KNOWING JESUS *through the* OLD TESTAMENT

SECOND EDITION

CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT

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To the memory of Jim Punton

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Preface to the Second Edition

The convictions on which the book was first based, as expressed in the preface to the first edition, are as firm in my mind as they ever were. And they have been strengthened through ongoing teaching on the subject. Wherever I teach on this topic, there is usually a moment of eye-opening fresh insight on Jesus when he is presented in the light of how he saw himself in relation to the Old Testament. Somehow, and not surprisingly, the whole Bible comes to make much more sense when Jesus Christ, as the Bible's center of unity, is brought into focus in a way that affirms rather than overlooks all that went before him.

This edition of the book has an additional sixth chapter. When I wrote the original book with its five chapters, I had in mind readers for whom, as for myself, the deity of Jesus of Nazareth is an absolutely solid affirmation of faith and an assumption that author and readers could share. It goes without saying, I thought. Comments I have received from time to time have made it clear that it is dangerous to make that kind of assumption. If it goes without saying, it needs even more to be said! In fact, I have realized that the omission of any discussion of the way in which the Old Testament also shapes what we mean by speaking of Jesus as God was a serious defect of the original book. So I have added this sixth chapter, explaining how the Old Testament reveals the God whom Jesus embodied. Some of the content of the chapter is abbreviated and adapted from my book *The Mission of God*, chapter four.

I have added a few questions and exercises at the end of each chapter that I hope may be used either by individuals or by groups.

It is pleasing to hear from time to time that the book is being used in a number of institutions of theological education on the list of textbooks for courses in biblical theology—even though it was intended for a more popular readership. For that reason, I have included a few more items in the bibliography at the end for those who wish to study further the whole vast field of historical Jesus research and the Old Testament background to the

New Testament. Of these, by far the most significant in my view have been the magisterial works of N. T. (Tom) Wright. With enormous erudition and historical scholarship, he has argued in phenomenal depth for an understanding of Jesus in relation to Israel of the Old Testament and intertestamental period, with which my own much more amateur portrait here is in broad accord. For those who need to study further, most of the books listed provide comprehensive additional bibliography.

I express my thanks to Pieter Kwant and the staff of Langham Literature who have kept encouraging me to believe that this book has an ongoing future. I am delighted that at least part of that future will be within the global fellowship of Langham Partnership.

Chris Wright
March 2014

Preface to the First Edition

My love for the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament came somewhat later in life than my love for Jesus Christ. But each has reinforced the other ever since I entered the world of biblical studies. In the midst of the many intrinsically fascinating reasons why Old Testament study is so rewarding, the most exciting to me is the way it never fails to add new depths to my understanding of Jesus. I find myself aware that in reading the Hebrew Scriptures I am handling something that gives me a closer common link with Jesus than any archaeological artifact could do.

For these are the words *he* read. These were the stories he knew. These were the songs he sang. These were the depths of wisdom and revelation and prophecy that shaped his whole view of "life, the universe and everything." This is where he found his insights into the mind of his Father God. Above all, this is where he found the shape of his own identity and the goal of his own mission. In short, the deeper you go into understanding the Old Testament, the closer you come to the heart of Jesus. (After all, Jesus never actually *read* the New Testament!) That has been my conviction for a long time, and it is the conviction that underlies this book.

For it saddens me that so many Christians these days love Jesus but know so little about who he thought he was and what he had come to do. Jesus becomes a kind of photo montage composed of a random mixture of Gospel stories, topped up with whatever fashionable image of him is current, including, recently, the New Age caricatures of him. He is cut off from the historical Jewish context of his own day, and from his deep roots in the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is ironic that this widespread lack of biblically informed knowledge about Jesus is growing at the very time when there is a new impetus and enthusiasm in scholarly circles, both Christian and Jewish, for historical research on Jesus. The so-called Third Quest for the historical Jesus has already generated numbers of exciting and fascinating works of scholarship,

which at times almost persuaded me I would rather be a student of the New Testament than of the Old!

That feeling usually evaporated fairly quickly as I felt my own amateur status in that field, which needs to be made clear at this point. I have been acutely aware that to write anything at all on the New Testament in general or Jesus in particular is like crawling through a minefield under crossfire. However, with the help of several friends of undoubted New Testament scholarship, I have been bold enough to crawl on, trying to take into account as much of current scholarship as was feasible. My constant comfort has been to remind myself that I am not writing for fellow scholars but for people who want to deepen their knowledge of Jesus and of the Scriptures that meant so much to him. In that sense, I found it hard to decide whether this is a book about Jesus in the light of the Old Testament, or a book about the Old Testament in the light of Jesus. Perhaps it is both.

I have also managed to fulfill one other minor life's ambition with this book, which was to write at least one book entirely without footnotes. This again was dictated by the sort of reader I had in mind. Biblical experts will detect in every paragraph the sources of so many of my ideas, but it is tedious to hang them out at the bottom of every page. My acknowledgment to all those from whose books I have learned so much is paid by the bibliographical list at the end of the book.

More personal gratitude is due to many who have helped me through the minefield in various ways. First, to my students at the Union Biblical Seminary in Pune, India, who bore my first gropings in this area, under the title "Old Testament Hermeneutics." It was while teaching that course that I came across John Goldingay's articles on "The Old Testament and Christian Faith: Jesus and the Old Testament in Matthew 1–5," in *Themelios* 8, nos. 1-2, (1982–1983). They provided an excellent framework, first for that course and then, with his kind permission, for the broad structure of this book, which is rather loosely linked to the themes of the early chapters of Matthew's Gospel. Second, to Dick France, who helped to prime the pump for my amateur New Testament research with some very helpful bibliographical suggestions that generated a flood of other discoveries. Needless to say, neither of these two friends bears any responsibility for the final content of this book.

My thanks are due also to Kiruba Easteraj and the Selvarajah family for their hospitality and kindness in Montauban Guest House, Ootacamund, India, where the first chapters were written during summer vacations.

My wife, Elizabeth, and our four children know only too well how much I depend on their love and support, and over the years they have learned to share or bear my enthusiasm for the Old Testament. They need no words to know my appreciation, but this at least puts my deep gratitude on paper.

Finally, a word of explanation for the dedication. It was Jim Punton, a man who always made me think simultaneously of Amos in his prophetic passion for justice and of Jesus in his warmth and friendship, who first sowed the seed of this book. “Chris,” he said to me once, putting his arm around me like an uncle, “you must write a book on how the Old Testament influenced Jesus.” That was nearly ten years ago. Sadly, Jim’s untimely death means that he cannot judge whether I have achieved what he had in mind.

Chris Wright
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1992

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Jesus and the Old Testament Story

Jesus: A Man with a Story

Judging from the selection of readings in an average Christmas service, in the consciousness of the average Christian the New Testament begins at Matthew 1:18, “This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. . . .” A natural enough assumption, we might agree, since Christianity began with the birth of Jesus and this verse proposes to tell us how it happened. What more do you need at Christmas?

If the average Christian pauses between the Christmas hymns to wonder what the previous seventeen verses are all about, his or her curiosity is probably offset by relief that at least they weren’t included in the readings! And yet those verses are there, presumably because that is how Matthew wanted to begin his Gospel, and also how the minds that shaped the order of the canonical books wanted to begin what we call the New Testament. So we need to respect those intentions and ask why it is that Matthew will not allow us to join in the adoration of the Magi until we have ploughed through his list of “begettings.” Why can’t we just get on with the story?

Because, says Matthew, you won’t understand that story—the one I am about to tell you—unless you see it in the light of a much longer story that goes back for many centuries but leads up to the Jesus you want to know about. And that longer story is the history of the Hebrew Bible, or what Christians came to call the Old Testament. It is the story that Matthew “tells” in the form of a schematized genealogy—the ancestry of the Messiah.

His opening verse sums up the whole story: Jesus, who is the Messiah, was the son of David and the son of Abraham. These two names then become the key markers for the three main sections of his story:

from Abraham to David;
from David to the Babylonian exile;
from the exile to Jesus himself.

For any Jew who knew his Scriptures (and Matthew is usually reckoned to have been writing primarily for Jewish Christians), every name recalled stories, events, periods of history and memories of their national past. It was a long story, but Matthew compresses it into seventeen verses just as Jesus could later on compress it into a single parable about a vineyard and its tenant farmers.

What Matthew is saying to us by beginning in this way is that we will only understand Jesus properly if we see him in the light of this story, which he completes and brings to its climax. So when we turn the page from the Old to the New Testament, we find a link between the two that is more important than the attention we usually give it. It is a central historical interface binding together the two great acts of God's drama of salvation. *The Old Testament tells the story that Jesus completes.*

This means not only that we need to look at Jesus in the light of the history of the Old Testament, but also that he sheds light backward on it. You understand and appreciate a journey in the light of its destination. And certainly as you journey through the history of the Old Testament it makes a difference to know that it leads to Jesus and that he gives meaning to it. We shall look at that in more depth after we have reviewed that journey in the next section. First let us note several things as regards Jesus himself that Matthew wishes us to understand from his chosen means of opening his story.

Jesus was a real Jew. In Jewish society genealogies were an important way of establishing your right to belong within the community of God's people. First Chronicles 1–9 and Ezra 2 and 8 are examples of this. Your ancestry was your identity and your status. Jesus, then, was not just "a man." He was a particular person born within a living culture. His background, ancestry and roots were shaped and influenced, as all his

contemporaries were, by the history and fortunes of his people. We need to keep this in mind, because it often happens that we can talk and think (and sing) about Jesus in such general and universal terms that he becomes virtually abstract—a kind of identikit human being. The Gospels bind us to the particularity of Jesus, and Matthew anchors him in the history of the Jewish nation.

There are (and always have been) those who do not like this Jewishness of Jesus, for a wide variety of reasons. Yet it is the very first fact about Jesus that the New Testament presents to us, and Matthew goes on to underline it in countless ways in the rest of his Gospel. And as we shall see throughout this book, it is this very Jewishness of Jesus and his deep roots in his Hebrew Scriptures that provide us with the most essential key to understanding who he was, why he came and what he taught.

Jesus was a real man. Jesus was "the son of Abraham." When Abram first makes his appearance in the Old Testament story in Genesis 12, the stage is already well set and populated. Genesis 10 portrays a world of nations—a slice of geographical and political reality. It is a world of real human beings, which we would have recognized if we'd been there—not some mythological utopia full of heroes and monsters. This is the human world whose sinful arrogance is described in the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. And this is the world within which, and for which, God called Abram as the starting point of his vast project of redemption for humanity.

The main point of God's promise to Abram was not merely that he would have a son and then descendants who would be especially blessed by God. God also promised that through the people of Abram God would bring blessing to *all nations* of the earth. So although Abraham (as his name was changed to, in the light of this promise regarding the nations) stands at the head of the particular nation of Old Testament Israel and their unique history, there is a universal scope and perspective to him and them: one nation for the sake of all nations.

So when Matthew announces Jesus as the Messiah, the son of Abraham, it means not only that he belongs to that particular people (a real Jew, as we have just seen), but also that he belongs to a people whose very reason for existence was to bring blessing to the rest of humanity. Jesus shared the

mission of Israel, and indeed, as the Messiah he had come to make it a reality at last. A particular man, but with a universal significance.

At several points in the most Jewish of all four Gospels, Matthew shows his interest in the universal significance of Jesus for foreign nations beyond the boundaries of Israel. It emerges for the first time here in the opening genealogy in an unexpected and easily overlooked feature. In his long list of fathers, Matthew includes just *four mothers*, all in Matthew 1:3-6: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. It may be that one reason for Matthew including them is that there were question marks and irregularities in their marriages, which may be Matthew's way of showing that there was scriptural precedent even for the "irregularity" of Jesus' birth from an unmarried mother. But probably more significant is the other thing they all have in common. They were all, from a Jewish point of view, foreigners. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites (Gen 38; Josh 2); Ruth was a Moabitess (Ruth 1); Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah, a Hittite, so probably a Hittite herself (2 Sam 1). The implication of Jesus being the heir of Abraham and his universal promise is underlined: Jesus the Jew, and the Jewish Messiah, had Gentile blood!

Jesus was the son of David. Matthew states at the outset what he will develop and demonstrate through his Gospel: that Jesus was the expected Messiah of the royal line of David with the rightful claim to the title "King of the Jews." He establishes this further by tracing Jesus' descent through the royal line of kings descended from David who ruled over Judah (Mt 1:6-11). Probably this represents an "official" genealogy, whereas Luke (Lk 3:23-38) has recorded Jesus' actual biological parentage (or rather that of Joseph, his legal but not biological father). The two lists are not contradictory but rather trace two lines through the same "family tree" from David to Jesus.

Much more was involved in asserting that Jesus was the Davidic Messiah than mere physical ancestry. We shall look at the implications in chapters three and four. They expected that when the true son of David would arrive, God himself would intervene to establish his reign. It would mean the rule of God's justice, liberation for the oppressed, the restoration of peace among humankind and in nature itself. Furthermore, the mission of the Messiah was also connected to the ingathering of the nations. The universal scope of being the son of Abraham was not canceled out by the

particular identity of being the son of David. In fact, in Old Testament expectation there was a link between the two. It would be through the son of *David* that the promise to *Abraham* himself would be fulfilled.

Psalm 72 is a good illustration of this. It is a prayer on behalf of the Davidic king, with the heading "Of Solomon." As well as looking forward to prosperity and justice, it includes this hope and expectation:

> May his name endure forever;
> may it continue as long as the sun.
> Then all nations will be blessed through him,
> and they will call him blessed. (Ps 72:17)

This is a very clear echo of the personal and universal promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3. (Compare also Ps 2:7-8; Is 55:3-5.)

Jesus is the end of the time of preparation. At the end of his genealogy, Matthew 1:17, Matthew makes an observation about it before he moves on to the birth of Jesus: "Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah."

Matthew is very fond of threes and sevens in his presentation of material in his Gospel. Both were symbolic numbers for completeness or perfection. Three double-sevens is pretty complete! His purpose is not merely statistical or just a matter of a historical curiosity. From that point of view his observation is not strictly accurate, since at several places in the genealogy biological generations are skipped over (as was quite common in Old Testament genealogy). Rather he is being deliberately schematic, with a theological intention. He is pointing out that Old Testament history falls into three approximately equal spans of time between the critical events:

> from the foundational covenant with Abraham to the establishing of the monarch under David;
>
> from David to the destruction and loss of the monarchy in the Babylonian exile; and
>
> from the exile to the coming of the Messiah himself who alone could occupy the throne of David.

Jesus is thus “the end of the line” as far as the Old Testament story goes. It has run its completed course in preparation for him, and now its goal and climax has been reached.

The Old Testament is full of future hope. It looks beyond itself to an expected end. This forward movement, or eschatological thrust (from Greek *eschaton*, “ultimate event” or “final conclusion”) is a fundamental part of the faith of Israel. It was grounded in their experience and concept of God himself. God was constantly active within history for a definite purpose, working toward his desired goal for the earth and humanity. Just as Matthew has summarized that history in the form of his genealogy, so his concluding observation in verse 17 points out that it is a history whose purpose is now achieved. The preparation is complete. The Messiah has come. In that sense, Jesus is the end. The same note is echoed throughout the Gospel in the urgency of Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom of God. “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand.”

Jesus is also a new beginning. Matthew’s Gospel (and the New Testament itself) opens with the words, “An account of the *genesis* of Jesus, the Messiah . . . ” (my translation). A Jewish reader would immediately be reminded of Genesis 2:4 and Genesis 5:1, where exactly the same expression is used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The same word in the plural (*geneseis*, “origins,” “generations”) is used several more times in the book of Genesis to introduce genealogies and narratives, or to conclude them and mark off important divisions in the book.

So the use of the word *genesis* here, by a careful author like Matthew, is fairly certainly deliberate. With the echo of the book of Genesis we are meant to realize that the arrival of Jesus the Messiah marks a new beginning, indeed a new creation. God is doing his “new thing.” Good news indeed. Jesus is not only (looking back) the end of the beginning; he is also (looking forward) the beginning of the end.

So much of significance is contained within Matthew’s opening seventeen verses. In its own way, it is rather like the prologue of John’s Gospel, pointing out dimensions of the significance of Jesus before introducing him in the flesh. We see that Jesus had a very particular context in Jewish history, and yet that he also has the universal significance that was attached to that history ever since the promise to Abraham. We see him as the messianic heir of the line of David. We see him as the end and also

the beginning. Only with such understanding of the meaning of the story so far can we proceed to a full appreciation of the gospel story itself.

Returning, however, to our average Christian in a Christmas service, probably the succession of names in Matthew's genealogy will not make her quite so aware of the outline of Old Testament history as it would have done for Matthew's original readers. So at this point it may be helpful to step back and very briefly review the Old Testament story, following the three broad divisions that Matthew observes.

The Story So Far

From Abraham to David.

(1) The problem. Matthew begins with Abraham, at the point of God's promise from which Israel took its existence. Luke begins further back with Adam. And indeed we can only understand Abraham himself in the light of what goes before. Genesis 1–11 poses the question to which the rest of the Bible, from Genesis 12 to Revelation 22, is the answer.

Having created the earth and human beings to dwell with him upon it, God witnessed the rebellion of the human race against his love and authority. The earlier stories portray this at the level of individual and family life. The later ones go on to show how the whole of human society is enmeshed in a growing web of corruption and violence, which even the judgment of the flood did not eradicate from human life. The climax of this "prehistory" is reached with the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. At the end of that story we find the effects of sin have reached a "global" scale, with humanity scattered in division and confusion across the face of the earth, an earth still under the curse of God. Is there any hope for the human race in such a condition? Can the nations of the earth ever be restored to the blessing and favor of God?

(2) Election. God's answer was a seventy-five-year-old man. To that man and his childless and elderly wife, God promised a son. And through that son, he promised a nation, which, in contrast to the nations since Babel, would be blessed by God. And through that nation, he promised blessing to all the nations.

No wonder Abraham and Sarah both laughed on different occasions, especially as they neared their century and God kept renewing the promise in spite of it becoming ever more remote. But the promise was kept. The laughter turned into Isaac ("he laughs"), and the family that was to become a great nation began to take shape and increase. So important was this choice that it formed part of the identity of the God of the Bible thereafter. He is known, and indeed chooses to be known, as "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." That description means he is the God of promise and fulfillment, and the God whose purpose ultimately embraced all nations.

This choice of Abraham also defined the identity of the people of Israel. Who were they? The chosen people, yes, but chosen, as Moses reminded them deflatingly and often, not because of their numerical greatness or moral superiority, but only because God had loved and chosen Abraham for his own redemptive purpose (Deut 7:7-8; 9:4-6).

(3) Redemption. Having migrated to Egypt as guests in a time of famine, the descendants of Abraham ended up as slaves—an oppressed ethnic minority in a hostile land. The book of Exodus vividly describes how they were exploited. Then it goes on to an even more vivid description of how God liberated them, through Moses. In the process of this great story of deliverance, God acquires a new name alongside this fresh dimension of his character: "Yahweh," the God who acts out of faithfulness to his promise in liberating justice for the oppressed. The exodus thus becomes the primary model of what redemption means in the Bible and gives substance to what an Israelite would have meant by calling God "Redeemer."

(4) Covenant. Three months after the exodus, God at last has Israel to himself, at the foot of Mount Sinai. There, through Moses, God gave them his law, including the Ten Commandments, and entered into a covenant with them as a nation. He would be their God and they would be his people, in a relationship of sovereignty and blessing on the one hand, and loyalty and obedience on the other.

It is important to see that this covenant was based on what God had already done for them (as they had just recently seen, Ex 19:4-6). God's grace and redemptive action came first. Their obedience to the law and covenant was to be a grateful response, and in order to enable them to be

what God wanted them to be as his people in the midst of the nations. We shall explore the meaning of this in chapter five.

(5) Inheritance. The generation of the exodus, through their own failure, unbelief and rebellion, perished in the wilderness. It was the next generation who took possession of the Promised Land, fulfilling the purpose of the exodus liberation. Under the leadership of Joshua, the Israelites gained strategic control of the land. But there followed a lengthy process of settlement in which the tribes struggled—sometimes in cooperation, and sometimes in competition—to possess fully the land allotted to them.

During the centuries of the period of the judges there was much disunity caused by internal strife and external pressures. Alongside this went chronic disloyalty to the faith of Yahweh, though it was never lost altogether, and was sustained, like the people themselves, by the varied ministries and victories of the figures called "judges," culminating in the great Samuel.

The pressures eventually led to the demand for monarchy (1 Sam 8–12). This was interpreted by Samuel as a rejection of God's own rule over his people, especially since it was motivated by a desire to be like the other nations when it was precisely the vocation of Israel to be different. God, however, elevated the sinful desires of the people into a vehicle for his own purpose, and after the failure of Saul, David established the monarchy firmly and became its glorious model.

Possibly the most important achievement of David was that he at last gave to Israel complete and unified control over the whole of the land that had been promised to Abraham. Up to then it had been fragmentarily occupied by loosely federated tribes, under constant attack and invasion from their enemies. David defeated those enemies systematically, giving Israel "rest from their enemies round about," and established secure borders for the nation.

So there is a kind of natural historical arc from Abraham to David. With David the covenant with Abraham had come to a measure of fulfillment: Abraham's offspring had become a great nation; they had taken possession of the land promised to Abraham; they were living in a special relationship of blessing and protection under Yahweh.

But then, as often happens in the Old Testament, no sooner has the promise "come to rest," so to speak, than it takes off again in a renewed form as history moves forward (we shall look at this characteristic of the

Old Testament in the next chapter). And so, in a personal covenant with David, God tied his purpose for Israel to his promise to the house of David himself. As in the covenant with Abraham, the promise to David included a son and heir, a great name and a special relationship (2 Sam 7). So then, with this new royal dimension, the story of God's people moves forward to its next phase.

From David to the exile.

(1) Division of the kingdoms. Solomon glorified and consolidated the empire that David had built, and built the temple his father had desired and planned. That temple then became the focal point of God's presence with his people for the next half-millennium, until it was destroyed along with Jerusalem at the time of the exile in 587 B.C.

Solomon also introduced Israel to foreign trade, foreign culture, foreign wealth and foreign influences. The golden age of Solomon's wealth and wisdom, however, had its dark side in the increasing burden of the cost of an empire—a burden that fell on the ordinary population. Samuel had warned the Israelites when they asked for a king that having a king would eventually mean forced labor, taxation, conscription and confiscation (1 Sam 8:10-18). Solomon's later reign proved all these things painfully true. All of this was totally contrary to the authentic Israelite tradition of covenant equality and freedom, and it produced increasing discontent among the people, especially in the northern tribes, who seemed to suffer more than the royal tribe of Judah.

When Rehoboam, Solomon's son, refused the people's request and his elders' advice to lighten the load and instead deliberately chose the way of oppression and exploitation as state policy, the discontent boiled over into rebellion. Led by Jeroboam, the ten northern tribes seceded from the house of David and formed a rival kingdom, taking the name of Israel, leaving Rehoboam and his Davidic successors with the remnant—the kingdom of Judah. The date was in the second half of the tenth century B.C., about 931

B.C. From then on the story of Israel is one of the divided kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

(2) The ninth century b.c. The northern kingdom of Israel, as with many states founded by revolution, went through a period of instability, with successive coups d'état after the death of Jeroboam and four kings in twenty-five years.

Eventually in the ninth century B.C., Omri established a dynasty and built up the political and military strength of the country. This was sustained by his son Ahab, whose wife Jezebel had been chosen for him as a marriage alliance with powerful Phoenicia, the maritime trading nation to the north of Israel. Jezebel's influence, however, was more than political and economic. She set about converting her adoptive kingdom to the religion of her native Tyre. She imposed the cult of Baal and systematically tried to extinguish the worship of Yahweh.

This produced a crisis. God called Elijah to be his prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel in the mid-ninth century. Elijah courageously brought about a (temporary) revival and reconversion of the people to their ancestral faith through the judgment of drought followed by the fiery climax of Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). Elijah also addressed the anger of God against the economic and social evil that was threatening the material structure of Israel's faith, as typified in Ahab and Jezebel's treatment of Naboth (1 Kings 21). Elijah was followed by Elisha, whose long ministry lasted throughout the rest of the ninth century and influenced both national and international politics.

In the southern kingdom of Judah, the ninth century was a quieter affair. With its established capital, court, bureaucracy and dynasty, Judah proved much more stable than the northern state. The first fifty years saw the reigns of only two kings: Asa and Jehoshaphat. Both were strong and comparatively godly and preserved the faith of Yahweh. Jehoshaphat also introduced a major judicial reform.

The second half of the ninth century saw an attempt by Athaliah, of the house of Omri, who had been married to Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram (as another of Omri's marriage alliances), to capture the throne of David for the house of Israel after her husband's death. Her reign only lasted five years,

however, before she was removed in a counterrevolution and the Davidic succession was restored in the person of seven-year-old Joash.

(3) The eighth century B.C. Meanwhile, in northern Israel, the dynasty of Omri had been overthrown in a bloody revolution led by Jehu, a fanatical Yahwist who considered it his mission to remove all traces of Baal, his prophets and his worshipers, by fair means or foul—mostly foul. His blood purge weakened the kingdom and lost him his allies. But by the second quarter of the eighth century his great-grandson, Jeroboam II, restored Israel to a degree of political, military and material prosperity that it had not seen since the days of Solomon.

But, as in the days of Solomon, the prosperity was not enjoyed by all. Underneath the upper and external extravagance, and in spite of the thriving and popular religious cult, lay an increasing poverty gap and a world of exploitation and oppression. There were economic problems of debt and bondage, corruption of the markets and the courts, and the nation was divided between rich and poor. God sent prophets to express his anger at the situation.

Amos and Hosea both prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel in the mid- to late-eighth century. Amos fiercely denounced the social injustices that he observed on all sides, defending the poor and exploited as "the righteous" (i.e., those with right on their side in the situation), and attacking the wealthy, luxury-loving class, especially in Samaria, as "the wicked." This was a total and very surprising reversal of popular religious understanding of the day. At the same time Amos claimed that the thriving religious practices at Bethel and Gilgal were not only *not* pleasing in the sight of God as the people believed but actually stank in his nostrils. The rampant injustice and oppression in the nation was not only a complete betrayal of all their history as God's covenant people (a history Amos recounts accusingly), but also turned their pretended worship into a mockery and an abomination.

Hosea, through the bitter experience of his own marriage to an unfaithful and adulterous wife, saw more of the internal spiritual reality of the people's condition. He saw the syncretistic Baal worship with the sexual perversions that went along with it, including ritual prostitution. So he accused the people of being infected with a "spirit of prostitution." Amos

had predicted that the kingdom would be destroyed and king and people exiled. It must have seemed laughable in the prosperous days of Jeroboam II, but within twenty-five years of his death, it happened and Hosea probably witnessed it.

By the middle of the eighth century B.C., Assyria had become the dominant world power and was rapidly expanding westward to the Palestinian states. After several rebellions, Israel was attacked by Assyria in 725 B.C. Samaria was besieged and eventually fell in 721 B.C. The bulk of the Israelite population (the ten northern tribes) was deported and scattered throughout other parts of Assyria's empire, while populations of foreigners from other parts were brought into Israel's territories. In this act of Assyria —an example of its policy of imperial subjugation—lies the origins of the mixed race of "Samaritans." So the northern kingdom of Israel ceased to exist. Its territory became nothing more than a province under the paw of the Assyrian lion—a paw now poised and threatening very close to Judah.

In Judah, the eighth century began, as in Israel, with half a century of prosperity and stability, mainly under the strong king Uzziah. His successor Jotham was also a good king, but all was not well among the people who, according to the chronicler "continued their corrupt practices" (2 Chron 27:2). Apparently the same social and economic evils had penetrated Judah as were blatant in Israel. This provides the background for the ministries of two great eighth-century prophets in Judah—Isaiah and Micah—who began during the reign of Jotham.

The Assyrian threat loomed over Judah also in the last third of the eighth century. King Ahaz, in 735 B.C., in an attempt to protect himself from threatened invasions from Israel and Syria, appealed to Assyria for assistance against these more local enemies. The Assyrians readily came "to help." They first smashed Syria, Israel and Philistia, and then turned to demand of Judah a heavy tribute for the favor. Ahaz's action, which had been directly opposed by Isaiah, proved politically and religiously disastrous, since Judah became virtually a vassal state of Assyria and was forced to absorb much of its religious practices as well.

Ahaz's successor, Hezekiah, reversed that policy. He linked major religious reforms to a renewed bid for freedom from Assyrian domination. His rebellion brought Assyrian invasions of devastating force, and indeed

he surrendered and paid up. But Jerusalem itself was remarkably delivered, in fulfillment of a prophetic encouragement from Isaiah. But instead of producing national repentance and return to Yahweh and the demands of the covenant, as preached by Isaiah, this miraculous deliverance only made the people complacent. They began to think that Jerusalem and its temple were indestructible. God would never, ever, allow them to be destroyed. But they were wrong. Terribly wrong.

(4) The seventh century B.C. The seventh century in Judah was like a seesaw. The reforming, anti-Assyrian policies of Hezekiah were completely reversed by Manasseh. His long, half-century reign became a time of unprecedented apostasy, religious decay, corruption and a return even to ancient Canaanite practices long abominated and forbidden in Israel, such as child sacrifice. His reign was violent, oppressive and pagan (compare 2 Kings 21 and 2 Chron 33), and as far as can be seen, no voice of prophecy penetrated the darkness.

His grandson Josiah, however (Amon the son only reigned two years), brought in yet another reversal of state policy. Josiah both resisted Assyria and reformed Judah's religion. In fact the reformation of Josiah, lasting about a decade from 629 B.C. and including the discovery of a book of the law (probably Deuteronomy) during repairs to the temple, was the most thorough and severe in its effects of any in Judah's history. Jeremiah, who was only slightly younger than Josiah, was called to be a prophet in the early flush of Josiah's reformation. But Jeremiah saw that its effects were largely external and didn't purge the idolatry from the hearts of the people or the corruption from their hands.

In the passion of his youth, Jeremiah denounced the religious, moral and social evils of Jerusalem society, from top to bottom. But he also appealed movingly for repentance, believing that God's threatened judgment could thereby be averted. As Jeremiah's ministry wore on into his middle age, God told Jeremiah that the people had become so hardened in their rebellion that he should stop even praying for them. From then on, Jeremiah foretold nothing but calamity for his own generation at the hands of their enemies. Their disbelief turned to outrage when he predicted even the destruction of the very temple itself, against the popular mythology which, since Isaiah's day, believed it to be safe forever under Yahweh's protection,

like Jerusalem itself. He suffered arrest, beatings and imprisonment for so unpopular a message. Unpopular, but accurate.

In the later seventh century the weakening Assyrian empire quite rapidly collapsed and was replaced by the resurgent power of Babylon under an energetic commander, Nebuchadnezzar. Irritated by repeated rebellions in Judah, which after the death of Josiah in 609 B.C. was ruled by a succession of weak and vacillating kings, Nebuchadnezzar finally besieged Jerusalem in 588 B.C. Jerusalem was captured in 587 B.C. and the exile began. The destruction was total: the city, the temple and everything in them went up in smoke. The bulk of the population, except for the poorest in the land, were carried off in captivity to Babylon. The unthinkable had happened. God's people were evicted from God's land. The exile had begun and engulfed a whole generation. The monarchy was ended. The exile of Jehoiachin ("Jeconiah") and his brother Zedekiah, the last two kings of Judah, brings to an end the second section of Matthew's genealogy.

(5) Some lessons of history. We saw some of the important features of the first period of Israel's history (Abraham to David). It showed the nature of Yahweh as a God of faithfulness to covenant promise and of liberating justice for the oppressed. It also showed the nature of God's people (Old Testament Israel). They were called into existence for the sake of God's redemptive purpose for all the nations. They experienced God's redeeming grace. They lived in covenant relationship with him, in the inheritance of the land he had given to them.

The central section (from David to the exile) also had its vital lessons, which the historical books and the books of the prophets made clear.

One affirmation was that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was in sovereign control of world history—not merely the affairs of Israel. The prophets had asserted this with incredible boldness. They looked out on the vast empires that impinged on the life of Israel and at times appeared to threaten its existence, and regarded them as mere sticks and tools in the hands of Yahweh, the God of little, divided Israel. Those who edited the historical books of Israel, from Joshua to Kings, did so most probably during the exile itself, when Israel was in captivity to one of those empires. Yet they

continued to make the same affirmation of faith: Yahweh has done this. God is still in control, as he always has been.

A second vital truth that permeates this period is the moral character and demand of Yahweh. The God who acted for justice at the exodus remained committed to maintaining it among his own people. The law had expressed this commitment constitutionally. The prophets gave it voice directly, each to his contemporary generation and context. God's moral concern is not only individual (though the masses of individual stories show that it certainly does claim every individual) but also social. God evaluates the moral health of society as a whole, from international treaties to market economies, from military strategy to local court procedures, from national politics to the local harvest. This dimension of the message of the Old Testament would reverberate from Matthew's list of kings, since so many of them heard the unforgettable rhetoric of the great prophets of the monarchy period.

A third unmistakable dimension of this era was the realization that God did not want external religious rituals without practical social justice. This was all the more surprising in the light of the strong Pentateuchal tradition that ascribed the religion of Israel—its festivals, sacrifices and priesthood—to the gift and commandment of Yahweh himself. Of course, even in the law itself the essential covenant requirements of loyalty and obedience had come before the detailed sacrificial regulations. And since the days of Samuel there had been the awareness that "to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam 15:22). Nevertheless there was still something radically shocking when Amos and Isaiah told the people that Yahweh hated and despised their worship, and was fed up and sickened by the very sacrifices they thought he wanted. Jeremiah told them that they could mix up all their rituals the wrong way around for all that God cared (Amos 5:21-24; Is 1:11-16; Jer 7:21-26). God will not be worshiped and cannot be known apart from commitment to righteousness and justice, faithfulness and love, the things that define God's own character and are his delight (Jer 9:23-24; 22:15-17).

All three of these prominent features of the message of the Old Testament in the period of the monarchy are to be found in the teaching of Jesus, son of David: the sovereignty (kingship) of God, the essentially moral demand of God's rule and the priority of practical obedience over all religious observances. In these, as in so many ways as we shall see,

especially in chapter five, Jesus recaptured and amplified the authentic voice of the Scriptures.

From the exile to the Messiah.

(1) The exile. The exile lasted fifty years (that is, from 587 B.C. to the first return of some Jews to Jerusalem in 538 B.C.). The period from the destruction of the temple to the completion of its rebuilding was approximately seventy years.

It is remarkable that Israel and its faith survived at all. That they did survive was largely due to the message of the prophets—particularly of Jeremiah up to, and of Ezekiel after, the fall of Jerusalem. They consistently interpreted the terrifying events as the judgment of Yahweh, punishment for the persistently evil ways of his people. From that perspective, the exile could be seen as a punishment that was *logical* (it showed God's consistency in terms of his covenant threats as well as his promises). But it was a judgment that was also *limited* (so there could be hope for the future). Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel foretold a return to the land and a restoration of the relationship between God and his people. Jeremiah portrayed it in terms of a new covenant **(**Jer 31:31-34). Ezekiel had visions of nothing short of national resurrection (Ezek 37), with reunified tribes of Israel living once again in God's land, surrounding God's temple and enjoying God's presence (Ezek 40–48).

Nevertheless, by the later years of the exile it seemed that many had abandoned hope. The Israelites accused Yahweh of having forgotten and forsaken them (e.g., Is 40:27; 49:14)—a rich irony in view of the fact that it was they who for centuries had treated him that way! Into this lethargic despair came the message of Isaiah 40–55 addressing the exiles. At a time when all they could see was the threatening rise of yet another empire (the Persians), these chapters of the book of Isaiah called on them to lift up their eyes and hearts once more to see their God on the move, bringing liberation at last.

The ringing affirmation of Isaiah 40–55 is that Yahweh is not only still the sovereign Lord of all creation and all history (and is utterly, uniquely so), but also that he is about to act again on behalf of his oppressed people with a deliverance that will recall the original exodus but dwarf it in significance. The clouds the people so much dread—the sudden rise of Cyrus, ruler of the new, expanding Persian Empire—would burst in blessings on their head. Babylon would be destroyed and they would be released, free to return to Jerusalem, which, sings the prophet, was already exulting in joy at the sight of God leading his captives home.

In the midst of all this directly historical prediction, the prophet also perceives the true ministry and mission of Israel as the servant of God, destined to bring his blessing to all nations—a destiny in which they are manifestly failing. The task will be accomplished, however, through a true Servant of Yahweh, whose mission of justice, teaching, suffering, death and vindication will ultimately bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth. The *particular* story of tiny Israel and the *universal* purposes of God are again linked together.

(2) The restoration. The historical predictions were fulfilled. Cyrus defeated Babylon in 539 B.C. and granted freedom to the captive peoples of the Babylonian empire to take up their gods and go home—under his "supervision," of course. In 538 B.C. the first return of some of the exiled Jews began. They were a tiny community facing enormous problems. Jerusalem and Judah were in ruins after half a century of neglect. They experienced intense opposition and a campaign of political and physical obstruction from the Samaritans. Their early harvests were disappointing, creating further problems. Not surprisingly, after a start was made and the foundations laid, work on the rebuilding of the temple was soon neglected. However, as a result of the encouragement of two of the postexilic prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, it was eventually completed in 515 B.C.

Throughout this period Judah had no independence, of course. It formed just a small subprovince of the vast Persian Empire, which stretched from the shore of the Aegean Sea to the borders of India and lasted for two centuries. In the fifth century it appears that disillusionment and depression set in again, partly as a result of the apparent failure of the hopes raised by Haggai and Zechariah. And this led to a growing laxity in religious and

moral life. This was challenged by the last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi, probably about the middle of the fifth century. He was concerned about the slovenliness of the sacrifices, the spread of divorce and the widespread failure of the people to honor God in practical life.

The same kind of situation was addressed a little later by Ezra and Nehemiah, whose terms of office overlapped somewhat in Jerusalem. Ezra's achievement was the teaching of the law and the reordering of the community around it, consolidated by a ceremony of covenant renewal. Nehemiah's achievements included the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, giving its inhabitants not only physical safety but also a sense of unity and dignity. As the officially appointed Persian governor, Nehemiah was able to give the needed political patronage and authority to the reforms of Ezra, as well as engaging in some social and economic reforms of his own.

(3) The intertestamental period. The canonical history of the Old Testament comes to an end in the mid-fifth century with Malachi, Ezra and Nehemiah. But of course, the Jewish community went on, as does Matthew's genealogy. The Jews lived through two more changes of imperial power before Christ.

Twice during the early fifth century Persia tried, and failed, to conquer the Greek mainland and spread its power to Europe. It was heroically beaten back by the Spartans and Athenians—who then fell to fighting with each other. Not until the mid-fourth century were the Greek states forced into unity by the power of Macedon, which then turned its attention east to the wealth of the Persian Empire just across the Aegean Sea. Under Alexander the Great, Greek armies sliced through the Persian Empire like a knife through butter, with amazing speed. The whole vast area once ruled by Persia, including Judah, then came under Greek rule. This was the beginning of the "Hellenistic" (Greek) era, when the Greek language and culture spread throughout the whole Near East and Middle Eastern world.

After the premature death of Alexander in 323 B.C., his empire was split up among his generals. Ptolemy established a dynasty in Egypt, and for more or less the whole of the third century, Palestine and the Jews were under the political control of the Ptolemies. From about 200 B.C. onward, however, control of Palestine passed into the hands of the Seleucid kings of Syria, who ruled from Antioch over the northern part of the old Alexandrian

empire. Their rule was much more aggressively Greek, and Jews faced increasing pressure to conform religiously and culturally to Hellenism. Those who refused faced persecution. The supreme insult was when Antiochus Epiphanes IV in 167 B.C. set up a statue of Zeus, the supreme god of Greek mythology, in the temple itself.

This sacrilege sparked off a major revolt when Jews under the leadership of Judas Maccabeus took up arms. It ended with a successful struggle for independence, climaxing in the cleansing of the temple in 164 B.C. For the next century, the Jews more or less governed themselves under the leadership of the Hasmonean priestly dynasty. This lasted until the power of Greece was replaced by that of Rome, which had been gradually expanding its sphere of influence throughout the whole Mediterranean basin during the second and first centuries B.C. In 63 B.C. Roman legions under Pompey (also, but less deservedly than Alexander, known as "the Great") entered Palestine. Thus began the long period of Roman supremacy over the Jews. And so it was that, when the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus decided that he wanted a census of the whole Roman Empire so that he could get maximum taxes from all the subject populations, a virgin from Nazareth gave birth to her firstborn son in Bethlehem of Judea, the city of David, and brought Matthew's genealogy to an end.

Two features of this intertestamental period are worth noting in view of their influence on the world into which Jesus arrived. The first was an increasing devotion to the law, the Torah. This became the supreme mark of faithful Jews. It eventually developed into a somewhat fanatical cause, supported by a systematic building of a whole structure of theology and exposition and application around the law itself. There were professional experts, called scribes, involved in this. There were also lay movements devoted to wholehearted obedience to the law—such as the Pharisees. We may be tempted to dismiss all this as legalism. Doubtless it tended in that direction, and Jesus, with his unique insight and authority, exposed some of the failure and misguidedness of his contemporary devotees of the law and tradition. But we should also be aware of the positive and worthy motives that lay behind this emphasis on keeping God's law. Had not the exile, the greatest catastrophe in their history, been the direct judgment of God on the failure of his people precisely to keep his law? Was that not also the

message of the great prophets? Surely then they should learn the lesson of history and make every effort to live as God required? In that way they would not only avoid a repetition of such judgment but also hasten the day when God would finally deliver them from their present enemies. The pursuit of holiness was serious and purposeful. It was a total social program —not just a fringe of hyperreligious piety.

The second feature was the upsurge of apocalyptic, messianic hope. As persecution continued and as the nation experienced martyrdoms and great suffering, it began to hope for a final, climactic intervention by God himself, as the prophets had foretold. God would establish his kingdom forever by destroying his (and Israel's) enemies. He would vindicate and uplift the righteous oppressed and put an end to their suffering. In varied ways these hopes included the expectation of a coming figure who would bring about this intervention of God and lead the people. These expectations were not all linked together or attached to one single figure. They included terms like messiah (anointed one), son of man, a new David, the return of Elijah, or the Prophet, the branch, etc. We shall look at some of these in chapters three and four. The coming of this figure would herald the end of the present age, the arrival of the kingdom of God, the restoration of Israel and the judgment of the wicked.

So just imagine the stirring of hearts and quickening of pulses in Jewish homes and communities when, into this mixture of aspirations and hopes, dropped the message of John the Baptist, and then of Jesus himself: "The time is fulfilled! [what you have been waiting for as something future is now here and present]; the kingdom of God is at hand! [God is now acting to establish his reign in the midst of you]; so repent and believe the good news [urgent action is required of you now]."

Light on the story. This, then, is the story that Matthew condenses into seventeen verses of genealogy, the story that leads up to Jesus the Messiah, the story that he completes. It is the story from which Jesus acquired his identity and mission. It is also the story to which he gave significance and authority. The very form of the genealogy shows the direct continuity between the Old Testament and Jesus himself. This continuity is based on the action of God. The God who is manifestly involved in the events described in the second half of Matthew 1 was also active in the events implied in the first half. In Jesus, God brought to completion what he

himself had prepared for. This means that it is Jesus who gives meaning and validity to the events of Israel's Old Testament history. So when we accept the claims of this chapter about Jesus (that he is indeed the promised Messiah, that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit of God, that he is uniquely God's Son, that in him the saving God has truly come among us), we also accept the claim that the same chapter makes about the history that leads up to him—the Old Testament.

It is important to remember that we are still talking about *history* here, and not only about *promises* being fulfilled (which is the subject of the next chapter). We know that, as Paul put it, all the promises of God "are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor 1:20). But in a sense all the acts of God are "yes" in Christ also. For the Old Testament is much more than a promise box full of blessed predictions about Jesus. It is primarily a story—the story of the acts of God in human history out of which those promises arose. The promises only make sense in relation to that history.

If we think of the Old Testament only in terms of promises that are fulfilled, we may fall into the trap of regarding the historical content of the Old Testament as of little value in itself. If it is all "fulfilled," is it worth anything now? Now that we have the "reality" of Christ, do we need to pay any attention to the "shadows" (as the author of Hebrews puts it, Heb 8:5)? But the events of the Old Testament story were themselves reality—sometimes life-and-death reality—for those who lived through them. And through them there was a real relationship between God and his people, and a real revelation of God to his people, and through them to us. It is the same God. The God who in these last days has spoken to us by his Son (as the author of Hebrews puts it, Heb 1:2), also and truly spoke through the prophets. And those prophets were rooted in the earthy specifics of their own historical contexts. They spoke into history, and their words come to us out of that history. We cannot, must not, simply throw that history away, like a discarded ticket when you reach your destination at the end of a journey.

Light on the old. When we look at events in the history of the Old Testament, then, with these points in mind, it has several effects. First of all, we must affirm whatever significance a particular event had in terms of Israel's own experience of God and faith in him. "What it meant for Israel" does not just evaporate in a haze of spiritualization when we reach the New

Testament. Second, however, we may legitimately see in the Old Testament event additional levels of significance in the light of the end of the story—that is, in the light of Christ. And third, the Old Testament event may provide levels of significance to our full understanding of all that Christ was and said and did.

Take for example that foundational event in Israel's history—the exodus. The event itself and the lengthy texts that describe it leave no doubt that God is characterized by care for the oppressed and is motivated to action for justice on their behalf. So prominent is this aspect of the significance of the story in the Hebrew Bible that it became permanently definitive of the nature of Yahweh, Israel's God. The exodus also defined what Israel meant by the terms *redemption* and *salvation*. That dimension of the exodus event remains true, as a permanently valid part of God's revelation, after the coming of Christ. His coming in no way alters or removes the truth of the Old Testament story in itself and in its meaning for Israel—namely, that God is concerned for the poor and suffering and desires justice for the exploited. On the contrary, it underlines and endorses it. What the Old Testament saw in that event remains true.

Looking back on the event, however, in the light of the fullness of God's redemptive achievement in Jesus Christ, we can see that even the original exodus was not merely concerned with the political, economic and social aspects of Israel's predicament. There was also a level of spiritual oppression in Israel's subjection to the gods of Egypt. "Let my people go *that they may worship/serve me*" was God's demand on Pharaoh. And the explicit purpose of the deliverance was that they would *know* Yahweh in the grace of redemption and covenant relationship. So the exodus, for all the comprehensiveness of what it achieved for Israel, points beyond itself to a greater need for deliverance from the totality of evil and restoration to relationship with God than it achieved by itself. Such a deliverance was accomplished by Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. It was the reality of that accomplishment that Moses and Elijah discussed with him on the mount of transfiguration, as, in Luke's words, they talked about "the exodus he would accomplish in Jerusalem" (Lk 9:31, my translation). And indeed when the Hebrew prophets themselves looked hopefully into the future, they pictured God's final and complete salvation in terms of a new and greater exodus, as a result of which salvation would reach to the ends of

the earth. So, when we look back on the original historical exodus in the light of the end of the story in Christ, it is filled with rich significance in view of what it points to.

Light on the new. But it is equally important to look at the other end of the story, the achievement of Christ, in the light of all that the exodus was as an act of God's redemption, as it is understood in the Old Testament. The New Testament affirms that the gospel of the cross and resurrection of Christ is God's complete answer to the totality of evil and all its effects within his creation. But it is the Old Testament that shows us the nature and extent of sin and evil—primarily in the narratives of Genesis 4–11, and then also in the history of Israel and the nations, such as their oppression in the first chapters of Exodus. It shows us that while evil has its origins outside the human race, human beings are morally accountable to God for our own sin. It shows us that sin and evil have a corporate as well as an individual dimension, that is, they affect and shape the patterns of social life within which we live, as well as the personal lives we lead. It shows us that sin and evil affect history itself through inescapable cause and effect and a kind of cumulative process through the generations of humanity. It shows us that there is no area of life on earth in which we are free from the influence of our own sin and the sin of others. In short, the Old Testament portrays to us a very big problem to which there needs to be a very big answer, if there is one at all.

Now, in the New Testament, of course, as Christians we believe we see God's big and final answer to the problem. But in the Old Testament God had already begun to sketch in the dimensions of his answer through successive acts of redemption in history, with the exodus as the prime model. Here we come back to the importance of treating the Old Testament as real history. Christians tend to say something like "the Old Testament is a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ." Carefully explained, this is true. But it can lead to the prejudice that dispenses with the Old Testament itself as little more than shadows, or a kind of children's picture book, of no significance in itself but only for what it foreshadowed. And then we can spiritualize and individualize our interpretation of the work of Christ in such a way that it loses all touch with the earlier dimensions of God's first works of redemption in the history of Israel.

But the exodus was *real* redemption. It was a real act of the living God, for real people who were in real slavery, and it really liberated them. They were liberated from political oppression as an immigrant community into independent nation status. They were liberated from economic exploitation as a slave labor force into the freedom and sufficiency of a land of their own. They were liberated from social violation of basic human rights as a victimized ethnic minority into an unprecedented opportunity to create a new kind of community based on equality and social justice. They were liberated from spiritual bondage to Pharaoh and the other gods of Egypt into undeniable knowledge of and covenant relationship with the living God.

Such was the meaning and scope of redemption in the Hebrew Bible. The very word *redemption* took its substantial meaning from this event. Ask any Israelite what he meant by saying that YHWH their God was a Redeemer, or that he himself was redeemed, and he (or she, if you had asked the likes of Deborah or Hannah) would have told you this story of the exodus and said, “That is what redemption is. That is how I know I belong to a redeemed people.”

That is exactly what some of the psalms do. They celebrate redemption by telling this story. They knew the scale of the problem, and they had experienced the scale of God’s answer.

Now of course, the exodus was not yet God’s last word or act in redemption. Yes, a greater “exodus” and a complete redemption still lay in their future. But within the limits of history and revelation up to that point, the exodus was a real act of the Redeemer God, and it demonstrated unmistakably the comprehensive scale and scope of his redemptive purpose. The exodus was *God’s* idea of redemption. How big, then, is our “New Testament gospel”? It should not fall short of, or be narrower than, its Old Testament foundation, for God is the same God and his ultimate purpose is the same.

This means that it is inadequate also merely to explain it like this (this is how I was taught as young Christian): “In the exodus, God rescued Israel from bondage to Pharaoh, and through the cross God rescues me from bondage to sin.” That is true, of course. But the mighty act of the exodus was more than just a parable to illustrate personal salvation. Furthermore, the nature of the bondage is not quite so parallel as that. Gloriously it is true

that the cross breaks the bondage of my personal sin and releases me from its effects. But the exodus was a release from bondage to the *sin of others*. The Israelites were in Egypt and in slavery, but not because of their own sins or God's judgment. Their sufferings were the direct result of the oppression, cruelty, exploitation and victimization of the Egyptians. They were suffering most from the sin of others. Their liberation therefore was a release from bondage, not to their own sin, but to the evil of others who had enslaved them.

This is not for a moment to imply that the Israelites were not themselves also sinners. They were as much in need of God's mercy and grace as the rest of the human race. The subsequent story of their behavior in the wilderness proved that beyond a doubt, just as that story also proved God's infinite patience and forgiving grace toward their sinful and rebellious ways. The sacrificial system, indeed, was designed precisely to cope with the reality of sin on the part of the people of God and to provide a means of atoning for it. The point here is that atonement and forgiveness for one's own sin is not what the exodus redemption was about. It was rather a *deliverance from an external evil* and the suffering and injustice it caused, by means of a shattering defeat of the evil power and an irrevocable breaking of its hold over Israel, in all the dimensions mentioned above—political, economic, social and spiritual.

