should argue the opposite.