

## Week 4

There have been many great spiritual leaders, many great teachers and many great prophets in the history of the Jewish nation. The scriptures bear witness to them. They include Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah etc. But none of these had been worshipped as Jesus had been worshipped as the divine Son of God. Jesus had become, in the eyes of many devout Jews during those 30 years after his death, a person of such stature that he could only be adequately described in terms of the sacred stories from the past. Hence, for example, Herod's massacre of the innocent children at the time of Jesus' birth (Matt. 2: 16 – 18); see also ( Jer. 31:15 ), reflected the similar story from ( Exodus 1:22) in which Pharaoh did the same in an attempt to kill the child Moses. Hence Jesus is portrayed as the new Moses.

### Matthew 2:16-18

<sup>16</sup> *When Herod realized that the visitors from the East had tricked him, he was furious. He gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its neighbourhood who were two years old and younger—this was done in accordance with what he had learned from the visitors about the time when the star had appeared.* <sup>17</sup> *In this way what the prophet Jeremiah had said came true:*

<sup>18</sup>     *A sound is heard in Ramah,  
the sound of bitter weeping.  
Rachel is crying for her children;  
she refuses to be comforted,  
for they are dead.*

### Exodus 1:19-22

<sup>19</sup> *They answered,*  
*The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they give birth easily, and their babies are born before either of us gets there.*<sup>20-21</sup>*Because the midwives were God-fearing, God was good to them and gave them families of their own. And the Israelites continued to increase and become strong.*<sup>22</sup> *Finally the king issued a command to all his people:*  
*Take every newborn Hebrew boy and throw him into the Nile, but let all the girls live.*

Further examples from St. Luke illustrate this method of using the Old Testament scriptures to interpret the Jesus event. In Luke 1: 46 f, we have the Magnificat of Mary which is clearly inspired by Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2 : 1 – 10. And in Luke 2:29 – 32 we have the Nunc Dimittis which is drawn from Isaiah 42: 6 and Isaiah 49 : 6.

In Mark's Gospel, the first to be written, the story of John the Baptist is introduced by quoting Old Testament prophecy. The quotation shows the Mark was apparently not a careful scholar of the Hebrew Bible. He was probably writing on the basis of a popular quotation already in circulation in Christian communities and did not check his reference

very carefully. His main point is quite sound, but he has made two interesting mistakes in presenting it.

In the first place Mark has put together two separate quotations and attributed both to Isaiah. Actually the first quotation seems to be a version of Malachi 3:1, and the second one is from Isaiah 40:3. In Matthew and Luke this error is corrected ( Matt. 3:3 and Luke 3:4 ) ; they use the Malachi quote later but do not identify it with Isaiah. ( Matt. 11:10, Luke 7:27 )

This style of writing is known as Midrash; the style of the Jewish Culture of the day which is used extensively by the Gospel writers. If we accept the Gospel stories literally, we will miss the point – the deeper insight – and our understanding of the Scriptures will be superficial. If we have the desire to deepen our understanding of the New Testament this is where we need to go from ‘Sight to Insight’. We now turn to St. Matthew’s and St. Luke’s Gospels to see how this method is further developed.

### The Gospel of Matthew

Ten times in his Gospel, Matthew uses a formula to introduce a quotation from the Old Testament. The formula is; ‘this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet’ ... ( see 1: 23, 2: 15,17,23, 4:14, 8:17,12:17, 13:35, 21:4,27:9.). These quotations are additions which Matthew has made to his source, Mark. But there are other places in the gospel where we can be almost certain that Matthew has an Old Testament passage in mind as he writes. In Matthew 21: 1 – 5, Jesus sent two disciples to find ‘a tethered donkey and a colt with her’. ..... ‘This took place to fulfil the prophecy: Say to the daughter of Zion: Look your King comes to you; he is humble, he rides on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden’. This is a quotation from Zechariah 9:9 which Matthew is keen to follow in every detail. He misses the subtlety of Jewish parallelism and has the King riding on two beasts! Mark, using the same midrash has only one beast.(Mark 11:11f) It is interesting to note that the footnotes of the Jerusalem Bible suggest that ‘Jesus deliberately took to himself both the words of the prophecy and the deeper meaning.’ This however suggests that throughout his passion, death and resurrection, Jesus was acting a part in order to impress Jewish readers. Does not this suggest an element of hypocrisy?