If, then, God's climactic work of redemption through the cross transcends, but also embodies and includes, the scope of all his redemptive activity as previously laid bare in Old Testament history, our gospel must include the exodus model of liberation, as well as the sacrificial model of atonement, or the restoration model of God's forgiving grace (as after the exile). The New Testament does, in fact, affirm the death and resurrection of Jesus as a cosmic victory over all authorities and powers "in heaven and on earth." At the cross Jesus defeated all the evil forces that bind and enslave human beings, corrupt and distort human life, and warp, pollute and frustrate the very creation itself. That victory is an essential part of the biblical "good news." And applying that victory to every dimension of human life on earth is the task of Christian mission.

So then we can see that when we take Old Testament history seriously in relation to its completion in Jesus Christ, a two-way process is at work, yielding a double benefit in our understanding of the whole Bible. On the

one hand, we are able to see the full significance of the Old Testament story in the light of where it leads—the climactic achievement of Christ; on the other hand, we are able to appreciate the full dimensions of what God did through Christ in the light of his historical declarations and demonstrations of intent in the Old Testament.

We have concentrated on the exodus so far. But the same principles could be applied to other major dimensions of Israel's story, such as the land—the story of its promise, gift and inheritance, and all the theology, laws, institutions and ethical imperatives that surrounded it.

The story of the monarchy, with the accompanying ministry and message of the prophets, would be equally illuminating, handled in both directions, as we have tried to do.

Matthew's opening genealogy, then, points us to one major way for us as Christians to take account of the Hebrew Bible in relation to Jesus and the New Testament, and that is as story—*the* story, with a multidimensional relevance culminating in the story of Jesus himself. Taken together, both Testaments record the history of God's saving work for humanity. *Salvation history* is a term that has been used by many scholars to refer to this, and some would regard it as the primary point of continuity or relationship between the two testaments of the Christian Bible. As with most scholarly positions, this has been argued over, but it does seem unquestionable that history is one important aspect of the link between Old and New, and that Matthew's genealogy, with all its explicit and implicit levels of meaning, points to this very clearly.

A Unique Story

We have used the expression "salvation history" about the Old Testament. This affirms that in the history of Israel, God was acting for salvation in a way that was not true elsewhere. Now this claim is an embarrassment for some. Not everyone likes the idea of one single chosen people of God enjoying a unique history of salvation, over against all the rest of the nations who seem to get a rather poor deal on the whole. Surely, some people say, if we believe in one God who is and always has been the one universal God of all humanity, then we need to see all the varied histories of

different nations and cultures as being also part of his work on the earth. And can those extrabiblical histories not also function as valid preparations for the fullness of his saving work in Jesus Christ? Obviously, the history of the Old Testament represents *one* way to Jesus—the history of his own people. But, it is said, we need not stress that particular history as far as other peoples are concerned who do not stand within the stream of the Judeo-Christian historical heritage. Rather, we should look within worldwide history for other preparatory routes to the knowledge of the gospel of Christ. When taken to the logical conclusion, this train of thought leads to the view that we may in fact dispense with the Old Testament (at least as far as any canonical authority is concerned) for people who have their own religious and cultural history and scriptural traditions. What are we to say to such arguments?

Clearly, if we believe that the Christian church has been right all through the ages to hold on to the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament as a vital and integral part of the canon of Christian Scripture, then we must say something about this problem of the relationship between *Israel's* history, or salvation history, and the rest of *human* history. Otherwise we might as well go on pretending that the New Testament really does start at Matthew 1:18 and forget all that Matthew was trying to tell us in his unique prologue. But, as we shall see, if we were to throw away the Old Testament, we would lose most of the meaning of Jesus himself. For the uniqueness of Jesus is built on the foundation of the uniqueness of the story that prepared the way for him to come.

Unfortunately, this is a link that is not often preserved in the current debate about the relationship between Christianity and other faiths. Many discussions about the significance of Jesus Christ within the context of world religions virtually cut him off from his historical and scriptural roots. People speak of Jesus as if he were the founder of a new religion. Now, of course, if by that is meant merely that Christianity has historically become a separate religion from Judaism, that may be superficially true. But certainly Jesus had no intention of starting another "religion" as such. He came to fulfill the faith of Israel. Who Jesus was and what he had come to do were both already long prepared for through God's dealings with the people Jesus belonged to. We really must understand the distinctive claims of the

Hebrew Scriptures if we are to get our understanding of Christ's uniqueness straight also.

A universal goal. The proper place to begin our discussion of this issue is to repeat a point made earlier: the Old Testament itself quite clearly intends us to see Israel's history not as an end in itself or for the sake of Israel alone, but rather for the sake of the rest of the nations of humanity. The order of the biblical story itself makes this clear. Just as the New Testament withholds our introduction to Jesus until we have been reminded of what went before, so the Old Testament brings Israel on stage (in the loins of Abraham) in Genesis 12, only after an extensive introduction to the dilemma of the whole human race. Genesis 1–11 is entirely occupied with humanity as a whole, the world of all nations, and with the apparently insoluble problem of their corporate evil. So the story of *Israel*, which begins at chapter 12, is actually God's answer to the problem of *humanity*. All God's dealings with Israel in particular are to be seen as the pursuit of God's unfinished business with all nations. Old Testament Israel existed for the sake of all nations.

This, as we have seen, was the explicit purpose of God's covenant promise to Abraham, first expressed in Genesis 12:3 and repeated several times throughout the book: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

It is then echoed in many various ways in other parts of the Old Testament. At Mount Sinai, for example, at the very point where God is impressing on Israel their unique identity and role in the midst of the nations, he leaves no doubt that he is far from being a minor local deity or even your average national god. The scope of his concern and his sovereignty is universal: "the whole earth is mine" (Ex 19:5). He had already tried, with less success, to establish the same point with Pharaoh, whose resistance afforded the opportunity for a display of God's power and a proclamation of his name "in all the earth." The purpose of the plagues and the liberation to follow was:

> so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth . . .
> that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth . . .
> so that you may know that the earth is the LORD's. (Ex 9:14, 16, 29)

The same universal dimension of Israel's role is alluded to by the prophets at times. Jeremiah, for example, looking back nostalgically to Israel's comparative faithfulness to God in the wilderness (compared, that is, with their apostasy in his own day), says:

> Israel was holy to the LORD,
> the firstfruits of his harvest. (Jer 2:3)

What harvest? Presumably his harvest among the nations. Israel was not the sum and limit of God's interest, precious though it was, as the context emphasizes. It was rather the firstfruits that guaranteed a much larger ingathering. Later the same prophet envisages what would happen if only Israel could be brought to true repentance:

> and if in a truthful, just and righteous way
> you swear, "As surely as the LORD lives,"
> then the nations will invoke blessings by him
> and in him they will boast. (Jer 4:2)

This is not only an echo of the universal promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, but also of its expansion in Genesis 18:18-19, where God says:

> Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.

God's promise—the blessing of all nations—is here linked to the ethical demand on Abraham's descendants. They were to be a community committed to the way of Yahweh—namely, to righteousness and justice. Only in that way could their mission of being a blessing to the nations be fulfilled. Jeremiah picks up this condition to the promise and builds it into his plea for genuine repentance. If Israel would only come back to living as it was created to, with social life and public worship both grounded in "truth, justice and righteousness," then God could get on with his wider and

greater purpose—blessing the rest of humanity. Jeremiah, who had been called to be a "prophet to the nations" (not merely Israel), was aware of the universal dimension of his mission. Much more was at stake concerning whether Israel would or would not change its ways than the fate of Israel alone. Israel's response to God had implications for the rest of the world.

So we need to keep this perspective in our minds at all times when reading the Old Testament and its very particular history. It is like keeping a wide-angle lens viewpoint alongside the more close-up picture. Israel's history is a *particular means for a universal goal*. So we should not be tempted to give in to the accusation that by holding on to the Old Testament and its history as vitally and indispensably linked to the New Testament (as Matthew's genealogy requires us to), we are somehow being narrow and exclusivist in our theology or our attitudes. Quite the opposite is the case. The rest of the world was not absent from the mind and purpose of God in all his dealings with Old Testament Israel. Indeed, to borrow a not unfamiliar phrase from John's Gospel: God so loved the *world* that he chose *Israel*.

A unique experience. Having made the point above, it still has to be maintained that according to the Old Testament, no other nation experienced what Israel did of the grace and power of God. God's action in and through Israel was unique. The story of election, redemption, covenant and inheritance, outlined in the historical survey above, was a story shared by no other people.

Now this does *not* mean that God was in no way active in the histories of other peoples. The Old Testament explicitly asserts that he was, and we shall look at that below. It *does* mean that only in Israel did God work within the terms of a covenant of redemption, initiated and sustained by his saving grace. Deuteronomy presents the events of Israel's previous history as unparalleled in all of time and space.

> Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another

> nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? . . . Because he loved your ancestors and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as it is today. (Deut 4:32-34, 37-38)

This passage includes all four elements of the redemptive history referred to above: election, redemption, covenant and inheritance. The passage then goes on to draw a theological implication, namely, that the uniqueness of Israel's historical experience points to the uniqueness of Yahweh himself as God: "You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other" (Deut 4:35).

Thus the revelation of the character of God and the nature of his redeeming work for humanity are bound together with the history of Israel. Israel's uniqueness is tied to God's uniqueness. To put it simply, God did things in and for Israel that he did not do in the history of any other nation. And that was how Israel knew that Yahweh alone was the true God.

This uniqueness of Israel's historical experience, however, was because of its special role and function in the world. It was to facilitate God's promise of blessing to the nations. It was to be his priesthood in the midst of the nations (Ex 19:6)—representing him to the rest of humankind and being the means of bringing the nations to saving knowledge of the living God. To fulfill that destiny it was to be a holy nation (different from the rest), characterized by walking in the way of Yahweh in justice and righteousness (as we saw in Gen 18:19). That is why the text from Deuteronomy above draws out not only a *theological* implication about God but also a *moral* implication about what is required of Israel in the light of their unique experience: "Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you" (Deut 4:39-40).

So Israel's unique historical experience was not a ticket to a cozy state of privileged favoritism. Rather it laid upon the people a missionary task and a moral responsibility. If they failed in these, then in a sense they fell back to the level of any other nation. They stood, like all nations and all humanity, before the bar of God's judgment, and their history by itself gave them no guaranteed protection.

Amos was a prophet who perceived very clearly how Israel's unique history, like a double-edged sword, cut both ways. He recounts the critical stages of Israel's redemptive history from the exodus, through the wilderness, victoriously into the land, up to the rise of the prophets. But he uses it not in order to congratulate Israel on its blessings and privilege but as a stark contrast to its present behavior. By rampant injustice and social corruption it was denying all that its history was meant to have made it. Its unique experience of God's salvation thus exposed it to even more severe penalty for their rebellion (Amos 2:6-16; 3:2).

So Amos predicted the unthinkable: Israel would be destroyed and its land left deserted. But surely, his hearers must have protested, God cannot treat his own people so! Are we not those whom he brought up out of Egypt? Yes indeed, came the reply. But so what, if you have reduced your moral standards of social life to the lowest common denominator of the rest of humanity? Your history by itself gives you neither excuse nor protection.

> "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?"
> declares the LORD.
> "Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor
> and the Arameans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7)

This devastating word must have rocked Israel to the core, even more than the fierce words of destructive doom that surround it on both sides. What? Israel, the same to God as remote foreigners on the very edge of the known world (Cush was roughly Sudan/Ethiopia)?! God, as sovereign in the movements of Israel's traditional enemies as of Israel itself?! Precisely, says God through Amos, if by your disobedience you forfeit all that your own history entitled and prepared you for.

We ought to be careful in handling this verse not to make it say more than it does. It has been used by some scholars to argue that other nations

stood on a level with Israel in God's sight and that he had been *savingly* active in their history also. This then can be used as part of an argument for various forms of religious universalism or pluralism. But Amos did not say that other nations were like Israel but that Israel had become like them, in God's sight, because of their sinfulness and his imminent judgment.

Similarly, the fact that Amos affirms the sovereignty of Yahweh over the national histories of other peoples—including their "exoduses" and migrations—cannot mean that he believed that God had "redeemed" those nations through those events, or that they stood in the same covenant relationship with God as Israel did. Such a view flatly contradicts what Amos himself had very emphatically stated a few chapters earlier:

> Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the LORD has spoken against you—against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt:
>
> "You only have I chosen
> of all the families of the earth;
> therefore I will punish you
> for all your sins." (Amos 3:1-2)

God had indeed chosen Israel and made a covenant relationship with it. As far as *that* is concerned, the text says, Israel alone had experienced it, whatever God may have done in the histories of other peoples. But as the verse also says in its last line, with that brilliant twist of the unexpected so characteristic of the rhetorical skill of Amos, this very uniqueness was no comfortable privilege but the reason why they were facing God's judgment.

So then, the Old Testament clearly teaches that Israel's history was unique. It is the history of the redemptive acts of God in his dealings with a people in covenant relationship with himself. Amos's unambiguous affirmation of it in 3:1-2 is even sharper when we notice that he knew that Yahweh the God of Israel *was* certainly active in the histories of other nations and was also morally sovereign over the activities of all nations (Amos 1:2–2:3).

To remember and stress this truth about Israel (that it was unique) does not take away from the other truth, namely, that God's purpose was ultimately universal in scope. Israel existed only because of God's desire to

redeem people from every nation. But in his sovereign freedom God chose to do so by *this* particular and historical means. The tension between the universal goal and the particular means is found throughout the Bible and cannot be reduced to either pole alone. What it comes down to is that, while God has every nation in view in his redemptive purpose, in no other nation did he act as he did in Israel, for the sake of the nations. That was its uniqueness, which can be seen to be both exclusive (in the sense that no other nation experienced what it did of God's revelation and redemption) and inclusive (in the sense that it was created, called and set in the midst of the nations for the sake of ultimately bringing salvation to the nations).

Now when we consider Jesus in the light of this, the vitally important fact is that the New Testament presents him to us as the *Messiah*, Jesus the *Christ*. And the Messiah "was" Israel. That is, the Messiah was Israel representatively and personified. The Messiah was the completion of all that Israel had been put in the world for (i.e., God's self-revelation and his work of human redemption). For this reason, Jesus shares in the uniqueness of Israel. What God had been doing *through no other nation* he now completed *through no other person* than the Messiah Jesus.

The paradox is that precisely through the narrowing down of his redemptive work to the unique particularity of the single man, Jesus, God opened the way to offering his redemptive grace to all nations. Israel was unique because God had a universal goal through it. Jesus embodied that uniqueness and achieved that universal goal. As the Messiah of Israel he could be the Savior of the world. Or as Paul reflected, going further back, by fulfilling God's purpose in choosing Abraham, Jesus became a second Adam, the head of a new humanity (Rom 4–5; Gal 3).

Israel and Other Stories

God in control of all history. Although the history of Old Testament Israel is the unique story of God's saving acts, the Bible also clearly affirms that Yahweh was in control of the histories of all other peoples as well. Sometimes this was a control exercised in direct relationship to how those other nations impinged on Israel. But in other cases it was not directly so. The migration of the Philistines from the Aegean, or of the Syrians from

northern Mesopotamia, had no connection with the Israelites at the time; however, says Amos 9:7, it was Yahweh who "brought them up." And whoever the Emites were, or the Horites, or the Avites, not to mention the dreaded Zamzummites, they had nothing to do with the Israelites! Yet their movements and destinies were under the disposition of Yahweh just as much as Israel's own historic migration, according to some fascinating bits of ancient geography and history in Deuteronomy 2:10-12, 20-23.

Mostly, however, it is the case that other nations are said to be under Yahweh's control in relation to how their history interacts with Israel's. That is to say, God fits them into his purpose for his own people Israel—sometimes for Israel's benefit, sometimes as agents of God's punishment on his own people. But then, God's purpose for Israel was ultimately the blessing and redemption of humanity as a whole. So it can be said that God's activity in the history of other nations also fits into that wider redemptive purpose.

In other words, we can make a theological distinction, but not a complete separation, between the history of Israel and other histories. Salvation history is real history. It must be seen as having happened within the flow of universal world history, all of which was under God's control. It is not some kind of extraterrestrial, sacred or religious history, just because "it's in the Bible."

Some examples of God's activity in the historical affairs of nations other than Israel will help to illustrate this point. Some of these have been touched on already.

Egypt	God's activity there had the whole world in view (Ex 9:13-16).
Assyria	The dominant world power for a century and a half, but to the prophetic eye, a mere stick in the hands of Yahweh (Is 10:5-19).
Babylon	Jeremiah owed much of his unpopularity in later life precisely to his conviction that Nebuchadnezzar had been raised up by Yahweh and entrusted with world dominion. He even went so far as to call him "my servant" (Jer 27:5-7). Habbakuk was dumbfounded by the same revelation (Hab 1). According to the book of Daniel, this interpretation of current events was relayed even to Nebuchadnezzar himself (Dan 2:37-38; 4:17, 25, 32).

Persia	The central theme of Isaiah 40–48 was that the most burning topic of international alarm of the day—the sudden rise of Cyrus, king of the united Medes and Persians—was directly the work of Israel's God and no other. Such was God's involvement with the unwitting Cyrus that he could scandalize his own people by referring to him as "my shepherd" and "my anointed one" and by picturing him as led by God's own hand in all his victories (Is 44:28–45:13).

The saving acts of God within or on behalf of Israel, then, most certainly did not take place in sterile, vacuum-sealed isolation, but within the turbulent crosscurrents of international politics and the historical rise and fall of empires whose destinies Yahweh himself controlled.

The nations share in Israel's history. In the Old Testament it often seems as if the nations are the intended audience of what God is actually doing in Israel. They are presented almost as the spectators of the drama he is engaged in with his people. The nations will tremble, sings Moses, when they hear what Yahweh has done to the Egyptians on behalf of his people (Ex 15:14-16). But, on the other hand, what would the Egyptians think of Yahweh if he were to turn and destroy his rebellious people, as he threatened to do (Ex 32:11-12)? Moses' intercession on their behalf at the time of the golden calf incident made much of God's reputation among the nations.

God had put Israel on an open stage. So if Israel would keep the laws God had given it, its national life would be so conspicuously righteous that other nations would notice and ask questions about its laws and its God (Deut 4:6-8). But on the other hand, if it failed to do so and if God then kept his threat and acted in judgment upon his own people, destroying his own city, land and temple, then the nations would ask why such an incredible thing could have happened. The answer was ready in advance (Deut 29:22-28).

But even if that judgment was fully deserved, such a state of affairs was a disgrace to God's own name. So when God acted to restore his people to their land, that too was for the purpose of reinstating his reputation among the nations (Ezek 36:16-23).

More than this, however, there is in some of the psalms a sense that the history of Israel is in some way actually available for the nations to

appropriate for themselves. In the psalms celebrating the kingship of Yahweh, the nations (plural) or the whole earth are repeatedly called on to rejoice and praise God for his mighty acts in Israel. Read, for example, Psalms 47; 96:1-3; 98:1-3. Now if Israel's salvation history (which is referred to in these psalms as the "marvelous deeds," "righteous acts," etc., of Yahweh) is to be a cause of *rejoicing* among the nations, then it must be that they in some sense benefit from it, or are included within the scope of its purpose, even though they have not personally experienced it.

How this could be so remains a mystery in the Old Testament. Indeed, I sometimes wonder what went on in the mind of the Israelites when they wrote some of the amazingly universal words in the Psalms. What did they think when they sang words like:

> Clap your hands, *all you nations*;
> shout to God with cries of joy.
> For the LORD Most High is awesome,
> the great King over all the earth.
> He subdued nations under *us*,
> peoples under our feet.
> He chose our inheritance for us,
> the pride of Jacob, whom he loved. (Ps 47:1-4, my italics)

or this:

> Sing to the LORD a new song;
> sing to the LORD, *all the earth*.
> Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
> proclaim his salvation day after day.
> Declare his glory among the nations,
> his marvelous deeds among all peoples. (Ps 96:1-3, my italics)

For the Israelites, Yahweh's *name*, *salvation*, *glory* and *marvelous deeds* meant only one thing—the incomparable history of his own people and everything that God had done for them. Yet in this hymn they are heartily inviting all nations, all peoples, all the earth no less, to join in the celebration and proclamation of those unique events. Mysterious as it may

be, this universal and inclusive element in the worship of Israel is unmistakably there. And it is very important to set it alongside the call for exclusive worship and loyalty to Yahweh alone, and the abhorrence of the religious practices of other nations, especially their idolatry, which is denounced in these very same psalms. Israel was to worship Yahweh only. But Yahweh was not God of Israel only. He was to be worshiped as the God of all nations and the whole earth.

The nations share in Israel's future. The Old Testament, however, goes further in its program for the nations than casting them in the role of spectators, even clapping spectators. Psalm 47, which is really quite breathtaking in its vista, moves the nations out of the audience in verse 1, right onto the center of the stage in verse 9:

> God reigns over the nations;
> God is seated on his holy throne.
> The nobles of the nations assemble
> *as the people of the God of Abraham*,
> for the kings of the earth belong to God;
> he is greatly exalted. (Ps 47:8-9, my italics)

The nations before God's throne are there not behind the people of God, nor even just alongside them, but *as* the people of the God of Abraham—the God whose promise to Abraham had the nations in mind from the beginning. It must have stretched the imagination of the Israelites when they sang such psalms as to when and how the words they had just sung could ever be a reality. Yet there they are, to be sung with enthusiastic faith and hope.

The prophets stretched the imagination even further. Amos, in the same chapter that we read his devastating likening of Israel to the other nations because of their sin and its deserved doom, speaks of a future restoration of the house of David, such that it will include "nations that bear my name" (Amos 9:11-12). This indeed is the very passage quoted by James as scriptural authority for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the young Christian church (Acts 15:13-19). We shall look at the significance of that event in chapter four.

James could easily have chosen several other prophetic texts to support his understanding of the event. Isaiah 19, for example, concludes with an amazing vision of both Egypt and Assyria gathering to worship God alongside Israel, being blessed by God and becoming a blessing on the earth. They will be transformed from enemies into "my people" by a process of healing and restoration, which has deliberate echoes of the very exodus itself. A saving exodus for the Egyptians?! (Is 19:19-25).

Jeremiah holds out to the nations the same hope, in virtually the same terms that he had held out to his own people. They stand under God's judgment, and he will punish them for what they do to Israel, but for those nations also repentance could be the road to restoration—*and inclusion*:

> After I uproot them [the nations], I will again have compassion and will bring each of them back to their own inheritance and their own country. And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name, saying, "As surely as the LORD lives" [notice the echo of 4:2]—even as they once taught my people to swear by Baal—then they will be established *among my people*. (Jer 12:15-16, my italics)

The link between belonging to the people of God and acknowledging the name of Yahweh as the one true and living God is even more clearly forged in a beautiful picture of the conversion of outsiders as the result of the outpouring of God's spirit and blessing, like fertilizing, life-giving water, in Isaiah 44:5 (my italics):

> Some will say, "I belong to *the* Lord";
> others will call themselves by the name of *Jacob*;
> still others will write on their hand, "*The Lord's*,"
> and will take the name *Israel*.

The same prophet moves far beyond this individual picture to a climactic vision of the saving work of God extending to all nations on earth. The same saving, liberating justice that God had shown on Israel's behalf will be activated for the nations:

> Listen to me, my people;
> hear me, my nation:

Instruction will go out from me;
my justice will become a light to the nations.
My righteousness draws near speedily,
my salvation is on the way,
and my arm will bring justice to the nations. (Is 51:4-5)

God is the speaker in that passage, but the mission is elsewhere committed to the servant of Yahweh, who, in the power of the Spirit, “will bring justice to the nations” and establish “justice on earth” (Is 42:1, 4).

In view of his mission, which God lays upon him,

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. (Is 49:6)

The appeal can go out universally:

Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth. (Is 45:22)

In chapter four we shall look at how these particular texts and the figure of the servant of the Lord are taken up into the identity and mission of Jesus.

This, then, is the “end of the story” to which the Old Testament points but which is never reached within its pages, and indeed still awaits us. The eschatological future hope of Israel saw its own history ultimately flowing into the universal history of the nations, in order that people from all nations could be granted salvation and included within the people of God.

This confluence was achieved, as we have seen, without abandoning the uniqueness of the history of Israel as a history of saving acts of God unparalleled in any other history, but equally without denying the activity and interest of God within all human history. On the contrary, the eschatological vision sees the achievements of the nations being brought into the new age and new creation. The economic and cultural history of the nations, coming as it does within the creation mandate to all humanity to use and steward the resources of the earth, is seen eventually to flow into the substance of the people of God. Isaiah 23:18, for example, after the declaration of historical judgment on the economic oppressions of Tyre,

foresees all the profits of the great trading empire as ultimately destined for the people of God. Haggai 2:6-9 envisages the wealth of the nations returning to its rightful owner—the Lord himself, in his temple. This expectation is endorsed in the vision of Revelation 21:24. In other words, human history "beyond" salvation history, the history of the rest of humanity who live by God's grace on the face of God's earth, also has its meaning and value and will ultimately contribute in some way to the glory of the kingdom of God as he rules over his redeemed humanity in the new creation.

A unique history, then, with universal effects. This is where the story that underlies Matthew's genealogy leads. We shall look further at the theme of the ingathering of the nations in chapter four, but it is fitting to conclude this chapter by noticing how Paul, so conscious of his unique mission to the nations, binds together the two dimensions of history.

It had indeed been a "mystery" (to use Paul's own word) all through the ages of Old Testament Israel as to *how* God could bring about for Abraham what he had promised him—namely, blessing for all nations. But Paul saw very clearly how that mystery had been revealed through the tremendous achievement of God in Christ. He saw that it was paradoxically through the narrowing down of God's redemptive acts to the unique particularity of one single man—the Messiah, Jesus—that God had opened the way to the universal offering of the grace of his gospel to all nations. In Galatians 3 and Ephesians 2–3, Paul explains that what the Gentiles had not had before (because it was at that time limited to the nation of Israel) is now available to them in the Messiah (and nowhere else—either for them or for the Jews). The great Old Testament hope that the nations would come to be part of Israel is then already being fulfilled through Jesus the Messiah.

But in Romans 9–11, Paul wrestles with the fact that it is happening in an unexpected and (from his own point of view as a Jew) undesirable way. The majority of his contemporary Jews had in fact rejected Jesus as Messiah. But as a result of that rejection, the Gentile nations were being "grafted in." However, the Gentiles did not constitute a separate "olive tree." For Paul there was only one people of God—then, now or ever. No, the Gentiles were being grafted into the original stock. In other words, as in the Old Testament worship and prophecy, the nations were now participating in the saving work of God, which he had initiated through the

history of Israel. These were Gentiles from every conceivable background. But they now shared the root and sap of Israel's sonship, glory, covenants, law, temple worship, promises, patriarchs—and . . . "the human ancestry of the Messiah" (Rom 9:5). The Gentile Christian, therefore, is a person of two histories: on the one hand, his or her own national and cultural background, ancestry and heritage, which as we have seen is by no means to be despised, and on the other hand, his or her new spiritual, "ingrafted" history—that of God's people descended from Abraham, which the Christian inherits through inclusion in Christ.

So ultimately the Christian believer singing hymns at Christmas and the Israelite believer singing psalms in the temple are as much brothers and sisters in the Messiah as the rest of the church congregation is brothers and sisters in Christ. The genealogy of Jesus conceals a story that led up to Jesus but that, as Luke also perceived, led up to a new beginning with him (Acts 1:1). The story goes on, until the promise to Abraham will finally be fulfilled, in a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language. That is the goal of all history, as it was of Israel's history. And in the church of the Messiah that goal is already being brought about in anticipation: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

One people, one story. The fact is that whether we read Matthew 1:1-17 in our Christmas service or not, that story of Old Testament Israel is our story as much as it is the story of Jesus. For through him, we have come to be the spiritual descendants of Abraham. "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29).

Chapter 1 Questions and Exercises

1. Many people ignore or skip over Matthew 1:1-17 as a boring genealogy. How would you explain to someone else why it is important?
2. Read Psalm 96. How is Israel's story of God's salvation something that the other nations of the world would benefit from and therefore rejoice in?

3. Select ten Old Testament texts that would give an outline of the Old Testament story, showing how it leads up to Christ. This should consist mainly of texts that describe significant events (such as creation, fall, call of Abraham, exodus and so on), and not just texts containing promises or predictions. Give a one- or two-sentence explanation of why you selected each of the ten Old Testament passages.
4. Study Psalms 105–107. Make notes connecting the different events that are mentioned in those psalms to the historical texts in the Old Testament that first described them. What is the overall message of those psalms, and why do you think Israel thought so much about its own history and included it in worship? What does Psalm 107 finally promise?
5. Study the transfiguration of Jesus in Luke 9:28-36 and make appropriate connections to the Old Testament. Explain why it was Moses and Elijah who came to talk with Jesus. Explain what Luke meant when he said that they were talking about “the exodus” that Jesus would accomplish in Jerusalem (v. 31).

- 2 -

Jesus and the Old Testament Promise

"And So Was Fulfilled . . . "

Even if Matthew's genealogy is understandably omitted from the readings at our Christmas services, the list will undoubtedly include other portions from the rest of Matthew 1–2, for they are among the most familiar of Jesus' infancy stories. Matthew weaves together five scenes from the conception, birth and early childhood of Jesus. And then, perhaps for the benefit of those who missed the point of his genealogy (or more likely skipped it altogether), he ties each of those five scenes to a quotation from the Hebrew Scriptures that, he claims, has been "fulfilled" by the event described.

Five scenes from Jesus' childhood. The five scenes and their scriptural links are as follows:

1. The assurance to Joseph concerning the child conceived in Mary: Matthew 1:18-25 "to fulfill" Isaiah 7:14, which was the Immanuel sign given by Isaiah to King Ahaz.
2. The fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem: Matthew 2:1-12 "to fulfill" Micah 5:2, in which it is prophesied that a ruler of Israel will come from Bethlehem.
3. The escape to Egypt, and then the return from there: Matthew 2:13-15 "to fulfill" Hosea 11:1, which is a reference to God having brought Israel, his son, out of Egypt at the exodus.

4. The murder by Herod of the boys in Bethlehem: Matthew 2:16-18 “to fulfill” Jeremiah 31:15, which is a lament for the Israelites who were going into exile.
5. The settlement of Jesus’ family in Nazareth: Matthew 2:19-23 “to fulfill” “the prophets,” which is a bit of a puzzle because there is no text that says exactly what Matthew records here. It seems to be a reflection of several possible allusions, which needn’t detain us here.

The five scenes thus cover the early life of Jesus, from conception through his birth in Bethlehem and his temporary stay in Egypt up to his settling in Nazareth. And in all of it Matthew sees Old Testament reflections. By repeated use of the fulfillment phrase, Matthew clearly wants his readers to see that Jesus was not only the *completion* of the Old Testament story at a historical level, as his genealogy portrays, but also that he was in a deeper sense its *fulfillment*. This gives us another way of looking at the Old Testament in relation to Jesus. Not only does the Old Testament *tell the story that Jesus completes*, it also *declares the promise that Jesus fulfills*.

A destination is not just the end of a journey; it is also the point of a journey. We can ask about any journey not only the question, “Where are you going?” but also, “Why are you going there?” The journey is undertaken because of some purpose or commitment, which is fulfilled when the journey reaches its destination. Or the journey may be undertaken because of some invitation and promise that the person on the journey had received earlier. In the Old Testament journey, God had declared his purpose and made his promise. He had made them known in all kinds of ways to and through Israel—especially in the prophets. God’s purpose or commitment was then fulfilled in the arrival of this child, Jesus. And through his five Old Testament quotations in quick succession, Matthew makes sure we don’t miss the point.

Now some people get a bit suspicious over what Matthew does here. Is he not just “prooftexting”?—that is, just matching up a few Old Testament predictions with some stories that seem to fit them. Or is it even worse: according to some, that Matthew has *invented* stories about Jesus to make

the Old Testament predictions "come true"? This idea that the infancy narratives are pious fiction, produced by a Scripture-fired imagination, has become quite popular in some quarters, but it really does not stand up to the evidence. There are two solid objections.

First of all, why did Matthew pick such obscure texts? If his purpose was to start from Messianic prophecies and create stories to fulfill them, there are any number of texts that, already in Matthew's day, were far better known and much more detailed regarding the coming Messiah. Any of them could have produced good narratives, if the "facts" could simply be invented.

Second, it is clearly mistaken to say that the narratives Matthew tells are fulfillments of Old Testament *predictions*, because only one of the texts he quotes is in fact a recognized Messianic prediction at all, and that is Micah 5:2, predicting that the future king would be born in Bethlehem. The others were not primarily predictions at all. The "Immanuel" prophecy was a sign given to King Ahaz in his own historical context, not (originally) a long-range prediction. In any case it would be odd as a straight prediction, since the child was actually given the name Jesus, not Immanuel—a fact that hardly escaped Matthew's notice, so he cannot have regarded his story as a neat prediction-fulfillment. Hosea 11:1 was not a prediction but a *past* reference to the exodus, when God had brought his son Israel out of Egypt. Jeremiah 31:15 is a figurative picture of the mourning of Rachel at the time of the exile of her descendants in 587 B.C. after the fall of Jerusalem. It was not predictive and had nothing to do with the Messiah in its context. The concluding comment related to Nazareth is so obscure that no one is completely sure what texts Matthew had in mind. That is hardly compatible with the view that Matthew was making up stories to fulfill well-known Messianic predictions.

It seems altogether much more probable that Matthew is doing exactly what he says—working back from actual events that happened in the early life of Jesus to certain Hebrew Scriptures in which he now sees a deeper significance than they could have had before. It was the events in the life of infant Jesus that suggested the Scriptures, not the other way around. And since the Scriptures are not obvious predictions of the events recorded, Matthew must have meant more by his affirmation that the Scriptures were

being fulfilled by Jesus than just that predictions had come true. But then, a *promise* is much more than a *prediction*, as we shall discuss shortly.

Geography and history. So then, what *was* Matthew's intention in his choice of Scriptures to punctuate his narrative? Probably there is more than one level of meaning in his mind. On the surface, the passages "accompany" Jesus in a geographical sense. That is, they are linked up to the fact that the Messiah, born in *Bethlehem*, ended up in *Nazareth* after a stay in *Egypt*. This in itself was probably a form of explanation as to why the person whom Christians claimed was the Messiah had come from Nazareth (not a good place to come from). This was a point of conflict between Christians and Jews that went back to the days of Jesus himself (cf. Jn 1:46; 7:41-43). Matthew is pointing out that Jesus was actually born in Bethlehem and that this fact fitted in with the Scriptures. So his point is that the prophet Jesus of Nazareth could legitimately be claimed as the Messiah because not only had he actually been born in Bethlehem (as the Scriptures foretold), but also the movements by which he ended up a resident of Galilee were also consistent with the fulfillment of Scripture. This Scripture-fulfillment motif in the infancy narratives serves the same purpose as the genealogy in Matthew 1:1-17. They both portray Jesus as the Messiah, the completion of a *story* and the fulfillment of a *promise*.

But even in this geographical dimension there lies a deeper significance to be picked up by those with a little more awareness of the Scriptures. There is, in fact, rather a lot of geography in Matthew 2–4. Either by his travels or by his reputation Jesus had an effective ministry that spans the whole of the classical area of ancient Israel—particularly the boundaries of the old Davidic kingdom (note especially the places referred to in Dan 4:24-25). The one who was the son of King David has a ministry as wide as the kingdom of David itself. The focal point of that ministry in the region of Galilee is further vindicated by Scripture when Matthew quotes from Isaiah 9:1-2 (Mt 4:13-16). Isaiah 9:1-7 is one of the outstanding Messianic and Davidic prophecies in the whole Old Testament. And it begins with referring to Galilee:

> In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
> but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of
> the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned. (Is 9:1-2)

So, the point of the *history* lesson in the genealogy of chapter 1 is corroborated by the *geography* lesson in chapters 2–4. “Great David’s greater Son” is claiming his kingdom.

The genealogy, however, has a wider scope than David, as we saw in our first chapter. There is the universal scope connected with Abraham, and the inclusion of Gentiles among the female ancestors of Jesus. This historical dimension also has its geographical counterpart in what follows. Foreigners enter the story.

After the birth of Jesus, the first story Matthew recounts is the visit of “Magi *from the east*”; and the second is the visit of Jesus himself to *Egypt*, in the west. The stories thus embrace both extremes of the biblical world—especially in Old Testament times—east and west. Furthermore, both regions are included within various Old Testament prophecies concerning the extent of God’s work of salvation (most notably Is 19:23-25). God’s purpose for Israel, and for the Messiah who would embody Israel, was the blessing of all nations.

Matthew then, though he wrote the most Jewish of the Gospels, wastes no time at all before getting to the point that when the Messiah came he had visitors, gifts and worship from the east, and was personally, if temporarily, resident in Egypt in the west. Furthermore, the worship of the Magi is almost certainly intended as an echo of Psalm 72:10, which in turn echoes the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, while the gifts of gold and frankincense recall Isaiah 60:1-6, where they are brought by kings from Arabia to greet the dawning of God’s new light in Zion. So the geographical ripples spread even wider in Matthew’s allusive and suggestive narrative. By showing Jesus in relation to the wider Gentile world so early in his Gospel, Matthew clearly wants us to see him as more than merely Israel’s Messiah, as the fulfillment of God’s saving purpose for the nations beyond Israel. And that is a fundamental part of what the Old Testament is all about.

There is yet another level of meaning in the Scriptures linked to these stories. Talking about Egypt on the one hand and Mesopotamia (Assyria, Babylon, "the East") on the other would never leave any Jew thinking only of geography. He or she would inevitably revert to history, as Jews characteristically do. As we saw in the first chapter, the bulk of the history recorded in the Old Testament is slung like a great hammock between the two poles of Egypt and Babylon, more specifically between the exodus from oppression in Egypt, and the exile to Babylon and the return. And that indeed is what is in the mind of Matthew as he reflects on the infancy of the Messiah, for he puts together two quotations from the Scriptures, one of which refers to the exodus from Egypt and the other to the exile to Babylon.

Hosea 11:1, quoted in Matthew 2:15, looks back to the exodus. Jesus has been taken to Egypt, but he will return, and so Matthew sees a correspondence with the exodus experience of Israel itself: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (meaning Israel, cf. Ex 4:22). He is not suggesting that the Hosea text was a prediction. His point is simply that what God had done for his people Israel—in fact the greatest thing God had done for them—had its counterpart, even in a purely physical sense, in the life of Jesus.

Then Matthew records Herod's slaughter of boys under two years old in Bethlehem. This he links to Jeremiah 31:15 about Rachel weeping and mourning for her children. You don't need a biblical chapter and verse to prove that parents whose children are killed will mourn and grieve. So the meaning of Matthew's quotation from Jeremiah lies a bit deeper than that. The verse in fact refers to the events immediately after the fall of Jerusalem to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C., when the defeated Israelites had been marshaled at Ramah for their long trudge into exile in Babylon. This was the cause of Rachel's "mourning," since there was a tradition that Rachel was buried at Ramah (cf. Jer 40:1). So Matthew observes that Jesus' "exile" to Egypt was followed by an outburst of grief and mourning, and he likens it to the grief that accompanied Israel's exile to Babylon. But the context of his quotation puts it in a more positive light. For all the rest of Jeremiah 31 is in fact a message of hope that out of the tragedy and grief would come future blessing. The very next words after Matthew's quotation run on:

Restrain your voice from weeping

and your eyes from tears . . .
They will return . . .
So there is hope for your descendants. (Jer 31:16-17)

So then, in his reflection on the single event of Jesus' going to Egypt and returning (and the linked massacre at Bethlehem), Matthew sees a double historical analogy, which he brings out by the use of two Scriptures, one referring to the exodus, the other referring to the exile, key points in the history and theology of Israel in the Old Testament.

But of course, the exodus and the return from exile were key points in the Old Testament precisely because they were indeed much more than mere history. Both events were utterly saturated in *promise*. And that is what makes them especially significant for Matthew, who is here presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament promise. The exodus is described from the very beginning as the result of God acting in faithfulness to his own promise (cf. Ex 2:24; 3:16-17; 6:5-8, etc.). Even the text Matthew quotes from Hosea, with its designation of Israel as God's son, implies this, for God could not allow his son and heir to languish further in slavery. The exodus proved God's commitment to his people and his purpose for them.

Likewise, the prophets predicted the exile for two centuries. But they also predicted that there would be a return from exile and a future hope for the people. In the prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah 40–55, that note of promise and hope became a symphony of expectation. Significantly, the original exodus itself was used as a pattern for God's future action. There would be a "new exodus." In the same way, Matthew uses both exodus and return from exile as patterns for what he sees in the life of Jesus.

Furthermore, by taking a text that describes *Israel* as God's son (as was fairly common in the Old Testament), and applying it to *Jesus*, Matthew is obviously also setting up a Jesus-Israel correspondence, which is even more suggestive for the thoughtful reader. After all, the Old Testament Israelites were the people of promise. They existed as the fruit of a promise to Abraham miraculously fulfilled. They were inheritors of a promised land. And they were bearers of a universal promise for the human race.

What a legacy Matthew pins on this little toddler being hurriedly carried off to Egypt by his anxious parents!

Now we could go deeper still. These early chapters of Matthew are so full of direct and indirect allusions to the Old Testament that scholars never tire of finding more and more of them—some more plausible than others. Certainly there is a clear intention to echo the Moses story: the hostile king, the threat to the child's life, the flight amid the suffering of others, the death of the hostile king, the return (cf. Ex 4:19-31). And this only adds to the picture of imminent salvation, for Moses was the liberator *par excellence*, and "Jesus" (the same name as "Joshua" in Hebrew) has already been explained as the one who will deliver his people.

Our purpose here, however, is not primarily to expound Matthew's Gospel but rather to see from it how Matthew (and of course the other Gospel writers) saw Jesus in relation to the Old Testament. And it stands out clearly that the Old Testament had declared a promise that Jesus fulfills. What Matthew does in these opening chapters about the childhood of Jesus is programmatic for the rest of his Gospel. He repeatedly comes back to this note of fulfillment, whether in some action or some teaching of Jesus, and supremely of course in his suffering and death.

But it is not just, as we have observed, a matter of predictions coming true. Rather Matthew sees the whole Old Testament as the embodiment of promise—in the sense of presenting to us a God of gracious and saving purpose, liberating action and covenant faithfulness to his people. That generates a tremendous sense of expectation and hope, reflected in all parts of the Hebrew canon. Hence, all kinds of Old Testament writing (not just prophecies) can be drawn in relating that promise to Jesus.

In order to explain Jesus, the New Testament connects him to a whole range of Old Testament Scriptures that are all perceived as expressing God's promise—whether directly or by implication. For Matthew, as for other New Testament authors, their Hebrew Scriptures stood before them rather like the words of a song I once heard a child sing, a song composed presumably by understandably optimistic parents:

I am a promise, I am a possibility,
I am a promise with a capital "P,"
I am a great big bundle of potentiality . . .
(written by Bill and Gloria Gaither)

The Promise Declared

Now that we have reached some understanding of what is meant by saying that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament promise, we can move on to explore how the concept of promise helps us gain a better understanding of the Old Testament itself, which is part of our overall purpose in this book. A good starting point for that will be to point out in more detail the difference between promise and mere prediction. Even in everyday life, promise is a much deeper and more significant thing than prediction. It is one thing to predict a marriage between two people. It is quite another thing to promise to marry a particular person! That is a good illustration of the first major difference, which is very clear in the Bible.

Promise involves commitment to a relationship. A promise is made between two people, as an "I-you" matter. It presupposes a relationship between them; indeed it may cement or forward that relationship, or depend on it. A prediction, on the other hand, may be quite impersonal, or "third-personal," and does not require any relationship between the predictor and the person or persons about whom the prediction is made. A promise may involve some degree of prediction (or expectation), but a prediction need not have anything to do with a promise. A promise is made *to* someone, whereas a prediction is made *about* someone.

Now in the Old Testament there are plenty of predictions involving the nations beyond Israel. Some of them are surprisingly detailed and even more surprisingly fulfilled in the course of ancient history. But they do not indicate a relationship or any commitment between God and those nations in terms of those predictions. In most cases the nations concerned were most probably unaware of the predictions. So in those cases predictions could be made and fulfilled without any ongoing relationship involved.

It was totally different in the case of the promises God made concerning Israel. There the very existence of Israel was the substance of the promise as it had been first declared to Abraham. And that promise was the immoveable foundation on which the relationship between God and Israel survived in spite of all that threatened it. To say that the Old Testament declares God's promise is another way of saying that at a particular time in history God *entered into a commitment* to a particular man and his

descendants. It was a commitment to a relationship between himself and them that involved growth, blessing and protection.

But it involved something else as well, of course—namely, the universal goal of bringing blessing to all nations through the descendants of Abraham. Indeed, sometimes this is emphasized as the very thing that God had promised Abraham. For example, in Genesis 18 the immediate promise that Abraham and Sarah would have a son within a year is quickly subsumed under the much more long-term and ultimate promise that God would bless all nations through the community that had not yet even begun (cf. Gen 18:19).

In that sense, God's promise to Abraham is in fact a commitment to *humanity*, not just to *Israel*. So although, as has just been said, the predictions concerning the other nations in the Old Testament period do not entail any promise or relationship with those nations *at that time*, the promise of God to Abraham does ultimately encompass humanity, precisely by envisaging people from all nations entering into the same saving and covenant relationship with God that Israel currently enjoyed. Israel enjoyed its relationship with God for the purpose of enabling other nations eventually to share in it. So it is perfectly appropriate that when the New Testament authors speak of Jesus as the fulfillment of the promise of the Old Testament, they think not just of Israel but also see Jesus as the Savior of the world, or rather see God saving the world through Jesus.

Think of the apostle Paul here. Paul's whole theology of mission was founded on his understanding of the crucial importance of the promise to Abraham and its universal significance. Galatians 3 is a clear witness to this. For Paul, the gospel itself began not with Jesus but with Abraham. For what, after all, *was* the good news? Nothing other than God's commitment to bring blessing to all nations of humanity, as announced to Abraham. "Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you'" (Gal 3:8).

The redeeming work of the Messiah Jesus was therefore "in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Gal 3:14).

Then after further discussion of the relationship between this fundamental promise based on grace and other aspects of the Old Testament, specifically the law, Paul concludes his words to these Gentile believers: “If you belong to Christ [the Messiah], then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs *according to the promise*” (Gal 3:29, my italics).

Today, just as much as back in the days of the apostle Paul, every Gentile believer who enjoys a *relationship* of sonship to God as Father does so as a living proof of the fulfillment of the Old Testament *promise* in Jesus the Messiah.

Promise requires a response of acceptance. A prediction needs no response. It can be made and fulfilled without the persons concerned knowing anything about it, let alone doing anything about it. There are examples of this in the Old Testament also.

There is no evidence, for example, that Cyrus ever acknowledged Yahweh (Is 45:4, “you do not acknowledge me,” seems to rule it out). And although it is possible, it seems unlikely that he ever heard of the predictions concerning him made in Isaiah 40–45. Nevertheless, he fulfilled them remarkably. Without knowing it, he submitted to the sovereignty of God, who used him for his redemptive plans involving Israel. Cyrus proclaimed liberty to the exiles after their generation in Babylonian captivity.

This is an interesting example because in this case the prediction concerning Cyrus was *part* of a *promise* concerning Israel, and it helps to point out the difference between prediction and promise. In fulfilling the prediction made concerning him, Cyrus was instrumental in fulfilling a promise concerning Israel, but he himself did not participate in it. His part in enabling the promise to be fulfilled did not require him personally to make any response to God. He simply acted in the exercise of his own ambitions, thereby in the mystery of providence also carrying out God’s promise.

But his action carved out the historical and political space within which the promise of God for the future of Israel could operate, and *that* most definitely called for *its* response. Indeed, the whole burden of the prophetic word of Isaiah 40–55 is to stir up that response among a people who had come to fear that they were finished forever. There was no point in God having promised a return from exile if nobody actually got up and returned!

They had to respond. And that meant exercising faith in God's word, uprooting from two generations of settled life in Babylon, and setting out on the long journey back to Jerusalem. Without that faith and action on Israel's part, God's promise would have gotten nowhere.

This, of course, is the pattern we find from the start. The promise to Abraham was effective because he believed it and acted upon it, and went on trusting and obeying long after it had become humanly impossible. The exodus was promised by God, but it would not have happened if the Israelites had not responded to the leading of Moses to get out of Egypt, and even then some of them did so reluctantly. The same people received the promise of the land, but because their faith and obedience failed at the crucial point, they never received it and perished in the wilderness. And so it goes on all the way through Scripture. The promise comes as the initiative of God's grace and always depends on God's grace. But God's grace has to be accepted and responded to by faith and obedience.

This way of regarding the Old Testament, as *promise*, thus has two effects. First, it helps us realize that salvation is, and always was, a matter of God's grace and promise. Some people have the idea that the difference between the Old and New Testaments is that in the Old salvation is by obeying the law whereas in the New it is by grace. But that sets up a totally false contrast. In the Old as in the New, it is God who takes the initiative of grace and calls people to faith and obedient response. In the book of Exodus, there are eighteen chapters describing God's mighty act of redemption, in fulfillment of his own love and promise, *before* the giving of the law to the people he had already redeemed. Israel, in the psalms and elsewhere, regarded the law itself as a further gift of grace to those already redeemed by grace. Far from setting aside the promise, the law was given to enable those who received the promise to live as they should in response to God's redeeming grace. Paul saw this clearly and argued it strongly against those who wished to build everything on Moses and the law. Don't forget, he points out that Abraham and the promise came *first*—chronologically and theologically, and that is what our "inheritance" of blessing and salvation depends on (Gal 3:16-22).

The second effect of regarding the Old Testament as *promise* is that it reminds us that there is a conditional element to the promise. The response of faith and obedience from those who received the promise is required in

order for the promise to be fulfilled. The prophets ruthlessly demolished Israel's confidence in the very things that had promises of God attached to them whenever that confidence was not linked to moral response. Here are some examples:

Amos, faced with a people who were living in blatant disobedience to God's social demands, turned the fundamental promises upside down. Neither election by itself (Amos 3:2), nor the exodus by itself (Amos 9:7), nor the land by itself (Amos 2:10-16; 5:2) was any guarantee of immunity from God's judgment. They could not claim the mere *fact* of having received those promises as if it excused them from living in obedience to God. A century later in Jerusalem, Jeremiah condemned those who were showing complacent trust in the promises concerning the temple on Mount Zion but at the same time were living in contempt of the law of Mount Sinai (Jer 7:1-15). That temple was indeed destroyed, but in the courts of the one that replaced it, Jesus himself fought the same battle with those who were proud of their election in Abraham but failed to "*do* as Abraham *did*" (Jn 8:31-41). And the author of Hebrews, who had the highest possible understanding of the eternity and assurance of God's promise, nevertheless has the sternest warnings in the New Testament about the danger of not responding to that promise by faith and obedient action—using Old Testament Israel for his object lessons (Heb 3:7–4:11; 10:19-39). Both of these two points will receive some fuller discussion in chapter five.

The message is clear and consistent throughout the Bible. The covenant promise of God is axiomatic and fundamental, and all our hope of salvation hangs upon it. But no doctrine of election, no covenant theology, no personal testimony of redemption, can take away the imperative necessity of faith proving itself in active obedience.

So when we talk about the Old Testament declaring the promise that Jesus fulfills, it does *not* mean that the Old Testament is declared redundant because Jesus fulfilled it. (If the Old Testament were merely a book of predictions, that would be so, because once a prediction comes true, it has no further useful function.) Rather, what it *does* mean is that in the Old Testament God has both proclaimed and proved his purpose of redemption. And that initiative of God's grace (God's promise) calls for a response of obedient faith, just as much from us as from the Israelites.

Promise involves ongoing levels of fulfillment. A prediction is a fairly flat affair. Either it comes true or it doesn't. If it does, that's the end of it. If it doesn't, you can either say the prediction was mistaken or try to say it wasn't properly understood and may yet come true in some redefined way. That is why the biggest prediction industry of all—astrology—is so notoriously vague or ambiguous in its pronouncements. The kind of things that astrologers predict for you can hardly fail to come true! By the same token, that is why it is so remarkable that so many Bible predictions, which sometimes include specific detail, did in fact come true.

A promise is different. Because it involves personal relationship and commitment, a promise has a dynamic quality that goes beyond the external details. Even something that may seem quite trivial like, "I promise to give you back the book I borrowed," goes beyond just the book itself. Once that promise has been made, something of my character is invested in it. Can I be trusted? Will I keep my word? Am I the kind of person who keeps a promise or just forgets to? So even very simple promises can reveal something about the person who makes them. But of course the more long-term and demanding a promise is, the more it can grow and develop in significance as time goes by.

When a young man and woman commit themselves to get married, a promise is involved in the betrothal or engagement, often with the sign of an engagement ring. At one level, that specific engagement promise at the time of betrothal is fulfilled on the day of the wedding itself. But it is then taken up and surpassed by a fresh exchange of promises (sometimes with more rings!), which launches their married life. In those promises, words such as "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health" are included. This is because the promise "to have and to hold, to love and to cherish" looks far beyond the honeymoon. Fulfilling that wedding-day promise will take different forms and make different demands and call for different responses as life and circumstances proceed. The promise remains. The words don't need to be changed or added to. From here on it is the relationship that dictates how the promise will be fulfilled in any given situation.

Now, because it is the relationship behind the promise that really matters, and because the intention of the promise is to sustain and nurture that relationship, the material form in which the promise gets fulfilled may

be quite different from the literal form of words in which it was originally made, and yet everybody knows that the promise has been truly kept.

Imagine a father who, in the days before mechanized transport, promises his son, age five, that when he is twenty-one he will give him a horse of his very own so that he can ride around and be independent. Meanwhile, in the years in between, the motorcar is invented. So on his twenty-first birthday the son wakes up to find a motorcar parked outside, "with love from Dad." It would be a strange son who would accuse his father of breaking his promise just because there was no horse. And it would be even stranger if, in spite of having received the even better gift of a motorcar, the son insisted that the promise would only be fulfilled if a horse *also* arrived, since that was the literal promise. It is obvious that with the change in circumstances, unknown at the time the promise was made, the father has *fully* kept his promise. In fact he has done so in a way that *surpasses* the original words of the promise. When the promise was made, the only independent means of transport was a horse. But now four legs have been replaced by four wheels. So the promise is fulfilled in a different *form* but with the same *intention*. The promise was made in terms that were understood at the time. But the promise was fulfilled in the light of new historical events and the possibilities they create.

Coming back to the Old Testament promise, I hope the relevance of these illustrations can be seen. God's promise went on being kept through the many ages of the Old Testament. And also, even though the New Testament fulfillments may look different from the literal words used in some Old Testament prophecies, they are still true fulfillments. God has kept his promise, even if it looks like he gave four wheels instead of four legs. In Christ, God has given us all he promised.

God's relationship with Israel through all the centuries was founded on the specific promise to Abraham. But in the Old Testament itself that promise is seen in different levels of fulfillment. In one sense, the promise to Abraham of "seed" was fulfilled the moment Isaac was born. But of course it went further than that. A major theme of Genesis is how from such small and threatened beginnings the posterity of Abraham grows to a community of seventy people—hardly yet a great nation. But the book of Exodus opens with those seventy having been "exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous" (Ex

1:7), thus fulfilling the promise at another level. The New Testament can see yet another level of fulfillment in referring to Jesus, as the “seed” (singular) of Abraham (Gal 3:16, 19), and still another in regarding the believing Gentiles of all nations as the sons of Abraham, in fulfillment of the same promise. One promise, but with several levels of fulfillment as history proceeds.

Another dimension of the Old Testament promise is the way it leads to a recurring pattern of promise-fulfillment-fresh promise-fresh fulfillment, repeating and amplifying itself through history. Like some science-fiction, time-traveling rocket, the promise is launched, returning to earth at some later point of history in a partial fulfillment, only to be relaunched with a fresh load of fuel and cargo for yet another historical destination, and so on.

Launched at the time of Abraham, God’s promise receives its first specific fulfillment at the time of the exodus. The references back to the patriarchs in the exodus narratives are frequent. At that point the promise of posterity is indeed kept, for Israel is not only a great nation, but also it has been freed to live as such.

But the promise also included a special relationship between God and this people, and that becomes the focal point at Mount Sinai. “Let my people go that they may serve me,” God challenged Pharaoh, and when at last they reached Sinai, as God had promised Moses, they would when he commissioned him there (Ex 3:12). God says that he had brought them to himself for the purpose of entering into a covenant with them (Ex 19:4-6).

Launched from Mount Sinai, the people of the promise head for its next stage of fulfillment—the gift of the land. After the failure initially at Kadesh Barnea, the next generation realizes the promise under Joshua’s leadership. But, as Hebrews observes, even Joshua did not give them “rest” in the land. That is, they were in the land but not yet fully in possession and control of it. The promise lurches precariously forward during the two centuries of tribal federation and infighting and judges, until at last under David there emerges a unified Israel in possession of the whole of the land as promised to Abraham.

At that point the promise receives a fresh launch with the promise to David that God would give him an heir (deliberately echoing the Isaac promise) and that his descendants would reign over Israel forever. That promise appeared to have crashed to earth amid the ruins of Jerusalem,

which ended the Davidic monarchy in 587 B.C. But already it had been given a fresh impetus, which survived and transcended that catastrophe, by the prophetic vision of a future true son of David who would reign over his people in an age of justice and peace. And additionally, out of the wreckage of the exile arose the promise of future redemption, still fueled by the original ingredients of the promise—a new *exodus*, a new *covenant*, a fresh appropriation of the *land* under the blessing and presence of God himself.

The historical flight path of the promise looks a bit like this:

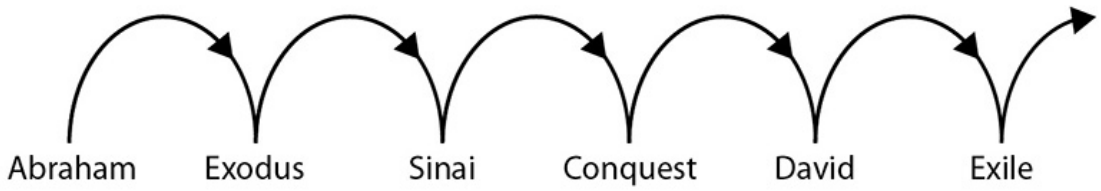

Figure 2.1

There is, then, a clear pattern of promise-fulfillment-fresh promise in the Old Testament. It was built into the ongoing historical relationship between God and Israel over the centuries. This means that when the New Testament talks about Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament promise it is not doing something new or unprecedented. Rather it sees Jesus as the final destination of an already well-recognized pattern of promise-fulfillment. By the end of the Old Testament, we are left *expecting* God to do again what he has done so often before.

The repeated "refueling" of the promise for fresh application also prepares us to expect that the final fulfillment will not be in exactly the same terms of the literal details of the original promise, like the horse and motorcar analogy. The New Testament delights to portray Jesus as the one in whom the reality of the Scripture promises is found, even in surprising ways. Even Jesus played on that surprise element. He teased the learned teachers of the law with questions about who the Messiah could be if David called him lord, though he would actually be David's son. He puzzled them with claims to be the Son of Man—did he mean that term with all the meaning that Daniel 7 implied? Even those who believed in him had

difficulty recognizing the fulfillment of promises in his person and ministry. John the Baptist was baffled. His disciples took offense. If Jesus really was the Messiah king, where was his kingdom? When would it really be seen in power?

It was only as the church reflected on its experience of Jesus in the light of the resurrection that they came to see, as Paul put it, that *all* the promises of God "are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor 1:20). "We tell you the good news," Paul said. "What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus" (Acts 13:32-33). These are some of the things they saw were now true about Jesus:

- He was the singular seed of Abraham, through whom that seed would become universal and multinational.
- He was the one through whom people of all nations would be blessed. For anyone anywhere, to be "in Christ" was to be "in Abraham" and therefore to share in the inheritance of God's people.
- He was the Passover Lamb protecting God's people from his wrath.
- His death and resurrection had achieved a new exodus.
- He was the mediator of a new covenant. His sacrificial death and risen life fulfilled and surpassed all that were signified in the tabernacle, the sacrifices and the priesthood.
- He was the One in whom we now have an inheritance, greater even than Israel's Old Testament inheritance of the land—an inheritance that cannot be robbed or lost.
- He was the temple not made with hands.
- Indeed he was Mount Zion itself, the place of the name and presence of God.
- He was the son of David, but his Messianic kingship was concealed behind the basin and towel of servanthood and obedience unto death.

In the next two chapters we shall look further at the meaning of some of these pictures and patterns, which the New Testament uses to portray all that Jesus meant. Our point here is simply that all these features of the *original* promises of God in the Old Testament were quite naturally literal or physical, in relation to the historical nationhood of Israel. So promises concerning God's actions in the future *had to be made* in terms already

within the experience and comprehension of those who received them (just as a five-year-old boy before mechanization could understand the reality and the usefulness of a horse as a means of transport). But the *fulfillment* of the promise, with all these varied forms, through what God actually did in Christ, is at a different level of reality. It was fulfilled at a different level but still with continuity of meaning and purpose in line with the original promise (just as a motorcar is a quite different "level of reality" from a horse but has the same function and purpose as a means of transport).

Of course, even in the age of motorcars, there are those who would prefer horses. The writer to the Hebrews addresses those who, although they had certainly come to faith in Jesus as Messiah, had not fully understood what that meant in terms of the complete fulfillment of all that their scriptural Old Testament faith had meant to them as Jews. So Hebrews sets out to demonstrate that because we have Christ we actually *have* all that the great institutions of Israel signified, only "better." He wanted Jewish believers in Jesus to recognize that they had not *lost* anything of their Jewish scriptural inheritance by putting their faith in Jesus as Messiah. In Christ they *have* it all still, but even better—enriched, enhanced and fulfilled. So much so that to want to go back to the previous era would be not merely retrograde but would actually be a denial of what they now already possessed in reality in Christ. To hang on to the original forms of the promise would be like preferring shadows to real objects. Or like wanting four legs when you've been given four wheels.

In our own day, there are those who look for future fulfillments of Old Testament promises in a manner as literal as the original terms themselves. They expect to see things happening literally in the land of Israel, with a tribal division like Ezekiel describes. From the same prophet, they look for a rebuilding of the temple and reconstitution of the priesthood and sacrificial system. Or a battle between biblically identifiable enemies. Or Gentile nations on actual pilgrimage to the present, physical Jerusalem. Or a revival of the throne of David.

There is a wide variety of such interpretations of prophecy held by many sincere Christian people. However, such expectations seem quite wide of the mark. Sometimes they simply make the mistake of taking literally what the Bible *always* intended figuratively even in its original form. But at other times they fail to see the living and "transformable"

quality of promises that were probably understood quite literally at the time of their giving. Just because the gift turns out to be a motorcar doesn't mean we should try to argue that the original promise of a horse was only meant figuratively. A horse was meant, a horse was what the child understood, and a horse was expected. But the changed circumstances and the progress of history enabled the promises to be fulfilled in a different and far superior way, without emptying the promise either of its purpose (to give a means of transport) or of its basis in a relationship of fatherly love. The father kept his promise in a way that was even better than when he made it.

To expect that all the details of Old Testament prophecies have to be literally fulfilled is to classify them all in the category of flat *predictions* which have to "come true" or be judged to have failed. Certainly, as we saw at the beginning of the chapter, the Old Testament *did* make predictions, and they were fulfilled with remarkable accuracy—as in the case of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. But as we also saw, Matthew's understanding of promise and fulfillment goes way beyond mere prediction. To insist on literal fulfillment of prophecies can be to overlook their actual nature as *promise*s—promises that had built into them the potential for different and progressively superior levels of fulfillment. To look for direct and literal fulfillments of, say, Ezekiel in the twenty-first-century Middle East is to bypass and short-circuit the reality and the finality of what we already have in Christ as the fulfillment of those great assurances. It is like taking delivery of the motorcar but still expecting to receive a horse. Or even worse—just ignoring the motorcar and demanding to get a horse.

The Promise Guaranteed

To speak of "the Old Testament promise" is almost a repetition. The word *testament* would actually be better called *covenant*, for that is the word used in the Hebrew Bible, and it is the word used by the New Testament when referring to the Old. And the idea of promise is very much at the heart of the word *covenant*.

The features of biblical covenants. In the world of ancient Israel, covenants of all kinds were common in secular life. There were international treaties between a superior, imperial power and its vassal

states, in which the “benefits,” protection and services of the conqueror were granted in exchange for political and military loyalty and allegiance. Such treaty covenants were sanctioned by threats of dire punishment from the gods or men or both. In everyday life there were simple covenantal oaths in which promises were elevated to a very solemn and binding form. There were “parity” covenants, entered into by equal partners who swore mutual obligations and responsibilities to each other, similar to what we call contracts.

When the term *covenant* is used in the Old Testament as a means of describing the relationship between God and human beings, it is somewhat flexible—that is, it does not conform wholly or neatly to any of the existing secular models but draws from different features of them, some more than others. Among the “standard” features of covenants made between God and people, the following are important:

(1) God’s initiative. It is God who takes the initiative in making the covenant. Sometimes this may come “out of the blue,” as with Abraham; sometimes as a sequel to what God himself has done, as at Sinai after the exodus; sometimes in response to some human action or attitude, as in the case of Noah’s righteous obedience, or David’s desire to build a house for God. In all cases, it is God himself who says, “I will make a covenant with you.” To that extent, although there is a human response and obligation, the biblical covenants involving God are not “parity” ones—that is, between equal partners. God is the sovereign initiator—the Lord of the covenant.

(2) God’s promises. In declaring his initiation of a covenant, God undertakes some specific commitment, which constitutes the substance of the covenant. God, of course, remains sovereign and free (he is not “bound” in the sense of being under constraint to any authority higher than himself). But God *chooses* to bind himself to his own word, and bases the security of that word on his own name and character—“by myself have I sworn . . .” The effect of the covenant, therefore, is to put the promises of God under guarantee, since they come from the truthfulness and eternity of God himself.

(3) Human response. In all of the divine-human covenants in the Bible, there is a required response. We saw this already in the last section. Sometimes theologians argue about whether certain covenants are “unconditional” or “conditional.” Actually, in my view, the words aren’t

really adequate either way. The covenants are all “unconditional” in the sense that they issue from the redemptive intention of God to act in blessing for human beings, who neither deserve such action nor could fulfill any condition to deserve it. They *call* for human response, but they are neither *based* on it nor motivated by it. God simply acts of his own accord and on his own initiative.

Yet in another sense they are all “conditional” in that some clear stipulations are laid down for those who are to benefit from the covenant relationship. This is clearly so in the Sinai covenant, with the commandments and laws written into it. But the continuance of the covenant itself is not conditional on those laws. If the survival of the covenant had *depended* on Israel’s obedience, the people would never have left Sinai, let alone have made it into the Promised Land, for they broke the most fundamental commandments within weeks of receiving them. Exodus 32–34 is the story of the golden calf, Moses’ intercession and the renewal of the covenant. That story makes it very clear that the covenant was not only initiated by God’s grace, it was also sustained by God’s grace. It can be called “conditional” if one thinks of any given generation of Israelites, for whom the blessings of the covenant were indeed dependent on their obedience. Many a generation suffered the curses and threats of the covenant by their disobedience. But the *covenant itself* continued, grounded as it was in the grace of God’s redemptive purpose for humanity, not just the obedience or blessing of Israel.

In our first chapter we did a rapid survey of Old Testament history along the three-section analysis of Matthew’s genealogy. Earlier in this chapter, we reviewed it again as the “flight path” of God’s promise, in its constant pattern of fulfillment and reinterpretation. It is worth surveying the route one last time, through a brief summary of the successive major covenants in the Old Testament, seeing how each is related to the others, and how all eventually lead toward the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus himself.

Some books talk about an Adamic or an Edenic covenant, between God and Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Certainly there were instructions, permissions and warnings in the narrative of creation and the Garden of Eden, but the text itself never speaks of a covenant, and it is not described that way anywhere else in the Old or New Testament. Even after the fall, there are certainly marks of God’s grace: the provision of skins for

clothing; the naming of Eve (mother of living—life would go on, in spite of the disobedience); and the prediction that the seed of the woman would ultimately crush the head of the serpent. This verse (Gen 3:15), sometimes called the *proto-evangelium*—or "first gospel"—is taken in some quarters as the first messianic prophecy in the Old Testament. Looked at retrospectively, of course, it is possible to see that Jesus did indeed crush Satan and will finally destroy him. But it is reading a lot into the verse in its own context to regard it as "messianic." It simply predicts that there will be unceasing conflict between the serpent and the human race, but that in the end, it will be humanity that wins—as indeed it was, in the man Jesus, representative of new humanity. So there are rays of hope in the engulfing darkness of the fall and the curse. But there is no reference to any covenant as such in Eden, either before or after the fall.

In each of the following covenants in the Old Testament we shall think about the scope of each one, then the substance (content) of it and then the response that God required.

The covenant with Noah (Genesis 6:18-21; 8:21–9:17). The scope of this covenant is universal. It is explicitly a commitment by God to the whole of his creation, to all life on earth—not just the human race but every living creature. It comes in two parts—first of all God's promise to preserve Noah in the midst of the judgment of the flood, and then, after the flood, God's commitment is extended to all humans and all creatures.

The substance of the promise is both negative and positive. Negatively, God promises never again to destroy the earth with a flood, in spite of the continuing wickedness of humanity. There will be no destructive global judgment in the course of human history itself (this does not of course rule out the reality of a final, universal and destructive judgment. Peter uses the flood as a prototype of that, 2 Pet 3:3-7). Positively, God promises to preserve the conditions necessary for life on earth—the seasons, the regularity of nature, the provision of harvests.

The ongoing history of the human race is based on the endurance of this Noahic covenant. As all development agencies point out, the hunger of so many of the human race is not because of an overall shortage of food on the earth, or the inability of the earth to produce food for its current (or future) population. The productive resources of the earth's crust and the oceans seem almost limitless in their resilient renewability. God has kept his

covenant. It is *human* incompetence, greed, injustice and aggression that deny the benefits of it to so many. God gives us the means to live and let live. Humanity chooses to live and let die.

The response stipulated with this covenant is very appropriate to its substance. God promises to *preserve* life. He calls on humanity to *respect* life. Though animals may be eaten, their "lifeblood" is exempt. And the lifeblood of human beings is to be held in highest sanctity, because God made human beings in his own image (Gen 9:3-6).

The Noahic covenant teaches us God's providence. It is not limited to a particular people or a particular place. It emphatically includes all life in the whole earth. It also illustrates quite well the inadequacy of asking whether it is unconditional or conditional. On the one hand, God has clearly continued to keep this covenant in spite of humanity's failure to maintain the sanctity of life. But on the other hand, where human beings have shown utter disregard for life, human and animal, they tend to reap consequences of great severity in the natural world also—eventually. Not all deserts, famines and droughts are the result of purely "natural" causes. There is a close connection between human behavior and ecological health or disaster. Hosea observed this long before twentieth-century environmentalists when he complained about the degraded human behavior that accompanies ignorance of God:

> There is only cursing, lying and murder,
> stealing and adultery;
> they break all bounds,
> and bloodshed follows bloodshed.
> Because of this the land dries up,
> and all who live in it waste away;
> the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky
> and the fish in the sea are swept away. (Hos 4:2-3)

The covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-27). The scope of this covenant is also universal, but in a different sense from the Noahic covenant. The earlier covenant is the basis of God's *providential* preservation of all life throughout the span of human history. That is sometimes referred to as God's "common grace"—the indiscriminate good

will of the Creator by which “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45).

The covenant with Abraham, on the other hand, is the basis of God’s *redemptive* work within human history. The universal goal of this covenant is to bring God’s redemptive blessing to all nations. The “all” clearly does not mean every human being who ever lived but has a representative sense. God’s redemptive purpose will ultimately be as global in its scope as the current sinfulness of the human race, as typified in the nations at Babel. People of every nation will share in the blessing covenanted to and through Abraham.

The substance of the covenant is seen in what was specifically promised to Abraham and his descendants, in pursuance of that ultimate, universal goal. It was threefold:

> *Posterity*: From Abraham would come descendants who would be a great nation.
>
> *Relationship*: With them God would have a special relationship of blessing and protection: “I will be their God; they will be my people.”
>
> *Land*: To them God would give the land of Abraham’s own wanderings as an inheritance that would prove his faithfulness and their relationship to him.

The response required by God is first specified as circumcision, in Genesis 17. Superficially this might seem a rather undemanding sort of response. But that would be just that—superficial. Even in its own context, the command to circumcise comes after the summons to Abraham to “walk before me and be blameless”—an obviously ethical injunction. Chapter 17 then describes how Abraham circumcised his whole household. Immediately following, in Genesis 18:19, God affirms that the purpose for which he had chosen Abraham was so that he will direct his children and his household after him (that is, the precise ones he had circumcised) to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.

The expressions “the way of the LORD” and “righteousness and justice” would come in the top five most significant and content-rich ethical

expressions in the Hebrew Bible. Here they occur as the very purpose of the election of Abraham, and as the means by which the promise will be fulfilled (see the last expression of purpose in the same verse, "so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him"). The ethical nature of the response required from Abraham is very clear and stands out in stark contrast to the context of this section of Genesis, which describes the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah and God's judgment upon them. In the midst of a world going the *way of Sodom*, God wants a community characterized by the *way of the Lord*. That is the response he is looking for in Abraham and the covenant community yet to emerge.

Circumcision was more than just an outward ritual. It involved the commitment of the heart to practical obedience. That was a truth well perceived in the Old Testament itself. It did not need Paul to point it out for the first time (Rom 2:25-29). Moses had done so emphatically before the people even reached the land of promise. In Deuteronomy 10:12-22, the command "circumcise *your hearts*" is preceded by reference to the ancestors of Israel, and is therefore clearly intended to recall the fact that circumcision was essentially the sign of the covenant with Abraham. And it is followed by specific ethical instruction to imitate God in his compassion and justice, since that is what it means to "walk in his ways."

So we can see a strong connection between the universal, missional goal of the covenant with Abraham ("blessing to all nations"), and this practical, socioethical response required of Abraham and his descendants ("walking in the way of the Lord"). Israel could only fulfill its role in the mission of God if it lived in obedience to the covenant with God. We shall develop this further in the next chapters.

The Sinai covenant (Exodus 19:3-6, 24, and Deuteronomy). The scope of this covenant was national. God initiated it between himself and the national community of Israel after its deliverance from Egypt. But the explicit links with the Abrahamic covenant prevent it from being national in an exclusive or narrow sense. First of all, the whole sequence of events from Egypt to Sinai is repeatedly said to be in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. God will act in redemption for this people because he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whose descendants they are. So Israel is the people through whom God's promise of blessing to all nations will be

forwarded. The initiation of a new and covenanted relationship with Israel is not an end in itself. It is simply the next step on the road of God's ultimate purpose in history for all nations.

Second, in his "preface" to the making of the covenant, recorded in the key verses of Exodus 19:3-6, God gave Israel an identity and role that was explicitly related to the rest of the nations. In the midst of "all the nations" in the "whole earth," which belongs to God (Ex 19:5), Israel was to be a priestly people and a holy nation. The function of priesthood in Israel itself was to stand between God and the rest of the people—representing God to the people (by their teaching function) and representing and bringing the people to God (by their sacrificial function). Through the priesthood, God was made known to the people, and the people could come into acceptable relationship to God. So God assigns to his people as a whole community the role of priesthood for the nations. As their priests stood in relation to God and the rest of *Israel*, so they as a whole community were to stand in relation to God and the rest of the *nations*.

There is, therefore, a missional dimension to the Sinai covenant also, linked to the ultimate goal of the Abrahamic covenant. It is not greatly stressed in the covenant arrangements and the laws, but it is unmistakably there (cf. Deut 4:5-8). It comes into focus again in some prophetic passages that reflect on Israel's failure to keep the covenant as being a failure in their mission to the nations.

The substance of the Sinai covenant filled out what had been promised to Abraham for the sake of the nation as a whole. A useful summary is given in the "program" God sets before Moses just before the onslaught of the plagues, in Exodus 6:6-8. God promises to accomplish four things:

- The *redemption* of Israel from its oppressors (v. 6);
- the special *relationship* between God and Israel: "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God" (v. 7a);
- the *knowledge of Yahweh*: "You will know that I am the LORD your God" (v. 7b); and
- the gift of the promised *land:* "I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob" (v. 8).

As these themes are developed in the rest of the Pentateuch, we can see that:

- God achieved that promised redemption in the exodus, proving his faithfulness, love and grace;
- the special relationship included God's promise to continue to bless and protect Israel, provided it continued in its commitment to live in obedience to his ways;
- the knowledge of Yahweh as the unique and living God was a responsibility as well as a privilege entrusted to Israel through its unique experience of his saving power (Deut 4:32-39); and
- the land was not a gift to be taken for granted and squandered in forgetful complacency but a place to live responsibly before God with a lifestyle that would ensure prolonged enjoyment of the gift itself (Deut 8).

The response stipulated within this covenant is total and exclusive loyalty to Yahweh. This involves not only the worship of Yahweh alone, to the exclusion of all other gods, but also moral commitment to the values and character of Yahweh. The commandments and laws stress both—to worship God alone and to live in God's ways. That is reflected in the way Jesus selected love for the Lord God (Deut 6:5) and love for one's neighbor (Lev 19:18) as the heart of the law, or the hook from which it all was suspended. We can see the same double point negatively when we notice that the law constantly emphasized two primary evils—idolatry and injustice.

Covenant obligation, then, can be pictured as two perpendicular lines. There is the vertical line of loyalty and obedience to God alone. And there is the horizontal line of love, compassion, justice and brotherhood to other human beings. The two directions of obligation are inseparable. In the law this is sometimes seen in the way social legislation is motivated by gratitude and loyalty to the God who delivered them. Since God had acted in justice and compassion on behalf of Israel, it was required to show the same things toward the weak, poor or vulnerable in its own society. This feature of Hebrew law was very influential on Jesus, as we shall examine in chapter five.

Looking again, then, at the relationship between the Sinai covenant and the covenant with Abraham, we can see a definite link between the required *response* to the Sinai covenant and the ultimate *goal* of the Abrahamic

covenant. That is, Israel's loyalty to Yahweh and obedience to the law were the major means by which it would enable God to fulfill his goal of bringing blessing to the nations. The Sinai covenant was not an end in itself, to make Israel into a separate nation for its own exclusive sake and benefit. It was a means toward the achievement of God's ultimately universal purpose for humanity. The prophets perceived this in passages such as Jeremiah 4:1-2 and Isaiah 48:17-19. In the Old Testament, ethics is linked to mission, as means is to end. There is no biblical mission without biblical living.

The covenant with David (2 Samuel 7; 23:1-7; Psalm 89; 132). The scope of the covenant with David was primarily the house of David itself—and that indeed was the substance of the covenant also (i.e., that there *would be* a house of David to continue on the throne of Israel).

As we saw in the historical survey in chapter one, the arrival of a monarchy was a major change in the nature of Israel as a people. After the loose federation of tribes with their internal fragmentation, and the external pressures from Canaanites and other enemies, the Israelites were finally bound together into a single state not only occupying the territory promised to Abraham but also controlling a number of subject states on their borders. And so at that point of change in the nation's life, even though it was initiated by human desires and compromises that God himself through Samuel disapproved of, God renewed his commitment to its future by pledging yet another covenant with the king he had given it. So although the scope of the promise was the house of David itself, it was in fact a covenant for the whole nation, because the promise that David's line would continue permanently was by implication a promise of a future for the people of Israel also.

The context in which the covenant with David is recorded also makes this link clear. The chapter immediately before it (2 Sam 6) records how David brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem. David had recently captured Jerusalem and made it his capital city. From Jerusalem he reigned over all the tribes of Israel, having previously reigned for seven years over the tribe of Judah alone at Hebron. The ark, more than anything else, symbolized the ancient historical tradition and faith of Israel as the people of Yahweh. It was constructed at Sinai and represented all that the Sinai covenant meant to Israel—the law, the holiness of Yahweh, his

approachability only through the blood of sacrifice at the mercy seat and his presence in the midst of his people. David's action in bringing the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, therefore, was clearly a deliberate move to demonstrate his allegiance to the ancient traditions of Israel's historical faith in Yahweh and to show that his understanding of his kingship was founded on the same covenantal basis as the old tribal federation.

In God's oracle to David through the prophet Nathan, we likewise find that the substance of God's promise was both for the house of David and also for Israel. God promised Israel continued security and "rest" (i.e., peace from enemies, 2 Sam 7:10-16). And in the prayer of response, which David offered after hearing God's promise through Nathan, the editor of the books of Samuel obviously wishes his readers to hear clear echoes of the exodus-Sinai theme. (Read 2 Samuel 7:22-24 and compare it with Deuteronomy 4:32-38.) So the covenant with David is presented not as something utterly new or as a break with the past but as an extension of God's covenant relationship with his people to the line of Davidic kings who would now reign over them. The covenant with David does not remove the covenant at Sinai but assumes it and builds on it.

The Davidic covenant not only has these explicit links with the Sinai covenant but also seems deliberately framed in such a way as to recall the Abrahamic covenant. We have already seen that it was David, in fact, who first achieved for Israel the possession of all the territory promised to Abraham. Other parallels between Abraham and David include the promise to make David great, to make his *name* great, to maintain a special *relationship of blessing* with him and his offspring, and especially the promise of a *son* and heir.

These echoes of the Abraham tradition in the historical books are greatly amplified in the poetic materials concerning the link between the throne of David and God's purpose for the nations beyond Israel. There are some psalms, for example, known as "royal psalms," that celebrate different features of the Davidic kingship and its base in Zion. Characteristic of these royal psalms is the idea that David, or his descendant on the throne, rules over all the nations of the earth! Now, whoever wrote hymns like that (e.g., Ps 2:8-11; 72:8-11; 110:6) knew perfectly well that such worldwide dominion had never been the privilege of any historical king of David's line. And as the history of the monarchy dragged onward and downward, it

would have been absurd to imagine that it ever would be. Yet they wrote such hymns, and people sang them, and presumably meant something by them.

Now we might be tempted to say that that kind of language was just typical flattery of monarchs making grossly exaggerated claims for their imperial ambitions, and that maybe nobody took it seriously (or literally at least). But there are times when it is clear that the psalmists had more in mind than just the historical or geographical statistics of the Davidic kingdom itself. Rather they saw that behind the throne of David stood *the throne of Yahweh himself.* This is clearest in Psalm 2. So God's purpose for Israel's king was the same as his purpose for Israel itself (i.e., to be the vehicle of God's intentions for all nations). Psalm 72, one of the most notable of the royal psalms, has this to say about the son of David:

> May his name endure forever;
> may it continue as long as the sun.
> *Then all nations will be blessed through him,*
> *and they will call him blessed.* (Ps 72:17, my italics)

The echo of the promise to Abraham could scarcely be more loud and clear.

When we observe the response that is written into the Davidic covenant, it reinforces the links that we have already pointed out between the Davidic covenant and the Sinai and Abrahamic covenants. It is the same fundamental demand for loyalty and obedience. In this case that demand is grounded on the relationship of son to father, which God grants to David and his descendants on the throne. The son-father relationship of the Davidic king to God is recorded both in the historical record (2 Sam 7:14) and also in the poetic celebration (e.g., Ps 2:7; 89:26-37).

The king in a sense "embodied" Israel, since Israel was also designated Yahweh's "firstborn son" (Ex 4:22). So to speak of the king as God's son had a double purpose—just as it did for Israel: to emphasize God's love (i.e., his unbreakable commitment) on the one hand, and the requirement of obedience (the primary duty of sonship) on the other. We shall see in the next chapter how both of these were fundamental to Jesus' self-consciousness as the Son of God.

The moral response expected of the Davidic king existed, in a sense, before there even was one. The Deuteronomic law of the king (Deut 17:14-20) very carefully makes the point that the king is not to consider himself above his fellows or above the law. On the contrary, he is to be exemplary in paying heed to the law and obeying it. The king was not to be a super-Israelite but a model Israelite. Psalm 72, written by or for a Davidic king, with the covenant much in mind, goes to the heart of the law's concern and expects the king to act for the special interest of the poor and needy:

> May he defend the afflicted among the people
> and save the children of the needy;
> may he crush the oppressor. (Ps 72:4; cf. vv. 12-14)

This standard was not forgotten, even (especially, perhaps) in later days when the monarchy in Jerusalem had become a matter of royal wealth and power, exercised on behalf of the wealthy and powerful elite in society, not on behalf of the "afflicted and needy." Jeremiah saw some of the worst of that kind of kingship, and he placarded the neglected duties of Davidic kings in the very gates of the palace itself.

> Hear the word of the LORD to you, king of Judah, you who sit on David's throne. . . . This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. [cf. Gen 18:19] Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. (Jer 22:2-3)

Even though these words were addressed to *the kings in Jersualem*, they are very clearly the language of the Sinai covenant law. It shows that even after the inauguration of the Davidic covenant and all its accompanying theology about Mount Zion, the prophets still gave priority to the fundamental moral demands of the Sinai covenant. On these scales Jeremiah weighed King Jehoiakim and found him wanting on all points (Jer 23:13, 17), especially as compared with his godly father, the great reforming king Josiah (vv. 15-17).

So once again we find the same combination: the universal, missiological dimension of the covenant, in its ultimate scope, for the blessing of all nations through Israel, and the explicit moral conditions of obedience and practical, social justice, which are here laid as a duty not solely on the nation as a whole as in the Sinai covenant but also on those who were entrusted with leadership and authority within it.

The new covenant. Ceremonies of covenant renewal are scattered through the history of Israel in the Hebrew Bible. The first happened less than two months after the Sinai covenant was made, while Israel was still at Mount Sinai (Ex 34). After that we could mention occasions of renewal by Moses on the plains of Moab (Deuteronomy), by Joshua after the conquest (Josh 23–24), by Samuel at the institution of the monarchy (1 Sam 12), by Hezekiah (2 Chron 29–31) and by Josiah (2 Kings 22–23).

The last of these, at the time of Josiah, was the greatest of them all. It involved a major religious, social and political reformation that radically reversed the direction of Judah's life as it had proceeded for the previous half-century. And Jeremiah witnessed it. In fact, Jeremiah's call to be a prophet as a youth came when the reforms of Josiah had been going for about two years. About five years later, the book of the law (probably Deuteronomy) was discovered in the temple during repairs, and that led to an even more stringent reformation. And then Josiah had a ceremony of covenant renewal.

It was all very impressive, externally. But Jeremiah saw beneath the surface and observed that the heart of the people was not really changed. The religious purges had not purged the deep-seated idolatry or the rampant social corruption (see especially Jeremiah 2; 5, and his comments, probably, on Josiah's covenant renewal in Jeremiah 11). Something much more transforming was needed, not so much a renewal of the covenant as a new covenant altogether. For his own generation, Jeremiah could see that nothing but judgment lay ahead. For them, there would come the fulfillment of the curses and threats inherent in the Sinai covenant. But beyond that judgment, Jeremiah had a vision for the future of his people. And part of that future vision was his portrait of a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34).

Because Jeremiah is quoted twice in the letter to the Hebrews (Heb 8:9-13; 10:15-18), it is Jeremiah's picture of the new covenant that is commonly meant when people speak about the "new covenant." However, the idea of a

new covenant was not unique to Jeremiah, though it may have originated with him. Ezekiel was a prophet among the exiles, and he also held out hope of a new covenant. And the idea is also found in the rousing words of encouragement to the exiles in Isaiah 40–55.

This breadth of material about a new covenant makes it more difficult to analyze in quite the same way as we did for the previous historical covenants, especially since this one is in the realm of visionary expectation, not precise historical detail. But it is well worth the attempt. Please take the time to look up the passages as we go along. It's the only way to get a grasp of the rich content the prophets were talking about. What we will clearly see is that the prophets made use of items from all the earlier historical covenants in their rich and allusive portrayal of the new covenant of their future hope.

The scope of the new covenant is at first very clearly national. In both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the major thrust is the hope of the restoration of Israel itself. Jeremiah's new covenant saying comes in the midst of two chapters (Jeremiah 30–31) wholly taken up with this comforting hope (these chapters are sometimes called "The Book of Consolation," in contrast to the bulk of Jeremiah's oracles of doom and judgment). God says he plans "to build and plant" his people. Accordingly, the new covenant will be one that God will make with "the house of Israel and the house of Judah."

Ezekiel's vision of the future restoration of Israel, with a new covenant relationship between God and his people, is spread mainly over Ezekiel 34; 36–37. Again, the scope is predominantly national in the terms described. God promises a restoration of the theocracy. God himself will be their true "shepherd," that is, the true king of Israel. But at the same time, "David" will be prince over them (Ezek 34:11-24). In Ezekiel 36 the restoration of Israel will be a marvel in the sight of the nations, which will vindicate the reputation of Yahweh, their God. The reunification of the nation is the theme in Ezekiel 37:15-28 (following hard on the resurrection of the nation in the first part of the chapter). Again, "David" will be king of the unified nation.

In Ezekiel's vision, the nations are referred to rather in the role of spectators. When God acts to restore Israel, then the nations will see and

hear and know who really is God. So there is a universal dimension, but it is not integrated into the covenant itself.

In Isaiah, however, the universal inclusion of the nations is worked into the covenant idea from the start. The scope of the new covenant in Isaiah 40–55 is as wide as the scope of salvation itself in those chapters, and that is "to the ends of the earth." The identity of the "servant of God" figure in these chapters is much debated (and we shall add to the debate in chapter four), but it is clear that he is sometimes identical with Israel (cf. Is 41:8; 42:19, etc.) and sometimes apparently distinct from Israel. In the so-called servant songs, it appears that an individual, called and anointed by God, will fulfill the role and mission of Israel—enduring great suffering as he does so. His mission, as it was Israel's mission in terms of the Abrahamic covenant, will be to bring God's salvation to all nations. And this idea is first expressed in Isaiah 42:6, using covenant language:

> I will keep you and will make you
> to be a covenant for the people
> and a light for the Gentiles.

The creation-wide context of the immediately preceding verse (Is 42:5) shows who is in the prophet's mind—all those who breathe and walk on the earth. The same point is made in Isaiah 49:6 (a verse used by Paul to authorize his own decision to take the gospel to the Gentiles, in Acts 13:47) and Isaiah 49:8. In Isaiah 54:9-10, the "covenant of peace" (an expression also favored by Ezekiel) is primarily again made with a restored Israel. But the explicit comparison with the Noahic covenant shows that the universal aspect is not lost from sight. It comes back into full view in Isaiah 55, the great "evangelistic" conclusion to this section of prophecy. There the "everlasting covenant" is equated with God's "unfailing kindness promised to David" (his covenant commitment). And that in turn is filled out by envisaging peoples and nations coming to Israel and to their God (Is 55:3-5), which is a link between the Davidic and the Abrahamic covenants that we noticed before.

The echoes of all four historical covenants should have been audible in that brief survey, but here is a replay in case you missed any of the notes.

Noah gets his explicit mention in Isaiah 54:9. But there are other places where the idea of all creation being involved in God's future covenant blessing is present. Ezekiel's covenant of peace included God's promise to restrain the ravages of nature and instead to give his people such an abundance of harvest that it would be like Eden itself (Ezek 34:25-27, 29; 36:30, 33-35). Jeremiah also uses the regularity and unfailing consistency of nature (which was a feature of the Noahic covenant) as a way of guaranteeing God's own intention to maintain his covenant with his people (Jer 31:35-37; 33:19-26).

Abraham can be heard in the resounding universalism of Isaiah 40–55 and the extension of God's salvation to the ends of the earth through one who will be a covenant and a light for the nations.

Sinai can be heard in almost all the passages: Jeremiah's emphasis on the law being written in the heart and on the knowledge of God; Ezekiel's emphasis on the cleansing of sin and the dwelling of God among his people; Isaiah's expectation of a new exodus, liberation from all kinds of bondage and the administration of justice for the nations.

David can also be found in all three prophetic visions of the new covenant: Jeremiah's "Righteous Branch" who will "do righteousness and justice" as the Davidic king was supposed to (Jer 23:1-6; 33:15-18); Ezekiel's true shepherd, ruling again over a united Israel of God (Ezek 34); and Isaiah's witness, leader and commander for the peoples (Is 55:3-4).

The substance of the new covenant is also complex, and ideally we should analyze each of the prophetic passages separately in its own context. But for the sake of gaining an overall view, we can isolate several key themes common to all of them.

(1) A new relationship with God. "You will be my people and I will be your God." These words formed the very essence of the covenant relationship between God and Israel from the beginning. The new covenant would reaffirm that central, warm and possessive relationship. One people, one God, forever (Jer 31:33; 32:38-40; Ezek 37:23, 27). Isaiah expresses it in terms of a restored marriage (Is 54:5-10).

(2) A new experience of forgiveness. So much of the prophets' message had been accusation of the people for their accumulating sins. Judgment was inevitable. But they also saw that God's capacity for forgiveness was not bounded by the people's capacity for sin. It was his divine desire and

intention to “solve the sin problem” for good. He would remember it no more (Jer 31:34). Characteristic of his priestly imagery, Ezekiel envisages it as a complete cleansing (Ezek 36:25; 37:23). Isaiah invites the sinner to an abundant pardon that surpasses human reasoning (Is 55:6-9).

(3) A new obedience to the law. If even the reform of Josiah, in which the law was read and publicly assented to, brought little change in the people’s behavior, then more than external pledges of obedience were needed. So Jeremiah writes into his new covenant God’s intention:

> I will put my law in their minds
> and write it on their hearts. (Jer 31:33)

The result will be that knowledge of God will no longer need to be “taught” because it will be an inner characteristic.

> They will all know me,
> from the least of them to the greatest. (Jer 31:34)

This is sometimes regarded as a picture of the individualizing and personalizing of the knowledge of God, with the assumption that previously it had only been thought of in corporate or national terms. Certainly it does imply that every person will know him. But on the other occasions that Jeremiah uses the phrase “from the least of them to the greatest,” it is a way of portraying a whole community by a single common characteristic (Jer 6:13; 8:10). That is probably its intention here also. The people of God *as a whole* will be characterized as a community who knows him.

Now if we go on to ask what it means to know God, Jeremiah allows us no sentimental feelings of private spiritual piety. He is absolutely clear. To know God is to delight in faithful love, justice and righteousness, as God himself does (Jer 9:24). More than that, it means not only to *delight* in such things but actually to *do* righteousness and justice by defending the rights of the poor and needy—that is to know God. Jeremiah defines the knowledge of God in one of the most challenging verses in the Bible.

> “He [Josiah] did what was right and just,
> so all went well with him.
> He defended the cause of the poor and needy,

and so all went well.
Is that not what it means to know me?"
declares the LORD. (Jer 22:15-16)

These things were the heart of the law, the law that would now, in the new covenant, be written in the heart.

"The law written on the heart" means much more than a new upsurge of sincerity in keeping it. We have already seen that the Old Testament from the beginning had called for obedience from the heart. The popular parody of the Old Testament as a religion of external legalism is far from the truth. The heart, as the seat of the will and intelligence (not just emotions), was of great importance in the law, in the psalms and in the book of Proverbs. Ezekiel goes further in emphasizing that such obedience of the heart involves not just a new law but a new heart itself—a spiritual heart transplant performed by the Spirit of God. Only such a spiritual miracle will produce the obedience called for (Ezek 36:26-32). True obedience would be the gift of the same Spirit who could turn dead bones into a living army in the mighty act of resurrection pictured in Ezekiel 37:1-14.

The book of Isaiah does not include this dimension in its sayings about the covenant itself, but there is a strong emphasis on the full acceptance of the law and the reign of justice in its visions of the mission of the servant to the nations as the agent of God's purpose for humanity (Is 42:1-4; 51:4-8). This is very similar to the prophecies of the messianic age under the future anointed son of David found in the earlier chapters of Isaiah (cf. Is 9:7; 11:1-5). It will be an age ruled by a new David but ruled according the law and justice of God.

(4) A new Davidic king. Jeremiah includes this element in his future hope as we saw (Jer 23:5-6; 33:15-26), and Ezekiel looks to a future "David" as the agent of theocracy and of the unity of the people (Ezek 34:23-24). It is possible that the "David" referred to in Isaiah 55:3-4 is actually an identity for the servant figure, previously anonymous and mysterious. If that were so, it would certainly link up the expectations associated with the coming "David" with the mission of bringing God's law and justice to the nations.

(5) A new abundance of nature. Abundance and fruitfulness were part of the promised blessings for obedience to the Sinai covenant (Lev 26:3-13

contains language that recalls the bounty of Genesis 2; Deut 28:1-14). If the covenant were to be restored on the farther side of the fulfillment of its curses in God's judgment, then it is not surprising that we find as part of that hope the expectation of return to the land, secure settlement on it, freedom from the traditional perils of wild beasts and human enemies and abundant fertility of crops and herds. Creation itself would be part of the renewal of God's covenant.

Old Testament hope was not merely the hope of some mysterious paradise after death but the living reality of God's blessing on his creation here and now for his renewed and obedient people. The recollection of Eden is also not out of place, because the hope of humanity since the fall, so poignantly expressed by Lamech at the birth of his son Noah, was that God would lift the curse from the earth and return to dwell once more with humanity in the earth (Gen 5:28-29). This is also the hope that brings the whole Bible to a close, with a vision of its fulfillment in a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1-3). A foretaste of that new creation is seen in the otherwise extravagant language with which the prophets look forward to the renewal of the land of Israel itself (Jer 31:11-14; Ezek 34:26-29; 36:8-12). As elsewhere in the Bible, the land of Israel functions in part as a token of the future new creation, as the place of God's presence and unhindered blessing.

So then there are several distinct "horizons" of future vision in these combined Old Testament pictures of God's new covenant. At horizon one, within the Old Testament period itself, there was a fulfillment of God's immediate promise to restore Israel to its land and continue his purpose with it as a people. That happened when Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon and gave freedom to captive peoples to return to their homelands in 538 B.C. The national dimensions of God's promise were fulfilled.

But at horizon two, the New Testament clearly saw the fulfillment of the new covenant promises in Jesus Christ, and specifically in his death and resurrection. Jesus himself interpreted his death in those terms, and the apostles likewise preached that in the coming of the Messiah Jesus, the new age of the new covenant and the outpouring of the Spirit had now begun.

Finally, at horizon three, the eschatological vision reaches right to the end of the Bible story. For the Bible concludes with the perfect fulfillment

of the new covenant vision: God dwelling with his people in the earth, redeemed and restored to its beauty and fruitfulness, in a perfect relationship of love and obedience, with all sin, evil and curse removed forever, and all ruled over by the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lion of Judah and the Lamb who was slain but now reigns on the throne of God.

Conclusion

We have made a long journey through the historical span of the Old Testament and its rich array of promise. We need to finish off by stepping back for a moment to survey the way we have come.

To change metaphors yet again, the Old Testament, considered as promise, is like a great river. Along the way several streams flow into it from different starting points and with different individual courses. These are the different streams of tradition, law, narratives, poetry, prophecy, wisdom and so on. But in the end, they all combine into a single current, flowing deep and strong—the ongoing, irresistible promise of God.

Scholars can map each stream of tradition, indicating its distinctiveness, the route it takes through the Old Testament literature and the individuals or groups responsible for preserving its flow. Our survey has been only a very roughly sketched map, because our aim has not been the minute details of Old Testament history and literature but to feel the full force of the great current of promise, fed by all its many streams.

The overwhelming impression through all this study of promise and covenant is *God's unwavering intention to bless*. God's covenant with Noah proclaims his blessing through the promise to preserve the conditions of life for all his creation. God's covenant with Abraham proclaims his purpose of blessing all humanity in and through the descendants of Abraham. And that remains the constant background to all God's subsequent dealings and promises involving Israel. God's commitment to that intention for humanity is what motivates and sustains his commitment to Israel in the midst of all the ups and downs of their checkered historical relationship.

So when the writers of the New Testament witnessed God's climactic discharge of that commitment to humanity in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, they checked what they had seen in Jesus with what

they already knew through their Hebrew Scriptures. They looked at all the events surrounding Jesus, and they understood them, illuminated them, explained and finally recorded them, all in the light of the whole sweep of Old Testament promise. God had made a commitment. And God had kept his word.

The Old Testament declared the promise that Jesus fulfilled.

Chapter 2 Questions and Exercises

1. Study the fulfillment texts in Matthew 1 and 2. How does Matthew see the childhood of Jesus against the background of the story of Old Testament Israel and the promises of God—not just certain predictions coming true? How do these two chapters encourage people's faith in God and in the great story of the Bible, which centers on Christ?
2. Read Isaiah 7, the "Immanuel sign." What did it mean at horizon one (for Ahaz and the people of Judah at that time)? How did Matthew reuse it at horizon two (in relation to the conception and birth of Jesus)? How does it reach right to horizon three, when God promises in Revelation 21–22 that he will "dwell with us" forever?
3. Discuss and explain the difference between prediction and promise. Think of examples in your own culture that would help to illustrate the difference between them in the Bible.
4. Read Acts 13:13-52. Take notes on how Paul uses the story of Old Testament Israel to lead his listeners to understand how God had kept his promises through Christ.
5. How would you explain to someone the sequence of covenants in the Old Testament? Select at least one text for each of God's promises to Noah, Abraham, Israel (at Sinai through Moses), David and the new covenant. Aim to show the links between them and how together they provide a route through the whole Bible story and lead ultimately to Christ. Do not forget to notice that all of them required some response from people, and ask what that means for our

response to God today, standing in the new covenant relationship through Christ.

- 3 -

Jesus and His Old Testament Identity

So Jesus came as the completion of the story that the Old Testament had told, and as the fulfillment of the promise that the Old Testament had declared. That much has been made abundantly clear by the way Matthew uses his Hebrew Bible even before we have gotten beyond chapter 2 of his Gospel.

But who was Jesus?

Mark, whose Gospel gets us into the action of Jesus' ministry faster than any of the others, punctuates his narrative with a whole series of questions that were raised by the impact of Jesus.

The demons started it: "What do you want with us . . . ? Have you come to destroy us?" (Mk 1:24). Too true!

Then the crowds took it up: "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!" (Mk 1:27). True again!

The religious leaders took offense: "Why does this fellow talk like that? . . . Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2:7). Truer than they realized.

"Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mk 2:16).

"Why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" (Mk 2:24).

"Where did this man get these things?" (Mk 6:2).

"Isn't this the carpenter?" (Mk 6:3).

Finally, his disciples got to the real point, as they sat trembling in a gently rocking boat that a few moments before had been tossing and on the

brink of swamping in a storm, which Jesus had simply snuffed out with a word.

"Who is this?" (Mk 4:41). That was the real issue. Who was *he*?

Coming back to Matthew's Gospel, we remember that Matthew 2 ended with Jesus growing up as a child in Nazareth. Nazareth the insignificant. Nazareth in Galilee of the Gentiles. Nazareth from which no good thing was expected to come. How could a local boy from such a background have the kind of significance that Matthew's first two chapters have prepared the reader to expect? This very question dogged Jesus in his own lifetime. It has been suggested that the word *Nazarene*, the mystery term of Matthew's list of fulfillments in chapter 2, may actually be a nickname meaning some thing like "the insignificant." Not the most promising identity for one born to be the very pivot of history.

"This Is My Son"

Perhaps that is why Matthew's next chapter leads up to a climax with a very different assessment of the identity of Jesus. Matthew 3 describes the ministry of John the Baptist and how he was persuaded, reluctantly, to baptize Jesus. This event, the baptism of Jesus, was so important that it is included in all four Gospels. And when the apostles preached the gospel in Acts, they often started with John the Baptist. It was obviously important to God as well, because here we have God the Holy Spirit coming down visibly on God the Son, and the voice of God the Father: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17).