Much more credible is the idea that Matthew used Old Testament images to convey his conviction that Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah. Matthew believed that he was describing events which had been foretold by God, many years before they happened, in the Old Testament. There, through the prophets, God had announced before hand what he would do in the last days. Now, with the coming of Jesus, these last days had come, and the events of Jesus’ life were the events about which the Old Testament writers had been speaking. Consider these words taken from 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah and Psalm 22 respectively, probably written during the exile – a time of great suffering for the people of Israel.

*‘Surely, surely, he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows’..... ‘But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.’ ( Isa. 53 : 4ff )*

Turning now to Psalm 22; To the tormented mind of the psalmist the suffering of Israel is proof that the Lord has forsaken his people. With gestures of derision the psalmist's enemies mock his confidence and faith in an almighty God. Hence he begins with those poignant words "*My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*"

That is to say, the fulfilment of the Old Testament is a first century way of bearing witness to Jesus as the one who is to be believed and obeyed. We would not use that method if we were writing a Gospel today. Apart from anything else it would be an insult to present day Jews to imply that their Scriptures were written with the sole intention of foretelling the Christ event. Today, if we were charged with the task of writing a Gospel of Jesus, we might show how Jesus fulfilled other laws – moral and spiritual laws, for example; Matthew did not do so, because Matthew lived in the first century. But it is still possible for us to believe what Matthew believed about Jesus, without expressing it in the way that Matthew expressed it.

When Luke wrote his story, he had before him the Gospel of Mark together with other material. The hypothetical source known as Q contains some teaching of Jesus (the beatitudes) and some parables. Other stories of Jesus' ministry might have come through oral tradition. About half of Mark was incorporated into Luke, but Mark was not sufficient for Luke's purposes. The world had moved on in the fifteen or so years since Mark. A Jewish rebellion had brought disaster on the holy land. In the conflict Judea had been conquered and Jerusalem and its Temple destroyed. Christianity had therefore lost its Jewish centre, and by this time most of the first generation of Christian leaders, all of whom were Jews, had died. Chief among these leaders were Peter, Paul and James the brother of Jesus.. Christianity was becoming a Gentile movement and so Luke was moved to be an evangelist to the gentile world. Luke was either a gentile himself or possible a Hellenised Jew.

### **The Gospel of Luke**

Luke also wrote in a time of tension between the Christian communities and the Roman empire. When Rome had burned while Nero, the mad emperor, had fiddled (64 AD), a scapegoat was needed. The Christians were an obvious target and many were crucified. Incidentally the violin had not been invented in this period. Also the Jews of the Diaspora became even more strict about their adherence to the Law of Moses as they felt threatened by the Christian church. (Interesting to note that the Pope recently recommended to all Catholics that they should return to the practice of fasting on Fridays – good news for the chippy!).

About the year 81 AD the Emperor Domitian came to power, ruling until the year 96 AD. More persecution followed. It was in this context that Luke wrote to a Roman official he called "most excellent Theophilus" (alternatively the title might just refer to any person who was a friend of God) hoping to counter the rising tide of hostility. Christianity, Luke was asserting, had outgrown its Jewish origin and had become a worldwide religion.

Hence in the birth narrative of this Gospel, Luke had a heavenly host in the sky herald, for all the world to see, the arrival of this child. The old priest Simeon, announced that this child would be a 'light to lighten the gentiles' as well as 'for glory to thy people Israel' In the genealogy of this Jesus, Luke had traced his heritage not simply back to Abraham, as Matthew had done, but to Adam, the father of the entire human race. Luke constantly fought

against any limiting prejudice that would exclude people of a different race. Perhaps this is why only Luke told the story in which a Samaritan leper, alone out of the ten cleansed, returned to give thanks to Jesus. Also the Parable of the Good Samaritan was a Luke original.

The Christian life, for Luke, was barrier free and beyond language, race, sex, nationality and economics. When the Spirit came and the tongues of fire danced on the heads of the Christians, they found that they could speak to each other across any barrier.

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<Questions for discussion>

- 1 Do you find that the style known as Midrash reduces the authenticity of the Gospels?
- 2 Is the Church free from sexual discrimination?
- 3 What particular gifts should a future Pope possess?

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