And it was important to Satan, since the three Synoptic Gospels all record that immediately after this event, Satan threw all his effort into getting Jesus to exploit his identity as the Son of God in ways that would divert him from his real mission. For Satan saw that if Jesus were to fulfill his mission it would mean defeat and destruction for Satan. So Satan began all his temptations with the challenging, questioning words, "*If* you are the Son of God . . ."

And clearly his baptism was important to Jesus himself. As a boy Jesus had been aware of the special relationship that he had with God as his Father (which Luke, not Matthew, tells us about in Lk 2:49). But through

his baptism, in his adult maturity at the age of about thirty, he receives full divine confirmation of his true identity and mission from the mouth of his Father himself. So awesome was this sense of identity and the implications it carried that it led to a period of intense struggle, alone in the desert. But immediately after he had survived that and proved his loyalty to his Father by resisting Satan with the very Scriptures Satan cunningly used, Jesus entered into his ministry with immediate, stunning effect.

So there is a contrast between what other people thought of Jesus (at least in the beginning) and what God his Father thought of him. Luke brings this out in a rather clever way by putting his version of the genealogy of Jesus immediately after his baptism. So just after we have read that God declared "You are *my* Son," Luke begins his next paragraph: "Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, *so it was thought*, of Joseph . . . " (Lk 3:23, my italics).

In other words, to human eyes, Jesus was the son of an unimportant carpenter in insignificant Nazareth. In God's sight, however, he was "my beloved Son in whom I delight." That was his real identity. God knew it. Jesus knew it, and in the course of his ministry others would come to know and believe it.

For such an important occasion as the baptism of his Son, you might have thought that God would have come up with something wholly new. Words never heard before by human ears. A fresh burst of divine speech, such as launched the ministry of Moses or Isaiah. But no. Whether history repeats itself or not, God certainly does. The words that meant so much to Jesus at this critical moment in his life were actually echoes of at least two and probably three different passages in the Old Testament. Presumably, God the Father knew that his incarnate Son, by age thirty, was so steeped in his Hebrew Scriptures that he would not only recognize the texts but also understand all that they meant for his own self-identity. The words themselves were not new. What was new was the way the three passages are brought together and related to a single person with a unique identity and mission. The three texts echoed here are Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 42:1 and Genesis 22:2.

"This is / You are my Son." This is an echo of Psalm 2:7, which was originally a psalm about King David and any king descended from him. He need not fear the posturing and antagonism of his enemies because it is God

himself who has anointed him king and who protects him. The declaration "You are my son; today I have become your father," was probably said at the coronation or enthronement of Davidic kings as God's way of endorsing their legitimacy and authority. However, the fall of Jerusalem and the exile in 587 B.C. was the end of the line for the Davidic kings. So this psalm was given a future look. People began to apply it to the expected, messianic son of David who would reign when God would restore Israel. The heavenly voice at his baptism identified Jesus as that very one.

"My loved one, in whom I delight." This is an echo of Isaiah 42:1, the opening verse of a series of "songs" in Isaiah 40–55 about one called the servant of the Lord. He is introduced rather like a king, but as the songs develop (Is 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-10; 52:13–53:12) it becomes clear that this servant will accomplish his calling not by kingly power as we know it but through frustration, suffering, rejection and death. By willingly paying that cost, however, the servant will not only bring restoration to Israel but also be the instrument of bringing God's salvation to the ends of the earth. God the Father identifies Jesus as that One—the Servant of the Lord.

"My son, my beloved one." This is very probably a third echo from the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 22:2, where God told Abraham, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac," and sacrifice him to the Lord. In the end, Isaac was spared, but Abraham was commended for his willingness to trust and obey God even to that ultimate extent. The story, known in later Jewish lore as "The Binding of Isaac," was deeply studied and reflected on for its double theme of Abraham's willingness as a father to sacrifice his son and Isaac's willingness as a son to be sacrificed (for Isaac was not a young child but at least a strong teenager/young adult by that time who could have resisted his hundred-year-old father and run away if he had wanted to).

Paul probably had this story in mind when he wrote Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" And almost certainly it was in the mind of God the Father as he identified Jesus at his baptism as his only Son whom he loved, but whom he was willing to sacrifice for the salvation of the world. Only this time it would be for real. There would be no ram to substitute at the last minute. Was Jesus, like Isaac, willing for

that? No wonder Jesus, fully aware in his adult manhood of the identity that he carried, went from this experience of baptism and God's voice straight into a time of intense and prolonged personal struggle and testing (which we shall look at more closely in chapter five). What was it going to mean for him to carry out the mission of being the Son of God in the light of all those Scriptures? What would it mean to *be* who he *was?*

Old Testament Pictures and Patterns

Later in this chapter and the next, we shall look at these various terms that were used about Jesus in more depth. The point to observe for the moment is how the Old Testament is being used here in relation to him. This moment of baptism, as we have seen, was of immense significance for Jesus. At the threshold of his public ministry he experiences divine confirmation and complete certainty about who he was and what he had come to do. Both his identity and his mission were involved in the way he took the initiative in asking to be baptized by the prophetic herald of the coming kingdom of God—John the Baptist. And how did his Father declare and confirm that identity? By quoting the Scriptures. By using figures, events and prophecies from the Old Testament as a way of filling in the content of who Jesus truly was.

Matthew has shown us how the Old Testament tells the story that Jesus completed. Then he showed us how the Old Testament declares the promise that Jesus fulfilled. Now Matthew shows us how the Old Testament described the identity that Jesus had. He opens up the Old Testament as a storehouse that provides images, precedents, patterns and ideas to help us understand who Jesus was.

Indeed, to step further back, it was the Old Testament that helped *Jesus* to understand Jesus. Now we might immediately think, "Surely Jesus knew everything about himself from the start—he was God!" Well, yes, of course he was God, and we will think a lot more about exactly what that means in chapter six below. But Jesus was fully human too, and we should not minimize that. I don't think we should imagine that Jesus as a baby or as a little toddler was "omniscient"—knowing everything in some supernatural way. In fact, Luke quite explicitly tells us that he was not. Luke makes a

point of saying that Jesus grew up like any other human child, both in physical size and in intellectual capacity: he “increased in wisdom and stature,” as the King James Version puts it in Luke 1:80; 2:52. Jesus grew up! Luke means that Jesus had a normal human development, from baby to toddler, child, boy, youth and adult. I am sure that Jesus grew up with increasing awareness of his special relationship with God as his Father from an early age—the story of Jesus in the temple as a twelve-year-old boy shows that. But at the same time, if he was truly human, then he must also have thought deeply about himself, his own people, what God wanted him to do and so on. He would have reflected on these things in the light of the Scriptures, which clearly filled his mind and heart.

So then, in his humanity as a growing young man and at the point when he entered his public ministry, who did Jesus think he was? What did he think he was destined by God to do? The answers came from his Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus would have studied them very thoroughly as a Jewish boy of his generation. He would have learned large sections by heart, as the rest did. And in those Scriptures Jesus found a rich tapestry of figures, historical persons, sequences of historical events, prophetic pictures and symbols. And in this tapestry, where others saw only a fragmented collection of various figures and hopes, Jesus saw his own face. His Scriptures provided the shape of his own identity.

By pointing this out to us in connection with Jesus’ baptism, Matthew shows that this was not some arbitrary, fanciful use of the Bible by later romantic admirers of Jesus. Rather, it was God’s own way of declaring the identity of his Son. Jesus’ self-identity was confirmed by his Father’s explicit identification of him. And that in turn was based on the Hebrew Scriptures of our Old Testament.

This point has brought us a step further in our purpose in this book. Our conviction has been that the more you understand the Old Testament, the closer you will come to the heart of Jesus. In our first two chapters we were seeing that fact “externally,” so to speak. They described how the observers and interpreters of Jesus understood and explained him in relation to the Old Testament story and promise. But here we are reaching into the “internal” self-identity of Jesus himself. We are no longer talking about a newborn baby or a migrant child, or even about an abstract concept of messiahship. Here we have an adult man, at one level indistinguishable

among the crowds of those who flocked to John for baptism and in any case otherwise unknown except as a carpenter's son from Nazareth, who knows his own identity with awesome personal consequences. And his Father's voice affirms that identity through three Old Testament figures—Abraham, David and the Servant of the Lord.

He has the authority of the Davidic king, with a special relationship of sonship to God, the divine King. This means that from the beginning of his ministry Jesus was conscious of his identity as the Son of God and Davidic Messiah, even though later on he sought to play it down among his followers because of its political misunderstandings. Jesus chose rather to emphasize a dimension of Davidic sonship, which we looked at in the last chapter—namely *obedience to his Father God*. Obedience to God was required from the Davidic king (2 Sam 7:14-16; Jer 22:1-5). How much more then for the Son of God himself, who later affirmed that obedience to his Father's will was his very meat and drink (Jn 4:34).

Obedience was also the link between being the Son in the line of King David and being the Servant of the Lord. These two ideas were not closely linked in the popular mind of Jesus' day, as far as we can tell. It seems to have been an insight of Jesus himself to see the messianic role of the Davidic king in the light of the suffering, obedient Servant of the Lord. Similarly, obedience was the link with the allusion to Isaac, as the one willing to be sacrificed, even as the only son of a loving father. Isaac was obedient unto death (almost).

Kingship, servanthood, sacrifice. All three are built into the calling of Jesus. All three are given depth and meaning by the Old Testament characters whose identities are merged in Jesus. His personal identity, the shape of his mission and the pattern of his life are all, so to speak, programmed by the intricate spiral patterns of a genetic code provided by the Old Testament Scriptures.

That "genetic" metaphor is not meant to suggest that somehow Jesus himself was "programmed." Of course not. He chose his course and acted with careful deliberation and prayer. Nor does it mean that it was possible simply to "read off" from the Old Testament the "genetic fingerprints" of Jesus of Nazareth. In the Gospels, it was those who knew their Hebrew Scriptures best who did not or would not recognize him as the Messiah. And Jesus' own use of the Scriptures in relation to himself was creative and

sometimes surprising. As we have already seen in chapter two, it was no simple matter of matching predictions to fulfillments in a kind of messianic identity parade.

However, what the genetic metaphor is trying to emphasize is that Jesus was not some new and exotic species. Especially Jesus was not, as so many people think, the "founder of a new religion." Yes, of course, he was unique in so many ways, which we shall discover as we go on. But for those with eyes and ears and memories, the Hebrew Scriptures had already provided the patterns and models by which Jesus could be understood, and by which he understood and explained himself and his goals to others.

Before going on to think further about what it meant for Jesus to be the Son of God, we need to give just a bit more attention to how the Old Testament is being used here.

"That's just typical." The word *typology* is sometimes used to describe this way of viewing the relationship between the Old Testament and Jesus. The images, patterns and models that the Old Testament provides for understanding him are called *types*. The New Testament equivalents or parallels are then called *antitypes*. This used to be a very popular way of handling the Old Testament in former generations, but it has fallen into disfavor among many scholars recently. Typological interpretation remains a traditional way of using the Old Testament, however, in some quarters of the Christian church. It is worth explaining a bit about it, for the benefit of those who have never heard of it, and also for the sake of those who may have been exposed to unbalanced or fanciful uses of it.

(1) Biblically, typology is not a theological or technical term. The English word *type* comes directly from the Greek word *typos*, which means an example, pattern or model. It is found in the New Testament with a loose range of meaning, sometimes applied to Christ but often to others. For example, Paul uses the word when he speaks of the events in the history of Israel as "warnings" or "examples" for us (1 Cor 10:6, 11). In several places, the word means an example to be followed, either by the apostles themselves, or certain churches, or pastors for their flock (Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:7; 2 Thess 3:9; Tit 2:7; 1 Pet 5:3). In Romans 5:14, we find Adam described as a pattern for Christ. In 1 Peter 3:21, we find an analogy being drawn between the flood and the ark on the one hand and Christian baptism on the other. So typology, then, is not a hard-and-fast method of tying the

Old to the New Testament. Biblically, it still just means a *range of examples,* models and patterns of correspondence. It is not a major interpretive key to unlock the mysteries of the Old Testament.

(2) Typology is a normal and common way of knowing and understanding things. There is really nothing fanciful about typology. We use it every day when trying to learn or teach something new or as yet unknown. Any teacher knows that in introducing new ideas or skills, you have to work by analogy or correspondence from what is already known and familiar—either past events, or experience, or preunderstandings. Even at the most advanced level, scientific knowledge progresses within what are called "paradigms" in the trade (i.e., accepted models or patterns of how physical reality is believed to function). Often one proven scientific result will act as a "type" or model for attacking as yet unsolved puzzles. And in the whole world of law and law courts, we build steadily on the power of "precedents"—a judgment that was made in one specific case will function as a model or "type" in future cases in which corresponding issues are at stake. And even in everyday speech, when we exclaim "That's just typical!" about somebody's action, what we mean is that we are not really surprised by it because it fits in with *a pattern of behavior* that we have come to expect from previous experience of that person.

(3) Typology was already a feature of the Old Testament itself. Already, in our survey of the Old Testament in the last two chapters, we have seen how the Old Testament itself has a kind of internal typology. Many events and persons are picked out and seen as "typical." That is, they illustrate something characteristic about the way God does things. So those particular cases can then be used to help understand when God does something new—either in promise or threat. *Sodom and Gomorrah* become proverbial for God's judgment against human sin. What God had done in destroying *Shiloh* is used by Jeremiah as a graphic type of what he intends to do to Jerusalem (Jer 7:12-15). Hosea and Jeremiah use the *wilderness* period as a picture for the future purification of Israel (Hos 2:16-23; Jer 32:2). The *exodus* is repeatedly used as a model for subsequent historical acts of deliverance. Even individuals can take on this "typical" dimension—*David*, of course, as the ideal king, but also *Abraham* as the model of faith and obedience (Gen 15:6), and *Moses* as the model prophet (Deut 18:15, 18). So

the use of “types” in the sense of examples or models is commonly found within the Old Testament.

(4) Typology is a matter of analogy. I said that the word *typos* itself is not used in a technical or formal sense in the New Testament. But there are many ways in which the writers of the New Testament draw our attention to analogies between the Old and the New where the word *typos* may or may not be used. In the midst of the obvious differences between the Testaments, there are also real points of correspondence.

We find, for example, correspondence between the word of God in creation in Genesis and the beginning of the new creation with Jesus, the Word, in John 1. The birth of Jesus as the beginning of the gospel of redemption in the New Testament is paralleled to the birth of Isaac as the child of promise in the Old (Gal 3–4, Rom 4). The shedding of the blood of Jesus can be understood by analogy with the exodus, the Passover Lamb and the crossing of the Red Sea all rolled into one! There are definite analogies between the community that Jesus gathered around him as the Messiah and a restored Israel, which we shall look at later. Paul draws heavily on the analogy of land and kinship to describe the new status of the formerly excluded Gentiles once they have been reconciled to God through Christ (Eph 2:11-22). The same passage makes comparisons between the temple and the church (meaning people, not a building, of course). Peter has the same combination of ideas in 1 Peter 2:4-12. There are other analogies, some of which we have noted already, such as between the new covenant in Christ and all the previous covenants in the Hebrew Bible, between the kingship of Yahweh and of Israel’s kings and the kingdom of God, between God’s concern for all nations and the whole world in the primal history of Genesis 1–11 and the scope of the Gentile mission and our future hope of all creation being redeemed and united in Christ.

So there is good biblical justification for seeing *analogy* as a valid feature of biblical interpretation, because the Bible itself uses it. The Old Testament uses analogy to speak of what was as yet future. “*That* (the future) will be like *this* (the present).” And the New Testament uses analogy to explain present events by reference to the past. When Peter stood up to preach on the day of Pentecost, the sun was not darkened and the moon was not blood, but he could confidently relate the significance of what was

happening at that moment to Joel's famous vision in Joel 2:28-32 and assert, "*This* is *that* . . . " (Acts 2:16-21).

(5) Typology is a matter of history. The correspondence between the Old and New Testament also points to the repeating patterns of God's actual activity in history. "Salvation history" is a shorthand expression for the belief that God has acted through specific events in history to accomplish salvation. In the last two chapters we saw in some detail how that action followed patterns of promise and fulfillment and then fresh promise. This helps us to grasp both God's sovereign control over history and his consistency in action.

God behaves typically as God. That is, there is something characteristic, something predictable, about what God does, once you know his previous actions. As I once heard a new Christian put it, in sheer wonder at her fresh experience of God's constant and consistent action, "God is always Godding!"

Now, of course, this is not at all saying that God is bound to a boring repetition of the past. God is also the master of surprise and could even exclaim triumphantly through Isaiah, "Forget the former things; . . . See, I am doing a new thing!" (Is 43:18-19). But even then, his "new thing" could be described in terms of the original thing—new exodus or new creation or new covenant. So when the New Testament witnesses saw who Jesus was and what he had achieved, they said in effect, "That's just typical of God! What God has done in Jesus Christ is just like all the things that God actually did in the past, though of course it surpasses and completes all God has ever done before."

(6) Typology is not merely prefiguring or foreshadowing. The older view of typology fell into disfavor because it was solely concerned with finding "prefigurations" of Christ all over the Old Testament. The idea was that the central feature of a "type" was that it prefigured Christ. But this was handled not as something observed *afterward* in the light of Christ but rather as the very reason for existence of whatever was being regarded as a "type." So a "type," in this view, was any event, institution or person in the Old Testament that had been arranged by God for the *primary purpose* of foreshadowing Christ. This had two unfortunate side effects.

First, it usually meant that the interpreter of the Old Testament failed to find much reality and meaning in the events and persons of the Old

Testament in themselves. There was no need to spend time understanding and interpreting the texts *in their own Israelite historical context and background* or to ask what they meant to those people at that time. You could just jump straight to Christ, because that is where you would find the supposed "real" meaning. This ends up with a very "Platonic" view of the Old Testament. That is, it is really only a collection of "shadows" of something else. Such a way of reading the Bible devalues the historical reality and validity of Old Testament Israel and all that God did in and through and for them.

Second, this kind of typology had a tendency to indulge in fanciful attempts to interpret every detail of an Old Testament "type" as in some way a foreshadowing of some other obscure detail about Jesus. Once you had severed the event, institution or person from its actual historical roots in Israel, then the details would no longer be seen as simply part of the story as the Old Testament narrator told it. Since the "real meaning" was actually to be found in Jesus and the New Testament, all the details must have some *hidden* significance that could be applied to Christ. It was up to the skill or imagination of the writer or preacher to bring such meanings out, like a magician bringing rabbits out of a hat to the astonished gasps of admiring readers or listeners. All the colored threads of the tabernacle could signify something about Jesus. The five stones that David picked up represent the five wounds of Christ, or the five loaves he used to feed the crowd, or the five ministries that Christ has given to the church. He took them out of a stream, which was the Holy Spirit. And so on. This way of handling the Hebrew text is quite rightly now regarded as invalid and subjective. Unfortunately it is still around, and some preachers love that kind of clever speculation—which is usually all it is.

Typology, then, to sum up, properly handled, is a way of understanding Christ and the various events and experiences surrounding him in the New Testament by analogy or correspondence with the historical realities of the Old Testament seen as patterns or models. It is based on the consistency of God in salvation history. It has the backing of Christ himself who, on the authority of his Father, saw himself in this way.

But typology is not *the only or primary* way of interpreting the Old Testament for itself. This is partly because it is selective in the texts it uses from the Old Testament (i.e., those that particularly help us to understand

Christ), whereas the New Testament itself tells us emphatically that the *whole* of the Scriptures are written for our profit (2 Tim 3:16-17), and partly because it is limited in the meaning it extracts from those selected texts (again, meanings that specifically relate to Christ). To come back to our three texts in the declaration at Jesus' baptism, it is clear that each of them helps us to understand great truths about the identity and mission of Jesus. But when we go back and read the whole of Psalm 2, Isaiah 42 and Genesis 22, it is equally true that they have enormous depths of truth and meaning for us to explore that are not directly related to Jesus himself. Typology is a way of helping us understand Jesus in the light of the Old Testament. It is not the exclusive way to understand the full meaning of the Old Testament itself.

Jesus As the Son of God

Having come back, then, to Jesus and his baptism after our detour through the meaning of typology, let us look more closely at the sense of identity and purpose that Jesus derived from his baptismal experience. We shall check out the Old Testament background a bit more thoroughly and see how it influenced the way Jesus thought of himself. But we shall also discover that Jesus was not just an identikit figure pasted together from bits of the Old Testament. He transcended and transformed the ancient models. He filled them with fresh meaning in relation to his own unique person, example, teaching and experience of God. So for his followers what began as a moment of recognizing and understanding *Jesus* in the light of their Scriptures ended up as a deepening and surprising new understanding of their *Scriptures* in the light of Jesus. That was certainly the experience of the disciples on the Emmaus road in Luke 24.

So we go back to the baptismal voice and its first phrase, "You are my son." The awareness of God being his Father and himself being God's Son is probably the deepest foundation of Jesus' selfhood. This is something on which most New Testament scholars would agree. Even those who sift the texts of the Gospels with rigorous suspicion as to what may be regarded as authentically from Jesus himself agree that the Father-Son language regarding God and himself survives the most acid skepticism. And they

would also point out that for Jesus, God's fatherhood and his own sonship were not merely concepts or titles. Nor were they merely part of his teaching curriculum. They were living realities in his own life. Jesus *experienced* a relationship with God of such personal intimacy and dependence that only the language of Father and Son could describe it. It was deepest in his prayer life, and that was also where his closest friends observed it, as they heard him habitually use *"Abba,"* the intimate Jewish family word for father, in personal address to God. This was something new and unprecedented that Jesus brought to the meaning of being children of God.

Let us then turn back to the Scriptures from which Jesus would have soaked up his preliminary understanding of what it meant to call God Father and to think of himself as God's Son.

And the first point we need to make is that Israel also called God Father and God called Israel his son.

God As Father—Israel As Son

In order to understand Jesus we have to look at more than just the titles by which he was addressed or that he used for himself. In fact, Jesus tended to avoid titles, with the single exception of the "Son of Man." And even if we take those titles that we find in the New Testament and go back to the Hebrew Scriptures, we have to do more than just look up a concordance and check out the phrases there. This is especially so of this expression "Son of God" as it was used in the Old Testament.

If we only look it up in the concordance, we may end up very confused, for the expression has a bewildering elasticity. It can, for example, refer to angels (probably, Gen 6:2, 4; Ps 89:6). Even Satan is called one of the sons of God (Job 1:6; 2:1). It can be used to describe human rulers and judges (Ps 82:6). Even the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar used it to describe the mysterious fourth man in his fiery furnace (Dan 3:25). And, of course, we have already seen that it was applied especially to the Davidic king.

Rather, what we must do is look at the whole range of material that was associated with sonship in relation to God as father in the Hebrew Bible. The idea was not, of course, anywhere near as dominant as the idea of

covenant relationship between God and Israel, but it is much more extensive than many Christians think. And it also began early.

It is found in Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses, which is one of the oldest of the poetic texts in the Hebrew Bible. This poem is therefore a very ancient witness to the faith of Israel and rules out the idea that the fatherhood of God was a late development in Israel's history, or that it was a brand-new teaching by Jesus. Actually in Deuteronomy 32 it would be better to talk about the parenthood of God, since it uses the imagery of mother as well as father to describe God. This parenthood of God is linked to his creation of his people (Deut 32:6), Yahweh's own uniqueness as God (Deut 32:15-18, 39) and his corrective discipline of his people (Deut 32:19-20).

We shall look at the parental metaphor in four ways. First, we shall check up what the parent-child relationship actually meant in Israel's society, since that will clarify what it meant when transferred to God and Israel. Second, we shall see how the metaphor undergirded the covenant concept, which we already studied in some depth in chapter two. Third, we shall see how sonship was a relationship that generated hope and expectation. Fourth, we shall see how the idea was broadened and given a universal and eschatological flavor. In each case we shall find significant links with Christ that help us to understand more deeply his sense of identity and destiny.

Fathers and sons in Israelite society. Obviously, to use the language of father and son is to draw from the human experience of family life, and then to apply the parent-child experience metaphorically to God and to human relationship to him. (This is to look at the matter from the human perspective. Ultimately, our own human experience of parenthood and family is a reflection of God, for we are made in his image. That is probably what Paul is getting at in Eph 3:14-19.)

In Israel we find evidence of the metaphor in common life in the use of the Hebrew word *Ab* (father) in "*theophoric*" names (i.e., personal names that include all or part of the name of God; my own name, Christopher, is "theophoric"—it means "Christ-bearing"). In Hebrew names, translated into English, *jah*, *jo*, *jeho* were all abbreviations of Yahweh. And *el* was the general word for God. These syllables could be combined with other words, so that names were like statements. "Elijah" puts them together—"Yahweh

is my God." "Jonathan" and "Nathaniel" mean "Yahweh/God has given." "Johanan" (John) and "Hananiah" mean "Yahweh is gracious." "Jehoshaphat" means "Yahweh is judge." And so on.

Names such as Joab, Abijah, Eliab, etc., mean "Yahweh (or God) is father," or "my God is father" or "Yahweh is my father." The person who had such a name, and the parent who gave it to them, were making a statement about God in relationship to the named person, or possibly to the whole people. This shows clearly that the idea of God as father was common enough in the popular life of Israel, even if it did not achieve a prominent place in their major theology. There were plenty of people with names like that walking around in Israel at any time.

The metaphor has two fairly well-defined, complementary meanings.

(1) The attitude of God as Father toward Israel. This is one of concern, love, pity and patience with the son, but it is also a desire for the son's best interests, which therefore includes discipline.

> The LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son. (Deut 1:31)

> Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you. (Deut 8:5)

Other examples of this would include Psalm 103:13, Proverbs 3:12 and 2 Samuel 7:14.

(2) The expectation of God as Father from Israel. God, in the same way as a worthy human father, is to be viewed as a trustworthy, protective authority to be respected and obeyed. This aspect can be seen negatively when God complains or grieves that his fatherly care is being scorned, abused or ignored. Texts such as Deuteronomy 14:1, Isaiah l:2-4; Jeremiah 3:19 and Hosea 11:1-4 show how God felt toward his son, Israel, and what was expected of his son in return. The best expression of God's heart on this point is: "'A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?' says the LORD Almighty" (Mal 1:6).

At the human level these dimensions are seen clearly in the laws related to parental authority, which were unusually strict in Israel because of the

vital importance of the stability of the family within the covenant basis of the nation (e.g., Ex 20:12; 21:15, 17; Deut 21:18-21; 27:16; Prov 30:17). In Old Testament Israelite society, the father was the head of the household ("head of a father's house" was his technical title in Hebrew). That is, he had domestic, judicial, educational, spiritual and even military authority over a quite sizeable community of people, including his adult sons and their families and all dependent persons (the extended family, which might have been up to forty or fifty people). He was, in short, a figure of considerable power, social importance and protective responsibility.

The important status of these heads of households is illustrated positively in Joash's protection of his adult son, Gideon, in Judges 6, and negatively in Job's lament of what he had lost as a result of the calamity that had deprived him of family and substance in Job 29–30. It was almost certainly these heads of households who consulted, decided and acted together as "the elders" whom we read of in many Hebrew stories.

The fatherhood of Yahweh was not, then, primarily an emotional metaphor. Rather it was a matter of authority on the one hand and obedience on the other, within the framework of a trusting, providing and protective relationship. Already we can see the matching outline shape of Jesus' personal awareness of God as his Father. For authority, willing obedience and complete trust were the hallmarks of that intimate relationship as Jesus enjoyed and expressed it.

Israel's sonship and the covenant. Although the idea of the fatherhood of Yahweh is overshadowed by the covenant concept in the Hebrew Bible, there is a close link between the two. When you analyze the texts where father-son language is used for God and Israel, they show an interesting dual aspect that is quite similar to the dual nature of the covenant itself. On the one hand, the relationship between Israel and God was a given fact that God had achieved, and on the other hand, it also contained a demand that Israel must fulfill. The covenant was both a statement and a claim, both an indicative and an imperative. As regards Israel's sonship, this same dual aspect emerges when we notice the difference between passages where Israel is referred to as "son" in the *singular* (which tends to emphasize the givenness of the relationship) and those where Israelites are addressed as "sons" or "children" in the *plural* (which tends to emphasize the expectations of the relationship).

(1) National level. There are some passages where Israel as a whole is called Yahweh's son, or Yahweh is portrayed as father of the whole nation. These would include Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 32:6, 18; Hosea 11:1; Jeremiah 31:9 and Isaiah 63:15-16; 64:8.

The point here is that Israel owes its national existence to the creative or "procreative" action of Yahweh. Yahweh was father and Israel was his son because he had brought Israel into existence. He had "fathered and mothered" the nation as "the Rock who fathered you . . . the God who gave you birth" (Deut 32:18; "you" is singular). So it was not by Israel's choice or action or merits that it enjoyed the status of being Yahweh's son any more than we earned the right to be born. In this respect, Israel's sonship is a *given* that corresponds with the unconditional *givenness* of Israel's election and the covenant. It was entirely a matter of divine initiative. Israel was the "firstborn son of Yahweh" for no other reason than that he had brought it into existence as a nation, just as it was the "people of Yahweh" for no other reason than that he had "set his affection on" them and chosen them for himself (Deut 7:6-8). Sonship here is very much a matter of privilege.

(2) The personal level. There are other passages where Israelites are addressed as sons/children of Yahweh in the plural. These would include Deuteronomy 14:1; 32:19; Isaiah 1:2; 30:9 and Jeremiah 3:22.

Here the focus is on the Israelites' responsibility before Yahweh to show the loyalty and obedience required of sons. Thus Deuteronomy 14:1 argues that the "sons of Yahweh," a holy God, must themselves be holy. Most of the prophetic passages that use the metaphor are in this plural category, accusing Israelites of failing in their duty as sons to live in ethical obedience to God. In the texts above, for example, they are "rebellious sons," "faithless sons" or "lying sons." This second aspect of Israel's sonship thus clearly corresponds to the other side of the covenant relationship, namely the imperative demand for obedience—a demand that applied to all individual members of the nation.

So what we find, then, is that both poles of the covenant (God's initiative and Israel's obedience) are held together within the same relational metaphor of father and son.

Deuteronomy adds two other ideas to enrich the metaphor still farther. First, there is its use of *inheritance* language. This is a prominent feature of

Deuteronomy. It repeatedly describes the whole land as Israel's inheritance. This is another way of expressing and reinforcing the point that Israel is Yahweh's son, for it is the firstborn son who inherits. This inheritance image corresponds precisely with the first aspect of Israel's sonship, namely, that it is something unconditional and simply given, for that is exactly what Deuteronomy stresses again and again as regards the gift of the land to Israel.

Second, there is Deuteronomy's use of *love* language. Deuteronomy is very fond of love! It highlights Yahweh's love for Israel (Deut 7:7-9 and elsewhere). And it was Deuteronomy that Jesus quoted when asked what was the greatest commandment in the law: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6:5; cf. Deut 10:12). Now "love" in Deuteronomy is a love that can be commanded and therefore means much more that just the emotion or affection that father and son share. It is rather a matter of faithfulness and obedience within the discipline of the father-son relationship. In fact, some scholars have argued that in Deuteronomy filial love is synonymous with covenant obedience. That is, to love God as son to father is the same thing as to obey God and keep the covenant.

When we turn back to the New Testament, we can detect some of these covenantal patterns in the ways it speaks of Jesus as Son of God.

We saw in the last chapter that the successive covenants of the Old Testament all come together in Jesus as the inaugurator of the new covenant. In several ways Jesus was aware of being the one who represented Israel. In referring to himself, for example, as "the true vine" (Jn 15:1-8) he was drawing on the Old Testament imagery of Israel as Yahweh's vine or vineyard. In a related image, he described himself as the heir (Mk 12:7), and the language of inheritance entered into Christian vocabulary to describe aspects of Christian experience through Jesus Christ, who is "heir of all things" (Heb 1:2).

On the shoulders of Jesus as the Son of God lay the responsibility of being God's *true son*. Jesus would succeed where Israel had failed, submitting to God's will where it had rebelled, obeying where it had disobeyed. This was certainly a dimension of Christ's temptations in the

wilderness after his baptism, which we shall look at more fully in the next chapter.

The author of Hebrews who, more than any other New Testament writer, glories in the exalted status of Jesus as the unique Son of God, also links his sonship with his suffering and obedience. “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb 5:8). This of course does not mean that Jesus had to be compelled by suffering to be obedient after being previously disobedient. Not at all. It is simply underlining that sonship for Jesus, as for Israel, was tied to obedience and that for Jesus obedience to his Father’s will involved suffering. The fact that he was willing to suffer proved the depth of his obedience. Perhaps the author of Hebrews had Christ’s temptations in mind, or perhaps more particularly the final great spiritual battle in Gethsemane. There, as Jesus faced the extremity of what obedience would cost him, he chose finally and fully to submit his own will to that of his Father, as he had done all his life to this point. There, too, we find on his lips the intimate word *Abba*, as he struggled to hold together his lifelong experience of his Father’s loving presence and protective care on the one hand with the immediate prospect of abandonment to death on the cross as the price of obedience on the other (Mk 14:36).

Sonship as the foundation for hope. Gethsemane shows us that Jesus shrank back from suffering and death like any other human being would. Yet the Gospels also tell us that he went to his death with complete confidence that God would raise him from the dead. Earlier, during his ministry, as soon as his disciples had begun to grasp who he truly was and to affirm that he was the Messiah, Jesus immediately began to prepare them for his rejection, suffering and death (Mt 16:21). He did this repeatedly. But all the Gospel accounts add that he also said he would be raised again on the third day. Apparently this made little impression on the disciples in their shock and bewilderment over a suffering Messiah, but after it happened, they remembered that Jesus had indeed said it.

We must not think, of course, that having this confidence concerning his resurrection in any way lessened the horror of the cross for Jesus. Gethsemane itself wipes out any facile idea that the expectation of resurrection somehow neutralized the depths of pain and suffering he endured in bearing the sin of the world, as does the agonized cry of

dereliction and abandonment from the cross. However, the question arises, how and why could Jesus have been so sure of his resurrection? Why did he tell his disciples again and again (even if they couldn't "hear" it) that he would rise again?

One clue in the Caesarea Philippi passages is that Jesus, while accepting Peter's recognition that he was the *Messiah*, redirected his teaching in terms of the *Son of Man* (Mk 8:31). As we shall see in the next chapter, "the Son of Man" was a term Jesus used for himself that was derived from Daniel 7. And one marked feature of the imagery in that text is that the Son of Man figure apparently is vindicated and endowed with great glory and authority. Another clue is that Jesus identified himself with the suffering servant figure of Isaiah 40–55. We saw that that was part of the identity he had confirmed for him at his baptism. And again, the servant was a figure who, beyond suffering and death, would see vindication, victory and the positive achievements of his ministry (Is 52:12; 53:10-12).

But in my view the strongest reason for Jesus' confidence in the face of death lies in his self-conscious identity as the Son of God. As such he embodied and represented Israel, the son of God in the Scriptures. And the father-son relationship between Yahweh and Israel was a ground for hope and permanence, even when Israel stood among the wreckage of a broken covenant—a covenant that it had broken by its own disobedience. The sonship relationship was something that survived the greatest disaster. Even as a covenant-breaking, rebellious nation, Israel remained God's son. A rebel son but still a son. A "prodigal son" but still a son who could return from death to life.

In the narrative texts, the declaration that Israel was Yahweh's firstborn son came *before* the exodus and the making of the Sinai covenant (Ex 4:22). And in the prophetic texts, the relationship of sonship not only survived even *after* the judgment of exile had fallen on the nation but also could be appealed to as the basis for a fresh act of redemption and a restored relationship. So, in Isaiah 63–64, Israel cries to God as its Father in the expectation of his loving care after discipline, and his forgiving, restoring power. As Father, he will be its champion, defender and redeemer, even if he has had to exercise parental discipline on it also.

Yet you, LORD, are our Father.

We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand. (Is 64:8)

You, LORD, are our Father,
our Redeemer from of old is your name. (Is 63:16)

The same combination of ideas is found in Jeremiah 31:18-20.

The father-son relationship between God and Israel, therefore, contained within itself an element of permanence, which injected hope into an otherwise hopeless situation amid the ruins of the Sinai covenant. Israel's relationship to Yahweh could continue to be affirmed in spite of alienation from the land and in spite of the experienced wrath of God. Yahweh still had a future for his people. He could not abandon them. The Father could not ultimately disown his son.

If this had been so for Israel as the *rebellious* son of Yahweh, then how much more must it be true for the *sinless* Son of God himself? If God would not abandon or utterly destroy his son Israel, whose sufferings were the result of its own sin and God's judgment upon it, then he would certainly not abandon the Son whose sufferings were not for his own sin but for the sin of the world, including Israel itself (cf. Acts 2:24-26). Jesus went to his death confident in his Father, because he knew his *history* (God had always proved his covenant faithfulness to his son Israel) and because he knew his *identity* (as Son of God he embodied Israel and would therefore prove that faithfulness of God, even in death).

Another small clue to this understanding of Jesus' confidence lies in his prediction of resurrection on "the third day." The texts in which he told his disciples that he would be rejected and put to death add that he would rise again "on the third day" (Mt 16:21; Mk 8:31; Lk 9:22). He repeated this detail when explaining the whole event to the disciples after his Emmaus encounter (Lk 24:46). It even entered into the Christian tradition, since Paul summarizes the gospel as he had received it with the phrases: "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4).

Now the only Scripture that makes any reference to a third day in relation to resurrection is Hosea 6:1-2.

Come, let us return to the LORD.
He has torn us to pieces
    but he will heal us;
he has injured us
    but he will bind up our wounds.
After two days he will revive us;
    on the third day he will restore us
    that we may live in his presence.

The meaning here is unquestionably national. That is to say, it is the people of Israel who, in the midst of God's judgment, look forward in repentance to him raising them up again. By taking up that detail of the prophecy, Jesus links his own expected resurrection to Israel's. In *his* resurrection lay *its* restoration. We shall examine that point in the next chapter. For the moment we recall from chapter one that Matthew has already made the connection between Jesus as the Son of God and Hosea's description of Israel as God's son (Hos 11:1). The Father who brought his son out of Egypt, in the face of threat and death, would not abandon the same son to the power of death forever (cf. Acts 2:24-28). Sonship meant hope and confidence.

Israel's sonship and God's universal purpose. This inextinguishable hope that Israel always maintained was based on the unique relationship that it had with God, a relationship pictured on the one hand as a father-son relationship and on the other hand as a covenant that bound them both together. But Israel's hope was also linked to its understanding of its role in the fulfillment of God's great purpose for all the nations and the world. There was a future for Israel because, by God's grace and promise, there was a future for the world.

We saw already, in the first two chapters, that from the start Israel was aware that its very existence was for the sake of the rest of humanity. This had been explicit in the covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:3; 18:18, etc.). It had been recalled in the prelude to Sinai, when Israel was given its identity and mission as God's priesthood in the midst of the whole earth, which belongs to Yahweh (Ex 19:4-6). All God's dealings with Israel were simply carrying forward God's unfinished business with the nations.

So when you examine key Old Testament concepts, which in their immediate contexts seem to apply only to Israel, you find that they also have this universal dimension or vision. *Election* obviously meant the choice of Israel, but not to status, rather for servanthood and for the sake of the nations, as Isaiah 40–55 points out. *Covenant*, likewise, indicated God's unique relationship to Israel, but that too was to enable it to be a "covenant to the nations" and to bring the knowledge of Yahweh's law and justice to the ends of the earth (Is 42:4-6; 51:4-5). *The kingship of Yahweh* was acknowledged in Israel, but in the Psalms, which celebrate it, it is also clearly universal: God is and will be king over all nations (Ps 47:7-9; 96; 98).

It is worth asking, then, whether the idea of Israel as son and Yahweh as Father also had led to a more universal, eschatological dimension. Because if it did, this would clearly be another important thing to include as we explore what sonship meant for Jesus.

"Israel is my firstborn son," declared God (Ex 4:22; cf. Jer 31:9). The expression *firstborn son* implies the existence or the expectation of other sons. This cannot mean that Yahweh was somehow the father of all other nations or of their gods at that time. The earliest use of Yahweh as Father of Israel in Deuteronomy 32 actually distinguishes between Israel and the rest of the nations on the grounds of Israel's unique relationship to "the Rock who fathered you." Nevertheless, the idea of Israel being Yahweh's *firstborn* son certainly envisages the possibility, indeed the definite expectation, that other nations *will become sons*. But that expectation in turn depended on Israel fulfilling the demands of its *own* sonship (i.e., that it should live in loyalty and obedience to Yahweh). From this point of view, the sonship of Israel can be understood as a missional concept. If Israel, as Yahweh's firstborn son, would live by God's standards and obey his laws, then God could pursue his goal of bringing blessing to the nations —"bringing many sons to glory," as Hebrews puts it.

We have seen the very strong link between Israel's ethical obedience (especially social righteousness and justice) and God's fulfillment of his promise to Abraham to bless all nations. In Genesis 18:18-20, especially verse 19, we saw that the very purpose of election is that Abraham and his descendants should keep the way of the Lord in righteousness and justice in order that God would be able to keep his promise—that is, blessing all

nations. Ethical obedience stands as the middle term between election and mission. But, as we have seen, ethical obedience was the primary significance of the son-father relationship of Israel to Yahweh.

Jeremiah 3–4 gives us an interesting combination of these ideas. The overall thrust of the passage is an appeal for true repentance, a genuine turning back to God with practical evidence and not mere words. The father-son motif is used several times (as well as Jeremiah's more familiar husband-wife motif). In Jeremiah 3:4, Jeremiah pictures Israel appealing to Yahweh as father to let it off and not be angry any more. But it is clear that it is just superficial talk and not a true ethical repentance. "This is how you *talk*," says God, "but you do all the evil you can" (Jer 3:5).

Later we find God himself yearning for a real father-son relationship between himself and Israel—with an inheritance gift from him and obedience from them. There is a real pathos in his words.

> How gladly would I treat you like my children
> and give you a pleasant land,
> the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.
> I thought you would call me "Father"
> and not turn away from following me. (Jer 3:19)

Finally, God appeals for a genuine repentance from Israel, and goes on to point out what will happen if it does as he asks.

> "If you, Israel, will return,
> then return to me,"
> declares the LORD.
> "If you put your detestable idols out of my sight
> and no longer go astray,
> and if in a truthful, just and righteous way
> you swear 'As surely as the LORD lives,'
> *then the nations will invoke blessings* by him
> and in him they will boast." (Jer 4:1-2, my italics)

Here we find a clear allusion to the universal promise of the Abrahamic covenant, and it is linked to the requirement of ethical obedience on the part

of Israel, using three of the "biggest" ethical words in the Old Testament vocabulary: truth, justice and righteousness. If Israel, as the Son of God, would turn back to living in the way God wanted them to, then the consequences would be wider than just the forgiveness of Israel itself. God would be able to get on with his ultimate purpose of bringing blessing to the nations. Similar thinking lies behind Isaiah 43:6-7; 48:1, 18-19.

"If You Are the Son of God . . . "

We can see what an awesome responsibility lay on the shoulders of Jesus as he faced up to the task of being the Son of God. As the representative or embodiment of Israel, he was called to obedience. But what was at stake in that obedience was not merely Jesus' own conscience and his relationship with God his Father, vital though that was. Nor was it even just a matter of proving, in his own person, that Israel could be obedient after all and thus satisfy the longing of God's heart as expressed in the prophecies above.

More than both of these, the obedience of Jesus as Son of God opened the way for the fulfillment of God's universal purpose for all humanity, the purpose for which he had called Israel his firstborn son. Christ's obedient sonship fulfilled the mission that Israel's sonship had prepared for but had failed in disobedience. The saying attributed to David Livingstone, "God had only one Son and he made him a missionary," has more depths of truth than perhaps the old explorer himself appreciated.

For that reason, because so much was at stake—no less than the salvation of the world—the devil's onslaught on Jesus' sonship tried so desperately to deflect him from obedience to his Father's will. Aware that Jesus, through his obedience, would win the world for God, the devil offered him the world in advance if he would sell out to him. But Jesus resisted and set himself deliberately on the path of loyal obedience to his Father in full awareness that it would lead to suffering and death. There was no other way. But it was the way by which he, the firstborn Son, would "bring many sons to glory." Very probably it was this combination of Jesus' sonship, obedience, suffering, humanity, temptation and victory that underlies the profound meditation of Hebrews 2:10-18; 5:8-9.

The apostle Paul was appointed as “apostle to the Gentiles [the nations]” and thus had a special, personal interest in the effect for all nations of what God had done through his Son. At the beginning of his letter to the Romans he summarizes the gospel in an interesting way that combines the human and divine sonship of Jesus with the opening up of salvation to all the nations:

> the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake. (Rom 1:2-5)

Later on, when he is exploring the mystery of how the current rejection of Jesus by most (but not all) Jews had led to the ingathering of the non-Jewish, Gentile believers, he picks up a prophecy of Hosea that talked about the sons of God (one of Hosea’s favorite metaphors, as we have already seen): “Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘children of the living God’” (Hos 1:10).

Hosea was talking about the restoration of Israel after judgment and envisaged it in the language of the father-son relationship. But in the first part of the verse he alludes to the Abraham promise of the expansion of Israel into a great nation beyond the possibility of numbering (Gen 13:16; 15:5). This allusion to Abraham, as we have seen so often already, “opens up” the prophecy to a wider future scope than the restoration of Israel alone. It breathes in the air of God’s universal promise of blessing.

So although Hosea undoubtedly had *Israel* alone in mind, Paul, when he quotes the verse in Romans 9:26, picks out the wider implication and applies it to the fruit of his own missionary work. It is the *Gentiles* who are now becoming “sons of the living God” through their believing response to Jesus. The expression “not my people” had originally, in Hosea’s prophecy, been a term of judgment on Israel. But Paul uses it here to describe those who previously had no share in the blessings of Israel (i.e., the Gentiles). It

is *they* who have now been called to belong to the people of God. It is *they* who thereby enter into a relationship of sonship to God as Father. Paul has taken the Old Testament terminology for Israel as God's people and God's son and transposed it into his own missionary vocabulary and applied the terms to people from the Gentile nations, in order to explain what was going on as a result of his own evangelistic work.

What he says there in Romans is the theological expansion of what he had much earlier written to the Galatians—a church of Gentile believers. First of all he emphasizes that through the Messiah, Jesus, they are one with the Jews in relation to God—using the language of sonship.

> So in Christ Jesus you are all children [*sons*] of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:26-29)

Then he goes on to show how this has come about through the work of God's own Son.

> When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out "*Abba*, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Gal 4:4-7, my translation)

We have come a long way from our starting point, the baptism of Jesus, and have already begun to jump ahead to the missionary theology of Paul and the early church. I hope it is clear from what we have surveyed in this chapter that New Testament missionary theology was based on the identity of Jesus, and that in turn was based on a deep understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the next chapter we shall look at Jesus' own sense of mission and how it both derived from his Hebrew Scriptures on the one hand and shaped the mission of the New Testament church on the other.

What we have seen in this chapter is that the Old Testament provided the models, pictures and patterns by which Jesus understood his own essential identity and especially gave depth and color to his primary self-awareness as the Son of his Father God. In an eternal sense, of course, Jesus always was, is and always will be God the Son, the second person of the Trinity. But we have seen how in his earthly life and historical context he embodied and fulfilled the identity and mission of Old Testament Israel, the "firstborn son" of God.

Chapter 3 Questions and Exercises

1. Make a list of all the points you have learned in this chapter that have filled out from the Old Testament your understanding of what it means that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
2. What else have you learned about what it means for us as Christian believers to be children of God, having received "adoption to sonship" through Christ? What does it say about (a) our status in Christ before God and (b) how we ought to live?
3. How would you explain the significance of Jesus' baptism to someone? Examine the Old Testament background to the words of God the Father and their significance for Jesus. Use those Scriptures to help explain who Jesus was and what he had come to do.
4. Select five or six Old Testament texts (from the ones we surveyed in this chapter) that speak about Israel as God's son and God as its Father. Take notes for each text on what it says about this concept for Old Testament Israel and what it would have meant for Jesus to know that he was the Son of God. How should these texts speak to the church today if we claim to be God's children?
5. Study Romans 1:1-5. It is often neglected or rushed over when people want to study Romans. How does Paul link together Jesus as the son of David and as the Son of God, and connect these ideas to the resurrection? Why are these links important to the way Paul will then present the gospel in Romans, as God's faithfulness to his

promises to Israel? Why does he link these truths about Jesus to his missionary task of calling people from all nations to “the obedience of faith” (which he repeats at the end of Romans—16:26)?

6. Muslims reject the whole idea that Jesus was “the Son of God”—which they often misunderstand in physical or sexual terms. Are there any ways that your deeper understanding of what the Bible means by “Son of God”—especially connecting Jesus to Old Testament Israel—could be helpful in explaining the concept to Muslims?

- 4 -

Jesus and His Old Testament Mission

One thing that is very clear about Jesus is that he knew he had been sent. He was no self-appointed savior, no popularly elected leader. He had not just arrived. He was sent. This awareness of a purpose and a mission seems to have developed alongside his consciousness of being the Son of his Father, even from a young age, as Luke tells us (Lk 2:49). But it became crystal clear, as we have seen, at his baptism. Knowing what his mission would entail led him into that time of struggle and testing in the wilderness.

No sooner, however, had he returned from that costly victory over the testings of Satan than he declared the manifesto of his program in the Nazareth synagogue with a word from the prophets, “The Lord has anointed (commissioned) me.” From then on his driving purpose startled his friends and enemies alike. Nothing could stand in the way of what he was conscious of having been sent to do. To do his Father’s will was his very meat and drink (Jn 4:34).

What then was his mission? What did Jesus himself believe he was sent to achieve? What were his personal aims and objectives? What did he think he was doing?

Much scholarly ink has been used up answering these questions! There are two ways of approaching the problem. One way is to look at the kind of expectations that surrounded Jesus in the Jewish society of his day. If the Messiah were to come, what did people think would happen? Of course, as the Gospels make plain, Jesus did not fit all these expectations precisely. Nevertheless, he was as much aware of them as any of his contemporary

Jews would have been. And insofar as they had scriptural roots, he must have been deeply influenced by those expectations and would have sought to interpret his own ministry and mission in relation to them.

The other way to find out what Jesus' aims were is to look at the sayings and actions of Jesus himself. How did Jesus speak about his own mission? Here again we will find that it is Jesus' creative and original way of handling his Hebrew Scriptures that gives us the clearest clues to his mission. These two ways of approach, of course, interlock and overlap in many ways. But we shall take each in turn and see how they reinforce what we have been discovering already.

Jewish Expectations at the Time of Jesus

The sources for knowing what Jewish expectations were at the time of Jesus are found in what is known as the intertestamental literature. This includes a great variety of materials—poetic, narrative, apocalyptic and so on—from the centuries that lie between the end of the Old Testament era and the emergence of the Christian church. These writings come from many different ages and sources and are not at all homogeneous. But they are of very great importance in understanding the world of Jesus and the first disciples and therefore as background to the New Testament. Great amounts of scholarship, both Jewish and Christian, have been devoted to studying this literature.

By the time of Jesus the strongest strand of expectation among Jewish people, widely evident in these writings, was a looking forward with desperate hope to the *restoration of Israel*. It was expected that God would intervene in world affairs to vindicate his people, liberate them from their oppressors and restore them to their rightful place as his redeemed people.

They described their current situation as similar to still being in exile. Even though the Jews had come back to their land after the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C., many believed that in a sense the exile had not ended as long as they were still an oppressed people in their own land. In fact, Rome was regarded as the new Babylon, and "Babylon" was used as a code name for Rome among resistance movements. So the hopes of

restoration, originally expressed by the prophets in terms of return to the land after the exile, were reapplied to the hope of ultimate freedom from their all enemies. This hope was sometimes based on God's direct action; sometimes linked with the arrival of the Messiah—though that was not a clearly or unanimously defined figure; sometimes linked to the expectation of a new Jerusalem and/or a new temple. Whatever the accompanying details, the core of the hope was clear—Israel would be restored.

A second expectation in these writings was that after the restoration of Israel there would be an *ingathering of the nations* to become part of the people of God with Israel.

The fate of the nations was rather ambiguous in Jewish expectations. On the one hand there were many predictions that they would be judged and destroyed as the enemies of God and his people. Yet on the other hand there was the belief that the judgment of the nations, like the judgment of Israel itself, would be a purging judgment after which salvation would be extended to the nations, and some from among them would be gathered in to the future people of God.

Both of these aspects of Jewish expectation at the time of Jesus—the restoration of Israel and the ingathering of the nations—had deep roots, of course, in the Old Testament itself. As regards *Israel*, even the prophets with the sternest words of judgment on Israel held out the hope of restoration beyond that judgment. And from the exile onward, that hope grew stronger and clearer. It can be seen in Jeremiah's "Book of Consolation" (Jer 30–34), in Ezekiel's vision of the new land and temple (Ezek 40–48) and in the soaring vistas of new creation and redemption in Isaiah 40–55. And as regards the *nations*, we saw in chapter one that God's purpose for them was ultimately that they would be included within God's restored people. The coming of the king to Jerusalem would mean peace and universal rule for the nations (Zech 9:9-13). When God would act to restore Zion and reveal his glory, then the nations would also gather to worship him.

> You will arise and have compassion on Zion,
> for it is time to show favor to her;
> the appointed time has come.
> For her stones are dear to your servants;

her very dust moves them to pity.
The nations will fear the name of the LORD,
all the kings of the earth will revere your glory.
For the LORD will rebuild Zion
and appear in his glory.
He will respond to the prayer of the destitute;
he will not despise their plea.
Let this be written for a future generation,
that a people not yet created may praise the LORD:
"The LORD looked down from his sanctuary on high,
from heaven he viewed the earth,
to hear the groans of the prisoners
and release those condemned to death."
So the name of the LORD will be declared in Zion
and his praise in Jerusalem
when the peoples and the kingdoms
assemble to worship the LORD. (Ps 102:13-22; cf. also Is 49:5-6; 56:1-8; 60:10-14; 66:18-24)

So Old Testament prophecies concerning the future of Israel are interwoven with prophecies about the future of the nations also. There is even a comparable "ambiguity" of judgment and hope. Israel is to be sifted in judgment virtually to extinction, yet Israel will be redeemed and restored (e.g., Is 26:9; 35; Jer 16; 25:15-33; Amos 9; Mic 2–3). Likewise, the nations are to be judged and destroyed as enemies of God, yet the nations are to be gathered in to share in the salvation and inheritance of the people of God (e.g., Is 24; 34; Mic 4; Joel 3). In Zephaniah, the punishment of the nations is set parallel to the judgment on Jerusalem, and so, in Zephaniah 3, the restoration of Jerusalem (Zeph 3:14-17) has universal overtones for the nations (Zeph 3:9).

In other words, the dividing line between judgment and salvation is not a line that runs simply *between* the nations and Israel but *through* both of them. Just as there will be a "remnant of Israel," so there will be "survivors of the nations" (Is 45:20-23; 66:19-24; Zech 14:16-19). And the Old Testament sees *both together* (the purified and believing, obedient remnant

of Israel together with those of the nations who respond to the appeal to identify with Yahweh and his people) as the eschatological future people of God.

So Jewish hopes at the time of Jesus, then, focused primarily on the restoration of Israel, with the closely attached implications for the nations. The restoration of Israel and the ingathering of the nations were seen in eschatological terms as the final great act of God, the Day of the Lord. The two things would be part of the same final event that would usher in the new age, but the restoration of Israel was logically and chronologically expected first. Only when Israel was redeemed could the nations enjoy the blessing promised to Abraham (Gal 3:14).

John the Baptist

Into this charged atmosphere of eschatological hopes, “there was a man sent from God whose name was John” (Jn 1:6). It is indeed this framework of restoration hope that provides the context for understanding the ministry and message of John the Baptist. As the records of his preaching show, John regarded his mission as one of winnowing and sifting the nation by his call to repentance so that it would be prepared for God’s imminent purging and restoration. John consciously stood on the threshold of the fulfillment of Israel’s hope.

But not every child of Abraham by birth would enter into the fulfillment of that hope. Only those who produced the “fruit of repentance” in radically changed lives (Lk 3:8-9) would escape the purging judgment and belong to the renewed people of God. John’s mission was to identify, through his call for repentance and baptism, the remnant of Israel who, by responding, was destined for cleansing and restoration as the true, eschatological people of God. His ministry would thus prepare the ground for the imminent intervention and arrival of God himself, as the quotations from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 make clear (Mk 1:2-3). That, indeed, was how the angel who announced his conception to his astonished father, Zechariah, summed up in advance John’s life’s work: “He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and

the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Lk 1:16-17). And the Lord, when he came, submitted himself to be baptized by John!

So we come back to the baptism of Jesus, but now we can see it from a different perspective. We can see how Jesus, by accepting John's baptism, accepted and agreed with John's message and recognized his significance for the fulfillment of the hope of Israel. Jesus queued up with the crowds of those coming to the Jordan. Jesus himself had no need of personal repentance or cleansing, but nevertheless he identified himself with those who wanted to express their longing to be right with God, to be obedient to God's will and to see the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus joined those who were longing for the restoration of Israel, for that was his hope too. Indeed, it was his personal mission.

All the Gospels begin their accounts of Jesus' ministry with his baptism by John. It was also a key point in the preaching of the apostles about Jesus among Jews in the book of Acts. Scholars who have researched the aims of Jesus regard this as a vital piece of evidence. The fact that Jesus accepted and endorsed the ministry of John the Baptist and launched his own ministry on the foundation of John's shows that Jesus also saw his own mission in terms of the fulfillment of the great expectations of the restoration of Israel. If John was the one who had been sent to *prepare* Israel for its eschatological restoration by God himself, then Jesus was the one who had been sent to *accomplish* it.

The Messiah

We need to look again at the baptismal voice and the identity it conferred on Jesus. We saw that the first part of what the voice from heaven said identified Jesus as the Son of God in the sense of the Davidic king, whose rule was celebrated in Psalm 2. And we have noted that Psalm 2 was already interpreted messianically in the time of Jesus. Among the many varied ideas about who or what the Messiah would be and do, it was popularly agreed that the Messiah would be the son of David, so much so that Jesus could use that belief as the basis for a characteristic piece of brain

teasing that challenged people to think through the consequences of their beliefs in the light of Scripture (Mt 22:41-46).

We are so used to calling Jesus “Christ” (which is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew “messiah”) that it comes as something of a shock to realize that the word itself as a title is actually hardly ever found in the Old Testament. It is in fact ironic that we talk so much about “messianic” ideas and hopes when not only is the word not common in the Old Testament, but also Jesus himself rarely used the word, told others not to use it and preferred other titles. What can account for this?

The term *messiah* (*mashiah* in Hebrew) occurs in Daniel 9:25-26. It is part of Daniel’s visionary prophecy of the long-term future for his people. An “anointed one” will come and will bring a climax to God’s purpose, which is summed up in the words “to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place” (Dan 9:24). The idea of fulfillment and completion is very strong.

Before this, the word is not used in a predictive sense in the Old Testament. That is, there are no texts specifically predicting a future “messiah” in so many words. But the idea of *anointing* certain people for specific tasks was common enough in Israel. There were “anointed” people in the community. The word *anointed one*, then, was not originally *predictive* but simply *descriptive.*

To anoint someone with oil was symbolic of setting him or her apart for a particular role or duty with appropriate authorization for it. Priests were anointed with very special sacred oil. Kings were anointed at their accession (or beforehand in some cases, as for example David himself as a lad). Prophets were also regarded as anointed ones, which may have been literal in some cases, or perhaps metaphorical. The basic idea was that the anointed person was set aside and equipped by God and for God, so that whatever he or she did was done in God’s name, with the help of God’s Spirit, under God’s protection and with God’s authority.

A most interesting use of the word for “anointed one” that is not predictive but historical occurs in Isaiah 45:1. There, to everyone’s surprise, God himself uses it to describe the pagan king, Cyrus, the newly rising star

of the Persian Empire. “This is what the LORD says to *his anointed*, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of.”

Now Cyrus was not an Israelite, certainly not a king in the line of David. Nor was he “the Messiah” in the later technical sense of the term. But God’s description of Cyrus as “his messiah” at this point in history tells us a lot about what the term meant at the time. And that in turn sheds light on what it later meant when applied to the expected “coming one.”

First of all it was God who *chose* Cyrus and raised him up for the appointed task (Is 41:2-4, 25). Second, therefore, Cyrus’s accomplishments were really God’s, for it was God who was acting through him as *God’s agent* (Is 44:28; 45:1-5). Third, Cyrus’s specific task was the *redemption and restoration of Israel* from the hands of its enemies (Is 44:28; 45:13) so that, fourth, all his worldwide victories and dominion actually were for the purpose of delivering and establishing the people of God (Is 41:2-4; 45:1-4). And fifth, beyond that Israelite context, his work would ultimately be a step on the way to the extension of *God’s salvation to the ends of the earth* (Is 45:21-25).

All of these were features in the developing messianic concept in post-Old Testament times, particularly as associated with the expectation of a coming son of David. The messiah would be God’s agent to deliver and restore Israel, not a pagan king this time but a true Israelite, the true son of David. And in delivering Israel, the Messiah would bring salvation to the world.

Why, then, did Jesus soft-pedal the “Messiah” idea? It was certainly not because he rejected it. His own Father’s voice had confirmed his identity as the messianic son of David. Jesus claimed, from his earliest preaching, to be anointed by the Spirit of God (Lk 4:18-21, quoting Is 61). He accepted Peter’s half-understood confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi. He identified himself as such to the woman by the well in Samaria (Jn 4:25-26). And when challenged on the point in his trial he did not deny that he was the Messiah but went on to add further definition to it (Mk 14:61-62).

Nevertheless it is striking that on several occasions when those he had healed or blessed in some way acknowledged that he was the Messiah, he urged them not to spread the rumor around—which most of them promptly did, of course—such is human nature. And it is equally striking that, of all

the figures and titles in the Old Testament relating to the coming eschatological deliverer of Israel, the one that Jesus used *least* was that of the Davidic, kingly Messiah. Indeed, although others used it about him, he never used it about himself in his own teaching.

So why this reticence? The most probable reason is that the term *Messiah* had become so loaded with the hopes of a national, political and even violent Jewish restoration that it could not carry the understanding of his messiahship that Jesus had derived from a deeper reading of his Scriptures. If he had stood up and claimed to be the Messiah it would have been "heard" by his contemporaries with a load of associations that were not part of Jesus' concept of his mission.

Jesus lived in the midst of a highly charged political atmosphere. In spite of the return from Babylon centuries before, the Jews had never known real freedom and independent sovereignty—apart from a relatively short period after the successful Maccabean revolt. Under the Persians, and then the Greeks and now the Romans, the Jews were still in a kind of exile, even in their own land. The longings for national freedom, the murmurs of revolt and the apocalyptic, messianic hopes all bubbled close to the surface of national life.

There were others who claimed to be messiahs before and after Jesus. They all ended up as tragic, failed heroes. And it would unquestionably have been within that potent mixture of hopes and angry aspirations that any messianic claims (by Jesus or anyone else) would have been interpreted and evaluated. If Jesus really were the Messiah, then his Jewish contemporaries knew exactly what *they* expected of him. The trouble was that what *they* expected of a messiah and what Jesus intended in being the Messiah did not match. Jesus had no intention of being a conquering king, militarily or politically. Which is not to say that he was not a king or indeed not a conqueror, but of a very different sort from popular expectations.

Now at this point we need to be very careful to understand what is *not* being said here. It is *not* being said that Jesus disassociated himself from Jewish hopes of restoration. We have seen that the whole thrust of both Old Testament and post-Old Testament expectation was that God would act to restore Israel. If Jesus had tried to opt out of that he would never have gone to the Jordan for baptism in the first place and he would have found no followers of his own either. We shall see shortly other features of his

teaching and actions that clearly show that he believed *passionately* in the scriptural promises of the restoration of Israel and his own part in it. No, the difference between Jesus and his contemporaries was not *that* Israel must be restored, but *how* it would happen and what it would mean.

Nor is it being said that just because Jesus did not initiate a political movement or a revolt against Rome he therefore had no interest in politics or that his message had no political implications. In the next chapter we shall look more fully at the ethical teaching of Jesus and take note of its political dimensions. But for the present it will be enough to say that if Jesus had intended *only* to talk about a purely *spiritual* revival in an otherworldly framework with no relevance to the seething politics of his day, then he went about it in a very strange way. So many of the words and actions of Jesus were so challenging to the political authorities that they executed him as a political threat.

Jesus did not, of course, advocate violent revolution against Rome. But to argue that because he did not preach *violent* politics he was therefore uninterested in politics at all is absurd. Nonviolent is not simply nonpolitical—now or then. No, the difference between Jesus and his contemporaries was not that he was purely spiritual while they were political (a modern kind of dichotomy that would probably not have made much sense in Jesus' world anyway). The problem was that his announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God in the present did have profound political and national consequences for the old order of Jewish society that were too radical and final for its leaders to tolerate.

The Messiah came to usher in the new age. But the new age meant the death of the old age. He came to achieve the restoration of Israel. But that could only come about after the fires of judgment and purging. As Jesus looked at his own society, he saw it heading for that terrifying judgment—just as the prophets before him, like Jeremiah, had done. So much of his preaching has that urgent note of warning and impending disaster. Like John he saw a "wrath to come": the wrath of Rome as well as the wrath of God. But the deeper awareness of his own messiahship lay in this: Jesus believed he was called to take Israel's judgment on himself at another level. For the Messiah was a representative figure. He *was* Israel. Their destiny was therefore his, and his destiny was theirs. Yes, at one level, national and political Israel was heading for destruction. But at another level Israel, *in*

the Messiah, would suffer judgment and then the restoration that *God,* not the politicians or the guerrillas, planned. Jesus would redeem Israel by dying its death and accomplishing its resurrection as its representative, its embodiment, its king, its Messiah.

That was why as soon as the disciples came to accept that Jesus was the Messiah he *immediately* began to teach them of his impending violent death and third-day resurrection. *That* was how the Messiah they now haltingly recognized intended to accomplish the restoration they expected of him. It is not really surprising that they could not grasp his meaning until after the events of the cross and resurrection. Even then, it took a seven-mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus to spell out to two of them what it all meant. Like everybody else in Palestine (except, presumably, the Romans), those two disciples were hoping for the redemption of Israel, as they dolefully told him. In Jesus they thought they had the answer to their dreams. Jesus told them that actually they had indeed gotten that answer—in him, the Messiah. But, just as Israel's restoration lay on the other side of judgment, so, in his person, it was necessary for "the Messiah to suffer these things *and then* enter his glory" (Lk 24:26). The Messiah's resurrection was Israel's redemption. God had done for Jesus the Messiah what they were expecting God to do for Israel. But in Jesus *as* the Messiah, God had at a deeper level actually done it for Israel. As Paul would later put it, "We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus" (Acts 13:32-33). The new age of redemption and restoration had dawned.

So it is not surprising either, therefore, that whereas during his earthly ministry Jesus had muted his messiahship (because of misunderstanding among even those who believed in it), *after* the resurrection the disciples went about enthusiastically proclaiming that Jesus was truly the Messiah, with a new understanding of what that meant—an understanding that was exciting, surprising, joyful—but still just as threatening to the Jewish establishment, as the early chapters of Acts show.

The Son of Man

Jesus, then, saw that for him to be the Messiah meant taking on himself the identity and destiny of Israel. This is confirmed by his favorite term for himself, “the Son of Man.” If Jesus was reticent about using the name of Messiah, then the reverse was true of this expression. He sprinkled it so freely into his conversations and teachings that people inquired in genuine puzzlement, “Who is this Son of Man?” (Jn 12:34). Scholars have filled libraries asking and answering the same question!

In fact it was not really a title at all. In the Hebrew Bible it is an expression (*ben-adam*) used frequently as a poetic alternative to the word *man* in the general sense (e.g., Ps 8:4; 80:17; Is 51:12, etc.). It simply means “a human being,” with an emphasis on human weakness and mortality often implied. It is a bit like the word *Mister*. Just any ordinary man. In Ezekiel it is used ninety-three times as a way of addressing the prophet. It may be to suggest humility before the glory of God, or it may be in some sense a representative term—he as the individual prophet representing his people as a whole.

In the Galilean Aramaic that Jesus spoke, the equivalent expression (*bar nash*, or *bar nasha*) had a similar sort of meaning and could also be used as a way of speaking of oneself, rather like the English use of *one* instead of *I* or *me* (a modest English speaker might say, “One likes to think,” rather than the stronger, “I think”). It probably had a self-effacing tone as an alternative for *I*. Thus Matthew quite often changes the phrase “Son of Man” in a passage in Mark into “I” or “he” in his own Gospel when referring to Jesus.

Most scholars are agreed that the “Son of Man” was not a messianic title or figure in the intertestamental Jewish writings. That is, the people of Jesus’ day, whatever else they were hoping for in the way of a messiah, they were not on the lookout for a “Son of Man.” This meant that by using it of himself Jesus could avoid the package of misunderstandings surrounding other familiar messianic titles and instead fill this term with meaning that was based on his own true perception of who he was and what he had come for.

On the other hand, because it did not have a fixed meaning already, people got confused! They asked Jesus about the Christ and he answered about the Son of Man! As we have seen, it was really only after the cross and resurrection that his messiahship could be fully understood. From then on, Jesus as the *Christ* and as the *Son of God* dominated the preaching of

the church, and the term Son of Man was scarcely heard again. In fact in the whole New Testament it is found almost exclusively on the lips of Jesus alone, the only exceptions being Stephen's vision at the point of his martyrdom (which echoes Jesus, Acts 7:56), Hebrews 2:6 (which quotes Ps 8:4) and Revelation 1:13 and 14:14 (which are allusions to Daniel 7:13).

So what meaning then did Jesus fill into this unusual self-designation? Scholars have studied in great depth all the sayings of Jesus in which the term "Son of Man" occurs. There are plenty of them—thirty in Matthew, fourteen in Mark, twenty-five in Luke and thirteen in John. There is general agreement that, apart from some distinctive uses in John, the Son of Man sayings fall into three broad categories.

First, there are those where Jesus uses it when he is talking about his then present, earthly ministry. These sayings tend to speak of his authority over sin, sickness or even nature (e.g., Mk 2:10, 28).

Second, there is a larger group of Son of Man sayings that speak of the Son of Man suffering rejection, dying and rising again, which significantly come after the disciples begin to recognize Jesus as Messiah (e.g., Mk 8:31; 9:31; Lk 9:44, etc.).

And third, the largest group of all, there are sayings that talk about the Son of Man coming in eschatological glory, sometimes with the clouds (which represent deity) and sometimes to act as judge on God's behalf (e.g., Mk 14:62; Mt 13:41-42; 19:28, etc.).

Taken together, these three categories are remarkably comprehensive as a way of encapsulating how Jesus saw his own identity, as well as how he envisaged his immediate and more long-term destiny. He was the one, first, entrusted with authority in his ministry, which he exercised over sin, disease, death, nature and even such fundamental ordinances of the law as the Sabbath. It was a startling and unique authority, which raised eyebrows, questions and hackles all around him. But as he exercised that "unauthorized authority" it led him into conflict with the existing authorities. That conflict eventually ended up with his rejection and death. We have already seen how he understood the mission of the Messiah in terms of suffering and also, in the last chapter, how he recognized that suffering would be the price of his obedience as the Son of God. However, beyond suffering and death, Jesus spoke about being vindicated in resurrection and then exercising the heavenly authority of God himself.

Where did he get all this? (Another question Jesus himself had to answer!) There is no doubt that the third of the categories above, the idea of future vindication and glory, comes from the description of "one like a son of man" in Daniel 7, and it seems clear that the figure described in Daniel is what substantially lay behind Jesus' choice of the Son of Man as a self-designation. So we need to look at that chapter.

In Daniel 7, Daniel sees the kingdoms of this earth, portrayed as ravaging beasts from the sea, given controlled freedom to oppress and harass the people of God. The people of God, described as "the saints of the Most High," are attacked and devoured almost to the point of extinction. But then the visionary scene changes dramatically in verse 9. Instead of a picture of human history at ground level, we are transported into the presence of God ("the Ancient of Days") seated on his throne. There, through the presence of a human figure described as "one like a son of man," the tables are turned. This son of man comes into the presence of the Ancient of Days, the beasts are stripped of authority and destroyed, and dominion, kingdom and authority are given to the son of man and the saints forever.

This "son of man" figure in Daniel 7 has a curiously double point of reference. On the one hand, he appears to represent *the saints*—that is, the human people of God in history. The parallelism between Daniel 7:14 (where authority and kingdom are given to the son of man) and Daniel 7:18 (where the kingdom is given to the saints) shows this. The son of man, in the vision, represents or symbolizes the saints. It has been suggested that he may be an angelic figure, since in Daniel nations can be represented in the spiritual domain by angels (e.g., Dan 10:13, 20-21). Or perhaps he is simply a kind of corporate, representative human figure, embodying, in the vision, the people of God as a whole. From this point of view, the figure fitted in very well with Jesus' identification of himself with Israel. As the Son of Man he represented them. He shared their experience. His destiny was theirs and vice versa.

But on the other hand the son of man in Daniel 7 is closely associated with *God* himself. Daniel sees him "coming with the clouds of heaven" (Dan 7:13). That was very much part of the "ambiance" of deity in the Old Testament. Furthermore, he is given authority, glory, power and worship and his kingdom is eternal (Dan 7:14)—all rather more than the normal lot

of any son of Adam. In fact, there are Greek versions of the text that translate Daniel 7:13 in such a way as to *identify* the son of man with the Ancient of Days. And this tradition finds a strong echo in Revelation, where the description of Jesus in glory is a combination of the reference to the son of man and a virtual direct quotation of the description of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:9-10 (Rev 1:7, 12-16). The two descriptions are conflated into one picture.

So there was an air of deity about the son of man figure also. Indeed, it may have been this aspect of the Danielic figure that clinched the verdict against Jesus on the grounds of blasphemy at his trial. When the high priest asked Jesus whether he was the Messiah, Jesus did not deny it. But immediately he went on to claim that his accusers would see the Son of Man in divine glory "coming on the clouds of heaven" (that is, in the presence of God, Mt 26:63-64). The shift from Messiah to Son of Man must be deliberate and the language comes from Daniel.

Even if this saying of Jesus in the context of his trial was not heard as a claim to a fully divine status, it was still a horrendously conflictual thing to claim. By casting himself in the role of the Son of Man in the sense of Daniel 7, Jesus was claiming to represent the true people of God, the saints of the Most High. But he was standing in the presence of the high priest, Caiaphas, who occupied that role. He was before the Sanhedrin, the representative court of Israel, in Jerusalem its holy city, near the temple, its most holy place. And in the midst of all these people and places, dripping with holiness and the very essence of Israel, Jesus calmly claims to be the Son of Man in full Danielic symbolism, the one whom God would vindicate and entrust with supreme authority. He was claiming to be the one who would be presented on behalf of the saints of God to the Ancient of Days. He was the one who would receive eternal dominion and authority to act in judgment (an impression strengthened by the other Old Testament echo in what Jesus said, namely, Psalm 110:1).

This was strong stuff from one who had just been arrested at dead of night and was himself on trial for his life. But there was worse. For in Daniel 7 the enemies of the son of man/saints of God were the beasts. Who then were these enemies of Jesus? As so often, Jesus did not need to spell out the implications of what he said to the Jewish authorities. His meaning and its implied threat were clear and quite intolerable. Chief priest or chief

beast? No wonder Caiaphas tore his robes, cried blasphemy, called for the death penalty and permitted the spitting and beating. The claims of Jesus were enough to burst old blood vessels as well as old wineskins.

The Servant of the Lord

To find Jesus talking about himself as the Son of Man at the very start of his suffering is in one sense to be expected by any attentive reader of the Gospels. Ever since Caesarea Philippi he had repeatedly emphasized that "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be killed" (Lk 9:22). Yet in another sense this whole emphasis on the suffering of the Son of Man is strange because it is not clearly part of the picture of the son of man in Daniel 7. Some would say that suffering was no part of the Danielic son of man at all. Others would say that it is only there by implication, inasmuch as he is a representative figure of the saints who certainly do suffer all the ravages of the beasts. Yet Jesus, who used this expression for himself more than any other, linked it repeatedly to his expectation of suffering, rejection and death. Why did he do so?

The answer is that Jesus drew on yet another figure from his Hebrew Bible, and that was the Servant of the Lord. We saw in the last chapter that the voice of his Father at Jesus' baptism identified Jesus as the Servant by alluding to Isaiah 42:1. The "suffering servant" in the book of Isaiah was understood messianically in Jesus' day. But it was not explicitly connected or identified with the Son of Man. It seems that it was Jesus himself who brought these two portraits together. That is, he called himself the Son of Man (which pointed to future vindication and authority, as Daniel 7 said), but he insisted that the Son of Man "must suffer" and he portrayed his coming death as fulfilling a mission that has its roots in the description of the Servant in Isaiah.

These two ideas, suffering and servanthood, come together in a key saying of Jesus in Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The saying comes as the climax of a lesson on servanthood, which Jesus gave to his disciples in the wake of the request of James and John for privileged positions in Jesus' kingdom. To reinforce his point, he uses his

own example of voluntary servanthood, proved through his self-sacrificial coming death. It is the last phrase (“give his life as a ransom for many”) that lifts the saying from talking about serving in general to showing clearly that Jesus had in mind the very special ministry of the Servant of the Lord. For it is clear from Isaiah 53 that the Servant would not only suffer, but he would also die—or rather be brutally killed—and his death would be as a sacrifice for the sin of many (Is 53:10-11).

Later on Jesus makes an even clearer reference to Isaiah 53, in Luke 22:37. On the night of his arrest, Jesus warns the disciples of dangers ahead. Incidentally, in my view the reference to buying a sword was probably proverbial rather than literal. Jesus was warning his disciples what to expect, not telling them to fight, since he later prevented them from doing so. As so often, they misunderstood him (Lk 22:36). They were all going to face danger because Jesus was about to be treated like a criminal, for he says, “It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’ [Is 53:12]; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment” (Lk 22:37).

The emphatic repetition about fulfillment shows that this was not just a casual quotation for effect. Jesus here claims to be the one whom Isaiah 53 was written about—the Servant of the Lord who would give his life for the sake of others.

In fact, finding words from Isaiah 53 on the lips of Jesus as he and his disciples were leaving for the Mount of Olives is not surprising, because that part of Isaiah seems to have been much on his mind that night. Just a little while earlier, with the disciples arguing again about their competing claims for greatness (what a time to be obsessed with that question!), Jesus had to repeat his lesson on servanthood with the words, “I am among you as one who serves” (Lk 22:27). And at the most solemn moment of all, at the end of the Passover meal, he took the fourth cup of blessing with the words: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor 11:25), “which is poured out” (Lk 22:20) “for many” (Mk 14:24) “for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28).

Scholars argue over the precise reconstruction of the exact words of Jesus at that moment. What is very clear is that Jesus referred to the shedding of his own blood (about to happen in a few hours) as a *covenantal* act and a *sacrificial* act, and that it was for the benefit of others.

Several Old Testament passages seem to be combined in his meaning. The blood of the covenant recalls Exodus 24, where sacrificial blood sealed the covenant between God and Israel at Mount Sinai. But the "new covenant" recalls Jeremiah 31:31-34, which, as we saw in chapter two, was promised by God for his people and included complete forgiveness of sin. Then again, the expressions "poured out" and "for many" recall Isaiah 53:12 and the work of the Servant in his death. And finally, God told the Servant in Isaiah 42:6 and 49:8 that he would be "a covenant for the nations."

It may well be that the reason for the variations in the different accounts of the words of Jesus on this solemn occasion of the Last Supper is simply that Jesus did not just speak one sentence and move on, as if he were reciting a liturgy at a church service. He had in fact interrupted the Passover liturgy with his own startling declaration, and he quite probably explained his words from different Scriptures to make sure his disciples didn't miss his full meaning this time.

So there are good grounds for believing that Jesus saw himself as the Servant figure of Isaiah and interpreted his mission and especially his suffering and death in terms of Isaiah 53. Certainly the early church made this identification, and it seems much more likely that they got the idea from Jesus than that they invented it themselves. One of the earliest terms for referring to Jesus among his followers in the book of Acts was "God's holy servant" (Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30). Peter, one of those who shared most closely in the private thoughts of Jesus, also found his own mind turning to Isaiah 53 when reflecting on how Jesus set an example of suffering without retaliation (1 Pet 1:21-25). Matthew links Jesus with the Servant very clearly, not just in his record of the baptismal voice with its allusion to Isaiah 42:1 but by his full-length quotation of Isaiah 42:1-4 (Mt 12:15-21) and of Isaiah 53:4 (Mt 8:17). Both of these are in the context of Jesus' healing ministry.

If Jesus' mind was absorbed with Isaiah 53 in relation to his coming suffering and death, it seems that he thought of his prior ministry of teaching and healing in terms drawn from the other servant songs and related passages in Isaiah. In his famous "sermon" at Nazareth right at the beginning of his public ministry, he read from Isaiah 61:1-2 and applied the words to himself as now fulfilled.

The Spirit of the LORD is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Lk 4:18-19)

The passage has many similarities with the mission of the Servant as described in Isaiah 42:7. Later, when answering John's disciples, he points to the visible effects of his healing and preaching ministry in words that echo both Isaiah 35:5-6 and Isaiah 61:1. "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Mt 11:4-5).

So, then, it is clear from his baptism, through his public ministry, and especially in his suffering and death, that Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the mission of the Servant of God. In order to get the full value of this insight into the mind of Jesus, however, we must do the same as we did for the other figures that Jesus found in his Hebrew Scriptures and applied to himself. That is, we must look back into the Old Testament and find out how the identity and mission of the Servant was described there. For, as we have said before, the more deeply we understand the Scriptures Jesus used, the closer we shall come to the heart of Jesus himself. And what is more, we shall have a sharper understanding of our own mission in the light of his. So who was the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah, and what was he called to do?

The Mission of the Servant in the Old Testament

In the book of Isaiah, before we are introduced to the mysterious figure of the Servant of the Lord as an individual, the prophet first applies the term to *Israel as a nation*. Israel was God's servant.

But you, Israel, *my servant*,

Jacob, whom I have chosen,
you descendants of Abraham my friend,
I took you from the ends of the earth,
from its farthest corners I called you.
I said, "You are *my servant*";
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.
So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Is 41:8-10, my italics)

This means that when God introduces his Servant in Isaiah 42:1, in terms that appear to describe an individual, there must be some connection with the identity of Israel already mentioned. The Servant figure is never in fact given any actual name in these chapters *except* Israel or Jacob (cf. also Is 44:1-2; 45:4). More significantly, many of the things that are said about the Servant figure as an individual are also said or implied about Israel as God's servant in a corporate sense. So, for example, we immediately notice that being chosen by God and upheld by God's right hand is said of both (see Is 42:1, 6). Both the individual and the nation are called to be witnesses to God in the midst of and to the nations (Is 42:6; 43:10, 21; 49:3, 6).

So there is definite *continuity* between Israel as the servant and the Servant figure who appears to be an individual. So much so, in fact, that some scholars interpret all the passages about the servant as being corporate—that is, as referring to Israel. Now it is true that Israel is sometimes personified in the Hebrew Bible as an individual—for example, as a wife or a son. But in those cases the metaphorical intention is clear. Some of the passages in Isaiah that describe the commission, experiences, words and feelings of the Servant, however, are so graphic and personal that most scholars believe that the prophet must have meant them to refer to an individual person. In any case, it is not uncommon in the Hebrew Bible for writers like prophets and poets to move back and forth between corporate and individual categories. The nation as a whole could be spoken of in the collective singular, and particular individuals could represent or embody the wider community. So there is nothing impossible about the prophet in these

chapters using the same idea—servant—to describe both the nation of Israel and also a particular individual.

At this point, however, things get somewhat more complex! Not everything that the prophet has to say about Israel as the servant is as warm and positive as the verses quoted above. The historical context in which these prophecies of Isaiah 40–55 were heard was the exile. The whole section is a tremendous word of challenge and encouragement to the Jews who had survived the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and were now into the second generation of captivity in Babylon. And they were there because of the judgment of God upon the sin, disobedience and failure of the nation, which had been denounced by the preexilic prophets. Israel, the servant of God, in spite of all the blessings and privileges it had experienced from God, was at that moment of history paralyzed and useless as far as the fulfillment of its mission was concerned. This is how Isaiah describes Israel, in the present reality of its sin and failure:

> Hear, you deaf;
> look, you blind, and see!
> Who is blind but my servant,
> and deaf like the messenger I send?
> Who is blind like the one in covenant with me,
> blind like the servant of the LORD?
> You have seen many things, but you pay no attention;
> your ears are open, but you do not listen."
> It pleased the LORD
> for the sake of his righteousness
> to make his law great and glorious.
> But this is a people plundered and looted,
> all of them trapped in pits
> or hidden away in prisons. . . .
> Who handed Jacob over to become loot,
> and Israel to the plunderers?
> Was it not the LORD,
> against whom we have sinned?
> For they would not follow his ways;
> they did not obey his law. (Is 42:18-22, 24)

Those words are familiar enough to anyone who has read the prophets (and they are reinforced in Is 43:22-28). But they are very significant here because this prophet calls Israel God's servant and puts this word of rebuke almost immediately after his ringing description of the character and mission of the servant in Is 42:1-9. So although there is clearly a measure of continuity and identity between the individual Servant and the nation of Israel, we find here that there is a definite discontinuity and distinction between them as well. The nation of Israel, far from fulfilling its mission as the servant of God to bring him glory among the nations as his witness, actually stands under his judgment. They were far from God spiritually (as well as, in a sense, geographically), and it is as if they are blind, deaf and incapacitated. They need to be brought *back to God*, not just *back to Jerusalem*.

Cyrus will serve God's purpose by providing the political liberation that will bring them back to Jerusalem. But who then will restore them spiritually? Who else but the Servant figure? That is probably what is implied by Isaiah 42:3, 7. The bruised reed and smoldering wick, the blind captives sitting in darkness, probably meant Israel in exile. The Servant would have a mission of compassionate restoration. Listen to his own testimony in the second "Servant Song":

> And now the LORD says—
>
> he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
>
> to bring Jacob back to him
>
> and gather Israel to himself. (Is 49:5)

The Servant, then, has a mission *to* Israel. It is the Servant of God who will accomplish the restoration of the servant Israel to God. But for what purpose? Another twist in the developing picture of the Servant reveals the answer. In Isaiah 49, the Servant faces apparent failure.

> But I said, "I have labored in vain;
>
> I have spent my strength for nothing at all." (Is 49:4)

This is amplified in Isaiah 50:5-9, where the Servant experiences rejection and physical abuse. It seems that the Servant's mission is failing, with frustration and opposition.

God's answer to the Servant's depression is startling. God now entrusts the Servant with an even *wider mission*—not just Israel but the world!

> And now the LORD says [vv. 5-6 are God's answer to v. 4] . . .
>
> It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
> to restore the tribes of Jacob
> and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
> *I will also make you a light to the Gentiles,*
> *that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.* (Is 49:6, my italics)

The Servant, then, also has a mission to the world. But we should be careful to note that this is indeed "*also*." That is, the universal mission of the Servant expands but does not replace or cancel the mission of restoring Israel. In fact, this particular "Servant Song" is actually addressed to the nations in Isaiah 49:1. It is as if the Servant wishes to explain to the nations how it has come about that he, who had been commissioned to restore *Israel*, has become the means of bringing salvation to *them*—the foreign nations (Is 49:6). The reason is that God himself had redirected and expanded his mission: not Israel only but the world, as well.

To sum up what we have found so far, then: Israel, as a people, was the servant of God, chosen and upheld by him with the purpose of being a light to the nations, as was the original intention of the election of Abraham. But historically Israel was failing in that role and mission. Israel as the servant of God was "blind and deaf" and under God's judgment. The individual Servant is thus at one level *distinct* from Israel because he has a mission *to* Israel, to challenge it and call it back to God. The restoration of Israel, God's servant, is the task of the Servant himself. Yet at another level, the Servant is *identified* with Israel, and similar language is used of both. This is because, in the surprising purposes of God, the Servant will actually fulfill the original mission of Israel. That is, through the Servant, God's justice, liberation and salvation will be extended to the nations. The

universal purpose of the election of Israel is to be achieved through the mission of the Servant.

The Servant and the Mission to the Gentiles

Returning now to the New Testament, we can begin to see not only how Jesus understood his own mission, but also how *his* mission to Israel is related to the later *apostolic* mission to the Gentiles (the nations).

We saw in the opening sections of this chapter that Jesus saw his own mission in terms of the hopes of the restoration and redemption of Israel. This was clear from the way he endorsed the ministry of John the Baptist and launched his own ministry from John's.

Several other actions of Jesus have to be interpreted in this light, that is, as pointing to his mission as the restoration of Israel. His choice of twelve disciples, for example, was intentionally symbolic of an embryonic restored Israel. He called them a "little flock" (Lk 12:32), which was a term for the remnant of Israel, and envisages them judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt 19:28). There was his entry into Jerusalem, which, without a word of explanation from him, was for all to see a claim to fulfill the promised royal restoration of Zechariah 9:9-10. There was his action in the temple shortly afterward. This was more than just a "cleansing" of the temple from traders. It was almost certainly a prophetic sign, pointing to the destruction of the temple, which he also explicitly predicted. But the only reason why the temple would be destroyed, in current Jewish expectation, was if and when the new age of Israel's restoration dawned, at which point a new temple was expected. The disciples later realized that Jesus meant exactly that. He was the new temple. A few nights later, as we saw above, he was claiming to inaugurate the new covenant in the context of a Passover meal that pointed to his own death as the sacrificial lamb. And three days after that, he was explaining to two disciples on the road to Emmaus that the redemption of Israel that they were hoping for had indeed been accomplished through his resurrection on the third day. A messianic king, a new temple, a new covenant, a new Passover, a redeemed Israel—and all in the space of a week between Palm Sunday and Easter Day!

There can be no doubt, then, that Jesus saw himself and his mission as directed primarily to Israel. Thus far we can see him fitting the role of the Servant. But what then of those texts in Isaiah that spoke of the mission of the Servant to the nations?

There are some signs even during his earthly ministry that Jesus did have a universal vision of the ultimately worldwide effect of the gospel, embracing foreign nations as well as Israel. Indeed, sometimes he gave great offense by referring to foreigners. His own townspeople in Nazareth were not at all pleased when he picked out two foreigners, Naaman the Syrian and the widow of Zarephath, as models of response to God in his synagogue address (Lk 4:24-30). Only rarely did Jesus himself deal directly with Gentiles, but his reaction to their faith was very significant. Marveling at the faith of the Roman centurion in Matthew 8:5-13, Jesus used it as a springboard for a remarkable vision of a great ingathering of the Gentile nations. But what is most interesting is that he used language drawn from Old Testament texts, which had referred to the ingathering of the exiles of Israel. “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside” (Mt 8:11-12).

The Old Testament background to this ingathering from different points of the compass comes from passages like Isaiah 43:5 and 49:12 and Psalm 107:3. Just as Paul used Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 (which referred to Israel) to refer to the ingrafted Gentiles (Rom 9:24-26), Jesus was redefining and extending the meaning of the restoration of Israel to include Gentiles.

However, it is clear that the dominant burden of Jesus’ mission *in his own lifetime* was to Israel. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,” he said (Mt 15:24). And he confined his disciples to the borders of Israel also: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel” (Mt 10:5-6).

After his resurrection, however, we hear the familiar words releasing the disciples from any such limits and commissioning them instead to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Luke’s record of the “Great Commission” emphasizes the idea of *witness*, which has interesting roots in the servant passages of the Old Testament. He ends his Gospel with these words of Jesus, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise

from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. *You are witnesses* of these things" (Lk 24:46-48, my italics).

And he begins the book of Acts in the same way. The disciples, still puzzled by events, inquire of the risen Jesus whether the time has now come for the restoration of Israel. Jesus in a sense deflects their question by redirecting their mission in exactly the way God had done for the servant in Isaiah 49. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8, my italics).

"You will be my witnesses" is a deliberate echo of Isaiah 43. In that chapter God promised that he would redeem, gather and restore Israel (Is 43:1-7) and then immediately declares twice "you are my witnesses" (Is 43:10, 12). The people of Israel were to bear witness among the nations that Yahweh is the true and living God, the only one who had revealed and saved. Now Jesus uses exactly the same words to tell the disciples that they must bear witness to the nations that Jesus alone is Lord and Savior.

As we have seen, this "witness" in the servant passages of Isaiah is to go "to the ends of the earth"—one of the favorite phrases of the prophet. So the shape of the mission of the Servant in Isaiah not only explains the primary mission of Jesus to Israel but also provides the key to the launching of the mission to the nations after his resurrection.

The Gentile mission of the early church is another important clue to an understanding of the aims of Jesus. Scholars who have researched the question we started with in this chapter, "What were Jesus' aims and intentions?" point out that at least part of the answer is found by noticing what immediately *preceded* and what very quickly *followed* his ministry. John the Baptist came first. And all the New Testament traditions stress that Jesus began his ministry from John. Jesus shared John's vision that the expected restoration of Israel was being accomplished. Then, very soon after his death, we find that the little group Jesus left behind had become a dynamic movement committed to taking the good news to the Gentile nations, willing to face all the problems that it caused—practical, geographical, cultural and theological. The first followers of Jesus were committed to world mission!

Jesus was launched by a revival movement for the restoration of *Israel*. He himself launched a movement for the blessing of the *nations*. Jesus, therefore, was the hinge, the vital link between the two great movements. He was the climax and fulfillment of the hope of Israel and the beginning of the hope of the nations. And that was precisely the role of the Servant of God.

How perceptive indeed was the prophetic word of old Simeon, when he held the infant Jesus in his arms and saw in him not only the fulfillment of all his hopes for Israel but also of God's promise for the nations.

> Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
> you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
> For my eyes have seen your salvation,
> which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
> a light for revelation *to the Gentiles*,
> and the glory of *your people Israel*. (Lk 2:29-32, my italics)

If all this is now clear to us, as it became clear to New Testament writers like Luke, we may be puzzled as to why it was that the Gentile mission of the early church actually got off to a rather slow and shaky start. Its mission to the world did not start all at once. Remember that Luke wrote his Gospel and Acts long after those early days and in the light of his theological and scriptural reflection. Why did it take angels and rooftop visions, persecution and scattering, not to mention blinding lights on the Damascus road, to drag the early Jewish Christian church into a mission to the Gentiles, and even then not without some theological kicking and screaming?

Well, we are not told explicitly. But my own feeling is that it had something to do with the remaining ambivalence and misunderstanding about the restoration of Israel that we hear in Acts 1:6. I think there is a comparison with Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God, which he declared had already come and was present in reality through himself, and yet was still to come in its fullness in the future. *Already, but not yet.* Likewise, the restoration of Israel had indeed already happened through the resurrection of the Messiah. And yet in another sense it still lay ahead. At least, it was not very obvious to the naked eye on the streets of Jerusalem even after Pentecost.

Imagine the reasoning of the disciples. According to their Jewish expectation, if the ingathering of the Gentiles were to take place, Israel had to be restored first. Both events were part of the great eschatological scenario. They couldn't happen separately. Yet even after the resurrection of Jesus, and in spite of their eager and enthusiastic witnessing to it, Israel had not yet responded to the good news. Or rather, those who had responded were still a tiny minority, even if they began to number thousands instead of dozens. Peter's preaching in Acts 3 passionately appeals to his fellow Jews to turn and believe his witness to Jesus, so that "the times of refreshing may come"—the redemption of Israel. The events have reached that point. The Servant has been sent first to Israel so that God can fulfill his promise to Abraham and bless the nations. If only Israel would respond to him even now. Notice how his sermon follows exactly the pattern we have seen so far: *Israel first, then the nations*. "You are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways" (Acts 3:25-26). But they wouldn't turn. So the apostles may have thought, "If Israel has not yet been visibly restored, the ingathering of the Gentiles can hardly begin yet, can it?"

But then God surprised them. Here was Cornelius, a Roman centurion who respected the Jewish God but knew nothing about Jesus. Here was Peter, who knew Jesus but wanted nothing to do with unclean Gentiles. An angel. A strange vision on an empty stomach. A knock on the door. And God brings them together in an encounter so important that Luke spares two precious chapters of parchment to tell it twice (Acts 10; 11). The conversion of Cornelius astonished Peter and his friends and then the rest of the church. They had to recognize it as nothing less than an act of God (Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-18): "So then, even to the Gentiles *God* has granted repentance that leads to life!"

Then at Antioch the gospel showed its remarkable crosscultural power as large numbers of Greek-speaking Gentiles "believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21). Once again the church was compelled to recognize the hand of God (Acts 12:21) and the grace of God (Acts 12:23). The Gentile mission was an act of God before it ever became a strategy of the church.

So what could have happened? Nothing less than that in some sense the promised restoration of Israel must already have happened, or be happening, and was being demonstrated precisely in the ingathering of the Gentiles. If God was doing the one (gathering the Gentiles), he must be doing the other (restoring Israel). The two were inseparably linked. And this was exactly how James interpreted events in the wake of the even more remarkable results of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. Listen to what James said at the council of Jerusalem.

> The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders that God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:
>
> 'After this I will return
> and rebuild David's fallen tent.
> Its ruins I will rebuild,
> and I will restore it,
> that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
> even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
> says the Lord, who does these things'—
> things known from long ago." (Acts 15:12-18; quotation from Amos 9:11-12)

We should not miss the tremendous significance of this judgment. At a council of the church, convened specifically to resolve this issue, the considered apostolic interpretation of events was that the inclusion of the Gentiles into the new messianic community was an eschatological act of God. And the important point is this. James insists that this turn of events not only fulfilled prophecy concerning *the nations* but also demonstrated that the prophesied *restoration of Israel and its Davidic kingdom* was being fulfilled. If God was gathering the nations, then Israel too was being restored.

Now, Paul was at that council. Doubtless he agreed with its theological interpretation. But he was faced with reality on the ground in his missionary work. And that reality, which broke his heart, was that while some Jews did accept the message of Jesus the Messiah, most did not. He met with rejection and resistance at every turn, even though he deliberately went to Jewish synagogues first in all his travels. How could this be squared with the idea that Israel was restored? Did it not rather show that God had simply abandoned Israel, forgotten his promises and turned instead to the Gentiles? Such an alternative possibility was faced by Paul in Romans 9–11 and decisively rejected. God had *not* been unfaithful to his promises to Israel. Quite the contrary. The inclusion of the Gentiles was God's paradoxical fulfillment of those promises.

Unfortunately many modern Christians find Romans 9–11 difficult and obscure and treat that section as a mere parenthesis or afterthought. Romans 1–8 seems to say all we think we need to know about the riches of the gospel. But in fact these later chapters are critical in understanding Paul's whole theology of history and mission.

In Romans 1–8 Paul demonstrates that our salvation depends entirely on God and not ourselves. Specifically, it depends on God's grace and God's promise, as the Hebrew Scriptures so clearly proved.

But then the question arises—How can we trust God's promise to us (Gentiles) if God has failed to fulfill his promise to Israel? If it were true, as appearances suggested, that God had just abandoned Israel in spite of all his covenants and promises, then why on earth should the Gentiles have any confidence in the promises of such a God? Unless Paul can show that God had *not* failed Israel, all his talk about salvation for the Gentiles would be hollow and baseless.

So Paul sets out to prove two affirmations: that God's promise had *not* failed (Rom 9:6) and that God had *not* rejected Israel (Rom 11:1-2). He does so by pointing out that even in the Old Testament not all ethnic Israelites truly responded to God (Rom 9:6). The prophets spoke of a faithful remnant through whom and to whom God would fulfill his promises. That remnant, to which Paul himself belonged, now included both Gentiles and Jews who believed in the Messiah Jesus and received God's righteousness by faith. Gentile believers, therefore, were not some new people to whom God had transferred his favors. The Gentiles had not

replaced the Jews. Rather they were like wild olive shoots that had been grafted on to the original stock. They had in fact become part of Israel. And that grafting in of the Gentile nations was nothing less than the original purpose of God in calling Israel in the first place. It was by *that* means, in *that* way, that "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26). What had happened was *not* the replacement of Jews by Gentiles but *the expansion of Israel* to include Gentiles, people from all nations now united by faith in the Messiah Jesus.

So, Paul argued, the salvation of the Gentiles, far from proving that God had rejected Israel, in fact proved the opposite. God was still in the business of saving and restoring Israel. The restoration of Israel had already taken place (in the resurrection) and yet still lay ahead in its fullness when all Israel would be saved. The mission to accomplish the ingathering of the nations fills the gap and tension between the two poles of Paul's thinking.

All this was Paul's mature reflection. But it is evident that even in the earliest days of his missionary work he had a rationale for his strategy of going first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. And it was based explicitly on the Servant pattern, which shaped the ministry of Jesus. In Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas were invited to bring a message to the Jewish synagogue after the reading of the Law and the Prophets. After briefly reviewing the biblical story, Paul affirms his fundamental conviction that the resurrection of Christ was God's means of achieving the restoration of Israel. "We tell you the good news: what God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus" (Acts 13:32-33).

Many Jews believed on that occasion. But when opposition was aroused the following week, Paul solemnly redirected his mission to the Gentiles, using a very significant biblical text as his warrant for doing so.

> Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For *this is what the Lord has commanded us*:
>
> 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
> that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" (Acts 13:46-47, my italics)

This is a direct quotation from Isaiah 49:6, where it was the word of God to the Servant in response to his struggles and depression in Isaiah 49:4. We have already seen how deeply the pattern of the Servant influenced Jesus. Here we see that Paul also found in it the pattern of his own mission. He takes words originally addressed to the Servant of the Lord and affirms that they were God's command to himself and his missionary team. The twofold mission of the single Servant in the prophetic vision has actually been divided between two persons in its historical outworking—Jesus, the restorer of Israel, and Paul, the apostle to the nations.

Paul has sometimes been accused of distorting the simple teachings of Jesus. It seems to me, on the contrary, that there is a fundamental oneness of understanding between them at this point, which derives from the profound reflection on their Hebrew Scriptures that both of them engaged in. Both Jesus and Paul saw the prime importance of God's people Israel. Both saw God's purpose for Israel being fulfilled in and through the Messiah. Both saw the mission of the Servant as the hinge between God's promise to Israel and God's promise through Israel for the nations. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Paul sorrowed and agonized over the hardness of heart of his own people. Jesus envisaged a great ingathering of the nations to the Lord's banquet. Paul gave his life to distributing the invitations for the banquet.

It is perhaps to Luke that we owe the observation of such a degree of agreement between Paul and Jesus. After all, he had the unique opportunity of living with the one for much of his mission to the nations and of researching the other in his mission to Israel. Luke has provided us with more of the New Testament than any other single writer in it. So in some ways we owe the very shape of the New Testament to him, not just externally, in the ordering of the books, with Acts standing between the Gospels and the Epistles, but also theologically.

For Luke begins his Gospel with the most extended emphasis on the fulfillment of all Israel's hopes for redemption and restoration. The songs and prayers and Scriptures that are festooned around the births of John the Baptist and Jesus in Luke 1–2 are saturated with the motif of fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about Israel: John's mission is to bring Israel back to God (Lk 1:16-17); Jesus would possess the throne of David forever (Lk 1:32); God has been faithful to Israel as against the powerful of the earth (Lk 1:52-55); their salvation is now being accomplished (Lk 1:68-79);

the arrival of Jesus fulfills the hope of Israel and the nations (Lk 2:29-32); and thus arouses thanksgiving among those "who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk 2:36-38).

Luke then ends his Gospel and begins Acts with the note of fulfillment overflowing into mission to the nations (Lk 24:44-47; Acts 1:1-8). Finally, he concludes his whole work with Paul in Rome, still hard at work summarizing for Jewish visitors his whole ministry as having been "because of the hope of Israel" and proving from the Scriptures that that hope had been fulfilled by the coming of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus the Messiah. But at the same time we find him more confident than ever, in view of where he was, that "God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles" (Acts 28:23-28).

From the temple in Jerusalem to a guesthouse in Rome—that is the span of Luke's great story. From the heart of Israel to the hub of the nations—that is the dynamic thrust of the New Testament geographically, historically and theologically. It was a story shaped by the mission of God himself as Jesus and his apostles discerned it in their Hebrew Scriptures.

Our Mission in the Light of Christ's

What, then, does all this say to us? It is, I hope, illuminating to reach a deeper understanding of how Jesus understood his own identity and mission through his reflection on his Scriptures, as we have strolled or stumbled our way through the last two chapters. We have dug over a lot of the soil in which the roots of his consciousness spread and drew their nourishment. And we have finished up seeing how influential his Servant identity was on the perception and shape of the mission of the early Christian church. But I want to conclude this chapter with four points where these biblical insights must have an impact on our view of how we as modern Christians must live out our own mission.

The unity and continuity of mission. First of all, we should by now be impressed with the continuity and integration of the mission of God's people from ancient Israel right through to our own day. We saw the link between the whole people of Israel as the servant of God and the individual Servant figure. And we saw how Jesus the Messiah saw himself in relation

to both—embodying Israel and yet also having a ministry to Israel. And then we saw how Paul identifies the mission of the Servant with the mission of the church in reaching out to bring the gospel to the nations, just as the Servant was commissioned to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. The continuity of mission and witness to the nations thus runs through Israel, the Servant, Jesus and the church—connecting Old and New Testaments on a single trajectory.

So we ought to realize, then, that missional commitment is not some kind of optional extra for the extra-enthusiastic. Nor was it just a new idea, hastily invented by Jesus on the Mount of Ascension to give his disciples something to do with the rest of their lives after he left. Still less was it a merely modern movement of the church that coincided with colonial expansionism. *Mission lies at the very heart of all God's historical action in the Bible.* The whole Bible bears witness to the mission of God to the fallen, suffering, sinful human race, and indeed ultimately to his whole creation as well. That is why God called Abraham, sent Jesus and commissioned his apostles. For there is one servant people, one Servant King and one servant mission.

"To the Jew first." Second, we must take seriously the order of the servant mission as expressed both in Jesus' ministry and in Paul's repeated aphorism, "To the Jew first." Paul insisted that even though many Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah, God had not rejected Israel. Israel would be saved. They would be saved along with Gentiles, both through Jesus Christ. And since the Christ had come through Israel and been sent to Israel, he must be offered first to Jews. So Paul's expression "To the Jew first" was not only a matter of missionary strategy that he followed as he moved from city to city; it was also a theological conviction.

The church was not a new Gentile phenomenon, even if it looked like that as its membership became increasingly Gentile. The community of Jesus followers was a new *humanity*, composed of both believing Jews and Gentiles. But it was also organically and spiritually continuous with the original people of God, as Paul's olive tree picture in Romans 11 shows. Israel had been redefined and extended, but the Jewish roots and trunk were not replaced or uprooted just because unbelieving branches had been lopped off.

Evangelism among Jews is a matter of considerable controversy today. There are powerful voices arguing that it is historically offensive because of the atrocities of Christians against Jews, culturally inappropriate and theologically mistaken.

One particular theological viewpoint rejects the need for evangelism among Jews. Jews, it is said, are already in covenant relationship with God and have no need of "conversion" to Christianity. Jesus, as the founder of what is now predominantly Gentile Christianity, is the Christian Savior. He is simply unneeded by Jews. This is the view of the so-called two covenant theory. The new covenant through Jesus is for Gentile Christians. Jews are saved through their own original covenant. Evangelism in the name of Jesus is therefore rejected.

There are three reasons why I cannot accept this view and regard it as fundamentally unbiblical.

First, it ignores not only the Jewishness of Jesus but also his whole conscious identity and mission that we have been exploring all through this book. Jesus came within Israel, to Israel and for Israel. To say that Jews don't need Jesus is to undermine everything Jesus believed about himself and about God's purpose in sending him to his people. It is ultimately to betray the gospel itself by excluding from it the very people among whom it was birthed and to whom it was announced.

Second, it fails altogether to see the integral link between Jesus' mission to Israel and God's purpose of extending salvation to the Gentiles. This, we have seen, is the essence of the Servant identity of Jesus. This was not only the historical interpretation of the earliest church but also is fully scriptural, that is, in accordance with the Hebrew Bible. Jesus is the Savior of the world *because* he is the Messiah of Israel. He cannot be one and not the other. If he is not the Messiah for the Jews, then he cannot be the Savior of the Gentiles. So if evangelism among Jews (in the sense of graciously calling them to see in Jesus the Messiah who fulfills their historic, scriptural faith) is disallowed, it cuts the nerve of all other evangelism. The gospel has to be good news for the Jews if it is to be good news for anyone else. And if it *is* good news for them, then to fail to share it with them is the worst form of anti-Semitism.

Third, the "two covenant theory" utterly subverts Paul's claim that the very heart of the gospel was that in it God had created *one* new people. It

simply cannot be squared with Ephesians 2–3. Or even Romans 9–11. For Jesus was not just the Messiah of Israel. He was also the new Adam. In him God's purpose for humanity as a whole was achieved, precisely *not* through two separate covenant arrangements but by a single new people in Christ. "His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, [Jew and Gentile], thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (Eph 2:15-16).

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs *together* with Israel, members *together* of *one* body and sharers *together* in the promise in the Messiah Jesus (Eph 3:6).

Mission in servanthood. My third reflection on the depth of the influence of the Servant figure on Jesus and the church is that it ought to be the model and pattern for all Christian mission in the name of Jesus. One of the most astonishing things about Jesus is that whereas his contemporaries looked for a Messiah who would come in triumphant power, he came in humility and initial obscurity and devoted his life to compassionate service to those whom society scorned, oppressed, excluded or overlooked. And having made the point that he himself had not come to be served but to serve, he modeled it unforgettably in washing the disciples' feet *and then explicitly setting that as the example of how we should act*.

The spirit of servanthood, written into the prophetic vision of the Servant, lived out in the ministry of Jesus, should be the motive and the method of all Christian mission. First of all, of course, it ought to be characteristic of relationships *within* the church. Paul never strayed far from its influence. After a lengthy exhortation to Gentile and Jewish Christians at Rome to be tolerant of each other's conscientious scruples, he points to the example of Christ—as the Servant! "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Rom 15:7-9). For Paul the gospel is as ethical as it is missional!

With such an example before us in both Old and New Testaments, and with the explicit command of Jesus, it is one of the great tragedies of history that the Christian church has so often fallen back into the

triumphalistic domination patterns of the world and then baptized them and called them "mission." We have imagined that the best way to save the world is to rule the world, with the tragically ironic result that Christian mission in the name of the Servant has been indelibly associated in the minds of many with power—military, cultural, economic and political. It is an image that is hard to live down. But the historical abuse of mission is no reason to abandon it altogether. For the mandate of the Servant King still stands. He still calls for servants, for those who will serve him by serving the world.

Mission in its wholeness. My fourth and final point, which draws this chapter to its conclusion and also prepares the way for the next chapter, takes us back once more to those Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah. The "career" of the Servant is described with a tantalizing mixture of explicit detail and reserve. The climax, of course, comes with his violent suffering and death and triumphant vindication in Isaiah 53.

But it is in Isaiah 42 that we find the greatest detail regarding the actual purpose, character and goal of the Servant's mission. The strongest emphasis in the opening verses is on his mission of *bringing justice to the nations.* In fact the nations are described as waiting for him to bring the law (*Torah*) and justice (*mishpat*) of God to them. In other words, the Servant has the task of making real to the rest of humanity the whole package of ethical values and social priorities that God had entrusted to Israel. Being a "light to the nations" includes this moral teaching dimension as well as the extending of the saving light of the covenant. The same picture, though with a different movement (the nations come to Zion, rather than the Servant going to the nations) is found in Isaiah 2:2-5. As the song in Isaiah 42:1-9 continues, this fundamental mission of justice is augmented by *compassion, enlightenment and liberation.* Justice and gentleness. Healing and wholeness. The picture is very rich indeed.

Now, if we accept the unity and continuity of the servant mission—from Israel, through the prophetic Servant, in the life and death of Jesus and then on to the mission of the church—then we have to see these as important dimensions of our mission as a whole. Christian mission, if it is true to the whole biblical pattern, cannot be confined to verbal proclamation alone. The mission of the Servant included justice, compassion, enlightenment and

liberation. Jesus included these objectives in his self-definition in Luke 4:18-21.

Yet it is clear that in his own lifetime he did not complete the task entrusted to the Servant of bringing the law and justice of God to the nations. Is it not then surely the case that these are aspects of the mission that he has entrusted to his servant church—those who, being "in Christ," are commanded to carry forward "all that he began to do and to teach"? Essential to the Great Commission are Jesus' words, "teaching them to *obey* all that I have commanded you." He did not merely say "teach them all that I have taught you," as if discipleship were purely cerebral—all the stuff we need to teach and learn about the Christian faith. It is a matter of *obeying* what Christ *commanded* (which included plenty about mercy, compassion, justice, love, practical service, care for the needy, forgiveness, etc.), and then discipling others into the same pattern of practical obedience.

But what did Jesus himself understand by these words? What were the moral values and priorities of Jesus? That is what we shall turn to in the next chapter. What we have seen in this one is that the Old Testament set forth a mission—a mission Jesus accepted as the driving aim of his own life and then entrusted to his followers.

Chapter 4 Questions and Exercises

1. Think about the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. List points of similarity and contrast. In what ways did Old Testament expectations influence their preaching and teaching?
2. In the light of the Old Testament, how would you answer the question, What was Jesus aiming to do in his life and ministry?
3. How would you explain to someone what it means to call Jesus "Messiah," "Son of Man" and "Servant of the LORD?" For each of these three concepts, which Old Testament and New Testament texts would you connect? What are the practical implications for each of these titles for us as we follow Jesus? Particularly, when we think about the mission of Jesus, what does it mean for our mission today?

4. Study Luke’s account of Paul in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:13-52. Pay particular attention to Paul’s sermon in Acts 13:16-41. What would you say is its main point? How would you describe Paul’s understanding of Jesus in the light of the Old Testament Scriptures?

- 5 -

Jesus and His Old Testament Values

Matthew 3 ends with Jesus, still dripping from his baptism in the Jordan, basking under an open heaven in the loving approval of his Father, sealed by the visible sign of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 4 is an abrupt contrast. The chapter divisions in our Bible were not originally part of Matthew's writing, so he just went straight on from the words in Matthew 3:17, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased," to say, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread'" (Mt 4:1-3).

Jesus Tested in the Wilderness

"*If you are the Son of God . . . "* The very words show the force of the struggle Jesus went through in the wilderness. Was he really sure who he was? Shouldn't he just prove it to himself before testing it out on others? And if he really was the Son of God, then the mission and responsibility that now lay on his shoulders were immense. Could he face up to the implications?

What did it mean to be the Son of God? Jesus had, in a sense, taken on the *identity* of Israel as the Davidic messianic king. And he had, in another sense, taken on the *mission* of Israel as the Servant of God. And therefore

he had also taken on the *responsibility* of Israel—the obligations and commitment of covenant loyalty to God himself. *Jesus* must live as God had wanted *Israel* to live. He must obey where it had rebelled. He must succeed where it had failed. His identity was not to be just a matter of labels or titles or honors. It was to be lived out in the total orientation of his life toward God through his values, priorities, convictions, teaching, actions and relationships. It is those values and teachings that we want to explore in this chapter.

Where did he turn for the resources to face such a challenge? Where else but to his Bible? Jesus met and deflected each of Satan's temptations with a word of Scripture. However, this was far from any superficial "rent-a-reference" technique. The intense struggles with the meaning of his personal identity and future mission could not be evaded with a casual quote. It is clear that Jesus was meditating deeply on his Bible. In fact, the struggle he was enduring in the wilderness was partly created, partly solved, by what he found there. In this chapter we shall be looking at how Jesus was molded and formed in his values and in the priorities and principles of his life and teaching by the Hebrew Scriptures. We shall look particularly at how the teaching of Jesus reflected the Old Testament Law, the Prophets and the Psalms. Let's begin, however, with the Scriptures Jesus quoted in reply to the devil during his struggle in the wilderness.

One particular section of the Old Testament seems to have been the focus of Jesus' attention during those forty days of solitude. All three of his replies to the devil are drawn from two chapters in the first part of Deuteronomy (Deut 8:3; 6:13, 16). What special significance did Jesus find there?

The book of Deuteronomy presents itself to us as four great speeches of Moses to the Israelites. They had reached the eastern side of the River Jordan after the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, immediately before they would cross over the Jordan to conquer the land of Canaan. It was a critical moment for them—the end of one period and the beginning of the next.

For Jesus, too, the obscure safety of life as a village carpenter had come to an end. He had crossed his Jordan, leaving the wilderness of being unknown and setting out on a public and costly mission. The same crowds with whom he had mingled anonymously around John the Baptist would

soon be surging around Jesus, hungry for his bread and then for his blood. The Israelites had heard from Moses a rallying call to uncompromising loyalty to God. Forty years of testing in the wilderness were brought to an end with a rousing word of encouragement to face the challenge ahead. No wonder Jesus turned to those words of Moses as he wrestled with the cost of obedience. Imagine him, the Son of God, hungry and exhausted after forty days of struggle in the desert, reading or recalling these words:

> Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you. (Deut 8:2-5)

"This is my beloved Son . . . "
"As a son, the LORD your God disciplines you . . . "
"*If you are the Son of God . . . ,*" then why be hungry?
" . . . feeding you with manna . . . "
If God fed Israel, why not ask him to feed you . . . *if* you're his Son?

Was this the whirling confusion of thought in the mind of Jesus within which he recognized the testing, seductive voice of the enemy who would dog his steps all the way to Gethsemane?

But the thrust of the ancient word of Scripture cleared away the fog. *Why* had God let Israel be hungry and then fed them? To teach the people dependence, not on bread but on God himself and on God's promise. God gave Israel food to show it there was something more important than food —namely, faith in God's word. Later on, Jesus would do the same for the crowds, though even his disciples would be slow to grasp the point (Jn 6). But for the present, he had the word that came from the mouth of his Father; bread could wait.

The Father God can be trusted to know the needs of his people and meet them. Jesus found this truth in his Scriptures, proved it in the testing of his own experience and was very soon teaching it to his followers. A life oriented toward God is free from anxiety and faithless worry, not because food and clothes don't matter, but because (a) there are things that matter more and (b) God knows we need them. The radical earthiness of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:25-34 shifts the whole life perspective of the children of God. It comes as a shaft of light out of Deuteronomy, refracted through the personal testimony of Jesus himself.

The devil learns fast. He is not very original, but he picks up the game. If Scripture is to be quoted, he can join in. And if the identity and mission of Christ is the issue, he can even show his hermeneutical skills by applying Scripture in a Christ-centered way. If Jesus believes he is called to a mission to Israel (and *if*, of course, he is the Son of God), then let him try the miracle option. Jump from the temple, the place where God is and the crowds are. Better even than the charity option of bread for the masses, a spectacular demonstration of his superpowers and of God's special protection of his person from harm would surely convince the crowds of his credentials. You need a verse? Try Psalm 91:11-12. Soft landings guaranteed.

Again, Jesus replies with a Scripture, which goes to the heart of proper response to God and exposes the superficiality of Satan's suggestions. The promise of God's protection in Psalm 91 was for the humble and obedient worshiper, not for the stuntman. The right attitude to God was to trust in that protection when it would be needed, not to test it out beforehand, to see whether God really meant it. There are circumstances when a desire for something spectacular or for a miracle is a sign of unbelief, not faith, and Jesus spotted such a trap here. So he parries Satan's misapplication of a Scripture with a direct command given by Moses in the light of Israel's complaints: "Do not put the LORD your God to the test" (Deut 6:16). And in any case, as we saw so clearly in the last chapter, Jesus saw that the path ahead of him led through rejection, suffering, physical crushing and finally death. He held no certificate of immunity from the laws of God or the laws of gravity. And he certainly would not buy Satan's spurious promise, even signed with a psalm.

Finally (for the moment), Satan tries the political option. No record of a prooftext this time, but maybe he was using the thought implanted from the Father's voice with its echo of Psalm 2:7. "You are my Son; today I have become your father."

And how does the Psalm go on?

> Ask me,
> and I will make the nations your inheritance,
> the ends of the earth your possession. (Ps 2:8)

"Ask of *whom*, Jesus?" whispered Satan. "If the world is your mission, why take the slow road, the hard road, the Servant's road, the Father's road? There is a much quicker route to the messianic kingdom, surely, and the crowds back there will help you take it—make you take it, even. Why disappoint them and destroy yourself? Do as I say and you will have the world at your feet."

This time Jesus' reply went right to the roots of the faith of Israel: "Fear the LORD your God, serve him only." That text (Deut 6:13-14) goes on, "Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God." Popularity is no proof of deity. Since there is only one living God, he is to be loved and obeyed exclusively, no matter how many or how attractive are the apparent alternatives. Jesus' Jewish "creed" would have been echoing in his heart, since it comes just a few verses before the one he used to dismiss Satan. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6:4-5).

Monotheism is a fighting faith. One Lord, one love, one loyalty. That was supposed to have been the defining characteristic of God's people, Israel. But for centuries the virus of endemic human idolatry had lain in its bloodstream and erupted with a regularity that astonished prophets and historians. Jesus took up the fight again, with an uncompromising affirmation of the faith of Moses as his own. When he was tested in the wilderness like Israel (God's firstborn son, Ex 4:22), Jesus the Son of God committed his human life to the full personal and moral consequences of

Israel's monotheistic faith and worship. In his humanity, Jesus would bow down to nobody and nothing else.

So then, in the temptation narrative we see Jesus using his Hebrew Scriptures to define and affirm the whole orientation of his life toward God. He was meditating on those chapters of Deuteronomy, which preach the fundamental attitudes and commitments that God expects from his people as their side of the covenant relationship (Deut 4–11). These chapters of basic orientation come *before* the details of the laws themselves. God was concerned not about mere conformity to laws but about the whole shape of a person and society, the inner drives of the heart, the direction of the walk of life. And in wrestling with the future direction of his own calling, Jesus accepts that the values, priorities and convictions of his life on earth must be shaped by the words of Moses to Israel, words in which he heard the voice of his Father God as surely as he did when he stepped out of the Jordan.

So let us think about those chapters that meant so much to Jesus.

The basic orientation of life before God: Deuteronomy 4–11. It would be well worth taking a pause to read Deuteronomy 4–11. As you do, try to imagine its impact on Jesus as he meditated on it alone in the wilderness. Notice some of the key themes that occur again and again as Moses preaches from the heart to the heart. The repeated command is to obey God's laws wholeheartedly, since that is the way to life and blessing for a people who have already experienced God's redemption. Grace comes first, and obedience is the right response.

Notice the stress on the uniqueness of Israel's historical experience, and how it was designed to impress on it the uniqueness of its God, Yahweh, and so lead it to healthy living before him (Deut 4:32-40). Notice the scale of values and priorities embedded in the Ten Commandments (Deut 5:1-22), a sense of what matters most that influenced the teaching of Jesus greatly. We shall look at this later.

There are warnings about how dangerous it would be when the people would move from the years of manna in the wilderness to the plentiful bounty of the land. Wealth can lead people to forget God even while they are enjoying the blessings of God, especially material abundance (Deut 6:10-12; 8:6-18). One of the sharpest edges of the teaching of Jesus was precisely on the dangers of wealth. The parable of the rich fool

immortalizes the challenging teaching of Deuteronomy 8:17-18. But then these warnings about the danger of wealth are balanced with warnings about the danger of forgetting or doubting God in times of need and hardship (Deut 6:16; 8:1-5), which likewise find an echo in Jesus' teaching about positive faith in God's providence.

Flattery is the mark of a false prophet. Neither Moses nor Jesus had any time for it. On the contrary, both made a point of popping the balloons of arrogance that Israel blew up for itself when they boasted about how God had chosen it and redeemed it. Three times in three chapters Moses disillusioned Israel of any idea that it could claim some credit for its remarkable history. It was not because of *numerical* superiority, as if it were some great nation. Far from it. "The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you" (Deut 7:7-8).

It was not because of *economic* superiority, as if Israel could boast of its own productive abilities. Any such ability came from God in the first place. "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth" (Deut 8:17-18).

And it was not because of any *moral* superiority, as if Israel could boast of its own righteousness over against the wickedness of their enemies. "Do not say to yourself, 'The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.' No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity . . . for you are a stiff-necked people" (Deut 9:4-6).

The fact was that if any nation had deserved to be destroyed it was Israel, and on at least two occasions only the intercession of Moses had stood between it and such a fate (Deut 9:7-29). No, the historical report card of Israel was nothing to take home with pride. The devastating use that Jesus made of Israel's history in some of his parables (e.g., the tenants of the vineyard), along with the threat of impending destruction, was one of

the most controversial elements in his teaching, which led directly to the official plot on his life.

Many of the parables of Jesus are about the sharpness of choice and decision. Wheat or weeds, sheep or goats, wise or foolish, rock or sand, God or money. They are full of contrasts between one kind of behavior or attitude and another. Jesus leaves no middle ground for the apathetic. You could not just shrug your shoulders or "sit on the fence," as the English proverb puts it. You either followed him or you walked away. The same kind of moral and spiritual stark choices characterize Deuteronomy. You either love God or you hate him (Deut 7:9-10). You prove any profession of love in practical obedience. Any other way of life is to hate him. Indifference is practical hatred. And so too the consequences of our choices are simple: blessing or curse. Moses lays it out before the people with literally monumental clarity. He identifies whole mountains with one or the other (Deut 11:26-32; 27:1-26)! The closing chapters of Deuteronomy portray this choice with evangelistic zeal:

> See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live. . . .
>
> This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life. (Deut 30:15-16, 19-20)

Simple obedience. There is a basic simplicity about the moral teaching of Jesus that reflects the same kind of simplicity that we find in the Old Testament. I do not mean, of course, that obedience is *easy*. There is a commitment, a cost, a challenge. There is precisely the struggle against tempting alternatives that Jesus himself faced and recognized as idolatrous and satanic. What I *do* mean is that obedience ought not to be *complicated*, either by the competing claims of other gods (the moral maze of polytheism) or by the confusing rules of human experts (the moral bondage of legalism). When you read the Gospels you can see that the common

people heard Jesus gladly and responded to his invitation to enter the kingdom of God not because he made things *easy* (quite the opposite) but because he made them *simple*.

Matthew found that he could summarize the preaching of Jesus in four terse phrases: “The time is fulfilled,” “the kingdom of God is at hand,” “repent” and “believe the good news.” Each of them, of course, like the label on a filing cabinet drawer, points to a whole array of content inside. But there is a memorable simplicity. Jesus himself could summarize the whole law in two fundamental commandments—to love God and to love one’s neighbor. His so-called Golden Rule—“Do to others as you would have them do to you”—was not a revolutionary bright idea of his own. He clearly says that it sums up the Law and the Prophets. It expresses the simple essence of the Old Testament.

Jesus treated his Scriptures not as a maze in which every alley has to be explored whether it leads anywhere or not, but as a map on which every feature is there to help you plan a journey with a clear sense of direction and a single destination.

It is important that we hold on to that essential simplicity, because one of the complaints many folk have about the Old Testament law is that it appears so complicated and detailed that any serious attention to it seems bound to land you in legalism. However, once you get your *orientation* right, as Jesus did through his testing in the wilderness and his meditation on the challenge of Deuteronomy, it is possible to have a clarity and simplicity in the fundamental values and priorities of the law.

That is what we find in the teaching of Jesus. It was not just a *repetition* of all the laws, like a shopping list. Nor was it a *new* law that replaced the original. Rather, he restored the true perspective and essential *point* of the law. He brought back the urgent appeal of Moses for a single-minded, uncomplicated loyalty to God himself. “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?” (Deut 10:12-13).

So let us turn to see some of the values in the Old Testament law that are then reflected in the teaching of Jesus.

Jesus and the Law

Jesus said very emphatically that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17-20). So we shall survey some of the major features of the law and see how they are reflected in the values and teaching of Jesus.

The law as response to grace. The very first thing we must do in looking for an understanding of the law in the Old Testament is to observe where it comes from. As we saw in chapter one, it comes in the context of a story. Before we face the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, we have had a book and a half of narrative. And we have also seen in chapter one how it is a story of God's relationship with his people, through the family of Abraham and then with the nation in Egypt. It is a story of constant blessing, protection, promise and fulfillment, reaching its climax in the great act of liberation—the exodus. It is the story, in other words, of God's grace in action.

Before God gave Israel his law, he gave them himself as their redeemer. So when he finally gets them to the foot of Mount Sinai, he opens the whole proceedings of law and covenant with the words, "You yourselves have seen *what I did to Egypt*, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant . . . " (Ex 19:4-5, my italics).

That was true. Only three months before, the people had been making bricks as slaves in Egypt. Now they were free. The long trudge through the wilderness might have raised some objections over the idea that they had been carried on "eagles' wings," but they were certainly out of Egypt, liberated from "the house of bondage." And it was God who had taken the initiative in getting them out. In God's grace and in faithfulness to his covenant promise, he had acted first and redeemed them. He had not sent Moses with the Ten Commandments under his cloak to tell Israel that if it would keep the law, God would save it. Precisely the other way around. He saved it and then asked it to keep his law in response.

So the law was given to Israel in the context of a redemptive relationship that had already been established by God's grace. The law was never intended as a means of *achieving* salvation but rather as guidance for *responding* to salvation by living in a way that pleased the God who had saved you. That is why the Ten Commandments begin with a statement, not

a command. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex 20:2).

That is why, when an Israelite son asked his father what the law *meant*, the answer was a story—the old, old story of God’s saving love and deliverance. The very meaning of the law was to be found in the gospel.

> In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. . . . He brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land he promised on oath to our ancestors. The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.” (Deut 6:20-25)

“*Our* righteousness,” indeed—but only in response to God’s righteousness. God’s righteousness was demonstrated in the exodus. Israel’s righteousness was their “right” response. Obedience flows from grace; it does not buy it. Obedience is the fruit and proof and sustenance of a relationship with the God you already know.

The same priority of relationship with God over the details of behavior is found in the teaching of Jesus. When Matthew introduces us to Jesus as teacher in his great Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7, he shows how before Jesus got down to detailed questions about actual behavior, he sketched a portrait of the happiness that comes from a character oriented to God. The beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12) are not laws; they are *descriptions* of a quality of life lived in relation to God, life within the kingdom of God, life as a disciple of Jesus himself. The beatitudes deal with a person’s attitudes, stance, commitments, relationships, priorities and loyalties. Blessedness flows from having all these dimensions of our lives centered on God. The good deeds that will then *follow* will result in praise, not for oneself but for God the Father from whom such “light” comes (Mt 5:16).

Jesus’ urgent announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God (which we shall look at later) and his call to people to enter it also point to

this priority of getting one's life into a right relationship with God in order to be able to please him. His portrayals of God as the generous father, the waiting and forgiving father, the generous vineyard owner, the creditor who releases an enormous debt, all speak of the priority of grace. He taught that obedience flows from love. That was true for himself (Jn 14:31) and for his followers (Jn 14:15; 15:9-17). And he taught, in our case, that such love flows from the grace of being forgiven (Lk 7:36-50). With characteristic simplicity he stated the fundamental priority: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:33).

Jesus' attitude to the law, then, was explicitly not to reject it but to show that keeping the law was not the only thing that mattered; the real priority was knowing God himself. There is much in the life and teaching of Jesus that reflects the ethos of Psalm 119. The writer of that psalm rejoices in the law, certainly, but rejoices more in the richness of relationship with God and sees that relationship expressed and enjoyed through diligent obedience to God's word. In fact, the psalmist swings back and forth between his wonder at the promise, the grace, the goodness, love and salvation of God and his determination to live according to God's law. He delights in the law because it enables him to please the God he loves. Obedience to God flows from gratitude for grace—in both Old and New Testaments.

> *You* are my portion, LORD;
> I have promised to obey *your words*.
> I have sought *your face* with all my heart;
> be gracious to me according to *your promise*.
> I have considered my ways
> and have turned my steps to *your statutes*.
> I will hasten and not delay
> to obey *your commands*. . . .
> The earth is filled with *your love*, LORD
> teach me *your decrees*. (Ps 119:57-60, 64, my italics)

Motivations for obedience. A distinctive feature of Old Testament law is the common "motive clause." These are phrases that are added to particular laws giving reasons or motives why people should keep those

laws. Such motive clauses are particularly common in Deuteronomy, because that book has a preaching style in which encouragement and motivation are natural. But they are not confined to that book and can be found in Exodus and Leviticus also. The effect of them is to show that God was not merely concerned with external or mechanical obedience to rules for their own sake but wanted to instill an ethos of intelligent and willing moral behavior in Israel.

Some of the characteristic motivations and incentives that we find in Old Testament law are also reflected in the teachings of Jesus, showing how authentically he recaptured the ethos and point of the Torah. The following four points of motivation in Old Testament law should sound familiar to us when we remember the sayings of Jesus.

(1) Gratitude for what God has done. This follows naturally from our previous point about the law being set in the context of the story of God's redemption of his people. In the light of all that God had done for his people, how should they respond? Sheer gratitude should trigger obedience out of a desire to please the God of such faithfulness and salvation. The God who loved Israel's forefathers enough to rescue their descendants from slavery is the God who should be loved in return, with a covenant love expressed in obedience. "We love because he first loved us" is not an Old Testament text, but it echoes the heartbeat of Old Testament ethics—as does its sequel that if we love God we must love our brother (1 Jn 4:17-21).

This motive of gratitude for what God had actually done in liberating his people from oppression surfaces most often, as might be expected, when the law is dealing with how Israelites were to treat vulnerable people in their own society—the poor, the stranger, the debtor, the slave. These were the very conditions from which God had rescued Israel, so its behavior toward such people should, in gratitude, be correspondingly generous. Notice in each of the following examples how the command to compassionate and generous behavior is based on Israel's own past experience.

> Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. (Ex 22:21)

> Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt. (Ex 23:9)
>
> When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God . . . who brought you out of Egypt. (Lev 19:33-36)
>
> If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so that they can continue to live among you. . . . You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God. (Lev 25:35, 37-38)
>
> Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. (Lev 25:42)
>
> If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites . . . do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. . . . When you release them [the debtor-slave after six years], do not send them away empty-handed. Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the LORD your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today. (Deut 15:7-8, 13-15)

The clearest example of this motivation in the teaching of Jesus comes in the parable of the ungrateful debtor (Mt 18:21-35). The mercy displayed by the king in forgiving an enormous debt ought to have generated a grateful response in the forgiven servant. He then ought to have shown his gratitude by forgiving the trivial debt owed to him. Mercy received should lead to mercy offered. Israel, of all people, should have known this. As can be seen from the laws above, a people whose very historical existence and

survival proved the merciful grace and favor of God should know how to act toward the needy out of gratitude for what God had done for them.

The parable of Jesus ends on a sober note of warning, which also reflects the influence of the law. For the passages about generosity and behavior based on gratitude were not just cheerful recommendations—"It would be really rather nice if you could all be kind to each other." They were an integral part of a whole covenant law that was sanctioned by God's threatened judgment of disobedience. It is a feature of the Torah that *love is commanded*. In other words, while it certainly has an emotional dimension, love is not merely an emotion. Love is an act of the will, which is demonstrated in obeying God's commands. The same is true with gratitude. Of course it has an emotional dimension—the book of Psalms overflows with the emotion of thanksgiving. But the behavior that gratitude motivates is commanded. It is not just an optional preference for the more sensitive souls.

So Jesus portrays the painful destiny of the unmerciful debtor to make the point that mutual forgiveness is not a nice thing for the soft-hearted but an essential mandate of the King on those who submit to the reign of God. Their behavior to one another must prove the genuineness of their gratitude to the God of incredible, unbounded forgiveness.

There is an interesting reflection of this feature of the law in the teaching of the Wisdom literature. In the book of Proverbs there is a lot about compassionate attitudes and actions toward *the poor*. These sayings are linked to our response *to God*. In this case, it is not so much God as redeemer to whom we should prove our gratitude by generosity to others but rather God as Creator, to whom we are accountable for our treatment of any human being made in his image. Some characteristic texts include:

> Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,
> but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. (Prov 14:31)
> Whoever mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker. (Prov 17:5)
> Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,
> and he will reward them for what they have done. (Prov 19:17)
> Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor
> will also cry out and not be answered. (Prov 21:13)

> The righteous care about justice for the poor,
> but the wicked have no such concern. (Prov 29:7)

It seems that Jesus had imbibed this flavor of the Wisdom tradition in some of his teaching specifically about the poor: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:31-46).

(2) Imitation of what God is like. The way God had acted on behalf of Israel was to provide not merely the motive for ethical obedience but also the model for it. The law was meant to enable Israel to be like Yahweh, its God. His character and behavior were to be its moral example.

A favorite expression in the Old Testament for how one ought to live is "walking in the way of the LORD." Israel was called to walk in God's way, as distinct from the ways of other gods, or of other nations (2 Kings 17:15), or one's own way (Is 53:6), or the way of sinners (Ps 1:1). Right at the start, God had chosen Abraham for the explicit purpose that he and his descendants should "walk in the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice" (Gen 18:19). The idea of imitation is strong. You observe what God characteristically does and then follow suit. As John Bode's hymn ("Oh Jesus, I Have Promised") puts it, "O let me see thy footsteps and in them plant my own."

We saw above how Moses includes among his fundamental requirements of God that Israel should "walk in obedience to him" (Deut 10:12). The literal Hebrew is: "walk in all his ways." Almost as if someone had asked him what "the ways of the LORD" are, he goes on to explain:

> The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And *you are to love those who are foreigners*, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. (Deut 10:17-19, my italics)

Israel's social behavior was to be modeled on the character of God in all its richness. It must love others as God had loved it, when it was needy

foreigners in a strange land or homeless wanderers in the wilderness. It must do for others what God had done for it.

This principle is expressed at its simplest at the beginning of Leviticus 19. “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2).

We might think that “holiness” in the Old Testament was only a matter of ritual practices, food laws and all the symbolic details of Israel’s religion. But read the rest of Leviticus 19. It is quite clear that being holy did not mean what we might call being extra-specially religious. In fact only very few of the laws in the chapter are about religious rituals. Rather, it shows that the kind of holiness God has in mind, the kind that reflects God’s own holiness, is thoroughly practical and down to earth. Look at the details of Leviticus 19. Holiness means:

- generosity to the poor when you get returns on your agricultural investments (Lev 19:9-10; cf. Deut 24:19);
- fair treatment and payment of employees (Lev 19:13; cf. Deut 24:14);
- practical compassion for the disabled and respect for the elderly (Lev 19:14, 32; cf. Deut 27:18);
- the integrity of the judicial process (Lev 19:15; cf. Deut 16:18-20);
- safety precautions to prevent endangering life (Lev 19:16; cf. Deut 22:8);
- ecological sensitivity (Lev 19:23-25; cf. Deut 20:19-20);
- equality before the law for ethnic minorities (Lev 19:33-34; cf. Deut 24:17); and
- honesty in trade and business (Lev 19:35-36; cf. Deut 25:13-16).

We call such matters “social ethics” or “human rights” and think we are very modern and civilized for doing so. We go to great lengths to get them written pompously into declarations for this and charters for that and codes for something else. God just calls them “holiness.” All through this chapter runs the refrain, “I am the LORD,” as if to say, “You must behave this way because this is what I would do. Imitate me.”

In short, to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18, 34) is not a revolutionary new love ethic invented by Jesus. It was the fundamental ethical demand of Old Testament holiness, which Jesus reaffirmed and sharpened in some cases.

Leviticus 19, in fact, appears to have had a major influence on the teaching of Jesus (and is incidentally also strongly formative in the ethics of the letter of James). But whereas Jesus' contemporaries thought that holiness required strict religious purity and a protective separateness in national life, Jesus chose to emphasize its ethical thrust, particularly as regards compassionate and caring relationships.

Scholars who have studied most closely the conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees in particular point out that the clash was not merely about sincerity and hypocrisy, or about internal and external obedience, or anything so simple. Jesus utterly shared with the Pharisees the consuming desire that God's people should be holy. He shared with them too a deep love for the Torah and the assumption that the way to holiness was to be found there in God's revelation. He also shared the dominant motivation of imitation of God as the energizing force for moral behavior.

But whereas they pursued a program of holiness that demanded *performance* of the ritual requirements of the law to near perfection, a holiness that was characterized by *exclusion*—whether of Jews who failed or refused to live that way or of the Gentile nations in general and the Romans in particular—Jesus introduced a complete paradigm shift in the meaning of holiness itself. Imitation of God for him pointed primarily to the other characteristics of God he found in the Torah: the God who was the benevolent Creator and provider for all humanity and even for the creatures; the God of merciful deliverance and incredible grace in forgiveness; the God whose love embraced especially the outcasts and whose covenant with Abraham was specifically for the blessing of the nations. In other words, Jesus defined holiness more in terms of God's mercy and called for an imitative mercy on the part of all who would submit to his reign.

The transforming power and radical shift of behavior patterns that Jesus brought with this teaching are clearly seen in his famous "love your enemies" challenge. Notice how the motivation Jesus uses is indeed the imitation of God—the God of grace and mercy. Notice also how Jesus echoes Leviticus 19:2 but understands holiness as the perfection of loving mercy in the most earthy and practical ways.

> But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who

> mistreat you [that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous, Mt 5:45]. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.
>
> If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. . . . And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. [Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect, Mt 5:48.] *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.* (Lk 6:27-32, 34-36 my italics)

(3) Being different. The word holy, then, does not mean especially and rigorously religious. What it actually does mean, essentially, is "different." It speaks of something or someone being distinctive, set apart and separate. It is the fundamental description of God himself precisely because he is different—utterly "other" than anything or anyone in the created world. In many contexts in the Old Testament, the holiness of Yahweh is contrasted with the idols of the nations. Yahweh is the living God, the *Holy One* of Israel, the God who is utterly different. For Israel, then, being the people of Yahweh meant being different too. When God said "You shall be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy," what it meant, colloquially, was "You must be a different kind of people because I am a different kind of God."

When God got Israel to Mount Sinai, the first thing he impressed on it, as we saw above, was *his own* initiative in delivering it from Egypt. The second thing he stressed was what he had in mind for *it*. "Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:5-6).

Israel would be a nation among other nations, but they were to be holy —different from the rest of the nations. This had very practical implications, whether they looked back to where they had left or looked forward to where they were going.

> You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. (Lev 18:3)

> You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own. (Lev 20:26)

Even the foreigner Balaam recognized this conscious sense of distinctiveness about Israel:

> I see a people who live apart
> and do not consider themselves one of the nations. (Num 23:9)

This could sound like the most awful snobbishness. But that would be to misunderstand it entirely. Israel was not to regard itself as better than the nations out of self-righteous pride (as we saw above). Rather, by reflecting the character of their God, it was to be a light to the nations—a light witnessing to the moral values of God himself. Switching on the light in a dark place is not arrogant. It's common sense. God created Israel to be a light in a dark world. But a light is only seen if it shines, and in the same way, Israel would only be seen through its practical obedience to God's law. Then its visibility would raise questions about the God it worshiped and about the social quality of life it exhibited. This is exactly what is in mind in the motivational words of Deuteronomy 4:6-8:

> Observe [these laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding *to the nations*, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

If Israel would live by God's standards of social justice and compassion, then it would indeed be "light" to the nations (Is 58:6-10, where "light" is mentioned twice and linked to "righteousness").

It is a short step to the familiar words of Jesus to his disciples about the exemplary quality of their lives and its effect on the observers around us: "You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:14-16; cf. 1 Pet 2:12).

And there is also a clear call from Jesus to be different. He pointed to the familiar patterns of relationship and ambition in pagan society and said, "You are not to be like that" (Lk 22:25-30; Mt 5:46-48; 6:31-34). He also pointed to the very best of religious uprightness among their fellow Jews and told his disciples they must be and do differently even from that (Mt 5:20; 6:1-8).

(4) For our own good. In the Old Testament, obedience to the law was not just an arbitrary duty, "because rules is rules." A frequent motivation is the encouraging assurance that it is for our own good. This is the thrust of the exhortations in Deuteronomy. "The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, *so that we might always prosper and be kept alive*" (Deut 6:24, and see also Deut 4:40; 5:33; 30:15-20, etc.).

The assumption behind this kind of motivation is that God, as the creator of human beings, knows best what kind of social patterns will contribute to human well-being. His laws were not meant to be negatively restricting but rather to provide the conditions in which life can be most truly humane and beneficial—in that culture and at that time. Obedience therefore brings blessing not as a reward but as an intrinsic, natural result, just as physical health is not some kind of bonus or reward for good behavior. Good health is simply the natural product of sensible living the way our bodies were designed to.

Another way of looking at this, and in any case an illuminating exercise, is to apply the question "Who benefits?" to the range of social legislation in the Torah. Whose interests are being protected? What kind of vulnerability is being cared for? The answer so often is found to be that the law is benefiting the weaker, poorer, defenseless categories of people in Israel's

community: the debtor, the slave, the homeless widow or orphan, the landless worker, prisoners of war, women and children, refugees.

It is very important to see that the law was given for people's sake, not for God's sake. Of course it is true that our obedience makes God happy. But the purpose of the law was not to make *him* happy, but *us*. That is what the psalmists recognized when they exclaim things like "O how I love your law," or say they prefer it to gold or honey. They could see that obedience to God's law, far from being the dry crust of stale legalism we might imagine, was actually the surest route to personal fulfillment and satisfaction, genuine freedom, and social harmony and prosperity. The law was a gift of grace, a blessing, a treasure, one of the many great privileges God had entrusted to Israel—for its own good and then for the blessing of the rest of humanity.

Jesus, in tune with this whole ethos of the Torah, was enraged by the way the legal experts of his day had turned the law from its prime purpose of being a blessing and a benefit into being a burden on ordinary people. We must note carefully that Jesus did not condemn or reject the law itself. Nor did he condemn the scribes and Pharisees for their love and passion for the law. In fact, he said that insofar as they taught what Moses taught, they were to be obeyed, but not imitated (Mt 23:2-3). What his penetrating observations exposed, however, was the way that detailed passion had robbed the law of its whole point.

What was the point of having a law for the benefit of parents, if the regulations built on top of it worked in the opposite direction (Mk 7:9-13)? What was the point of having laws about tithing, whose prime purpose was to provide justice and compassionate welfare for the poor (Deut 14:28-29), if they became so meticulous in detail that the major issues of justice and mercy were neglected (Mt 23:23)? Above all, what was the point of having a Sabbath law explicitly for human need, if it was turned into a reason for neglecting or postponing human need?

The Sabbath controversy is most interesting, partly because it was clearly a major and long-running issue between Jesus and those who opposed him, but mainly, for our purpose here, because it illustrates beautifully how Jesus "saw the point" of the law in a way which his opponents so often seemed to miss.

The Sabbath law in the Ten Commandments is given in two different forms. In Exodus 20:8-11, its theological basis is the creation account in Genesis 1 and God's own Sabbath rest after creation. In Deuteronomy 5:12-15 it is based on the fact of God's redemption of Israel from Egypt. But in both cases the *beneficiaries* of the law are listed carefully and include all domestic workers, male and female slaves, foreign workers in the community and even working domestic animals. Yes, the Sabbath was a holy day *for the Lord.* But it was also social legislation *for the benefit of the whole of society*, with particular emphasis on those most easily exploited. Indeed, Deuteronomy adds the revealing touch "so that they may rest as you do." The Sabbath was not to be a day for the leisure of a few supported by the continuing toil of the many. I believe it was Harold Macmillan, former British prime minister, who described the Old Testament Sabbath law as "the greatest piece of workers' protection legislation in history." Exodus, likewise, puts the Sabbath law as the climax of a series of laws for the benefit of the poor—in the law courts, in social life generally and in agricultural practice (Ex 23:1-12).

Jesus, then, when the Pharisees objected to his disciples in satisfying their hunger on the Sabbath or protested at his own deliberate acts of healing on the Sabbath, very pointedly makes it clear that the Sabbath, far from being the day for avoiding such things, was precisely the best day for them (Mt 12:1-14; Mk 2:23-28). It was the day above all days for bringing blessing and healing. Yes, it was God's day—but it was given for human benefit.

So when Jesus summed it all up, in another of those sayings full of potent, memorable simplicity, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27), he was not propounding some new idea—even though it was radical and shocking in the atmosphere of disapproval and misunderstanding into which he spoke it. Rather, as in so much of what he said and did, he was recapturing the *original, authentic point and thrust of the law.* The priorities and values Jesus taught were the true heart of the law. The irony and tragedy of his conflict with the scribes and Pharisees was that it was precisely they who prided themselves on being the true guardians and teachers of the law in all its glory. So they thought. But in Jesus' estimation they had not only perverted the true purpose of the law but were also

preventing it from benefiting the very people it was given for (Mt 23:4, 13-14).

The law's scale of values. When one of the teachers of the law asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment in the law, it was a significant question. The rabbis of his day debated it (along with also debating which was the *least* important commandment in the law). For them, it was a somewhat academic question. The whole law in every detail was binding, so it didn't ultimately matter which detail was given pride of place. It must all be obeyed. When Jesus answered the question, however, with his famous double commandment, to love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself, he gave his answer a new twist at the end. "All the Law and the Prophets *hang* on these two commandments" (Mt 22:34-40, my italics). In other words, they are like the hook from which the rest of the Scriptures are suspended. They have a fundamental priority. They are the scale or criteria by which the rest should be ordered. They show you what really matters. Everything else is subordinate to these crucial two laws.

In Mark's account, the man responded to Jesus' answer with considerable insight about the scale of values in the law. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself *is more important than* all burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mk 12:32-33, my italics).

Jesus commended him by saying he was "not far from the kingdom of God." In other words, this inquirer's appreciation of priorities coincided with the way God himself operates. He shared the same value system that Jesus himself had discerned in the Hebrew Bible. For once again we have to be clear that this perception, expressed by both Jesus and this thoughtful teacher of the law, was not a clever new theory about Israel's law. It was only drawing out with clarity something the Old Testament itself had declared. So let us examine the priority scale we find there. In what ways does Old Testament law show what things are of greater or lesser importance?

(1) God comes first. It would be hard to miss this! The Ten Commandments make it very obvious by putting the three commandments related directly to God at the head of the list. In fact the order of the commandments in the Decalogue is revealing in itself as a clue to the

priorities of God's law. They begin with God and end with the inner thoughts of the heart. And yet in a sense, the first and the tenth correspond with each other, since covetousness puts other things or people in the place that God should occupy: "covetousness which is idolatry," as Paul said more than once (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5; cf. Lk 12:15-21).

After God and God's name comes the Sabbath, which, as we have seen, was for the benefit of the whole community, especially for workers. Then comes the family (respect for parents), individual life (no murder), marriage (no adultery), property (no theft) and the integrity of the judicial process (no perjury). God, society, family, individuals, sex, property. It is an order of values that Western culture has more or less completely reversed. The idolatry of consumerism puts material things, sexual freedom and selfish individualism way above the blessing and protection of family, or commitment to the common good of society, and has no place for God at all, other than in mockery or swearing.

The demand of putting God before all else could be costly. There is a sharp edge to biblical faith. Deuteronomy 13 is an interesting example of this. The chapter warns Israel against various subtle temptations to be drawn away from total loyalty to God into other forms of idolatry. Among the sources of such temptation it cites miracle-working religious leaders (Deut 13:1-5)—a modern enough phenomenon.

Then it goes on to an area that can produce the greatest tension of all—one's own family (Deut 13:6-11). The tension in these verses is all the more sharp when you remember how central the family was in Israel's life. The whole social structure of the nation was organized around kinship. The extended family unit (the household, or "father's house") was the basis of economic life as well as fundamental in the covenant relationship with God. In the law, every effort was made to protect the household and to preserve its economic well-being. Individuals got their primary sense of identity from the wider family, owed it loyalty and could face serious sanctions for spurning its authority.

But what do you do if your loyalty to God conflicts with your loyalty and love for your own closest family circle? What if the family itself becomes the source of idolatry? What if the family becomes a stumbling block in the way of complete loyalty to God? The dilemma is one that

believers have faced all through the ages and is still very real for some people today. Deuteronomy's answer was uncompromising.

So was Jesus. We can feel something of the starkness of this Old Testament text in the words of Jesus, warning his disciples that the claims of the reign of God must come before the family—and even one's own life. "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26). Jesus uses the word *hate* here, not in an emotional sense. He was not calling people to "hate" their families in the way that English word sounds. Rather he was saying that loyalty to Christ must come above all other loyalties—including love for one's own life.

Jesus himself had to resist the attempts of his own family to deflect him from obeying his calling (Mt 12:46-50), and he gave his famously abrupt answer to the one who wanted to fulfill family commitments before following Jesus (Mt 8:21-22).

Remember, all this comes from the same Jesus who berated the Pharisees for the way they nullified the law about honoring parents; the same Jesus who made arrangements for the care of his mother in the midst of his own death agonies. Jesus was *not* (as has sometimes been alleged) *anti-family.* He was *anti-idolatry*. And the family, when it takes the place of ultimate value in a person's life, when it stands in the way of a person's submission to the reign of God, when it hinders God's mission, becomes just as much an idol as any stone statue. God must come first. That can be painful and terribly costly. But many down the centuries have proved it is the way of true discipleship.

(2) Persons matter more than things. One of the most fundamental principles of Old Testament law is the sanctity of human life. Nothing (in the literal sense of *no thing*) is worth more than a person. This is not contradicted by the fact that a number of offenses were sanctioned by the death penalty. The reasons behind the death penalty in the Old Testament are complex but understandable. It was not just an indication of a vengeful, primitive society where life was cheap.

Broadly speaking the death penalty applied to two kinds of offense: those that directly offended God himself and those that threatened the stability of Israel as a covenant society. The first were "vertical" offences—issues like idolatry, blasphemy, prophesying falsely in God's name and so

on. The second were “horizontal”—affecting other persons, such as Sabbath breaking, intentional murder and acts that threatened the viability of families (rejection of parental authority, fracture of the sexual integrity of marriage and so on). All these capital offenses were connected in some way with the Ten Commandments. In fact, most (but not all) of the Ten Commandments were sanctioned by the death penalty through the details of other laws based on them. This shows the central place of the Decalogue in Israel’s law—even though there is very little evidence that execution actually ever happened for many of the offenses listed as capital. It is possible that in some cases execution was the “maximum penalty,” frequently reduced to other penalties in practice.

However, what is more interesting, but not often noticed, is what the death penalty did *not* apply to. In Israelite law no offense involving *property* carried a death penalty. This is referring to ordinary judicial procedure. Exceptional cases like Achan had to do with fundamental violations of the covenant in the context of war, not ordinary theft. Theft was, of course, treated seriously—as is clear from it being included in the Ten Commandments. But you could not be put to death for stealing in ancient Israel, which makes it a lot more “civilized” than most Western countries until fairly recently. The reason? No amount of material property was worth a human life. Life and property could not be measured against each other. However, *kidnapping*, the theft of a *person* (usually then sold into slavery), *was* a capital offense (Ex 21:16).

The other side of this coin is that deliberate murder was not to be punished by a mere fine. If someone stole another person’s *life*, he could not “get off” by paying any amount of *money*. Life and money could not be matched. The fact that the law specifies this point (in Num 35:31-34) in relation to the single issue of *intentional* murder makes it possible that the death penalty may have been commuted in other capital cases sometimes where life was not directly involved.

(3) Needs matter more than claims. The law of Israel, however, went further than showing the absolute value of human life in comparison with material things. It also puts human needs before claims and apparent legal rights. There is an ethos in the Torah that calls for an attitude of consideration for the needs and sensitivities of others, even in situations where you may have a legally legitimate claim. Here are a few examples.

(a) The runaway slave: We might feel that slaves, captives, debtors and poor people ought not to exist at all in an ideal society, and we'd be right. But given that human society is fallen and sinful, and that even in Israel such results of evil did in fact exist, it is very noticeable how Old Testament law tries to restrain the claims of the stronger party and attend to the needs of the weaker party in each case. "If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master. Let them live among you wherever they like and in whatever town they choose. Do not oppress them" (Deut 23:15-16).

This is an astonishing law. It cuts right across the whole grain of slave legislation in the ancient world (and indeed in modern times). The almost universal rule in societies that have had slaves is that runaway slaves were to be returned, under stiff penalties for them or anyone who sheltered them. Old Testament law swims against the stream and puts the needs of the slave above any legal "property" rights of his owner. In fact, this law undermines the whole institution of slavery. It is one of several places in the Old Testament where slaves are given human rights and dignity beyond anything in the world of that age (e.g., Ex 21:26-27; Deut 15:12-18; Job 31:13-15).

(b) The female captive: There was no Geneva Convention in the ancient world governing the treatment of prisoners of war. Little mercy was given or expected. Victorious armies especially prized women and girls. Once again, we find that the Old Testament law, on the one hand, starts with the realities of life. It acknowledges the harsh reality that prisoners are taken in wartime and some of them will be women. But on the other hand, the law tries to mitigate that harsh reality for such women, who are the most vulnerable and the most abused.

> When you go to war against your enemies and the LORD your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her *as your wife*. Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured. After she has lived in your house and *mourned* her father and mother *for a full month*, then you may go to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife. If you are not

> pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. *You must not sell her* or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her. (Deut 21:10-14, my italics)

Notice how the law carefully restricts the "rights" of the victorious soldier. Rape is not an option at all. Nor can he just take the woman for temporary sexual pleasure. If he wants her, he must take the full responsibility and commitment of giving her the status of wife, with all the legal and social benefits that go with that. And even then he is not to invade her privacy immediately, as the right of a husband might allow. She is to have a full month to adjust to the grief and loss she has already suffered. And if in the end the man regrets his action, the woman is not to be further debased as if she were slave property but given the normal, though tragic, freedom of a divorced wife. The law seems designed to offer some human compassion and protection to the woman in the context of the horrible reality of the aftermath of battle.

The last line of the law is an implicit criticism of the whole practice. As we know from Jesus' comments on the divorce law, the Law of Moses *permitted* some things that it did not wholly *approve* of. God took account of human "hardness of heart." The same thing goes for slavery, polygamy and even, we might add, monarchy. The important thing, it seems to me, is not to criticize the Old Testament law for failing to eradicate all social evils (especially the ones we struggle most with ourselves, such as the oppression and abuse of women), but rather to observe the ways it tried to mitigate their worst effects by attending to the needs of the most vulnerable party in any situation. The basic human needs of the victim take priority over the rights or claims of the victor.

(c) The debtor's pledge:

> Do not take a pair of millstones—not even the upper one—as security for a debt, because that would be taking a person's livelihood as security. . . .
>
> When you make a loan of any kind to your neighbor, do not go into their house to get what is offered to you as a pledge. Stay outside and let the neighbor to whom you are making the loan bring the pledge out to you. If the neighbor is poor, do not go to sleep with

their pledge in your possession. Return their cloak by sunset so that your neighbor may sleep in it. (Deut 24:6, 10-13)

Debt is degrading. It can even become dehumanizing. Debtors become the victims of practices so brutal that it is not surprising the word *shark* is often applied to those who exploit human poverty by sucking the needy into bondage and fear through unscrupulous loaning tactics.

Old Testament law recognizes reality by permitting, indeed commanding, loans to those who need them. Lending to the poor is a righteous act. But the law prohibited the taking of interest, which was one of the most radical dimensions of biblical economics. However, it did permit the taking of pledges as security for a loan. The lender needs some security for his loan. However, even this creditor's right to take a pledge is limited in the interests of the debtor. The law protected the debtor's life and needs on the one hand and his privacy and dignity on the other. The millstones ground the flour for daily bread. The cloak gave warmth for nightly sleep. To take *those* things was to rob someone of basic human necessities. No legal right justified such behavior. Needs come before claims.

(d) The gleanings of the harvest: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner" (Lev 19:9-10; cf. Deut 24:19-22).

Surely a landowner has the right to enjoy the full return on his investment of effort, plowing and sowing on his own property? Not so, says the law. The needs of the poor come before the claims of ownership. He must deliberately *not* take all the produce for himself. This law of gleanings was in addition to the triennial tithe, which was also available for the sustenance of the landless poor (Deut 14:28-29). Property rights are never the bottom line of a moral argument. In any case, as God rather bluntly pointed out, "The land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers" (Lev 25:23). Tenants have no absolute right of disposal of what is the landowner's property. The owner of a property dictates how it may be used. Here the divine landlord (God) instructs the tenants (Israel) to make sure that adequate provision is made for the needs of the poor.

When we survey the life and teaching of Jesus, there is a strong echo of this dimension of the Torah. Human life and human needs take precedence over all other personal claims or rights, as well as over rules and regulations. Jesus' parables paint situations where a person could have felt justified in acting in one way but chooses to act instead with mercy or generosity. The Samaritan had good cause to ignore the Jewish casualty but didn't. In fact, by loving the Jew as his neighbor, he obeyed the law in a way that the custodians of the law (the priest and Levite) failed to. The father of the prodigal son could have rejected and disowned him but chose instead to welcome and reinstate him. The owner of the vineyard could have paid the latest workers just a fraction of the daily wage but chose generously to meet their needs rather than satisfy the jealous justice claims of the earlier hired hands.

Or, conversely, when the "rich fool" had far more harvest than he needed for himself, he could have followed the thrust of Old Testament law and shared his blessing with the needy. He knew what he should have done. But his self-centered greed cost him his life. More explicitly, at the end of the parable about the rich man and Lazarus, "Abraham" condemns the rich man because his utter failure to meet the obvious need of Lazarus was a failure precisely to heed the law and the prophets (Lk 16:29-31).

Again, the Sabbath controversy illustrates this most clearly. Human hunger comes before human regulations. Jesus backs that up with an interesting quotation from the prophet Hosea, showing that *in the Old Testament itself* there was a strong awareness that the moral values of mercy and justice have priority in God's mind over the ritual laws: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent" (Mt 12:7; Hos 6:6).

Jesus used the same text on another occasion to answer criticism of his social intercourse with those whom society marginalized (Mt 9:10-13). Clearly it provided a significant priority guide for his own life. Likewise the healing and saving of human life matters more than Sabbath laws, with an obvious comparison with animal welfare (Mt 12:9-14).

Jesus taught the uncomfortable message about putting even the unreasonable demands of others above the legal limits of one's own responsibility (Mt 5:38-48). In the parable of the sheep and the goats, response to human need is presented as the criterion of final judgment (Mt

25:31-46). He put the need of a distraught woman for the loving assurance of forgiveness above the social etiquette of table manners (Lk 7:36-50). He put the need of a sick woman above the ritual defilement of menstrual uncleanness (Mk 5:25-34). He went about among those to whom official society gave no *rights* and met their *needs*—for food, friendship, forgiveness, love, healing, acceptance, dignity.

The authority of Jesus. "Do not think," said Jesus, "that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets." The radical and shocking nature of some of what Jesus said and did must have led some people to think that was what he was doing. But as we survey the whole range of his life and teaching in relation to the law we can see what he meant. "I have not come to abolish them," he went on, "but to fulfill them" (Mt 5:17).

Exactly what he meant by "fulfill" here has been much disputed among scholars. My own view, which does not deny the various technical meanings of the word given in the commentaries, is more in line what I've been saying above. Jesus was bringing into full clarity the inherent *values and priorities* of the Torah. His own teaching certainly built on and surpassed the law itself. But it was facing in the same direction. His whole life was oriented by a deep reflection on the fundamental demands of the law, since he found in it the mind of his Father God. To a people who had become so obsessed with the details of the law that they had forgotten its original purpose, he brought back a sense of what really mattered first in God's sight. Jesus was "filling out" all that God intended through the priorities that the law itself contains.

Jesus was not imposing on the Torah an arbitrary selection of his own favorite texts. Rather, the Torah itself, carefully read and understood, makes very clear its own scale of values and sense of priorities. Jesus brought back to light the simplicity and clarity of the *point* of the Torah from the layers of well-meant regulations that had been intended to protect it but had in effect buried it.

No wonder, then, that "the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Mt 7:28-29). For that was indeed the point. Jesus was actually *not* just a teacher of the law. For although he shaped his own life and values by it, and restored its great central thrust in his teaching, Jesus claimed that he, himself, took precedence. Response to *him* became determinative, as once

the law had been. Life and security were to be found in *him* rather than in the law. “Take *my* yoke upon you” (Mt 11:29), he said, when his contemporaries would speak only of the “yoke of the law.”

When Jesus replied to the rich young man’s inquiry about the source of eternal life, his answer was authentically scriptural. “If you want to enter life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:17), he said. He certainly did not mean that obedience to the law *deserved* life in a meritorious way but rather that obedience *proved* the relationship with God from which life flowed. This was precisely the point underlined by Moses in Leviticus 18:5 (which Jesus and Paul both quote) and Deuteronomy 30:16. But when Jesus went on to invite the man to a costly discipleship, in which *Jesus himself* became the key to the life of the kingdom of God and everything else had to be renounced, the man turned away. The law in and of itself gave no life. Life came from the *source* of the law, God himself. That source confronted the man, but he walked away. Another rich fool, only in real life, not in a parable.

Fool was not my choice of word for him but Jesus’ own. Not that Jesus called him a fool there and then, of course. On the contrary, we sense the sad longing in the heart of Jesus at the man’s decision, when Mark tells us that “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (Mk 10:21). But he had heard the words of Jesus and chose not to do them. And that, said Jesus on another occasion, is the action of a foolish person. For it is on our active response to Jesus’ words that our eternal security and destiny depend.

The immediate cause of the crowd’s astonishment after the Sermon on the Mount was the way it ended, with Jesus’ story of the two house builders (Mt 7:24-27). The critical difference between the wise man and the fool was not over their obedience to *the law* (as would have been expected from, say, the book of Psalms or Proverbs), but their response to *Jesus*. The word of Jesus now occupies the seat of judgment. To do or not to do, that is the question, once you have heard. One way leads to life and safety, the other way, collapse and death.

If Jesus *had* been only a teacher of the law he might have caused a stir with his radical exposure of its priorities and the way he challenged the additions that had been made over the centuries. He might have carved out a name as a great and original thinker. He might even have had a school of interpretation named after him. But they would not have set out to *kill* him.

The experts in the law had some fairly serious disagreements and major disputes in Jesus' day, and indeed they tried to get Jesus to take sides in some of them. But they did not kill each other over disputed legal teaching.

Yet surely we gasp with astonishment when we read as early as Mark 3:6 that the Pharisees were plotting to kill Jesus. Why? Because he did not merely act and teach in a way that contravened their understanding of the law but actually set himself up as having even greater authority than the law. He claimed authority over the Sabbath. He took it on himself to forgive sins—a prerogative only for legally constituted authorities. He invited people to take *his* yoke upon themselves, rather than the yoke of the law. He asserted that "sinners" were entering the kingdom of God through their response to *him* (not their observance of the law), and conversely that those who rejected him had excluded themselves. Such claims not only seemed to be intolerably arrogant, but they also called in question the whole constitution of Israel as a community whose claim to God was based on covenant loyalty to the law. By putting himself in that place of central authority, Jesus threatened the whole existing system. There was ultimately only one way to deal with that, and it was not by polite rabbinical counterargument.

So they set out to kill him and be rid of the threat.

That was how they had dealt with the prophets, as Jesus pointed out. And so we turn next to think of Jesus as a prophet and in the light of the great prophets of the Old Testament.

Jesus and the Prophets

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked his disciples what the popular opinion was about him. Who did people think he was? The answer they gave is interesting. Some people thought he was John the Baptist revived and reunited with his severed head. Others thought he was Elijah, who was supposed to be sent before the great Day of the Lord. Others thought he was Jeremiah—or one of the prophets anyway. A prophet, at the very least, was how the crowds saw Jesus. Why? What was it about Jesus that led to these rumors and perceptions? There must have been something in the behavior

and teaching of Jesus that brought to mind memories of the great prophets of old.

"The Prophets" make up an enormous chunk of the Hebrew canon, of course. The Latter Prophets include the three major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets—Hosea to Malachi. (In the Hebrew canon the Latter Prophets are distinguished from the Former Prophets, which is what they called the history books from Joshua to 2 Kings). These books of the Prophets (from Isaiah to Malachi) are all different and cover nearly four hundred years of Israel's history, as we saw in chapter one. Yet we can isolate a few central themes that dominate their messages over the generations. Obviously, this is to simplify things enormously, and you really have to study each prophet on his own terms and in his own context to understand them fully. Nevertheless, it is helpful to have a broad overview of prophetic concerns with which we can compare Jesus to see how and where he fits and why he was reckoned among the prophets.

Three major areas of life occupied the energies of the prophets a lot of the time. First, there was the *spiritual* aspect, concerned with the people's relationship with God, the threat of idolatry and the hypocrisy of worship that was unrelated to practical moral living. Second, there was the *social and economic* aspect, concerned with the processes in Israel's society that were causing poverty, exploitation, debt and corruption. And third, there was the *political* aspect, concerned with the use and abuse of power by those who wielded it—in the palace, the temple, the courts, etc. The crowd's idea that Jesus might be Elijah or Jeremiah is helpful at this point, because those two prophets between them illustrate all three areas very well.

Spiritual loyalty to God. Elijah stood on Mount Carmel as the great champion of the faith of Yahweh against Baal (1 Kings 18). He presented the people with the starkness of choice: "If Yahweh is God, serve him; but if Baal is God, serve him." In other words, you can't go on trying to serve both. We have already seen earlier in this chapter how Jesus reiterated this ultimate choice, echoing the great Old Testament prophetic challenge. "You cannot serve God and money," he said. To submit to the reign of God means rejecting all competitors. And just as the prophets of old had exposed the hypocrisy of Israel in claiming to worship God while ignoring his covenant

law, so Jesus displays full prophetic stature in his condemnation of the claims and postures of the religious elite of his day. His use of the expression “Woe to you” was a clear echo of the prophetic word of judgment. It was not a term of polite disagreement but a solemn pronouncement of God’s wrath upon someone. Isaiah 5 is a graphic illustration and background for a chapter like Matthew 23.

Like the prophets, Jesus was consumed by a spiritual jealousy for the honor of God. Like them, he attacked those who imagined that God was impressed by religion divorced from the moral and social values of God himself. Like them, he suffered for doing so. We saw in chapter one that this was a significant theme in the prophetic message in the preexilic period. On more than one occasion Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6,

> For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
> and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

He quoted the verse to stress the fundamental priority of moral obedience to God over the ritual expression of religious commitments. That verse is only one of many that he could have quoted that make the same point even more graphically. It would be worth pausing again to read the following passages, reflecting on the impact they would have had on Jesus’ sense of values and priorities: Isaiah 1:11-20; 58:1-7; Jeremiah 7:1-11; and Amos 5:21-24. God matters more than religion.

Economic issues. The same Elijah who stood on Mount Carmel to defend the name of Yahweh from idolatry also confronted Ahab over the illegal seizure of a vineyard. The story of Naboth in 1 Kings 21 is a graphic illustration of the second main area of prophetic concern—the economic realm.

Two things about the land of Israel stand out very clearly in the Old Testament:

On the one hand, the land was God’s gift to Israel. He had promised it to Abraham and then kept that promise in the great historical events of exodus and conquest. But it was a gift that was meant for the enjoyment of *all* Israelites. So there are clear instructions that it was to be divided up fairly and as widely as possible, across the whole kinship network, with every family receiving a share—an inheritance from God himself.

On the other hand, the land still belonged to God. He was its true owner (Lev 25:23). And so this divine ownership of the land was the foundation for Israel's economic system. God was the real landlord; Israel was the tenant. God held Israel accountable to himself for everything it did on and with the land. This is what lies behind the detailed laws in the Torah concerning use of the land, preservation of people's share in it, justice and compassion in sharing its produce, protection of those who work on it, special provision for those who become poor and have to sell it, and all the other specific economic mechanisms designed to sustain an equitable distribution and enjoyment of the resources God had given to his people.

From the time of Solomon onward, this system came under increasing pressure and dissolution. Fewer and fewer wealthy families accumulated more and more land, while poorer families became dispossessed or were driven into debt bondage. The courts, far from defending the oppressed, increased the oppression through bribery and corruption. Kings, far from acting with the justice required of them, instead perpetrated the kind of high-handed tactics that the story of Naboth illustrates. As we saw in chapter one, this process aroused the anger of prophet after prophet. In fact, socioeconomic issues loom larger in the preaching of the prophets than any other, with the possible exception of idolatry itself. And of course, the two were closely linked. The faith of Yahweh underpinned a system of economic and social justice. Baal was the god of a society of stratified wealth and power. To abandon Yahweh for Baal was no mere spiritual affair, but it opened the way to rampant injustice in the socioeconomic sphere also, which is very precisely illustrated by the Naboth story, since Jezebel was actively trying to replace the faith of Yahweh with that of Baal. Idolatry and injustice went together. They still do.

Coming back to the New Testament and the Palestine of Jesus' day, we need to recognize that the country faced very similar economic problems, but they were made even worse by the imposition of the Roman imperial government. Much scholarly study has been given to the social and economic situation in first-century Palestine, and it does not make pleasant reading. There was intensive exploitation of the agrarian peasant farmers, the majority of whom were tenants, since the ownership of land was concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy families. Tenant farmers were hard-pressed trying to meet a variety of demands on what they could

produce—rents, taxes, tithes, debt repayments. And all this before they could think of what they could afford to consume for themselves to stay alive and have something to invest in the next year's sowing.

Since many of the landowners lived in Jerusalem, there was antagonism between town and country. Villagers suffered many hardships and discriminations, and there was much discontent. There were clashes between Jewish peasantry and Gentile settlers in Galilee and the eastern parts of the land who were perceived as an economic threat. The pressures of poverty, debt and dispossession drove some people into the extreme revolutionary camp of the Zealots, who attacked both the Roman power and the Jewish aristocratic collaborators. It was a tense and sometimes violent agrarian scene in which Jesus grew up. The message of the Old Testament prophets would have sounded very relevant to the social and economic situation.

Jesus was a carpenter. The trade he pursued was not merely joinery. The word used to describe him, *tekton*, meant somebody skilled in practical small engineering jobs—mostly in wood but frequently also in stone or other building materials. The *tekton* was a versatile person, making or mending agricultural implements, domestic furniture, boats and other large constructions, and also frequently employed for contract work in public building works. They would have a village home base and workshop, but often they would travel around with the tools of their trade, seeking employment from private or public employers—on the farms, with the fishing fleets, in the cities on new building projects and so on.

It is very possible that Jesus, during his twenties, traveled extensively around Palestine working as a *tekton* before he eventually laid that trade aside to embark on his public ministry. Some scholars suggest this on the evidence of the wide range of social contacts that Jesus had both in Galilee and in the Jerusalem region, as well as the breadth of familiarity with so many aspects of everyday life that emerges in his parables. Jesus knew what he was talking about. He had seen life at every level, as itinerant workers certainly do. He was probably a familiar figure, using his skills among the fishing fleets around the shores of the Sea of Galilee, mending furniture and farm implements for local people, long before he called some of his friends to become his followers in a new venture. It is quite possible that he helped to build the boat he preached from. Who knows?

So, like the prophets before him, Jesus spoke from a position of close observation of the realities of the situation in which he lived. He grew up and lived within his own culture and its tensions. He would have listened to countless conversations among fellow workers, hammering away together on some construction project. He would have seen the hard slog of life on the farms and in the vineyards. He would have heard the struggles of those who had crippling debts. He would have listened to the murderous mutterings against absentee landlords by aggrieved tenants, the bitterness against tax collectors. He would have felt the pain of fathers whose sons chose to escape and go far away to what they imagined would be a good life. He would have met mothers whose daughters ended up in prostitution to pay debts that never seemed to shrink. He would have witnessed violent incidents on the roads, fatal accidents on building projects. He would have seen crucified rebels and criminals . . .

So one Sabbath, he attended the synagogue somewhere near his family's carpentry shop in Nazareth, read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and launched his new ministry on the basis of it. "*Today*," he said, "this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21). In view of the whole social context in which he lived and worked, he could hardly have chosen a more significant text:

> The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
> because he has anointed me
> to proclaim good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
> and recovery of sight for the blind,
> to set the oppressed free,
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Lk 4:18-19; from Is 61:1-2)

His mission, he declared, was to be among the poor and for the sake of the poor, and the rest of his life—the places and the people where he spent most of his time—endorsed that policy statement.

The prophecy in Isaiah 61 draws on ideas connected with the jubilee year in ancient Israel. That is almost certainly what is meant by "the year of the Lord's favor." The original law of the jubilee is in Leviticus 25. It was

intended to be a year when Israelites who had been compelled to sell land or dependent members of their family into slavery because of mounting debts would have their debts canceled and be able to return to full possession of their ancestral family land. It was to occur every fiftieth year. It was thus designed to alleviate the worst effects of continuing indebtedness. One generation's hard times should not condemn all future generations of a family to bondage. A jubilee would occur approximately every other generation and give a fresh start. Its twin pillars were *release* from debt and *restoration* to one's rightful inheritance.

Some scholars suggest that Jesus was calling for an actual jubilee year to be put into operation, that is, a radical program of debt cancellation and redistribution of land. In the context of Roman Palestine, however, that would have been essentially a call for revolution—and Jesus certainly rejected and resisted that option. Most scholars, however, point out that Jesus did not call for a literal operation of the law in Leviticus but rather quoted from the prophetic use of jubilary ideas as a way of characterizing his own ministry.

In other words, Jesus was deeply concerned about the economic realities that the jubilee had tried to remedy, but his answer was not a straight return to that ancient legislation. Jesus did not announce a jubilee and hope it would lead to the arrival the kingdom of God (by a political revolution). Rather, he announced the arrival of the kingdom of God and then used the jubilee as a picture of what it was all about. Like the prophets, Jesus took the themes of release and restoration and applied them both in the *economic* sense in which they originally functioned and also with "value-added" *spiritual* dimensions. Release from bondages of all sorts and restoration to fullness of life and harmony in relation with God and other human beings were part of the prophetic vision of the age to come and part of Jesus' vision of the inbreaking kingdom of God.

Jesus was not a revolutionary, in the usual sense of that word. There is no evidence that he sided with those who advocated violent seizure of land from absentee landowners and redistribution of it to tenant farmers. However, he was very much aware of the problem and the anger it generated. The parable of the so-called wicked husbandmen (or parable of the tenants) in Mark 12:1-9 shows that he knew all about the murderous bitterness of tenant farmers and their desire for ownership of vineyards for

themselves. But he shows no sympathy with their actions or intentions, and rather uses the story (which may well have had a basis in incidents he himself witnessed) as a means of condemning the religious and political leaders of his people. That is whom Jesus was talking to (Mk 11:27; cf. Mt 21:45). The parable should not be construed as a rejection of the whole Jewish people.

On another occasion, Jesus refused to get involved in a dispute over land, using the occasion instead as an opportunity to hammer home the dangers of greed that possession of land can engender (Lk 12:13-21). In a more famous incident, he would not be trapped into siding with the Zealots who were calling on people to refuse to pay imperial taxes to Rome. Instead, Jesus put the whole issue under the higher demand of what belongs to God (Mt 22:15-22).

On the issue of debt, however, Jesus had plenty to say. As in the days of the great prophets (cf. Amos 2:6; 5:11-12; Neh 5), debt poverty was one of the major social evils. It was a source of exploitation and oppression, the prime mechanism by which the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. The jubilary hope of *release* from the chains of indebtedness was as deep as it seemed forlorn. The interesting thing is that the word for “release” in both Greek and the underlying Aramaic and Hebrew that Jesus spoke was used of both literal financial remission of debts (as in Deut 15:1-2) and also the moral or spiritual forgiveness of sins, about which Jesus was passionately concerned. So we find that a number of the parables of Jesus use stories about the release of debt to illustrate the meaning of forgiveness—and its personal, relational implications.

A king’s merciful release of a debtor from an enormous debt is contrasted with the man’s subsequent behavior as a minor creditor (Mt 18:12-35). A similar but shorter story illustrates forgiveness in Luke 7:41-43. The story of the so-called unjust steward in Luke 16:1-8 portrays the role of the middleman in the polarized structure of creditor and debtor. His action was not so much to cheat his master by reducing the debt but rather to remove from the debt the illegal element of interest, which had been concealed in the document. It is known that interest, which was technically illegal, was charged at frequently very high rates by simply stating that the debtor had borrowed an amount that was actually the loan plus interest. The interest did not appear on the loan document, but the amount that had to be

repaid included the interest as well. The steward deleted that hidden interest from the documents, and the master could not condemn him without exposing himself as the one who had charged interest secretly in the first place. The “unjust” steward was actually restoring some justice in the sphere he could maneuver in, and by his generous action he was opening up the possibility of new relationships with those who would otherwise have rejected him.

Zacchaeus, likewise, after a meal with Jesus, which transformed his life’s priorities, came back to obeying the law by promising to restore any stolen goods fourfold (as the Old Testament law required). But then he went on to offer a generosity far beyond legal requirements in giving half of his goods to the poor (Lk 19:1-9).

“Release for us our debts, as we also have released our debtors” (Mt 6:12, my translation). The well-known petition in the Lord’s Prayer is of course traditionally understood as a request for forgiveness of sins, and indeed is expressed that way in Luke’s version (Lk 11:4) and in Matthew’s record of Jesus’ own further comments. But most scholars believe that Matthew has preserved a form of the petition that shows that Jesus had financial debts in mind also. Since his parables linked debt and forgiveness, it is very likely that Jesus had both concrete and spiritual dimensions in mind. There is no reason why we should have to choose one or the other exclusively, between literal debt and spiritual sins. We do not need to spiritualize “Give us this day our daily bread” as if it has nothing to with actual physical hunger, even though we know that elsewhere Jesus could use literal bread to symbolize spiritual nourishment. For Jesus debt was a real problem, and so was sin. Both need to be fixed.

Jesus taught a prayer that, like the Beatitudes, engaged with earthly as well as spiritual realities. To pray that God’s reign should come, that God’s will should be done on earth as in heaven, would certainly include the longing that God should act to change the social conditions that crushed the life out of people by indebtedness. Especially since it was indebtedness that most seriously threatened the availability of daily bread. The two petitions are closely linked. The radical challenge of the prayer, however, was not just in the plea that God would intervene to relieve the burden of debt, but that those who sought such benefit of the reign of God must respond by themselves acting in generosity and forgiveness. It was authentically

prophetic to insist that the vertical blessing must have horizontal effects, in the economic as well as in the spiritual sphere.

Jesus' critique of wealth was another way in which he strongly reflected the prophetic ethos on economic matters. Now Jesus was no ascetic. He did not glorify poverty. He did not live in rigid austerity. On the contrary, he was willing to be served (in life and in death) by the relatively wealthy, and his enjoyment of food and drink and company gained him a reputation as a friend of sinners (which was meant as an insult but taken as a compliment; Lk 7:34). But in word and act Jesus portrayed the dangers of wealth in terms of which the prophet Amos would have approved. He saw the insidious idolatry that wealth generates and warned against its utter incompatibility with serving God (Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13). It was not so much wealth in and of itself that Jesus condemned but rather its tendency to produce an attitude of complacent self-sufficiency (Lk 12:15-21). Self-sufficiency is the diametric opposite of the prime quality needed for entrance to the kingdom of God—humble dependence on God in faith (Mt 6:19-34).

And so, to the utter amazement of his disciples, Jesus was prepared to let a rich man who had inquired about eternal life turn and walk away because he was unwilling to meet Jesus' demands in relation to his wealth. Jesus loved the man. But Jesus also saw his heart. In his case, while he held on to his wealth, he was not free to do what the righteousness of the reign of God required. Costly discipleship was not for him. However, while Jesus stood among the prophets in his critique of wealth, he went much further than the prophets in advocating an alternative strategy. On the one hand, he taught and modeled a carefree (though not careless) attitude to material things, born of confidence in God's provision. And on the other hand, he called for a radical generosity that cut right across expected norms of behavior. These were his twin policies. Trust in God and generosity to others.

Generosity can be upsetting. Jesus himself, for example, caused great offense by generously offering his own presence and the forgiving grace of God to those whom society regarded as ill-deserving of any such things. But he reinforced his action by parables that portrayed God the Father as incomprehensibly generous. The story of the landowner who hired workers for his vineyard and then paid those who had worked only a few hours a

whole day's wage (Mt 20:1-16) must have been as irritating to the real hearers as to the fictional workers. For it not only described the generosity of God that transcended human norms of fair play but also challenged them about real-life economic relationships. Anyone who acted like the farmer in Jesus' parable would actually be in trouble with neighboring landowners, and probably also with the best of the labor force as well. Generosity would actually be perceived as injustice. Justice preserved the status quo. Generosity undermined it.

Other stories have a similar double edge—both pointing to the way God does things as King and also offering models for human imitation. Jesus told the story of the rich man who is snubbed by his own associates but then goes on to give a feast for all the outcasts of society (Lk 14:16-24) not just to answer a comment about the heavenly banquet of the kingdom of God. It was followed by his specific recommendation that people should actually demonstrate that kind of unrepayable generosity in their own social lives (Lk 14:12-14). Such action is an investment in the reality of the new order of God's kingdom (Lk 12:32-34). Whether it was two whole days' wages (as the Good Samaritan gave to care for his "enemy" to whom he acted as neighbor) or two small coins (as the widow gave to God out of her poverty), Jesus observed generosity wherever he saw it and commended it. But at the same time he pointed out that to give up anything, or to give away everything, for the sake of following Christ and living under the reign of God was no loss—in this age or the age to come (Mk 10:23-31). In the end, as Jesus said, though it is not recorded in the Gospels, it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).

Political conflict. Some people compared Jesus to Jeremiah. Why Jeremiah? Perhaps it was because both Jeremiah and Jesus suffered abuse and rejection. It is also true that Jesus, like Jeremiah, expressed great compassion and sorrow for his own people, both in their immediate "lostness" and in their impending future disaster. The "weeping prophet" foreshadowed the weeping Messiah.

But there is another, sharper, reason for the comparison, which lies in the *reason* why Jeremiah suffered such rejection. And that was that Jeremiah brought an uncompromising warning of judgment to come upon his nation (Jer 4:5-9). He voiced and acted out prophetic threats against the very heart of the nation—the temple itself (Jer 7:15; 19:1-15). And as the

external threat against Judah grew in intensity from the world power of Babylon, Jeremiah urged his national leaders to accept and submit to Babylon and not embark on futile plots of rebellion (Jer 27).

In other words, Jeremiah stood out against the whole political direction of Judah's government during its last two decades up to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. For his words and actions Jeremiah was branded a traitor (Jer 37:11-15). He was imprisoned more than once, physically assaulted (Jer 20:1-2) and very nearly lynched on one occasion (Jer 26). Jeremiah was not just laughed at as a crank. He was hated as a serious critic and threat. His words and actions were politically intolerable. Two kings and various religious officials tried to silence him permanently.

So if the crowds saw Jeremiah in Jesus, it presumably wasn't a "gentle Jesus meek and mild" that caught their attention or provoked their historical memory. The crowds were witnesses to the gathering storm of conflict between Jesus and the religious and political authorities. The Gospels show us that, again and again, the same word or action of Jesus that led the crowds to marvel at his authority provoked opposition, censure or plotting from the religiopolitical leaders. Almost everything he said and did collided with the official line. And a major reason for that was that Jesus, like Jeremiah, declared that *Israel itself* was on a collision course with the judgment of God, and the collision was urgently, horrifyingly, inescapably close. His stance on this was authentically prophetic. He brought words of sharp warning as well as words of wonderful salvation. That was very like the Old Testament prophets.

Three features of his words and actions illustrate the seriousness of this aspect of Jesus' prophetic significance: his attitude to the Romans, his rejection of the Pharisaic agenda and his words and actions in the temple.

(1) The Romans. First of all, there was his attitude to the Romans. It is sometimes said that since Jesus did not preach revolution against Rome he must have been nonpolitical. We have already said that this is very shortsighted because it suggests that revolutionary violence is the only *political* option even in a situation of oppression. But we can go much further, because Jesus himself did. Not only did he *not* preach violent revolution, he actually advocated *positive acts of love* toward the occupying forces. This was swimming against the whole tide of Jewish political

sentiment at the time. In that sense it was radical and even more truly revolutionary.

> And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. . . . You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. (Mt 5:40-45)

The command to love your enemies was radical enough, but Jesus was not content to leave it general like that—even though it would be unmistakable whom he was referring to in the context of his day. The confiscation of clothing and conscription of labor for baggage carrying were common features of the Roman occupation. Jesus urged that people, *in love*, should go beyond the limits of what could be demanded by those whose laws they only obeyed reluctantly and at the point of a sword.

Such teaching would not have endeared him to the Zealot movement, the armed resistance fighters. Yet it must be realized that by commanding love toward the Roman enemy, Jesus was not adopting a pro-Roman political stance, as though to condone the oppression itself, any more than God’s sending rain on the unjust condones their injustice. He was even less endearing to the Sadducees, the party who collaborated with the Roman colonial government. For Jesus, the reign of God was supreme over *all* human authority, as he reminded Pontius Pilate at his trial. He could not be bought by either side in the major political conflict of his day. His radical agenda undermined both.

(2) The Pharisees. Second, there was Jesus’ conflict with the Pharisees over their definition and practice of holiness. This was much more than just a matter of sincerity versus hypocrisy. The Pharisees’ program needs to be seen as a comprehensive, sociopolitical theology and ethic. They, like the vast majority of Israel, longed for the overthrow of the oppressor and the establishment of Israel as God’s people in freedom in their own land. And they believed that the way to achieve that goal was neither ascetic withdrawal and waiting (the way of the Essene sect) nor revolutionary armed violence (the way of the Zealots). Rather they sought to achieve a

society totally shaped by the Torah. That meant fastidious observance of every detail. It meant being absolutely clear who was holy and who was not. It meant scrupulous observance of the Sabbath as the clearest badge of Israel's covenant identity.

And Jesus threatened their whole ideology and program from the roots. We have seen how he operated with a different understanding of the key values of the law and effectively devalued some of the things they emphasized most. But more seriously, like the prophets before him, Jesus engaged in activities that were symbolic of his message—or rather, actually embodied it. Among those prophetic sign-actions (actions that most infuriated the Pharisees because they undermined and radically criticized their whole system) were his table fellowship and his actions on the Sabbath.

Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. In so doing he broke through one of the major social and religious barriers of his society. The matter of who ate with whom was of great significance. The Pharisees operated carefully controlled table fellowships that excluded those who would not or could not fit in with their pursuit of holiness. Even when Jesus was invited to and attended meals with Pharisees, he created embarrassment by what he said and did (Lk 7:36-50; 14:1-24). But what was worse was that he deliberately cultivated close social relationships with precisely those groups of people whom the Pharisaic program excluded: "sinners," tax collectors, prostitutes. By *eating* with them, Jesus was *including* them in his vision of God's kingdom and showing that the kingdom of God was all about grace and mercy and forgiveness, not about purity and exclusion.

Jesus also went out of his way to behave in extraordinary ways toward those whom society marginalized for other reasons: the sick (especially leprosy sufferers), women (including the ritually unclean) and children. We must not underestimate the disturbing force of Jesus' actions in this area. He was deliberately flouting the religious and social status conventions that undergirded his society's perception of itself. People thought that it was essential to preserve these fundamental distinctions in the quest for the kind of society that would please God and persuade him to cast off the Roman yoke. Jesus showed his rejection of that whole philosophy by his habitual social intercourse. It was not an *occasional gesture* toward the poor and the outcast. It was not a matter of a few token photo opportunities. Jesus gained

a *reputation* as the “friend of sinners.” His disciples were asked critically about his table manners. It was a persistent, intentional policy, and it cut right across the dominant theology and ethos of the spiritual leaders of Israel. Jesus habitually had meals with people that the Pharisees would never have eaten with. He *included* those whom they *excluded.* It was a provocative habit.

And Jesus healed on the Sabbath. Deliberately. In fact, if you look at the healings of Jesus, it is interesting that whereas most of them happened at the request of sick persons who approached Jesus, in the case of the healings on Sabbaths, it was Jesus who took the initiative, unasked. People asked for healing at almost any time *except* the Sabbath (as the synagogue superintendent said was proper, Lk 13:14). Jesus *chose* to heal on the Sabbath. He took the initiative to do it at precisely the time when people would have been reluctant to ask. Again, there is something of a prophetic symbolic action about this. It was public, noticeable, deliberate, controversial and pointed. And it aroused his opponents to anger because he appeared to be trampling on something they considered a prime mark of a faithful, distinctive people. Once again, Jesus’ understanding of what constituted the people of God and what was pleasing to God differed radically from theirs. They saw Sabbath observance as necessary to avoid God’s judgment. Jesus saw it as the day above all days to demonstrate God’s salvation.

(3) The temple. Third, there were his words and actions in and about the temple. The fact that Jesus threatened the destruction of the temple, in word and in symbolic action, was one of the most remembered things about him, which is not surprising since it was just about the most scandalous and provocative of all his actions. It featured prominently in his trial. Scholars who sift the Gospel narratives for what they are prepared to consider authentic and historical are all agreed that the so-called cleansing of the temple is firmly grounded in fact, and indeed some regard it as a major clue to understanding the aims and intentions of Jesus (Mt 21:12-13; Mk 11:15-17; Lk 19:45-46).

However, *cleansing* is no longer regarded as an adequate term for what Jesus did and what he meant. The word *cleansing* suggests that the only thing Jesus objected to was the commercial trading in the temple courts. But the exchange and purchase of animals and currency was an integral part of

the whole sacrificial system for the many pilgrims from near and far. It was not regarded as “unspiritual.” There may well have been an element of profiteering involved, but Jesus’ action does not seem to have been directed against merely that but rather at the whole temple machinery.

Much more probably, Jesus’ temple action was a prophetic sign, signifying nothing less than the coming destruction of the temple and its whole sacrificial system. This fits in with Jewish apocalyptic expectations that when the Messiah would come, there would be an end to the old temple and the arrival of a new temple, fit for the new age of God’s reign over Israel and the nations. Jesus believed that he was initiating this new age in his own person. So his prophetic act in the temple (like his riding into Jerusalem on a donkey the previous day, pointing to Zechariah 9:9) was a dramatic way of announcing its arrival. This would fit also with the prophecy of Malachi 3:1-3.

We also need to understand the role of the temple as the very heart of Israel and the heartbeat of Israel’s nationalism. The temple was the nerve center where Israel could most truly be itself—holy, distinct, separate, undefiled, exclusive. It was the navel of Jerusalem, the navel of the earth. It was the pinnacle of Mount Zion, the city of God. Not for nothing, therefore, did the Romans keep a garrison of soldiers right next door, since the temple was the scene of occasional unrest and the hatching of anti-Roman riots. So Jesus was also denouncing the role of the temple as the focus of nationalistic pride and antagonism to the Gentiles. It had become the symbol of an Israel at odds with the world rather than an Israel for the nations. It had become a perversion of the very mission of Israel itself. This interpretation fits well with the words that accompanied Jesus’ prophetic action.

“Is it not written ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers’ ” (Mk 11:17). The direct quotation is from Isaiah 56:7, which is a chapter saturated with God’s universal desire for outsiders to come and enjoy the blessings of his salvation. Foreigners and eunuchs are promised inclusion and acceptance and joy in the house of God. This echoes but surpasses the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the original temple in 1 Kings 8:41-43. Instead of being a fortress to keep Israel safe and the nations out, the temple should have been the beacon of Israel as God’s light to bring the nations in. And

for those who had ears to hear and scriptural memories, the donkey ride on the day before would have recalled Zechariah's prophecy that when the Messiah came he would take away the hardware of warfare and "he will proclaim *peace to the nations*" (Zech 9:10).

And that last phrase of Jesus' scathing words ("a den of robbers") brings us right back to Jeremiah. For that is exactly what Jeremiah said to the people of Jerusalem in the temple itself at a previous time of great national peril when the enemy was Babylon (Jer 7). At that time also the temple was the heart of Israel's nationalism and resistance. Then too the people believed that so long as the temple stood, they were safe, protected by the God who could never destroy his own temple. Safe, said Jeremiah, like robbers in a den; but not at all safe from the coming judgment of God, which would destroy Jerusalem and temple together.

Jesus gave the words an extra twist, because the word translated "robber," *lestes*, did not just mean a thief but was the current word for the anti-Roman resistance fighters—terrorists, in our language. Such was the perversion of the whole ethos of the temple. But it could not last. Jesus saw in the near future not (as the Jewish leaders hoped) an act of judgment by God on the Gentiles that would finally exclude them entirely from the temple, Jerusalem and the land, but rather an act of God's judgment on the temple itself as the center of such exclusiveness and the beginning of a new extension of blessing and salvation to the nations. This was a thorough and politically intolerable reversal of the temple ideology of his day. That is why it was a major factor in his trial as far as the Jews were concerned. To threaten the temple was to threaten the very foundation of the state as they understood it. Nothing but the death penalty would do.

So, like Jeremiah, Jesus uttered prophetic words of judgment on the temple, and along with it the city and nation. There is no doubt that in this respect Jesus adopted fully the stance of the great prophets of divine judgment on Israel—even though, again like Jeremiah, he did so with intense grief and compassion. There are at least eight clear predictions of the destruction of the temple or Jerusalem in the Gospels and Acts (Mt 23:37-39; Mk 13:2; 14:58; 15:29; Lk 13:34-35; 19:42-44; 21:20-24; Jn 2:19; Acts 6:14). And this is only part of a very strong strand of judgment language in the wider teaching of Jesus. One scholar has counted some

sixty-seven passages where Jesus issues a warning or threat, coupled with some explanation or call to repentance or other action.

Clearly, Jesus drank deeply from the profound seriousness of the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. Like them, he allowed no special immunity from the wrath of God to a people who were denying or perverting the reason for their existence. Like them, he knew that judgment begins at the house of God. Like them, he knew he would suffer for his message. Unlike them, however, as the Messiah he would in a deeper sense take that judgment upon himself.

Jesus, the Psalms and the Reign of God

Jesus came to a people who knew how to pray and how to sing. The rich heritage of worship in Israel was part of the very fabric and furniture of the mind of Jesus. So it is not at all surprising to find him often quoting from the Psalms, even with his dying breath. Nor is it surprising to find that the values and concerns that have occupied our attention in this chapter already are deeply embedded in the Psalms, because the Psalms reflect like a thousand mirrors the great themes of the law and the prophets.

There are many ways in which we could show links between the Psalms and Jesus. We could trace the pervasive contrast between the character, actions and fate of the good, the wise and the godly, on the one hand, and the wicked, the foolish and the ungodly on the other. It sets the whole tone for the Psalter from the very first psalm and surfaces in the sharp edges of the parables of Jesus. We could list the repeated ethical concerns of the Psalms and see them shared by Jesus—like the importance of truth and the damage of falsehood; the high premium placed on humility and walking in personal communion with God; the warmth of generosity and kindness that marks the righteous person in imitation of the ways of God himself; the anger at injustice, hypocrisy and perverted behavior; the celebration of the abundance of God’s good gifts in nature and providence and the matching exhortations to trustfulness and freedom from anxiety; and the gratitude that overflows into a commitment to obedience to God’s law.

But we shall focus on one major theme in the Psalms that provides an important background for the central pillar of the preaching of Jesus—the

kingship of God. Nothing is better known about Jesus than that he came proclaiming that “the kingdom of God is at hand” and spent a great deal of time explaining what it meant.

It might be somewhat surprising that we have only come to look at the subject of the kingdom of God at this late stage in the book. Should it not have featured in a prime position of honor near the start? Well, it could have, but my strategy was deliberate. Our whole purpose has been to see how much Jesus was shaped in his identity, mission and teaching by his Hebrew Scriptures. And this was as true of this central theme in his agenda as of everything else. The kingdom of God meant the reign of *this* God—the God revealed in the history, law, prophecy and worship of his own people, recorded in the Scriptures he knew and loved. The spiritual and moral content of the expression “kingdom of God” was already shaped by the great teaching and challenges of the Torah and the Prophets and the Psalms. And so it has been important for us to work our way through that material before we ask what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God. Jesus preached about the kingship of God to people who already knew that their God was king. But he preached it in ways that certainly surprised them.

It is a common misunderstanding that the idea of the kingdom of God was something *introduced* by Jesus. Certainly there was a freshness and an urgency about his announcement of its arrival (or its imminence, depending on how one interprets “the kingdom of God is at *hand*”). He was clearly proclaiming that something new was bursting on the scene through his ministry, something that demanded attention and urgent action. But he was not putting a totally new concept before a bewildered audience. His Jewish listeners knew very well that God was king. Their Scriptures stated it often enough, and they sang words to that effect regularly from the Psalms in their synagogue worship. In other words, and in our terms, *the kingship of God is an Old Testament concept.*

In chapter one we looked at a group of psalms that celebrate the kingship of Yahweh, with an eye especially on the remarkable way in which they envisage all the nations praising the God of Israel for his saving acts. We now turn back to that same group of psalms to take note of some other themes that run through them, which would have been part of Jewish understanding of the expression “kingdom of God” as Jesus used it.

Another pause for Bible reading would be in order! Read through Psalms 24; 29; 47; 93; 95; 96; 97; 98; 99; 145 and 146. All of these include references to Yahweh as king or expressions such as "the LORD reigns" or "sits enthroned" or "rules over the nations." Apart from that common proclamation, there is considerable variety in the moods and themes of these psalms. We shall pick out just three major aspects that between them are a fairly good summary of how the idea of the reign of God was understood in the Old Testament.

The universal dimension. The widest aspect of the reign of Yahweh expressed in these psalms is the affirmation that he rules over the whole earth. The LORD is king of all nations and all creation. This universal reign of Yahweh was actually first expressed in a song of praise that is not in the book of Psalms but in the book of Exodus. It is the song of Moses in Exodus 15, which in the context of the story was sung on the far shore of the Sea of Reeds after the Israelites had safely crossed and the pursuing Egyptian army was washed away. The song ends with the climactic words "The LORD reigns, for ever and ever" (Ex 15:18). One can almost hear, under the breath, the implication "and not Pharaoh." For the whole sequence of events that had just come to its climax at the sea had been to prove exactly who was the real king, who had the real sovereign power. Moses kept pointing it out to Pharaoh, but Pharaoh never learned the lesson. Yahweh's conflict with Pharaoh demonstrated not only that it was Yahweh, not Pharaoh, who was king in Egypt, but also that his rule extended over the whole earth (see Ex 8:22; 9:14, 16, 29). Daniel conveyed the same message at the opposite end of Old Testament history to Nebuchadnezzar in words that echo the Psalms (Dan 4:3, 17, 25, 32, 34-35; cf. Ps 145:11-13).

The widest and most basic sense of the kingship of God in the Old Testament, then, is this universal sovereignty. The LORD God of Israel is God of everything and everybody in all creation.

The earthly dimension. The Psalms celebrate the kingship of Yahweh over all the earth as an act of faith. It was certainly not something evident to the naked eye. Clearly God's kingship is not in fact acknowledged by all the nations. However, Israel, through the covenant relationship, had accepted the rule of God over itself as a nation. God was the acknowledged king in Israel—so much so that for several centuries this belief prevented it from

having a human king over them. And when at length the pressure for a monarchy became irresistible, the narrative presents it very ambiguously—as a definite step away from real theocracy and yet as a vehicle that God could use to express and locate his own kingship. Israel did not need to have a king at all. But once it had one, God "embodies" his own divine rule in the person of the Israelite king (a very imperfect embodiment, to be sure, but the link is made nevertheless, as in Psalm 2).

So, as well as the universal dimension of God's kingship, the Old Testament has this very particular dimension. God's covenant relationship with Israel was in a sense the relation of a king to his subjects. Indeed, the idea of a "covenant" made use of the political model of the treaties of that era between imperial kingdoms and their vassal states. That is what lies behind the description of Yahweh as "the Great King."

In the ancient world, the prime job of a king was to protect his people from their enemies and to give them laws and good government (the same basic priorities that we expect from our own governments). The two other texts in the Torah (apart from the one in Ex 15:18) in which Yahweh is portrayed as king interestingly pick up each of these. In Numbers 23:21-23, Yahweh as king is the protector of his people. In Deuteronomy 33:3-5, his kingship is linked to the giving of the law.

So the kingship of God in Israel had very *practical, earthy effects*. It was not just a theological item of belief. It was the authority of God as king, which lay behind the specific details of Israel's law—with all its characteristics that we surveyed above. There was, therefore, a powerfully *ethical* thrust to the acknowledgment of Yahweh's kingship. His reign was one of *righteousness and justice*, earthed in the real world of social, economic and political relationships. And this is what we find in some of the psalms that celebrate it.

If the King of glory dwells on his holy hill, then Psalm 24 asks who can stand there—who can worship God acceptably? The answer is clear and ethical. "The one who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps 24:4). A fuller version of what these phrases mean, spelled out in social reality, is found in Psalm 15. Later kingship psalms emphasize the justice of God's reign.

> Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. (Ps 97:2)

The King is mighty, he loves justice—
you have established equity;
in Jacob you have done
what is just and right. (Ps 99:4)

Again, this is spelled out in social detail in other psalms, in terms of practical compassion on all the needy of the earth—man and beast.

The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.
The LORD is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made. (Ps 145:8-9, cf. 14-20)

He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets prisoners free,
the LORD gives sight to the blind,
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.
The LORD reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD. (Ps 146:7-10)

The kingdom of God, then, meant the reign of *Yahweh*, and where Yahweh is king, justice and compassion must reign too. As we saw above, one of the very core features of the law was the imitation of Yahweh. If *God* chooses to behave in the ways described in Psalm 146, then his people must demonstrate the same qualities in their own social structures and relationships. That is precisely the duty laid on the king in particular, as the embodiment of God's kingship in Psalm 72.

So when Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God, he was not talking about a faraway place or an ideal or an attitude. It was not just pie in

the sky or joy in the heart. The reality of God's rule cannot be spiritualized into heaven (now or later) or privatized into individuals. Of course, it does have spiritual and personal dimensions, which are fundamental also. We are called to submit to God's reign in our individual lives. But the term itself speaks of the aligning of human life on earth, in all its dimensions, with the will of the divine government of God. To pray "may your kingdom come" is to pray "may your will be done on earth as in heaven." The one must produce the other.

"Heaven rules," said Daniel—on earth. And the rule of the God of heaven demands a repentance that puts things right in the social realm as much as in personal humility (Dan 4:26-27). Jesus cannot have meant any less. Especially since his declared agenda, taken as we saw in its precise wording from Isaiah 61, could easily have been taken from the psalm quoted above—a psalm celebrating Yahweh's kingship in specific terms related to human needs and social evils.

To enter the kingdom of God means to submit oneself to the rule of God, and that means a fundamental reorientation of one's ethical commitments and values into line with the priorities and character of the God revealed in the Scriptures. The point of being Israel and living as the people of Yahweh was to make the universal reign of God local and visible in its whole structure of religious, social, economic and political life. It was to manifest in practical reality what it meant to live, as well as to sing, "the LORD reigns."

The eschatological dimension. So in the Old Testament the kingship of God was in one sense a universal sovereignty over all nations, nature and history. But in another sense it meant the specific rule of Yahweh over Israel within the covenant relationship where his kingship was acknowledged, and where it was supposed to be lived out in practical social and economic justice, love and compassion. But God's kingship, third, came to be thought of in a future perspective also because neither of the first two senses was being realized in full.

On the one hand it was obvious that the *nations* did not acknowledge Yahweh as king, and on the other hand it became increasingly and painfully obvious that even *Israel*, who acknowledged him as king, did not demonstrate it. He was king in name and title but not obeyed in reality in

the actual life of the nation. This credibility gap between the professions of worship and the practicalities of life was the spot where the anger of the prophets was most seen and heard. That anger was directed especially at the human kings of Israel, who not only failed to reflect God's kingship in its social and ethical demands but rather perverted and denied it.

So as the Old Testament era went on, there developed the hope and expectation that at some time in the future God himself would intervene to establish his reign in its fullness over his people and over the world. God would come as king and put things right. This hope is found in the prophets. Jeremiah, after a chapter that surveys the failures of several human kings (Jer 22), announces that God himself will "shepherd" his people through a true descendant of David (Jer 23:1-6). Ezekiel, using similar language but in greater depth and detail, combines God's own future kingship with a coming true son of David (Ezek 34; it would be worthwhile to read this whole chapter, thinking about the impact it would have had on Jesus). Shepherds and shepherding were common metaphors for kings in the Old Testament. (Which incidentally shows that when Jesus referred to himself as the good, or model, shepherd, it was a claim to be the rightful king of Israel, the embodiment of God's kingship over his people. "Good shepherd" is not just a picture of cuddly compassion.)

Isaiah 52:7-10 is the basis for the familiar modern hymn "Our God Reigns." In its context it was a word of rejoicing for Israel itself at the time of the restoration from exile (Is 52:7—"say to Zion"), but it also envisages "all the ends of the earth" joining in the song of praise to God's royal salvation. It is a magnificent eschatological and missional song.

The same message of future hope and blessing in Isaiah 33:20-24 is linked to the point that God as king will also be lawgiver and judge.

> For the LORD is our judge,
> the LORD is our lawgiver,
> the LORD is our king;
> it is he who will save us.

Similarly, Isaiah 2:2-5 envisages all nations accepting the law and the rule of Yahweh in such a way that there will be an end to war between nations. The same prophecy in Micah 4:2-5 is followed by an even more

explicit reference to Yahweh as king (Mic 4:6-9), and by the familiar word that it would be from Bethlehem that the ruler of God's people would arise (Mic 5:1-5).

So much, then, for the coming kingdom of God as envisaged by the prophets. Returning to the Psalms, the note of rejoicing on which some of them end is a celebration of the hope of God's coming. The God who reigns *now* in the affirmations of faith and worship will *one day* come to reign in reality, and when he does it will be to put all things right for his whole creation. "Putting things right" is probably the best way to catch what the Hebrew means by "he comes to judge." It does not just mean "to condemn"—though it will certainly mean the destruction of wickedness. But since the coming of God is made the subject of universal rejoicing of all creation, it must also include the idea of God reestablishing his original desire and design for his world, in which the liberation of the peoples will spell joy for nature also (cf. Rom 8:19-25).

> Shout for joy before the LORD, the King.
> Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
> the world, and all who live in it.
> Let the rivers clap their hands,
> let the mountains sing together for joy;
> let them sing before the LORD,
> *for he comes* to judge the earth.
> He will judge the world in righteousness
> and the peoples with equity. (Ps 98:6-9, my italics)

So when Jesus came announcing "The time is fulfilled, the reign of God is at hand," he was making a sensational claim. He was saying, "What you have been longing for as something in the future is now bursting into the present." What they sang about as a matter of hope in worship was now among them as a matter of reality in person—the person of Jesus. The eschatological was breaking into history. God was coming to reign.

The teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God does show that there was still a *future* dimension even from the perspective of his earthly ministry. That is, it was not yet fully manifest in what he came and did. He

likened it to a process that would be at work, even in hidden ways (like seed growing or yeast rising or net fishing).

But the point was, the reign of God had definitely arrived. It was inaugurated. It was present and at work right there in the midst of the people, said Jesus. It gave them an opportunity they must not miss. And it made demands they could not evade—demands that they already knew about from the riches of their Scriptures and all the moral depths of Old Testament faith.

For Jesus did not come to teach people *new* ideas about some new moral philosophy that he called the kingdom of God. Of course he sharpened and provoked their thinking with his questions and parables, transforming their perspectives. Of course he helped them gain a fresh, God's-eye view of how things were meant to be under his rule. Of course he drove his points right home to the inner recesses of the heart, searching our motives as well as our actions. Of course he brought a new urgency, a new power, a new motivation for the obedience of personal discipleship. But in its major features the kingdom of God already had its *essential ethical* content from the Old Testament. The kingdom of God was already filled with the whole range of ethical values, priorities and demands that we have surveyed in the law and the prophets. If Yahweh God has come to reign, then the Scriptures had already shown clearly what that would mean for God's people and for the world.

There was no ambiguity at all about what was required of the people of God under his kingship. No ambiguity about what it would mean for the world when God would establish his rule. The dynamic power of the message of Jesus lay not so much in *what* the kingdom of God meant as in *the fact that it had arrived.* The gospel that Jesus preached was good news of a present reality. Good news of the kingdom of God. Good news, at least, for those who were prepared to receive it in repentant hearts and a radical new agenda for living.

And this is also the note on which we need to end this chapter—gospel! We have spent a lot of time looking at the ethical values, priorities and principles that we find in the Old Testament—in the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms. And we have seen how they are reflected in the life and teaching of Jesus in so many ways. This is not surprising. After all, Jesus

lived a life of perfect obedience, modeling what a faithful Israelite should be like.

But we must immediately be careful not to imagine that he taught that the kingdom of God was all about keeping the rules and somehow proving that you were among the righteous who would stand upright and vindicated on the day God came to establish his kingdom. No—from first to last, Jesus preached the *gospel* of the kingdom. It was a matter of grace and promise, through and through. It was to be received, not earned. You entered it through repentance and faith in him. And then, having entered, having submitted to God as king through submitting to Jesus as Lord and Savior, then and only then you would learn to walk in his ways and live under his rule—in other words, be a disciple of Jesus. That could well be a road of suffering, persecution and death, as it was for Jesus himself. But it was the road of blessing and joy.

And that note of joy—the joy of the kingdom of God—is what the Psalms most celebrate about God's kingship. Isaac Watts captured the mood of Psalm 96 and Psalm 98 in his famous hymn, which really should be sung much more often than just at Christmas! Notice how he echoes the ecstasy of those psalms and the way they include all humanity and all nature, and anticipate the universal rule of God's saving justice and love. And even without *naming* Jesus, we sing the hymn knowing that Jesus is indeed the Lord, King and Savior who Isaac Watts meant. Our final chapter will show how the God of the psalmists is indeed the God who has walked among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Joy to the world! the Lord has come;
Let earth receive her king!
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world! the Savior reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and flocks, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,

Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness
And wonders of his love.

Chapter 5 Questions and Exercises

1. Some people think that the coming and teaching of Jesus make the Old Testament irrelevant. Or they make a big contrast between the "violent god" of the Old Testament and the "kind and loving" teaching of Jesus. Consider or discuss how you would respond to those views in the light of the content of this chapter. What passages would you use to support your answer?
2. Study the story of the temptations/testing of Jesus in the wilderness in Matthew 4:1-11. What do Jesus' three quotes from Deuteronomy 6 and 8 tell us about how Jesus saw himself and his ministry?
3. Read Deuteronomy 4–11, imagining yourself as Jesus reading it. In what ways did those chapters influence the way Jesus thought and taught?
4. Make a list of the things Jesus taught where you can see principles or priorities that reflect the Old Testament. Build two columns—one for references in the Gospels and the other for passages in the Old Testament that you think are reflected in some way in the Gospel text. How could this list help people see how much the teaching of Jesus was rooted in the Scriptures of the Old Testament?
5. Read Luke 4:14-21, which concludes with Jesus saying, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In what ways is it possible and right to apply the message of the Old Testament prophets about social and economic justice to our world today?

6. Read Psalms 93–99 and make a study of what they mean by saying "The LORD reigns." How does your study affect the way you understand the kingdom of God? How is each psalm reflected in the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God?

- 6 -

Jesus and His Old Testament God

In his opening verse, Matthew tells us that Jesus was “the Christ,” or Messiah. We saw in chapter three that “messiah” was not a divine title in itself. The Messiah was the human person whom God would anoint to carry out the plan and purpose of God. That was not the same thing as saying that the Messiah would actually be God. People believed that God would act in and through the Messiah, not necessarily that the Messiah would *be* God.

So today people sometimes say, “Jesus never claimed to be God. He never directly said the words, ‘I am God.’” Rather, they say, Jesus was just a particularly good, loving and humble man. It was only the church hundreds of years later that elevated Jesus to divine status and started worshiping him. The idea that Jesus is God, or a god, is nothing more than a religious myth invented by people who had to find ways to increase his importance in order to sustain their own power.

But this simply won’t do. It just doesn’t stand up to the facts. It certainly doesn’t square with what we read all over the New Testament about how Jesus spoke about himself and how his very first followers came to understand him within his own lifetime and theirs.

Let’s start again, as we did in the previous chapters, with Matthew as our guide. From the beginning he insists that, in Jesus of Nazareth, Yahweh the LORD God of Israel—the God of the Old Testament Scriptures—had kept his promise to come to his people. Then we shall look more widely at the way the rest of the New Testament portrays the identity of Jesus using words that the Old Testament had used only for God. And finally we shall

see that four of the greatest functions of Yahweh in the Old Testament are calmly attributed to Jesus in the New. Jesus does, or will do, things that only God has the right to do, according to the Bible.

Jesus and the Arrival of God

At the time of Jesus, whom were people expecting to turn up? They longed, of course, for God to send somebody to lead them out of their oppression and the feeling of being exiles in their own land. That's what their hopes of a messiah mostly focused on—which (as we saw earlier) was probably the main reason Jesus tended to stop people using that title about him. The word *messiah* carried popular assumptions that Jesus did not agree with. But more important than whatever *human* figure they hoped for, the longing of the Jews was that *God himself* would come to their aid. There are many promises in the Old Testament that speak about God himself intervening to save his people, to shepherd them, to gather them back to himself, to dwell among them again.

So when Matthew introduces John the Baptist, who in turn will introduce Jesus, it is very significant how Matthew chooses to explain and interpret the arrival of John through a text from Isaiah. Matthew applies to John the Baptist the following description:

> A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
> "Prepare the way for the LORD,
> make straight paths for him." (Mt 3:3; cf. Is 40:3)

The implication is clear: John was preparing the way not just for the arrival of Jesus but for the arrival of the Lord himself—which in Old Testament terms, of course, meant the LORD, Yahweh, the God of Israel. God himself was on the way! Get the place ready!

The difficulty was that Jesus did not appear to be doing all the things that people probably expected to happen when God showed up. Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God coming in hidden and unexpected ways, so much so that even John himself began to have questions later on. Had he announced the wrong messiah? So in Matthew 11 we read how John, after

he'd been in prison for some time, sent some of his own disciples to get a straight answer out of Jesus.

"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" they asked. And how did Jesus reply? He did not get angry and point to his lapel badge: *"Jesus—The Messiah You've Always Wanted!"* The whole messiah thing was too confused anyway. Nor did he rebuff them with, "Look, don't you know that it's *God* you're talking to? Can't you see my halo?"

No, Jesus simply told them to look around and see what was happening in his ministry, and then lay their observations alongside another familiar passage from Isaiah. "Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor'" (Mt 11:4-5).

With such a list Jesus was undoubtedly echoing Isaiah 35, a passage that was written for people like John who were discouraged and doubting that God would ever come to the rescue. To them, the prophet said:

> Strengthen the feeble hands,
> steady the knees that give way;
> say to those with fearful hearts,
> "Be strong, do not fear;
> your God will come,
> he will come with vengeance;
> with divine retribution
> he will come to save you."
> *Then* will the eyes of the blind be opened
> and the ears of the deaf unstopped
> *Then* will the lame leap like a deer,
> and the mute tongue shout for joy. (Is 35:3-6, my italics)

Notice the repeated word *then*. *When?* When would such things happen? When "your God will come." So if these things were clearly happening around Jesus, then the big question was: Who had come? Who was Jesus? By adding "and the good news is preached to the poor," Jesus was alluding also to Isaiah 61:1 (as he had done in his exposition of that text in the

synagogue in Nazareth in Luke 4:16-21). So Jesus was claiming to be the *anointed one of God* prophesied in that text. But he was more. He was doing what the Scriptures said would be the signs that *God himself* had come.

Matthew then tells us that as John the Baptist's disciples were leaving to take that word back to John, Jesus continued to speak to his own disciples about John. Yet again he sets everything in the light of the Scriptures. Who was John? How should the crowds understand the significance of his arrival and ministry? Jesus reminds them of Malachi.

> This is the one [i.e., John the Baptist] about whom it is written:
>
> "I will send my messenger ahead of you,
> who will prepare your way before you." (Mt 11:10)

What Malachi had said was this: "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the LORD you are seeking will come to his temple" (Mal 3:1). The *me* in Malachi's text is God himself. But Jesus hears the words as addressed to himself—*you*. That is, Jesus clearly identified himself with God in Malachi's text. God had made that promise, and now he had kept it by sending John as the messenger ahead of God's own arrival in the person of Jesus. Such an interpretation of the combined ministries of John and Jesus must have been very hard to grasp when you were living in the midst of it all.

If John and his disciples were puzzled and questioning, so were the disciples of Jesus. So Jesus took them up a mountain for a life-changing demonstration of his divine glory. If they could not grasp who he truly was, then he would show them. Here is Matthew's account of the transfiguration, slightly abbreviated.

> After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. . . .
>
> A bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to

him!”

> When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.
>
> As they were coming down the mountain . . . the disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”
>
> Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist. (Mt 17:1-13)

What an experience! Peter and John never forgot it (see Jn 1:14; 2 Pet 1:16-18). They knew they had been in the presence of God. They recognized the signs that often accompanied a manifestation of God in the Old Testament: extreme shining brightness, a cloud and a voice. Seeing Moses and Elijah there too, the awestruck disciples must have wondered whether they had been transported to Mount Sinai or Mount Carmel. They reacted as people did in the Old Testament when God appeared or spoke: “they fell facedown to the ground, terrified.” Not surprising, really.

And once again, in the conversation afterward, Jesus helps them to understand the significance of John the Baptist. They knew the accepted teaching of the experts—Elijah must first come before God arrives. The staggering challenge lay in the implications. Here is the logic:

- *Elijah* comes first, then *God* will come (drawn from Mal 4:5).
- You know that *John* has already come first, and then *Jesus* came.
- So if *John* was *Elijah*, who is *Jesus*?
- Get it?

In ways like this Matthew shows that Jesus used Scriptures that spoke about God in ways that pointed to himself. He did not stand up with a banner proclaiming, “I am God.” He did not need to. The people around him knew

their Scriptures. Jesus pointed to those texts, pointed to himself and in effect told them to draw their own conclusions.

The most climactic moment when Matthew shows us that Jesus was the personal embodiment of Yahweh, the God of Old Testament Israel, comes at the very end of his Gospel in what has become known as the Great Commission.

> Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Mt 28:16-20)

For those who "when they saw him" immediately "worshiped him," their conviction had already become crystal clear. Seeing Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, they knew they were in the presence of the Lord God who alone was worthy of their worship. For some others who "doubted," Jesus yet again echoes the Scriptures they knew so well.

In the book of Deuteronomy, exalted affirmations are made about Yahweh. In Deuteronomy 10:14, 17, for example, we are told that he is the God who owns the whole universe ("the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it"), and exercises authority over all cosmic powers and authorities as "God of gods and LORD of lords." Yahweh is the one single, sovereign, cosmic God. And in Deuteronomy 4 we read this: "Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in *heaven above and on the earth below*. There is no other" (Deut 4:39, my italics).

These scriptural phrases would have been familiar to all those on that mountain as words that could only be spoken by, or about, the living God. But these are precisely the words that Jesus echoes when he stands there and calmly utters the breathtaking affirmation: "All authority *in heaven and on earth* has been given to me." Jesus meant (and Matthew wants us to understand that Jesus meant) that he shares the "Yahweh identity." Jesus adopts the Yahweh position and uses scriptural Yahweh texts about himself.

Everything that his disciples knew to be true about the God of their Scriptures, their history and their people, they must now understand to be true of Jesus. If they had not realized it when he first came to earth, they must now be convinced of it before he leaves the earth: in Jesus of Nazareth, the LORD God, the Holy One of Israel, had come among them. And those who understood this responded in the only proper way—they worshiped him.

Jesus and the Identity of God

What we have been seeing in Matthew's Gospel can be seen in the other Gospels as well, of course. John's Gospel, written after the other three, plunges straight in with its preface affirming the divine identity of Jesus, the Word made flesh at his incarnation. And at its climax, Thomas declares to the risen Jesus, "My Lord and my God." And Jesus did not contradict Thomas. In between, John shows Jesus identifying himself in a range of "I am" sayings, climaxing in the unequivocal claim in John 8:58 that he is none other than the one who declared to Moses, "I am who I am."

However, we do not have to wait until texts as late as John's Gospel to find clear evidence that the followers of Jesus knew and affirmed his identity as the embodiment of the LORD God of the Old Testament. The New Testament contains evidence of the prayer and worship of the earliest communities of believers, reaching back probably even to the time before they were nicknamed "Christians," and certainly back before most of the New Testament itself was written. From the very earliest days, followers of Jesus were addressing him in prayer and worshiping him as Lord—things that Jewish men and women would never have dreamt of doing unless they were absolutely convinced that Jesus was truly God and that it was right and proper to call on him in worship and prayer. Otherwise, they were guilty of blasphemy and idolatry.

We need to look at two phrases, one in Aramaic, the other in Greek. One is a prayer, the other is an affirmation of faith.

Marana tha! At the end of his first letter to Corinth, Paul concludes with an expression in the Aramaic language—*Marana tha!* (1 Cor 16:22).

Since he leaves it untranslated, the words must have been familiar even to Greek-speaking Christians. The phrase means "O Lord, come!" Since Paul quotes it in its original language, it must have been a well-known, familiar part of the worship of the original Aramaic-speaking followers of Jesus. That is, it would have been an established part of the worship of the first followers of Jesus who lived in Palestine and spoke the same language as Jesus and other Jews in that part of the world. So this is a piece of the worship language of the earliest followers of Jesus long before they were even called Christians, and long before the missionary journeys of Paul into the Gentile world of Asia Minor and Europe. The phrase must have traveled with Paul and the other early missionaries as a regular part of Christian worship even when the language was Greek (just as *hallelujah* has become a universal and untranslated word in Christian worship in many languages, even though it is originally a Hebrew phrase meaning "Praise Yahweh").

Marana tha! Paul exclaims, writing it with his own hand (1 Cor 16:21) and expecting his readers to understand it and echo it themselves. *Mar* or *Maran* was the Aramaic word for "Lord." It is clear that the "Lord" Paul is referring to is Jesus, since the immediately following verse speaks of "the grace of the Lord Jesus." So here is a word that the earliest Aramaic-speaking Christian communities must have used to refer to Jesus. But we also know that the Aramaic *Mar* (*Marah, Maran*) was used among Aramaic-speaking *Jews* as a term for the God of the Old Testament Scriptures—that is, for Yahweh, the God of Israel. The word could also be used (and indeed it is still used in the Greek Orthodox tradition) for human beings in positions of authority (just like the Greek *kyrios* can be used as a human title as well as for God). But there are plenty of occasions in Aramaic texts of the period (including the Qumran scrolls) where the term is used as a title of God.

It is important to understand that the expression is a *prayer addressed to* Jesus (asking him to come), not just a *hope expressed about* Jesus (stating that he will come). So, by directing their invocation to *Mar Jesus,* the earliest Aramaic-speaking believers were addressing their prayer to the only one who can legitimately be invoked in prayer—the LORD God. They were calling on Jesus, their Lord, to come.

Kyrios Iēsous! The second piece of early evidence for the content of the faith of the first believers is the simple affirmation *kyrios Iēsous*, "Jesus is Lord." When the two words come together like this with *kyrios* first, it is not just a title (Lord Jesus) but a sentence with the word "is" understood: "Jesus is Lord."

Paul uses the term *kyrios* 275 times, almost always with reference to Jesus. But he was by no means the first to do that. As with the early Aramaic expression *marana tha*, Paul inherited this Greek confession from those who were followers of Jesus before him. Indeed he probably heard Christians using the expression *and hated it*, in the days when he was persecuting those who dared to claim that this crucified carpenter from Nazareth was (God forbid!) the Messiah and (even worse!) that he was Lord. It was Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus that made him blindingly aware that the phrase was not the heinous blasphemy he would initially have thought. Rather, it was the simple truth. Luke's account of that event stresses this point—that Paul came to recognize not just that Jesus was indeed risen and alive, but also that he was Lord (Acts 9:5, 17).

When Paul uses the two-word phrase in his own writings, it is clearly already a christological formula. That is, it was a frequently repeated phrase in Christian worship. It needed no explanation because it was already universally accepted as the standard and defining confession of Christian identity. It occurs in this formulaic way in Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3 and with slight expansion (to Jesus Christ) in Philippians 2:11.

Now the Greek word *kyrios*, like the Aramaic word *mar*, could be used as an honorific title for human beings (just as the word *lord* can be in English, or *seigneur* in French). But long before the word *kyrios* was ever applied to Jesus, it was probably being used by those who had translated the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament into the Greek texts that we know as the Septuagint as a way of rendering the personal divine name Yahweh. I say "probably" because we do not have many manuscripts of the Greek versions of Old Testament books that go back before the New Testament era. But even in them it is interesting that the scribes did not attempt to transliterate the Hebrew name Yahweh into equivalent Greek letters. Rather, they chose to indicate in Greek a custom that was already well established when Hebrew speakers read the Old Testament text aloud. Whenever

Hebrew readers came to the four letters YHWH in the written text, they substituted the Hebrew word *adonay* (meaning "Lord" in Hebrew) in their oral reading (a practice that Jews still follow to this day). So the Greek translators followed this tradition, and in the earliest manuscripts they either left the four Hebrew letters blank with dots (to warn the reader) or they put in four very ancient Hebrew symbols (indicating that the Name should not be spoken aloud but another word substituted). In view of the fact that later Greek manuscripts universally inserted *kyrios* at these points (more than six thousand times), it is most likely that scribes and readers were already using that word as the Greek equivalent of *adonay* whenever the Hebrew "Yahweh" occurred.

Any Greek-speaking Jew of the first century would have been entirely familiar with this custom. So when they read their Old Testament Scriptures in Greek, it was second nature for them to read *kyrios* and think *adonay*—knowing that *adonay* was a substitute for the personal name of God in the original Hebrew. So they read *kyrios*, and they thought "the covenant God of Israel." It is altogether remarkable, then, that even before Paul was writing his letters—that is, within the first two decades after Jesus' resurrection—this same term was already being applied to Jesus. And it was being applied not merely as a term of honor for a respected human being (as would have been natural), but with the fully freighted significance of its Old Testament reference to Yahweh the God of Israel.

We know this from Philippians 2:6-11. Paul may have composed this well-known passage just as it is in his letter. But it is much more likely, as many scholars think, that these are the lines of an early Christian hymn, which Paul is quoting here because it so strongly supports the point he is making at that point in his letter. Not only does the hymn celebrate the "super-exaltation" of Jesus (Phil 2:9a); not only does it say that God has given to Jesus "the name above every name" (Phil 2:9b, which can mean only one name—Yahweh); but on top of all that the hymn clinches its point by quoting one of the most monotheistic texts in the Old Testament about Yahweh and applying it to Jesus:

> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
> in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord

to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:10-11)

This is a partial quotation of words that were originally spoken *by Yahweh about himself* in Isaiah 45:22-23. And in that context the point of the words was to underline Yahweh's uniqueness as God and his unique ability to save.

"There is no God apart from me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
There is none but me.

"Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth;
for I am God, and there is no other.
By myself I have sworn,
my mouth has uttered in all integrity
a word that will not be revoked:
Before me every knee will bow;
by me every tongue will swear.
They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone
are deliverance [salvation] and strength.'" (Is 45:21-24)

Those magnificent prophecies of Isaiah 40–55 assert again and again that Yahweh is utterly unique as the only living God in his sovereign power over all creation, all nations and all history, and in his sole power to save. This was a core Jewish belief about God.

So here we have an early Christian hymn in Philippians 2 that deliberately selects a Scripture from such a context and applies it to Jesus. This early Christian hymn writer and all who sang or recited his words were affirming that Jesus shares the identity and uniqueness of Yahweh as sovereign God and Savior. They were so sure of this that they did not hesitate to insert the name of *Jesus* where the name *Yahweh* had occurred in the biblical text itself.

And then Paul, by quoting this hymn as part of his argument, calmly "gives to Jesus a God-title, applies to Jesus a God-text and anticipates for

Jesus God-worship" (a little triplet of phrases that John Stott often used when expounding this text in Philippians).

Philippians 2 is the most notable example of this practice of quoting Old Testament texts about Yahweh and referring them to Jesus. Paul does it quite deliberately and often. Look at the New Testament texts in the left column, and then compare them with the Old Testament texts in the right column. In each case, an Old Testament word about Yahweh God of Israel has been applied to Jesus.

Table 6.1

Rom 10:13	Joel 2:32
Rom 14:11	Is 45:23
1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17	Jer 9:24
1 Cor 2:16	Is 40:13
2 Tim 2:19	Num 16:5

Even more powerfully, the author of Hebrews launches his epistle with a whole salvo of God texts applied to Jesus.

This habit of taking Old Testament texts that applied to Yahweh, God of Israel, and calmly using them in contexts that clearly apply them to Jesus, is so "normal," so almost "casual," that we might miss how significant it really is. For Jewish believers to do this with their Scriptures, to apply God texts to a man who was their own contemporary, must mean that they were utterly and fully convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was none other than the Lord God whom they loved, worshiped and served.

Jesus and the Actions of God

Many of these Scriptures that were applied to Jesus are *functional* texts. That is, they speak of things that Yahweh does, provides or accomplishes. By such scriptural quotation, those functions of Yahweh are then attributed to, or closely associated with, Jesus. In other words, in the New Testament we find that they spoke about Jesus doing things that the Old Testament had said only God could do.

Actually, this is in some ways even more important than merely saying something like "Jesus is God." Such a bald statement leaves far too much unsaid. It is too abstract and undefined. The word *god*, in English or other languages, can be used with all kinds of meanings and assumptions that are not necessarily biblical at all. What the New Testament does is far more specific. It picks up some of the most essential actions of Yahweh God in the Old Testament—things that were at the heart of what it meant to say that "the LORD is (the) God and there is no other"—and makes Jesus the subject of those actions. Jesus does what only God can do. Let's take the four most outstanding things the Old Testament says about Yahweh. The Old Testament affirms that Yahweh alone is the universal *Creator, ruler, judge and Savior*. According to the New Testament, Jesus performs those exact same roles and functions.

Creator. The new Christian believers in Corinth had a question for Paul. Could they buy and eat meat in the marketplace, knowing that the animal had been earlier sacrificed to idols in a pagan temple? The question occupies Paul's pastoral and theological attention for three whole chapters (1 Cor 8–10). Two issues are intertwined: the status of idols (are they "real"?) and the state of the meat (is it somehow "contaminated" by having been sacrificed to an idol?). Paul tackles the first issue head-on at the beginning of his argument (1 Cor 8:4-6) and the second toward the end (1 Cor 10:25-26). And significantly he applies a strong creation theology to both questions.

In 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 Paul reminds these new believers of something he must have taught them from the strong monotheistic texts of the Old Testament—especially Deuteronomy 6:4. That famous verse is known as the *shema* (because its opening word in Hebrew is *shema*, which means "Hear!"). "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one." In fact, Paul not only recalls that text but expands it, both by emphasizing God as the

Creator of all things and by including Jesus in that role. “Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Cor 8:6).

All things came *from one God*, the Father, and all things came *through one Lord*, Jesus Christ. So if Jesus is Lord of all creation, these other so-called gods and idols have no real *divine* existence in the universe. It is truly remarkable that Paul has identified Jesus with the word *Lord* in the Hebrew text. “One God, one Lord” is the essence of Jewish monotheism, and Paul affirms it just as strongly as any of his contemporaries. Paul was not *adding* Jesus as another “Lord” to the one God of the text. No, he was *identifying* Jesus as that “one Lord” who is the “one God.” And he is saying that Jesus is one with God in the creation of all things, including the human race.

Moving to the other end of his argument, what about the meat then? Should Christians not buy and eat it because it had been sacrificed to idols? Paul’s answer is that Christians are free to eat whatever they like because all food comes from the good hand of God the Creator. And to make that point, he quotes Psalm 24—“The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (1 Cor 10:26). In the Hebrew text, of course, “The LORD” was Yahweh, the personal name of God. But for Paul, “The Lord” is clearly Jesus, since a few verses earlier he has been speaking of “the cup of the Lord,” and “the Lord’s table.” The whole earth, claims Paul, belongs to Jesus as its Lord, in the same way that the psalmist claimed that the whole earth belongs to Yahweh and not the gods of any other nation. Jesus is one with God the Creator.

The most outstanding text affirming the role of Christ in creation comes in Colossians 1:15-20. Five times Paul uses the phrase *ta panta*, “all things,” and makes it clear he is referring to the whole created universe—all things physical and spiritual other than God himself. And it is all created, sustained and redeemed by Christ.

> The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is

> the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Paul places Jesus in the same relationship to creation as the Old Testament affirms about Yahweh, the one living Creator God. The whole creation belongs to Christ by right of creation, inheritance and redemption. Christ is the source, sustainer and redeemer of all that exists. The same claims are made more briefly in Hebrews describing Jesus as God's Son, "whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe" (Heb 1:2), and by John describing Jesus as the Word "through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (Jn 1:3).

Those are the most explicit places in the New Testament where Jesus is identified as the Creator, but there are plenty of hints elsewhere. When the disciples, sitting in a boat on a calm sea that seconds earlier had been a raging storm, asked the question, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him" (Lk 8:25), the Psalms had already given the only possible answer—the God who had created them (Ps 65:7; 89:9; and especially 107:23-32).

Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Mk 13:31). He was claiming that his own word had a status and durability greater than the whole creation. And that meant that his word was on the same level as the creative word of God himself (Is 40:8).

On another occasion, some children were shouting his praises in the temple, and his opponents were indignant. Jesus responded by pointedly asking,

> Have you never read,
>
> "From the lips of children and infants,
> you, Lord, have called forth your praise"? (Mt 21:16)

He was quoting Psalm 8:2. That psalm, of course, was talking about praise offered to the LORD, Yahweh, for his creation of the heavens. Yet Jesus

calmly claims that such praise from children is appropriate for himself.

So then, the Old Testament repeatedly affirms that Yahweh the God of Israel alone is the *sole creator of all that exists*. And we have now seen that the New Testament includes Jesus in that role.

Ruler. The Old Testament affirms this uniqueness of Yahweh, second, through the equally robust affirmation that he alone is the *sovereign ruler of all that happens.* Yahweh reigns as the governor of all history. As Psalm 33 expresses it, the LORD calls the world into existence through his word, runs the world according to his plans and calls the world to account before his watching eye. And as Isaiah 40–55 proclaims, he does all these things utterly unaided and unrivaled. Yahweh alone is ruler of all. Where, then, could Jesus the carpenter's son from Nazareth possibly fit in such a view of things?

The answer came from Jesus himself. In a bold stroke he applied to himself the words of Psalm 110. This psalm went on to become the most quoted text in the New Testament. In fact the Jews had already understood that this psalm was about the coming Messiah even before the time of Jesus.

> The LORD says to my lord:
>
> "Sit at my right hand
> until I make your enemies
> a footstool for your feet." (Ps 110:1)

The first time Jesus quotes this text it was in a question to make people think (Mk 12:35-37). If David, the author of the psalm, called the expected Messiah "Lord," surely the Messiah must be *more* than just a "son of David"?

But the second time he quoted it was in a much more dramatic and expanded way. It was at his trial when the high priest asked him directly "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the blessed One?" "'I am,' said Jesus. 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven'" (Mk 14:61-62).

The phrase "sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One" is a clear echo of Psalm 110:1, and it linked Jesus with the rule and government of God. For in the Old Testament "the right hand of God" was a powerful symbol

for Yahweh's power in action. By his right hand Yahweh accomplished the work of creation (Is 48:13). By his right hand he defeated his enemies (Ex 15:6, 12). And by his right hand he saved those who took refuge in him (Ps 17:7; 20:7; 60:5; 118:15-16). For Jesus to claim that his accusers would see him occupying *that* position at the right hand of God was astonishing—indeed it was laughably grandiose at a time when he was under arrest and facing execution.

But Jesus made his startling point even more dramatically by combining this echo of Psalm 110 with an echo of Daniel 7:13-14, which spoke about the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven into the presence of the Ancient of Days. This was a very explicit connection to the universal power, glory, dominion and kingdom of God. The high priest knew exactly what Jesus was claiming and immediately accused him of blasphemy.

Jesus' earliest followers took their cue from Jesus himself and used the imagery of Psalm 110:1 to describe the present "location" of the risen and ascended Jesus. *Where was Jesus*, now that he was no longer walking around in Galilee? Jesus was not just "absent." Jesus was now already "*seated at the right hand of God.*" That is, they were affirming that Jesus is now sharing in the exercise of universal governance that belonged uniquely to Yahweh.

Peter was the first to make this connection and affirmation on the day of Pentecost. He links Psalm 110 to the resurrection of Jesus and then draws the cosmic conclusion about the Lordship of Jesus.

> God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to *the right hand of God*, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,
>
> "The LORD said to my Lord:
> 'Sit at my right hand
> until I make your enemies
> a footstool for your feet.'"
>
> Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah. (Acts 2:32-36, my

italics)

Paul was fond of using the double imagery of Psalm 110 (the right hand of God; enemies beneath the feet). It gave him the language to talk about the authority of the risen Christ and how Christ now shared the universal rule that belonged to Yahweh. And he then applied that truth in various ways. Here are some texts that echo Psalm 110. In Romans 8:34 he uses Christ's position of risen authority at God's right hand as the guarantee that no other power in the universe can separate us from the love of God. In 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 he looks forward to seeing all God's enemies, including eventually death itself, under the feet of the reigning Christ. In Colossians 3:1 he urges Christians to live their lives from the perspective of Christ's risen and ascended position at the right hand of God. And in Ephesians 1:20-23 he clearly echoes Psalm 110 in affirming Christ as Lord and ruler of all things, for the sake of the church.

> That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and *seated him at his right hand* in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed *all things under his feet* and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Eph 1:19-23, my italics, showing the echoes of Psalm 110)

Revelation climactically affirms that Jesus shares the governing rule of God over the whole universe. He is "ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev 1:5) and "ruler [or beginning] of God's creation" (Rev 3:14). In terms of Old Testament monotheism, such things could only ever be said about Yahweh. Yet here both statements are explicitly made about Jesus. Then in his vision John sees "the Lamb that was slain" (the crucified Jesus) standing at the center of the throne, along with the One who sits on it, and he hears the worship of the vast choir of the whole creation singing praise simultaneously:

> To him who sits on the throne *and* to the Lamb
> be praise and honor and glory and power,

for ever and ever! (Rev 5:13)

So it is clear that the New Testament speaks of Jesus Christ exercising the same sovereign rule that the Old Testament ascribed to the LORD God of Israel. The song of the psalmist, "*The LORD is king*," becomes the faith of the believer, "*Jesus is LORD.*"

Judge. One of the core functions of Yahweh in the Old Testament as a dimension of his sovereign rule is that he judges the whole earth. This conviction is found in the mouth of Abraham (Gen 18:25) and echoes through the Old Testament. Israel believed it, and the whole creation would one day celebrate it. Yahweh God is the universal judge of all creation.

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
    let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
    let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes,
    he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
    and the peoples in his faithfulness. (Ps 96:11-13)

Now if Jesus shares in the rule of God "at his right hand," then that must include sharing in the exercise of God's judgment. And that is indeed what the New Testament affirms. In fact, Jesus claimed it. His parable about the sheep and the goats places himself, as Son of Man, on the seat of judgment. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Mt 25:31-32).

Paul picks up the Old Testament expectation of "the Day of the Lord," which several prophets used to speak about the future day of God's combined judgment and salvation, and transformed the phrase into "the day of *Christ*" (Phil 2:16). That will be "the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares" (Rom 2:16; cf. 2 Thess 1:5-10). And just as the Old Testament looked forward to the day when all nations would be summoned before Yahweh as the judge of all the earth, so

Paul can affirm that "we must all appear before the judgment seat *of Christ*" (2 Cor 5:10), which means exactly the same as "we will all stand before *God's* judgment seat" (Rom 14:10).

Indeed, just as the Old Testament prophets warned people about the future judgment of God in order to motivate them to better behavior in the present, so Paul writes to Christian believers from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds that they must learn to accept one another and not treat each other with condemnation or contempt. And to motivate such behavior he appeals (among other things) to the fact that we all stand before Christ as judge. Once again, we find that Paul takes Scriptures that spoke about the LORD God and calmly applies them to Jesus Christ.

> For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.
>
> You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written:
>
> "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord,
> 'every knee will bow before me;
> every tongue will acknowledge God.'"
>
> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. (Rom 14:9-12)

The New Testament, then, reaffirms what the Old Testament had said about the final judgment of the living God but sees it now embodied in the one whom God has appointed to that seat of final authority—Jesus Christ. The psalmist's song of joy, "*He comes to judge the earth,*" is echoed by Christ's own promise, "*Behold, I am coming soon.*"

Savior. Among the songs of the redeemed in Revelation is this great affirmation:

> Salvation belongs to our God,
> who sits on the throne,
> and to the Lamb. (Rev 7:10)

Every Old Testament Israelite could have sung the first two lines of that song. It was one of the strongest beliefs they had—that Yahweh the God of Israel was the only God who could save anybody or any nation. Saving people is his speciality. Salvation virtually defines the *identity* of Yahweh God. "Our God is a God who saves" (Ps 68:20).

One of the earliest celebrations of salvation comes from Moses in the wake of the crossing of the sea at the exodus. Moses sings, "the LORD is my strength and my defense; *he has become my salvation*" (Ex 15:2, my italics). One of the oldest poetic metaphors for Yahweh describes him as "the Rock their Savior" (Deut 32:15). In the Psalms Yahweh is above all else the God who saves, simply because that is who he is and what he does most consistently, most often, and best. The 136 occurrences of the Hebrew root *yasha* ("to save") in the Psalms account for 40 percent of all the uses of that root in the Old Testament. "LORD, you are the God who saves me" (Ps 88:1), "the horn of my salvation" (Ps 18:2), "the Rock of our salvation" (Ps 95:1), "my salvation and my honor" (Ps 62:7), "my Savior and my God" (Ps 42:5). And not just mine, and not even just of humans, for this God saves "both people and animals" (Ps 36:6). So when Israel hit rock bottom in the exile, the prophet needed to remind them who its God was: "I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Is 43:3).

So yes, Israelites would have cheerfully sung, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne." But the third line of the song in Revelation includes Jesus within the saving work of God—Jesus the Lamb who was slain, Jesus the crucified and risen Savior. Salvation belongs as much to Jesus as to the God of Old Testament faith, for the two are really one in identity and function.

The name Jehoshua (Joshua, Jeshua, Jesus) means "Yahweh is salvation." Matthew records the angel explaining the name: "because he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). Luke festoons the arrival of Jesus with the language of salvation. He uses salvation terms seven times in his first three chapters: Luke 1:47, 69, 71, 77; 2:11, 30; and 3:6.

Jesus and his contemporaries know that the power to forgive sins, a central (though not exclusive) part of what salvation means in the Bible, belonged to God alone. And God had established approved mechanisms for such forgiveness to be available in the sacrificial system in the temple. So

when Jesus astonishingly declared to a paralyzed man not only that he was healed but also forgiven (and that he was forgiven simply because Jesus said so, without going to the temple), he faced the indignant question, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mk 2:7). Exactly right. So what was Jesus claiming for himself then, by claiming to do what only God could do? He was claiming the power to forgive—the saving power that belonged to God alone.

When Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem, it wasn’t because he was tired. He had walked all the way from Galilee. He didn’t *need* a donkey for the last mile or two. No, Jesus was acting out in a very deliberate and public way the fulfillment of a Scripture that everybody knew.

> Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
> Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
> See, your king comes to you,
> righteous and victorious, *[or, bringing salvation]*
> lowly and riding on a donkey,
> on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zech 9:9, my italics)

No wonder the crowds called out “Hosanna,” which is an urgent cry meaning, “Save us, now.” And they cried it to the one they hailed as “coming in the name of the Lord.” They may not have understood that the kind of salvation they wanted (freedom from Roman occupation) was not the salvation they actually needed. But what they did understand was that only someone who would act in the power of Yahweh could save them in any sense at all. They needed *God* to fulfill his promise that the LORD would come to Zion and to his temple—and that is exactly what God was doing that day in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the rest of the New Testament, Jesus is called Savior again and again, and God’s salvation comes to sinners only through Jesus Christ. But we should not get so familiar with this that we don’t see how surprising it is that they could speak about Jesus in this way. The Greek word *soter* (“savior”) was a fairly common term in the classical world. It was applied as an honorific title to both human kings and military conquerors, and also to the great gods and heroes of mythology. Roman emperors could be addressed as “our great god and savior.” There were plenty of “saviors” in

the pagan world. But not in New Testament Christianity. The word “savior” in the New Testament is applied to God eight times and to Jesus sixteen times, *and to nobody else at all ever*. “Salvation belongs to our God . . . and to the Lamb.” Nobody else merits even a mention. No other Savior but God in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

The earliest followers of Jesus were Jews. They knew that Yahweh alone is God and there is no other source of salvation among the gods or on the earth. They believed this passionately because their Scriptures affirmed it with unmistakable clarity:

> There is no God apart from me,
> a righteous God and a Savior;
> there is none but me.
> Turn to me and be saved,
> all you ends of the earth;
> for I am God, and there is no other. (Is 45:21-22)

Yet now they were so utterly convinced that Jesus of Nazareth shared the very identity of Yahweh their God that they could speak about Jesus in exactly the same way. Peter declares, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12; the same point is made in Acts 2:38; 5:31; 13:38; 15:11). The writer to the Hebrews describes Jesus as the author or pioneer of salvation (Heb 2:10), the source of our eternal salvation (Heb 5:9) and the mediator of complete salvation for all who come to God through him (Heb 7:25). Paul piles up the phrases “God our Savior” or “Christ our Savior” seven times in the tiny letter to Titus alone (sometimes he even uses both together: “our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ”; Tit 2:13). And in typical fashion, he takes a text from the Old Testament that spoke about calling on the name of the LORD for salvation (Joel 2:32) and simply applies it to Christ. “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. . . . for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Rom 10:9, 13).

Salvation in the New Testament is as completely Christ shaped as salvation in the Old Testament is Yahweh shaped. And so the psalmist’s

confident trust in *Yahweh, God of our salvation* is echoed by Paul's joyful longing for the appearing of *our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ* (Tit 2:13).

Conclusion

So what have we seen in this final chapter?

First of all we have seen a negative but very important point. There is one idea that we simply have to reject as impossible. That is the idea that Jesus was just a good man who gave us some rather splendid teaching about God and how we should all be more loving and kind but who only was elevated to divine status centuries later by power-hungry Christians. That idea is simply impossible to square with the earliest evidence we have from the New Testament itself, evidence that comes from before those earliest documents were written.

Then, positively, we have seen that as the earliest followers of Jesus sought to understand who he was, they naturally turned to their sacred Scriptures—what we call the Old Testament. And as they did so, they found again and again that the God of their historical faith, Yahweh God himself, had come among them in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus himself made astonishing claims to fulfill Scriptures that spoke about God coming to save his people. And with total conviction (for which they were willing to suffer and die), his earliest followers addressed Jesus in worship and prayer, using language drawn straight from passages of the Old Testament that had been written about Yahweh and sometimes spoken by Yahweh. And above all, both Jesus himself and his earliest followers attributed to Jesus functions and actions that were uniquely and exclusively things that God alone could do as Creator, ruler, judge and Savior. Jesus did, does, and will do what only God can do.

In our first five chapters we have seen that the Old Testament tells the story that Jesus completed. It declares the promise that he fulfilled. It provides the pictures and models that shaped his identity. It programs a mission that he accepted and passed on. It teaches a moral orientation to God and the world that he endorsed, sharpened and laid as the foundation for obedient discipleship. We have seen also that the Old Testament reveals

to us the God who, in Jesus of Nazareth, “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14).

So when we read the Old Testament, we do not need to look for forced hints in every text that “Jesus must be in here somewhere.” Rather we should be aware as Christian readers that the God who presents himself to us in these pages of the Old Testament as Yahweh is the God whom we know and see in the face of Jesus in the New Testament.

We have come to the end of a long journey in this book! I hope it has been a journey of biblical discovery that you will want to make again and again, to explore all the rich and wonderful scenery along the way. How can we summarize what we have seen? What kind of relationship exists between Jesus Christ and the Old Testament? How does it relate to him and how does he relate to it? We can summarize our six chapters like this:

- The relationship between the Old Testament and Jesus is *historical*, because the story of God with his people links them together with Christ as the climax.
- The relationship between the Old Testament and Jesus is *covenantal*, because the promise of God in the Old is fulfilled through Christ in the New.
- The relationship between the Old Testament and Jesus is *representational,* because the identity of Israel is embodied in Jesus as its Messiah King.
- The relationship between the Old Testament and Jesus is *missional*, because Jesus accomplished the great purpose of God for all nations and all creation that the Old Testament declared.
- The relationship between the Old Testament and Jesus is *ethical*, because the way of justice and compassion that the Old Testament holds up as pleasing to God is endorsed and amplified by Jesus in the New.
- And above all, the relationship between the Old Testament and Jesus is *incarnational,* because in Jesus of Nazareth, the LORD God, the Holy One of Israel, has walked among us.

As we love, worship and obey him as our Savior and Lord, may we love, honor, read and understand the Scriptures that were so precious and formative in his heart and mind.

Chapter 6 Questions and Exercises

1. If someone challenged you with the opinion that Jesus was just a good man who never claimed to be God, how would you respond, and what Bible texts would you use?

2. Why is it inadequate simply to say “Jesus was God”? What does the word *God* actually mean to most people in your culture? What Old Testament texts would you use to make clear that the person, character and actions of the God who was revealed in the Old Testament were then embodied in Jesus?

3. Study Philippians 2:5-11, Colossians 1:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 8:4-6. In each case explain what Paul meant—and the Old Testament background to what Paul says—about Jesus.

4. From the final section of this chapter, choose a New Testament text for each of the affirmations that Jesus Christ is Creator, Ruler, Judge and Savior. How would you show from the Old Testament that each of these functions is a sovereign prerogative of the LORD God alone?

5. Think about the journey of this whole book. Choose a New Testament text and an Old Testament text that summarize the main point of each of the six chapter headings. How would you explain to someone the purpose of this book?

Bibliography

This book list makes no claim to being a complete guide to the enormous amount of literature on Jesus or his relation to the Old Testament but includes some of the more significant recent works, many of which I found helpful in my own preparation. In the absence of footnotes in the text, this bibliography therefore also stands as an acknowledgment of the debt I owe to the work of others. It is confined to books. To have included articles in journals would have made it almost endless. Many of the works cited here include detailed bibliographies of relevant periodical literature.

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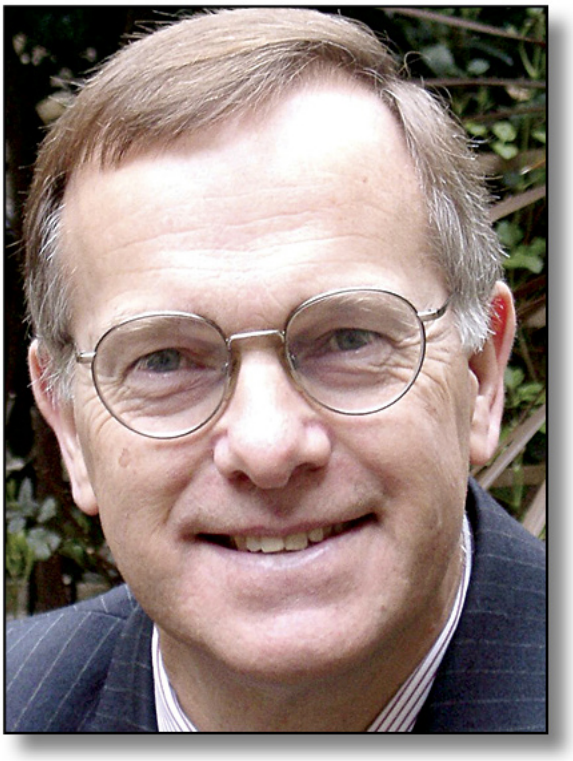

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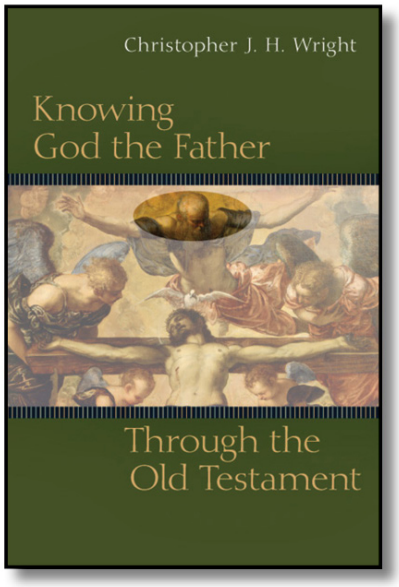

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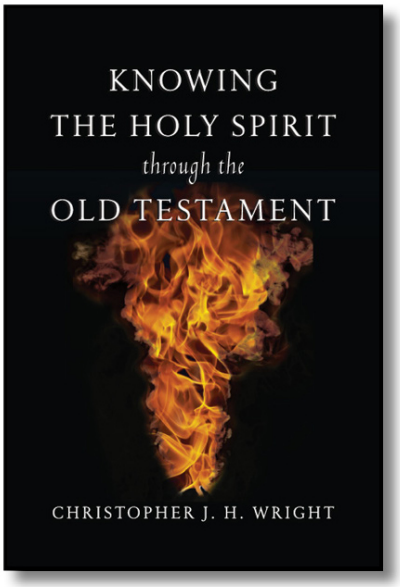

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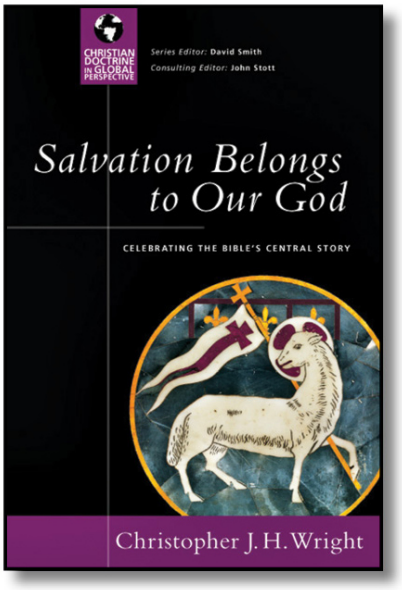

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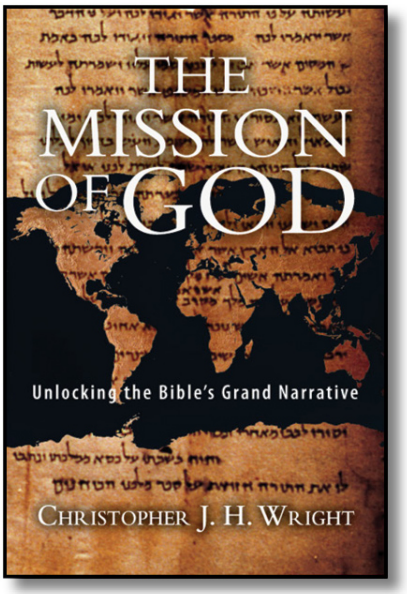

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